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MICRONESIAN VIEWPOINT

## THE MARSHALLESE CULTURAL CENTER ON KWAJALEIN

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*Marshallese Cultural Society, Kwajalein, Marshall Islands*

The Marshallese Cultural Center is located on the island of Kwajalein in the Kwajalein Atoll located in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. The center is operated by the Marshallese Cultural Society (MCS) whose goals are to promote, preserve, and nurture the culture and history of the Marshallese people. The core mission of the MCS is to help keep the Marshallese heritage alive for the young people of the Marshall Islands and to share the wealth of the island's culture with the rest of the world.

### ORGANIZATIONAL DETAILS

The center is situated within U.S. Army Kwajalein Atoll/Reagan Test Site (USAKA/RTS), a military facility that uses much of the land area of the Kwajalein Atoll. The Cultural Center building was constructed from funding under the auspices of the USAKA Environmental Department.

The Marshallese Cultural Society (MCS) is a volunteer organization that operates under a Memorandum of Understanding with USAKA. In 1999 the MCS was registered as a nonprofit corporation in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. A Board of Directors is selected by the

membership. The Board includes two Adjunctive Advisory members who have special expertise and interest in supporting the purposes of the organization. Up to the present time these members have been representatives of the Marshallese traditional leadership.

The MCS now works closely with the USAKA Host Nations Office, Public Affairs Office, and Environmental Department to promote and organize events and exhibits. The MCS is, however, an independent organization of members drawn from the USAKA and Marshallese communities. A USAKA liaison is appointed by the USAKA Commander to assist in coordinating events. The MCS continues to receive funding from the USAKA Environmental Department through the USAKA logistic support contractor for selected projects.

Because the cultural center is located within the USAKA military facility visitors must be screened and approved by USAKA Entry/Exit personnel for access. Information regarding entry may be obtained from the cultural society or from the USAKA Public Affairs Office.

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*Figure 1. The Marshallese Cultural Center on Kwajalein.*

### **Affiliations**

The cultural society has a memorandum of understanding with the Alele Museum located in the Marshall Islands capital of Majuro. Exhibits and resources may be shared between the Alele Museum and the center. The MCS has also established memoranda with the Bishop Museum for periodic loans of artifacts and exhibits.

### **THE CULTURAL CENTER BUILDING**

The Cultural Center building was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of the Interior. The structure was designed by architect Bob Wanslow and evokes the lines of traditional island dwellings. Members of the 23rd Engineering Company, Special Troops Battalion, from Fort Richardson, Alaska completed construction of the building in 1996. Several traditional village structures surround the grounds.

In 1997, the Marshallese Cultural Center held a formal opening ceremony attended by Marshallese leadership and the USAKA Com-

mander. A second opening ceremony took place in 1998 to celebrate the completion of the traditional buildings on the Center grounds.

The building is a compact 1400-foot square facility. Most of the building is used for exhibits that are open to the public. It is air conditioned and equipped with intrusion as well as fire alarm systems. It is equipped with a halon fire suppression system.

### **EXHIBITS**

Current fixed exhibits include:

- *A Brief History of the Marshall Islands.* A poster summary of highlights.
- *Marshallese Material Culture and Crafts.* Exhibits include artifacts relating to: navigation, sailing, and fishing; traditional tools and implements (including an exhibit donated by Dr. Marshall Weisler on the construction of traditional adzes); samples of exquisitely high quality mat and handicraft weaving; ornaments, spears and traditional dress.

- *WW II artifacts.* A small collection of artifacts relating to the US conflict with the Japanese in the Marshalls.
- *Shells of the Marshall Islands.* A lovely collection donated by well-known Marshall Islands malacologists Jeannette and Scott Johnson
- *Indigenous plants and their uses.* A small exhibit of plants of cultural importance to the Marshallese.



Figure 2. Part of the exhibit area of the Marshallese Cultural Center on Kwajalein.

- *Buckingham Collection.* Handicrafts, original writings, photo-albums, notes, letters and publications from Lt. Cdr. H.W. Buckingham, who was Chaplain for the Navy in Kwajalein from 1948-1949.
- *Joachim DeBrum photograph collection.* Copies of photographs on exhibit with permission from the Leonard deBrum family. They were taken by Joachim deBrum and document life in the Marshalls from the early 1890's to the 1930's. The cultural center has a complete collection of digital high-resolution images taken from

deBrum's original glass plates. The collection may be viewed as low-resolution images on a searchable database created by the cultural society personnel.

- *Historical Photographs.* A diverse collection of photographs that provide glimpses of Marshallese life from the 1880's to the present.
- *Birds of the Marshall Islands.* A poster summary that encompasses the natural history and Marshallese tradition relating to birds.
- *Nuclear Testing in the RMI.* A small collection of photographs and data relating to testing.
- *Ebeye History.* A poster history that traces Ebeye's transition from a sparsely populated peripheral island to the second largest population center in the Marshalls, a socioeconomic consequence of the US military presence at Kwajalein.
- *Traditional sayings.* A collection of Marshallese proverbs and aphorisms.
- *First Contacts.* A history of first Western contacts with the Marshalls presented through reproductions of engravings.

Temporary or on-loan exhibits include:

- *Kabua collection.* On loan from Iroj (traditional leader) Michael Kabua, the collection includes family pictures dating back to the turn of the century, as well as exquisite mats, *bungi* (breastplate worn by chiefs), *mar-mars* (necklaces), and traditional clothing worn by chiefs.
- *Bishop collection.* A sample of early Marshallese crafts, which include high quality mats and belts on loan from the Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawaii.

## STUDY RESOURCES

The Cultural Center houses a limited number of materials to aid in study and research. Materials include books, videotapes, audiotapes, and copies of historical accounts from the University of Hawaii Pacific Collection and the Bishop Museum in Honolulu.

## PROGRAMS

The Cultural Society organizes periodic programs to disseminate information regarding Marshallese culture and history. Programs have included Marshallese medicine, World War II oral history, social and economic presentations, and demonstrations on traditional crafts. Basket makers, weavers, and craftspersons are regularly present at the Center to display techniques and wares. The Cultural Society coordinates an annual *Manit* (Traditional Custom) Day program in September/October to highlight traditional crafts, music, dancing, and food for the Kwajalein community. In addition, a Marshallese Christmas performance is organized every year highlighting holiday songs and dance traditions from the islands.

A core goal of the MCS is to make the history and traditions of the Marshalls accessible to residents of the Marshall Islands. The group welcomes opportunities to present programs and exhibits to audiences beyond the Kwajalein venue.

The MCS sells a variety of items to support the work of the cultural center as well as to promote awareness and celebration of Marshallese traditions and culture. The following materials may be available for purchase: T-shirts, cards, brochures, reproductions of photographs and engravings.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY AND CONTACT

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