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## MICRONESIAN ROUND-UP

### ACTIVITIES OF THE ALELE MUSEUM IN 2004

by

Carmen C.H. Petrosian-Husa  
*Alele Museum, Majuro*

In Marshallese *alele* is the name of a small bag, where in former times the valuables of a family were safeguarded. In this respect the Alele Museum collects and safeguards the valuables of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, which symbolize the culture and traditions that were developed by the inhabitants of the *Aelon Kein*, as the Marshallese refer to their islands.

The museum is located in the center of Majuro, the capital of the Republic Marshall Islands. It is a non-profit organization and part of the Marshallese Historic Preservation Office under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. While the Historic Preservation Office deals mostly with archaeology and the preservation of sites, the Alele Museum has a wide variety of responsibilities.

The Alele Museum is best known for its exhibition, which is open to the public five days a week, free of charge. In the last year more than 1000 visitors, among them many school children and tourists came to see the museum. The collection of the museum is limited, and the artifacts on display are not extensive, as the museum exhibition is only in one room. Nevertheless, it offers a glimpse into the past of the Marshall Islands, showing how people managed to survive on small atoll

islands. A recent addition to the exhibition is a display about traditional fishing techniques. Here fishing methods such as *alele*, a communal fishing expedition under the authority of a chief, and others, like *kotoor*, *ituur*, and *ekkonak*, are explained,

The Alele Museum also houses the 2228 photos of the DeBrum collection. These photographs, taken between 1890-1930, depict life on the Marshall Islands during the German colonial time. Joaquim DeBrum, of Marshallese and Portuguese ancestry grew up on Likiep Atoll. He was a curious man with sundry interests and one obsession: photography. He acquired more than 30 cameras, using these heavy machines and glass plate negatives he documented many aspects of life. Today his photographs offer a glimpse into a time when major changes were taking place. They can be viewed from an esthetical, historical, anthropological and genealogical point of view.

In the last two years this class-plate collection was digitized and organized in a Portfolio Extense Database by Sue Rossof at the Marshallese Cultural Center on Kwajalein Atoll. In the future the entire collection will be presented in a computer stationed in the exhibition. A publication and internet presentation

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about the collection and its history are also being prepared.

The Alele Museum not only presents Marshallese customs and traditions, but also conducts yearly field research trips in order to gather information. In cooperation with the archaeologist of the Historic Preservation Office atoll wide surveys are conducted on a regular basis. In 2004 Wotho and Arno Atolls and Lib Island were surveyed.

Wotho Atoll is situated in the *kabin meto*, the far reaches of the northern region of the Marshall Islands. The survey of Wotho Atoll took ten days but, due to transportation problems, covered only Wotho, the main island of the atoll. During the survey fourteen historical and traditional sites were identified. The recent history of the atoll (World War II activities as well as relocation during nuclear testing was recorded and stories were collected). *Okwa*, a typical fishing technique of the northern atolls of the Marshalls was documented and a general description of the atoll and its main topographical features were included in the report.

Arno Atoll is situated next to Majuro, just one hour by boat away. However, it was not possible to conduct an extensive survey of the entire atoll, due to a very limited time frame, which allowed only a reconnaissance trip to the atoll. The resulting report covers only a small portion of the atoll, Lukōj, Kinejon, Jepo, Ine, and Matoleen Islands, which are all connected by the so-called Japanese road. Interviews were also conducted with several informants, covering a wide field of information—World War II, fishing and sea lore as well as carving skills.

Lib is a single island without a protective lagoon, and for more reasons than this unlike most of the Marshallese atoll islands. In the interior of the island lies a big lake, which features prominently in Libese stories, Lib Island is one of the few inhabited islands in the Marshalls not accessible by plane, therefore logistics for the survey were more elaborate than for other field researches. The island was completely surveyed and 18 sites were documented (7 prehistoric, 4 historic sites, 5 traditional sites, and 2 of undetermined age). The recent history of Lib, the relocation of the population to

Ebeye and back, as well as the construction of their new village were recorded.

Besides the surveys mentioned above, the Alele Museum also conducts anthropological researches. In 2004 several topics were subject of an ethnographic ‘investigation’.

Traditional medicine is a touchy subject in Marshallese society, because such knowledge is kept within the family and considered a family heirloom. Currently Marshallese healers are still very much in demand, but experience difficulties to find apprentices willing to learn the skills. In an attempt to remedy this situation, in 2002 the ‘Marshall Island Society for the Protection of Traditional Medicine’ (MISPTM) had been founded. In two workshops with healers from many atolls, remedies and herbal knowledge was collected and will be published next year. The Alele Museum helped editing the publication as well as researching background information.

Marshallese fishing methods are no longer common knowledge and even fishing is no longer practiced on a daily base in many families. Some methods have been given up and were forgotten, some, as for instance communal fishing methods for special purposes, are still practiced today. The ethnographical report presents traditional fishing gear such as hooks and lines, traps and nets and genuine Marshallese methods to catch fish. Fishing lore and the correlating Marshallese vocabulary are presented along with taboos and rules explained. A brief look at today’s fishing traditions shows the changes that are currently taking place in the Marshall Islands.

Traditional tools of early Marshallese were the topic of another research of the Alele Museum. An informant was hired to make four tools, which were in the past of vital importance for Marshallese households. The construction of these tools was recorded on video and extensive background research and interviews are also included in the written report.

Pandanus is an important food item in the Marshall Islands and mostly eaten raw, but its juice can be dried and preserved. Then it is called *mokwan* or *jāñkun* and is considered a Marshallese delicacy. In former time big rolls, weighting more than 200 pounds, were pro-

duced for the chiefs and were considered very valuable. For the production of this sweet a pandanus crusher is necessary, a tool widely used on all atolls and islands. The process of making a pandanus crusher was filmed and several informants were interviewed. In the course of the research two different types of pandanus crusher were identified, as well as the recent development of this device.

One tool, still very much in use and demand, is the coconut scraper as coconut milk is an important component for Marshallese cooking. Thus, most households have coconut scrapers and many men know how to make one. The coconut scraper, which was made for the Alele Museum was carved from wood, while most of the recent scrapers are made of plywood.

Another tool, occasionally found in Marshallese households, though already at the verge of extinction, is the breadfruit peeler. It is made from a tiger or humpback cowry. Today, knives have mostly replaced this household item. The documentation shows how comparably easy it is to make such a peeler, what shells should be used, and how perfectly designed this tool is for peeling breadfruits.

The last of the four documented tools was a fishing hook, made of mother-of-pearl. Such hooks are no longer in use today and its construction was a reminder of the past, when Marshallese fishermen still made their own fishing gear.

Besides these research activities the Alele Museum also coordinates many cultural activities in Majuro, as for instance the yearly 'Manit Day' in September when Marshallese culture is celebrated. In 2004 the Alele Museum organized the Marshallese participation in the Pacific Arts Festival in Palau.

As already mentioned some of the activities of the Alele Museum are documented on video. The Alele Museum houses an extensive audio and video collection, the inventory of which was recently updated. Currently more than 1500 videos are kept in the museum. Due to the development of new technologies the next step will be digitizing this collection.

In 2002 the Republic of the Marshall Islands joined the UNESCO Convention of

World Heritage and the Alele Museum was declared the focal point. Currently the Museum is trying to coordinate all parties involved to form a committee in order to have cultural and natural sites in Marshall Islands nominated on the list of World Heritage sites.

The Alele Museum is a well-established institution within the Marshall Islands. Even people who have never been in the museum know it by name, though most do not know about its activities, therefore, the museum has an information program. In a weekly radio program that can also be heard in the outer islands and regular articles in the Journal of the Marshall Islands activities of the museum and cultural issues are presented. In order to reach a more international audience a webpage was recently created - 'www.alele.org'.

#### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY AND CONTACT**

Carmen C.H. Petrosian-Husa is an anthropologist doing research in Micronesia since 1982. Her initial focus were the islands of the *rei metau*, Federated States of Micronesia, later on she worked in Palau, and is currently living in the Marshall Islands.

Carmen C.H. Petrosian-Husa, Alele Museum, P. O. Box: 629, Majuro MH 96960, Republic of the Marshall Islands. Email: cchph@ntamar.net