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PRESERVATION AND REVITALIZATION OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE A Perspective from Cultural Anthropological Research on In- digenous Navigation in the Republic of the Marshall Islands

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The Republic of the Marshall Islands Historic Preservation Office (RMI HPO), in cooperation with the Alele Museum, have expanded their main objective of surveying cultural resources to include anthropological research on intangible cultural heritage. We offer a perspective from our current research on indigenous navigation as to how cultural anthropologists can assist the RMI HPO in fulfilling their goals for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, specifically the development of programs for documentation and education. By working with a local community group, we aim to preserve indigenous navigational knowledge through inter-disciplinary and collaborative research methods, and to revitalize indigenous voyaging and navigation through community outreach and the development of a sustainable navigation-training program. We also draw attention to the importance of an official title within the *Historic Preservation Legislation* for people with indigenous knowledge that would help to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage.

How can cultural anthropologists and other professionals in Oceania help their host countries to fulfill their historic preservation goals for the intangible cultural heritage? We reflect on the philosophy of our current research on indigenous navigation in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) as it relates to the activities of the Historic Preservation Office (HPO) and Alele Museum. Our collaborative research with a community group offers a model for local practices of preservation throughout Oceania. We also call attention to locally relevant legislation that would help to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage.

PRESERVATION OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE RMI

The RMI HPO enacted the *Historic Preservation Legislation* (Spennemann 1992) primarily for safeguarding the tangible Marshallese past. The RMI HPO archaeologist and the Alele Museum ethnographer conduct cultural inventories in order to propose site nominations to the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, where sites are cultural, historic and archaeological properties (Thomas 2004). The RMI HPO defines cultural and historic property as “any site, structure, district, landmark,

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building, object or combination thereof, that is included or determined to be eligible in the Republic of the Marshall Island National Register of Historic Places” (Spennemann 1992, p. 8). One of the best examples of a historical site nominated for its local, national and international historical significance is the Joachim De Brum House on Likiep Atoll (O’Neill and Spennemann 2003).

The RMI HPO and Alele Museum importantly document the cultural heritage associated with cultural, or traditional, sites that are part of the natural environment and significant to local communities. The RMI HPO defines cultural heritage as “any aspect of culture as expressed in the oral traditions” (Spennemann 1992, p. 8), where oral traditions are “that body of knowledge of the indigenous people of the Marshall Islands about their past, including their beliefs, traditional practices (including traditional medicine and medical practices), skills, environment, and their spiritual world, which has been handed down, primarily in spoken form, from generation to generation” (Spennemann 1992, p. 10).

Recent Alele Museum projects investigate other manifestations of culture in addition to knowledge of oral traditions, e.g., indigenous fishing methods, tool use, and medicinal practices (Petrosian-Husa 2004). According to the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization (UNESCO), this broader conception of cultural heritage is termed intangible. UNESCO’s (2003, p. 2) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines intangible cultural heritage as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills- as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith- that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage,” where the intangible cultural heritage can be manifested as oral traditions and expressions; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and indigenous craftsmanship. Indigenous navigation is perhaps the quintessential example of intangible cultural heritage.

The current goals of the RMI HPO and Alele Museum for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, although originally written in terms of oral traditions, are to develop programs for documentation and education (Spennemann 1992, pp. 14-15). Another aim of the legislation, although it has not yet been implemented, is to officially recognize cultural experts by bestowing upon them the title of *ri-kapeel*, or people possessing indigenous knowledge and skills (Spennemann 1992, pp. 29-31).

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON INDIGENOUS NAVIGATION

We offer a perspective from our current cultural anthropological research that attempts to both preserve and revitalize one example of intangible cultural heritage- indigenous navigation. We reflect on the philosophy of this project as it relates to the goals of the RMI HPO for intangible cultural heritage, specifically our research design for documentation, our collaboration with a local community group to apply these findings for educational purposes, and the possibility of nominating to the RMI HPO a cultural expert in navigation for the title of *ri-kapeel*.

BACKGROUND

In contrast to other islanders in Oceania who guided their canoes primarily by the stars and winds, the Marshallese developed a sophisticated system for navigating by seeing and feeling how atolls disrupt the patterning of the deep-ocean swells and currents that pass by them. Researchers have worked with cultural experts since the turn of the 20th century (Davenport 1960, 1964, Erdland 1914, Hambruch 1912, Krämer and Neverman 1938, Laubenfels 1950, Winkler 1898), but there has not been an in-depth anthropological study similar to other Oceanic navigation traditions (Ammarell 1995, Feinberg 1988, Gladwin 1970, Lewis 1972, Thomas 1987). There are, however, indigenous explanations (de Brum 1962, Knight 1999) and local documentation through the RMI HPO (Spennemann 1993) and Alele Museum (Mote 2002).

Social changes in the wake of post-war economic development in the RMI hastened the

decline of inter-island voyaging and navigation, particularly the transmission of knowledge to the younger generation. Unlike the central atolls of the Federal States of Micronesia, there are very few elders alive today who formerly learned indigenous navigation. Captain Korent Joel, who blends indigenous navigation with modern celestial navigation as a ship captain, has called for a concerted effort to document and revive Marshallese navigation. Captain Korent, as well as navigation apprentices from the northwestern atolls, learned how to feel local waves on a particular reef on Rongelap Atoll that ideally models how off-shore swells feel at various positions around an island. Captain Korent also learned by sailing with his grandfather on fishing trips within the lagoon of Rongelap Atoll and between Rongelap Atoll, Alinginae Atoll and Rongerik Atoll. Forced displacement from these atolls due to high radiation levels from nuclear testing (Barker 2004), however, continues to prevent the transmission of this site-dependent knowledge, making indigenous navigation today, at least as defined by our research, which currently involves elders only from Rongelap Atoll, truly intangible. ,

To continue the transmission of navigational knowledge, Captain Korent initially approached *Waan Aelōn in Majel* (WAM; Canoes of the Marshall Islands), a non-governmental organization on Majuro Atoll established in 1989 to document and build the major designs of sailing canoes in the RMI. WAM engaged a number of elders, who in their youth had built and sailed canoes, to work with apprentices in order to reconstruct the old canoes and revitalize ocean sailing (Alessio 1989a, 1989b, 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1991d, 1993, Alessio and Kelen 1995). Knowing that an initiative to revive Marshallese voyaging and navigation will greatly condense into one or two years what would traditionally be a life long learning process, and the fact that youth are becoming increasingly detached from their heritage associated with the natural environment, Captain Korent requested that the physical basis for the important swells and currents be computer modeled in order to create a pedagogical tool to supplement experiential learning at sea.

WAM then contacted University of Hawai'i at Manoa (UHM) anthropologist Ben Finney, who with his Hawaiian colleagues had pioneered the study and revival of Polynesian voyaging. To resolve issues of canoe and navigational performance, Finney co-founded the Polynesian Voyaging Society to reconstruct the traditional Polynesian canoes and ways of navigating and to test these on extended experimental voyages. The philosophy of this project was to combine research with the revitalization of the Hawaiian heritage of oceanic exploration and voyaging. The data and insights gained over the last several decades by sailing the reconstructed Hawaiian voyaging canoe *Hōkūle'a* and other reconstructed canoes over the long sea routes of Polynesia have supported intentional exploration and settlement, while the Hawaiians and other Polynesian canoe sailors have gone on to develop a pan-Polynesian voyaging revival. (Finney 1977, 1979, 1994, 2003).

WAM now aspires to begin a similar Marshallese voyaging renaissance by first preserving and then revitalizing indigenous navigation. Alson Kelen, WAM's program manager, learned and documented canoe building and sailing as a local apprentice. He then developed curricula for WAM's canoe building and sailing programs, which have been critical in the revival of the canoe culture on Majuro Atoll. This background ideally places Kelen as both a navigation apprentice and our counterpart as a local researcher. Kelen has christened WAM's navigation project *Kapeel in Meto*, or indigenous knowledge of the ocean.

Drawing from Finney's experience in investigating Polynesian voyaging with the help of UHM oceanographers and meteorologists (Finney et al. 1986), he and UHM anthropology graduate student Joseph Genz similarly approached UHM oceanographer Mark Merrifield with the problem of investigating and analyzing the swells and currents used in Marshallese navigation. Our initial modeling results of the swell patterns did not favor the long-standing ethnographic model of swell refraction at island bathymetry (Winkler 1898), but rather suggest an interaction among deep ocean swells, reflected swells and currents. The

UH Sea Grant College Program, the National Science Foundation and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc. are providing support for an inter-disciplinary study that aims to both model the oceanographic phenomena used by Marshallese navigators and provide local explanations and perceptions of how they are used at sea to navigate.

RMI HPO GOAL 1: DOCUMENTATION

Although our research is not affiliated with the RMI HPO or Alele Museum, it is intimately linked to the preservation and revitalization efforts of WAM's *Kapeel in Meto*. Through Captain Korent's experience blending indigenous and modern celestial navigation and his desire to create a computer model, a sense of dynamism (Hezel 2005) pervades this local cultural preservation project. As a result, our three main methods- formal land-based instruction, experiential learning at sea, and oceanographic modeling- are inter-disciplinary and collaborative. We detail these research methods as they relate to local documentation in order to provide an exemplar for historic and cultural preservation efforts throughout Oceania.

For the oceanographic modeling, we designed a four-way discourse among a cultural expert on navigation, a local navigation apprentice/researcher, cultural anthropologists and oceanographers. Investigating the explanations and perceptions of the swell and current patterns, for example, requires an iterative process through these various backgrounds. The cultural expert initially shows and explains at sea the swell and current conditions that are important for navigation to the navigation apprentice/local researcher, cultural anthropologists, and oceanographers. We then use oceanographic instruments and remote sensing imagery to collect swell and current data at these sites. The cultural expert and our local, cultural and oceanographical understandings of his knowledge are then used to interpret the data and incorporate it into a model. Finally, the navigation trainee/local researcher, in collaboration with UHM researchers, will incorporate this model into local curricula.

Although we similarly designed the formal instruction and experiential learning at sea to involve a similar four-way discourse, these two methods have expanded to include additional cultural experts and local students of navigation. While Captain Korent is our key informant for the perceptions and use of oceanographic phenomena in navigation, we are turning to elders with more formal navigation training to understand other manifestations of navigation (e.g., expressions, legends and models). In this way, Captain Korent is learning from these elders as an apprentice to complete his training. Captain Korent has also invited certain members of the Marshallese community to participate in our formal classroom instruction as students. Including elders and students in our research design is importantly providing additional knowledge and insights. Further, our engagement with the international yachting community to assist with inter-island trips has provided us with the added critical framework of modern celestial navigation.

RMI HPO GOAL 2: EDUCATION

Cultural anthropologists can contribute to the education of the local community by making their research locally available. For example, there are collections of oral traditions, legends and expressions (Kelin 2003, Knight 1999, Spennemann 1993), some of which have importantly been written in the Marshallese language with culturally nuanced explanations (Stone et al. 2000, Tobin 2002). While cultural anthropologists are not generally local education specialists, they can also work collaboratively with their counterparts to create educational materials and programs that are specific to local needs. This is essentially applied anthropology- working with communities from an anthropological perspective to help them address problems in culturally appropriate ways, while maintaining moral and ethical standards (Wulff and Fiske 1987). While many funding agencies for graduate anthropological research do not provide support for community outreach, the UH Sea Grant College Program supports scientific research, education and extension directed toward improving the

understanding and stewardship of coastal and marine resources. The UH Sea Grant Graduate Trainee Program integrates these elements through various programmatic requirements. These include completing each year 15 hours of outreach activities and writing a non-academic article for the *Ka Pili Kai* magazine. As a result, we have built community outreach into our research proposal.

While some of the outreach is focused on training our local counterpart in anthropological methods and grant writing, we are working with WAM to make the community aware of our goals and research. We are attempting to reach the local community on Majuro Atoll through public lectures and classroom instruction that ranges from elementary schools to the College of the Marshall Islands. Newspaper and radio interviews will make this information more accessible to the outer-island Marshallese communities, and including written, audio and video materials on WAM's website will target the Marshallese expatriate communities in Hawai'i and the mainland United States.

The pan-Polynesian voyaging revival was stimulated through the participation of Polynesians as canoe builders, sailors and navigators, but has been sustained through the impact among schoolchildren who have been excited to learn about their ancestral seafaring heritage. We plan to assist WAM in the development of curricula for a formal indigenous navigation apprenticeship program in the RMI. The creation of such a navigation school in the RMI, combined with community outreach, will hopefully foster a greater local appreciation for the Marshallese voyaging heritage, which in turn may provide financial and logistical support for a continuing navigation program and the revitalization of indigenous voyaging.

RMI HPO GOAL 3: RECOGNIZE CULTURAL EXPERTS THROUGH THE TITLE OF RI-KAPEEL

We draw attention to *ri-kapeel*, an official title in the *Historic Preservation Legislation* that is reserved for people possessing indigenous knowledge and skills (Spennemann 1992, pp. 29-31). Traditionally, chiefs placed this title on people with exceptional knowledge and skills. To be-

stow the title of *ri-kapeel* upon a person within a particular domain of knowledge today, the RMI HPO first reviews recommendations by the community and prepares a list of candidates in collaboration with members of the Council of Iroij, and then the Council of Iroij elects one candidate. The election of candidates is based on their knowledge, the applicability of this knowledge in modern society and their willingness to train young apprentices. The *ri-kapeel* agrees to train one apprentice for at least one year, for which he receives monetary compensation. As this legislation draws from the traditional use of the title, it may have more importance among the community for preservation efforts compared to the National Register of Historic Places and other non-indigenous concepts. Unfortunately, there has yet to be an officially recognized *ri-kapeel* since the beginning of the RMI HPO.

Cultural anthropologists are invaluable to the RMI HPO and the Alele Museum for identifying and working with cultural experts. Based on our research, we can make strong recommendations to the RMI HPO for a *ri-kapeel* of navigation. Although the prestige of indigenous knowledge has weakened due to a shift in emphasis away from knowledge-based positions of authority (Stone 2001), certain levels of secrecy still surround it. Captain Korent's reputation as a skilled navigator has encouraged additional elders to work with us; however, there are others who do yet wish to share their knowledge. If an elder with navigational knowledge were to receive the first title of *ri-kapeel* in the RMI, he would thus set a strong example for the preservation and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage, and potentially set into motion the entitlement of additional *ri-kapeel* with different domains of knowledge (e.g., weather forecasting, canoe building, astronomy and medicine).

TOWARDS LOCAL PRACTICES OF PRESERVATION

The RMI HPO and the Alele Museum are importantly documenting the oral traditions associated with cultural, historic and archaeological properties, as well as other manifestations of the intangible cultural heritage. In addition, the

RMI HPO offers a model for locally relevant legislation to other historic preservation efforts throughout Oceania. Although not yet implemented in the RMI, the title of *ri-kapeel* draws from indigenous concepts and may still resonate locally with people today.

Historic preservation efforts throughout Oceania are increasingly engaging local practices of preservation. Similar to recent academic practices that allow for the reemergence of more local histories in Oceania (Hanlon 2003), local preservation initiatives call attention to what is important to the community. In particular, WAM's *Kapeel in Meto* developed from the motivation of one Marshallese to preserve and revitalize his nearly lost oceanic heritage. We, as cultural anthropologists, have embraced this individual's dynamic initiative by attempting to synergistically combine research with preservation and cultural revival, but it is ultimately local interest that will sustain such a vision.

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Ben Finney pioneered the reconstruction and testing of Polynesian voyaging canoes both to resolve issues in Oceanic migrations and to revive Polynesian voyaging. As founding president of the Polynesian Voyaging Society, in the mid-1970s he led a community effort to build the double canoe *Hokule'a* and sail her from Hawai'i to Tahiti and return, a voyage that provided realistic data on traditional canoe/navigation performance and sparked the Polynesian voyaging renaissance. When not sailing canoes he has taught at universities in California, Hawai'i, Australia and France, and published papers and books on Pacific voyaging, socio-economic change in Tahiti and New Guinea and the future of humanity in space.

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