

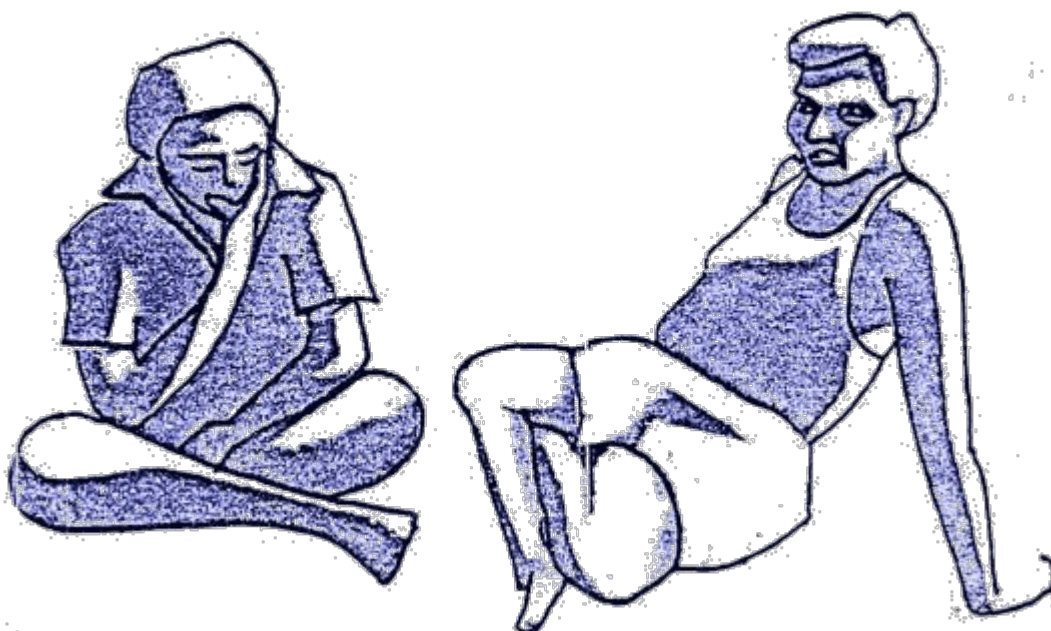
# Te taetae ni Kiribati

The language of Kiribati

## Grammar Handbook

### Lesson 1

## SOUNDS AND SPELLING



[Vowels](#)

[Nasals](#)

[Consonants](#)

[Nasals before other consonants](#)

When studying a language, it is often useful to remember that the writing system is a set of symbols which attempts to represent the sounds of the language which are distinctive – those sounds which indicate changes in meaning.

In practice it is not always easy to come up with a set of symbols which everyone agrees on, and this has been the case with Kiribati, which was first written in the mid-19th century by missionaries translating the Bible.

Since that time, various writing systems have been proposed and used, and while a great deal of regularity has emerged, there is still no complete agreement on how certain sounds should be written.

The spelling system used in this text does not deviate much from those in general use, but it does attempt to make the differences in pronunciation as explicit as possible. (Specifically, this means that you will find many doubled vowels and nasals in this text, where in most other writing you would find only a single form e.g. **marooroo** / **maroro**).

On the following pages the sound and spelling system of Kiribati is described in some detail. You are not expected to master all of the intricacies of pronouncing and spelling Kiribati in his one lesson; please consider this lesson as an introduction only. You will probably find yourself referring back to this lesson as you work through the language program.

To examine the sounds of Kiribati, it is convenient to group them into vowels, nasals, and consonants.

---

## 1. The Vowels

**a aa    e ee    i ii    o oo    u uu**

Kiribati vowels may appear as both long and short sounds, and meanings of words will often be distinguished by this difference. As this is not a characteristic of English, some difficulty may be expected in this area.

It is in the representation of vowel length that many of the spelling systems differ. Often, length is not indicated at all, or only in some words. In this text length will be indicated by a doubled letter; it may be thought of as the sound followed by itself.

There is no restriction on vowel combinations; therefore long vowel strings may occur, such as in the word **ruoia**, a kind of Kiribati national dance. These vowel combinations may also be expected to provide some difficulty.

(Note: The following description of Kiribati sounds should be considered as a reminder rather than as a guide. Actual pronunciation should be learned from a native Kiribati speaker.)

### **a aa**

This is pronounced like the a in father, or the vowel sound of hot, spot, not. While it keeps this pronunciation after **b'** and **m'**, after **b** and **m** it has a sound more like that in cat, bat, or hat.

<b>man</b>	from; animal
<b>maan</b>	long time; animals
<b>m'ata</b>	caterpillar
<b>mata</b>	eye; color
<b>baba</b>	board; fool
<b>b'ab'a</b>	to drown

## e ee

This is generally pronounced like the vowel in hate, cane, make.

**ben** coconut  
**been** coconuts

**tebe** to jump, dart, bounce up  
**enga** to be where?  
**reke** gotten  
**uee** flower

## i ii

This has the sound of the vowel in heap, meet, speak.

**ika** fish  
**iika** fish (plural)

**ingaabong** morning  
**tiku** to stay  
**riki** to become  
**aiine** women

## o oo

This is like the vowel of hope, coat, smoke.

**ota** residue of scraped coconut  
**oota** light

**koro** husking stick  
**roki** curtain  
**ongo** to hear  
**tooro** slaves

## u uu

This usually has the sound of the vowel in moon, soup, boot. When it appears immediately before another vowel, it is difficult to distinguish from **w**.

**taku** to say  
**takuu** curved

**uee** flower  
**bua** lost  
**ruuruu** cleaning out a shell

um'a house

## 2. The Nasals

**m mm    m' mm'    n nn    ng ngg**

Like the vowels, the nasal sounds may also occur lengthened, which may provide some difficulty for English speakers. This is another area in which spelling systems do not agree, often failing to indicate the additional length. For the most part these sounds are similar to those occurring in English.

### **m mm**

Except when lengthened, this is basically as in English. Unlike the other nasals, it may occur directly before any nasal or consonant sound, providing some combinations which are rare or non-existent in English. (A following **a** has the vowel sound of hat, cat, rat.)

<b>mate</b>	death
<b>mmanii</b>	thin
<b>mka</b>	rotten
<b>m'baa</b>	to kiss
<b>mronron</b>	round
<b>mte</b>	small, fine
<b>nama</b>	lagoon
<b>koom</b>	comb

### **m' mm'**

This symbol is only used before **a**, in which case the vowel sound remains like that in hot, top, or mock. (Some systems write **ma** for both sounds **ma** and **m'a**. In others, **m'a** is written **mwa**. It never occurs before **o** or **u**.)

<b>um'a</b>	house
<b>mm'aane</b>	male
<b>mm'akuri</b>	work
<b>kanimm'a</b>	adhere it
<b>m'ai</b>	cooked

### **n nn**

The n sound is basically that of English, except that it too can be lengthened. It can also occur alone however, as in, the word **N**, (the pronoun "I").

<b>nako</b>	to go
<b>kana</b>	to eat

<b>nnewe</b>	lobster
<b>ntabena</b>	kind of crab
<b>man</b>	from; animal
<b>N</b>	I (before future)
<b>nrairai</b>	exhaustion

## ng ngg

Although written with two symbols, **ng** is also a single sound, quite similar to that appearing in the English word singer (though not the sound in finger).

<b>ngai</b>	I
<b>ngare</b>	to laugh
<b>kangaa</b>	how
<b>ang</b>	wind
<b>eng</b>	yes
<b>ngka</b>	give me
<b>ngenge</b>	a begging look
<b>uringga</b>	remember it

## 3. The Consonants

**b   b'   t   k   r   w**

The Kiribati consonants may only appear at the beginning or middle of a word, never finally. They never occur adjacent to each other (although **b'** is usually spelled **bw** before **i** and **e**).

The spelling symbols for the consonants are not always good indicators of pronunciation, as quite a bit of variation occurs before different vowels, so some care must be taken to memorize the correct sound/symbol correspondences.

### **b**

This sound is somewhere between the English b and p, and was often spelled with a p in some earlier systems. It is rather like the p in spit. (The sound of a following **a** is as in cap, hat, back.)

<b>bane</b>	finished
<b>beebete</b>	easy, light
<b>koobe</b>	coffee
<b>buoka</b>	to help
<b>biri</b>	to run

### **b' (bw)**

Like **m'** this symbol only appears before **a**, where it has the effect of retaining the 'hot, stop, lock' sound of **a**. (Some writing systems don't use a separate symbol for **b'**, using **b** for both sounds. It is written **bw** before **i** and **e**. It never occurs before **o** or **u**.)

<b>b'aka</b>	to fall
<b>rab'a</b>	thanks
<b>bwe</b>	oar, paddle
<b>bwia</b>	floor
<b>b'aa</b>	rock, oil
<b>mb'aa</b>	to kiss

## **t**

This sound is some where between the English t and d, rather like the t in stick. When it occurs before **i** it is pronounced as an s (so that **ti**, 'only, we', is pronounced like see). In the Northern dialect it has this s pronunciation before **u** as well. (see next chapter on dialects. )

<b>toka</b>	to get on
<b>tiku</b>	to stay
<b>matuu</b>	to sleep
<b>tei</b>	to stand
<b>mata</b>	eye, color

## **k**

This is pronounced somewhere between the English g and k, but rather similar to the k in skill.

<b>karea</b>	to throw
<b>bike</b>	beach
<b>kiika</b>	octopus
<b>tiku</b>	to stay
<b>korea</b>	to cut

## **r**

A somewhat difficult sound for English speakers, it is made with a tap of the tongue, and sometimes sounds like a d or dr.

<b>roko</b>	come, arrive
<b>rama</b>	outrigger boom
<b>bure</b>	error
<b>ririki</b>	year
<b>reirei</b>	school

## **w**

This is usually pronounced similarly to w in English, but is often between w and y. Before **e** it is always pronounced as a y. (It never occurs before **o** or **u**.)

<b>waa</b>	canoe
<b>wetea</b>	to call
<b>kewe</b>	to lie
<b>wii</b>	tooth
<b>rawa</b>	passage

## Exercises

In many cases these exercises illustrate contrasts in pronunciation as well as the simple pronunciation of a symbol. Practice reading the lists both down and across, getting the correct pronunciation from your teacher. After completing the pronunciation drills, practice hearing the contrasts by taking dictation from your teacher with the text closed.

### **a - aa**

<b>man</b>	<b>maan</b>
<b>b'ab'a</b>	<b>b'aab'aa</b>
<b>baba</b>	<b>baabaa</b>
<b>maama</b>	<b>maamaa</b>
<b>b'a</b>	<b>b'aa</b>
<b>kana</b>	<b>kanaa</b>
<b>bana</b>	<b>baana</b>
<b>bao</b>	<b>baao</b>
<b>tan</b>	<b>taan</b>
<b>m'ane</b>	<b>m'aane</b>

### **b - b'**

<b>baba</b>	<b>b'ab'a</b>
<b>baabaa</b>	<b>b'aab'aa</b>
<b>baa</b>	<b>b'aa</b>
<b>bata</b>	<b>b'ata</b>
<b>bai</b>	<b>b'ai</b>
<b>raba</b>	<b>rab'a</b>
<b>baka</b>	<b>b'aka</b>

### **m - m'**

mata	m'ata
mane	mane
rama	ram'a
mai	m'ai
maaka	m'aaka

mka	mwenga
mb'aa	mwi
mronron	m'ai
mnaao	m'aane
mrara	moko
taamnei	mm'akuri
maninga	kanimm'a

## e - ee

ben	been
beka	beeka
bebe	beebee

## i - ii

ika	iika
tiku	tiiku
tibu	tiibu

## o - oo

ota	oota
rota	roota
bora	boora
koro	kooro
toro	tooro

## u - uu

taku	takuu
ruru	ruuruu
bubu	buubuu
bua	buua
tua	tuua

## t

toka	katea
------	-------



taka	roota
tiku	toto
tua	matuu
tei	matie

## k

karea	roko
ke	ngkoe
kiika	bike
ko	baka
kuuka	toki
kunea	tiku

## r

rama	rawa
rere	bure
riki	taari
roko	baro
rao	Beru
ruura	uraura

## w

waa	rawa
wetea	kewe
wii	Rewii
wati	wene

## n

nako	konaa	ben
nete	wene	kan
nii	kani	on
noku	bono	un
nuuka	benu	in

## n - nn

na	nna
n	nne
karina	karinna
kana	kanna
nete	nnewe

## ng

ngare	kangaa	bong
ngea	kangeri	kling
ngio	manging	ung
ngongo	ongo	tang
ngure	ibengu	eng

## ngg - ngk

ngai	ngkai
ngkoe	tiringga
riingga	uringga

## vowel combinations

ae	ai
mai	m'ai
bai	b'ai
aera	aira
taetae	taitai
tuae	tuai
aea	aia
bua	burae

tou	too
routa	roota
ao	au
mao	m'au
aoraki	auti
tao	tau
aon	karau
aue	uee

uota	ruoia
uaa	waa
aua	aoa
tua	tuae
bue	bwe

uia	wii
meang	aea
keu	ruoia
ia	ie
tai	tia

tia	tie
bia	matie
tei	riri
nei	ngkoe

## Section 2 - Nasals before other consonants

Some nasals before other nasals or consonants require the insertion of **i**. Some variation exists as to whether the inserted **i** is written, but in this text it will always be shown.

### m m'

This is the only nasal which does not require the insertion of **i** before other nasals or consonants. (**m'** is not distinguished from **m** before nasals or consonants.)

### ng

**Ng** requires the insertion of **i** when it appears before another nasal (**m**, **m'**, **n**), or before any consonant except **k**. This is the case both internally or at the end of the word before a word starting with **m**, **m'**, **n**, **b**, **b'**, **r**, **t**, **w**.

<b>nang</b>	about to
<b>N nang kiitana Betio.</b>	I'm about to leave Betio.
<b>N nangi nako.</b>	I'm about to go.

<b>kang</b>	eat
<b>kangkang</b>	delicious

<b>tang</b>	cry
<b>tangitang</b>	complaints, crying

### n

**N** requires the insertion of **i** before the other nasals, and before all the consonants except **t** and **r**. (Nor before itself: **taian nati**.)

Because of the frequency of occurrence of **n** as a linking particle or genitive marker, it is often necessary to decide between **n** and **ni**, and so the environments for the change should be carefully studied.

**rang + n + bati + n + raoiroi**

very      much      good  
**rangi ni bati n raoiroi** = very very good

**rang + n + bati + n + kukurei**  
very      much      happy  
**rangi ni bati ni kukurei** = very very happy

**rua ni mate**      grave (pit of death)  
**nati n uea**      prince (child of king)  
**nuuka ni bong**      midnight (middle of the night)  
**baba n takataka**      copra board (board of copra)

**kaain Onotoa**      person of Onotoa  
**kaaini Kiribati**      person of Kiribati  
**kaain Taiti**      person of Tahiti  
**kaaini Buritan**      person of Britain  
**kaain Ruutia**      person of Russia  
**kaaini Wereti**      person of Wales  
**kaain Nauru**      person of Nauru  
**kaaini Maiana**      person of Maiana

**I konaa n tiku**      I can stay  
**i konaa ni karaoia**      I can do it

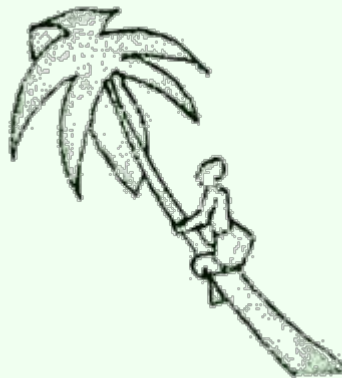
**I kan tiku**      I want to stay  
**I kani karaoia**      I want to do it

## Exercises

Insert the **i** into the following phrases where appropriate:

**um'a n kuuka**  
**tang n ataei**  
**bong n kukurei**  
**burae n moa**  
**oti n tai**  
**kaain Amerika**  
**boki n te reirei**  
**mane n kirabu**  
**kaibuke n kamb'ana**

**tang n kitaa  
bong n te namakaina  
Aro n Katorika  
tabo n mm'akuri  
kona n tiku  
kan mm'akuri taan reirei  
taan mm'akuri  
taian titooa  
taian kiika  
taian boom**



---

**Kiribati page**

© 1979, 2003 Stephen Trussel, ACTION / Peace Corps, The Experiment in International Living. The Experiment in International Living, Inc., prepared this handbook for the U. S. Government under ACTION Contract number 78-043-1037. The reproduction of any part of this handbook other than for such purposes as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, research, or other "fair use" is subject to the prior written permission of ACTION.