Technologies and discourses of colonialism in education in the Republic of Kiribati

Greg Burnett

The present secondary education system in Kiribati is little changed from its establishment and growth through the colonial years, and is marked by a heavy emphasis on English language and an academic western curriculum with the aim of placing students in white collar civil service employment. There appears to be little desire for change with most educational stakeholders seeming to give consent to the system. This article critiques the dominant voices in the educational and colonial past in Kiribati with a view to exposing the legitimising technologies and discursive practices that shape the post-colonial condition of education. Presented here is a postcolonial discourse analysis of the contradictory liberalism, articulated in key texts, that began to inform educational decision-making after the Second World War. Examined are the ways in which dominant voices perceived themselves and the I-Kiribati other, the power differential between the two and their tendency to silence other voices and ways of talking about education. The act of exposing ‘how they did it’ helps create the conditions for more just educational futures in Kiribati, as well as offering an alternative to popular culturalist perspectives on rethinking education in the Pacific.

Representation

This article is part of a larger work that involves an interrogation of the ways both I-Kiribati people and Kiribati the nation have been represented by various dominant groups and individuals and in turn how those representations have informed educational practice in the country over a period of time. Such an interrogation offers an alternative to the increasingly popular culturalist perspective from which educational futures in the Pacific are being framed (see, for example, Pene, Taufa’ulangaki and Benson 2002).
A recent furniture advertisement appearing in an Australian newspaper provides an unusual but useful example of the type of representation I am interested in, as well as the nature of the interrogation I am advocating. Presumably it has been authored by the manufacturer, whose experience of Kiribati remains unclear but is most likely minimal. The statements contained in the advertisement—"exotic by design" and "Kiribati three-seater lounge"—the price, the accompanying graphics of the furniture and the European male all work to create a ‘reality’. If we break down this ‘reality’ we can see quite clearly perceptions of the self, the I-Kiribati other and the type of relationship between the two. Kiribati is represented as exotic, an object to be desired, a place where dreams can be fulfilled. It is there to be utilised by those Europeans who have the financial and social means to reach out and possess it. The advertisement implies a certain type of asymmetrical relationship between the European self and the Kiribati other. The Kiribati other is there as a plaything for the European self. The self appropriates the other in order to satisfy desires. The other is mute and does not contribute a voice. The European self has a life, a face. It is no coincidence that the self is represented as male since colonisation of the non-European world has been largely a male exercise in domination (McClintock 1995:5). The phrase “exotic by design” is particularly ironic. Kiribati is exotic only because the advertisement designs it to be so. This particular representation of the Pacific as exotic and there for European pleasure has a long history in travel-writing, early exploration of the Pacific and, in contemporary times, in the tourist industry, all of which construct exotica as the essence of the Pacific. It does need to be noted here that in terms of the latter, Pacific peoples have been complicit in reinforcing this image for strategic reasons (see Spivak 1984/85:184). The point is that the ‘reality’ it depicts is a mere construction, the subjectivity in the representation does not and cannot be taken as the essence of Kiribati, or European-ness. All that can be said is that the depictions are manufactured for strategic purposes and the interests of the authors—in this case the economics of furniture manufacturing.
Discourse

The aim of the wider interrogation into Kiribati education is to examine representations, of which this is only an example—representations authored by those who dominated and still dominate social life and educational practice in the former British colony, known as the Gilbert Islands before independence in 1979 and Kiribati afterwards. From these representations there can be identified notions of self and other, as well as the often asymmetrical power relations between the two. Identifying subjectivity and power relations helps shed light on how it was that certain educational practices, knowledge and ways of knowing came to prominence in schooling and the resulting subjugation of alternative practices. These ideas of representation, subjectivity and power are drawn from the work of Foucault (1975:27) who describes these elements under the umbrella term of discourse. Discourse is used to describe the dynamic nature of representation, either graphic or texted, to create, position, produce, constitute or shape worlds (see Fairclough 1992:392; Lee 1994:30; Janks 1997:392; Luke 1999:163). Barrett (1991:130) rather neatly sums it up when she refers to “the production of things by words”.

These things only masquerade as truth, serving rather some particular purpose or, as the advertisement above states, the design of the author of the discourse. I wish to take these ideas from their perhaps Euro-centric French post-structuralist origins and apply them across cultural and geographical boundaries, that is, Europe to the Pacific, Britain to Kiribati. This approach follows Edward Said in his interrogation of European representations of the Orient:

The Orient [read Kiribati] is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it a reality and presence in and for the West (Said 1978:5, emphases added).

To put it simply, the act of identifying and analysing discourses exposes to all how they did it, how dominant groups legitimised, naturalised or normalised themselves as authorities and their educational practices as the only way to ‘do’ education in this part of the Pacific.
Texts and Voices

The chiefly textual representations under examination are drawn not just from education but include also texts that depict social life in Kiribati. This is for the simple reason that educational practice is and always has been firmly embedded in a societal context. The social context of schooling informs its practice. The two are inseparable. Texts include memos, letters, education reports, curriculum statements, parliamentary debate, travel-writing, newspaper articles and so on—a deliberately wide selection of text types. The authors targeted are those that are positioned as socially dominant, the former European administrators and, more recently, I-Kiribati authorities. It is not a simple case of the colonisers versus the colonised. It is not valid to explain colonisation only as a conflict along a singular axis between two homogenous groups (McClintock 1995:10). The wider interrogation upon which this article is based attempts to accommodate a complexity of multiple centres and margins (see Ellsworth 1989:320) and resist reductive binary analyses where one set of knowledges, systems of schooling, cultures and identities are pitted against the other.

How the dominant voices did it

The act of exposing how they did it, that is the discourses and technologies of legitimisation and the somewhat narrow focus on the dominant voices in Kiribati social and educational life is a valid and powerful form of research for a number of reasons. First it casts doubt (Patterson 1997:345) on dominant discourses and in so doing alludes to other realities, other ways of talking about schooling, not just in the present but also in the past. It clears a space upon which can be built more equitable educational futures. Second, the discursive tools of the master, once exposed, can be picked up and wielded by others who have been subjugated in discourse (Chow 1993:22). Rey Chow, a prominent post-colonial thinker now in the US considers her own Eurocentric education in British-controlled Hong Kong in this way. Third, if indeed there is an uneven distribution of privilege in Kiribati education, which
I maintain there is and will demonstrate next, equity, as Fine (1997:57) suggests, is more likely to be achieved by an examination of how privilege attaches itself to dominant voices rather than how the marginalised accrue deficits.

**Contemporary issues in Kiribati education**

What is the pedagogical problem against which this methodology is being brought to bear? I would like to highlight two closely related things about education in Kiribati, both of which have made it the focus of the overall interrogation.

The first is the distinct colonial flavour, despite the physical departure of the British 25 years ago and the passing of an even longer period of time since policy-making decisions began to be localised. Amongst the talk about schooling is a fair smattering of the following vocabulary, mere words perhaps but symptomatic of continuing colonial discourse: masters, preps, dorms, fatigues, wardens, matrons, head boys, head girls, mess rooms, promotions, failures, suspensions, expulsions. Schools are named after an English king, a colonial officer’s wife, long deceased American and British missionaries, an I-Kiribati president’s wife, some US Peace Corp volunteers and even a Japanese construction company. There is often a distinction made between those who are educated and those who are uneducated. The educated ones are those who know about maths, history and geography and perhaps above all can use English. Uneducated ones are those who for whatever reason have not been schooled in these things. There is an old Samoan man in an Albert Wendt novel who is described by a younger man just returned from university in New Zealand as having an incredible array of local Samoan skills and knowledges but who in the end is dismissed as an uneducated village man. What Foucault (1980:81ff) has called “particular, local [or] regional knowledges”, in other words, the old man’s knowledge, have “become disqualified, inferior [or] subjugated”.

Second, there can be identified an uneven distribution of privilege to those the system is intended to serve. An examination of a
number of documents, ranging from the country’s constitution to curriculum aims and teacher talk, reveals a mismatch between educational aims and actual practices of education, making the following sites of inequality valid targets for investigation. Among various centrisms:

i. There is an urban bias. This is evidenced in the perception among parents that urban schools are better-resourced and generally better able to produce successful graduates (Team Report 1992). This perception exists, despite the recently completed project to establish and fund junior secondary colleges on all outer islands (Tatua 4th Jan. 2000 pers. comm.)

ii. There is a level of gender inequality, not so much in terms of access, but in life chances after secondary schooling. Despite even greater numbers of girls than boys in all secondary school levels over the past decade (Tekawa 1999), the number of males in post-secondary study and employment far outweighs the number of females (Tiroa 1997:34, Tekawa 1999).

iii. A regime of national and school testing for enrolment and maintenance of a student’s enrolment is based heavily on English language competence. Students from particular social, economic and geographical backgrounds where English is not widely used find it hard to compete with students who come from backgrounds where English is more widely spoken.

Kiribati has received praise for its equitable system of educational provision compared to many other places in the region. Crocombe’s (2000:12) report to the 2000 Pacific Islands Forum, hosted by Kiribati, singles out the use of an island quota scheme for secondary placement as an example. However, I would maintain that it is perhaps a superficial ‘equality of opportunity’, with the deep-seated structural inequalities based on gender, language, economic background and location remaining relatively unaffected. Certainly all are invited to participate but by the end of schooling not only do many drop out or are pushed out but not all groups are represented among the eventual successful finishers.
Contradictory Liberalism

In order to demonstrate the approach outlined above, the discussion now turns to an example of educational discourse identifiable in the decades after the Second World War. Termed contradictory liberalism, it was a discourse that dominated educational practice and colonial governance in the lead up to self-determination and independence in the 1950s and 1960s. The contradictory liberalism in education identified here helps explain something of the inequality in contemporary educational practice mentioned previously. The war years marked a turning point in colonial attitudes generally from a time of cultural preservation and control where much educational practice was based on notions of the ‘authentic native’ (see Chow 1993:27ff), male exclusivity and discourses of ‘culturalism’ (see Stolcke 1995; McConaghy 2000; Hoffman 1999), to one marked by development, modernisation and self-determination. There was a general loosening of the colonial reigns and a greater sense of democratic governance with the inclusion of I-Kiribati voices in debates about the future of the colony. In terms of education there was an injection of spending on schooling and a greater acceptance of the idea that education was the catalyst needed for growth and prosperity. However, the changes wrought were perhaps only superficial. It is possible to show that, despite the rhetoric and the injection of funds for the expansion of colonial schooling, the colonial order of things remained intact. It is here that the contradictory nature of that liberalism is evident.

The post-war years might have been a period marked by the inclusion of more boys in secondary schooling but at the same time the selection process became more finely tuned. In the pre-war years, potential secondary school candidates were hand-picked by touring European education officers who ensured that the ‘right’ sort of element eventually flowed through secondary schooling to occupy the lower level positions in the civil service. The subjective nature of the interview as a selection method screened out not only the less able but also the possibility of dissenting or undesirable voices. Those screened out were
initially uncatered for and only later were streamed into a type of schooling based on relevance to village and atoll life. In the post-war years, as part of the new liberalism, the notion of the entrance exam was introduced with selection on merit heralded as more equitable. In actual practice though, the imposition of English language as the language of the exam served to regulate who could and who could not participate in much the same way as the officer’s interview. English language competence ensured once again that the right sort of I-Kiribati male came through to positions of social dominance. By independence the departing British had ensured their local replacements were of the ‘right’ type. There can be seen in this maintenance what Franz Fanon (1967:36) has called the “qualities of the West” due to a dualistic system of education where “the European elite undertook to manufacture a native elite” (Fanon 1967:7).

The act of carefully choosing key I-Kiribati for positions in colonial and mission governance has been a recurring technology of colonisation from earliest times. At the raising of the Union Jack in 1892, certain individuals were installed as Island Magistrates for their “spirit of obedience”. The Resident Commissioner in his 1914 annual colony report stated that:

Their [Island Magistrates] old spirit of obedience to a ruling caste, so sternly enforced in former days by the kingly families was fertile soil on which to grow the seeds of a newer order (GEIC 1915:14).

Similarly, in the post-war years, there was much liberal talk about finally admitting girls to higher levels of education. Often paraded as a sign of gender equity, the Elaine Bernacci School for girls (named after the then Resident Commissioner’s wife) began enrolments in the early 1960s. However, in keeping with the contradictory nature of liberal discourse, it placed profound limits on curriculum and post school chances for the girls who enrolled and completed the three years. Through the 1960s and early 1970s female students were offered a differential curriculum that focused on hygiene, domesticity and childcare. An Ordinance Relating to Education (GEIC 1955:8) hinted at deregistration
The purpose of the school, among other things, was to produce girls to be suitable wives of their future ‘educated’ husbands and mothers to their children, thus maintaining marital and social cohesion. The immediate post-war vision as expressed by the then Resident Commissioner went like this:

The object of this proposal is not only to provide girls suitable for vocational training as nurses and teachers, and wives for graduates of the boys’ school and others who proceed for higher training abroad, but also to ensure that some of the principles taught shall be handed down to the next generation by home example and instruction. (Maude 1945:18)

Stoler (1995:35) and Davin (1997) have argued that the emphasis on the home, hygiene and motherhood ensured the reproduction of colonial values, which in turn was intended to offset the dangerous possibility of a challenge to colonial authority arising, which might have occurred by educating I-Kiribati males. Fears were often expressed in earlier times of producing a restless and rebellious male citizen not easily governed. Arthur Grimble, a Resident Commissioner in the 1930s, had the following to say about limiting educational opportunity to I-Kiribati:

The acquisition of specialized knowledges [English language] by the general population would, in my opinion, be dangerous in as much as it would tend to inspire the natives with ambitions which they could never fulfill, and thus become the potential cause of political unrest. (Grimble 1930:2)

If indeed I-Kiribati girls were to be educated for roles outside of the home then it was done for the purposes of supplying teachers and nurses, extensions in many ways of the domestic role. During the planning stages, the girls’ school was slated to be close to the boys’ school in order to facilitate the controlled way the male and female relationships

for any school where, as it stated, “efficient or suitable instruction is not or will not be provided ... having regard to the class and sex of its pupils”. The purpose of the school, among other things, was to produce girls to be suitable wives of their future ‘educated’ husbands and mothers to their children, thus maintaining marital and social cohesion. The immediate post-war vision as expressed by the then Resident Commissioner went like this:

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that would develop. Furthermore, the school was to be sited near the hospital and the recently completed teachers’ college so that if girls were to develop aspirations outside of the home then it would be in the related areas of nursing or teaching.

Accompanying the liberalism inherent in the education of a greater number of boys and the eventual inclusion of girls, as well as the contradictions described above that ensured the maintenance of colonial order, there were also a number of what I have termed ‘technologies of governance’ that assisted that order. The practice of censorship was one such technology. It was a screening mechanism, similar in nature to the secondary entrance exam that governed what could and could not be said about the administration in the public domain. In the post-war years, a number of criticisms from both European and I-Kiribati were published in local and regional news media. These criticisms prompted a flurry of memos between sections of the administration with legal options considered on at least one occasion. Parliamentary transcripts from the 1950s record the I-Kiribati head of broadcasting and publications, perhaps an example of the ‘right stuff’ desired by the administration, reminding the assembly that nothing critical of the government was ever to be published in the colony media (see Proceedings of the Gilbert and Ellice Colony Conference 1st Nov.1956).

This culture of censorship initiated by the colonial administration in the post-war years lingers in the present. There has been much criticism of government in recent years by bodies such as the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA), Reporters Sans Frontiers and New Zealand’s Minister for Foreign Affairs (see Pacific Islands Report Sept. 11th 2000) over the banning of a particular journalist from covering the 2000 Forum meeting held in Tarawa (see Field 1999). Only very recently has there been the establishment of independent news sources in the country, consisting of two non-government newspapers and a non-government radio station.

There is the danger in an interrogation of colonial discourse such as that above, of leaving in its wake a passive colonised subject robbed of all agency (Parry 1995, Chappell 1995). It is therefore
appropriate at this point to signal the presence of oppositional voices in Kiribati social and educational life during the period under consideration. There were those who broke out of the limits imposed upon them. Two female members of parliament in the 1960s and 1970s were particularly outspoken on women’s rights, for example, in the areas of wage parity with men, domestic violence issues and male domination of political life. There were also a number of instances where I-Kiribati members of parliament took an anti-colonial stance on issues such as the slow pace of localisation of the work force, the reticence to expand educational services to all and the overall lack of Kiribati sovereignty in colonial affairs. The act of re-calling counter-discursive moments, as well as the destabilising of dominant discourses and technologies, is crucial in the process of searching for more equitable educational futures.

More equitable futures

To reiterate, the aim being advocated here is to identify and interrogate dominant discourses in Kiribati education and, where they can be located, counter discursive moments. The task is largely one of deconstruction, clearing a space whereby other ways of talking about education can be heard. In terms of construction, the wider project purposefully offers only a cautious direction in which education in Kiribati might turn. There is much reticence to make firm statements about what might be more appropriate educational practice. I, as a researcher, am aware of the historically troubled subject position I occupy as a European male in the Pacific, a position that has been at the vanguard of colonial dominance in Kiribati over the past century. A prescriptive form of current educational practice would run the great risk of being labeled neo-colonialist.

Very tentatively, therefore, the constructive part of the wider project favours the implementation of what John Willinsky (1998:252) has called “a student’s right to know”. More equitable educational futures may not necessarily mean dismantling and starting anew, nor may they necessarily mean a re-visioning of schooling around a pedagogy of
Martin Nakata (1999) has argued forcefully about the dangers of curriculum design based on perceived cultural difference and relevance. He argues that educational practices that overemphasise difference will only lead to the further marginalisation of indigenous people, since students are not being equipped with the skills necessary for success in non-indigenous contexts. I-Kiribati parents astutely realised this in their refusal to support the culturalist emphasis of the Community High School scheme of the late 1970s (see Hindson 1985).

Rather more equitable educational futures may lie in a form of critical pedagogy where the sort of politics of knowing suggested in this article is given a central place in curriculum specifically and schooling more generally. Students, parents and teachers, the three groups largely silent in educational planning in Kiribati, need to engage decision-makers in the politics of knowing and promote a critical understanding of just what and how past educational practices have contributed to the shaping of present social life and conditions in Kiribati. As Nakata states:

In order to understand our own position better, and to ultimately act to improve it, we must first immerse ourselves in and understand the very systems of thought, ideas, and knowledges that have been instrumental in producing our position. (Nakata 1998:3)

References


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