initiatives in these voyaging communities: Waan Aelon in Majel (Canoes of the Marshall Islands) and the Vaka Taumako Project.

*The Canoe is the People* is well suited to capture the interest and imagination of Pacific youth, and is an important resource for educators who aim to develop locally relevant curricula. The CD-ROM format also enables the incorporation of new information. An updated version presenting the full range of contemporary voyaging traditions in the Pacific would demonstrate a greater sense of urgency to build bridges now between the old and new generations, particularly in communities where the transmission of indigenous knowledge has weakened or stopped altogether.

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This repertoire of Marshallese healing knowledge has been compiled from the work of nine expert women healers and fifty-eight other contributors who met in two workshops and weekly sessions over a four-year period in Majuro. These women recalled (many orally) their practices and recipes for healing, while others drew on documentation they had recorded for themselves. Twenty-three participants filled in questionnaires about the twenty-five plants they considered most valuable in Marshallese medicine (appendix 1). Extracts from their records of plants used in different healing practices are acknowledged throughout the text by each woman’s initials. These extracts have been compiled together with plant information by Irene Taafaki of USP Centre, Majuro; Maria Kabua Fowler, a Marshallese contributor; and Randolph Thaman, biogeographer of the University of the South Pacific.

This book is intended as an aid in the training of healers today, as well as a repository of knowledge that is in danger of being lost. In the introduction, Kabua Fowler and Taafaki state that “medicinal expertise is carefully guarded, preserved, developed and passed on within the [Marshallese] clan and family” (3). Former reluctance to share this knowledge with outsiders has been set aside in the interests of future generations. Discussion of this process of bringing “medicinal knowledge into the public domain” (236), ethical issues, and the means of handling Marshallese taboos and customary rules would enhance our understanding of researching Marshallese traditional medicine (appendix 1).

Traditional Marshallese medicine is presented in chapter 5 by means of an alphabetical list of fifty-six plants, each listed under its Marshallese name, its Latin family and species name, as well as its English name. Each entry is illustrated with a photograph and includes a biogeographic description, followed by
explanations by one or more healers about how the different parts of the plant are processed and applied to a patient. Each plant entry is subdivided by the category of users, whether general, women, children, or infants, with a few for men. This chapter comprises 60 percent of the book’s pages (71–234).

Of the four other chapters, the introduction provides a background to training traditional medicine practitioners, with a second chapter (by Fowler and Taafaki) that summarizes women’s roles, attributes, and health. Chapter 3 (by Petrosian Husa) collates excerpts on traditional medicine translated from German ethnographies by Erdland and Kramer of the 1910 German Südsee expedition. A fourth chapter (by Thaman) sets out geographic habitats where the plants are found on Majuro Atoll. Six appendixes provide information on research methods, and lists of ecosystems, vascular plants, and indigenous and introduced species for Majuro Atoll, an urban center in the Marshall Islands.

The approach to traditional Marshallese medicine through plant ecosystems downplays the detailed knowledge contributed by the women healers. Many aspects such as Marshallese categories of healing, differences between urban practices and those still used on outer islands, and the integration of traditional medicine with western medicine all warrant greater elaboration.

Since the acknowledged focus is on women’s knowledge, men’s knowledge is missing. Issues of women’s reproductive health, such as excessive bleeding, are of great concern to the women today, but are not discussed in this volume. A generalized case study would provide useful insights into tracing the practices and medications administered at crucial stages during pregnancy and postpartum. It would provide important guidelines not only for the next generation of traditional healers, but also for hospital staff in Majuro and Ebeye. The drawbacks of the Health Ministry policy by which male health aides are assigned to each outer island have a long history of implications for understanding gendered health relationships and women’s suffering.

The concept of illness whereby the “interconnections between spirit, mind and body” become misaligned is vital to our understanding of how various medications work (5). Tantalizingly, nine treatments are listed—but only in the glossary. For example, “uno in boub, medicinal treatment for lethargy in women and men” (290) is worthy of a full explanation. Kinds of treatments, whether massage, potions, poultices, chants, or others that the healers identified, would enhance the plant information. The complexity of plant parts used in combinations for particular illnesses is covered all too briefly in the healer’s statements under an individual plant listing.

The organization of this book on “traditional medicine of the Marshall Islands” around the plants found today on one selected atoll differentiates it from other publications on traditional healing or medicine in other societies in the Pacific and beyond. There is no bibliography for Marshallese to compare their plant uses with those of other communities, or to learn about similar healing practices. Recent publications on flora and fauna
for the Marshall Islands are available, so this volume could have offered rich insights into women’s knowledge of uses of those plants for healing purposes. Their voices need to be heard more prominently.

A chapter is needed that discusses how these traditional healers negotiate their practices with those practicing Western medicine in the hospitals in Ebeye and Majuro. Do the healers send to their home atolls for plant material needed for various kinds of medicine? How have the sicknesses resulting from nuclear testing been handled by traditional healers? Women on Utrik who use traditional medicine and follow the local health officer’s advice have concerns about the effectiveness of both local and Western medicine on children’s illnesses, such as a large nodule on a child’s head. Many Marshallese who have experienced cancers resulting from radiation exposures are still seeking explanations for their sicknesses that make sense in their own terms. Guidance from their healers’ understanding of the interplay between local medicine and Western medicine would be helpful in alleviating continuing fears, particularly for the future health of their children.

This publication detailing local plant materials used in traditional medicine raises concerns about control of these women’s knowledge. It is important that Marshallese people protect information from commercial pharmaceutical exploitation, as several Pacific scholars have warned (see, eg, Pacific Genes and Life Patents, edited by Aroha Te Pareake Mead and Steven Ratuva [United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies, Call of the Earth Publishers, 2007]). Already we know that nin, or noni (Morinda citrifolia) has become commercially available in health food stores around the world, and now we hear that coconut water is to become a commercial product (Secretariat of the Pacific Community Web site, 26 Feb 2007). These plant products are new to Western inventories, and thus control over this local knowledge can slip so easily out of Marshallese hands. Also, the editors do not mention whether a version in the Marshallese language was considered.

This book represents many hours of labor by its editors. Information is clearly structured, and the recognizable photos of each plant listed in chapter 5, as well as the six appendices, glossary, and index, are particularly valuable.

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Susanne Kuehling is a German ethnographer who completed her training in Australia. She undertook eighteen months of fieldwork on the anthropologically renowned island of Dobu in the D’Entrecasteaux Islands in Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea. Her new book reassesses the ethnographic record left by Reo Fortune (1932)