ROOTS IN THE SEA

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THE REEMERGENCE OF TRADITIONAL SAILING CANOE BUILDING IN THE REPUBLIC OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

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For the
students and teachers
preserving the past
in the
Marshall Islands

Ilo Kautiej
Aelon Kein Ad

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.....vi

Chapter

1. Overview and History of the Republic of the Marshall Islands.....1
2. Canoe Culture in the Marshall Islands.....20
3. The Growing Importance of Waan Aelon In Majel.....34
4. The Interviews with Two Key Waan Aelon In Majel Personnel.....45
5. Canoe Culture in the Wider Context.....59

Appendix

1. Resources Consulted i
2. Glossary.....v
3. Interview Questions.....vi
4. Methodology and Data Collection.....vii
5. Vita.....viii

PREFACE

When I was searching for a topic to write about for my degree I couldn't think of anything more appropriate than to research on a topic that has long held my interest, traditional canoe building. Though I had grown up around these canoes and had many relatives involved in their construction it was evident that this was a dying art. Once I started investigating the written body of work on the topic of traditional canoe building, and especially in the Marshall Island, it became apparent that not much scholarly work had been dedicated to the subject. There has been recent interest in traditional canoe building throughout Polynesia, but scant among the scattered islands of Micronesia.

I started to talk with some of the Marshallese elders about what I wanted to research and why. They all replied with the same word, *Ekajjookok*, "it is shameful." The elders was saddened that no one, particularly from the younger generations, were keeping their traditions alive, instead opting for more modern things in life. They did mention the one hope in keeping this tradition alive and that was the non-governmental organization Waan Aelon In Majel (WAM), whose staff was researching, documenting, and training at-risk youth in the ancient art of traditional sailing canoe building and sailing.

Before I could begin any research in the Marshall Islands I needed to seek the permission of Imata Kabua who is the traditional leader and former president of the Marshall Islands. He was delighted to see that there was beginning to be "outside" interest in the work that WAM was involved with. He started to tell me stories from his youth of when he would travel from atoll to atoll in *Walap* (large sailing canoes) and how much he still loved the sea. I was humbled that I was allowed by Imata Kabua the honor of researching a topic dear to his heart and mine.

Contact was made with Dennis Alessio and Alson Kelen of WAM. Though Dennis was out of the country at the time of my study Alson helped me out immensely. Without his help and that of his staff my research would have taken many more years to accomplish. It was so refreshing to see that a younger generation of Marshallese *had* taken on the task of reviving a near lost art and were actively transmitting their knowledge to the next generation.

My hope is that one day when I go back to the Marshall Islands I can gaze at the lagoon and shore line and see many sailing canoes at anchor or gracefully plying the waters as they did so many years ago. It gives me much hope that canoe building and many of the other cultural arts are seeing a revival of late. There is much more that needs to be done in order for these arts to be self sustaining. However insignificant they may be, these are the things that make Marshallese *Marshallese*.

CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW AND HISTORY OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS (RMI)

Located in the central equatorial Pacific roughly 2282 miles WSW of Honolulu Hawai'i, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (or sometimes referred to as the Marshall Islands) is a group of 29 low lying coral atolls (1152 islets) and 5 islands of which around 2/3 are uninhabited. Most islands are only 7 – 8 feet above sea level. There are two distinct chains of islands within the RMI; the *Ratak* Chain (sunrise) to the east and the *Ralik* Chain (sunset) to the west. The RMI has a landmass of 70 sq. miles or equivalent to about the size of Washington DC, yet its territorial borders are comparable to about 2/3 the size of the contiguous US. The coral atolls are comprised of a ring of smaller islets enclosing a lagoon area[1]. The RMI is part of a larger geographical grouping of island nations that make up Micronesia of which the Federated States of Micronesia (Kosrae, Pohnpei, Chuuk), Nauru, Yap, Palau, and Guam are also a part.

Majuro Atoll is the capital and serves as the main governmental and commercial center for all the RMI. The RMI became an independent sovereign nation in 1986, after four decades of US administration. This US administration,

[1] Kwajalein Atoll, which hosts the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site and was the site of a very bloody WWII battle, is the largest coral atoll in the world with a land mass of only 6.5 sq. miles yet encompassing an immense lagoon of 1100 sq. miles.

known as the Trust Territory, was founded after World War II. In 1986 the RMI entered into a Compact of Free Association with the US.

Much of the commercial business is mainly located on Majuro Atoll with its access to international port and commercial aircraft facilities, while the rest of the atolls rely on fishing, small scale agricultural plots, and copra production for sustenance and wages. Of the two official languages, Marshallese comes from the root language Indo-Malay[2] and shares linguistic similarities with surrounding island nations. Though not as a matter of contemporary practice, the two atoll chains of the RMI have distinct, though archaic, dialectical differences. Most of the population is fluent in both Marshallese and English, the latter being the other official language. Census data for 2004 puts the total population of the RMI at around 60,000.

The RMI's executive, legislative, and judicial branches are a combination of western governmental systems and modified traditional forms of custom and law. The executive branch is the combination of a British parliamentary system, which is popularly elected and then elects a president, and a US system that has a president as the head of state as opposed to a Prime Minister in a British System. The judicial branch is comprised of two systems with separate jurisdictional powers; the Supreme Courts receive their mandates and laws from the executive branch and preside over constitutional issues, while the Council of

[2] According to some theories the Marshalls were settled by ancient seafarers of Melanesian (Indonesian and Malaysian) descent around b.c 1500.

Irooj[3] is made up of traditional leaders and presides over matters of custom such as land rights and property allocations.

Prehistory of the Marshall Islands

The Marshall Islands sit on what are presently extinct volcanic cores that erupted more than 70 million years ago. As this molten matter erupted it formed over time "high islands" examples of which include the islands in the Hawaiian chain. Over time, the volcanic fissures closed signaling an end to land formation and eventually these volcanic peaks slowly sunk into the sea propelled by their own weight. Eventually microscopic sea organisms started to cling to the side of the extinct volcano and contributed to the formation of reefs. It is not certain as to when the Marshall Islands had enough soil and plant growth to sustain human activity and habitation, but geological and ecological evidence suggests that date might be around 3000 BC (Dye 1987).

Marshallese stories have a differing viewpoint as to the creation of the islands and the origins of plants. According to myth (Downing 1992) the Marshall Islands were formed after a jealous chief flew away in his canoe carrying a basket of soil. This basket had a hole in it and soon the soil was scattered across the waters. Eventually the islands "grew" out of the ocean. The arrival of

[3] This council is made up of chiefs selected by the *Iroojlaplap*, or paramount chief.

coconuts, bananas, sea creatures, and other necessities of life are all a part of the rich oral tradition of story telling throughout the Marshalls.

Most theories contend that it wasn't until around the time of Christ that human settlement was established. It is believed that the Marshalls were populated by seafarers coming from the south and west (Melanesia) or from western Micronesia, from areas such as Guam or the Chuuk islands. The carbon dating of relics found on Majuro and Eniwetok Atolls yield dates of around 30 BC to 50 AD.

What these seafarers found upon reaching the shores of the Marshalls would have been islands with poor soil quality and almost non-existent sources of fresh water. Though wells can be dug, this water tends to be very brackish due to the low elevation of the islands and the high water table. Fresh water would have also been available from the collection of rainwater, though the rainy season is only for a few months toward the beginning and end of the year.

Because many of the islands were not connected to each other by appreciable landmasses, almost all of the communication and trade between islands was done by way of canoe, either with or without sails. People relied heavily on these boats to be able to fish the large lagoons that acted like supermarkets. From the lagoon they could catch the myriad varieties of fish, turtles, shellfish, and other sea creatures that inhabited these littoral waters. This sea catch offset the meager land based nutritional food sources until the later introduction of such foods as bananas, mangoes, breadfruit, pandanus, etc. "It is possible that up to 44 plant species, including various herbaceous species,

shrubs and trees, migrated to the southern Marshalls before the arrival of humans," (Thomas and Hatheway 1953).

Much of what we know of prehistory of the Marshalls is due in large part to the efforts of German explorers into the Pacific between 1908 and 1910 such as Krämer and Nevermann. The Marshalls are a matrilineal[4] society that is divided into three social classes; the *Irooj* class, the *Alap* class, and the *Rijerbal* class. The *Irooj* gives parcels of land called *weto* to *Alap*s. *Rijerbals* living on the land provide for the care of that land's crop planting and harvest. The first fruits of that land are then given in homage to the *Irooj* thus allowing for the *Alap* and *Rijerbal* to retain their assignment to that land.

The main crops gathered from the land would be breadfruit[5] (Artocarpus atilis), bananas of varying variety, pandanus[6] (Pandanus tectorius), and coconuts. Harvesting times for these plant coincided with seasonally occurring rainy and dry seasons. Pandanus was harvested December to April while breadfruit season was from May to November. Methods of preserving food to stave off the lean season had been established and many are still in practice to date.

With land being extremely scarce, there was much competition among the *Irooj*s to claim by conquest or treaty new land and *Alap*s to secure land tenure for

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[4] The oldest female would inherit all land rights and then would pass them to her eldest daughter. If the eldest child were male he would hold the title until his passing at which time it would pass not to his children but the next eldest sibling.

[5] Breadfruit is a member of the fig family and is harvested for a variety of food uses and its wood is the main component of canoe building. These trees can grow to be over 80 years old and be over 85 ft. in height

[6] Pandanus can be either a tree or shrub growing upwards of 25 ft. and is characterized by aerial prop roots and a prickly stem.

their families. Land could be given and taken away only at the *Irooj*'s discretion. The *Irooj* may grant land as an act of gratitude to a faithful servant. One such act referred to as *kwōdaelem* is when land is given by a chief to a commoner as a bounty for bailing out the chief's canoe in battle expeditions (Abo, et al, 1976).

First Encounters with the Outside World

The Marshallese were the first to permanently inhabit this group of atolls and had been living there for many centuries before the first visitors from outside of the Pacific began to appear.

The first European visitor to the Pacific was the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan (Spring 1480 – April 27, 1521). He was the first to set sail from Europe Westwards towards Asia and the first European to sail into the Pacific. His voyage across the Pacific in 1521[7] was an attempt, the first of its kind, to circumnavigate the globe, but it ended for him in the Philippines with his death. Though he never reached the Marshalls, his forays fueled the dreams of other explorers that soon would follow in his wake.

The first European to make landfall in the Marshalls was Spanish explorer Alonso de Salazar on August the 21st in 1526. Salazar was attempting to expand on Magellan's circumnavigation. It is not certain on which atoll he made landfall but it is widely believed to have been Taongi (Bokak) Atoll to the extreme North (Hezel 1983). "As the Victoria struggled northward, an island was sighted that appeared green and inviting to the scurvy-plagued crew. Reluctantly they

[7] Eighteen of his approximate 250 crewmembers and one of the 5 ships in his fleet did return to Spain in 1522, having circumnavigated the globe.

passed on, leaving the island with the name San Bartolomé[8] in honor of the saint whose feast was celebrated that day, as was customary among Catholic mariners of the time" (ibid). Other explorers such as Alvaro de Saavedra 1529, Ruy Lopez de Villalobos in 1549, and Alonso de Arellano in 1565 started the long list of Spanish explorers that would find themselves looking through their spy glass and seeing the green shimmering atolls of the Marshalls. For over 200 years after Magellan's foray into the Pacific the Spanish and Portuguese would enjoy a monopoly of the commercial rights to the land in the Pacific. Spain finally succeeded in establishing a colony in the East, which would be the Philippines. There would be an almost 100 year gap before the first Europeans other than the Spanish would arrive in the Marshalls.

Fortunes changed for the two rival powers on September 3, 1767 when the British ship Dolphin, under the command of Samuel Wallis, on an expedition to the Pacific sighted two islands believed to have been Rongelap and Rongerik (ibid). This marked the beginnings of an invigorated attempt by the British to expand their empire and grow in their naval power. The British were already bolstered by the successful voyages of Captain James Cook into what are now the Hawaiian Islands. The British were hoping to replicate the success of the Spanish and Portuguese in attaining lands valuable to the spice trade and other much sought after goods. With further successful British voyages, the Marshalls became a preferred sailing route known as the "Outer Passage" (ibid). In 1788 on the British transport ship Scarborough, Captain William Marshall sighted an

[8] This would be the name that would appear on maps for generations when referring to the Marshalls.

island that he and his crew named Knox Island. "A canoe with 25 natives came out to the ship and, after a long chant was sung, the natives boarded. They traded happily until a loose spanker accidentally knocked several overboard. Natives later returned to the ship and one tried to steal the head pump" (ibid). Captain Marshall visited many other islands in this group and eventually gave them the name that is still used to this day, the Marshall Islands.

The Russian explorer Otto Von Kotzebue (December 30, 1787 – February 15, 1846) visited the Marshalls, first in 1816 and then more extensively in 1817 and found it to be relatively virgin territory. The natives were able to describe to Kotzebue the passing of several ships and would show evidence of visits such as rusting pieces of iron or the occasional beaded necklace. Kotzebue's ships spent most of 1817 exploring many of the islands in the Marshalls. One of the greatest accomplishments of Kotzebue's voyage to the Marshalls was his valuable ethnographic account about life in the Marshalls. The natives were described as very friendly, usually approaching Kotzebue's ships and inviting them ashore. An excerpt from his journal provides a unique description of the natives he encountered:

> "The inhabitants of Radak (*Ratak*) are neither of large stature, nor remarkable body strength. Though slender, they are well built and healthy, and appear to attain a very old age, accompanied with a considerable share of cheerfulness, and activity. Children are suckled for a long time, and receive the breast when they can already walk and talk. The Radacker are of a darker colour than the people of Owhyee, from whom they are advantageously distinguished by greater clearness of the skin, which is not disfigured, either by the effects of the kava, or by any cutaneous disease. Both sexes wear their long beautiful black hair neatly and elegantly tied up behind. The children have it hanging down, unconfined, and curly. The men suffer their beard to grow, which is long, though not particularly thick. Their teeth are

> generally spoiled by the nature of their food; from the chewing of woody, fibrous fruite of the pandanus; and, sometime, in the front, are broken off. It is less frequent with the chief, for whom the juice of the fruit is generally pressed out, and separated over the edge of a shell." (Kotzebue 1817)

Kotzebue observed tattooing rituals, food gathering practices, and social hierarchy structures. Because he was impressed by what they accomplished with so little in the way of resources, he set out to help the natives. He set up a temporary forge to make knives and fishhooks, introduced goat and chickens (as the only other land animals he found were birds and the occasional rat), and introduced new food crops to alleviate food shortages[9] (ibid). He would visit these islands eight years later to find that the animals he had left were being raised for food and the feast he attended included some of the yams his crew had cultivated. He also found out that the metal tools he had helped to forge played a decisive role for the *Irooj* of Aur Atoll and his campaign against the *Irooj* on Majuro Atoll.

Kotzebue's ethnographic observations of the Marshalls and other Micronesian Islands would serve as a sort of field guide or primer for those that followed into these remote regions of the Pacific.

Whalers, Rogues, Missionaries, and Colonists

The many expeditions into the Pacific and the ethnographic accounts being compiled all contributed to a better understanding of the whereabouts of islands and the "hostility or friendliness" of the natives that one might encounter.

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[9] Kotzebue was shocked to find the Marshallese practiced infanticide after the third birth because of periodic food shortages.

All this could not have come at a better time for the demand for whale oil continued to grow and new sources were constantly being sought out. Whaling areas had been established to the north all the way up to Arctic waters. These whaling areas followed the migratory paths of birds and seemed to coincide with the migratory patterns of the whales. Until around the 1830s whaling ships had avoided the southerly migration of the whales as the locations of dangerous reefs and hostile natives were not entirely certain. It was around the 1840s when the American whaling fleets "whitened the Pacific Ocean with its canvas." Though this fleet would make most of its anchorages in Ponape and the Kosrae Islands to the West, it wasn't long before the allure of "Wood, Water and Women[10]" (Hezel 1983) would have the young sailors arriving on the Marshall's shores.

Despite the positive remarks made by Kotzebue during his 1817 visit to the Marshalls, the Marshalls were still regarded as dangerous territory up until the 1850s. The crew of a German trading vessel came ashore on Ebon Atoll brandishing their pistols anticipating a violent reception only to find that two missionaries had been living there for the past ten months unharmed by the natives (Hezel, 1983). The Marshalls had garnered a notorious and well founded reputation for their hostility as accounts of their many attacks totaled more than all combined attacks in the Carolines to the West. One such incident would solidify in the minds of the captains the Marshalls' bloody reputation.

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[10] "Whalers, the old saying goes, required three things of the islands at which they called; wood, water and women" (Hezel 1983).

In 1824 a mutiny[11] on the Nantucket whaling ship Globe would find the mutineers seeking to build a new "empire" on Mili Atoll in the central Marshalls. Though the natives had become accustomed to visits by the Spanish, Portuguese, British and others, the mutineers were savagely attacked by the natives on Mili. There were five crewmen that had no hand in the mutiny and they managed to sail away with the Globe leaving the mutineers marooned. Tensions between the mutineers and natives culminated with the massacre[12] of the mutineers leaving only two of the Globe's crew alive. The US naval cruiser Dolphin would later rescue the two sailors, William Lay and Cyrus M. Hussey, after almost three years of living with the natives (Lay and Hussey 1840).

In the years after the Globe mutiny captains were wise to give the Marshalls a wide berth. If they did have to go to shore it would be with a small number of heavily armed men getting the most basic of supplies and then beating a hasty withdrawal. Though the stories of the Globe and other forays into the Marshalls succeeded in keeping most visitors away, they certainly didn't dissuade missionaries from carrying out Kingdom work and spreading the gospel to these natives.

A chance encounter in 1855 by Dr. George Pierson helped subsequent missionaries achieve safe-passage into the Marshalls (Hezel 1983). Dr. Pierson

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[11] The lead mutineer, Samuel Comstock, had brutally murdered the *Globe's* captain and crewmembers that were unwilling to be part of his plan to find an "island paradise" and form a new empire.

[12] The massacre had been provoked by several acts of cruelty by the mutineers on the natives.

met with a powerful *Irooj* named Kaibuke[13] on Ailinglaplap Atoll. Kaibuke, though in the past an enemy of all white people and instigator of many previous attacks, found Dr. Pierson to be a very amiable person. Kaibuke pledged that missionaries visiting the Marshalls was be safe from harm and sealed this pledge by exchanging names with Dr. Pierson and sending his sister to accompany Dr. Pierson as he made introductions to other *Irooj* (ibid). Upon accomplishing this, Dr. Pierson was able to report to missionaries in Kosrae the success of the talks and this ushered in a new era in foreign visitations to the Marshalls.

In 1857 the mission packet Morning Star dropped anchor in the lagoon at Ebon Atoll. Among those aboard this ship were Edward Doane, Hiram Bingham accompanied Dr. Pierson, and the Hawaiian teacher Kanoa (ibid). A rousing reception ensued as Kaibuke was eager to meet with his old friend Dr. Pierson, and Dr. Pierson was eager to introduce Doane to Kaibuke. Having off-loaded all the provisions needed to start a mission, Pierson and Doane set about the task of building the first church.

Pierson and Doane found Ebon to be the ideal spot to start a mission in the Marshalls given the island's lush vegetation, hospitable people, and the fact that it was a natural meeting point for many of the *Iroojs*. On the Sabbath, the congregational size would vary between 50 to 200 people as the coming and going of canoes was a frequent sight on Ebon (ibid). With the mission established and Pierson and Doane in failing health, Hawaiian missionaries soon took over the work in the Marshalls under the supervision of Benjamin Snow

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[13] Kaibuke would have been an *Iroojlaplap* or paramount chief. This would account for his sway over the other *Irooj* in converting them to Christianity.

(ibid). Soon schools teaching reading and writing, a coconut press for making coconut oil, and other introductions were starting to slowly change the pace of life in the Marshalls.

The way had been paved for foreigners to enter into the Marshalls because of the work that the missionaries had done. The missionaries owed their success to previous expeditions like Kotzebue's that shed light on this remote part of the Pacific. "The missionary is the merchant's pioneer" was reported in a Sydney editorial (ibid) for the next group to follow in the footsteps of the missionaries were those wanting to make a profit in the Marshalls.

As early as 1859 traders started to visit the shores of the Marshalls carrying wide-eyed young entrepreneurs eager to start a business. One of the first was a German from Hanover, Adolph Capelle, whose name would soon become synonymous with copra. Capelle offered a partnership in the company he was setting up to a Portuguese, Anton DeBrum. Capelle soon founded A. Capelle and Company. They subsequently moved their business to Jaluit Atoll, which was fast becoming the commercial center of the Marshall Islands. It was not uncommon to scan the lagoon and see sailing ships of all types with cargo to off-load and cargo to load from shore.

With the new trading companies being established in and around Jaluit, there was a lot of hustle and bustle coming from the crews on trading schooners or whaling vessels stopping off to re-supply. It was easy to see that there was starting to be permanent settlement by many Europeans into the Marshalls, thus beginning the first inklings of colonization. The Marshalls were becoming

important to the economies of European nations as many governmental officials were starting to negotiate and sign treaties with the local *Irooj* that called for land rights for the business interests. This stability in turn offered inducement for people to settle into the Marshalls knowing they had the backing of their country. On November 29th, 1878 a new flag unfurled over the Marshalls with its five-striped, black and white, and red colors resembling the German flag (ibid). This act culminated with the German annexation[14] of the Marshall Islands and the first full political intervention by an outside political entity. This treaty assured Germany of trading privileges, port authorities, and the establishment of coaling stations among other things. This situation would be repeated throughout the Pacific, as other European powers were keen on solidifying their territorial claims. Already though the winds of change were blowing signaling the rise of a new power in the Pacific and the distant drum beat of war.

The Empire of the Rising Sun, World War II, Trust Territory, and Modern Times

Many of the European countries had carved out territories in the Pacific in the hopes of establishing new trading routes, expanding its empires and augmenting their wealth. Japan, like its European counterparts, was eager to expand its empire and seek new territories to supply an ever-voracious appetite for raw materials. Japan was not a late comer into trade in the Marshalls and had had a presence there since the establishment of the German administration.

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[14] This treaty had been signed by *Irooj*s of the Ralik islands basically giving Germany "preferred country status" in the Marshalls (Hezel 1983).

Japan had been growing in its regional might bolstered by victory over Russia and China. Having sided with the Allies in WW I, Japan took the opportunity to annex German territories throughout the Pacific in 1914 meeting little or no resistance (Thomas, 2005). Jaluit was once again the main commercial center of the Marshalls though it would now be dominated by the flag of the Rising Sun. Japan quickly spread its influence throughout the Marshalls by starting schools instructed in Japanese language. Schools weren't the only thing being built in the Marshalls as the Japanese built military fortifications, seaplane bases, airstrip, and ship docks to support military operations in and around the Marshall Islands. The Japanese officers quickly increased in numbers throughout the Marshalls and in time started to settle[15] in with the local populations. In early October of 1914 Truk became the main Japanese naval headquarters in the Pacific, putting the Marshalls at the vanguard geographically to the east.

The Marshalls would be governed by a string of Imperial naval commanders. Commanders in the Marshalls and other recently occupied Pacific territories now enjoyed the fruit of their labors in that they could send back to Japan the raw materials to feed its growing imperialistic hungers.

At the outbreak of WWII and the Japanese surprise attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawai'i, Japan's Pacific Empire extended as far south as the Solomon Islands and as far east as the Marshall Islands. Japan controlled strategic coaling stations and sources of raw materials. Upon the US

[15] Japanese genomic features are still quite prevalent in the Marshalls today.

declaration of war against Japan the US started to launch campaigns against various Japanese strongholds throughout the Pacific. The 1942 Doolittle Raids on Japan served as a morale booster but were soon followed by operations such as the Battle of the Coral Sea[16] and the Battle of Midway[17]. With British forces making progress on the South-East Asian front, the US started to increase the pressure on Japan's Pacific Empire. Starting with Operation Galvanic which was a campaign against the Gilbert Islands to the south of the Marshalls, and Operation Flintlock which evicted the Japanese presence from the Marshalls, the tide was beginning to turn on the once expansive Japanese holdings in the Pacific. The crushing blows to Japanese might in the Pacific were dealt with the air raid on the Japanese Naval Headquarters in the Truk Islands, and General MacArthur's re-capture of the Philippines.

The Marshall Islands that had once been under the jurisdiction of the Spanish, then Germans, then Japanese, had now come under the control of the US Navy in August of 1945.

The US was the first nation to use the atomic bomb in its two raids on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The US had been so preoccupied with further developing an atomic device that they desired to start a series of tests to determine its other uses and potential for greater yields. As a result of this desire the US was anxious to find a geographically isolated and remote area to conduct such tests and the Marshall Islands fit the bill. Isolated, remote, and with a

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[16] Considered on of the major turning points in WWII, this battle was the first in which naval ship did not directly engage each other, but instead the attack were carried out by carrier based aircraft.

[17] This battle of June 1942 is considered the turning point in the battle for the Pacific

prevailing tradewind that would push the radioactive plume far out into the open ocean the northernmost islands of the Marshalls were chosen.

The first in a series of atomic bomb tests took place in 1946 on Bikini Atoll. The Able test was carried out using a fleet of war prize ships anchored in the lagoon to test the effects of an atomic bomb blast in the air. The subsequent test, code-named Baker, used the same test fleet but this time tested the bomb underneath the fleet.

The Bikinians had been asked in early 1946 if they would be willing to temporarily leave their island and be relocated to nearby Rongerik. "For the good of all man kind and to end all wars", was the wording of Commodore Ben Wyatt, the military governor of the Marshalls, to an assemblage of Bikinians (Niedenthal 2001). Except for an unsuccessful return to Bikini in the 1970's, the island was deemed too radiologically unsafe and the temporary relocation to Kili Atoll has turned into a more permanent one. They have remained in exile to this date on the cramped island of Kili left almost wholly dependent on imported food. Commenting on Operation Crossroads, as the atomic tests at Bikini were called, Bob Hope summed up the irony of the situation; "As soon as the war ended, we found the one spot on the earth that hadn't been touched by the war and blew it to hell" (ibid). In all 67 tests were conducted on Bikini and Eniwetok in the Marshalls. Three islands on Bikini were completely vaporized leaving only craters several hundred feet deep to be quickly filled by the sea.

A year after the start of nuclear testing on Bikini Atoll, the United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific[18] was established and included the Pacific regions known as Micronesia. The Code of the Trust Territory was enacted in 1952 that allowed for two systems of law to exist side-by-side; a more formal law for the carrying out of governmental functions and traditional law based on the traditional laws of the six administrative districts[19]. The year 1965 saw the establishment of the Congress of Micronesia that allowed for legislative powers, though limited in scope, and gave the first inkling of a movement towards autonomous governing among the districts. With the Congress of Micronesia in full swing there were frequent meetings among its members discussing the various forms of government that could be pursued should they become independent. Out of this the Northern Marianas voted in 1976 to become a commonwealth of the US. In 1979 several districts approved a constitution originally drafted a year earlier which would later become the Federated States of Micronesia. Two districts, the Marshalls and Palau opted out of joining the fledgling federation and voted for the creation of a Compact of Free Association with the US. This free association allowed the two republics to fully control their internal self-government and foreign ties, yet gave total responsibility to the US for their defense. The US would declare the articles of the TT as no longer in effect in 1986, the same year

[18] The Trust Territory or TT was administered from Saipan in the Mariana Islands located of Guam

[19] These districts are now known as the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (Kosrae, Pohnpei, Chuuk, and Yap), the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau.

the Marshall Islands declared independence. The TT was officially dissolved in 1994 with Palau becoming a sovereign state.

CHAPTER 2

CANOE CULTURE IN THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

The Pacific Ocean is the largest body of water on the face of the earth. It was named the "peaceful sea" by Ferdinand Magellan during his circumnavigation attempt of 1517-1522. The Pacific makes up a third of the earth's surface and has an area of 69.4 million square miles. Starting in the North in the Bering Sea to Antarctica's Ross Sea in the extreme southern hemisphere it extends approximately 9,600 miles and stretches 12,300 miles from the east starting in Indonesia to the coast of Columbia. The Pacific Ocean also has the lowest point on earth, the Mariana's Trench, which is 37,797 feet below the water's surface. Around 25,000 islands are circumscribed by the waters of the Pacific, more than the total in the rest of world's oceans combined. Currently there are seventeen independent states located in the Pacific.

Despite the Pacific being referred to as the "peaceful sea," in reality it is far from that. The intersections of major tectonic plates through and around the Pacific cause much geological instability so that volcanic activity and undersea earthquakes occur. These two events can lead to a rather devastating phenomenon, the tsunami. Many remember the horrific effects of the undersea earthquake that resulted in the massive walls of water hitting the Indonesian island of Sumatra and affecting the coast of West Africa many thousands of miles away. Added to underwater terrors are the atmospheric conditions that contribute to some of the most ferocious storms on the planet, typhoons. Many

of these typhoons can start as mere rainstorms in the Eastern Pacific, but can soon turn destructive by the time they reach places like the Chuuk Islands[20] or Guam[21] to the West.

Many theories abound as to who, when, and how the islands in the vast expanses of the Pacific were inhabited. Some theories contend that navigators were blown off course and accidentally made landfall on new islands. Other theorists contend that because of the navigator's intimate knowledge of celestial movements, wave deflection patterns, coral reef locations, and other naturally occurring cues that the Pacific islands were logically and systematically inhabited. Some theories rely on linguistic evidence.

The islands of the Pacific are divided into three geographic regions.

Melanesia, from the Greek for "black island," extends from the western side of the Eastern Pacific to the Arafura Sea to the North and North East of Australia. Melanesia includes the islands of Fiji, New Caledonia, New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Maluku Islands, and Torres Strait Islands. Inhabitants of these islands are thought to be descendants of people from Papua New Guinea from around 35,000 years ago.

Polynesia, from the Greek for "many islands," extends in a triangular fashion starting with the Hawaiian Islands to the North, New Zealand to the South and West, and Easter Islands to the far East. Polynesia commonly includes

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[20] I was part of a 2003 FEMA effort in Chuuk to re-build homes lost to Super Typhoon Pongsona and Tropical Storm Cha'tan. This Typhoon contributed to over 67 deaths and 1,000 injuries in Chuuk

[21] The winds associated with Super Typhoon Paka in Guam in 1979 were recorded at over 236 miles per hour.

American and Western Samoa, the Cook Islands, French Polynesia (Tahiti), Hawai'i, the Loyalty Islands and so forth. Polynesian islands have long been associated with Lapita-culture. Lapita was a type of pottery found throughout many of the Polynesian islands and was thought to have originated in the Bismarck Archipelago. Many of the theories surrounding the progression of Polynesian settlement reside around the carbon dating of lapita artifacts. Some theorist feel that a more accurate dating of Polynesian settlement can come from analyzing linguistic patterns and looking for natural progressions from one island group to the next (Finney 2003).

Micronesia, from the Greek for "small islands," extends from the Philippines in the West to the Marshalls in the east. Many of the islands lie along the equatorial line. The islands of Micronesia include Yap, Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia (Chuuk, Pohnpei, Kosrae), the Marshalls, Nauru, Kiribati, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and the Territory of Wake Islands. It is commonly believed that Micronesia was settled from the west near the area of the Caroline Islands. Micronesian Islands, such as the Gilberts to the south may have had intermittent contact with Polynesian voyagers from islands such as those from the Phoenix group.

The earliest radiocarbon tests from archaeological sites in the Marshalls generally cluster around 2,000 years ago (Thomas 2005). This evidence suggests that the first indication of human occupation or activity in these islands occurred in and around the late B.C. or early A.D. period. Another theory, though controversial, puts habitation of Bikini Atoll in the northern Marshalls at around

3,500 years ago (Streck 1990). While the exact settlement pattern that occurred within the Marshalls remains arguable, it is generally agreed that the Marshall Islands were colonized from areas to the south and southwest. Linguistic, cultural and biological evidence links Marshallese with the Eastern Melanesia/Kiribati interaction area (Spennemann 2005).

Canoe Culture in the Marshall Islands

Due to the vastness of the Pacific and the great distances between its islands, any sort of communication, transportation, food gathering, and so forth had to be done by use of boats. As a result navigators that would guide these canoes over these distances had to learn the art of celestial navigation, reading wave patterns, and have an intimate knowledge of other natural cues to successfully sail from island to island. This ability to navigate successfully could be the difference between life and death.

Not only would the navigators require such skill, but the designs of the canoe would have to be such that they could withstand the rigors of the open ocean, be able to transport people and cargo, and be solidly constructed and able to withstand years of use because the effort to make such a boat is considerable.

During my time in the Marshalls, sailing canoe building, repair and sailing was observed on Majuro and Namo atolls. Also, access to the various reports done by the non-governmental organization Waan Aelon in Majel allowed for documented resources of canoe building to be examined along side oral

interviews with person associated with these activities. The documented information in the following sections would not have been possible had it not been for the vision and drive of an American named Dennis Alessio.

Dennis came to the Marshalls in the late 1980s with the desire to document sailing canoe design and the culture surrounding it. He made several trips to the outer atolls in the Marshalls and was able to provide detailed written information on Marshallese canoe design that had not previously existed.

Building canoes, for many of the Pacific cultures, was an art form passed down from teacher to apprentice following strict customs because of its inherently secretive nature. These apprentices were usually very closely related to the builder, such as children, or children of a close relative. This art had been dying out over the decades in the Marshalls as very few of the older builders were passing along their skill to the younger generation. Dennis was able to convince a builder on the outer islands of the benefits of documenting this ancient knowledge lest it be lost to successive generations. This was the turning point that fueled the renaissance in traditional sailing canoe building in the Marshalls. Dennis later would hire Alson Kelen[22] and Jill Luciano as part of the WAM endeavor.

No discussion about canoe culture can start without first understanding the history and the basic tenets of canoe design and construction. Though there are many similarities between canoe designs throughout Micronesia, each island

[22] It was ironic that Dennis, the founder of WAM, was on the mainland for the duration of my time in the Marshalls. Much of the information for this project was conveyed by Alson

group had over the years developed canoes to suit their unique purposes. The Marshalls were no exception.

Many of the European explorers that ventured into the waters of the Pacific were extremely knowledgeable about boat design and navigation and they would invariably comment admiringly about the canoe designs and the skills of the natives handling them. The German poet and botanist Albert Von Chamisso, was commissioned in 1815 as the botanist for the Russian brig Rurik that was part of the Kotzebue expedition into the Marshalls. Chamisso, in 1821 provides one of the first accounts of Marshallese canoes during his voyage:

> We admired the rapidity with which their boats sailed close to the wind. It had one disproportionately large sail, of fine woven mats, which was in the shape of an acute angled triangle. The skill with which they put about their boat in tacking deserved the admiration of every seaman. I immediately ordered to lay-to and admired the ingenious construction of it; and the surprising skill more. The models and agreeable manners of these islanders astonished us greatly as we could not expect to find this in the South Sea, in an island that had never before been visited. They were all unarmed, and the strictest subordination was evident; the chief sat on the left side with his legs under him on an elevation placed on the outrigger, which was ornamented with colored mats, having his head adorned with flowers and shell wreaths. They hastily threw us some Pandanus fruit and a handsome mat. From the first meeting it was to be concluded that we had to deal with very kind hearted people. (Hezel 1979)

Canoes in the Marshalls come in three sizes that relate to their various functions. The smallest canoe is the *korkor*. These one to three person boats are mainly used in the shelter of the lagoon and are usually paddled. Some of them have been observed with sails such as those that I observed while on Namo Atoll. *Korkors* are mainly used for fishing reefs close to shore and intra-island travel depending on water surface conditions.

The next larger canoe is called the *tipnol* which can carry between 10 and 15 people depending on length. These canoes would usually have a sail[23], increased cargo area and could travel between atolls based on sea conditions. On Namo Atoll there are a few *tipnols* being used to transport fish caught from the various islets and transport them to the fish base on Majikin Island for export to neighboring atolls for sale.

The largest of the Marshallese sailing canoes is the *walap*. Historical accounts such as those from Chamisso described that as many as fifty people could fit into one of these boats. Anecdotal evidence suggests *walaps* reaching lengths of 100 feet. No canoes this size currently exists in the Marshalls though a fifty-foot *walap* was constructed on Eniwetok Atoll in the Northern Marshalls. These canoes because of their design and size were primarily used for travel in the open oceans.

Given the different sizes of boats based on their use, there were different hull geometries, which complemented the canoes' roles. The five types of canoe hull design are *Mwijitbok*, *Taburbur*, *Malmel*, *Tojeik*, and *Jekad* (Alessio 1990). Taburbur hull designs were favored on boats built for open ocean travel. Canoes built using the *tojeik* hull design were considered a good middle ground between

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[23] According to Marshallese myth, canoes didn't originally come with a sail. According to the myth, Jabro (the youngest) and Timur (the oldest), two of ten brothers, were all part of a canoe-paddling race. The other brothers had already taken off before Jabro could. Jabro's mother told him not to fret and showed him a sail and helped Jabro install it to his canoe. He quickly came upon and outpaced his other brothers, all except Timur. Timur took the boat from Jabro, but changed the direction of the canoe's travel. Timur reached the island thinking he won the race, when it fact it was Jabro that won. Marshallese still gaze into the night sky and point out the stars named for each of the ten brothers. Timur's star faces away (west) from his brother Jabro. All these stars were used for navigation (Grey, 1951)

speed and utility. A *tipnol* canoe, being built on Namo atoll by Harry Anien using the tojeik design, was to be used for intra-island cargo carrying, but was also capable of travel to other nearby atolls in good weather conditions.

The primary material used to build these canoes was wood that was either gathered from trees growing on the islands or driftwood that had floated to the islands from other places[24]. The most commonly used wood is from the breadfruit tree (Artocarpus atilis). This tree is very versatile as it is a primary food source yielding the green, starch-laden breadfruit. In canoe design breadfruit is valued for is durability and rot resistance.

> During the drying process over a period of six months, it was noted that the wood shrank very little, as there were no check (cracks) found. When the pieces were completely dry, they were light in weight and easy to work. These same findings were true of the logs used in the construction of the main hull of the canoe" (Alessio 1990).

The breadfruit tree has a lifespan upwards of 80 years and can grow as high as 85 feet. Most of the canoe builders agree that a tree must be at least 30 years old to yield a sufficient amount of wood to make a boat the size of a *tipnol*.

Another tree used in canoe construction and equally as rot resistant as breadfruit is the *lukwej* (Calophyllum inophyllum) tree. *Lukwej*, when dried, is a much stronger and heavier wood than breadfruit, but is less stable (Alessio 1990). *Lukwej* trees are characterized by glossy leaves with white flowers and can grow upwards of 60 feet. This wood is used for the outrigger assembly of the canoe. Other traditional uses of this wood have included pounders, such as

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[24] Pacific Ocean currents can allow for wood from the Pacific coast of North American to drift to the Marshalls.

for pounding breadfruit or pandanus, and its oil can be used for skin care such as cuts, blemishes, insect bites and burns.

One of the many unique characteristics of traditional Marshallese canoe construction is that all the component elements of a canoe are lashed together with a rope called *ekkwal* (coconut coir), which is made from the fibers of the coconut (Cocos nucifera) husk. Not a single nail is used in the canoe's construction. Soaking the husks of the coconut in seawater for a period of six months makes *ekkwal*[25]. By this time the fibers have become loose and are easily washed out in salt water. After a few days of drying in the sun the fibers are ready to be rolled into the rope for lashing together the various parts of the canoe and rigging for the sails. WAM documented some of the unique qualities of this natural fiber:

> The natural oil inherent qualities in the fibre itself contributes to the coirs rot-resistant qualities even after it has been cured by being soaked in salt water. There is an inherent strength in the qualities of coconut coir. When it is wet, it flexes, yet retains its strength and actually tightens. Its ability to stretch and remain strong is a unique quality which manufacturers of artificial rope and line have tried to duplicate without success. With normal use as the lashing on an outrigger canoe the life expectancy of *ekkwal* is generally two years (ibid).

There are several main components on an outrigger canoe and additional ones if the canoe is being rigged for sailing. The first component is the *wa* (hull), which is comprised of two parts; the lower *jouj* and the *mej*. The *jouj* was usually constructed first and determined the overall length of the canoe though several logs could be lashed together to achieve a longer length.

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[25] A small pit is dug in the sand at low tide and the coconut husks are buried face down.

The next canoe component is the outrigger (*kubaak*) float, which sits parallel to the main hull connected by the outrigger boom assembly. The outrigger acts as a counter-balancing mechanism for the main hull, as the main hull is quite narrow in profile, and is about 3/4 or slightly less in length than the main hull.

The outrigger boom assembly links the main hull with the outrigger. This boom assembly is made up of a variety of components that when put to work with the *kubaak* provides shock absorption and allows for storage and cargo space. "Micronesian outriggers always have the *kubaak* to the windward; combining this feature with the flexible outrigger assembly, provides greater stability, thus increasing the craft's ability to sail faster and closer to the wind" (ibid).

For canoes that have a sail (*ujele*) to them several components make up this assembly. A long main mast post or *kiju* extends upward from a platform on the outrigger boom assembly. The *ujele* is held in place by two long pieces of wood that converge at the front of the boat; they are the *rojak maan* (located on the top), and the *rojak kora* (located on the bottom). Various shrouds or rigging lines complete the sail assembly.

Marshallese as well as other Micronesian sailing canoes are notable in that the sail assembly is not permanently affixed to the boat. This allows the canoe to sail in either direction always keeping the *kubaak* upwind to the *wa*. The sailors would simply undo a few lines and lift the *rojak maan* and *rojak kora* from one end of the boat to the other. The main hull design is asymmetrical in

shape. The side facing the wind (windward) is shaped much like that of an aircraft wing with the leeward side (facing away from the wind) being flat. This asymmetrical design allows for the canoe to be steered on a straighter course and allows for minimal drag. This also explains the canoe does not need the use of a centerboard or keel.

The Marshallese Art of Navigation

The navigator is standing on the deck of his outrigger canoe, miles from land, as it tosses in the open waters of the ocean. His every sense is keenly aware of the smallest movements the canoe makes, or the direction and strength of the wind, or the sound the waves make breaking on to the hull. From the many years of training the navigator can interpret the swell of the wave as it deflects off distant islands and the names of positions of stars in relation to land. By putting all this information together the navigator knows with a fair degree of certainty where he is.

Marshallese have long been known for their navigational skills, either using celestial points of reference or using wave pattern reading.

Celestial navigation is a form of navigation common to many islands in the Pacific. Marshallese navigators has an immense knowledge of many of the stars in the sky and plot a course to various islands by knowing where the stars would rise and set in relation to the islands. Gladwin, in his book *East is a Big Bird*, described this system of navigation as one of dead reckoning. This form of navigation was not very easy to learn and required complete attention and

patience while being instructed on sea and land. Many years later an apprentice was deemed ready when they could start with any island and rattle off the stars going to and coming from that island (Gladwin 1970).

One of the tools long used by the Marshallese to teach navigation is the stick chart. The stick chart makes reference to the naturally occurring phenomena of waves hitting off islands and deflecting in relatively consistent patterns away from that island. By using stick charts the navigator could figure out distance to an island.

Three types of charts were used for teaching navigation; two variations of *rebbelip* and the *wappepe*[26]. The *rebbelip* is square in shape and illustrates the sailing directions for many of the islands in the *ratak* and *ralik* chains (Spennemann, 1998). The *wappepe* is a smaller square chart that shows wave patterns common to all atolls (Spennemann 1998). The latter type has been verified as being an authentic form of the stick chart (Spennemann 1998).

These types of charts were of particular use in the Marshalls, as opposed to other Pacific Islands, because of the number of islands in the two chains of the Marshalls in relation to the prevailing trade winds. The two chains in the Marshalls run NNW to SSE and are at a right angle to the ocean swell (Spennemann 1998). This accounted for the many swell deflections and the

[26] The wappepe is the central design in the seal of the RMI government.

Marshallese navigator's use of this special tool only developed in the Marshalls[27] (Spennemann 1998).

Along with the question of how the islands were populated is also the question of how navigation spread throughout the Pacific. Lorenzo Sartilug, of the Yap Department of Education, presented an interesting story about the spread of navigation in the Micronesian islands during a recent presentation.

> Long ago, there lived a great navigator named Paluwlap in the Marshall Islands. He had two sons named Rongrhik (or Fanurh in Satawalese) and Ronglap (or Wareiyaeng in Satawalese). Rongnap was older than Rongrik. These two sons learned the art of navigation from their father and they themselves became master navigators. Paluwlap also had two sister named *Ralik* (Ratiw in Satawalese, which means "west") and *Ratak* ("east"). Each got married and had sons of her own. *Ralik* had three sons of her own. *Ralik* had three sons named Soawiras (Chuuk), Soawap (Yap) and Soawpanneoi (Palau). *Ratak* had only two sons, named Soawkerhaw (Kosrae) and Soawfoanopei (Pohnpei). Because all of the sons of Paluwlap and his sisters were great navigators, they were able to travel throughout Micronesia and taught the local people traditional navigation.

This story from the Micronesian island of Satawal, to the West of the Marshalls, highlights the interconnectivity of the cultures of the Pacific. Linguistically there are many similarities between the names in the stories and the place names of the Marshalls. One explanation[28] given for this story's relevance to navigation is that navigators able to traverse the Micronesian islands all the way to the eastern most part of it must have been the most skilled of navigators. These navigators, in turn, could have backtracked westerly teaching those navigators on the islands they encountered, the lost nuances of

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[27] "The story behind the wappepe is that is was originally brought to the Marshallese from Woleai Atoll, in the Yap District of the Caroline Islands, when a boat from Woleai was lost at sea and drifted to an island in the Marshalls" (Spennemann 1998).

[28] Alson Kelen came up with the idea after a discussion on the merits of Lorenzo's story.

navigation. It is a very distinct possibility that since Marshallese navigators were known to have traveled as far west as Pohnpei and as far east as the Hawaiian islands that some sort of interaction and exchange among the navigators could have taken place.

The Pacific Ocean is a vast watery world dotted with far-flung islands that are inhabited by a myriad variety of people. Despite some of their differences they all shared the knowledge of navigation that allowed for their movement, communication, and ultimately their survival.

CHAPTER 3

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF WAAN AELON IN MAJEL (WAM)

The signing of the Compact of Free Association between the United States and the newly formed Republic of the Marshall Islands in 1986 ended a long period of history in which the RMI had been under the rule of various countries. The lowering of the Trust Territory flag and raising of the RMI flag was not only symbolic but also literal; the RMI was on the cusp of emerging from centuries of foreign rule.

These were seen as heady times for the newly minted country as the agreement was viewed as the best of both worlds. The RMI would have full sovereignty over its political, social and economic affairs. The US would agree to provide funding to the RMI for a 15-year period in which the money was to help the RMI on its way to self-sufficiency. The RMI would call on the US for technical assistance, postal services, military defense and a plethora of other benefits that the RMI would not have the capability to provide to its citizens.

The RMI was set to charge full ahead with the sense of urgency that nation building always seems to bring. With money flowing in for the US the RMI set about the daunting task of running its own affairs from the first time. Providing accessible education, growing the economy, forging alliances with other nations, improving infrastructure were just a few of the many charges before the RMI government.

I was witness to much of this transition as my grandfather, Atlan Anien, was speaker of the parliament and had been for many years before. The influx

of visiting heads of state from all over the Pacific with their commitments for economic assistance and political ties seemed to overwhelm my grandfather at times. The RMI was on a course to build a base of prosperity and finish off the end of the 20th century with an eye on what the next century could bring.

In the 15 years that I have been absent from the RMI much has changed there. The population has doubled in size, much of the open spaces in the commercial district have been filled in with new buildings, there has been an influx of foreign investment, and a sense that the government was truly calling all the shots.

Other and more ominous changes had also taken place during this time. There was a general breakdown in the adherence to traditional customs and structures. A poorly educated population with a high dropout rate was beginning to emerge and leading to increases in petty crime rates. One of the highest per capita suicide rates in the world was also developing.

Many factors could have contributed to the patterns starting to emerge in the RMI. The most commonly attributed cause was that nation building takes time and the RMI was simply going through the growing pains of finding "their own way;" a simple argument but a very convincing one. Another idea brought forth was that two forms of government existed in the RMI; the constitutional government ratified in 1986 with its elected officials (not necessarily traditional leaders) and the traditional government called the Council of *Irooj* made of up traditional leaders as determined by matrilineal descent. With the two systems in place mixed messages and initiatives were constantly causing friction. A rift was

starting to form whereas the constitutional government was very forward thinking in wanting the RMI to become part of the modern world, but the intact and effective Council of *Irooj* still in existence had a very powerful tie with the past and its traditions still held sway with many people in the RMI.

It was starting to become apparent that a wealth of knowledge that had sustained the RMI from prehistoric to modern times was starting to vanish. A country trying to rapidly westernize was starting to learn new habits that ran counter to what was appropriate and vital. Could a country take another approach where it could modernize using knowledge that it already had, but guide it in a new direction?

This was in effect the basic tenet behind the creation of Waan Aelon In Majel. From its very beginning the intent was to seek out, document and transmit a wealth of traditional canoe building knowledge and parlay that into a meaningful educational curriculum seen lacking in the public and private school systems. In its mission statement, WAM directly addresses such issues when it states:

> WAM, using the medium of canoe and boat building, directly contributes to the achievement of the national development objective of fostering cultural and economic development, national unity and self-identity. It empowers the youth of today by teaching them traditional and modern sustainable skills, enabling them employment and income generation. This reduces the poverty level in the Marshall Islands while enabling the youth the ability to contribute to their family and community. (WAM informational brochure)

I traveled to the RMI to see first hand how exactly WAM had carried out the tenets of its mission statement and to see the effect that the program had had

on the youth of the RMI and the cultural contributions that WAM had made in the advancement of canoe culture, and more importantly, Marshallese canoe culture.

With the documentation phase of the work that WAM was doing and their funding starting to wane, Dennis Alessio (the founder of WAM) and Alson Kelen (WAM's program director) began consulting with other NGO's that were fascinated with the cultural prospects of WAM. WAM wanted to take the static archival nature of the information that had been documented for the Alele museum and turn it into something more organic. The idea for a "living archive" of information was fomented with an emphasis on engaging Marshallese youth at risk, those youth that had slipped through the cracks of a deteriorating educational system. Using the large amounts of documentation on canoe building, WAM began the process of creating a core curriculum that would see to fruition the marriage of ancient traditional knowledge and modern applicability. After several years of struggling to find funding and a building site, WAM secured much needed money from the former Outrigger Hotel and land through the help of former RMI President Amata Kabua. It is ironic that the site chosen for the WAM program is the site of the first RMI parliament building. A program looking towards the past now sat on a site that was focused on the future!

Possessing funding and a program site, WAM set about to identify not only who would benefit from the program, but in what tangible ways these students could gain by becoming part of the program. It quickly emerged that the program would be more than building canoes, sailing canoes, and maintaining them. There were programs on the island that already taught some form of

carpentry. But building boats is a far cry from building houses. The real benefit would be the intangible life lessons that WAM had the potential to instill.

A burgeoning youth population that had resulted from a lack of family planning and a breakdown of traditional values had already begun to erode their job prospects and sense of direction. Alson talked about the transformative power that belonging to WAM had on the youths that were starting to participate. Hands-on-training aside, these youths were having to learn to show up on time, clock in for work, how to work with others, creatively problem solve, and engage in reviving an ancient tradition that most had only heard about in stories from their elders.

WAM started their charter in 1998 as a Non-governmental Organization and took in students for the fledgling canoe building project. However, training in canoe building, the construction of a canoe house, and involvement with the community had already begun in previous years. The community had already begun to rally behind WAM's cause by finding a site for the program and negotiating its lease with local *alaps,* organizing volunteers to build the canoe house, and finding suitable trees to harvest so that canoe building classes would have appropriate materials.

Soon the program began graduating trainees as they successfully completed the WAM curriculum. Alson estimated that roughly a little over 50 percent completed the entire course of the WAM curriculum. The other half had quit after a few classes feeling that they had learned enough from WAM to comfortably move on to other endeavors. This other half went back to school or

reentered the job force with their newly acquired skills. Alson recalled one graduate of the program that went on to find work in the US at a major hardware retailer. Alson credits this and other successes due to an English course offered by volunteers that taught "work shop" English to WAM students. In an interview with Pacific Magazine, Alson remarked in the article on how much progress the trainees had made in the course of their training with WAM. "We had 194 students come from Majuro Middle School to visit the canoe house one day, and the three trainees did all the talking explaining about the canoe. This was quite a contrast from their first day in the training program when they were hard-pressed to come up with the name of even a couple of the parts of a Marshallese canoe" (Johnson). Alson went on to explain that the main element of the work that WAM was doing was in developing the trainees to take what they learned and go on to promote canoe culture, not only the Marshalls but beyond. "We're pushing our trainees to be future trainees," adds Alson (Johnson 2001).

One of the first things a trainer, such as Mentil Laik will teach the new trainees is the basic technique of selecting breadfruit logs to be used for canoe building. Various landowners from Majuro and other local atolls donate many of the logs.[29] WAM only takes those trees that are past the fruiting life or are too old and dangerously close to existing buildings. When WAM cuts trees, they plant new ones in their place teaching not only the trainees but also the landowners about sustainable planting practice. While collecting the logs, the

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[29] After conducting a survey of my property it was discovered that several of our breadfruit trees had reached the end of their productive life spans. Alson determined that the trees would still be suitable for WAM's use and so he had his students harvest the trees.

trainees continue to learn the *Jedkã* (log surveying process). This training includes the identification of what types of woods are used to build the different parts of the canoes. Log cutting also includes learning how to organize the logistical transfer from the logs to the WAM site and the safe use and maintenance of chainsaws. The training techniques of felling, cutting, and cleaning the logs are also taught.

The next step will be for the trainees to learn how to build model canoes. In this part of their training Mentil will teach the various names for the parts of the canoe and by building models will prepare them for building full size canoes. Each trainee will learn how to build their own model canoe before they can advance to full size canoe building. WAM makes sure that each trainee builds the models to authenticity and to correct proportions. Some of the models have been presented as ambassadorial gifts for diplomatic protocols.

This aspect of the training, the canoe-building phase, has proven to be quite lucrative to WAM and its students. A few years ago saw the first batch of completed canoe models to hit the Majuro Atoll market with great success. WAM continues to accept orders and were at least six months backlogged for new canoe models. WAM's vision of making a cottage industry for the trainees is now becoming a reality.

Once the trainees have successfully mastered canoe model building, Mentil describes the transition to building full sized canoes as a "smooth transition". In Mentil's view, you just make the model canoe parts larger! The full-scale canoe-building phase of the training will involve the trainees learning

traditional canoe building chants called *roro*. A *roro* is a chant that is either sung or spoken. It has a rhythmic meter, can rhyme at times, and is usually one or two sentences long. Mentil will sing the *roro* that provides a description of how to make a certain part of the canoe. One such chant is sung while swinging the adze to hollow out the main hull of the canoe. Singing the chant provides all those working on that section of the boat the direction for how and where to swing the adze, and the speed or rhythm with which to swing the adze.

During the full size canoe-building phase, Mentil will introduce the trainees to sailing and maintaining the canoes. By completing this segment of training most of the trainees hold the skills to be considered as experienced sailors. They continue their advanced training on the *tipnol* (mid-size sailing canoe) "WAM", and are now at the point where they are comfortable sailing and taking sailing charters without the assistance of a trainer. They are now the main crew for WAM's income generation charter sailing program. The Majuro Atoll Local Government sponsored two challenging canoe races that drew a broad range of competitors and the "best of the best" from around the Marshall Islands. The WAM trainees were among the youngest sailors who participated.

Throughout the various segments of training, Mentil feels that the best measure of his teaching success will be if he can teach, "the trainees to be future trainers." This has become an important aspect of the work that WAM does. The trainees are continuously learning such things as written and oral studies on canoe parts, legends, old Marshallese proverbs, wise sayings, Marshallese *roro*s, and how all of this relates back to traditional canoes and sea life. Gaining

this knowledge gives the trainees the self-esteem that motivates them to give presentations to visitors, especially young Marshallese school children. Trainees have worked with hundreds of students from different public and private schools on Majuro. From the beginning Mentil insures that trainees will be able to take on the role of "presenter" for the school visits and outreach programs.

One of the new training developments for WAM centers on their new fiberglass shop. This allows trainees to further their training beyond traditional canoe building and to learn modern boat building techniques. In early 2003 trainees built a 24' catamaran sailing cargo vessel. With the help of the RMI National Training Council (NTC), WAM has established the first NTC certification for Boat Building and Fiberglass Technology. WAM developed a two-year, four semester curriculum for this certificate level program.

One of the most important aspects of Mentil's contributions to WAM is the interaction he has with the elementary school children, particularly with his introduction of the Marshallese concept of manit. There is a very important concept in Marshallese culture simply referred to as *manit* or custom. Manit can take on many meanings, but in this sense Mentil refers to the great responsibility he feels to impart the ancient Marshallese knowledge of canoe building and culture to future generations. WAM has recently paired up with the Upward Bound program that brings in students to WAM to have hands on training in all aspects of canoe building. It is basically an abridged version of the curriculum that WAM trainees go through.

During my visits with WAM I was able to be a part of the many classes of the Upward Bound program. It is during such classes that Mentil can be "hands on" with the students experiential education. In one particular class, the students were learning how to make *coir*, which is rope made out of coconut fibers. Another class had the students making repairs to a sailing canoe. Both the boys and girls learn how to weave sails of pandanus leaves. Traditionally this aspect of sailing canoe construction was reserved for women, but with so few that still have the knowledge of weaving WAM wants to train as many students as they can. One of Mentil's great joys is when the students can see the tangible fruits of their labors. It is at this moment that students have translated ancient knowledge and methods into meaningful work.

The Upward Bound students are also learning knowledge that is environmentally friendly and sustainable. Using sailing canoes greatly reduces the need for gas consumption in a country where gas tops $5.00 per gallon. They also learn the basics of forestry and land conservation as they harvest trees to be used for canoe building.

I asked Mentil if traditional sailing canoe building had become more popular in the Marshallese Islands as a result of the renaissance in Polynesian ocean voyaging. He quickly laughed and said that though there was maybe some influence, he feels that sailing canoe popularity in the Marshallese is more related to the wagering that goes on between the various sailing canoe builders and owners. This wagering is certainly fueled by the many races held throughout the year in Majuro's lagoon. These races are starting to attract the attention of

outer atolls builders, as they want to share in the glory. Some of the outer atolls stage preliminary races where the top winners and their boats will then sail to Majuro to compete in the races.

Mentil has spent the summer working on small projects around the WAM site eagerly waiting for the next batch of trainees to start. With WAM's focus on taking in trainees that are deemed "at risk youth," Mentil knows that his task will be hard going at the beginning. If these new trainees can successfully complete the program though, they have a much higher chance of finding skilled positions not only on Majuro, but wherever they travel. It is in that thought that Mentil finds his ultimate joy in the work he does with WAM.

CHAPTER 4

THE INTERVIEWS WITH TWO KEY WAAN AELON IN MAJEL PERSONNEL

I grew up in the Marshall Islands learning to sail and build canoes from my older relatives. An uncle from Namo Atoll had built a small sailing canoe as a gift for my grandfather. The canoe was to be used for fishing, but it soon fell victim to my insatiable desire to sail. The exhilaration of water splashing off the bow and outrigger of the canoe as it sliced its way through the water will never leave my memory. We would spend hours zipping around the lagoon, chasing frigate birds swooping down to catch fish or trying to outrace a motorboat.

I had always wondered why my younger cousin Marty and I were the only ones on Majuro that would sail the old style canoe in the lagoon? At that time in the mid 1980s very few sailing canoes if any could be found on Majuro Atoll. Our canoe appeared to be the only one. I couldn't imagine why such a canoe, which was perfectly suited for its environment, would not be more widely utilized.

When my family lived on Oahu in the Hawaiian Islands, we had become familiar with the Polynesian Societies Voyaging (PVS) canoe *Hokule'a* and the many trips that it had made to Tahiti and the Cook islands in an effort to revitalize traditional Polynesian voyaging and boat building. Why had the Hawaiians forgotten about how and why they built canoes? To me it seemed that the Marshallese would never get to that point of forgetting how to do something so

innate to their culture. It did happen though and the Marshallese were losing vital knowledge that had sustained them for many centuries, as were the Hawaiians.

My subsequent move to the Midwestern United States did little to diminish my interest in canoe culture and how the Marshallese style canoe had greatly contributed to my ancestor's ability to live in such remote islands. The only setback was I was in Indiana and the Marshalls were halfway around the world. I was afraid that the Marshallese would lose their knowledge of building canoes.

To the extent that this knowledge would not be forgotten, WAM has been the only hedge against losing this vital knowledge. Inspired by the example of what the Polynesian Voyaging Society has accomplished since the mid 1970s, WAM has been able to slowly build momentum to reinvigorate and engage the Marshallese as to the importance of the education and documenting that WAM does.

When I was in the process of putting together this paper it was apparent that an important part of it would be the information that I would gather during the oral interview process. Though there is still little written information on canoe culture in the Marshalls, there is even less first hand information from the people that are part of this revitalizing effort.

Even up until a few months before finalizing the parameters of the paper, I was unaware that an NGO was involved in reviving canoe culture in the Marshalls. Instead I was focusing more in the renewed interest around Marshall's canoes that outside organizations, such as the Hawaiian based PVS, had taken. Needless to say, having an organization like WAM was going to

make gathering information a lot easier since they would have a concentrated knowledge base from which to collect information. I had already started the process of contacting people that I had remembered from my childhood that I knew were still building canoes. My hope was to be able to interview those canoe builders.

As of the writing of this paper there had previously been no attempts at conducting significant interviews with people from WAM. Since WAM has been the only organization dedicated to the revitalization of traditional canoe building in the Marshalls, it was imperative that interviews be conducted with personnel from WAM.

The first person that was on my list to interview was the founder of WAM, Dennis Alessio. Since he had been part of WAM from the very beginning I saw this as the perfect opportunity to get the full story from *the* most significant person involved. As I initiated contact with him and started to explain the intent for the paper, I could tell that he was very excited to have outside interest in the activities of his organization. It wasn't until I told him when I was going to be in the Marshalls to conduct my research that I found out that he would not be in the Marshall to be part of the interview process.

Dennis suggested two other key players in WAM that could provide as compelling of a story. To further this, Dennis felt that since these two others were also Marshallese (Dennis is from the US) the answers they would provide would be spoken more from a Marshallese perspective. In this way, the interview process would allow for a more accurate depiction of the story of WAM since it

would come from the Marshallese themselves without the "filter" of a western lens.

Dennis had always had it in his mind that a Marshallese person would eventually take the reins of WAM once he stepped down from the position as its director. In some sense he felt more of a custodian of the knowledge than the author; keeping the fire from dying out until others could take his place. To that end, he directed me to Alson Kelen who is the program manager for WAM. In Alson, Dennis saw the opportunity for a Marshallese person to take over for him.

When I first arrived at the WAM site and met Alson I could tell right away his enthusiasm for the work that WAM did. This was evident as he showed me around their various office spaces and workshops. Although he had a lot to say about the buildings, there were two things that I could tell brought him the most pride; the personnel of WAM and the sailing canoes that they built. Over the course of several weeks, I shadowed the classes, community outreach to schools and other organizations, his administrative functions, and other activities in an attempt to gain a better understanding of why he had become involved with WAM. Though the oral interview that I conducted with him contained valuable information, it was through observing his day-to-day activities that I garnered the most telling insights. As with any interview I wanted Alson to start at the beginning so that he would set the context for where he was currently with WAM. Most of the questions asked during the interview revolved around his work with WAM and the impact that it has had on the knowledge base of traditional sailing canoe building and its future as a viable cultural force.

Alson Kelen was listening to the radio and reading the paper, while out fishing in the Majuro lagoon, when he heard about the job announcement for a position with WAM. Alson, whose family was from the northern RMI atolls, had been around the water all of his life and had dreamed of working for the Alele Museum, which at the time WAM was a part of. Alson eventually became hired at a time when WAM was finishing its documentation process of canoe design and building. Alson traveled to northern Eniwetok Atoll to document and translate a project that saw the design and construction of a 50-foot *walap*. This *walap* eventually made a trip to the 1992 VI Festival of Pacific Arts in Rarotonga, in the Cook Islands, where it was named "the fastest traditional craft in the entire Pacific" (WAM informational brochure).

Alson described his role with WAM as starting long before Dennis actually offered him the job. Growing up and listening to his uncles chant the oral traditions of navigation and canoe building, only served to fuel his curiosity. When the position with WAM was offered he jumped at the chance to assist in the initial process of helping Dennis document and translate.

I asked Alson about that first project when they traveled to Eniwetok Atoll.

> "For our first program it was the Eniwetok Canoe, to do a comparison of construct and design. The design of this canoe reminded everyone of a knife, as the hull was so narrow. Our goal was to find a typical Marshallese design, and what we found (sic) that design was the same with exception of the width. What we found was that change in design was congruent with the environmental condition that allowed for its influence."

Alson went on to further recall that Dennis was starting to attribute the design of this hull with what other islands in the Marshall were designing. The

locals protested by saying that the design of the "knife" hull has to do with the fact that Eniwetok is more isolated than other atolls so their boats had to be extra fast to cut down on traveling time.

> "Dennis wanted to call this type of canoe a *korkor*, which is the smaller type of canoe, but the locals insisted that this type was considered the *walap* design which denotes the largest sized canoes. The planking with all its decking was the same and it was the same design as every where else, just more adapted to its surrounding."

A major component of the first study that Alson was a part of was to document the various types of canoe shapes. Alson detailed the three main types of canoe design but noted a significant uniqueness in Marshallese design that was not found in other Pacific island canoe building.

> "One of the most unique things that we found in Marshallese canoes, it doesn't matter what design it is, but for example even the smallest paddling canoe *korkor* but it can also be used as a sailing canoe. Ours is always a sailing canoe. I always would like to joke around and say we are lazy and we prefer to sail, and I would say this to master carvers from around the Pacific. However, they say no because we are smart. They would say 'you make sure that your tools do the work for you, and you don't work for your tools'. We just design it and the product does all the work."

Alson went to add that given the great distance that some would need to travel to get to fishing grounds or to deliver cargo, the advantages of having a sail meant the difference between a safe and quick voyage, or using up your energy trying to paddle and not reaching your destination. "Getting lost in the Pacific would be a bad idea," Alson concluded.

Once this initial part of the documenting phase was concluded, funding had run out, as did the chance to document canoe design on other Atolls in the Marshalls. It would have been easy for Alson and Dennis to be discouraged, but

they decided to pursue other avenues of funding and a shift in emphasis from documenting canoe design to starting a "living archives." Also at that time they started to talk with other NGOs, such as Youth-To-Youth in Health, that were looking for cultural components to add to their programs that mentored at risk youth. By doing so they could provide a meaningful training program that had cultural significance.

> "Why only have a static archive of information in some library when you could having a 'living' one? Why don't we train the kids since they are right ones to train? We have a high percentage of kids that fall through the cracks, so why don't we modify to the program to work with youths at risk. Our programs current focus, WAM, is still to work with Youth at risk; now the ones we are really focusing on were the serious kids with high drop out rates. Unfortunately we had to go through a couple years of not having funding, but with the help of the former Marshall Island president, Amata Kabua, we started the canoe house and have been spreading out ever since."

I then asked Alson what it meant to teach a living archive and how that effected the development of WAM's curriculum as they sought to teach at risk youth.

> "Canoes are the medium of the whole program, but life skills are what Marshallese kids are lacking and what this program is designed to teach them. Just getting them to punch in (as in a time clock) in the morning and afternoon, we bring them in and train them how to build, maintain, and charter canoes for example. People would then ask me 'so what if you train them to build canoes and maintain them', what next? The big picture is carpentry, life skills training. Given the complexity of building canoes, if they can do this they can build anything. Houses are square, but canoes have curves to them and complex lashing points. If they can build a canoe, they can build anything."

Building the curriculum around teaching canoe building to at risk youths has been a source of pride for WAM. The program had grown so much that they launched out from teaching traditional building methods to incorporate more

modern technologies. They started up the fiberglass shop and are now servicing boats for the many yachters that make their way through the Pacific Islands and come to port in the Marshalls.

> "It is very important that we teach using modern techniques because the islands are small and the quantity of breadfruit trees and drift lags is small and will not last forever. We need to use the same techniques, but using modern material. I look to use the term; we need to modernize not westernize. So we use the same design, but just substitute a more modern material. We are preparing the kids now for times when locally grown material may not be available."

I asked Alson about the first class that WAM started back in 1998 for at risk youths. He recalled how, even though WAM's focus was to teach youth at risk, it became apparent that the program would reach far beyond just at risk youth.

> "When the program was first started in 1998, the canoe house was built as a training project along side building canoes. The local women and elders would teach the younger generation how to make thatch roofing for the canoe house and that also brought the whole community together. Our school outreach program actually brought elementary school children in and we also had them helping to build the canoe house. Our neighbors became heavily involved in seeing that the program would succeed and so they would everyday stop by and see if there was anything or work that they could do."

Marshallese people have long been known for their hospitality and sense of community. I could tell during this portion of the interview that Alson was relieved to know that although knowledge in building traditional canoes was on the decline, the Marshallese sense of community and hospitality was still very much alive. Long after the program site and canoe house had been built, neighbors and community people still stop by and offer whatever assistance they

can. During my time at WAM it was not uncommon to find an elder, who was not working for WAM, to be teaching youth along side WAM staff.

There have been many challenges for WAM; problems with finding sustained levels of funding, local materials for canoe building and repair, and consistent governmental support. Along with the challenges I asked Alson what had brought him the most amount of pleasure while working for WAM.

> "I had a hard time working with the kids since I was about the same age so we were like peers to each other. I was expecting that they would be responsible and I was expecting more from them. They taught me what life was really like for them and I feel very fortunate that I can share these challenges with the trainees. Not only have the trainers been learning something, but also everyone in WAM has been learning.
>
> The most rewarding part of working for WAM has been a lot, especially the trips. This trip we took to Maui with my boys (trainees) had been so much fun. They did a lot of the work and they said that some 40,000 visitors came to visit the site and first thing they would see were our boys, since our display area was set-up near the front entrance. I was so impressed because they would say that they did a great job. I would take more of a back seat and would allow them to approach the visitors and talk about the project. I remember the first time that when our English language volunteer came in to teach the trainees English, they were so shy. They would actually run to the rest room and hide in there, as they were so afraid to talk to her. They were like wild animal. Not these same kids were here and they were not only approaching strangers, but also talking English to them. They even started helping out other countries at their canoe display areas in helping then with their canoe project while at the expo. A Marshallese phrase came to mind; *Wa kuk, wa jumor*, which means a voyage of unity. We build canoes together and it was good to see them finally starting to break out of their shell and reach out to others. I no longer saw them as youth at risk, but builders winning awards. Because of lack of funding, I sometimes go unpaid, but seeing the trainees reach new levels of bravery has been very much fun."

Alson went on to explain that this type of praise that his trainees received from visitors and other canoe builders at the Maui festival was echoed when they went to other cultural festivals throughout the Pacific. They had learned self-

discipline and were able to surmount the bad conditions that had previously held them down.

One of the last questions that I asked Alson was for him to reflect on how the program had challenged people's perceptions that ancient knowledge could still be a viable part of modern culture. I was interested to find out if WAM was a catalyst for people to revive ancient knowledge in areas other than in traditional canoe building.

> "I think that WAM has. I see more programs focused on traditional life and traditional skills. Women's groups are focusing on handicraft making and a type of food prepared for long ocean voyages, *janikuin*, is starting to become more popular. These things are starting to put the islands on the cultural map again. Also, we are seeing that the Marshalls are starting to participate in more cultural expositions than before. Now it is getting stronger and stronger. I would like to think that that has been WAM's part in helping to remind people of their heritage.
>
> When we started having canoes races, it started to spread to outer islands. We found out that canoe building on outer islands had been jumped started because they wanted to be able to race their canoes in our competitions. Our program is now like an icon in the community. It has been a win-win situation.
>
> The main reason I feel that there is so much cultural interest of late is that though canoe culture has always been big, it just has not always been recognized. Publicity always helps and seeing at risk youth being transformed into kids that contribute to community has been rewarding and people take interest."

Alson could have talked for many more hours extolling the virtues of the program, but he didn't have to, as the progress that WAM had made was self-evident. Ask anyone in the community about WAM and they could only sing its praises.

Another person that Dennis directed me towards was actually one of the trainers. Mentil Laik was one of those first batches of trainees that had successfully completed the WAM program. Originally from Ailuk and Wotje

Atolls, he started making boats with his father and grandfather at the age of 12. His grandfather was a navigator for his home atoll, though Mentil never learned much of the navigational knowledge. Along with his brothers Mentil learned ancient familial secrets to building boats from the ground up, starting with the *jouj* and *mej*, which are the two main sections of the hull. Mentil found boat building to be a pleasure and would recall many late evenings putting the finishing touches on whatever part of the boat they were building that day.

Mentil would later move to the main atoll of Majuro around 1967 and for the next few decades worked whatever jobs he could find. All the while the boat building knowledge laid dormant in his memories. It wasn't until the formal training program through WAM was established that he became a trainee. Mentil had worked earlier with Dennis Alessio on an Alele project that would see the refurbishing of a sailing canoe from Jaluit Atoll. This boat was eventually sent to the Field Museum in Chicago and is now the centerpiece of an extensive permanent exhibit on the Marshall Islands and surrounding Oceanic islands.

Mentil is one of the "master" canoe trainers on staff for WAM. He oversees all aspects of teaching the new students all there is to know about canoe building. Mentil described to me the basic series of "courses" that he and the other trainers would teach to the trainees.

Though Mentil spoke no English, his enthusiasm for what he did for WAM was universally evident. He is typical of many Marshallese people in the sense that he is very soft spoken and would rather be working on something and

teaching than being interviewed and put on the spot. His answers to my initial questions were short, but nonetheless his enthusiasm still was clear.

Though I had asked many of the questions that I had asked Alson, Mentil was able to offer many differing insights into the significance of the work that WAM does.

> "Working as a trainer for this program has been very rewarding. Teaching trainees basic carpentry, building, maintenance had been very fun. One of the things that I really enjoy teaching the youth is *roro*, which are chants that help the builder of the canoe remember steps in building and to keep them in rhythm. The *roro's* are very important to imbue the boat with a balanced soul.
>
> What has also been most important is to teach the youth *manit* (cultural manner) such as how to behave to elders. My hope is that by teaching these *manit* that the youth will no lose them."

I went on to ask Mentil what were some of the challenges that he faced in teaching the youth at WAM. In particular I wanted to know if there was anything about working for WAM that he didn't enjoy. He gave me a puzzled look and then simply explained that there was nothing about WAM that he didn't enjoy.

> "What has been really fun is when the elementary school children will come to the program site and we get to tell them stories from long ago. We also teach them how to weave sails using pandanus fibers, how to repair boats, and the most fun part how to sail them. They will come in and see what we want them to do and the students will say it is too hard. By the end of the day, they are unwilling to leave because they have had so much fun.
>
> It makes me sad that these students had never heard of some of these things from their parents and grandparents. When they leave though, I'm glad to have exposed them to what we do that is part of their culture."

Since Mentil had lived most of his life on the outer islands and away from the more modern conveniences of life on Majuro, I was curious to see how he

would respond to a question about the relevance of reviving ancient knowledge in the context of a world trying to modernize.

> "There is a lot of importance in what I'm trying to teach. The canoes that we are building are teaching Marshallese that they should be proud of their heritage. If there are no longer canoes being built, life will become very hard. Building canoes teaches them so much such as practical skills, sailing canoes save from them having to buy gas, and it helps people make use of land resources such as the breadfruit trees that are used in the construction process.
>
> It is important that my children can grow up with the chance to learn the same knowledge that my father and his father taught. It is our way and it is too important to just give up on. It would make me very sad if it was lost."

I asked Mentil why traditional canoe building had become popular once again. As he gave his answer he seemed amused that something so trivial could have actually contributed to its revival.

> "It seems that when we started to have racing competitions for the canoes that many people wanted to build boats to race. Another thing that would happen is that these same boat builders would also bet on the outcome of the races. Several thousands of dollars would exchange hands, but more importantly they were racing for the pride of their islands.
>
> I also see that what they (Polynesian Voyaging Society) in Hawaii are doing is important, but I don't know much about those types of boats."

A recent income resource for WAM has been the building of canoe models. Though you can buy a cheaply made model of a canoe at the airport tourist shop, the kinds that Mentil has been building are faithful reproductions of the types of canoes that he also builds in full scale.

> "I started doing these models when we started having visitors from the hotel next door come over to our work shop. After we would give them a ride in the lagoon in our big canoe, they would ask if they could have a model of the canoe they rode in as a souvenir. After asking Dennis if we could make them he thought it was a good idea, another way to train the youth in canoe building.
>
> Now, before the youth are allowed to build a big canoe, they must first show to us that they can build a model canoe that is accurate. The

CHAPTER FIVE

CANOE CULTURE IN THE WIDER CONTEXT

From the program's humble beginnings as a one-man mission to document canoe-building techniques, WAM was starting to catch the attention of significant off-island interests. It was with the start of WAM building the canoe house and prospects for training programs that the governments of New Zealand, Australia and the U.S. injected large scale funding into the programs. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Marshall Islands government, and land grants though the College of the Marshall Islands rounded out the list of financial contributors to WAM programs.

The United States Department of Interior, through their Pacific Insular Region Anti-Substance Abuse Resistance Program (PIRAAP) grant, provides technical assistance funding for an administrative trainer who is working with three college level student trainees in setting up the administrative framework for the long-term sustainability of WAM.

The United States Department of Labor Workforce Investment Act (WIA) provides a grant to fund vocational skills training for up to 16 local youth-at-risk, including women, in traditional outrigger canoe building, maintenance and sailing along with modern fiberglass boatbuilding training. WAM is in the beginning stages of developing curriculums with preliminary funding from UNESCO and the Government of New Zealand for a full-fledged Apprenticeship Program in these four locally practical and sustainable trades:

1. Traditional canoe making and wooden boatbuilding
2. Contemporary boat building and fiberglass technology
3. Carpentry and woodworking
4. Furniture making and cabinetmaking

The United States Department of Health has given a grant to be used for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment (SAPT). This funded the addition of a counselor-in-training to the staff at WAM. This is a one-year pilot project which will result in four incarcerates being released to the WAM program for vocational and life-skill training and rehabilitation.

It wasn't until a March 2005 report from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) that provided the personnel at WAM with concrete evidence that there were indeed tangible fruits to the program's labor. The ADB on-island consultant, Colleen Peacock-Taylor, had met with 12 alumni from the WAM program in an attempt to assess the impact of life skills and the vocational training education. A performance evaluation tool, "The Most Significant Change" identified attitude, behavior and relationship changes from each of the respective youth. All alumni identified positive changes as a result of their engagement with WAM (which ranged from three months to three years). With respect to relationship changes, most youth reported that the quality of their interaction with family members had improved dramatically. Many said they are more respectful of their parents and more helpful at home. Significantly, they also reported that their parent's view about them had changed and that family members showed interest and pride in their work. In terms of behavioral changes, participants reported that they no longer "run around" and get into trouble in their communities. They also reported consuming much less alcohol.

Many said they had changed peer groups and are better able to handle pressure from friends and girlfriends. "Their status in the community has changed too with the common phrase of 'people know me and respect me now,' being used often in reference to these interviewed WAM alumni. (Peacock-Taylor 2005).

One of the most significant changes reported by all alumni in the ADB report was in the area of improved self-worth and cultural pride. The process of building traditional canoes had changed their lives. These alumni stated in the report that they now feel good about "being Marshallese" and have a much greater understanding and respect for their culture. The WAM alumni talked in the report about how they were spending more time with their grandparents and being interested in "the old stories"; their memories of customs they hear as young boys are returning. The report mentions that traditional leaders talk to them now and are interested in what they are doing at WAM. The traditional leaders strongly believe Marshallese culture must be maintained and passed on to the next generation.

As a result of their experiences with WAM the report finds that these young men have more clearly defined goals for the future. Just having a goal was considered a major milestone when these Alumni first started. To make these goals a reality, most alumni said they still need support from WAM, particularly in terms of finding employment or returning to school. Many talked about wanting to train other youth to be boat builders, carpenters, and fiberglass workers; some want to go to the outer islands and contribute to development there. They think WAM should expand to work with youth in the outer islands

and teach a wider range of vocational skills so alumni can find jobs. The report also noted that these young men thought that more girls/women should get involved with the training that WAM provides.

Long before WAM had many of the funding and programming resources established on Majuro, WAM was starting to become recognized as a legitimate part of the revival of sailing canoe building and voyaging. Probably the first major foray into this still young community would come at The Sixth Festival of Pacific Arts in 1992 held in Rarotonga, the capital of the Cook Islands. This festival is held every four years in different island nations around the Pacific. The intent of the festival is for these island nations to share their culture, beliefs, myths, traditions, legends, songs and dances in an effort to sustain their primacy in each respective culture. Canoes from Hawai'i, New Zealand, Cook Islands and other Pacific Nations were scheduled to participate in this event.

Polynesian Voyaging Society founder and author of books on the revival of Polynesian canoe culture, Ben Finney, was one of those in attendance at the festival. Finney first became involved with ancient voyaging practices in the 1960s. It was in 1973 that he along with several other enthusiasts set upon the task of building a sailing canoe typical of the Hawaiian Islands. The hope was to recreate open ocean voyaging, an art and skill largely forgotten to time. Recruiting the help of a Satawalese navigator, Mau Piailug, the newly minted Polynesian Voyaging Society's sailing canoe, Hokule'a, set sail from the Hawaiian Islands to Tahiti. Since that first voyage many successful voyages have followed with each one learning new facets of this almost forgotten art.

Hokule'a has since come to symbolize for many Hawaiians their strong sense of cultural identity and tradition.

In Finney's book, *Sailing in the Wake of the Ancestors: Reviving Polynesian Voyaging*, he writes about this encounter with Dennis Alessio.

The Tole Mour, a schooner designed for delivering medical supplies to the outer atolls of the Marshalls, arrived at Aitutaki island carrying the dismantled pieces of a Marshallese sailing canoe on its deck. Once reassembled this canoe would participate in the festival that included canoes from other mostly Polynesian islands. The canoe had been fashioned on Eniwetok Atoll from pieces of driftwood. "Officially the canoe bore the name Waan Aelon Kein[30] (Canoe of These Islands), but everybody called her *Walap*, which simply means 'Big Canoe' (Finney 2003).

The plan was for all the canoes participating in the festivals to eventually sail and link up on the island of Rarotonga which lay to the south of Aitutaki. A delay in setting sail due to weather allowed the Marshallese to finish reassembling their canoe. Once the canoe was ready for a test-spin, the other boat builders were quickly fascinated by how the Marshallese crew was able to deftly work the large lateen sail and move it from front to back, thus changing the direction that the boat could travel.

With the arrival of improved weather a small fleet of canoes and escort ship started the southerly trip to Rarotonga. *Walap* with her sleek hull was able to travel at much faster speeds than her more cumbersome Polynesian canoe

[30] This canoe eventually went on display at the National Maritime Museum in Auckland, New Zealand.

counterparts. *Walap* was so fast that she would have to occasionally heave to, as she could easily outpace her escort ship the Tole Mour.

With the safe arrival of all the other canoes participating in the festival in Rarotonga, each canoe was greeted by the cheering crowd as they entered the harbor. According to traditional stories many of the exploratory voyages that set out from Rarotonga all left using this sheltered harbor.

Many of the speeches lauded the efforts of the crews and their skill in navigating the vast ocean distances. For the Marshallese this was their first time to be acknowledged outside of the Marshalls for their efforts in reviving traditional sailing canoe building. For many of them it was their first time outside of the Marshalls! Dennis was quoted in a newspaper[31] piece as saying, "The Marshallese realize now that their canoes are pretty good. They thought before that if the canoes were any good, then Americans would be using them."

The Marshallese used the construction of the canoe and its navigation as metaphor for life. Seeing that canoe culture was on the brink of vanishing and invigorated by their attendance at the canoe festival, they were able to rise above the imagery of the typical Marshallese idea of being a backward culture of people dependent solely on U.S. aid and unable to continue their traditions. Since the canoe was captained and crewed by Marshallese it was for them a rite that signaled their taking back of traditional ways and honoring the traditions of their northern islands.

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[31] Honolulu Star Bulletin (Honolulu), 11 March 1993.

In looking back at my experience with WAM and my observations throughout the outer islands in the Marshalls there is an intense, though not overtly outward sense, that a struggle for cultural identity is taking place. This comes to light as modern and outside methods and outlooks are at times clashing with long held assumptions and traditions that span thousands of years. Much of this didn't start to happen until the era of colonialism starting with the Germans.

Before colonialism Marshallese were a fairly homogenous group of people. The sea circumscribed the Marshallese culture with sailing canoes being the most important link to the sea. The world in which they sailed, known as *Koine*, ranged from the Kosrae and Ponape to the West and possibly Yap, to Kiribati and Banaba (Ocean Island) in the south, to Eneen-Kio (Wake Islands) and Johnston Atoll and probably Hawai'i in the east (Spennemann). They had contact with a large variety of people either intentional or by accident. "Their own accidental dispersals also carried the Marshallese far afield" (Spennemann).

The Marshallese sense of identity for all the atolls was not a fixed term as it has now become, referring to themselves as *ri-majol*, "of the Marshalls". Rather they used terms such as *Aelon Kein Ad*, "our atolls" or *Armij Aelon Kein*, "people of these islands" to describe themselves. Because of this no delineation was needed as to where the sea of the Marshallese ended or where that of another adjoining cultural group began.

It was in the post war era that the Marshalls, like other Pacific cultures, began to grapple with what it meant to be from where they were from. Through publications made by the Trust Territory of the Pacific Commission and other groups the delineations of culture and ethnic groupings became much more apparent and widely known. In more recent times there have been many events that take on the form of cultural festivals and symposiums that seek to connect these various groups and showcase their uniqueness. This then feeds into the sense of nationalism that I was starting to see in the Marshalls.

Marshallese would just go about their ways and interact with the world accordingly before colonialism. Many concepts such as race, class, religion and culture were largely introduced and developed as a result of colonialism. Could it then be said that "culture" and "tradition" are the rhetoric that is being used to distinguish differences and identity? I don't think that it is necessary for Marshallese to have to justify their own unique sense of cultural identity and tradition, either to themselves or others, via cultural festivals or symposiums. There are other ways to conceive and justify their identities and that is through history. This expression through history can take on various forms, some of which are sung, danced, painted or carved to name a few. Perhaps it is through this expression if embraced, that Marshallese can truly feel the sense of self-worth.

While in the Marshalls I was able to observe how this exhibition of culture was taking place. Various branches of the government would send delegations to off-island events that would exhibit a facet of Marshallese culture. These took

the form of traditionally woven handicrafts and clothes, stick dancing or traditional ceremonial practices. Though each was designed to display and educate the larger public about practices that sustained Marshallese culture through the ages, they were none-the-less static in their application. It was sad to see that these exhibits were promoting very viable means of providing industry while at the same time maintaining a strong sense of cultural identity, but too often there was no strong evidence in the Marshalls that this was taking place.

Perhaps the only two exceptions to this are what WAM and the Alele Museum are doing. Not only could they exhibit a vital part of Marshallese and Pacific culture, but also they were actively engaged in documenting and teaching this art of traditional canoe building. They were both looking at the past as a model for cultural identity. Another example could be when Eniwetok Atoll built their canoe for the festival as a way of showing how vital canoes were to overcoming the vast ocean distances to sustain their atoll. An observer at one of the Pacific cultural festivals noted that among all the exhibitors only the Marshallese had chosen not to wear pre-missionary traditional dress opting for clothing styles typical of those introduced during missionary times.

Today, as the Marshallese Government moves towards a more westernized style of development, it is apparent that a rapid disappearance of traditional skills in canoe building and use is occurring. The outrigger canoe represents a level of highly sophisticated technology that has been proven as appropriate for use in the Marshall Islands. To this end WAM conducted a study on Ailuk Atoll to showcase this concept.

Since canoe building is on the decline in a number, if not all of the atolls, it is clear that these outer island societies are at risk of losing a cultural and economic resource at a time when they can least afford it. Traditional means of marine resource ownership have become less effective, many times resulting scarcity of food resources since they were not managed the way they once were. As traditional food gathering and finding resources has become more difficult, the resulting effect was that these outer islanders gradually adopted more modern methods.

Copra[32] production was once a reliable source of income, but with historically low prices, the Marshall Islands Government has shifted to marine resources and tourism as a possible means for offsetting this economic loss. WAM asserts that traditional canoe building could still make a difference between massive government subsidies that could further erode traditional means and allow for the natural self-sufficiency that has sustained the outer islands to continue.

The WAM study titled, *Economic Survey of Boat Use and Construction Costs of Traditional Marshallese Sailing Outrigger Canoe on Ailuk* is probably the first data collection attempt in this area. Ailuk was chosen for this comparison study as the Marshall Islands Marine Resource Authority (MIMRA) had introduced the use of 18' fiberglass fishing boats with outboard motor engines. These boats were being used along side traditional sailing canoes for fishing and transportation.

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[32] Copra is the sun-dried white meat found on the inside of a coconut. It was for this resource that the German merchants sought to cultivate throughout the Marshall Islands.

From talking with Alson there had been a shift in attitude towards using motorboats as they were believed to be faster, easier to maintain and a fisherman could catch more fish than if they used a traditional sailing canoe. What WAM was able to discover from the comparison survey seriously changed many of the fisherman's outlooks on the use of traditional sailing canoes.

Though the MIMRA supplied boats were made from fiberglass, they were not suitable for the environment. The combination of constant salt-water corrosion, jarring from the surf and intense heat and humidity causes the boats to develop cracks and other stresses on the outer and inner hull. There is no fiberglass repair shop located on the outer islands that could repair such cracks and so the useful life of a fiberglass hull was averaged to around four years (Alessio).

Another consideration was the pairing of the fiberglass boat with an outboard engine. Again environmental factors contributed greatly to these engines requiring a lot of downtime for repair. With no engine repair shop on the outer islands, fishermen had to wait for parts to be shipped from Majuro. If the parts were not available on Majuro then they would have to be flown in from Hawai'i at considerable expense and time. According to Alson many of these boats and engines were sitting idly on the beach, as fishermen either didn't have the expertise for repairs or the financial means to buy expensive parts. For the fishermen that were using traditional canoes, Alson points to a vastly different set of observations.

Traditional canoes are made with locally available resources that use knowledge still available to the outer islands and are appropriately suited to the equatorial climate of the Marshalls, so they fared much better than their fiberglass counterparts. The study also pointed to a traditional canoe of 20'–25' having a life span of around 25 years (Alessio), far better than four years for fiberglass boats. Traditional canoes contributed substantially to the outer island economy as it greatly decreased reliance on imported food, gas (which was around $5.75 per gallon) and expensive parts/labor for repairing fiberglass hulls and outboard engines.

Alson points to another interesting assumption that these fishermen had about the use of the two boats. It had been assumed that because the outboard motor boats were fast, they would be able to travel quickly from fishing spot to fishing spot allowing them to catch more fish than if they use the slower traditional sailing boats. The study did show that the average catch of a motorboat each time it went out was more than that of a canoe. Since the motorboats had considerably more downtime for repairs and were subject to frequent gas shortages, comparisons in the study showed that traditional canoes actually average more pounds of fish being caught since the traditional canoe could be fishing more days of the year (Alessio 1991).

The study also had an interesting observation which lends itself to the notion that Marshallese are still inextricably linked with tradition and the sense of pride that comes with it:

> It was noted that the men who sailed and fished with the canoes were held in high esteem within the village. Upon their return from sailing,

> no matter what time it was, there were always people waiting to see how successful they were as well as hear stories of their adventures. This point in fact adds greatly to the self-esteem and identity of the men involved. The outrigger canoe symbolizes this opportunity for revitalization throughout the Marshall Islands (Alessio 1991).

I was able to witness a similar sense of self-esteem playing out while I was on Namo Atoll. While my uncle Harry Anien was building his canoes many of the children would want to come and help him out. Through this interaction he has taken on several apprentices that wish to learn from him the ways of building traditional canoes. It is hoped that these students will pass on that knowledge to the next generation. For traditional canoe making to be sustained on Namo Atoll, there will always be a need to manage resources so that critical components such as breadfruit trees will be available when needed.

From what can be gathered from the report it become apparent that although canoe building is in decline, it is not because of technological or economic disadvantages that the outer islanders face. It seems that there are probably other social factors that are involved.

There is a sense that you need to make money in order to provide for your family on these outer islands. That is why many of the outer islanders still toil to eke out a living by producing copra. Much of the land is tied up in this venture. The reality is that this money is being used to sustain aspects of life that are incongruous to what is appropriate for Marshallese culture as the previously mentioned study points this out. Why do you need to spend $5.75 per gallon in gas for a motorboat and engine when a sailing canoe will be more productive? Why buy imported foods that have greatly contributed to the onset of type 2

diabetes, when there is an abundance of locally available food that is naturally healthy?

The decline in sailing canoe use, in my opinion, has much to do with Marshallese choosing to integrate new technologies without first looking at the long-term implications of those choices. By 1879 Otto Finsch, a German ethnographer, naturalist and explorer, had observed that the use of sailing canoes was starting to become increasingly rare (Spennemann 2005). The Marshallese chiefs had chosen to use European style sailing schooners in favor of traditional sailing canoes due to the increased amount of cargo schooners could carry. This transition to schooners was widely accepted by most chiefs by 1910 (Spennemann 2005).

So far, outsiders have largely spearheaded the majority of interest in reviving traditional canoe building and navigational methods. It would take a local interest that would cross the border into cultural pride for the particular movement to sustain itself.

A fellow researcher from University of Hawai'i, Joe Genz, was researching at WAM at the same time I was. During a presentation to a group of high school students on his doctoral thesis in Marshallese navigation, he described a nautical occurrence that happens when wave deflection patterns cause rough seas on either ends of the island. The English translation for the name of this region is *roots*. A navigator that wandered into these regions would have missed making landfall by seeing the island in their course of sailing. Joe posed the question to the students by saying that because the navigator missed the island but was now

in the *roots*, what could the navigator do? One student quickly raised her hand and said that like with a tree the navigator can follow the *roots* and find the tree, with the tree being the island. Immediately the other students had a look as if a moment of sudden clarity had beset them.

The reason traditional canoe building in the Marshall Islands can be called a revival is the Marshallese have wandered off course from their traditional patterns of sustainability. How can it be that a culture that relied so greatly on their skills in building and navigating canoes could come to the brink of losing all that accumulated knowledge? The Marshallese have lost so much that they can no longer reach the island straight on. They have wandered into the *roots*. Will they be able follow the *roots* in the sea and find their way back to self-sufficiency? I would hope the reply would be yes, as any other answer would only acknowledge that so much that sustained the Marshallese for many generations would be permanently lost. The Marshallese would be like a canoe with no rudder, left to drift out into the ocean never to be seen again.

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GLOSSARY

Alap – (alup) Landowner.

Copra – coconut meat that has been shelled, sun-dried, and bag for collection and processing into commercial products.

Irooj – (yirewej) Chief; king.

Iroojlaplap – (yirewejluplup) Paramount Chief.

Jouj – (jęwij) Canoe part, bottom part of canoe. Also can means thanks.

Kubaak – (kiwbahak) Outrigger; partner of opposite sex.

Kora – (koray) Women; female; effeminate; lady.

Kōrkōr – (kerker) Paddling canoe.

Maan (mon) – From mman meaning man

Mej – (męj) Eye of

Ralik – (raylik) west or sunset.

Ratak – (ratuck) east or sunrise.

Rijerbal – (rejedbal) Worker; employee; personnel; commoner.

Rojak – (rejak) Spar of sail; boom; gaff

Tipñõl – (tipgel) Large outrigger canoe, for sailing

Wato – (waytew) Land tract usually given a unique name.

Wa – (wah) Canoe; ship; boat; vehicle

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. Which is your home atoll?
4. How long have you been a part of the Waan Aelon in Majol program?
5. Describe what your role is with the Waan Aelon in Majol program.
6. (If they are a student) Please describe what you are being instructed in and what you have learned so far. (If they are one of the instructors) Please describe your teaching curriculum and how you go about instructing the students.
7. Describe the circumstances of when you were first approached to be part of the Waan Aelon in Majol program? (If an instructor: for how long have you built canoes)(If a student: what interested you in the program?)
8. What has been the most rewarding part of your involvement with the Waan Aelon in Majol program?
9. What has been the most challenging part of your involvement with the Waan Aelon in Majol program?
10. Do you feel that the Waan Aelon in Majol program positively or negatively contributes to the body of indigenous cultural knowledge? Either way, please elaborate on your response?
11. What importance or implication, if any, does this program have to Marshallese culture?
12. How has the Marshallese community responded to the work of the Waan Aelon in Majol program?
13. Besides the activities native to the Waan Aelon in Majol program, have any outside activities been spurred because of the Waan Aelon in Majol program, such as outreach programs to school, boat races, tourist interest and so forth?
14. What are your hopes and desires for this program?

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

Master boat builders and students will be observed at their usual/normal place of employment, Waan Aelon In Majel, as they go about building sailing canoes, sailing the canoes built, and guiding tours for local and foreign populations. For the process of note taking, subject can/will be interviewed using a computer to digitally record the interview, to facilitate later writing processes. Permission to record such interviews will be obtained through the use of a written consent form, as the interview will be used for research purposes only.

I will also be working with the Historic Preservation Office in the Marshall Islands and the Alele Museum (the Marshall Island's national historical artifacts repository), as they are very keen to the possibilities that his project might have in promoting their work of Waan Aelon in Majel. Another source of material can be found at Charles Sturt University in Australia. Dirk H.R. Spennemann, a sociologist, has been one of the few that has conducted and collected scholarly information about the Marshall Islands.

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