

Kiribati: A Study of Tenses and the Particle ‘a’

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1 Introduction

In the English language there are three general tenses: past, present, and future. To distinguish between them, the form of the verb changes with each tense. For example, the verb *to run* is *run* in present tense, *ran* in past tense, and *running* in the present tense. However, not all languages differentiate tenses through conjugation. For example, Kiribati, a language belonging to the Austronesian language family which is spoken in the Gilbert Islands, uses auxiliary words to differentiate tenses. Additionally, instead of having three tenses like in English, according to Cowell (1955) Kiribati has four: the aorist, continuous, simple future, and completed past tenses. Although the book describes the pattern for each tense, it is brief and contains no discussion on their actual uses, so this paper seeks to explore the usage of each tense through data gathered in recording sessions¹ with a native Kiribati speaker. In addition, this paper examines the particle *a* which appears in the continuous tense, the past tense, and possibly the simple future tense in the form of *na*.

Because data shows that the simple future tense can only describe the future and the completed past tense can only describe the past, in this paper they will be called the future tense and the past tense respectively. To explain the specific uses, these standard definitions of terms will be used: the present describes an action that has started, but has not been completed, the past describes an action that has already been completed, and the future describes an action that has yet to start.

The next section of this paper will review the previous study of Kiribati as observed by Cowell (1955), followed by presenting some of the data that I collected through the recording sessions about the general usage of each tense. In section 4 there is a discussion of the ambiguity found in the Kiribati tenses as well as some theories about the meaning of the particle *a*. Finally, the main points of this paper will be summarized in the conclusion followed by the appendix which contains all of the data collected in the recording sessions.

2 Previous Study: Cowell (1955)

2.1 Tenses: Cowell (1955) There was very little information about the tenses in Kiribati in Cowell (1955). He explained that there are four tenses in Kiribati and described the basic forms of each. According to Cowell (1955) the aorist tense describes the present or simple past according to context. It is formed by using the verb by itself, as shown in the following example:

- (1) Aorist tense: Cowell (1955)
I tangira
1sg. like
‘I like/liked’

The other three tenses have no description of their usage, only their basic form. Cowell (1955) wrote that the simple future tense is formed by adding *na* before the verb and also notes that the *i* (‘I’) changes to *n* (‘I’) before *na* (‘shall’) and *nang* (‘about to’). Example (2) demonstrates this tense:

¹A Marantz PMD 661 solid state recorder and a SHURE SM35-XLR head-worn microphone with RPM626 XLR Preamp was used for the recordings.

(2) Simple future tense: Cowell (1955)

N	na	tangira
1sg.	shall	like
'I shall like'		

There seems to be no difference between the simple future tense and the English future tense, so in this paper the tense will be called the future tense.

The next tense, according to Cowell (1955) is the continuous tense and it is formed by adding *a* before the verb. In addition, on page 8 he mentions that "the particle *a* implies an uncompleted state i.e. that the action started in the past and will be continued in the future." Although Cowell specifically designates *a* as an 'uncompleted state,' for the purpose of this paper, I will gloss *a* as merely a 'state' like in (3):

(3) Continuous tense: Cowell (1955)

I	a	tangira
1sg.	state	like
'I am liking'		

Finally, Cowell (1955) suggests that the completed past tense is formed by adding *a tia n* before a verb as shown in example (4):

(4) Completed past tense: Cowell (1955)

I	a	tia	n	tangira
1sg.	state			like
'I have liked'				

- i. *Tia n* has been left without a gloss in this example because Cowell (1955) offers no explanation for their presence in the sentence.

As with the future tense, there seems to be no major differences between the English past tense and the completed past tense in Kiribati so it will be denoted plainly as the past tense in this paper.

3 Actual Usage of Four Tenses

This section aims to describe the meaning and usage of each tense in Kiribati. Although the examples all use the first person singular and have only one clause, each tense can be used with different pronouns, the impersonal construction², and in complex sentences³ without restriction.

3.1 Aorist Tense The aorist tense, which is just the verb by itself, can be used to describe both the present and the past. To distinguish between the two, the verb being used, any time-describing adverbs, or the context must be considered.

The following two examples are sentences where the verb is the only distinguishing factor between past and present:

(5)	I	tiringa	Tom
	1sg.	kill	Tom
'I killed Tom'			

(6)	I	anene
	1sg.	sing
'I'm singing'		

² Section 6 of the appendix has examples of the impersonal construction

³ Section 7 of the appendix has examples of embedded sentences

Without context or any adverbs, only the characteristics of the verb can be used to guess the tense implied. In such a situation, the verb *Tiringa* ('kill') denotes the past in the aorist tense while *anene* ('sing') denotes the present.

The next two examples show how the use of time-describing adverbs can influence the denoted tense:

- (7) I *tiringa* Tom **n** **te** **tai** **aei**
 1sg. kill Tom n DET moment DET(this, now)
 'I'm killing Tom at this moment'

- (8) I *anene* **ngkoananoa**
 1sg. sing yesterday
 'I sang yesterday'

Although *tiringa* ('kill') typically denotes the past when in the aorist tense, with the addition of *n te tai aei* ('at this moment') it can describe the present. Conversely, *anene* ('sing') usually denotes the present but when followed by *ngkoananoa* ('yesterday') it can denote the past. Because the aorist tense can express both past and present it can be used with a wide variety of time-describing adverbs, but since it cannot describe the future it is restricted from using any future indicating adverbs.

- (9) Past tense adverb
 I wareware **ngkoananoa**
 1sg. read yesterday
 'I read yesterday'

- (10) Present tense adverb
 I wareware **ngkai**
 1sg. read now
 'I'm reading now'

- (11) Future tense adverb
 *I wareware **ningabong**
 1sg. read tomorrow

Example (11) uses *ningabong* meaning 'tomorrow' making the sentence ungrammatical in Kiribati because the aorist tense can never express the future. Examples (9) and (10) on the other hand are acceptable because they are suggesting a time that the aorist tense can express: the present or the past. Even without a time-describing adverb, the context can also be strong enough to override the base tense of a verb as with the next example:

- (12) I *mooi*
 1sg. drink
 'I'm drinking'

Example (12), when being the answer to a question like, "What were you doing earlier" would more accurately mean 'I was drinking,' despite the base tense of *mooi* ('drink') being the present. Just based on the context of the conversation the past tense will be understood by the listener.

3.2 Continuous Tense The continuous tense can represent the present and the future. It is formed by placing *a* in front of a verb with the base tense being the present. Some possible sentences are:

- (13) I **a** tiringa Tom
 1sg. state kill Tom
 'I'm killing Tom'

- (14) I **a** anene
 1sg. state sing
 'I'm singing'

Both of these examples have no adverb nor context but are understood to be in the present tense. For emphasis or to describe the future time-describing adverbs can be added like in the following examples:

- (15) Past tense adverb
 *I a anene **ngkoananoa**
 1sg. state sing yesterday

- (16) Present tense adverb
 I a anene **ngkai**
 1sg. state sing now
 'I am singing now'

- (17) Future tense adverb
 I **a** anene **ningabong**
 1sg. state sing tomorrow
 'I will sing tomorrow'

Because the continuous tense cannot express the past, any past-describing adverbs such as *ngkoananoa* ('yesterday') in (15) make the sentence ungrammatical. Examples (14) and (16) have the same general meaning of 'I am singing now', but by including *ngkai* ('now') in (16) any possible ambiguity will be removed and there will be a slight emphasis on the fact that the singing is occurring **right now**. *Ningabong* ('tomorrow') or other future-describing adverbs can be used to denote the future in the continuous tense with most verbs like in (17) but there is at least one exception as shown in the following examples:

- (18) Continuous tense
 *E bwaka te karau **ningabong**
 3sg. fall DET rain tomorrow

- (19) Continuous tense
 *E a kakarau **ningabong**
 3sg. state rain tomorrow

- (20) Future tense
 E na kakarau **ningabong**
 3sg. will rain tomorrow
 'It will rain tomorrow'

Although normally the continuous tense can be used with adverbs that describe the future, in the case of (18) and (19), the use of *ningabong* ('tomorrow') makes the sentences ungrammatical. To say that 'it will rain tomorrow' the future tense must be used instead, like in example (20). Because this is currently the only known exception, it's impossible to draw concrete conclusions as to why this phenomenon occurs, but the current hypothesis is that this is an exception specific to the impersonal construction in the continuous tense.

3.3 Future Tense The future tense, as the name suggests, can only describe the future. Regardless of the context, the verb, or any adverbs used, this does not change. The basic sentence pattern is *na* before a verb as shown in (21).

- (21) N **na** anene
 1sg. will sing
 'I will sing'

An interesting aspect of the future tense is that although the first-person singular is being used, instead of using *i* for 'I,' *n* is used instead. It is ungrammatical to use *i* in a future tense sentence as seen in the next example:

- (22) *I na mooi
 1sg. will drink
- (23) N na mooi
 1sg. will drink
 'I will drink'

To express, 'I will drink' *n* must be used for 'I' so only (23) is grammatical. Although the reason has not been fully investigated yet, according to Cowell (1955) this change occurs before *na* ('will') and *nang* ('about to') and is most likely due to the phonological properties of the morpheme *na*. More information will appear in the Discussion section about the particle *na*.

While the future tense can only describe the future, it can be used with both future and present tense adverbs. When present tense adverbs are used in the future tense, it merely indicates that the speaker wants or believes the action will occur very soon:

- (24) N na tiringa Tom **n** **te** **tai** **aei**
 1sg. will kill Tom n DET moment DET(this, now)
 'I will kill Tom this moment' or 'I will kill Tom this instant'
- (25) *N na kororoa Tom **ngkoananoa**
 1sg. will strangle Tom yesterday

Although present and future tense adverbs can be used, as shown in (25), past tense adverbs like *ngkoananoa* ('yesterday') cannot be used in future tense sentences.

3.4 Past Tense The past tense, denoted by the morphemes *a tia n* placed before a verb, is very similar to the future tense in that it can only denote one tense. Regardless of the verb or adverbs used, the past tense exclusively describes the past and cannot be used with adverbs describing the future such as example (27).

- (26) I **a** **tia** **n** tiringa Tom
 1sg. state done n kill Tom
 'I killed Tom'
- (27) *I a tia n tiringa Tom **ningabong**
 1sg. state done n kill Tom tomorrow

3.5 Summary

English tenses expressible with each Kiribati tense and the general form

	Present tense	Past tense	Future tense	Form
Aorist tense	Can express but is ambiguous	Can express but is ambiguous	Can't express	(pronoun) (verb)
Continuous tense	Can express but is ambiguous	Can't express	Can express but is ambiguous	(pronoun) a (verb)
Future tense	Can't express	Can't express	Can clearly express	(pronoun) na (verb)
Past tense	Can't express	Can clearly express	Can't express	(pronoun) a tia n (verb)

Types of adverbs usable with each tense in Kiribati

	Present tense adverbs	Past tense adverbs	Future tense adverbs
Aorist tense	Can be used with	Can be used with	Cannot be used with
Continuous tense	Can be used with	Cannot be used with	Can be used with
Future tense	Can be used with	Cannot be used with	Can be used with
Past tense	Can be used with	Can be used with	Cannot be used with

4 Discussion

4.1 Ambiguity and overlap In the Kiribati language there is a large amount of overlap and ambiguity between the tenses. The aorist tense can represent both the present and the past and the continuous tense can represent both the present and the future with the verb, any time-describing adverbs, or context required to remove the ambiguity. There is also clear overlap between the past tense and the aorist tense, the future tense and the continuous tense, and the aorist tense and the continuous tense with not much understanding as to the difference in the meaning. Currently the only difference found is that there is no ambiguity when using the past and the future tenses so therefore, to be able to speak more precisely, it may be better to use those. For the overlap in meaning for the aorist and the continuous tenses though, there is no such difference. They seem to be completely interchangeable.

4.2 The particle 'a' According to Cowell (1955) the particle *a* is "an uncompleted state i.e. that the action started in the past and will be continued in the future." However, due to the existence of the particle *a* in the past tense such as in example (26) and (27), his definition proves to be inconsistent. Therefore, instead of *a* meaning an uncompleted state it seems more reasonable to consider it just a state. Although this paper has glossed *a* as a state, there are currently three outstanding hypotheses explaining the particle.

The first hypothesis is that it truly is a state, but there is one contradictory factor, lying in the ambiguity of the aorist and continuous tenses. As described in sections 3.1 and 3.2, the aorist tense can describe past and present actions while the continuous tense describes present and future actions. There is a clear overlap between these two, often where the particle is the only distinguishable feature. If *a* were to hold the meaning of 'state' it stands to reason that the meaning of *I anene* ('I'm singing') and *I a anene* ('I'm singing') would also be slightly different. Possibly the latter would be something like 'I am in the state of singing.' But, according to the Kiribati speaker, these two sentences have the exact same meaning. This fact alone is not enough to discredit the theory, because even in English whether it is 'I'm singing' or 'I'm in the state of singing' there is not a large difference in meaning, but it is enough to question its veracity. The past tense has the same problem, with the past tense and aorist tense overlapping without a clear difference in meaning. The only difference is that the *a* is in the phrase *a tia n* and because *tia* holds the meaning for 'done,' the whole phrase means a 'completed state' instead of just a state. Just these facts alone are not enough to disprove the theory, but there is also no concrete proof verifying it, so other possible meanings were explored as well.

The second hypothesis is that instead of *a* being a state, it has a similar meaning to the English copular

verb *to be*. Again, this theory has the same problems as the previous one, because there is no difference in the meaning of the sentences with and without *a*. This theory was entertained because of the assumption that the *na* in the future tense is somehow related to *a* and that the *na* means 'will' in English. In this way, the difference between 'I anene' and 'I a anene' would be 'I sing' vs. 'I am singing' and for the past tense 'I sang' vs. *I a tia n anene* ('I was singing'). Again, there is not enough evidence to discredit this hypothesis, but there is also a lack of data supporting it.

The last hypothesis, born from the problem described above, is that *a* has only grammatical meaning, and serves only as a tense indicator. For the continuous, future, and past tenses, the presence of *a* (*tia n*) and *na* (and the change from *i* (first-person singular pronoun) to *n* in the future tense) are the only factor distinguishing them. It stands to reason, therefore, that these words may not actually have lexical meaning, but hold only a grammatical meaning like the suffix *-ed* in the past tense of English.

All three hypotheses are possible but this study did not gather enough data to draw any conclusions about them.

5 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to clarify the usage of the four tenses observed by Cowell (1955) and to build a better understanding of the meaning of the particle *a* that is found in the continuous, past, and possibly the future tenses in Kiribati. Through recording sessions with a native Kiribati speaker I discovered that the four tenses tend to overlap leading to uncertainty of what tense the sentence is referring to. For example, the aorist tense can represent the past and the present while the continuous tense can represent the present and the future so without the help of context, time-describing adverbs, or extra knowledge about the verb, the time frame of an action can be ambiguous. To remove this ambiguity, the aorist tense can be substituted with the past tense and the future tense can replace the continuous tense when talking about the past and the future respectively. Such changes have no effect on the overall meaning and merely serve to clarify the sentence. As for the overlap of the aorist tense and the continuous tense, the data was inconclusive for identifying any difference.

The *a* and *na* found in all tenses except the aorist tense is still a mystery when it comes to meaning, but because the verb cannot be conjugated to denote tense, these particles are essential in distinguishing tense of the sentences.

In the future, more research on the particles *a* and *na* are necessary as well as a more in-depth study of the impersonal construction of the continuous tense, and what type of verbs in the aorist tense have a base meaning indicating the past. Because *tiringa* ('to kill') and *kimoa* ('to rob') are the only verbs that have been found to be initially in the past tense, it is possible that telic words tend to indicate past while atelic words tend to indicate present but further evidence is necessary to draw any conclusions.

Appendix

(1) *tangira* ('like/love')

a. Aorist tense

I tangira
1sg. like/love
'I like'

b. Aorist tense

I tangira ngkoananoa
1sg. like/love yesterday
'I liked/loved (it) yesterday'

c. Aorist tense

E tangira te booki
3sg. like DET book
'He/she likes the book'

d. Aorist tense

E tangiri booki
 3sg. like book
 'He/she likes books'

- i. This example is the plural version of 1c. The shape of the verb doesn't change regarding the tense, but can to distinguish plural and singular.

e. Aorist tense

E tangiriai
 3sg. love me
 'He/she loves me'

- i. Morphemes can also attach to the verb to indicate the object of the sentence

f. Aorist tense

E tangiriko
 3sg. love you
 'He/she loves you'

- i. Morphemes can also attach to the verb to indicate the object of the sentence

g. Continuous tense

I a tangira
 1sg. state like/love
 'I am beginning to like/love (something/someone)'

h. Future tense

N na tangira ngkai
 1sg. will like/love/want now/soon
 'I'd like (it) now/soon'

i. Past tense

I a tia n tangira
 1sg. state done n like/love
 'I liked (but no longer like) (something)'

j. Past tense

I tia n tangira
 1sg. done n like/love
 'I liked (but no longer like) (something)'

- i. While this isn't ungrammatical, it is not used often and may be considered as slang in Kiribati. 1i has the same meaning and is more commonly used.

(2) *tangiria* ('love/want')

a. Aorist tense

I tangiria ngkoananoa
 1sg. want yesterday
 'I wanted (it) yesterday'

- i. Unsure why *tangira* changed to *tangiria* but according to Cowell (1955) the suffix *-ia* holds a plural, animate meaning. In this instance, this explanation seems inadequate though.
 ii. Because the only difference between 2a and 1b is that 2a is *tangiria* and 1b is *tangira* while the English meaning changes from wanted to liked/loved, it is tempting to say that *tangiria* holds the meaning of 'want' while *tangira* means 'like/love.' 1i. might disprove this theory seeing *tangiria* was translated as being in love, but it is possible that *tangiria* means 'want'

specifically in the aorist tense and refers to being 'in love' in the continuous tense. It is also possible that like in Spanish how *te quiero* can be literally translated as 'I want you' but more accurately means 'I love you' when *tangiria* is referring to a person, it could mean 'I love you' with a literal translation of 'I want you' as well.

b. Aorist tense

I	tangiria	n	te	bong	aei
1sg.	want	n	DET	day	DET(this/now)

'I want (it) today'

i. Refer to 1g.

c. Aorist tense

*I	tangiria	te	booki
1sg.	want	DET	book

i. According to the Kiribati speaker, this sentence sounds too commanding and therefore unnatural

d. Continuous tense

I	a	tangiria
1sg.	state	love

'I am in love (with someone/something)'

i. Discussion found in 2a.ii.

(3) *mooi* ('drink')

a. Aorist tense

I	mooi
1sg.	drink

'I'm drinking'

b. Continuous tense

I	a	mooi	ngkai
1sg.	state	drink	now/soon

'I am drinking now'

i. According to the Kiribati speaker, for expressing something that you do every day, use the aorist tense rather than the continuous

c. Continuous tense

I	a	mooi	ningabong
1sg.	state	drink	tomorrow

'I will drink tomorrow'

d. Future tense

N	na	mooi
1sg.	will	drink

'I want to drink'

i. This could be said in reply to the question, "Do you want to drink?"

e. Future tense

N	na	mooi	ningabong
1sg.	will	drink	tomorrow

'I will drink tomorrow'

i. No difference between this and 3c. Even though the continuous tense can be ambiguous in whether it refers to the present or the future, with the addition of *ningabong* there is no longer any doubt to which tense and so they are exactly the same.

(4) *wareware* ('read')

a. Aorist tense

I *wareware*

1sg. read

'I'm reading' or 'I was reading'

- i. In the context of someone asking, "What were you doing before?" then 'I was reading' is the proper translation
- ii. The Kiribati speaker did not specify which was the base tense

b. Aorist tense

I *wareware* n te *booki*

1sg. read n DET book

'I'm reading the book' or 'I was reading the book'

- i. The Kiribati speaker did not specify which was the base tense

c. Continuous tense

I a *wareware* *iai*

1sg. state read it

'I am reading it'

d. Future tense

N na *wareware*

1sg. will read

'I'm going to read'

e. Future tense

N na *wareware* *ngkai*

1sg. will read now/soon

'I'm going to read now/soon'

f. Future tense

N na *wareware* *ningabong*

1sg. will read tomorrow

'I will read tomorrow'

g. Future tense

N na *wareware* n te *booki* *ningabong*

1sg. will read n DET book tomorrow

'I will read the book tomorrow'

h. Past tense

I a *tia* n *wareware* n te *booki*

1sg. state done n read n DET book

'I read the book'

- i. This could not be used in reply with "What were you doing before?"
- ii. This can be used when talking about a book you already finished reading

(5) *tiringa* ('kill')

a. Aorist tense

I *tiringa* Tom

1sg. kill Tom

'I killed Tom'

- i. The verb *tiringa* indicates the past as a base tense, possibly because it is considered telic

b. Aorist tense

I	tiringa	Tom	n	te	aoa	aei
1sg.	kill	Tom	n	DET	hour	DET(this,now)

'I've been killing Tom during this hour'

- i. This sentence is rather hard to express in English, but basically this would be used in a situation where someone is in the middle of killing Tom. It's already been some time since it started, possibly around 30 minutes, and the person will continue to kill Tom for some time, perhaps another 30 minutes. It was hard to determine exactly what this sentence means merely because the idea of killing someone for an extended period of time is rather interesting in itself.

c. Aorist tense

I	tiringa	Tom	n	te	bong	aei
1sg.	kill	Tom	n	DET	day	DET(this,now)

'I killed Tom today'

d. Aorist tense

I	kan	tiringa	Tom
1sg.	want	kill	Tom

'I want to kill Tom'

e. Aorist tense

I	tangiria	n	tiringa	Tom
1sg.	want	n	kill	Tom

'I want to kill Tom'

- i. There seems to be no difference between 5d. and 5e.

f. Continuous tense

I	a	tiringa	Tom
1sg.	state	kill	Tom

'I'm killing Tom'

g. Continuous tense

I	a	tiringa	Tom	n	te	tai	aei
1sg.	state	kill	Tom	n	DET	moment	DET(this,now)

'I'm killing Tom in/at this moment'

h. Continuous tense

I	a	tiringa	Tom	n	te	miniti	aei
1sg.	state	kill	Tom	n	DET	minute	DET(this,now)

'I'm killing Tom this minute'

- i. For both 5g. and 5h. the meaning is slightly ambiguous. It was hard to determine whether Tom was being killed at the time these were said, as the current English suggests, or if a better translation would be 'I will kill Tom this minute/in a moment.' Because of the relatively small duration of a minute and a moment, the difference between starting the action and finishing it are rather small, and making it difficult to pinpoint.

i. Future tense

N	na	tiringa	Tom
1sg.	will	kill	Tom

'I will kill Tom'

- j. Future tense
 N na tiringa Tom n te bong aci
 1sg. will kill Tom n DET day DET(this,now)
 'I will kill Tom today'
- k. Future tense
 N na tiringa Tom n te tai aci
 1sg. will kill Tom n DET moment DET(this,now)
 'I will kill Tom in a moment/momentarily'
- l. Past tense
 I a tia n tiringa Tom
 1sg. state done n kill Tom
 'I killed Tom'
 i. Same meaning as 5a.

(6) *kakarau/bwaka te karau* ('rain')

- a. Aorist tense
 E kakarau
 3sg. rain
 'It's raining'
- b. Aorist tense
 E bwaka te karau
 3sg. fall DET rain
 'It's raining'
 i. There seems to be no difference between 5a. and 5b.
- c. Aorist tense
 E karau ngkai
 3sg. rain now
 'It's still raining'
 i. The Kiribati speaker said that this sentence suggested the idea that it had been raining up until this point in time, and it is still raining now as well. There doesn't seem to be a reason why the connotation of still is included in the sentence
- d. Continuous tense
 E a kakarau
 3sg. state rain
 'It's raining'
 i. Same meaning as 6a. and 6b.
- e. Continuous tense
 *E bwaka te karau ningabong
 3sg. fall DET rain tomorrow
 ii. Usually the continuous tense can take future-indicating adverbs, but this is the lone exception, possibly because this sentence is an impersonal construction
- f. Future tense
 E na bwaka te karau
 3sg. will fall DET rain

'It will rain'

g. Future tense

E na karau
3sg. will rain
'It will rain'

h. Future tense

E na kakarau
3sg. will rain
'It will rain'

i. Holds the same meaning as 6f. and 6g.

i. Past tense

E a tia ni karau
3sg. state done ni rain
'It's been raining' or 'It rained'

j. Past tense

E a tia ni kakarau
3sg. state done ni rain
'It's been raining' or 'It rained'

i. Meaning is the same as 6i.

k. Past tense

E a tia ni bwaka te karau
3sg. state done ni fall DET rain
'It's been raining' or 'It rained'

(7) Embedded sentences about rain

a. Main clause: ? / embedded clause: aorist tense

N ana iango te manne e bwaka te karau
1sg. REFL think/thoughts DET man 3sg. fall DET rain
'The man thinks it's raining'

b. Main clause: ? / embedded clause: past tense

N ana iango te manne e a tia ni karau
1sg. REFL think/thoughts DET man 3sg. state done ni rain
'The man thinks it rained/was raining'

c. Main clause: ? / embedded clause: past tense

E iango te manne bwa e a tia ni karau
1sg. think/thoughts DET man 3sg. 3sg. state done ni rain
'The man thinks it rained/was raining'

d. Main clause: aorist tense / embedded clause: aorist tense

E taekinna bwa e kakarau
3sg. think/say bwa 3sg. rain
'He/she says/thinks it is raining'

e. Main clause: aorist tense / embedded clause: future tense

E taekinna bwa e na kakarau
3sg. thinks/say bwa 3sg. will rain

'He/she says/thinks it will rain'

- f. Main clause: aorist tense / embedded clause: past tense

E	taekinna	bwa	e	a	tia	ni	kakarau
3sg.	think/say	bwa	3sg.	state	done	ni	rain

'He/she says/thinks it rained/was raining'

- g. Main clause: future tense / embedded clause: aorist tense

E	na	taekinna	bwa	e	kakarau
3sg.	will	think/say	bwa	3sg.	rain

'He/she will think/say that it is raining'

- i. According to the Kiribati speaker, 7g, 7h, and 7i are slightly weird, but are still acceptable. This is probably due to the awkwardness of predicting what someone will say or think, especially in regards to discussing rain.

- h. Main clause: future tense / embedded clause: future tense

E	na	taekinna	bwa	e	na	kakarau
3sg.	will	think/say	bwa	3sg.	will	rain

'He/she will think/say that it will rain'

- i. Main clause: future tense / embedded clause: past tense

E	na	taekinna	bwa	e	a	tia	ni	kakarau
3sg.	will	think/say	bwa	3sg.	state	done	ni	rain

'He/she will think/say that it rained/was raining'

- j. Main clause: past tense / embedded clause: aorist tense

E	a	tia	n	taekinna	bwa	e	kakarau
3sg.	state	done	n	think/say	bwa	3sg.	rain

'He/she will say/think that it is raining'

- k. Main clause: past tense / embedded clause: future tense

E	a	tia	n	taekinna	bwa	e	na	kakarau
3sg.	state	done	n	think/say	bwa	3sg.	will	rain

'He/she will say/think that it will rain'

- l. Main clause: past tense / embedded clause: past tense

E	a	tia	n	taekinna	bwa	e	a	tia	ni	kakarau
3sg.	state	done	n	think/say	bwa	3sg.	state	done	ni	rain

'He/she will say/think that it rained/was raining'

References

Cowell, Reid (1955) *The Structure of Gilbertese*. Tarawa, Gilbert Islands: Rongorongo Press.