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Changing Views, Cultural Survival
Knowledge and Power in the Marshall Islands

Francis Bacon's insight that "knowledge is power" is as meaningful today in the Marshall Islands, and elsewhere, as it was in 16th-century England. For over 2,500 years the Marshallese people accrued an immense body of knowledge that allowed them to survive in an environment containing few natural resources. In the past, when Marshallese people and culture were more isolated, those who controlled this information kept it concealed because knowledge represented power.

The position of the traditional chief, known as *irooj,* was sanctioned and empowered through his knowledge. This belief and practice were reflected linguistically in the Marshallese expression, *irooj im jela* (the *irooj* and knowing); "the *irooj* knows everything." He may not have known "everything" but he did control the knowledge available and regarded as worthwhile in his community. Chiefs achieved control by surrounding themselves with those who had specialized knowledge. By controlling them, he displayed his power. Historically, the *irooj* assembled accomplished individuals into a *nitijela* (pit of knowledge). This group was composed of a diviner, medicine person, navigator, fishing master, genealogist, storyteller, sorcerer, magician, and warrior.[1] It was the chief's ability to gather these experts around him, and control their use of knowledge that added to his power.[2] Individual participants in the *nitijela,* enhanced their own power and their families' status.

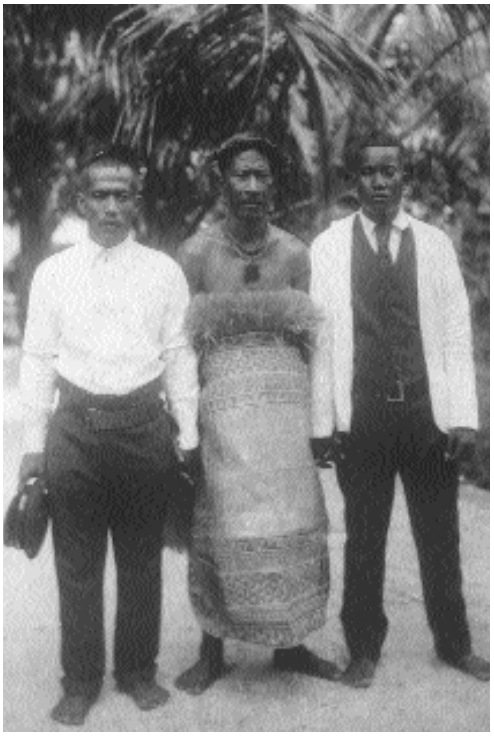
In 1914, August Erdland wrote that knowledge concerning Marshallese astronomy, for example, was a valuable inheritance which no one outside the particular family group could possess.[3] Knowledge and the associated navigational skills were considered familial treasures that raised the owners' social and political status. The *irooj* and citizenry alike entrusted themselves to the leadership of the experienced navigators whose knowledge of the stars, clouds, and waves enabled only them to determine the position of the atolls and predict the weather. The navigator enjoyed privileges that were otherwise reserved only for the *irooj* and ruler class. Therefore, to ensure a higher social station and a better inheritance for their progeny, the navigators, as well as other members of the *nitijela,* concealed the substance of their science.

Today, with increased external influences, the shift from traditional rural to urban living, and the availability of new technologies, traditional knowledge and its control no longer offer the same prestige. As "western" values replace or diminish Marshallese traditions and are transmitted to younger generations, both the practice and knowledge of the traditional Marshallese way of life disappear. The available knowledge pool has been fragmented into individual private arenas of practice, with variations among atoll and island groups. Many Marshallese are not aware that traditions and stories differ among atolls, and that those who "know" have little agreement.

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) has much in its favor. It is an independent

Traditional outrigger canoe, c.1900.

nation where the majority of its citizens are Marshallese in heritage. Land tenure is such that it is difficult, if not impossible, for outsiders to own land. Several organizations are collecting and preserving historical information.[4] However, while people elsewhere, say, Hawaii, perceive the adverse effects of external cultural influences, and are joining together to preserve traditional art and customs, the movement is less evident in the RMI. The cultural identity movement on the Hawaiian Islands is currently prompting a revival of traditions. The contemporary philosophy of Hawaiian identity does not base "Hawaiianness" on blood quotients, but on the presence of and participation in certain cultural practices. Politically, the revival movement focuses on the repatriation of seized land and reparations for losses, but culturally, beliefs about identity focus on the language, crafts, and performance arts represented by rural Hawaiians.[5] Native Hawaiians lost much of their land during the last century, and almost lost their language. Nevertheless, the Hawaiian cultural identity remains strong. The Hawaiian Renaissance might hold lessons for the Marshallese.



Traditional clothing vs. "western" clothing, c. 1900.

Photos courtesy Alele Museum, Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Islands.

What is evident in the RMI is the gradual "westernization" of youth. Children watch "western" television and movies, and play video and computer games. Those living in the urban centers might be taught more about western ways and ideas than traditional Marshallese culture. Many young people have never been to one of the rural, more traditional, outer islands and have little knowledge of Marshallese history. But, they are exposed to readily available "western" ideas and knowledge. On the other hand, much of the traditional Marshallese knowledge is typically held "secret." Ironically, the secrecy that once increased the power and prestige of an *irooj* and his family is, in many ways, now obsolete. Correspondingly, the transmission of traditional knowledge, the knowledge-based positions of certain families, and the relationships that once tied youth to knowledgeable elders have weakened. Younger generations are unaware of protected information and its ramifications.

Conceivably, under today's conditions, everyone could obtain respect and a sense of control over cultural information if the learned people shared their traditional knowledge and modern technology made it readily available. Although sharing unique knowledge might not have been characteristically Marshallese, the future might bring schools—modern equivalents of knowledge pits or *nitijela*—where Marshallese elders can teach younger generations the traditional methods of navigation, astronomy, fishing, medicine, crafts, dancing, and *maanpa*, the traditional Marshallese art of self-defense. At least traditional arts could be preserved and possibly revived, and knowledgeable elders could be accorded special recognition, if value can be placed on public knowledge and not private knowledge. In this case, "external" educational ideals could prove valuable.

Notes

1 Augustin Kramer and Hans Nevermann, Ralik-Ratak (Marshall-Inseln), G. Thilenius (ed.), *Ergebnisse der Sudsee-Expedition 1908-1910. II. Ethnographie, B: Mikronesien*, Vol. 11. Hamburg: Friederichsen, De Gruyter and Co, 1938.

2 Phillip Henry McArthur, The Social Life of Narrative: Marshall Islands. Unpublished Dissertation, Department of Folklore, Indiana University, 1995.

3 August Erdland, *Die Marshall-Insulaner. Leben und Sitte, Sinn und Religion eines Sudsee-Volkes,* Anthropos-Bibliothek, Internationale Sammlung Ethnologischer Monographien, Vol. 2:1, Munster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1914.

4 The Republic of the Marshall Islands Historic Preservation Office and Alele Museum both have ongoing projects. The Waan Aelon in Majel (formerly Waan Aelon Kein) has documented traditional canoe making. Youth to Youth in Health teach dancing and songs to the Marshallese youth.

5 Alan Handler, and Jocelyn Linnekin, "Tradition, Genuine or Spurious," *Journal of American Folklore,* 97 (1984): 273-290.

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