

**IEP JĀLTOK:  
A HISTORY OF MARSHALLESE LITERATURE**

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by  
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Where the stories reflected the truth and beauty of their lives, and the lives of their ancestors who came before them.

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## Introduction

The term “lep Jāltok” is a Marshallese proverb meaning “a basket whose opening is facing the speaker.” When a girl is born we say, “Jerammon bwe juon ñe iep jāltok.” Daughters are seen as baskets full of offering because Marshallese society is a matrilineal society - one in which land and lineage is traced through our mother. I feel this is a proper metaphor for this portfolio, as I am a Marshallese daughter offering my own basket full of writing, history, and poetry. A lineage of Marshallese literature.

The journey for this thesis first began as a means of finding a connection to my home – the Marshall Islands. I was born in my country, but moved to Hawai’i at six years old and lived here for sixteen years before moving to California to pursue a Bachelor’s in Creative Writing and then finally returning to my islands once again, eighteen years after I had left. Going home was a rude awakening – I had no idea how limited my knowledge was of Marshallese culture. Still, I loved learning our history in the bits and pieces I was able to pick up from conversations with my parents, my family, my friends, and my co-workers. My motivation for returning to Hawai’i after two years to get my Master’s was mostly practical – I knew that if I was to attain a degree, I would be able to teach courses

at College of the Marshall Islands, which was a higher position than my current job as a Communications Officer. I also believed that by enrolling in the Center for Pacific Islands Studies, I might be able to study the two topics I was very passionate about: my culture, and spoken word.

I initially chose to focus on Marshallese oral traditions because of my passion for my culture and spoken word. I began writing and performing for the stage during my senior year of high school, and continued to perform poetry during my college years. I thought that by studying Marshallese oral traditions, I would be able to get the best of both worlds. I also felt that I might be able to not only deepen my connection to my culture and history, but I also to understand the connection between the written and the oral. After my two years in this program, I see now that this connection does exist, and that there does not need to be a division between the two mediums of expression.

This portfolio has come a long way since I first began to investigate our oral traditions. It now considers not only oral traditions, but our entire history of literature, a literature that has always existed but has never been examined. It seeks to reframe how we look at that literature, and how we examine writing and text. What happens when we open up the definition of literature, writing, and text, to include not only the written work, but to also oral traditions, weaving, tattoos, and stickcharts? What you get is an indigenous history of Marshallese literature that privileges Marshallese voices and the different ways in which we have expressed ourselves. This portfolio combines archival studies, interviews with my elders and literary criticism, as well as my own new poems. It is my hope that by giving space to these voices, and reframing the way we look at

Marshallese literature, that this might be another step towards understanding our history and ourselves in a different light.

### **Why Marshallese Literature?**

The study of Marshallese literature has so far not been embarked on. Oral traditions, specifically bwebwenato or storytelling, nuclear testing, militarism and colonialism, the social hierarchy of chiefs, lineage, education, climate change – these have been the topics of focus for studies on the Marshall Islands and the Marshallese. Marshallese literature has so far been unexamined. This may have occurred for a number of reasons. Perhaps people believe that 1) there is no Marshallese literature, or not enough to study or 2) it is not a subject “worthy” or “necessary” to study. At the beginning of my research, I was one of those people who believed both of these untruths.

When I began this research, I had to convince myself that Marshallese literature is a subject worthy of study. Although I myself am a writer, and I have a passion for literature and storytelling, I had come to believe that this passion was not applicable or useful to other Marshallese people. I had come to believe the common rhetoric that studies which have no “practical” use, ie studies that do not contribute to hot topics such as climate change or nuclear compensation, or focus on social or historical problems, are merely fluff, and will have no tangible impact on Marshallese lives. I had come to believe that literature and writing simply does not matter. However, I now believe that the study of

Marshallese literature holds the possibility of contribution to the survival of Marshallese culture and values in a world dominated by the presence of media and literature that privilege western principles and concepts which have a damaging effect on how we view ourselves.

My mother, Hilda Heine, wrote about this damaging effect in her dissertation "*Tuwaak Bwe Elimaaajnono*" *Perspectives and Voices: A Multiple Case Study of Successful Marshallese Immigrant High School Students in the United States*. She wrote, "After years of colonization, many Marshallese see themselves as they are seen by Westerners - as, 'lazy, impoverished and undisciplined' (Heine 2004, 19)." When Marshallese continue to be bombarded by this perspective, that we are nothing but lazy and undisciplined, that we are merely problems that need to be fixed - then we are bound to begin to believe that perspective, to doubt ourselves and then to drown in a fatalism that confines us as a people. Epeli Hau'ofa, the famous Tongan scholar and writer, reinforces this perspective, actually drawing on Marshallese history as an example in his essay *Our Sea of Islands*:

Belittlement in whatever guise, if internalized for long and transmitted across generations, may lead to moral paralysis, to apathy, and to the kind of fatalism that we can see among our fellow human beings who have been herded and confined to reservations or internment camps. People in some of our islands are in danger of being confined to mental reservations, if not already to physical ones. I am thinking here of people in the Marshall Islands, who have been victims of atomic and missile tests by the United States. (Hau'ofa 1999, 31)

When I first read this section, it was startling to recognize my country in a text, referencing our experience as an example of how many Pacific Islanders have been exploited as a people. It was also a bit of a slap in the face to have our traumatizing history

held up as a cautionary tale. Still, Hau'ofa's assertion is not wrong. Marshallese have lost our islands, our land, due to a nuclear race, and to militarization – forces to which we never belonged to and which we have no part of. We have been confined and herded to smaller islands – a metaphor of the smaller mentality we have also adopted. A mentality that tells us that we are vulnerable, we are victims.

However, I believe that, just as Hau'ofa asserts later in his essay, if we were to study the stories, chants, and visual texts which we have produced as a people before European contact and colonization, and the essays and writing that we produced after, what emerges are multiple perspectives that are bigger than the smallness so many of us have come to believe in. I chose to focus my portfolio on Marshallese voices as a way of reframing how we see ourselves, and to present a bigger picture. By focusing on giving space to these voices – voices which have existed all along – it is my hope that it is one step towards furthering the belief that we are not victims of a history forced upon us. That instead we are agents of change, and that we continue to be agents of change, even in a world that tells us otherwise.

I also believe that the study of Marshallese literature contributes to larger conversations currently happening in the Pacific. Teresia Teaiwa's work, particularly her essay, "What Remains to be Seen: Reclaiming the Roots of Pacific Literature" (2010) was especially influential on this portfolio, where she considers the different forms of visual texts which existed alongside oral traditions, long before the European standard of writing entered our cultures. Penny Van Toorn's book *Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal Cultures of Writing in Australia* (2006) focuses on a history of Aboriginal writing,

starting with evidence of alphabet letters carved into clubs. Much of Alice Te Punga Somerville's work focuses on the history of Maori literature, such as "Maori Cowboys, Maori Indians" (2010) which unpacks how Maori writers such as Witi Ihimaera considers Maori indigenous identity through short stories (2010). David Hanlon's book *Upon a Stone Alter: A History of the Island of Pohnpei to 1890* (1988) uses oral traditions, archival research, anthropology, and archaeology to consider the history of Pohnpei, breaking through the conventions of traditional disciplinary boundaries to present a history that privileges indigenous voices. These scholars push the boundaries of what Pacific studies looks like, using literature, oral traditions, and indigenous voices to reexamine Pacific identity and history. Besides contributing to conversations on Pacific studies and history, I hope that this portfolio will also act as a blueprint to encourage more Pacific Islander students to use their culture in outside contexts, in a similar way in which I used Marshallese cultural protocols to study literature.

### **Marshallese versus(?) Micronesian**

During a seminar in Pacific Island Literary Criticism, my classmates and I were asked to write a Pacific author we had read recently on the chalkboard. What emerged were names such as Albert Wendt, Caroline Sinavaiana-Gabbard, Patricia Grace, Epeli Hau'ofa, Selina Tusitala Marsh, Teresia Teaiwa, and Haunani Kay-Trask amongst others. We were then asked to analyze this list – where did these writers come from? As a class we agreed that nearly all of these writers originated or claimed heritage in the region

known as the South Pacific, specifically Polynesia, while more than a few were also from the Melanesian region. But what about writers from the Micronesian region? Teresia Teaiwa was the only one on the board, whose ancestry includes both Kiribati and African. Where were the other Micronesian writers? When our professor, Alice Te Punga Somerville, pressed us, a few other names emerged: Craig Santos-Perez from Guahan, Emehliter Kihleng from Pohnpei and me, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner – a new and, unlike the other three, still unpublished writer from the Marshall Islands. It felt a little lonely to have only these four names on the board under “Micronesia,” each of us representing our respective islands - as if one could point to us and say “There – there is Pohnpei. Over there is Guahan. Farther over is Kiribati. And over there, sitting in a seat in a Kuykendall classroom in the University of Hawai’i, is the Marshall Islands.”

Obviously, this cannot be true. We are not the only writers in our entire region, not even in our respective countries. The problem is that the writers from our region have not been widely read by outsiders and, as a result, remain unknown by the rest of the Pacific literary community. Another contribution to the problem is access and distribution of this writing. Nevertheless, the dominant perspective is that Micronesian writers simply do not exist. Nicholas J. Goetzfridt comments on this silence in his essay “Indigenous Literature: Micronesia,” (2000) when he writes that “the ‘development’ of writing, which has its basis in 19th century efforts to Christianize islanders, and in the educational systems of four colonial powers since the 1600s, has not produced a collection of published Micronesian literature” (Goetzfridt 2000, 524-25).



This portfolio challenges this notion, first by challenging the concept of Micronesian literature itself. Micronesia was a term first created by French explorer and naval officer Jules Dumont d'Urville, who chose the term because of the many “little” or “micro” islands in the region. It was not a term chosen by the people – rather it was forced upon us and has become our signifier hundreds of years later. Micronesia is incredibly diverse – it includes over 2000 islands, with at least sixteen different languages. Kihleng was the first author to really consider and shed light on this in her piece “The Micronesian Question” which was published on the Tinfish Press website in 2013:

MICRONESIAN lacks concrete definition  
 An inadequate  
 Insufficient  
 Identity  
 Misplaced  
 Bestowed wrongly  
 Upon a large and diverse  
 Pacific Island population  
 Who are not under one flag  
 Who do not speak one tongue  
 Who do not eat the same food  
 And most of all who  
 Do not want to be recognized as one

In this excerpt, Kihleng captures the truth behind the resentment so many Micronesians have about being lumped all together into one category. This is why studying a history of writing for a region this diverse is bound to have problems with oversimplification and generalizations that can sustain limited perspectives of us as a people. Focusing on one culture and history out of Micronesia is vital now more than ever, with more and more people from the Micronesian region immigrating to Hawai'i and other states in America, and having to deal with others' and our own limited perspectives of us

as a people. When many of us first came to Hawai'i, we were bombarded with ignorant questions and ideas which grouped us together as one. I am often asked if I am Micronesian, but I am never asked what type of Micronesian. And when I say "Marshallese" only a few have known what this means, or have recognized that there is a difference between "Marshallese," "Chuukese" or "Pohnpeian." Many of us have given up explaining that there are different cultures at all, exhausted by the constant retelling of the different histories and cultures, and frustrated by the blank stares, and instead simply say we are "Micronesian" when asked where we come from. Whereas many Polynesians such as Hawaiians, Samoans, and Maori have the luxury of specific recognition, the different peoples of Micronesia unfortunately remain unknown, or unknown beyond the general group or category and have come to be known as only one culture, one people - especially in Hawai'i.

On the other hand, I am not completely advocating against using the term – claiming this connection can be useful as a tool for coming together for a common cause, such as challenging the recent Basic Health Hawai'i state health insurance plan for COFA (Compact of Free Association) people that threatens the health care of all citizens of Micronesian nations living in Hawai'i. However, the purpose of this portfolio is not to give voice to all Micronesians, but rather a specific part of Micronesia, thereby breaking the myth that we are all the same people across the board – that we are in fact, an incredibly diverse community. By focusing on one country, and one culture, in this case the Marshall Islands, we are able to give space for multiple voices that have so far gone unrecognized in Hawai'i, and in the scholarship of Pacific studies. This portfolio does not seek to claim

that the voices of the Marshallese matter more than those of other Micronesians. Rather, it seeks to contribute to the existing scholarship of Micronesia, and to encourage further studies in other Micronesian cultures. In this case, it is not Marshallese versus Micronesian. It is not a battle, or a competition. Rather, it is one piece of a larger picture.

### **Writing a Thesis versus Writing a Portfolio**

At the beginning of my program I had a very specific goal in mind. I wanted to learn more about our oral traditions and I also wanted to produce a new set of poetry in response to those traditions – my idea being that this new crop of poems would eventually contribute to my first manuscript of poetry. However, as I took more classes, and learned more about what was at stake in scholarly and academic work – especially when I learned about the responsibility of the researcher to the community he or she is studying – a seed of self-doubt began to grow in my mind. Just who would be benefiting from a creative portfolio of poetry? The answer (or so I thought at the time) is that only I would be benefiting. If the audience for poetry is extremely limited in United States, that audience is even more limited in the Marshall Islands. How would this help other Marshallese write? Who would even read this thesis? Would this be an extremely self-serving project? Do I need to expand my academic pursuits to something more scholarly – more credible? In the end, poetry just seemed like the “easy” and the “fun” route.

However, with the guidance of my committee, I was forced to interrogate the questions themselves. What qualifies as “scholarly”? How is poetry any less “credible”

than the academic thesis? Poetry is another form of expression – and at times a form of expression that could be argued to be easier to understand than a 50 page academic thesis. And how can one say that poetry is “easy” when I personally can say that I have spent the same amount of hours on huge papers that I would on a few lines of poetry? To write, and to write well, to connect with a reader – this requires dedication, skill, and constant vigilance. It requires an unyielding pursuit of honesty.

It also struck me that, as a writer studying my genealogy of writers, I have a responsibility to continue this tradition as well. I have always seen writing as a form of healing – why not continue that form of healing by writing about the wounds which have been ignored, the voices which have been silenced? Why not tell the new stories, not just the traditional stories? We Marshallese are not static – our culture is constantly changing and growing as we change and grow as well, and so our stories have reflected those stories. Why not demonstrate these changes in a new art form – one which engages with multiple traditions? In the end, I chose the portfolio – not only because this option engaged my passion, but also because I felt the yearning to continue the tradition of Marshallese expression.

### **An Indigenous Marshallese Methodology**

This portfolio seeks to study an important facet of Marshallese culture and society. As such, it only makes sense that the methodology for this portfolio be based on Marshallese culture as well. I am by no means, a Marshallese cultural expert. However,

my family has imparted certain values and principals upon me that are important to the structure of our society and which are distinctly Marshallese. The three Marshallese values and concepts which guided my steps throughout my research 1) going through proper channels, 2) jitdam kapeel, and 3) maan peio or kabwojrak, or reciprocity. Also influencing this methodology are concepts introduced by Linda Tuhiwai Smith's book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* as well as Monica Labriola's thesis *Iien Ippan Doon: Celebrating Survival in an 'Atypical Marshallese Community* (2006). Smith writes that the indigenous methodology approaches "cultural protocols, values and behaviors as an integral part of methodology" (Smith 1999, 15).

Going through the proper channels was the first crucial step of my research. In the past, before starting any sort of task or project, one needed to go through the proper channels to gain approval – usually this meant gaining the approval of the Irooj, the Chiefs before taking any further steps. Meeting with the Irooj, however, is usually a delicate process, one which I do not have any experience with and am not entirely accustomed to. So before I began this project I needed to find out who I was allowed to speak to, and whether this project would be acceptable. I consulted first and foremost with my parents. Both were born and raised in the Marshall Islands, and have an acute awareness of cultural protocols and history. When I first approached my parents about the topic of my study, I asked if I would need the approval of the Irooj, before beginning my project. They informed me that because the subject of this research, orality and literature, was a shared activity and was not a taboo subject, I could proceed without needing the approval of Irooj.

Another facet of moving through the proper channels was to meet with the Republic of the Marshall Islands Historic Preservation Office (RMIHPO), whose purpose, according to their website (last updated in 2013), is “protecting and preserving the tangible and intangible cultural resources” of the Marshall Islands. First I met with Deputy Historic Preservation Officer Josepha Maddison, and then with Chief Cultural Anthropologist Matt Riding and Chief Archaeologist Michael Terlep, and gave them my research proposal and discussed the purpose behind my research. They informed me that the only requirement I had to fulfill before beginning my research was to fill out an Anthropological Research permit. Once this was signed off by Secretary of Internal Affairs Daisy Alik-Momotaro, I was ready to move forward.

The second concept was *jitdam kapeel*. For this section I employed a methodology which had been previously engaged by LaBriola. She emphasized the Marshallese concept of *jitdam kapeel* – which, loosely translated, means learning genealogy and gaining knowledge from sitting and talking with one’s elders. LaBriola recognized the importance of this concept because of the value it places on relationships.

In the Marshallese tradition, knowledge stems from an intricate understanding of these connections and relationships — of the spaces that connect people in complex and often overlapping genealogies and social hierarchies. The Marshallese expression *jitdam kapeel* suggests that wisdom is assured to those who study and understand these genealogies. (LaBriola 2006, 12)

For this portfolio, I attempted to understand the genealogy of expression through the practice of *jitdam kapeel* with elders who had been identified by other community members as Marshallese oral experts. This was necessary, not only because much of the information on Marshallese oral traditions that they have knowledge about has not

been documented, but also because there is a need to privilege their voices as living archives.

Besides sitting and talking with my elders, jitdam kapeel was employed in another way: I studied the writing of researchers who came before me. This was achieved through a preliminary overview of the texts available. I began with the recently published text *Etto ñan Raan Kein: A Marshall Islands History* (2003), published by Julie Walsh and my mother, which gave me a detailed overview of the history of the Marshall Islands. It allowed me to see the timeline of Marshallese history that I had only a vague idea of before I began my research. It gave me the chance to later understand how certain events influenced the writing and the chanting of Marshallese. Because of my limited experience in research on Marshallese history, I also needed to understand what other researchers had accomplished before me – who they interacted with and what ideas and concepts they emphasized or privileged, and what areas had been left blank. Here I looked into texts such as Phillip McArthur's dissertation *The Social Life of Narrative: Marshall Islands* (1995), Jack Tobin's collection *Stories from the Marshall Islands* (2002), *Bwebwenattoon Etto: A Collection of Marshallese Legends and Traditions* (1992) along with *Jabōnkōnnaan in Majeļ: Wisdom from the past: A collection of Marshallese Proverbs, Wise Sayings & Beliefs* (2000), from anthropologist Dirk H.R. Spennemann, and *A History of Marshall Islands* (1982) by Gerald Knight. These texts provided an overview of Marshallese orality itself, and also gave clues and ideas as to what gaps there are in the study of the tradition. Besides these texts, I also brushed up on my Marshallese language skills by studying and practicing with *Spoken Marshallese* (1969) from Byron W. Bender,

and reading texts that were available in Marshallese language (mainly *Jeje Ko Rekwojarjar* also known as the Bible). It is prudent to note here also that the Marshallese spelling I chose to use for most of this portfolio is guided by the spelling in the *Marshallese English Dictionary* (1976).

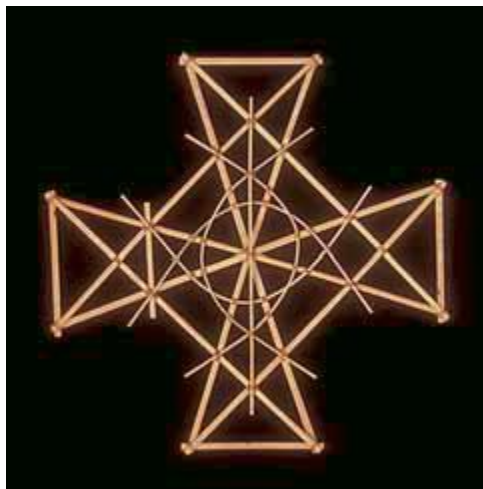
The third concept which guided my research was *maan peim* or *maan peio*, and *kabwojrak*. *Kabwojrak* and *maan peio* apply to situations or occasions where two people, or two groups of people meet or get together to discuss or make a decision on something important. "*Kabwojrak*" refers to the gifts prepared by the host, in most cases the *Irooj*, to give to visitors in return for kindness or honor shown by the visit. The idea is that one does not go to visit someone empty handed, especially if the host is a traditional leader because most likely the visitor will be receiving a gift from the *Irooj* or host. It would be embarrassing if you do not bring a gift but you left the meeting or visit with one. The connecting concept between the two terms is the idea of reciprocity. There is a similarity between the two terms, and yet also a subtle difference. The terms demonstrate how important and layered the idea of reciprocity is to Marshallese.

To carry out this concept, freshly baked banana bread, a dinner of chopped steak, a case of chicken for a birthday party, a case of fruit juice, a small monetary amount – these were a few of the tangible and immediate ways in which I thanked each of my interviewees for their help and contribution. Besides these acts and gifts, writing is another means of reciprocity. The creation of new writing is my attempt at contributing to this genealogy. The poetry written was inspired directly by the research, the process of research, as well as the different stories I came across while taking this journey. It



engages with themes, ideas, and elders from my interviews, as well as the texts I have analyzed. It also tells other stories – most are stories from my family. All are stories which I feel contribute to the fabric of Marshallese society.

The overall structure of this portfolio might be best explained through the metaphor of the stickchart. Marshallese stickcharts are based on Marshallese knowledge of navigation and voyaging which are at least 2000 years old. The stick chart is analogous to the European map – it can be seen as a map of the Marshall Islands. It is made from the midribs of coconut fronds bound together by coconut sennit, in what looks to the outsider like geometrical patterns. Cowrie shells are dotted along the sticks indicating, depending on the model, either wave patterns or locations of islands. Figure 1 shows one type of stickchart – the wapepe stickchart – which depicts wave patterns.



*Figure 1 The wapepe stick chart.*

The stickchart is an appropriate metaphor for my methodology for three reasons. First, stick charts were made from materials which already existed in the Marshallese environment – coconut trees and shells. All of the knowledge examined in this portfolio, the texts which make up a history of Marshallese literature, as well as the elders I interviewed, come from my environment. In a sense, I am using materials from my environment to create this portfolio. I am not “discovering” anything new – I am merely presenting a different way, one way, of looking at this knowledge.

Second, stick charts are three dimensional products. Unlike most European maps, which are two dimensional and which lay flat on a piece of paper, stick charts are tactile, bumpy and thicker than paper, yet also lightweight. Similarly, this history of writing is more than the usual European cannon of literature. It is three dimensional – filled with tactile forms of expression that go beyond the page – using orality, poetry, weaving, tattoos, and even stickcharts.

Third, as previously stated, stickcharts are made up of different pieces of coconut frond midribs which have been laid across one another in a specific pattern and tied together to present an overall map of the islands. In a similar sense, I have taken different pieces – visual texts, archival research on oral traditions, interviews with my elders, the history behind our introduction to European writing, the essays and texts we produced after, and the new poems I have written – I am taking all of these seemingly different elements, laying them across one another, and presenting them in a specific pattern to show how they are connected. These connections produce a bigger picture - a new map of our history of writing. And just like the stickchart, there are gaps between these different

pieces, gaps where texts and voices are missing. However, this portfolio does not attempt to fill in all of the gaps. It is merely showing one perspective, one map, one history of Marshallese writing.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Reading the Waves: Stick Charts and Visual Literacy**

The scholarship of histories and the history of writing in an Oceanic culture generally begin with a focus on initial European contact. However, I do not wish to use this as the genesis of our history of writing. This is my way of attempting to write against the concept that our history of writing only began with colonial contact. Rather, I wish to begin this history of Marshallese literature by introducing and examining the many different ways we used pandanus sticks, coconut fronds and midribs, as well as our own voices to tell our stories and to preserve and share our knowledge thousands of years before the introduction of the pencil, the paper, and the written word.

To begin, I would like to focus on evidence of our visual literacy, before delving into our oral literacy. Teresia Teaiwa introduces this concept in her essay, *What Remains To Be Seen: Reclaiming the Visual Roots of Pacific Literature*, where she argues “for a theory of the polygenesis of Pacific literature” (Teaiwa 2010, 731). She argues against the perspective that orature is the sole foundation of literature and literary practices.

By continuing to reify the roots of Pacific literature (or even simply assume that they are oral), we continue to mystify writing as a practice and reinforce it as alien...Liberating Pacific literature from a singular and oral genealogical origin

opens it up to multiple sources of inspiration and diverse forms of engagement. (Teaiwa 2010, 735)

Instead of confining Pacific literature to merely oral origins, Teaiwa argues for evidence of “visual literacy,” evidence of technologies and arts that are similar to writing, and which existed in Pacific cultures long before European contact, and alongside oral traditions.

My purpose with this section is to argue that, just as Teaiwa proposes, we Marshallese were producing our own forms of texts and using materials from our environment, reflecting a world distinctly Marshallese, long before we came in contact with Europeans. This production co-existed alongside our oral traditions, another form of storytelling that preserved our values and our knowledge. I use the word co-existed purposely – I am in no way proposing that one form of storytelling and literature is more important or valid than the other. I do not wish to belittle the importance of Marshallese oral traditions by beginning with our visual texts. Instead, I would like to argue that both these forms of literature are equally important, but by beginning with our visual texts, I am introducing another origin story – that Marshallese literature was writing as well as speaking and listening.

Historian David Hanlon has written on Pacific people’s ability to write and present their history in their own ways, referencing the Pohnpeians who use the art of tattoo as their way of writing and preserving their history. He also argues against focusing on first-contacts or cross cultural encounters with the Europeans, saying that in doing so, we are limiting the history of the Pacific.

If we admit that contact, encounter, and colonialism are the loci through which Oceanic pasts have been approached, we must also admit that these events and processes are but a part of the pasts of this area of the world, and not the only, first, or necessarily most important foci for historical investigations of the region. (Hanlon 2003, 26)

Albert Wendt reinforced this when he referenced the art of the Samoan tattoo as a way of preserving ones history and identity in his essay “Tautauing”, and also as a methodology for indigenous literary criticism (Wendt 1999, 399).

If one was to liberate Marshallese literature from the constraints of European contact, as well as oral genealogical origins what would one find? Where is the evidence of our visual writing? Marshallese are not known for drawing petroglyphs or carving alphabet letters onto clubs like the Aboriginal people of Penny Van Toorn’s history (Toorn 2006) . What do we have that might be seen as early evidence of “writing”?

The first obvious form is the eo, the tattoo. One origin story told by Lerooj Litarjikūt Kabua in 1951, based on a story she heard from ri-bwebwenato ̄atōb from the northwestern islands, can be found in Jack Tobin’s collection *Stories from the Marshall Islands* (2002). According to this tale, tattooing originated from ̄ewej and ̄aneej, two men from heaven who were both Irooj of the ̄ajjidik jowi, or clan. They brought tattoo ink, a tattoo house, and they tattooed all the people, beginning with the Irooj. “The Irooj were tattooed on the face. After they finished tattooing the Irooj and the people and the fish; all the animals, they put colors on everything. There were no colors before that” (Tobin 2002, 49). The importance of tattoos to Marshallese culture is demonstrated by this origin story – tattoos were brought down from the heavens, from two of the highest Irooj, they were

used to mark the other Irooj as well as commoners, and to bring color to a world that had previously been without.

Dirk Spennemann has also written on the history behind Marshallese tattoos, drawing his work from the research of Catholic priest and amateur anthropologist August Erdland, who studied and lived in the Marshalls from 1901 to 1911, and the work of German researchers, Augustin and Elisabeth Kramer and museum curator Hans Nevermann. According to Spennemann's *Marshallese Tattoos* (1992), Marshallese drew from our surroundings and the elements for our tattoo designs and motifs. Crabs, shells, fish, sharks, dolphins, ocean waves, and clouds all served as inspiration for tattoo designs. Spennemann writes that, "it becomes clear that spiritually and conceptually Marshallese tattoos and their motifs are firmly rooted in the marine environment" (Spennemann 1992, 27). Marshallese used the art of tattooing to record what they saw around them.

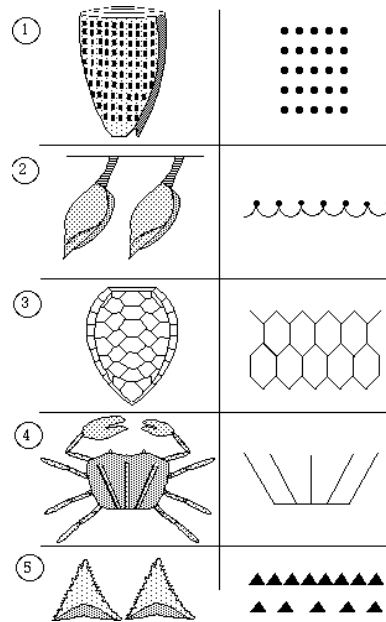
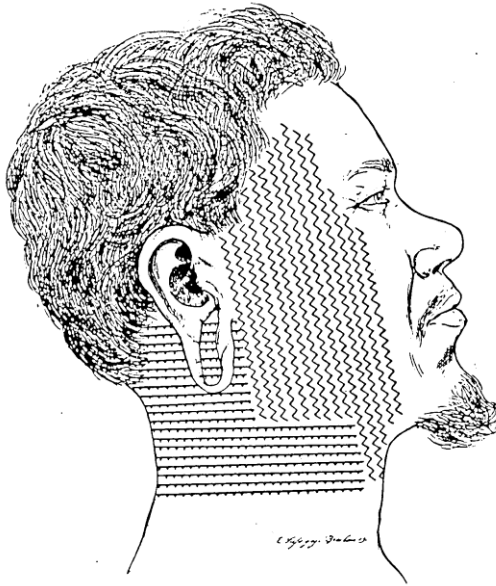


Figure 2 Marshallese tattooing motifs (right) and their natural examples (left). (Spennemann 1992, 29)

Other designs included tools and objects that were used – sticks to pick breadfruit, grass stalks, nets for cleaning or soaking breadfruit, fans, woven rope belts, canoe parts. There was supposedly one depicting the position of “praying to the gods” (38). Also, the size and position of tattoos were indications of rank and social status. While most men and women above the age of twenty or so were tattooed, certain types of tattoos, such as facial and neck tattoos, were restricted to high ranking Irooj and Lerooj.



*Figure 3 Head tattoo of Irooj Laninat of Mile (Spennemann 1992, 79)*



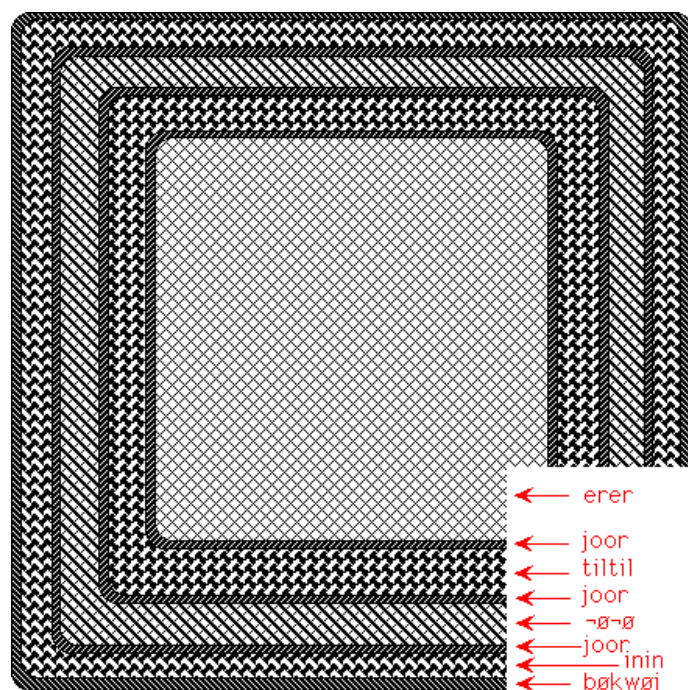
*Figure 4 Shoulder tattoo of Lerooj Nen from Tinak, Arno (Spennemann 1992, 108)*

The symbols used in an eo were used to tell stories of what kind of environment the tattooed person was in, what they valued, how they worked, and also their place in society. In a sense, the symbols used in an eo could be “read,” to tell a different story, or



the symbols could be used to “write” a different story according to the person being tattooed.

According to Spennemann’s recordings, more modern tattoos were also based on weaving symbols and motifs. Tattoos used the designs that could be found on fine mats and arranged them in similar ways to weaving. Which brings us to our second evidence of visual text: aj, Marshallese weaving.



*Figure 5 The structure of a fine Marshallese mat with a series of ornament zones pointed out with the name of that zone (Spennemann 1992, 54)*

According to Spennemann’s research, the designs on a jaki, or a mat, were representative of Marshallese society. As Figure 5 shows, there were eight different zones identified on the jaki. Spennemann translates and describes what five of those eight zones represents:

- 1) ȼōȼō (to wreath), the offsprings in a lineage who inherit their land rights from their mother

- 2) Joor – (pillar or post), the important positions held by both irooj (chiefs) and alap (lineage heads)
- 3) Tilti – (embroidery), the offsprings of a lineage inheriting their land rights through the father
- 4) Iñiñ – (intertwined), the special relationship between the father's and the mother's lineage
- 5) Bokwōj – (to embrace) the parental embrace tightly safeguarding the valuable bond of love, peace, and harmony among the members of the clan (Spennemann 1992, 54)

These five definitions and meanings demonstrate how Marshallese wove different motifs into their jaki as a way of preserving cultural values such as genealogy, land inheritance, the importance of children and parents, and the love between family members. A weaver with a knowledge of the history and meaning behind these symbols and motifs could ostensibly “read” a jaki and see what that particular weaver has to say, and vice versa a weaver could “write” or weave a very different story with each jaki.

Besides tattooing and weaving, other important evidence of visual text is derived from the Marshallese skill of navigating the ocean. In an article in *The Micronesian Reporter* in 1951, a spotlight on Marshallese navigation featured Raymond deBrum, well-known Marshallese expert in Marshallese navigational skills. An editorial in the beginning describes how effortless and skilled Marshallese were at navigating the sea: “But it also is said that to the Marshallese who have been trained from infancy in the art of navigation by sail – who know how “read” the waves and “feel” the currents – sailing is like climbing a coconut tree – child's work” (Olson, 1951) .

Here the editor of the *Micronesian Reporter*, Cynthia Olson, attempts to explain and conceptualize indigenous Marshallese ways of knowing through the framework of western terminology. She aptly connects the act of reading with navigating the waves,

using the metaphor of reading words across a page and connecting it to reading waves across the lagoon. Both are skills which are acquired through training and practice. Both rely on certain symbols and images to convey a meaning. And this idea is applied more vigorously in the Marshallese stick chart, our third evidence of Marshallese visual text.

As stated earlier, the knowledge which inspires Marshallese stick charts is nearly 2000 years old. The sticks depict natural phenomena and interpret the wave and current patterns that strike the islands. As will be mentioned later, there are three different versions of the stick chart that are generally sold in handicraft shops on Majuro. Those recorded in the *Handicrafts of the Marshall Islands* (2006) include the rebbelib, the medo, and the wapepe. The rebbelib is a general square shaped wave chart which can include all of the islands in the Marshalls. The medo covers only a few islands and is said to be useful for specific voyages. The wapepe (pictured earlier) is a smaller, cross shaped chart which depicts the waves around a single island (Mulford 2006, 8).

Stick charts were included in the training undertaken by Marshallese men seeking navigational skills. According to an interview with deBrum, these charts used to be well-kept secrets - only amongst families and experts were they shared. Kramer and Nevermann (1938) also wrote that there were no regulated systems for making the stick charts, and that one school did not offer the same teachings as the other so that each stick chart could only be interpreted by its maker.

One of the elders I interviewed, Captain Korent Joel, also mentioned that a few of the most recognizable stick charts, even the more well-known ones such as the medo and the rebbelib, are ones he had never seen before. This is corroborated in articles such

as Dirk Spennemen's *Essays on the Marshallese Past: Traditional Marshallese Stick Chart Navigation* from his website "Digital Micronesia – An Electronic Library and Archive:" last edited in 2005: "In fact some types of stick charts of today, particularly the two common types of the rebbelip charts, are believed by some old men to be recent introductions that were influenced by modern methods of mapping and plotting positions. The only type that was verified by several old men to be authentic was the wappepe type."

While the history behind the stick chart remains somewhat shady, what can be argued is that what we have here is another piece of evidence of Teaiwa's "visual literacy." We Marshallese constructed, through materials from our surroundings, and through our own ways of knowing and learning, a model for depicting and preserving our knowledge of "reading" waves and island locations. And it only makes sense that one of our first texts would be a navigational chart, reflecting our knowledge which helped us survive and thrive.

In this same way, Marshallese adopted western forms of reading and writing to also reflect our culture and our survival. The stick chart becomes not only our first example of a text – it also symbolizes the history of writing which followed after. The sticks overlapping and connecting one another reflect the writing which has come along different waves, through different patterns, different genres. And standing steady in the middle of it all is our islands – a representation of our culture, history, and knowledge of ourselves as a people.

### **Grasping for Orality: An Introduction to Basic Terminology**

In May 2013, I was invited to University of Hawai'i Hilo to perform poetry for a few classes and for the community. I took this opportunity to meet with the Marshallese lakwe Club, the student club at UH Hilo comprised of Marshallese students, and to conduct a writing workshop which focused on Marshallese bwebwenato. To begin the workshop, I informed the students that the focus of my thesis work at UH was on Marshallese storytelling, and that this workshop was a chance for me to gain their valuable insight into the medium. I then asked participants what, in their opinion, constitutes Marshallese storytelling. Immediately, they named two specific traditions – bwebwenato and inoñ. When I asked them to define these traditions, the students began to engage in a lively debate over what the difference was between bwebwenato and inoñ. Some argued that inoñ was exactly the same as bwebwenato – others felt that bwebwenato was real life stories, while inoñ was merely made up fairytales. At one point a few of them actually turned to me and demanded that I find out the true definition and difference between these terms during the course of my thesis work.

A large portion of the students who made up this group had been born and raised in the Marshall Islands. For a few them, this was their first time living in Hawai'i. I chose this group because I saw them as my peers but with one major difference: most of them had been raised entrenched in Marshallese culture in the Marshall Islands, while I had the experience of growing up in Hawai'i with what felt like a confusing mixture of both American and Marshallese culture. I thought they would have valuable insight into Marshallese storytelling from their background that I did not have. While I did learn quite

a few different things from the participants, this situation in particular demonstrated how muddled and oftentimes confusing these forms are even to other Marshallese who have been born and raised back home.

To begin discussing the different forms of Marshallese orality, I will start by providing an overview and brief definition of each form that I came across throughout my study. As the previous anecdote demonstrates, these definitions are not by any means the only definitions out there. They are merely the definitions I found in the most commonly referenced text for Marshallese definitions - the *Marshallese English Dictionary* written and compiled by Takaji Abo, Byron W. Bender, Alfred Capelle, and Tony DeBrum (1976). Or if the terms were not found in this text, then the definitions I have cited were ones given to me by the elders I had interviewed. Besides bwebwenato and inoñ, I will also expand the terms under the tradition of orality to include roro, ikid, jabōnkōnnaan, and al in mur.

“Bwebwenato” is the most well-known form of Marshallese orality. In the dictionary “bwebwenato” is defined as: “Talk; conversation; story; history; article; episode; lore; myth; tale. *Ta ñe komeañ ej bwebwenato kake?* What are you four talking about? *Emman ke bwebwenato ilo pija eo boñ?* Did the movie last night have a good story? *Kabwebwenato*. Make a conversation with a stranger.” Below this definition was the term “bwebwenato bajjek” which is simply defined as a “chat.” Further down, “bwebwentoon etto” is defined as “legend” (Abo, Bender, Capelle 1976, 47).

“Inoñ” is defined as: “Legend; folkloristic story; fiction; lore; myth; day-dream. *Ionun ia ne kwoj inoñ kake?* Where does that legend you’re telling come from (Abo et al. 1976,

77)?” The definition is somewhat similar to bwebwenato, however much less fluid, and seems to focus on the myth and folklore more.

“Roro” is another genre which falls under the category of oral traditions, one that I’ve mentioned a few times already. “Roro” can be categorized as both a verb and a noun, depending on its usage, and is defined as follows:

Chant; shout rhythmically while doing a job requiring team work, as carrying a canoe. *Eor roro nan aope kain jermal*. There is a chant for any type of work. *Lollap en ekanooj jela roro*. The old man can really chant. *Rej rooje aer jermal*. They’re chanting while working. *Elon rujan wa i lometo*. There are many chants for a vessel in the lagoon. Anything goes at sea. (Abo et al. 1976, 253)

According to the Merriam-Wester dictionary, “chant” can be further defined as: “to say (a word or phrase) many times in a rhythmic way usually loudly and with other people. These definitions give a basic overview of the most commonly referred-to forms of Marshallese oral traditions and have been the focus of most anthropological studies (more so with bwebwenato and inoñ rather than roro). Throughout the course of my interviews with my elders, however, I came across a few more terms which fell under the category of orality. Jabōnkōnnaan is one of those forms.

Jabōnkōnnaan is defined in the dictionary as a “Proverb or saying” (Abo et al. 1976, 82). I had not considered this an oral tradition because it did not fall into my own categories of chant or stories at the time. However, each of my interviewees mentioned it as an important aspect of orality, and I later came to find that jabōnkōnnaan could be seen as a sort of building block of Marshallese orality.

The other terms I came across during my interviews and my research are not defined in the dictionary, and have been hard to locate in scholarly articles. The first was

the “ikid.” I first learned of the ikid from my interviews. The earliest documentation I could find of the ikid was in Jack Tobin’s *Stories from the Marshall Islands*, dictated to him by Jelibōr Jam from Kwajalein Atoll, who defines ikid as “*al im bwebwenato*: song-stories.” In the footnotes, Tobin included his observation of the sounds of the ikid, which differentiate it from the other forms. “This, and all *ikid* are chanted in an almost continuous, low monotone by the narrator. They were chanted by navigators to help keep them on course, and awake and alert. (Presumably the low tone helped assure secrecy.)” (Tobin 2002, 128). The ikid has also been defined by a few of my interviewees as a type of roro. Whether it is a roro or a song-story, one thing everyone agreed on is that the focus of these forms is specifically on navigation. The most famous ikid is “Ikid eo an ̄ainjin” an epic tale which documents all of the navigational signs throughout the Marshall Islands. One of the few places where one could find this chant in its entirety is in Tobin’s collection. I also received copies of different versions from my mother. When I first asked my parents about the ikid, they both agreed that this might be the closest thing to “slam poetry” in the Marshallese language, since it is a spoken/story/song - which definitely captured my attention.

The second form that was brought up is one that I have not been able to find in any other sources so far. This is the “Al in Mur,” another type of traditional singing which uses lower keys and was generally used by sailors to stay awake while paddling and by grandparents and parents to lull their children to sleep. This was brought up by a few of my interviewees – however I have yet to find any written documentation of this form.



While these definitions are helpful in understanding the different forms, they still left some questions unanswered. I wanted to know more about what has been found in the past, what type of work anthropologists have done in this field, and what new questions needed to be asked and answered. To accomplish this, I did a preliminary study of the work done by explorers, scientists, anthropologists, and scholars before me. I thought that by grounding myself in this work before interviewing my elders, I might be able to question the claims made within these texts and gain expert opinions on whether these claims were true or false. Unfortunately, some of this work was found after my interviews, and so I was unable to reference all of them in my field work.

### **Reading Orality: Diving into a Sea of Anthropology**

The earliest writing I could find on Marshallese oral traditions comes from the explorations of Otto von Kotzebue, a lieutenant in the Russian Navy whose expedition was funded by a Russian nobleman to explore the world from 1815 to 1818. Kotzebue was in the Pacific to explore and chart the islands that were there for Count Romanzoff of Russia. They made two trips to the Marshall Islands, or what they called at the time the “Radak” or Ratak chain of islands. The first was for three months in 1817. The second was seven years later in 1824. He was accompanied by a crew which included Adelbert von Chamisso, and French artist Louis Choris. Their written accounts were published in three volumes, and were originally published in 1821 before being republished in 1967. *A Voyage of Discovery into the South Sea and Beering's Straits* provides detailed

descriptions of early Marshallese lifestyle. The closest I could find in these accounts which seemed to resemble some aspect of our oral tradition is one description that was written by Kotzebue (1967) when they landed on one of the atolls of Aur on the 19<sup>th</sup> of February:

The princess ordered a pantomime, with songs, which is called by the inhabitants *Eb*, to amuse me. Two of her play-mates sat themselves by her, the one beat a drum, and the other joined now and then the solo song of the princess, which resembled screaming. The name *Totabu* was frequently repeated, and I only regret that I could not understand the words. The pantomime would perhaps not have been much amiss if they had not, in the heat of action, and at the same time gesticulated so furiously, that the foam stood in their mouths. (Kotzebue 1967, 112-113)

This scene demonstrates aspects of what used to constitute our oral traditions – the use of a drum, a performance, and what seems to have been a story. The name “Totabu” was also the Marshallese pronunciation of Kotzebue, so we can assume from this and the actions portrayed that the performance was meant to convey Kotzebue as a fierce warrior. Another recording occurs when the explorers come into contact with a Marshallese chief named Rarik:

Rarik took me to his house to witness another dramatic representation: the subject was the war on Majuro [Majro]. Women sang, or rather screamed, the deeds of the warriors; and the men in their dances endeavoured, by angry gestures and brandishing their lances, to describe the valour of the combatants. (Kotzebue 1967, 321)

This scene demonstrates one of the primary uses of our oral tradition – warfare. The singing/screaming of the women is evidence of one of the important roles of Marshallese women – which is to encourage and give strength to the Marshallese men when they are about to enter battle. In this case, they were retelling those tales of valor.

Besides this instance, Chamisso also took the time to record an appendix entitled “Songs of Raduck.” Raduck was the term for one of the chains of the Marshall Islands – what is today known as the Ratak chain. Those who translated the work of Kotzebue and Chamisso decided to leave this section which uses German letters to describe the Marshallese sounds being used. The first song is one that is sung by the women and was translated as:

Dive in the sea six times,  
 Rise from the sea six times, (repeated six times)  
 Seven times! (Kotzebue 1967, 433)

From this particular recording, we see another aspect of Marshallese lifestyle – one that centered on the ocean which surrounded our islands. This also demonstrates another instance where the women are using oral traditions to spur their men to action.

The second song recorded is one that is sung by a chief of Likiep atoll, whose name is recorded by Chamisso as Wongusagelig, and details his travel from when he departs from Likiep atoll to Aur atoll, when those of “Meduro” or Majuro and Arno were at war with him. The English translation is recorded below:

Wongusagelig  
 Goes under sail;  
     On the beach the people throng!  
 Shift the sails Round!  
 Strike we not on the reef!  
 Land out of sight!  
     Ebb! Ebb!  
 Wongusagelig, (repeated)  
 And there resounds the command,  
 Keep the ships together!  
 There dashes the wave surely in!  
 To the ship before steer! steer! steer!  
     steer! steer! steer!  
 Carries away us, the flood! (Kotzebue 1967, 433)

In this particular instance, the “song” tells the story of a particular event. It demonstrates the importance of orality to remembering and recalling historical events in the Marshall Islands. This is also the earliest mention of the land of “Ebb” or Eb – a mythical island which is continuously referenced in later recordings of bwebwenato. Eb was said to be an island where the soul went after a person passed away.

While these recordings are labelled as “songs” rather than stories or chants specifically, it can be argued that they are also evidence of oral traditions because of the fact that they accomplish many of the same goals as roro and bwebwenato. Also, “songs” the way we might imagine songs today, would have sounded different in the past. It is possible that Chamisso used the terminology of “songs” merely because it was the closest description he could find from his own background to apply to the situation – when in fact it could have been either roro or al in mur.

A preliminary look into the scholarship on bwebwenato, inoñ and roro since then demonstrates that most of this work has been undertaken by outsiders, and that the focus has been mainly on bwebwenato in particular, and has been generally an act of collection and preservation, rather than an actual study and analysis.

One of the earliest recordings comes from Erdland. According to his observations, Marshallese children were “greatly interested in tales and legends, through which, by the way, they learn the vocabulary of the language. In the evening hours parents and older natives tell stories until the children fall asleep. A good memory and quick perception enable mere five-year-olds to recount all kinds of stories and tales fluently.” This

observation demonstrates the traditional form of learning – which was generally through the oral traditions of storytelling. “The islanders had no indigenous alphabet. They transmitted their thoughts by word of mouth. Their panomimicry is richly developed and characteristic of them” (Erdland 1914, 58). This quote demonstrates that there was no need for an alphabet system back then since Marshallese had such richly developed oral senses.

Besides these observations, Erdland also includes a page of collected jabōnkōnnaan, or proverbs, along with their definitions and translations, but no commentary. Besides jabōnkōnnaan he also includes a section entitled “poetry” where he writes,

They composed poetry to American melodies. Aside from church hymns, the modern poetry can be divided into love poems and sailors’ poems. Both kinds are very difficult to translate, especially the sailors’ poems, since they contain many particular terms from sea and weather lore that are incomprehensible to the common people and are part of a higher language of the nobles and experts. The thoughts are very beautiful. (Erdland 1914, 69)

This observation brings about a number of questions – just what does he mean by the term “poetry”? Obviously, he is using terminology from his own background of western literature. If this was the case – what would be the closest thing to poetry? Is what he is referring to as poetry actually roro or even the ikid? This could be the case, especially since the words he states being used are the “part of a higher language of the nobles and experts.” These “nobles and experts” he refers to could be the navigators and the chiefs. They would have been the ones to have access to the more complicated and secretive roro, which generally used more “particular terms from sea and weather lore.” Navigators

were also generally of a higher class than the other commoners because of their specific knowledge and skills – it would make sense that they would be using more complicated terminology that could not be easily deciphered by an outsider anthropologist with limited linguistic skills.

Along with poetry, Erdland also includes a collection of myths, and describes the technique of *bwebwenato* as follows:

The method of narration is usually lively and brief; the recital is fluent, even when children or young people narrate. The text of the story, as far as the words are concerned, is not fixed and varies according to the skill of the individual. The text of so-called “songs” however, which are commonly sung between two important events or during longer intervals, is invariable. One cannot really speak of singing; it is more a recitation. Whole sentences are rattled off *recto tono*, during which the voice is raised or lowered a major or minor second or at the most a third, as the individual wishes. This spoken singing is very tiresome and soporific to our ears. Moreover, the meaning of the individual words is very difficult to understand because of the frequent contractions and mutilation of the words (“poetic license”). Nevertheless, they may not be omitted, since with the progress of comparative linguistics some scholar may yet succeed in determining the meaning of words that at present are incomprehensible. (Erdland 1914, 71)

Lines such as “This spoken singing is very tiresome and soporific to our ears” or the “mutilation of the words” are insulting to read, and are evidence of Erdland’s condescending manner and bias towards those he was studying. Nevertheless, his observations are useful in that we can glean certain techniques from this tradition – for one thing the fact that the “songs” take different keys, which he describes as “raised or lowered a major or minor” in using the terminology of traditional western music. His description also reflects the description used by Tobin of the *ikid*. It is possible, in fact, that some of the spoken-singing he witnessed was the recitation of the *ikid*. We do not

know for sure, however, since there is no explicit mention of roro or ikid in Erdland's publication.

Since Erdland's study, more anthropologists and western scholars have visited the Marshall Islands and had their interests captured by our bwebwenato. Contemporary collections include Jack Tobin's *Stories from the Marshall Islands* (2002), as mentioned earlier, *Bwebwenattoon Etto: A Collection of Marshallese Legends and Traditions* (1992) from Jane Downing, Dirk H.R. Spennemann, and Margaet Benett, along with *Jabōnkōnnaan in Majeļ: Wisdom from the past: A collection of Marshallese Proverbs, Wise Sayings & Beliefs* from Bernice Joash, Kinuko Kowata and Donna Stone (2000), and *A History of Marshall Islands* by Gerald Knight (1982).

Jack Tobin's *Stories from the Marshall Islands* seems to be one of the oldest, with interviews from 1950 –1975. Tobin was in the Marshall Islands for around three decades of his life, after he first arrived in Arno Atoll as a part of an anthropological expedition. This collection is in both Marshallese and English, and complete with over 90 different stories that begin with “Jinoiñ ȼal In”, or “The Beginning of this World,” dictated to him by Jelibōr Jam from Kwajalein. Jam was educated at the Protest Mission School on Jaluit Atoll, and worked with the Japanese government as an interpreter and field officer for many years. Jam is a descendent of ȼatōb, a ri-meto or navigator and ri-bwebwenato or storyteller, who was well known for being taken by the Germans, put inside a ship until they were far from his home atoll, and tested to see if he could find his way back home. He did, because of the presence of limliṃ or arrowroot detritus in the water (Tobin 2002, 373).

Jam began his story for Tobin with a preface which echoes the concerns of many of the elders today: “This is the longest and most important story in the Marshall Islands. Old people know it. But the young people do not know it. They are not interested. They only want to learn the knowledge of the white man” (Tobin, 2002, 11). Jam uses this opportunity to tell not only a story that is important to him, but also to comment on what he sees as a crumbling society and culture due to the influence of “the white man.”

Tobin reasserts this claim in the preface when he states that “All of my informants seemed to like giving me information, and all of them agreed that it would be beneficial to record the stories for future generations as well” (Tobin 2002, xi). In the introduction to this collection, Tobin mirrors the lament of Jam when he states, in reference to roros, that “some of the roro will, of course, disappear along with the activities with which they have been associated as, for example, sailing canoe roro” (Tobin 2002, 8). He also comments on bwebwenato along the same vein, stating that “The lack of interest, motivation to learn, and consequent lack of recruitment of replacements will undoubtedly result in the eventual disappearance of the ribwebwenato, living depositories of Marshallese culture” (Tobin 2002, 9).

What is significant to note is that out of twenty two informants who were cited and interviewed by Tobin, only one of them was female – Lerooj or Chiefess Litarjikūt Dorothy Kabua of Majuro Atoll. The story she told to Tobin focused on the goddess Liwātuonmour from Namo Island, who was said to have been the mother of all the Irooj, or the chiefs, and was guardian of the people and brought people back to life. Lerooj Kabua is well known for being strong, opinionated and vocal. She was actually one of the first women



to speak out against the nuclear testing conducted at Bikini and Enewetak atolls. Accompanied by her son, Amata Kabua, high chief and future first President of the Marshall Islands, they represented Micronesia at the UN Trusteeship Council meetings in July of 1953. Lerooj Kabua was able to use her position and her voice to speak out against the unjust and inhumane treatment of her people. It is a possibility that her status as a lerooj allowed her the freedom or the agency to be able to be interviewed by Tobin.

Another point for Tobin's collection is the fact that it so far has the only full, printed version of "Ikid eo an ̄ainjin." Not only is it available in Marshallese and English, but it is heavy with footnotes explaining each ancient Marshallese term, and the relevance and modern day position of each navigational sign. When I interviewed Alfred Capelle, a cultural expert with extensive experience in Marshallese traditions, he asserted that this copy is the only full and accurate copy. What also makes this collection so valuable are the footnotes and the comments section which Tobin includes in all of his stories. Not only is the reader given a specific story, but he also provides important information which places the stories, explains certain archaic terms or kajin etto and provides a context to understanding the stories on a deeper level.

*Bwebwenatoon Etto*, is a collection compiled and edited by Jane Downing, Dirk H.R. Spennemann, and Margaret Bennett and was published by the Republic of the Marshall Islands Historic Preservation Office in 1992. This is one of the more common collections of Marshallese stories, and is used in high school and middle school as reference material for Marshallese courses. These stories are also available in both Marshallese and English, however the quality and quantity of the stories are far less than

Tobin's, with about only 20 stories. The anthropological data available bases its critiques off of western forms of knowledge, such as Greek mythology. Instead of citing the storytellers, this collection merely groups all of the stories together as common stories well known by most Marshallese. This is problematic – because there is no biography, background, or context included, the voices of the storytellers, an integral factor to the stories told, are deemed unnecessary. This is an act of erasure – and demonstrates the problems anthropologists have been commonly critiqued for – the act of taking and not giving proper due where it is necessary.

Another important distinction between Tobin and Spennemann collection is the inclusion of a specific character – namely Letao. Letao figures as a main character in many of the stories in Spennemann's collection, however he is barely mentioned in Tobin's work. Letao is our most famous trickster figure, similar to Hawaiian hero Maui and other mythic characters. He has been known to give Marshallese the knowledge of fire, sailing, and he is also generally used as a character who demonstrates what Marshallese generally see as negative qualities, such as pride, jealousy, and greed. He also continues to have a presence in today's Marshallese subconscious – he is still well-known by many Marshallese youth.

*Jabōnkōnnaan in Majel* is a collection that is usually grouped with Spennemann's *Bwebwenatton Etto* and is used in the high schools and middle schools in the Marshall Islands for Marshallese Language curriculum. This collection was compiled by Donna K. Stone, Kinuko Kowata, and Bernice Joash and published by the Marshall Islands Alele Museum most recently in 2000, with funding from the Mitsubishi Bank Foundation and

support from the organization Japanese Overseas Cooperation Volunteer (JOCV). The preface begins by comparing jabōnkōnnaan to proverbs of the English language. I especially appreciated their breakdown of the term into two separate words – “jabōn” meaning “end of or edge of” and “kōnaan” meaning “to talk.” Put together then the term would mean “the edge of talking,” or a way of indirectly expressing ones’ self (Joash, Kowata, and Kinuko 2000, v). I appreciate this breakdown of definitions because I have not heard this explanation anywhere else (vi). This collection is useful not only for the authors’ interesting perspectives on jabōnkōnnaan but also because it provides explanations in both English and Marshallese. According to my own family members, this collection does not cover all of the proverbs that are used in the Marshallese language, and quite a few are not properly explained or given the depth they deserve. However, it is still useful as a reference.

*A History of the Marshall Islands* is a book which focuses on the stories of one specific storyteller – La Bebedin of Rongelap Atoll. His authenticity and stamp of approval is given in an introduction by publisher Joe Murphy, a former Peace Corps volunteer and life-long resident of the Marshall Islands who also began and continues to run the Marshall Islands Journal along with the Micronitor which published this collection. “Gerald “Jerry” Knight is one of the best known authors of Pacific lore and culture currently in print today,” writes Murphy. “His particular focus on the Marshall Islands has made him an accepted authority on the history of the islands.” The collection was compiled and published by Gerald in 1982 and also includes about 20 stories.

Besides these collections, Phillip McArthur's dissertation *The Social Life of Narrative: Marshall Islands* analyses narrative and its role in the social life of Marshallese. I found his work to be closely tied with my own studies of the role of oral traditions in our culture. McArthur is a former missionary of the Christian denomination the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS), and his four years of work is the first attempt to foreground the place of narrative in Marshallese social-cultural life. There have been previous attempts to collect Marshallese bwebwenato and inqñ into volumes for preservation and posterity. However, this is the first attempt at analyzing those stories and how they reflect the Marshallese culture and the social structure of Marshallese society.

An interesting part of his dissertation is his analysis of a live performance. He strips the story down to a text and analyses one of his interviewees' performance line by line, noting when the man stutters, how he redirects the story, when he gets loud or quiet, and so forth. While this revealed a lot about the narrative structure of Marshallese bwebwenato, there was also assumptions being made on McArthur's part about the ribwebwenato. Also, stripping down the story to a text seemed unreasonable, and seemed to defeat the entire purpose of bwebwenato. Bwebwenato is meant to be live, not textual. However, what is interesting is how McArthur's informant applies the traditional story of Jebro to explain modern day relations. The legend of Jebro is also known as the origin legend behind the sail for the Marshallese canoe. According to the legend, twelve brothers decided to compete in a canoe race to see who would become chief of their atoll. As they lined their canoes up along the shore, their mother came along with a bundle under her

arms. She asked the eldest, Timur, if he would take her on his canoe with him. But because he was more concerned with winning and was worried she would slow him down, he told her to ask his younger brother instead. Each brother responded in the same way to their mother until she got to the youngest, Jebro. Jebro decided to let her on his canoe. When the race started and they had reached the middle of the lagoon, his mother unravelled her bundle and hoisted up a sail, allowing his canoe to fly faster than the rest of his brothers, and winning him the title of Irooj. One of the main morals of this story is Jebro being rewarded because he honored his mother, thus demonstrating the importance of our matrilineal society (McArthur 1995, 184).

According to McArthur's informant, the primary difference between American culture and Marshallese culture is the principle of matrilineal descent, and that the unfortunate consequence of Americanization are men forgetting their mothers in their pursuit of money and success. McArthur explains that for his informant, the American way is embodied by Timur, the eldest brother individualism while Jebro represents the valued Marshallese model of appropriate conduct within matrilineal relations (185). McArthur's analysis of how these legends are applied to relationships with America continue further when he discusses the trickster character Letao in regards to American relationships:

He asks the rhetorical question of how we can make sense of Letao stories (lines 82-83) and then answers his own questions: They are like American movies, something you see, but what you see is not real. People are not really killed, it just looks that way: Letao was not really a coconut tree, he just looked that way. Both movies and Letao stories are deceptions. And those movies belong to the Americans, who, like Letao, present many kinds of ambiguities. (McArthur 1995, 380-381)

McArthur is able to present how a Marshallese man explains the ambiguities and the mystical qualities of legends by comparing the legend and magic of Letao to that of fictional television shows. The reader is able to see how Marshallese even in the modern times can use traditional legends to make sense of life around them. While I found some of McArthur's dissertation lacking, especially when it came to his analysis of Marshallese politics, I found his analysis of key legends, symbols, and common sayings as a basis for understanding the roles of our legends in today's society to be particularly useful.

While McArthur, Tobin, Spennemann, and Knight's works portray varying degrees of authentic storytelling, they also present a number of problems. The fact that many of them are written by outsiders only serves to differentiate and locate these collections at a distance from our culture. While they do provide a valuable source of Marshallese culture and knowledge, they are nonetheless limited by the positions and background of the authors, collectors, and intended audience. If these collections were intended entirely for Marshallese, perhaps they would have been more inclusive and accurate, owing to the fact that the Marshallese audience would be more critical and aware than a foreign audience. The Marshallese in general are apt to keep certain information to ourselves rather than share it with outsiders – so in this regard, it is possible that their interviews were actually more limited. Also, as males, they might have been less privy to cultural stories and information about women, or might not have been able to grasp certain important cultural details from their position as males. It also raised a number of questions for myself – just what would a Marshallese *ri-bwebwento* tell another Marshallese,

particularly a young Marshallese, raised in the diaspora, seeking to learn about her own culture? How would their answers differ?

There were other specific questions I wanted answered as well. I realized I was not so much interested in collecting all the Marshallese bwebwenato, roro, or jabōnkōnaan as I was in the social purposes, history and genealogy behind them. What was their purpose in the past? Who qualifies as ri-bwebwenato? What are other forms of oral traditions? Who was the first to begin using these oral traditions? And are they as important today as they were in the past?

I knew I would find a few of these answers through my interviews.

## CHAPTER 2

### Jitdam Kapeel: Interviews with Elders

According to the Marshallese English dictionary, the term “jitdam” means to “Seek knowledge; look for the true pedigree; study one’s genealogy; inquire of an authority. *Jitdam kapeel*. Seeking knowledge guarantees wisdom (a proverb). *Jitdam ke ej ja mour*. Inquire of him (who has the knowledge) while he’s still around (Abo, Bender, Capelle, deBrum 1976, 109).” My mother broke down the term a bit further for me, and explained that if one was to split the terms “jitdam” in two, it would be “jit” and “dam.” “Jit” would be alluding to “jijit” which means to sit while “dam” means forehead, which alludes to sitting and metaphorically touching foreheads with your elders. Since the head is an especially sacred part of the body for Marshallese, and it is where all knowledge is stored, it makes the concept of “touching foreheads” that much more significant.

When I began my research, I was in the Marshall Islands, specifically on Majuro atoll visiting family for the summer while also co-teaching a course at the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI). I used this time to conduct my interviews. Before my interviews began, I drafted a list of questions that I sought answers to. I let the conversations wander, following the general structure of bwebwenato, or talking story, but used this list of questions as a guide. My line of questions focused on the origin of the traditions, how they defined the different traditions, how they explained its purpose, their own musings on whether or not these traditions are still being used, and how they were used in the past. I also asked each elder to tell me the bwebwenato or roro which they found to be



most important in terms of value to Marshallese manit or history. I also paid attention to the style they spoke in, and how roro sounded different from bwebwenato. Besides this, I asked for their opinions on the ikid, al in mur, and the jabōnkōnaan to see how their understandings of the concepts differed or were related to what I've studied so far and how these forms might dialogue with one another.

Writing and critically analyzing the interviews for its content was a hurdle I had not been prepared to leap over. I was not able to fully grasp the depth of everything we discussed because I was unable to understand some of the words and concepts that were explained. I can only hope that after an extended period of living at home, and possibly a longer period of studying and learning, will these ideas and concepts finally sink in. For the purposes of this portfolio, however, understanding every nuance, metaphor, or jabōnkōnaan, was not necessary since the focus was not on presenting perfect, indisputable answers. While it might help my readers to actually see the text of what was being said, ultimately it would not assist what I am attempting to accomplish with the purpose of this portfolio – which is to find my own connections to these traditions to inspire my poetry. In the study of Marshallese orality, I came to learn rather quickly that there are no set answers – on many topics, my elders had completely different answers and opinions. Instead, I decided to focus on the emerging themes and concepts. In what ways did their definitions and history of Marshallese oral traditions dialogue with one another, and with the texts I had studied previously? In what ways did their stories contradict one another? When I sat down to write my reflection of these interviews, I also decided to use a more “bwebwenato” style of writing – a talking story type of writing which

sounds less academic, more storytelling, and focused on questions such as, “What captured my mind poetically, linguistically? How did real life chanting sound, and how did it make me feel?” This style of writing reflects the way these interviews were conducted, as well as one of the forms of Marshallese orality.

After I had drafted my questions and decided how I would analyze these questions, I asked my parents for their recommendations on how to proceed with the project and also who to interview. They recommended names such as Willie Mwekto, Carmen Bigler, Captain Korent Joel, Alfred Capelle, amongst others. I should also add that my parents, like other Marshallese I approached about this subject, always added, after telling me their recommendations, that most of the best storytellers had already passed away. In their mind (and this was reiterated throughout my interviews) Marshallese orality is a dying tradition as each elder endowed with these specific skills passes away. At the time of writing this thesis in fact, my first interviewee, Willie Mwekto had sadly passed away on December 10, 2014. I was unable to attend his funeral because I was still attending school here in Hawai'i. Learning of his death was both shocking and deeply saddening. It also made me realize how much more important it was that I write this portfolio with the same passion that he showed me during our discussions.

## Willie Mwekto



*Figure 6 Willie Mwekto, pictured here in the kitchen of his home*

Mr. Mwekto had spent most of his life teaching classes on Marshallese language and culture at CMI and is a well-known expert in roro and bwebwenato. I have witnessed him roro at special occasions and events, and he served as expert witness in numerous court cases on land and culture. Mr. Mwekto also self-published a rare and an incredibly valuable book called *Kadkad In*, which documents the ancient terminology of Marshallese language and orality. I received my copy from my mother, who impressed upon me the fact that it is so far the only other published copy she has seen in years. This book will be discussed further in Chapter 3. Mr. Mwekto was also my grand-uncle – he was my grandmother’s eldest brother, on my father’s side, which is one of the reasons my father always recommended him.

At the time of the interviews Mr. Mwekto had been forced to retire due to a number of medical illnesses – diabetes, high blood pressure, and gout being just a few of the

illnesses which restricted his movements. Because of these factors, I met with him at his home. I met with him on four separate occasions – he was hard of hearing at the time, and this, coupled with my limited Marshallese linguistic skills, made our conversations pretty difficult to navigate, which made more frequent interviews and visits necessary.

I generally dropped by in the afternoon, taking a taxi over to his house in Demontown after teaching at CMI. Mr. Mwekto's wife, grandson, or his particularly aggressive dog would greet me at the door. His wife, who happened to be one of his former students, would announce my arrival, help him out of bed and supported his weight as he walked over to sit with me at his kitchen table. Mr. Mwekto had shaky hands, thick, weak legs from gout, and a gummy smile that reached the twinkle in his pinched eyes. His wife would sit in the adjacent living room throughout most of our conversations, yelling over her translations of my questions or his answers when either one of us couldn't understand each other. While we talked orally, I would snack on cold cups of kool-aid, hot boiled pandanus, or fresh donuts that his wife offered me. To reciprocate for the time he spent with me, I brought over fruit and cans of juice, and later, at his request, a bulk package of frozen chicken legs for his birthday party. Visiting with Mr. Mwekto was always a mixed bag – I never knew what to expect. He had a very racy sense of humor, punctuating our deep conversations with his dirty jokes and a twinkle in his eye.

There were a number of points which stood out from my conversations with Willie. The first, was that to fully understand the Marshallese language, one must also understand the language of *lañ*, *lojet*, and *ene* - or the language of the sky, the ocean, and the earth, respectively. These three types of languages are the building blocks of the

oral traditions. This was actually reflected in his book as well, which was split into chapters focusing on lañ, lojet, and ene.

I learned the most about roro from Mr. Mwekto. On the few occasions that I have witnessed chanting done in other cultures, such as in the Hawaiian culture, chanting seemed to have a specific purpose – for an occasion, a welcoming, or a thank you. I came into our discussions with that preconceived notion, having seen Mr. Mwekto chant during the opening occasions of some Marshallese events in the past. But, according to Mr. Mwekto, Marshallese chanting is different because it is not limited to special occasions. Mr. Mwekto talked about how there are roro for everything – even for specific plants. Also, unlike other Pacific cultures, roro is not limited to certain positions or people – but, it is limited by the family you come from. Certain roro and knowledge are passed down only to family members, and some families can be very guarded about this knowledge. He explained that just as how certain people have specialized knowledge of subjects such as math and psychology, there are specialized knowledge of certain aspects of Marshallese culture, such as roro, navigation or traditional medicines, and that some families hold the monopoly on these knowledges. For his part, Mr. Mwekto said he learned about roro from his grandfather in Kwajalein. His grandfather taught him about the different languages of the earth, and the different names for clouds, currents, and waves – all of which he transcribed into his book. When it came to the origin of roro, his answer varied with different interview sessions. At one point, he mentioned a Marshallese woman named Tarmelu who had taught everyone about roro, including his grandfather. But during another session he said it was Liwātuonmour, a Marshallese woman, goddess, or

deity (her identity depends on who you talk to) who had given birth to the first line of Ralik chiefs, and was known to have lived on Namō atoll. I was fascinated and intrigued by the idea that one of our traditions actually came from a woman. Who were these women who birthed the spoken word? What were they like? I wondered if the other elders I interviewed might be able to give me more solid information.

When asked about whether or not roro is still being used today, his answer was that it is - but that its use has been limited by Christianity. According to Willie, Christianity wiped out most of the roro being used because of the taboo topics of a few of the roro, specifically those that dealt with topics such as sexuality. At the same time, however, he also stated that “manit” or Marshallese culture, was also to blame for the disappearance of roro, because it was manit which policed the use of taboo roro.

While it seemed that most of our discussions focused on roro, Willie also introduced me to the actual performance of “lkid eo an ̇ainjin” – the type of song or chant used for navigation. He was able to perform some of this chant for me, but stopped midway because he was unable to recall the entire chant. It was a lengthy chant, and similarly to the other roro he had performed, moved quickly without a beat or a pause, and with inflections at certain points in his voice.

From this discussion with Mr. Mwekto, I learned some key information: I learned about the different aspects of Marshallese language, the purposes of roro, and his explanations for what he thinks is a dying form due to manit and Christianity. I was also introduced to the importance of Liwātuonmour for the first time. Throughout our discussion of roro, he would actually break out into roro without warning – I only knew that he was

chanting because he spoke quickly, the words flowing over one another without a pause or a beat, and with the inflection of his voice going high and then low at different parts. Afterwards I would ask him if that was a chant, and he would nod with a smile.

### Alfred Capelle



Figure 7 Alfred Capelle pictured here in the Retirement Center

Alfred Capelle was another interviewee who came highly recommended. Mr. Capelle has led a very accomplished career, from Director of the Alele Museum, to President of the College of the Marshall Islands, to serving as an Ambassador, and most recently working at the Office of Manit. He was also directly involved in the work of collections such as *Bwebwenatoon Etto* and the *Marshallese English Dictionary*. Mr. Capelle is tall with long limbs, spoke quietly and confidently, and our conversations flowed smooth and unencumbered. Unlike my interviews with Mr. Mwekto, I only had one

meeting with Mr. Capelle – mostly because he was able to answer my answers quickly and succinctly and also because he had a series of doctor’s appointments throughout the summer that kept him preoccupied. For our interview, we met at the retirement center near the courthouse. While other elders were taking computer lessons, playing cards, and talking story nearby, we discussed orality.

We started the interview by discussing the roro, al in mur, jabōnkōnaan, and bwebwenato. His definitions were similar to those I had found in the dictionary. “Al in mur,” however, was a new type of oral tradition that I had not heard before my interview with him. According to Mr. Capelle, it was a type of song that we used in the past – we did not have Christian songs or the western form of singing, which utilizes harmony and rhythm and other forms. Instead, we sang al in mur. Al in mur is decidedly more spooky sounding, because it does not rely on harmony and utilizes lower pitch levels. Al in mur was used during long voyaging canoes, but it was also used by parents when lulling their children to sleep. Mr. Capelle was not able to provide an example – however he recommended a future interviewee who would be able to – Lobwij Lorak. Following our discussion of al in mur, we then briefly discussed the jabōnkōnaan, which Mr. Capelle explained as a “guideline” or, “rules for conduct”. The definition of jabōnkōnaan is generally limited to “proverb”, so hearing his explanation added to those I had previously read about. Mr. Capelle defined bwebwenato as legend, history and talking story, demonstrating the fluidity of the term.

One of the topics that struck a chord with me was the origin of roro. Mr. Mwekto had put forth the theory that roro originated with Liwātuonmour in a previous interview, so



I decided to propose it to Mr. Capelle to see if he agreed with that theory. Mr. Capelle said that he saw it as plausible, adding that since Liwātuonmour was also the mother of clans, and since she birthed that important Marshallese lineage, it is also plausible that she birthed the roro.

After discussing the different types of orality, I shifted the discussion to the fact that Liwāuonmour and her sister, Lidredrepju, were both known to be rocks – specifically basalt pillars. Ever since I had learned of this, I was fascinated. I saw Lidredrepju in real life, on the rocky shores of Aur, back when I took a trip out there with my mother two years ago while she was campaigning for the Aur Atoll senator's seat. My mother had told me that I really needed to see this Lidredrepju – she impressed upon me the importance of this historical site. When I saw it, however, I have to admit I felt a bit underwhelmed. “That's it?” I thought. It was simply a large rock in the middle of a reef, standing between the island of Aur, Aur and the next island, which was only a few yards away from where we were standing. What made this rock so special? I didn't see any different markings or anything spectacular that would make it stick out. From then on I kept wondering – what is up with the basalt pillar? I kept asking other people why this was such a big deal but I was never satisfied with their response.

I have to say that Mr. Capelle's response was the best response. “Eban jako. Permanence.” he said. “Eban jako” translates to “It will never be gone.” He added that breadfruit trees, coconut trees, even shrines – these decay at some point. But these rocks will always be there. He also added that there is a tangible, familiar quality to it – at any time of day throughout the years, one can simply walk to the other side of the island and

there is Lidredrepju. It is not a mystical imagined being – it is right there in front of you. Children can walk right up to it, swim and jump off of it (though I’m not sure whether they actually do this or not). According to Tobin, the stone was used to sharpen weapons before wars – another interesting concept (Tobin 2002, 51). What I took away from this aspect of our conversation is that it’s a material object that can withstand the test of time.

After doing a bit more research on Lidredrepju and Liwātuonmour in Tobin’s *Stories from the Marshall Islands*, it turns out that while Lidredrepju is still there, Liwātuonmour was cast into the sea by a missionary – Dr. Rife. According to Tobin: “Although the rock (dekā) was thrown into the sea many years ago, the story is still known on Namō or was when I visited there in 1951.” He actually mentions that it was my uncle Dwight Heine who brought him to the rock and told him about the legend. Tobin adds “It is indeed unfortunate, to say the least, that a possible clue to the origin of the Marshallese people has been lost because of the misguided action of an overly zealous missionary. He was obviously trying to eliminate the competition” (Tobin 2002, 54).

Another point that stood out to me during our conversation was Mr. Capelle’s idea that roro had been replaced by modernity. Here Mr. Capelle’s definition of roro differed slightly from Mr. Mwekto. Mr. Capelle explained that roro was used to bring strength to our bodies to accomplish tasks such as building canoes and houses. Following along this line of theory then, his idea is that roro is no longer necessary because our types of daily work has changed. Mr. Capelle explained that today all you need to carry a canoe is a truck – there is no need for a chant as there is less physical strength being exerted in the task. At one point, he even joked that trucks, gas, money, and beer are the new roro. We

both laughed at the joke during this interview but upon reflection I felt there is a profound sadness to that statement.

The last point which stayed with me was our discussion of the structure of roro itself. I asked Mr. Capelle about how people learn to roro – are there specific guidelines to pitch levels, when to speak quickly, slowly, what words to use, etc.? According to Mr. Capelle, there people learn roro through imitation. There are no specific ways of constructing, writing, or performing roro. Imitation was how we learned these traditions from the beginning. This fascinated me – this means that the roro that we listen to today are like time capsules of history. We might not be able to understand all of the words that are used, but just listening to a chant is like listening to another era, another society in which our ancestors are alive and well. One can almost imagine it.

### **Lobwij Lorak**



*Figure 8 Lobwij Lorak pictured here in the Retirement Center*

Lobwij Lorak was the third elder I interviewed. He came recommended to me from Mr. Capelle. Mr. Capelle said that Mr. Lorak stopped at the Office of Mani from time to time just to talk story with him about Mani and culture, and that he (Alfred) had learned a lot just from these discussions. He also mentioned that Mr. Lorak would know more about al in mur. I met with Mr. Lorak at the same retirement center that I had previously met with Mr. Capelle. Mr. Lorak was dark, leathery skin beneath long - sleeved checkered shirts tucked into pleated slacks, his black and gray hair gelled and combed back in thick waves. Mr. Lorak was not working at the time of our interviews, and was supported instead by his family members. Mr. Capelle knew this, and asked me to provide a small monetary compensation for Mr. Lorak as a means of reciprocation for the time he spent helping me. Unlike my other interviews, he spent most of our conversation telling me different bwebwenato, rather than discussing the terminology itself or the purposes behind orality. And rather than defining specific terms through his own interpretation, he generally chose to use bwebwenato as an explanation. Mr. Lorak seemed to enjoy the process of bwebwenato more than the other elders. Unfortunately, I had trouble understanding a lot of his stories – and he had trouble explaining them. Unlike Mr. Capelle, Mr. Lorak spoke less English, so at times he was unable to explain certain ideas and terms to me, and instead recommended that I ask Mr. Capelle.

Case in point – one of his first stories was one that explained the origin of the term “jake jebol eo.” The story centered on a man named Totali Ban, a man who supposedly was unafraid of anything and boasted constantly about his strength - until another man named Bikar wagered that he’d be able to kill him just using a flock of birds. In the end,

Bikar was able to best him, which is when Totali says at the end, “lolok im jake jebol eo.” Unfortunately, I was unable to fully understand the story and its depth. I had a few questions that we were unable to answer because of our language barrier – he had trouble understanding my questions, and I had trouble figuring out how to ask them. But what I did take from the story was the concept that jabolkonnan has origins in bwebwenato, that stories could explain the proverbs themselves, and that these forms could dialogue with one another.

The next story he told was the story of the twelve brothers. This was a story that I have heard before, which centered around eleven brothers who all had one arm and one leg – all except for the twelfth brother who had both his arms and legs. Because he was different, he was ostracized and made fun of by the rest of his brothers. As the story goes, although he was the youngest and the weirdest he was able to save all of his brothers in the end from a demon, using his cunning and his ability. According to the story, the brothers were immortalized as a set of twelve rocks that can still be seen in Arno.

At this point, Mr. Lorak laughed and said that you can never tell with some of these bwebwenato if they're true or not – maybe it was twelve brothers, maybe it was ten. His point being, some of these stories and their details might have changed or evolved over time. What is true, however, is that those rocks in Arno are still there to this day. In this way, Mr. Lorak was able to demonstrate another important aspect of bwebwenato – its use as an origin of landmarks. A number of the bwebwenato he cited were used to explain landmarks in other atolls. This also reminded me of Liwātuonmour and it made me realize that her story was also an origin landmark story.

One of my favorite parts of the interview was when I asked what he considers one of the more important roro to Marshallese culture. He recited a roro which originates from the proverb “korā im ajrā.” Unfortunately, my only recording of his recitation was lost. But from what I remember, it focused on the power of lightning, and the power of women. I first read of this jabōnkōnaan in a collection provided by the non-profit organization Women United Together in the Marshall Islands (WUTMI) headed by Carmen Bigler (one of my later interviewees). They define it as follows:

Women provide stability in rough situations. “Ajrā” is lightning that comes from the center of the sky and strikes only once. This is usually a sign that weather will improve, even if dark clouds appear everywhere and the wind blows very hard. Once women appear and act, like this type of lightning, things will improve and calm down. (WUTMI: Women United Together in the Marshall Islands, 2009)

Mr. Lorak explained that this was a reflection of one of the most important values of Marshallese culture: women’s strength.

### **Nickson David**



*Figure 9 Nickson David pictured here in his office at the Courthouse*

Nickson David was my next interviewee who was recommended to me by both Mr. Mwekto and Mr. Capelle. Mr. David was a bit younger than the other elders I had interviewed, but had just as much experience with Marshallese culture and preservation – which made him an ideal candidate for his position as a judge in cases that dealt with traditional rights to land and inheritance. He had long arms and a shock of gray white hair, thick glasses that he peered over while screening calls and visits from co-workers. He chose his words carefully as he thought through his answers, and studied the papers in front of him with the same interest as if he had just received them that day. The papers he was studying, and which he gave me copies of, were handouts he had collected over the years that included roro that I have not seen published anywhere else, as well as jabōnkōnaan and other Marshallese terms. We referenced these sheets throughout the interview, and Mr. David used them as a guide for our conversations. He went through the different jabōnkōnaan and roro that he found interesting and explained the depth or added a definition of his own for each one.

Mr. David's interview differed from the others in two ways: one was that his focus and specialty seemed to be his ability to break down specific Marshallese words to their roots, and to give their definitions more depth. For instance – he broke down the word “Irooj” which is the Marshallese term for chiefs, to “erwuj” which means multiple people, which refers to the multiple people coming together for that one person – for the Irooj. In this respect, Mr. David was able to explain that our language itself is a reflection of our culture and customs – in this case, our respect for our Irooj is indicated by the specific

word chosen for them. On the other side of that coin, the Irooj is not just a single entity representing power, but he also represents the power of all the people who support him. The second pivotal difference between his interview and the previous interviews was his emphasis on *manit*. *Manit* is defined in the Marshallese English dictionary as “Custom; behavior; conduct. *Ejeja manit*. He knows how to conduct himself. *Ejeja kilen komanit*. He knows the workings of protocol (Abo, Bender, Capelle 1976, 213).” His assertion was that *roro* and *bwebwenato* are inseparable from our culture and customs – and that they are influenced but also conduits of the practice of *manit*. He also mentioned that *manit* does not just refer to the way people act but also to language, and that to fully understand the depth of *jabonkoonan* and *bwebwenato*, one must first understand *manit*.

Another aspect of our conversation I found interesting was when he discussed the *roro* of Ebon. This was a specific chant that celebrates the story of the Morning Star, the ship which landed on Ebon atoll that brought the first missionaries to the Marshall Islands. This chant is still repeated, even during church services. It not only reiterates a historical event that can be corroborated by outside sources but it also fuses two forms of thought – it is a Marshallese tradition celebrating the introduction of a foreign tradition or religion. Genealogy was another theme to our conversation. According to Mr. David, *bwebwenato* and *roro* are important because you learn about the family lines through these mediums - not from anything written down. As stated earlier, genealogy is an incredibly important part of Marshallese culture. To demonstrate this importance, he gave me a copy of a lineage of chiefs, which included my great grandfather Jetnil, who, it turns out, is the connection between me and Mr. David – we are both descendants of Jetnil. Equally



interesting was the fact that one of the first names listed at the top of the chart, the mother of all the chiefs, is a woman named “Liwatoimour,” which is a different way of spelling Liwātuonmour. I asked Mr. David if this was in fact the same Liwātuonmour who birthed the Ralik chiefs. He paused to think about it, but shook his head. He only said that the people on the chart are usually real people – not characters from bwebwenato or inqñ. His answer also told me that from Mr. David’s perspective, the characters in these stories are not historical figures, but rather mythical characters.

### **Carmen Bigler**



*Figure 10 Carmen Bigler pictured here in the kitchen of her home*

The importance of genealogy was a topic which was revisited in my interviews with Carmen Bigler. Mrs. Bigler received her Bachelor’s degree in Anthropology from University of Hawai’i when there were very few Marshallese women attending and going to college, before returning home to the Marshall Islands to work at various government

positions. She became one of the more well-known figures in Marshallese history when she became elected, as the only woman, to the Congress of Micronesia in 1965. She was also a co-founder of WUTMI or “Women United Together in the Marshall Islands,” a highly influential non-government organization for women and has held various leadership positions within the government. Unlike the other elders I had interviewed, I actually grew up with Mrs. Bigler, knowing her as one of my tougher, charismatic grandmothers from my mother’s side. As a child I remember tagging along with my mother when she dropped by her house just to talk story. This time I went solo to talk orality with Mrs. Bigler at her home in Batkan. Ms. Bigler always struck me as tall, almost overbearing with an attitude that never backed down or apologized, accentuated by graceful hands that swayed as she joked and teased those around her. She had just recently had surgery on her leg, and was still in a cast. But this did not make her any less sharp. She thanked me for the banana bread I had baked her (as per instructions from my mother as a thank-you for her assistance) and then proceeded to critique my less-than-stellar kajin majel. After she had her fill of thoroughly teasing and making fun of me, we began our conversation.

What stood out about my bwebwenato with her was the reasoning she gave for the types of bwebwenato and roro she focused on. When I asked about her knowledge of bwebwenato and roro, she began by saying that she did not feel qualified as an expert, and that she only felt comfortable sharing the stories and chants which originate specifically from her own family. She explained that each family has bwebwenato and roro which preserves family history, and which belong specifically to that family. I found

this interesting, because (through my study of the collections) I had come to assume that most bwebwenato and roro are community and culturally based knowledges.

Another important part of our bwebwenato was on how these forms have begun to disappear. While Mr. Mwekto blames Christianity, and Mr. Capelle blames modernity, Mrs. Bigler's argument was that the oral traditions are disappearing because the language itself has begun to disappear. According to Mrs. Bigler, with fewer Marshallese speaking the "proper" form of Marshallese language, and with less knowing traditional and also "ancient" Marshallese language, these forms have begun to lose their power and people are in turn losing their knowledge and understanding of them. In fact, just my use of the term "ancient" to describe certain Marshallese words and ideas demonstrates the chasm that has grown between the language of today and the language of our past.

When I asked her what bwebwenato she would categorize as most important, she named a specific bwebwenato from her family. Their great grandmother, Litarmili, was an Irooj's wife who lived on Majuro. He abandoned his wife and went to Laura to live with other lovers (a common practice back then amongst Irooj, Ms. Brigler added). While in Laura he heard from others that his wife, rather than waiting around for him, had left with her family to the island of Arno. The Irooj immediately took a fleet of canoes with him to Arno, retrieved Litarmili, and then went to live on a piece of land called "Mon kiri." The women who had been his lovers decided to see go and check out their competition. When they arrived, Litarmili came out and performed a roro: "Litarmili kabuñ karein Majuro/ Julele julele kotabal lañ/ ña wot itobar Irooj eo." These lines can be loosely translated to, "Litarmili honors/worships the women of Majuro/ Reach, reach for the heavens/ I'm the

only one to reach the chief. “ In this roro, Litarmili is basically teasing and shaming the other women, claiming that she alone was able to reach the chief in his high position. Mrs. Bigler told me that this roro is the most important and well-known roro to their family, and explained that its significance lies in the fact that it demonstrates the importance of their great grandmother, that the Irooj turned away from his lovers and sailed to Arno just to win her back. And the fact that Mrs. Bigler chose this roro further demonstrates the importance of their matrilineal line, and the woman who began that line.

### **Korent Joel**



*Figure 11 Korent Joel, pictured here in the dining room of my parents' home*

The second to last interview was with Captain Korent Joel. Captain Korent was continuously referenced by the other elders, especially when the subject of navigation and navigational chants came up. He came highly recommended by my parents and by

anyone I talked to about the topic of orality. Captain Korent is one of the last Marshallese endowed with the knowledge of traditional Marshallese navigation, a remnant of the past. He is also skilled and well-versed in western forms of navigation. He served as one of the principal informants for Joseph Genz's dissertation *Marshallese Navigation and Voyaging: Re-Learning and Reviving Indigenous Knowledge of the Ocean* (2008).

We met at my parents' home in Rairok. Our meeting was set up by my cousin Senator Wilbert Heine, who knew him personally and also drove him over for our interview. Because I had been told over and over how important and knowledgeable this man was of the sea, I imagined Captain Korent to be a giant, burly seaman, who defied the odds of the ocean and who could easily survive stormy nights on canoes and chartered ships, with thick hands for hoisting up sails and carving canoes. I was surprised then, to welcome a thin, somber man to my home, who was almost as small as I was - smaller than the rest of the elders I had interviewed. He was withdrawn, quiet, with thin shaky hands, cracked, taut skin, and half his face sagging slightly more than the other half. He informed me that he had suffered from the debilitating consequences of a stroke for many years. Everything he said hung with a dark heaviness. Case in point – the reason for his stroke. Captain Korent explained that he felt the stroke came about as punishment for assisting Genz in his study on navigation. Because Genz was an outsider, and not rimajel, he felt that perhaps his decision to assist him had offended someone. Who he was referring to was unclear – he mentioned that it could be other Marshallese who disagreed with him. But he also hinted that it could be a more ominous, omniscient presence that was punishing him. This demonstrates Captain Korent's perspective that

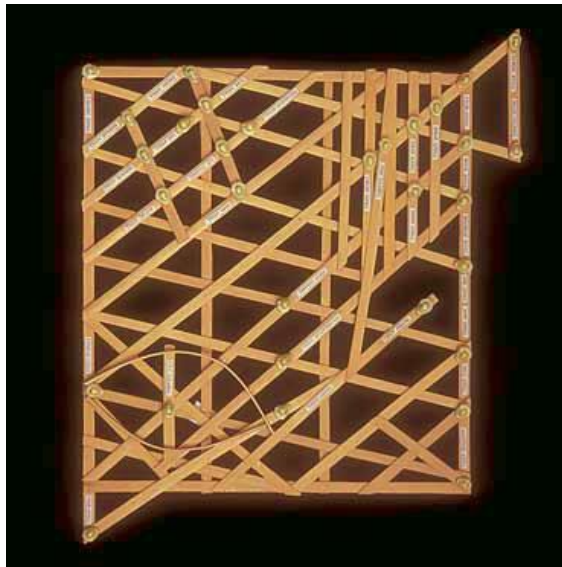
respect and reverence towards traditional Marshallese knowledge is necessary – not only because it deserves respect, but also because of the consequences should that knowledge be used improperly. It was also the only time during my interviews that an elder felt, saw, and openly explained the consequences of assisting an outsiders' research. The previous elders reiterated that they had no problem helping researchers – as long as it meant that it would help preserve knowledge in the long run.

This story also demonstrates is Captain Korent's belief that there are real world consequences for the decisions that we make about knowledge. For Marshallese, knowledge is not something that is shared readily. It is not a right for everyone to have. Rather, it is given to those who are deemed worthy. Navigation, traditional medicine, tattooing, lineage, magic – these knowledges were drenched in secrets that were passed down between family members, and were not readily shared with others.

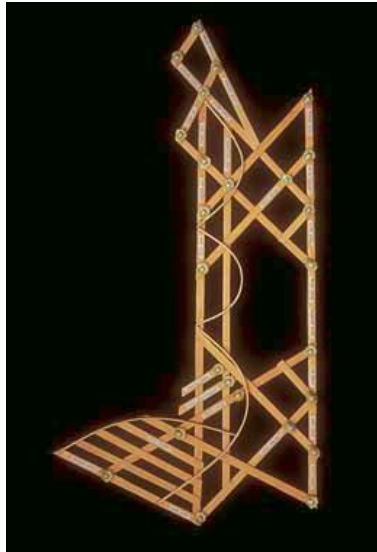
Captain Korent also told me about learning traditional navigation from his grandfather. He remembers being told to lie on a canoe, and asked which direction the waves were going in. If he got it wrong, he said, he was severely beaten. When I expressed my shock at the severity of the consequences, he responded that his instructors had to be tough because if a navigator made the wrong calculations, people would die.

Another important part of our conversation was our discussion on stick charts. Because stick charts plays a key factor in this study (I discuss this later in Chapter 2), and because of his expert navigational experience, I was curious about his knowledge of them. From a book entitled *Handicrafts of the Marshall Islands* which was written by Judy

Mulford, I showed him the section entitled “Meto” which displayed a number of different stick charts (Mulford 2006, 7). I asked him to show me how they’re generally used. When he looked at the different versions however, he said that two out of three of the stick charts shown were not real stick charts – he said he had never seen anything being used like that before, and that they, the “medo” and the “rebbelib” stick charts, were fake. See figure 12 and 13 below.

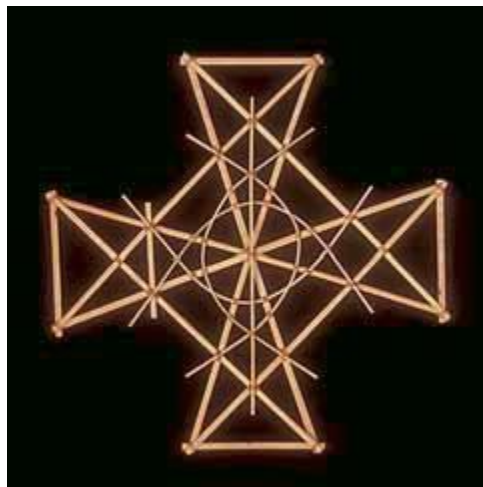


*Figure 12 - The "Rebbelib" stick chart. Photograph from the Handicrafts of the Marshall Islands booklet (Mulford 2006, 7)*



*Figure 13 - The "Medo" stickchart. Photograph from the Handicrafts of the Marshall Islands Booklet (Mulford 2006, 8)*

The only one which he recognized was called the “Mattang” or the “Wappepe,” a stick chart defined by the booklet as “a small, square shaped teaching chart that identifies wave patterns formed around a single island” (Mulford 2006, 8). See figure 14 below.



*Figure 14 - The "Wappepe" or "Mattang" stick chart. Photograph from the Handicrafts of the Marshall Islands Booklet. (Mulford 2006, 8)*



He also expressed his distaste with stick charts being sold in stores as Marshallese handicrafts for tourists. He recounted an experience where he saw a man making a stick charts to be sold. He asked the man if he knew how to use the stick chart, to which the man replied sheepishly that no, he had no knowledge of it – only how to make it. Captain Korent finished this story by saying that this could have dire consequences, and that he felt it was not right to be making and selling these stick charts, and buying them as well, if one had no knowledge of how to use it. In this sense, he seemed to be alluding that he disagreed with the marketing and commercialization of stick charts – he hinted there could be dark consequences if this practice kept happening.

Besides this discussion on stick charts, I attempted to guide our conversation to the ikid. According to Captain Korent, there are only two types of ikid – Ikid eo an ̄ainjin, as was previously mentioned, as well as what he called “Ikid en an Kabua,” which tells the story of one of the paramount chiefs’ journey and battle. He also admitted to learning the ikid, that it was especially useful tool for navigation, and that the kok̄lā (navigational signs) throughout it are still relevant and true to this day. When I asked him to recite the ikid however, he politely refused – actually he did not so much refuse as he ignored the question and changed the subject multiple times (a cue to me that basically meant no.) He would only say the other person who would be able to recite the ikid in its entirety, and recite it well, is Irooj Mike Kabua. Unfortunately, Irooj Mike was traveling off island throughout the summer that I was researching on Majuro, and so I was unable to ask him to recite it for me.

## Nidel Lorak



*Figure 15 Nidel Lorak pictured here in a conference room in the Nitijel*

My last interview was with Senator Nidel Lorak. Senator Lorak represents Arno Atoll in the Nitijela, the government of the Marshall Islands. Senator Lorak was recommended by a number of the other elders also. He has a long standing history serving as senator in the government, and at one point was the Ministry of Education (MOE) and helped put together a number of materials for Marshallese education. One of them is a book I reference later – *Naan Ko Rouné*. I had been trying to get in touch with him for a number of weeks, and finally reached him. When we set up an appointment, though, he didn't make it, and I found later something came up. Luckily, we were just able to squeeze in one interview the morning that I was about to fly out of the Marshall Islands back to Hawai'i. We met in one of the meeting rooms in the Nitijela, where his office is located nearby. Senator Lorak had trouble walking due to diabetes and gout and walked around with the assistance of a thick cane. He also shaded his eyes with pair of black

sunglasses that gave him a cool look. As with many Senators, he was comfortable speaking and expressing his views and was lively and very charismatic.

Because of his previous work with MOE, most of his ideas and views focused on curriculum development, and what he saw as a failure on the part of the ministry to do proper development of Marshallese materials. He was adamant in his support of further research to be done to promote Marshallese culture in schools, and was very critical of the Marshallese Language Arts (MLA) program. He talked about how Marshallese cultural knowledge was generally passed down through grandparents, but that this has changed so that more children are learning about culture through MLA classes rather than at home. “Ikijoñ jetok pein bubu im jimma,” he said. “Jitok pein bubu im jimma” is a saying which basically means laying with one’s grandparents and listening to their stories, a practice that seems to be happening less and less, evidenced by what he sees as a lack of knowledge of practices such as roro in the younger generations. He compared the Marshall Islands to Hawai’i and Guam, saying that Hawai’i was now working to revitalize their language, as is Guam, but that most of it is gone because of privileging American knowledge and the English language over their native tongue.

His fear of losing cultural knowledge was one of the reasons behind writing his children’s book, *Naan Ko Rouné*, a collection of jabōnkōnaan, bwebwenato, values, and ideals. I asked him why he felt it was important to write this knowledge into a book, especially in a culture that seems to value orality more than the written text. Nidel agreed with this viewpoint adding, “Armij in majol ejjab armij in jeje” meaning, “the people of the marshalls are not people of writing.” He went on to explain that if one was to look back on

history, writing was a practice done by “ripelle”, or outsiders and foreigners. Despite this perspective, he also saw that more and more elders were passing away, and that their knowledge of Marshallese culture and values were dying with them. He felt that writing this book, and other Marshallese materials like it, was a way of saving that knowledge and eternalizing it for future generations. Senator Lorak’s act of writing his book represents the countless other rimajel before and after him who have used textual production, something decidedly western and non-Marshallese, as a way of cultural preservation. Writing, then, does not mean succumbing to foreign influence and doing away with traditional Marshallese culture and values, but instead a way to preserve those values, and to keep Marshallese culture alive. His book is one example of how Marshallese have used text to survive and thrive. It was heartening to hear this, and to see another elder corroborate what I have been suspecting all along – that there does not need to be a divide between Marshallese oral traditions and written traditions. That instead, the two can and should support one another.

### **Reflections on Preservation**

Initially, I went into my field research expecting at least a few solid answers regarding our oral traditions. From my interviews, I learned more about the act of bwebwenato, I developed a deeper understanding of certain jabōnkōnaan, I imagined the past as I listened to Mr. Mwekto roro, and I was introduced to the ikid, al in mur, and to Liwātuonmour and Lidepdepju, the possible foremothers of roro. I felt I had developed a

slightly deeper understanding of the Marshallese oral traditions. And yet I was not by any means closer to being considered an “expert.” If anything, I came away with more questions, and more holes, than definite answers. I realized that Marshallese oral traditions are so much more fluid than I had imagined, and that their definitions and purposes varied according to who you spoke to.

With this group of elders for example, I only came to a realization later that most of my interviews had been with Marshallese men. This was mostly because I had received more suggestions for male interviewees rather than female interviewees. This might suggest a gender bias amongst my informants. Although I only highlighted the interview with Carmen Bigler, I had actually also interviewed two other women whom I had not included here: Josepha Maddison, Deputy Historic Preservation Officer, and Mary Silk, a fellow instructor at College of the Marshall Islands. I was unable to include these interviews however, because of logistical errors – my discussion with Josepha Maddison had been one of my first interviews and this was reflected in my initial stumble: the entire interview unfortunately had been recorded over a tape recorder that had no tape. With Mary Silk, we had numerous conversations but these were never officially recorded, and we were never able to book a solid interview because of our schedules. Both had valuable insight into oral traditions that would have added to this portfolio. However, as this portfolio is only the beginning, I do hope to revisit these interviews with these women, and to also include more women in general, and build upon what I have in this portfolio for future research endeavors. Having this awareness did bring to mind a few questions: namely, how would my insights into oral traditions have varied if I had interviewed as many, or

more, women than men? What kinds of information and stories would I have learned? In what way would gender play a role in oral traditions? In the end, though, I have to be content with what answers I do have.

My interviews taught me that oral traditions was a way to process the world around us, and to pass down our stories, history, values and customs. At the same time, however, I also realized that oral traditions are more than ancient or archaic knowledge that needs to be preserved like a dusty museum artifact behind a glass case. If anything, these traditions are living, breathing entities that are yearning to be experienced, over and over again. Experiencing these traditions is experiencing the past, listening and honoring our ancestors and the knowledge that helped keep our people alive and thriving for thousands of years.

As I turn my focus towards textual evidence of expression in the next chapter, one of the themes which stayed with me from these interviews and which guided my overview and analysis of the following texts was the purpose behind our need to speak and tell stories – our intrinsic desire to preserve. It is this desire to save our thoughts and ideas, to capture an imprint of life as it passes by us – it is this is that ultimately guides many Marshallese into a new era, into a form of expression.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Compasses and Writing in the Sand: European Contact**

Before examining the texts written by Marshallese, I would like to begin by introducing and analyzing the recorded observations I was able to find documenting first Marshallese contact with the European form of writing/storytelling. As explained in earlier chapters, Marshallese had been using elements from our own environment to tell stories and convey knowledge centuries before the European explorers appeared with their own tools (namely the pencil and paper). These introductions, however, pushed Marshallese into another realm of storytelling beyond orality, tattoos, and stickcharts: textual production.

The earliest documented Marshallese interaction with other forms of writing that I could find was with explorer Otto von Kotzebue, as well as with missionaries Edward Doane and Hezekiah Aea, who were the first to teach formal writing, and the first to write and publish Marshallese language texts. The earliest recording came from Kotzebue's first exploration in the Marshall Islands – specifically on the atoll of Odje (now known as Wotje). As explained earlier, Kotzebue was in the Pacific to explore and chart the islands that were there for Count Romanzoff of Russia. They made two trips to the Marshall Islands, or what they called at the time the “Radak” or Ratak chain of islands. The first was for three months in 1817. The second was seven years later in 1824. At one point during the act of meeting and greeting, a Marshallese native who is identified as “Lagediak” by the explorers, along with a group of other Marshallese, are all invited by

Lieutenant Schischmareff on board their ship on January 21, 1817. At one point, the Lieutenant attempted to persuade Lagediak to show him the group of islands around the area. Lagediak used a compass to point that the islands were in the South. The Lieutenant then immediately wrote down those directions, and in doing so introduced Marshallese to their act of European writing:

The writing was a new discovery, which excited their attention as well as reflection. I tried to make Lagediak understand that all we spoke was written down on the tables; wrote his name down and said, that is Lagediak. He was greatly frightened to see himself represented by such singular figures, and seemed to fear that he would be obliged, by magic, to assume such a shape; the others laughed heartily at the comical Lagediak on the tables, while he himself stood in great uneasiness, expecting the terrible metamorphosis. (Kotzebue 1967, 68)

The initial reaction of rimajol to the foreign concept of writing was fear, as well as uneasy laughter and fun. From Schischmareff's observations, we are led to believe that rimajel saw writing as a form of magic – that writing could be seen as a separate representation of what it is actually recording. The idea of rimajel reacting in this way to writing seems charming – while there is definitely fear recorded, it seems as if the laughter also meant that the act of writing was just as much a novelty to them as the other foreign items they were introduced to by these explorers. This fear, however does not last long, and Schismschmareff was able to get Lagediak to use the pencil to mark channels and, passages, and the other group of islands.

Another instance in which we see Marshallese using writing in the accounts of Kotzebue is a scene in which Kotzebue is interacting with islanders on an atoll they called "Torua," which we know now to be Taroa, an atoll in Maloelap. At one point Kotzebue is speaking with Langedju, a chief of an atoll they called "Olot" (it is unclear which



Marshallese atoll they're referring to here). Like his Lieutenant, Kotzebue is again asking the islanders to help him understand the geography of the surrounding islands. Kotzebue drew on the sand the island groups which Lagediack had previously identified, while stating their names. While Lagedju was impressed with his knowledge of the names of the islands, he also took it upon himself to correct the map he had drawn, effectively using the stick to draw the map as he saw it. "The map, as was afterwards proved, was very correct; for, as I discovered all these groups, I have accurately copied it in my notebook (Kotzebue 1967, 108-109)," wrote Kotzebue.

This situation did not utilize the traditional writing method of pencil and paper, which meant that Langedju did not have the same type of wild reaction as Lagediack. However, it did portray a type of writing through the use of a visual representation. If writing is merely a visual recording of a thought, then why would this instance not count as writing? In this case, Langedju immediately understood what Kotzebue was trying to ask, and took up the use of the sand and stick to correct, display, and pass on his knowledge of the surrounding islands.

These two observations are so far the earliest recordings I have found which portray Marshallese interactions with writing. While they are two decidedly different situations, they are similar in the sense Kotzebue and his officers create the situation by their attempts at understanding the geography of their new surroundings. It is only with the assistance of the Marshallese that they come to this knowledge – and it is only through the act of writing and the use of visual representation that the two groups are able to communicate this knowledge to one another. In one situation, the writing uses tools which

are foreign to the Marshallese – this is probably more or less the reason for their fear and shock. Their reaction is probably more to do with the tools being used, as well as the use of alphabets – a foreign concept to a culture that so far has had no need for writing its language down. The second situation incites less fear and shock because it utilizes tools from their own surroundings, and also because these tools are used to represent something they probably have experience teaching – navigation. Navigation is something that was always a part of traditional Marshallese knowledge – it would make sense that Langedju taught him this information with ease.

### **Holy Printing Presses: Publishing the Word of God**

When I first decided to conduct a survey of all Marshallese literature, I knew I would be leaving out an important part if I did not consider the Bible. The Bible is probably the only text that is widely read by most of the Marshallese population. I sent out a message to my older cousins, aunties, and uncles asking them what they would consider important Marshallese texts and, of course, the Bible was the first suggestion. The conversation which arose out of this suggestion was what I found interesting, and telling.

My cousin Daisy, a staunch church goer who proudly sports a “Couples with Christ” sticker on her car on Majuro, was the first to suggest the Bible and wrote: “I often think about those Marshallese who never graduated from college, but were responsible for translating the Bible to Marshallese language. They did a great job in translating a comprehensive piece of writing to our language.” There was some debate amongst my

family members about where to find the original translators until Jack, a former Peace Corp Volunteer, wrote “The Bibles here never list who translated, I've looked, I have one that goes back to the 1970's. Too bad because that bible is so well written, so tight language-wise--it must have taken some highly sophisticated people to put it together and thoroughly edit it.” My cousin Sherwood responded to this statement by writing, “Well, they did it in a time when men sailed thousands of miles without navigational instruments; predict weather for up to weeks in advance; knew that "kajur wot wor" well before other civilizations realized that "unification is power..."so yea, I agree with Jack that there must've been some highly sophisticated people who helped translate the Bible.”

Both Daisy, Jack, and Sherwood articulate the admiration many people have for the first translators who did not have the luxury of schooling and yet possessed the intelligence to translate a comprehensive work of literature into a completely different language and culture. What arises from the above conversation not only supports my argument that the Bible is one of the most well-known Marshallese texts – but also that the contributions of the Marshallese in the process of the translation was clearly overlooked. Years later here we are, debating over social media about who could possibly have contributed hours of detailed and thorough translations to provide the Marshallese with the text which has had the biggest influence on our culture.

Unlike the rest of the Pacific, the introduction of missionaries to the Marshallese was relatively late. Marshallese had attained a fierce reputation as violent, and so many ships stayed away from the islands from the early 1500s to the early 1600s (Walsh 2012, 125). The first missionaries that the Marshallese were introduced to was through Captain

Ichabod Handy. Handy had been trading for some time with Marshallese and wrote of their peaceful interactions. He offered to transport a Reverend Dr. George Pierson to his assignment at the newly established mission in Kosrae, with a brief stop and introduction in the Marshall Islands. This resulted in the establishment of the Protestant mission. It was not until 1855 that Dr. Pierson negotiated and gained the permission of Chief Kaibuke to establish a mission on Ebon. In 1857, the first group made up of George and Nancy Pierson, Edward and Sarah Doane, and Hawaiian missionary Hezekiah Aea sailed aboard the ship *Morning Star* to make their home on the atoll of Ebon. This historical moment was mentioned earlier by both Willie Mwekto and Nickson David as a roro. Mwekto performed and translated a part of the roro for me – he explained that the roro focused on how the Marshallese not only welcomed these missionaries but helped pull in the ship themselves. A part of the chant he performed is actually explained in *Etto ñan Etto*. Apparently Kaibuke’s followers chanted, “Ñijir Tomede Eo,” as they pulled on a big rope tied to the ship, welcoming the missionaries. Alele sources explain that “Ñijir Tomede Eo” is chanted to memorialize the initial coming of Christianity to the Marshall Islands, and also symbolizes energized and loyal friendship (Walsh 2012, 138).

This event is also recorded in Tobin’s collection through a parable or prophecy as told by Jobel Emos of Kwajalein in 1975. The parable/prophecy tells the story of a triton, a type of conch shell, and a tattler, a type of bird. The conch shell asks the bird to fly around the Marshall Islands. As they fly, they sing and prophesize of a coming “light.” e sang, “Kidid, kidid, ukokōj ña/ Ukokōj raan eo. Ukokōj raan eo/ Raan eo, raan jeeded eo, raan ñweeded eo/Raan eo epādtok ilikin ña in ia in ke?/Ilikin Mile O-O. (Ijuweo)”

(Tobin 2002, 157). According to Emos, the meaning of the song can be translated to “Tattler, tattler, turn over (discover) the rock pile to find the light./Turn over the dawn, turn over the dawn./The dawn it is dawn already (jeeded eo) / The dawn is the color of sunrise/ The dawn is here on the ocean side of where....?/ On the ocean side Mile O-O. (Over there)” (Tobin 2002, 157). It was after singing this song that the Morning Star ship arrived. Emos explained to Tobin that the triton was a metaphor for the gospel because of its gleaming shell while the tattler represented the Morning Star, which carried the gospel (Tobin 2002, 157-158).

This story by Emos reveals the initial welcoming reaction of Marshallese to the missionaries. Rather than an interaction of war and violence, the missionaries were welcomed with open arms. As we will see from the writing accounts of Hezekiah Aea and Doane, this was also reflected in their reaction towards the new religion as well as the act of reading and writing. From what I could find in the letters at Hawaii Mission House Museum, both Doane and Aea were chiefly responsible for the first printing and translation of Marshallese language. The first appearance of printing is in a letter from Doane to a Reverend C.W. Clark on June 12, 1860:

I send you copies of your printing during the past year. We have printed a primary book and new hymns. The book we are beginning to use already....I need hardly ask your opinion of the worth of these books to us. We esteem them more than silver and gold.

From this account we can make a few observations: the first printing that the rimajel interacts with seems to be a primary book and a book of hymns. We also see the importance of the written word to the missionaries who find the prints valuable, “more

than silver and gold.” Doane continues for another few paragraphs discussing the importance of attaining a printing press and how this is necessary for all missionary work. Another interesting line is where he writes “Our hymns are a great pleasure to us, one or two can read them, and many, children especially, can repeat the hymns.” This reminded me of the traditional form of learning that Marshallese received and was written about by Erdland later – the act of listening and repetition. It would make sense that rimajel had no trouble listening and learning this new knowledge.

While Doane takes the lead in printing and translating the texts from English to Marshallese, it is the Hawaiian missionary Aea who takes up the task of teaching students reading and writing. In a letter which he began writing in August 27, 1860 and ends on June 8, 1861, Aea records his experience and his progression:

Aug 27. Began my teaching the language of this island. On that day I taught the children letters. The language of this island is hard, unlike the language of Apaiang. Some words of that place resemble a little the Hawaiian language, but the language of Ebon here does not resemble at all the Hawaiian language, so I have trouble in teaching the words of the old-timers of this island, but we are not discouraged in teaching the language....I have taught the children the local alphabet [here he gives some examples of the local language].”

Here we see that Aea was actually struggling with the language. The language of “Apaiang” that he compares to Hawaiian language could be one of the languages spoken in the other islands in Micronesia where they had settled previously. Here is also the first written mention of a “local alphabet.” Unfortunately, I was reading a translated version of the letter so I did not have a chance to look at what was the examples of the “local language”.

We learn more about the reactions of Marshallese to reading in a second letter on August 22, 1861, when we see the appearance of another section of the Bible - the Book of Matthew:

There were in the house some twenty youth. No sooner did they see the new sheets – than there was a universal call, one for me – one for me- and getting them down they sat around my table and another small lamp on the floor. And directly there was the murmur of all these voices reading readily what we had printed and they had not before seen. Some new letters they had not before seen balked them somewhat, but these they soon mastered – and then read right along like good American readers. We have now about one hundred children and youth and young men and women – who all read something we have printed – and about fifty, reader of those portions of the Bible we have printed. At the end of the island where we live all the children and youth are readers, and have got along so far we have closed this school for four days in the week.

The reaction of the Marshallese as recorded by Doane is one of appreciation and awe, as well as an eagerness to read. Doane's comparison of Marshallese readers to "good American readers" is condescending, but nonetheless portrays how well the Marshallese were reading already. Also, we get a ball park figure of the amount of Marshallese at the time who were reading – about "one hundred children and youth and young men and women." Interesting to note here is how most of the population is the youth who are taking up this new act – and also that there is equal gender inclusion – women, as well men, were reading.

I was surprised by these accounts – it is clear from Doane and Aea's observations that Marshallese did not resist this new form of learning. In fact, from the missionaries' observations, they embraced it and seemed to enjoy it. Their acceptance could be because of a number of reasons: it could be because it was simply a novelty, something foreign and exotic to the rimajel. It also might have been that rimajel were and are

naturally curious and inquisitive, and appreciated gaining a new form of knowledge. Some credit could also be given to the persistence and what seems to be the mild manners of these missionaries – they didn't seem to try and establish too many laws, not until a few years later, and they also seemed to have established comfortable relationships with members of the community. It should also be noted that the missionaries emphasized kajin majel, Marshallese language, rather than English language. This showed some savvy and understanding on their part – it was much easier to communicate and to teach their new religion since they prioritized the local language over their own. Either way, the rimajel didn't seem to be co-opted or forced into this new tradition in any way. On the contrary – they welcomed it with open arms.

However the ultimate question still has yet to be answered: who were the Marshallese who helped translate the original Bible into the Marshallese language? I was able to find the answer in a section of the first letter that referenced teaching the Marshallese students. On December 21, Aea wrote, "Mr. Doane and I began the printing of the Bible in the language of this island, the translation being done by Mr. Doane and he and I making the corrections." This seems to be the only reference, and the earliest reference, that I could find to my question of who initially translated the Bible to the Marshallese language: it was Doane and Aea. And, according to their letters, they had no specific Marshallese informants assisting them. Either Doane or Aea learned the language from living in the community, and so they had no need for a specific teacher, or they had a specific teacher but did not feel that he or she was important enough to include



in their letters. Ultimately, this was a disappointing answer to my question, and will remain a mystery until some other form of evidence is found.

### **Marshallese Written Literature: Prolific Protests and Preservation**

We Marshallese have used pandanus sticks to tell the stories of the ocean. We have carved our lineage into our skin, used coconut fronds to depict our familial values, and we have used our voices to propel canoes and connect to the spirits. With the introduction of the pen, the pencil, the alphabet, as well as a new language, we Marshallese embarked into the modern age of expression: the written word.

We Marshallese continued to use the written word for the same purposes we used stickcharts and bwebwenato: for preservation. One of the earliest texts which demonstrates this is an article written by one of the interviewees – Alfred Capelle. His article is not only evidence of preservation but also of cultural reflection. The article was published in the *Micronesian Reporter* in 1977, entitled “Marshallese Narrative: The Effects of Change (Alfred 1977, 19).” This article was especially applicable to this portfolio, in that it allowed me to see how another Marshallese would conceptualize and reflect on our oral traditions. In this article, Alfred expressed concern about safeguarding our oral traditions from extinction, which is puts issues of preservation today in perspective when you consider that this concern was articulated as early as 1977. “The people of the Marshall Islands are seriously concerned about the preservation of their tradition and culture and are taking advantage of all possible resources, such as print,

tape-recording, etc., to ensure such preservation” (Alfred 1977, 19). Alfred admits, just as he had earlier, that relying on the written word is necessary to ensure that this type of knowledge would not die out. It is significant that he also mentions tape recordings – which is a reflection of the times since video recording was not yet widely used.

In the rest of the article, Alfred focuses on his observations of a roro expert performing the entire ikid. Much of what he observes were echoed in my interviews as well. “In talking with the chanter, we observed that the old man is sad at the prospect of Marshallese culture inevitably being lost under too strong a foreign influence,” he writes, but takes a positive note in the next paragraph. “On the other hand, however, it is heartening to know that no foreign influence has yet infiltrated Marshallese life to the extent where the more precious and important chants, legends, and so on have been affected by the interjection of foreign, or alien words into them” (Alfred 1977, 19).

I found this observation to be heartening. It is true that foreign words are still relatively rare in most of the bwebwenato and roro that have been preserved. This ensures that listening to roro or bwebwenato is to listen to a time before the foreigners – the oral tradition becomes a capsule in a sense, a vehicle for traveling back in time.

The most applicable part of his article were his observations on taking the chant from the performance to the recording to the actual text itself. Apparently, Alfred faced a number of the same problems as I did when trying to translate the oral tradition into writing. “For example, there are some Marshallese sounds that are not translatable into the Roman alphabet system, and we constantly have to compromise the orthography in order to get the words into written form.” However, he also admits that, “Although the

tape recorded version leaves much to be desired, it is far better than the written version.” He concedes to inevitable differences between hearing and reading a chant – in the end, having a recording is much more effective than writing. “The chant is most effective in the oral-aural channel, and least effective in the written-visual channel” (Alfred 1977, 21). This line felt like a confirmation for my reasoning of not reproducing some of the chants that I had heard. I also appreciated his note that “the teaching and learning of the chants in the Marshallese schools and homes will be implemented through a live, rather than a solely technological channel so that the appropriate and meaningful gestures, for example, might also be preserved” (Alfred 1977, 21).

Alfred’s article is a specific case of writing being used as an act of reflection as well as cultural preservation – a dominant theme in much of my conversations on Marshallese orality. This is reflected once again in a children’s book published by former Minister of Education Nidel Lorak, as mentioned earlier. *Naan Ko Rōūne* was originally published only one year after Alfred’s article in 1978 by the department of Education while the Marshall Islands was still under Trust Territory in 1979.

The book itself is thirty seven pages of jabōnkōnnaan and bwebwenato, all with colorful illustrations indicative of a children’s book, and written entirely in Marshallese. The front cover of the book is aesthetically interesting – below the title is actually a collection of jabonkonnaan in the form of a stick chart. It not only uses a cultural symbol, but it repurposes that symbol by using written text. If we follow my earlier observation of a stick chart being another example of visual literacy before traditional text, then this cover page becomes layer upon layer of visual literacy.

The book is written entirely in Marshallese, and while many of the *jabōnkōnnaan* focus on customs, it also has quite a few sections on appropriate children's behavior. For example, on page 4 there is a picture of a boy sitting on the shoulders of a man with the title being "AJIRI IN LO AERAAR." The word "aeraar" refers to touching shoulders. Below this title is a section which says, "Ajri in irooj. Ajri in irooj ro im ilo an ro rej bok er rej door wot er nai ioon aeraer. Ajri in irooj wot ekkar bwe ren jijet ioon aeran arnej ne rej bok er, ak kojamboik er ekkar nan mantin Majel" (Lorak 1978, 4). Loosely translated, this paragraph is basically stating that only the children of the *Irooj*, the chiefs, are allowed to be seated on the shoulders of the people, and that it is not culturally appropriate for other children to do so.

*Naan Ko Rōūne* is important it is also one of the earliest children's book to be written and published by a *rimajel*. The act of writing again becomes a tool for cultural preservation. It is also a fusion of tradition and modernity. Tradition, because of its emphasis on *jabonkonnaan* and the use of Marshallese language, culture, and customs, and modernity, because of its packaging as a children's book and utilizing a primarily western tool of learning.

While the purpose of the previous forms of expression was mainly for preservation, the written word provided another medium for a new purpose: protest. Before I begin analyzing a few of these texts, it would be useful to understand the historical events which surrounded and influenced these texts – the most applicable of which was the testing of nuclear weapons conducted by the United States from June 30, 1946 to August 18, 1958. During that time, the United States tested a total of 67 nuclear tests, the most powerful of

which was the “Bravo” shot which was the equivalent of 1,000 Hiroshima bombs. Islanders from Bikini, Enewetak, and Rongelap were all displaced because of the program, and our people continue to suffer the numerous consequences from the radiation and contamination of our islands. Writing during this time became a critical tool against the nuclear testing program, and against the many injustices we rimajel were forced to face. The first text that I would like to examine is one written by my uncle Dwight Heine, who was thirty four years old at the time and was also the Superintendent of Elementary Schools in the Marshalls as well as a representative in the House of Assembly in the Marshall Islands Congress. He became the principal draftsman of the petition submitted to the UN regarding the nuclear testing (303). After it was written, he went to Washington where the petition was heard on July 7, 1954.

In this petition, Heine begins by first introducing himself and his background. He begins by showing how schooling was something he had grown up with: “My parents were my first teachers,” and by emphasizing where he went to school, and how he came by much of his education through scholarships and studies in New Zealand, Samoa, and Fiji. By choosing to begin this petition this way, it emphasizes his genealogy of education, shows his credibility as a leader amongst his community, and forces his audience to come to know him as a human being.

His petition also subtly portrays his experience of colonization, and how little control he had in his life at times because of these intruding forces. “Upon finishing this school I was sent back to the Marshalls to teach in the school there at the one I previously attended. My teaching career was interrupted after one year when I was recruited by the

Japanese to work in a phosphate pit. I spent almost all of the war years digging phosphate rocks with picks and shovels,” he writes (Heine 1954, 1). After being forced to dig rocks instead of pursue his teaching, the Americans came, and once again his work was influenced by the surrounding colonizers. This time, he worked for the United States Navy Military Government as an interpreter. He uses this section to remind his audience that it was the Marshallese who willingly assisted the Americans during times of war. Without their help, their work would not have been as effective.

The Marshallese people were a very warlike people less than a hundred years ago, but since then – after Christianization and educated by American missionaries – we have laid down our arms and never picked them up since. During this time we have known of only one murder case and that was over thirty years ago. (Heine 1954)

Rather than just telling his audience that the Marshallese are a peaceful people, Heine skillfully inserts facts about our history - how we “evolved” from a warlike people to a peaceful people who have never had a murder case. By taking the time to emphasize this point, Heine paints the picture of a peaceful people who are bewildered by the horrific consequences of the nuclear testing program. The most telling section of his statement, however, is when he compares how strict Americans were with their laws for something as small as firecrackers, and yet how careless they were with a nuclear weapon.

I have noticed that it is illegal to set off fire-crackers in New York to celebrate the Fourth of July. I read in the paper that several people were arrested for violating this safety rule. The H-bomb is a “super-fire-cracker” which needs “super safety rules” (Heine 1954).

By comparing the way Americans dealt with firecrackers in New York to how they dealt with the H-bomb in the Marshall Islands, Heine is subtly pointing out that there was not enough awareness with how they handled those weapons when it was used in foreign

territory. Obviously, lives in one location mattered more than the other. He ends his statement by driving home the fact that the Marshallese do not agree with the testing, and also holds his audience responsible for the next steps that need to be taken. His language throughout his statement is unfailingly polite, understanding and, once again, subtle. He is not here to start a war with the US – he merely wants them to take responsibility for their actions and “to be a little more careful.” His allusion to the fire crackers in this city he had never been to was an attempt to connect with his audience, while also shaming them. If this city’s government was vigilant on restrictions over something as small as a firecracker, then really they had no excuse for being so callous and irresponsible with a nuclear bomb.

Uncle Dwight’s cousin, Carl Heine (known to our family as Uncle Lan) would later use the act of writing to capture a turning point in the Marshall Islands history – when the country is considering independence, free association with the United States, or remaining a part of Micronesia after becoming a Trust Territory following the events of World War II. Heine published the first, and so far only book by a Marshallese - *Micronesia at the Crossroads* (Heine 1974).

This book covers a period of major political upheaval. The “Micronesian Dilemma” was one that concerned both Micronesian and American leaders as well as leaders from the United Nations. In this book, Heine outlines the colonized history of Micronesia and analyses the different factors to consider regarding the political status of our islands. Should the region be unified as a whole, disregarding the differences in culture and language? Should the region be independent or become another colony of the United

States? What are the benefits and the drawbacks from having these different political status'? What do Micronesians as a people desire? What are their hopes and fears for their future?

In the preface, he addresses the discrepancies between the oral tradition most Marshallese grow up with and the body of literature produced by outsiders and Westerners based on their own ideas of his region:

And I came to realize that the Micronesia of oral tradition and the Micronesia of the written literature are not the same and that, although the assessment of the "outside observer" was nice to have, most of the time it was not a true reflection of the real Micronesia I thought I knew. (Heine 1974, preface)

What is interesting to note here is the division Heine creates between the Micronesia of oral tradition and the literature of Micronesia. The Micronesia of oral tradition is one that he knows, one that is the "real" Micronesia. The Micronesia of the written literature, however, is made up by outside observers, not Micronesians. Ultimately, Micronesian literature is foreign literature – not Micronesian at all. Which is an interesting observation coming from a writer who identifies as Micronesian.

Heine spends the rest of the book discussing a Micronesia that was fraught with political problems and clashing ideals. He saw the status of independence for Micronesia as a lofty construct of American idealism – one that was not plausible for Micronesians. "Americans are part of a society lucky enough to be "born free"; a society that did not have to struggle against the weight of attitudes, values and institutions that accompany traditional societies" (Heine 1974, 45). What are these institutions that he speaks of? He directly names this hierarchy in a later chapter: "Who will benefit the most if Micronesia



should become independent now? Obviously, it will be the traditionalists, the landed paramount chiefs. Independence is considered by them to mean a Micronesia as it was in the past” (Heine 1974, 50) Heine is alluding to the fact that one of the sole reasons why independence is not a viable option is because it will only benefit a small privileged group, and that independence and freedom will not be achieved just by changing the political status of a country. As Heine comes from a non-chiefly family, this critique seems all the more personal.

Besides this, he also mentions numerous times that one of the main problems with striving for independence is the fact that Micronesia is a region – not one single entity. “As an entity carved out of the Pacific Ocean by Westerners, unity and harmony have not come easily to these people, who have pride in each of their respective cultures” (Heine 1974, 75). Here Heine’s writing reflects some of the resentment that many islanders share – a resentment of being forced into a grouping and a category even though our cultures are so different.

Another factor that Heine considers is the limited resources of these islands. He is against independence – not only because of what he sees as false promise and hope, but also because he sees it as impossible for the islands to survive without outside assistance. But what does surviving mean exactly? How have these islands survived on their own without foreign aid for so many years? Shouldn’t a subsistent lifestyle based on the land and the sea be enough? No, says Heine. “The few who are living on a pure subsistence economy are doing so by necessity rather than by choice” (Heine 1974, 60). Heine’s analysis lacks any of the romanticism which many outside scholars and new

Pacific Island scholars tend to lean towards. A subsistence lifestyle, while attractive to those who haven't lived it, is not one that is easy or luxurious. It is also amazing that Heine has the foresight to acknowledge that this will not be changing anytime soon. "The revolution of rising expectations in Micronesia today is unparalleled in all its history (Heine 1974, 68)," he writes, and this rising expectation has continued to grow into today.

On the other hand, however, his lack of faith in the resources of Micronesia demonstrates the kind of thinking which Epeli Hau'ofa has written against in his essay *Our Sea of Islands* – the kind of thinking which has been influenced by colonialist, westernized, and globalized perspectives. Heine quotes Samuel T. Coleridge when he writes "The dwarf sees farther than the giant, when he has the giant's shoulder to mount on." Obviously he sees Micronesia as the dwarf and the United States as the giant. In this statement alone, we see how Heine views the power differences between the two countries, and why he pushes for a freely associated status with the United States.

This is not to say that Heine is not critical of the United States and the way the government administered the islands.

Lack of foresight and unimaginative policies has caused more harm to America's reputation than anything else. Prior to the creation of the Congress of Micronesia, the administration had consistently refused to allow Micronesian participation in the overall planning for Micronesia. (Heine 1974, 73)

Heine directly critiques the administration for not including Micronesians in the planning process, and states that while much of the problem does have to do with Micronesians themselves – the beginning stages of issues stems from the United States' inability to work with those they were governing.

This book is rich with different perspectives and critiques – not only of the United States but also of Micronesian leaders and the Micronesian culture. Heine does not sugar coat nor does he romanticize the Micronesian cultures. He is adamant about considering the realistic possibilities of economy and what true political freedom would look like. Although many of his views might be seen as dated, it is nonetheless a realistic and honest portrayal of one Marshallese leader as he struggles to understand and find solutions for the future of his people.

To date, *Micronesia at the Crossroads* still remains the only book written in its entirety by a Marshallese. However, there have been a number of books published in the past 10 years which have been the result of collaborations between Marshallese writers and outside scholars. These collaborations have garnered considerable publications – the purposes of most of these publications are not necessarily for protest, but once again are meant mostly for preservation, if not just simply storytelling and expression. They reflect a population that has grown comfortable with the written word enough to tell their stories. This population, however, is not fully comfortable just yet, reflected by the fact that most of these projects were spearheaded by foreigners collaborating with one or more Marshallese.

*Mour Ilo Republic eo an Marshall or Life in the Republic of the Marshall Islands* (2006) is a collection of essays. The text is available (as indicated by the titles) in both Marshallese and English versions, and was published by the University of the South Pacific. As the cover states, it was “written by Marshall Islanders” and edited by Anono Lioem Loeak, Veronica C. Kiluwe, and Linda Crowl. Translations were done by Veronica

C. Kiluwe, Maria Kabua Fowler, and Alson J. Kelen. This collection includes seventeen first-hand stories and essays written by Marshallese, and includes the perspectives of government workers, NGO and canoe training experts, Irooj and Leroij (male and female chiefs) amongst others. The collection was published in 2004, commemorating and marking 25 years since the Constitution of the Marshall Islands was enacted. The essays, edited by Linda Crowl, a former Peace Corps volunteer to the Marshall Islands, cover a wide range of topics including women's organizations, Marshallese legends, preserved pandanus, the emergence of mission schools, adoption services, Rongelap nuclear survivors, and the importance of land and canoes.

Emlain Kudo Kabua, former first Lady to the RMI who was married to former President and High Chief Amata Kabua, was interviewed by her daughter Maria Kabua Fowler, and her life story was included in the essay "Kwo ke'e Nan am Detake Ian? Or Are You Ready to be the Wife of an Iroij" (Kabua and Fowler, 72)? Kabua remembers being pledged to Amata from her birth, and her training as a Ierooj. "It was not easy growing up with worwor an iroij because I always had to mind my manners, to learn all the crafts, to serve the iroij the best food, and to act properly, within mantin Majol. If I accompanied iroij, I had to walk behind, with my head bowed, and not look around...If people said hurtful things, I could only answer only politely...My training stood me in good stead for our very public life that was to follow" (Kabua and Fowler, 73). This very personal account of Kabua is one that has yet to be heard or written about by most rimajel and especially by outsiders. The life of a Ierooj is generally shrouded in secrets and rumors.

For a lerooj to come out and openly discuss her life in a public written document is incredibly monumental and important.

This collection is important because it prioritizes Marshallese voices, stories and perspectives. It also leaves room for current struggles, and adapting cultural practices, allowing the authors to decide for themselves what kinds of stories they'd like to be remembered for. The collection would also not have been as successful if Crowl hadn't collaborated with Loeak, who is a lerooj in her own right and who is also a vocal advocate and community organizer for women's organizations. Loeak is also currently the first Lady of the Marshall Islands.

Another recent publication as a result of a collaboration is *Traditional Medicines of the Marshall Islands: The Women, the Plants and the Treatment or Uno in Aelōñ in Majōl: Kōrā Ro, Mar in Uno Ko, Uno Ko*. This was written by Irene J. Taafaki, Maria Kabua Fowler, and Randolph R. Thaman in 2006 and was also published by USP.

Traditional Marshallese herbal medicine is an ancient knowledge that is practiced by a select few families. This knowledge tends to be heavily guarded in secrecy and passed down only to the next of kin. With this collection, we finally see some of these secrets revealed, in both Marshallese and English. It discusses the importance of these medicinal practitioners, the rules and taboos which come with these traditions, and also examines the role these medicines play particularly in women's health and women's roles. Besides essays which explain the history behind the herbal practice, it also includes detailed tables charting which plants are applicable to certain ailments. It also has color

photographs of specific plants, displaying its name, describing its characteristics, and its uses.

In this collection we once again encounter Kabua-Fowler, who, like the previous collection, contributed from her position as the daughter of Irooj and first President Kabua. Her second last name (Fowler) came from the American Peace Corps volunteer whom she married. It is important to note that as the daughter of an Irooj, Fowler had access and rights to certain knowledges which other women or informants might not have been able to claim.

In the preface, Fowler begins by quoting the Marshall Islands Constitution and writes that “We, today, still give thanks and credit to our forefathers whose knowledge and contributions have made our people excel in, amongst other things, the identification and usage of the plants they found on these remote and tiny islands” (Fowler 2006, vii). It is also significant to note that oral tradition, specifically chants, are referenced multiple times within this collection, due to its healing powers.

“Chants play an integral role in Marshallese traditional medicine, albeit one that is less talked about... Used alone, chants can be powerful” (Taafaki, Kabua Fowler, Thaman, 2006, 8). Chants are not only important for carrying tradition and preserving knowledge but for its literal healing power as well.

I include this collection because of the fact that the majority of its success is due to the contributions of a Marshallese woman. It is also another example of a Marshallese using text to preserve traditional knowledge for future generations.

Writing need not serve a specific purpose however – sometimes it can just be a way to play with language and to tell a story. For the past few years, the *Journal* has published separate instalments of poetry written by Cent Langdrik. I have a copy of all the poems he had given to the *Journal*. The manuscript, clearly typed using a type writer, totals twenty poems, all in Marshallese, using different styles and lengths. What is interesting about Langdrik's poetry is that it utilizes the western form of sonnet for many of its pieces, and that it also reflects an author who is merely having fun with language. One of my favourite is a personification piece named "Jet Ek" which loosely translated means "A Few Fish". The first line is "Ewōr juon ek, etan in kupañ" which can be loosely translated to mean "There was a fish whose name was kupañ." Kupañ is a type of well-known Marshallese fish. The next line is "Emman kilin, ak ejaje jipañ," which means "[the fish] had nice skin, but wasn't very helpful." The two lines are humorous and charming to hear because the end words rhyme in Marshallese, and also because it is appealing to hear human characteristics being assigned to an animal – and a very critical characteristic as well. The next line is, "Juon bar ek, etan in bwebwe" means "Another fish whose name is bwebwe" which is again an actual, commonly eaten fish, followed by the line *Na idike, bwe ej bañ a bwebwe* which means "I don't like him/it because they are crazy." This time, Langdrik plays with the word "bwebwe" which means crazy but is also the name of a fish.

Besides Langdrik's playfulness, much of his poetry also reflects an understanding of Marshallese familial values. "Al Eo An Juon Om" is a sonnet about a hermit crab lamenting the loss of his mother, "Kōjatdikdik Eo" is the tragic story of a loving older

brother, the sole provider for his siblings, who passes away and leaves his younger siblings grief stricken and hungry.

What is interesting to note about Langdrik's style of poetry is that he tends to use western forms - specifically sonnets. At some point down the line, I hope that there might be some way to formally publish Langdrik's collection of poetry. It is not only a useful way of encouraging other Marshallese writers, but might also be of use in writing courses in schools – it would allow Marshallese to see, read, and hear a very Marshallese voice.

*Al in Aelon Kein* is so far the only published collection of poetry written by those living in the Marshalls. While it includes a number of outsiders, three quarters of the selections are Marshallese. The collection was published by the Micronitor in February of 2005 by P.K. Harmon, a former theatre and humanities professor from the College of the Marshall Islands who had spent seven years in the Marshalls. In the intro Harmon asks a question that has actually been plaguing me since I started writing: "Is anyone interested in poetry in the Marshall Islands?"

Apparently so. Harmon put out a call for submission and Marshallese poets responded. The entirety of the selections are poetry written in English – though there are two selections which are in broken/pidgin Marshallese/English. Michelle Kramer, who's noted as a "jetsetter who splits her time between New Zealand, Hawaii, and the Marshalls, submitted two pieces – "We Jus Dibberent" and "Me Forgive." "We Jus Dibberent" was particularly interesting:

Borever be in lobe wit my people  
We no good sbeak englis but we dry



Me wand do bwebwenato to you  
 But blease don't be madd  
 Me only dry rrite boetry  
 Me not bwebwe bwguase me no good sbeak englis  
 Me learn jiddik englis and me dry sbell  
 I sorray ib you no can understand me  
 U dry sbeak and rrite my language  
 I bet you mighd strug gal  
 But me understand you one ribelle  
 We all C-Mart only broblem is cannot sbeak same  
 Language  
 Me like say dat we just dibberent  
 Blease blease understand me  
 komool tata (Kramer 2005, 15)

Kramer seeks to embody the voice of a Marshallese who isn't fluent in English, and yet still yearns to have a voice and to have a say in this collection. The character she embodies admits to his or her faults, and yet also takes a stab at the reader when he/she states "U dry sbeak and rrite my language/ I bet you mighd strug gal."

Kitene Kare, who's noted as a worker for Continental Marshall Islands, starts off the collection with her piece entitled "I Hate You":

*I will always love you* he said.  
 Each time I remember these words  
 I see red- red pandanus red bananas  
 red everything like a whore's suffering chamber.  
 His betrayal dragged my soul – there I sat  
 Not caring yet caring  
 As the wind wept upon my back.  
 The words *I will*  
*Always love you* like a mocking.  
 I groomed my soul of its flaws  
 To give to you. You colored it  
 With ashes and dipped it in tuna oil. (Kare 2005, 1)

I found this piece interesting because of the specific imagery: the red pandanus, the red bananas, and also her soul colored by ashes and dipped in tuna oil. Her use of these images of ashes and tuna oil reflects how her soul has been soiled by the relationship. And yet these images – ashes, tuna oil, red pandanus, and red bananas – are decidedly Marshallese experiences.

Marshallese have used writing to convey experiences such as heartbreak through images like those above. We have told our history to American audiences as a way of confronting their government for their thoughtless actions and as an act of defiance and protest. We have told our stories to anthropologists in order to preserve knowledge that could be lost. In short, we as a people have used, and continue to use literature and writing to serve our own needs and purposes. Whether for purposes of preservation, or as a form of resistance against colonialism, writing has a long and rich history amongst my people. What is interesting to note as well is who the dominant writers are – most of them were of mixed ancestry – both Marshallese and European. Others were of chiefly descent. Most were male. Here I am reminded of Van Toorn, who wrote that, “Each act of reading and writing is carried out in a particular political and historical context in which the powerful decide which practices are to be counted as correct and normal, and which will be declared erroneous and insignificant” (Van Toorn 2006, 45). While most of these writers are not going so far as to declare what is erroneous and insignificant, it is worthwhile to acknowledge that the history of Marshallese writing tends to arise from privilege.

However, this history is not, by any means, a complete and full survey of all the literature written by Marshallese – it has not considered the national anthem which was written by Emlain Kudo Kabua, the capstone projects which have been self-published by seniors graduating from CMI, nor does it include the numerous children's books published through the RMI Ministry of Education. My mother Hilda Heine's dissertation *"Tuwaak bwe elimaaajnono": Perspectives and voices. A multiple case study of successful Marshallese Immigrant High School Students in the United States* is the first and only dissertation written by a Marshallese, and is also not included in this history. Much like the gaps between the sticks of the stick charts, there are definitely some gaps within this history. However, what I attempted here was merely the first initial step towards a history of Marshallese writing.

## CHAPTER 4

### IEP JÄLTOK: CONTINUING THE LEGACY

Woman is a basket. Iep jeltok. This is an old Marshallese jabōnkōnaan, and applies well for this next section – my collection of poems. Iep jeltok signifies the importance of female children to the Marshallese culture. When a female child is born, we say “Iep jeltok ajiri ne.” We say that you are fortunate to have a daughter. Daughters inherit the land, the titles, and the clans from their mother, and pass these on to their children. Daughters stay with their families – they give birth to a new line and they also look after their parents in their old age. They are the ones who retain the history, culture, and customs that have been instilled in them. They are the basket whose opening, whose offering, faces towards their family – not away from their family like sons (Iep jeltak), who generally leave their families and go with the families of their wives instead. I like to imagine the baskets the women in my family offered before me – what they each gave to their family with love, laughter, tears. What kinds of stories did they have to tell? What did their baskets look like? What was their offering? And what about me? What do I have to offer?

This entire portfolio, as well as this poetry, is a small part of what I have to offer. Some of this poetry are inspired by stories I have inherited. Some are completely new stories. Ultimately, these are stories of preservation, stories that are meant to preserve a tiny prism of how I, a Marshallese girl living in 2014, sees the world around me. It is definitely a misshapen basket of stories. It is an intricate, layered, worn-out and frayed

basket. It is sun-burnt and poorly made – by someone whose hands are still getting used to the cracked fronds beneath her fingertips.

This collection reflects traditional Marshallese bwebwenato and roro. This means the story itself is at the heart of each piece. Each poem is a narrative. The poetry is also a reflection of roro because it emphasizes sounds, the way the words are shaped by our mouths and by repetition. It is performed, and meant to be spoken out loud, not just silently read. It exists not just for the page, but for a stage.

Which brings about another style that has influenced this collection. Spoken word. Spoken word was my introduction to the interaction between an audience and a poet – that collective, shared space, so reminiscent of storytelling, yet reflecting a new, urban sense of knowing. Spoken word is nitty gritty – it is in your face, it doesn't apologize. It is brash, young, and loud. It sounds more like the Oakland bass bumping, it runs breathless across concrete streets. It is not delicate. Spoken word is also what inspired me to begin this journey, to start to investigate our oral traditions, and the lineage of writing that came before me.

And since so much of this poetry is inspired by those traditions, it means this poetry is also old. It is the history of our islands – the way I see our history unfolding first through Liktañur, Liwātuonmour, and Lidepdepju, then missionaries and the wars, then nuclear testing, colonization, which means these are also poetry of protest. It is a history which reflects the research I have conducted for this portfolio - the documents, books, archives which I rummaged through, as well as the elders I interviewed and talked story with. It is

a history that writes against the dominant narrative that tells us we are bystanders, we are weak, we are non-existent.

This poetry is my form of healing. It strips off the festering, rotten bandages that have been lashed around wounds. It lets those wounds breathe and heal beneath the sun. It gives it the space to grow and to understand, to change, to become whole once more. It is my attempt at healing myself, healing my community through stories that need to be shared, need to be spoken. Sometimes this means sharing stories which are painful. Stories which are meant first and foremost for an ignorant audience – an audience that remains clueless about a people in the middle of the ocean who still compares the strength of a woman's voice to the splitting crack of lightning, a people still struggling with the aftermath of nuclear testing and colonization and a bleak future of debts, globalization and climate change. Perhaps, by creating this dialogue, that audience can give us the due space we deserve in this world. Perhaps by showing our humanity they can understand us as a people.

This poetry is also for other Marshallese – who are so used to seeing representations of other people in literature, but never themselves, or their families. It is my offering.

*lep jāltok* (yiyip jalteq). “a basket whose opening is facing the speaker.” Said of female children. She represents a basket whose contents are made available to her relatives. Also refers to matrilineal society of the Marshallese.

*lep jāltok ajiri ñe* - you are fortunate to have a girl child.

- Marshallese English Dictionary

*My mother once told me girls represent wealth for their families.  
"Girls continue the lineage."*



**Basket**

woman tip your lid  
across the table  
you swell  
with  
offering  
so

much  
to  
offer

earth  
of your  
mother

seeds  
of your  
father

an ocean  
of lineage

thin  
strips  
of leaves

the next  
basket

waiting  
to be

woven

## Basket

woman tip your lid  
towards the table  
you swell

with offering

you

offer

offer

offer

scrape

your floor

bare

a vessel?

a receptacle

littered

with scraps

tossed by

others

i fell asleep

dreamt

my smile

was merely

a rim

woven

into my

face

**Liktañur**

I.

jesus might have been a man  
and so was adam

but the sail  
that powers the Marshallese canoe

feeds our family  
fights our wars  
claims our land  
visits clans

came from

a mother

## II.

1. And so it was that the Irooj's wife Liktañur gave birth to ten sons who all lived on the island of Woja. 2. One day the sons argued, voices clapping like thunder against the trees. 3. And they said Who will be Irooj of this Island? 4. And the Eldest, Timur, said Why don't we have a canoe race to the island of Jeh? The first to reach the island will be Irooj, he said. 5. As the brothers lined up on the beach, carved canoes pointed towards a sea swallowing the sun their mother Liktañur walked up to them. 6. And Liktañur struggling with a bundle in her arms asked My son will you take me with you? 7. And Timur looked at the bundle and said Ask my younger brother. 8. And the younger brother said Ask my younger brother who said the same thing. 9. She will only slow me down. 10. And so on. 11. Ask Jebro! The brothers laughed. He is the youngest! He will lose anyway! 12. And Jebro, with his back to the swirling sea, said Yes Mother I will take you with me. 13. As the brothers paddled furious against the salt biting at the wood of their paddles Liktanur, standing on the canoe with her son Jebro, began to unravel the bundle slowly the way the sun unravels its silky rays. 14. And Jebro said, What is that mother? 15. And Liktañur said Behold my Son. 16. This is what shall be called the Mast and the Sail.

## Lidepdepju

Let me take you out to see Lidepdepju  
 through overgrown  
 leaves winding  
 breadfruit trees and  
 twisting pandanus  
 we will slap at mosquitoes  
 and red ants that sting  
 our toes will itch from sandy dirt  
 Let me take you  
 to that clearing, follow  
 the voice of the ocean

there

is Lidepdepju, standing  
 alone deep  
 in water  
 firm  
 in ocean floor  
 between our shore  
 and the next

This is our gift for you, Lidepdepju –  
 baskets of fresh bwiro, salted fish.  
 The finest jaki caress  
 basalt calluses of your skin  
 We are here  
 to pay tribute, to ask  
 for your guidance  
 We are here  
 to ask for your strength.

Lidedepju we are here

to sharpen  
                     our spears  
                                     for war.

**Dr. Rife**

They told me you are a god

They call you some funny name  
that I can't pronounce

So I took your stone body  
and threw you  
to the other side of the lagoon.

They watched you sink  
to the depths  
some cried  
some fell to their knees  
some whispered heathen chants beneath their breaths.

There -  
I told them  
your god is nothing more  
then a rock.

*Luerkolik ej ño diun ña duireañ*

*Lidepdepju erbet inij eo*

## Juon Wot Emon

Below are the lyrics to one of the many songs written by my great-grandfather Jimma Carl Heine while he was living in the Marshall Islands as a missionary. We continue to sing this song today during family gatherings. The left column are the original lyrics in Marshallese while the right column are the lyrics translated to English by my mother.

Etolok ilukon lometo  
Eolok wot, ej ber ailin eo emontata  
Ijo iar lotak ie  
Ij kememej ijo iar bed ie  
Ke iar ajiri  
Imweo iturin kiop ko renaj  
Ijo iar lotak ie

Alin otemjej renana,  
Juon wot emon  
Jeramen elap ao onkake  
Bwe in lo ailin eo ao

Kei ij ito-itak ion lol in  
Ij buromoj  
In jeblak non iben ro jatu  
Im on kin ro nuku  
Nat inaj ron ainikien jino  
Kir tok non io,  
Nat inaj bar kwelok imnukio  
Ilo mweo imo

Far away over the ocean  
Even farther, is the homeland that is best  
Where I was born  
I remember where I was  
When I was a child  
The house by the fragrant lillies  
The house where I was born

Another home is not as good  
Only one is the best  
My friends that I miss  
I can see them in my homeland

As I roam the world  
I am sad  
and want to return to my younger siblings  
and yearn for my family  
When will I hear my mother's voice  
calling to me  
When will I see again my family  
in my own home?

*Etolok ilukon lometo* Jimma Carl was a marine garden *Etolok wot ej ber aleon eo emontata* A culture of aqua hands pruning giant clams barnacled mouths wide open the unblinking eye of the reef watching. Always watching. *Ijo iar lotak ie* Once German once Australian once a rash and bold current flowing in from the east. *Ij kememej ijo iar bed ie*, Now father of a harsh tongue, a soggy Bible. *Ke iar ajiri*, Father of a used canoe *Imweo iturin kiop ko renaj*, She must have been beautiful. *Ijo iar lotak ie*. Bubu Arbella was tall straight hair to knees an unclear face a vacant voice *Alin otemjej renana* What else was she? Where are her wild letters sprouting from sand? *Juon wot emon* After pushing and pushing and pushing she snapped in two torn open she sprouted wings and Jimma could not find her. *Jeramen elap ao onkake*. He lost her. Jimma lost his wife. *Bwe in lo ailin eo ao*. He wandered for a year, searching. *Ke ij ito-itak ion lol in*. He found Bubu Nenij *Ij buromoj*, Bubu Nenij was not as beautiful as her sister. *In jeblak non iben ro jatu* Short thick kinky hair. An unclear face. A vacant voice. *Im on kin ro nuku* Was she ever afraid that she was just a shadow? *Nat inaj ron ainikien jino* Of what he lost before? *Kir tok no io*, Jimma was a used canoe. He heard the call of the other atolls, searching for God. *Nat inaj bar kwelok imnukio* Bubu was a barnacled mouth. A pair of unblinking reef eyes watching. *Ilo mweo imo*. Always watching.



## Hooked

### I.

After he felt the rain of bombs  
that left puddles of silver shrapnel, slivers of  
splinters where houses once stood and charred  
bodies – both japanese and marshallese –

After he watched soldiers shoot  
a woman's ears off  
because her husband  
was a deserter, an accused traitor,

After he watched his chief, strung up  
by his ankles, beaten raw for stealing  
from a dwindling supply of coconuts,

After fugitive nights, when fishing was banned,  
when he'd slip onto the reef flat, breathless,  
the moon curved, shining like  
the outlawed fishhook, gripped tight  
between his fingers

And after nights when even this  
became dangerous, after the children  
stopped asking for his stolen catch of fish,  
after even they had withered away,  
rows of ribs smiling  
grotesque grins through skin

### II.

After all of that  
it must have seemed  
heaven sent  
a gift from God  
this gift from the americans,  
this shining tower  
of food  
placed before him  
box after box after box  
of canned spam, flaky biscuits  
chocolate bars, dry sausages, hard candy and

bags and bags of rice all waiting  
to be eaten

He remembers  
he cried  
it was so  
beautiful

III.

Every day of the life he led after he remembers  
that pile of food taller  
than any building he had ever seen

He remembers it as he pops  
open a can of vienna sausage, savors  
the salty grease on his warm rice, the taste  
of a filled belly  
He remembers it as he slices spam, sizzling  
hot on the pan, he remembers it  
as he drizzles soy sauce  
into a boiling pot of crispy ramen

IV.

And even after  
his breathing  
turns heavy  
even after his joints protested the walk to the store  
even after  
the devious tingle trickled into his arms, even after  
the doctors told him the leg  
would have to go,  
even then  
he never  
stopped  
licking the grease  
from his fingers  
that still felt haunted  
by the outlawed  
hook.

V.

When his children asked him why  
he wouldn't, couldn't listen, why  
he kept eating the food his doctors  
had prescribed against, even after  
they begged  
he merely  
flexed  
his restless  
fingers.

He had been hungry.  
He would never be hungry again.

**The letter B is for**

*baam* (**baham**). From Engl. 2(inf, tr  
-e) 3,4,6(-i). Bomb.

*Kobaam ke?*

Are you contaminated

with radioactive fallout?

## Fishbone Hair

I.

Inside my niece Bianca's old room I found

two ziplocks  
stuffed  
with rolls and rolls of hair

dead as a doornail black as a tunnel hair thin  
as strands of tumbling seaweed

Maybe it was my sister  
who stashed away Bianca's locks in ziplock bags  
locked it away so no one could see  
trying to save that  
rootless hair  
that hair without a home

II.

There had been a war  
raging inside Bianca's six year old bones  
white cells had staked their flag  
they conquered the territory of her tiny body  
they saw it as their destiny  
they said it was manifested

It  
all

fell

out

III.

I felt  
bald and blank as Bianca's skull  
when they closed her casket  
hymns wafting into the night sky

## IV.

Bianca loved  
 to eat fish  
 she ate it raw ate it fried ate it whole  
 she ate it with its head  
 slurping on the eyeball jelly  
 leaving only  
 tiny  
 neat  
 bones

## V.

The marrow should have worked  
 They said she had six months to live

## VI.

That's what the doctors told the fishermen  
 over 50 years ago  
 when they were out at sea just miles away from Bikini  
 the day the sun exploded  
 split open  
 and rained ash on the fishermen's clothes

on that day those fishermen  
 were quiet  
 they were neat  
 they dusted the ash out of their hair  
 reeled in their fish  
 and turned around their motorboat to speed home

## VII.

There is an old Chamorro legend  
 that the women of Guahan saved their island  
 from a giant coral eating fish  
 by hacking off their  
 long and black as the night sky hair  
 They wove their locks

into a massive magical net  
 They caught the monster fish  
 and they saved their islands

VIII.

Thin

rootless

fishbone hair

black

night

sky

net

catch

ash

catch

moon

catch

star

for you Bianca  
 for you

## Flying To Makiki Street

Night lights peer into your oval window  
and you, cousin, are sobs buried  
beneath the cover of an itchy airplane blanket.

*Leavemealone!*

stings  
my palm from your shoulder.  
It evaporates slow  
into this arid cabin cradling us  
across the Pacific  
from the Marshall Islands to Hawai'i -  
your new home.

My nine year old mind is desperate.  
It wonders if sticks of juicy fruit gum  
could chew away  
the raw ache in your heart.

Or maybe while we peel open  
the wrapper of some ametama, wrap  
our teeth in sticky coconut rounds,  
we could find some way  
to peel apart the loss  
of your old home,  
your house by the reef.

Do you mourn that reef?  
That leathered dark brown edge  
of Rita? Do you mourn the sun  
burning like coils on a rusted stove?  
Do you miss Rita's tin roofs,  
its unpainted walls and the children  
who know the joy of rainstorms in heat?  
Do you miss your father, placid  
in his blank wooden chair, chanting  
family histories until the night turns deep?

Cousin let's stretch those nights  
to Makiki Street, with its pine trees  
bunkbed whispers and jawaian music  
blaring beneath damp Hawaiian rainbows.  
How we will fade into homework, classes,



schedules with tennis practice,  
band practice, ROTC, college preparatory

and your McDonalds uniforms  
folded  
starched  
every night – always so  
neat.

How our lives  
will be just like that:  
folded  
starched every  
bare night - so nice and  
neat.

It won't be so bad cousin.

Trust me.

### On The Couch With Bubu Neien

After six years of living in Hawai'i,  
I return to Majuro to find myself  
sitting on a couch with my grandmother, Bubu Neien  
sweating in jeans, my hands folded tight  
while questions nag the bones of my skull.

My grandmother has tongue cancer.  
Crouched coughing, hacking fidgeting  
with her embroidered handkerchief, she  
is a paper doll, crumpled  
into a heap, shivering  
in the heat.  
Her dark bruised skin melts  
away from her face.

Cancer rips  
words  
from the belly  
of her throat  
before they can be born  
before they can flutter  
in this space  
between us –  
an unturned layer of earth I  
can no longer cultivate

I can't speak Marshallese  
English syllables accent  
the walls of my voice, pronounces me  
Ashamed  
so I bury my native tongue  
beneath a borrowed one

The silence roars  
between us like  
the steel fan spinning sunlight  
across her red linoleum floor

and I wanna tell my grandmother that I wish  
our voices didn't yearn for language,  
that her stories could be netted  
from the depth of her brown eyes,

a water that runs deeper  
than the shallow  
rattle of her breath

I wish I could ask Bubu  
if she remembers when pink  
was my favorite color  
when my light-up sneakers squeaked  
and ribbons on my tricycle streamed  
pink I wish I could ask

if there was pink  
across the roof of the sun's mouth  
yawning across her childhood home – Ailinlaplap  
its reef a curved smile to the sky. I wish

I could ask about the ache  
of fingers caked hard, crooked  
from days of soap and iron washboards

Bubu what was that like?  
And when it turned to night did voices  
scrape the tin roof of your dreams?

The voices with names fading  
like stars into darkness,  
the warriors healers canoe carvers buried  
before you?

And what of those who came after?  
Do you hear my father - your son, the thump  
of his chubby fists on plywood floors? And just how

did those fists explode  
scattering the delicate glass  
of my mother's face?

So many questions  
to be asked answered made, but  
before my thoughts  
can implode  
Bubu Neien's hand  
reaches over  
pats

my knee  
 She smiles  
 lips stretched  
 across crinkles

She hands me a small bundle  
 of embroidered handkerchiefs  
 just the like the one she uses.

She points  
 to the blossoming stitches  
 along the borders of the terry cloth and then  
 she giggles  
 (she did them herself)

And suddenly sunlight  
 floods my insides  
 I gasp

*Wow Bubu! I say  
 Thank you.  
 Kommol!*

And she folds  
 the softness of her palm  
 over mine, rests  
 her head against my shoulder  
 with a sigh.

Three months later, in the coolness  
 of my dim Hawai'i room, I imagine  
 the white floral print that must be dancing  
 along her arms, I imagine the crinkle  
 of the paper flowers and the bent knees, the fold  
 of her palms on her still chest and the water  
 of her brown eyes closed, finally.

## My Rosy Cousin

My cousin is bloody roses tatted / on her ankle / her knuckles  
white as rice / gripping the steering wheel / cruising  
thru manoa / sunglasses ignoring those redred lights

My cousin is one cold pepsi one chocolate hershey bar /  
the daily ransom for driving me to school / lets make  
a quickstop / pitstop / 7eleven / gimme your money /  
you live with your parents / you don't gotta pay rent

My cousin is four a.m. taptaptaps on the window / slurred threats /  
Kōppeļoke kōjām eñ/ kwonej loe / passed out on the front lawn /  
mom's pissed again / ritto bāta tossed between aunties lips /  
when will she ever learn / coffee cups and morning gossip

My cousin is bullying / dede you're so stupid / dede you're so useless /  
other times she cuts/ straight thru bone / dede you're as white / white /  
white as they come / i mean what other marshallese writes /  
poetry and plays piano

My cousin goes to college / talks about classes with hawaiian teachers  
and tongan scholars / tells us tragic samoan love stories and funny  
fijian satires / doesn't that sound just like home / doesn't that sound  
just like majuro

My cousin asked me to write a poem / a poem about her / so i said that i would /  
so this is a poem/ about how i bloomed / inside her voice / inside her stories /  
this is also about how i was pruned / cut raw / dripping bloody /  
just like her ankle red roses

## Spoken Marshallese Lesson Nine: A Conversation Drill

*You will often be questioned by other Marshallese, especially those born and raised in the islands, or in the outer islands. This is a good chance to practice the proper response (you will practice as B).*

A: Kwojela ke eñwōr? Do you know how to fish?

B: Ijaje. Kwomaron ke katakin iō? I don't know how. Can you teach me?

A: Kwojela ke inoñ? Do you know how to tell Marshallese legends/stories?

B: Ijaje. Kwomaron ke katakin iō? I don't know how. Can you teach me?

A: Kwojela ke kowainini? Do you know how to pick coconuts?

B: Ijaje. Kwomaron ke katakin iō? I don't know how. Can you teach me?

A: Kwojela ke umum mā? Do you know how to cook breadfruit in the earth?

B: Ijaje. Kwomaron ke katakin iō? I don't know how. Can you teach me?

A: Ijjab kanuij jellā, ak inaj kajioñ. I'm not an expert – but I can try.

### **How to Interview a Marshallese Roro Expert**

1. Bake a banana bread, warm and fresh. Wrap in foil.
2. Look over your translated questions – make sure they're grammatically correct.
3. Get a taxi an hour ahead – there's always lots of stops along the way for the other passengers. Get a van – those are cheaper only 50 cents before the bridge and a dollar after. Make sure the windows are closed – this means the ac is working.
4. Arrive early.
5. Shake their hand, greet him/her good morning.
6. Explain your project in your broken Marshallese.
7. Apologize profusely for your broken Marshallese.
8. Explain why this project matters to you – how you crave connection to a deeper, ancient past.
9. Take out the consent form, ask him/her to sign it.
10. Turn on the video recorder.
11. Listen.

## The Captain

I interviewed Captain last  
for my research project  
From everything I had been told,  
I expected broad shoulders for hauling anchors  
a face weathered by salt sprays and  
a laugh that dared the ocean roar

I had not expected  
the thin frame  
the shaky hands  
the face lined with cracks  
as brittle as dried out coral

His world  
was the sky  
rocking up above  
while he lay  
back flat against a canoe  
the ocean nudging him  
urging him to listen  
Which way am I coming from?  
Which way would you like to go?

His world  
was black magic  
words muttered that etched  
crevices into his body, left his skull  
numb, his face thawed  
and melting

The language of the sea  
was a hard lesson  
and no one  
wanted to learn it anymore  
only the white man  
hunting for his piece of paper

Maybe I'm being punished  
he tells me, all thick lips  
gaps and gums  
Maybe I should never  
have helped him





my mother says

go – look. It's Lidepdepju

the legend, the goddess, the beautiful.

but all I see

is a rock

on the reef

## I.

After six hours on a ship, women  
 spill from the fiberglass hands  
 of bubbling speedboats, women  
 in popsicle colored baseball caps and silk  
 guams, faded muumuus, and flowered  
 chuukese skirts, whooping, hollering, laughing  
 in the Aur Atoll water.

My mother is running for the Aur Atoll senator's seat.  
 Throughout all the elections, 32 senators elected  
 were men  
 Throughout all the elections, only 1 senator elected  
 was a woman.

My mother knows the stakes  
 She knows the odds are slim  
 So she disembarks on her motherland flanked  
 by a campaign army  
 of women.

For many  
 this is their first time back home  
 after many years.  
 For me and my cousin this is our first time ever.

## II.

My mother informs us -  
 the youngest of the crew -  
 that this is no vacation cruise no  
 jumbo we're here to work.  
 So we unroll the bags, help string up lights  
 wake up at dawn and trudge door to door  
 filming, snapping photographs, both of us  
 hauling stacks of fliers listing  
 my mother's genealogy  
 her work history  
 and her campaign promises.

We march  
 beneath the shade of gnarled breadfruit trees thicker

than any I've ever seen, dodge  
 barking dogs with bared  
 teeth, pass concrete shells  
 of abandoned houses and curious children threading  
 through grass as tall as our knees.

As we march she stops to talk  
 to a man who husks white flakes  
 into a plastic orange basin, surrounded  
 by an audience of bloated bags of coconuts,  
 she talks  
 to the woman who stitches spiderwebs  
 of pandanus from rolls  
 of sun-dried plaits stacked up around her.

At night we help the other women fill plastic plates  
 meant to persuade  
 the bellies of ri-Aur seated,  
 at the feet  
 of my mother, her voice amplified

### III.

This is my mother promising a change  
 This is my aunty stirring a large pot of homemade stew  
 This is my cousin promoting WUTMI – her NGO for women  
 This is another aunty discussing lowering diabetes  
 This is another aunty stringing a lei of flowers  
 This is another cousin strumming an ukulele and singing  
 This is a grandma telling us stories  
 of what Aur used to be  
 This is the mother of all mothers  
 standing in the oceanside  
 watching

### IV.

And this is my cousin and I  
 running away  
 into tangled leaves climbing moss and whispering bushes  
 where we splash  
 into water clear as a mirror, the sky - a giant empty canvas  
 We emerge  
 hair still wet

as we stroll beneath a warm rain that drizzles on our face  
Aunties we've just met  
call us in  
to their smoky cook houses  
where fresh tonaj, hot  
and soft melt in our mouths  
as we fall asleep on a sun worn jaki  
we fall asleep as girls  
listening to the women the women the women  
talkingwhisperinglaughing  
the women we hope to one day be

### **Saltwater Lavender**

Waves of

contractions  
crash  
into me  
crack me  
open split  
down the middle

Do not measure  
the breaths the minutes  
the hours of clenched  
fists curled toes  
eyes pinched  
shut tight  
closed

Just inhale  
the saving  
Grace  
of hot towels  
dipped in sweet lavender  
Dream of saltwater  
orange fruit and sunsets  
uncle clyde aunty kaka  
mom hetine tamera  
baby dokie all of us  
that one picnic afternoon  
that ordinary sunday  
wish she could see  
it someday

and when  
she is pulled  
from my body  
an army of white  
coats shout  
an order:  
OPEN  
YOUR  
EYES

And there she is.

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