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Stories from the Marshall Islands: Bwebwenato Jan Aelon Kein
(review)

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custom and heart inform each other in Ambonwari psychological conceptualization. Furthermore, it allows *kay* to bind different kinds of time (ancestral, historical, personal) into a workable whole that provides the context of Ambonwari lives.

Telban lays out this careful analysis of *kay* primarily in the early parts of the book (though he returns to his analysis and enriches it in almost every chapter). He then links *kay* to two other concepts: that of path or marriage (*konggong*) and that of speech, story, or myth (*mariawk*). With these three concepts as a base, he offers accounts of clanship, naming systems, kinship, marriage, mythology, and religion. All of these discussions are marked both by their attention to detail and by their clarity, and they will prove valuable to regional specialists.

At various points throughout the book, Telban discusses the intersection of *kay* and Ambonwari conceptions of time, and these discussions make temporality a key theme of the book as a whole. Yet even as Telban's considerations of temporality are stimulating and deserve the attention of those interested in temporality and historicity, I have focused this review on his analysis of *kay* because it is this that provides the book's most sustained focus. By laying out the complexity of the concept of *kay* and showing why it is so central to Ambonwari culture, Telban has written a book that should stimulate many others who work among people who employ similar concepts to rethink their own understandings of the nature of such notions and of the way they tie together individual action, custom, and history, to

create the life-worlds of the people they study.

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Stories from the Marshall Islands:

Bwebwenato Jān Aelōn Kein,
by Jack A Tobin. PALI Language
Texts: Micronesia. Honolulu:
University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.
ISBN cloth, 0-8248-2545-4; paper,
0-8248-2019-3; xiii + 405 pages,
maps, appendixes, notes, bibliogra-
phy, index. Written in English and
Marshallese. Cloth, US\$55.00,
paper, US\$19.95.

Narratives can make or break a people. At stake are traditioning, identity formation, and cultural creativity. People who forget their own stories risk living out someone else's story.

Stories from the Marshall Islands reveals a treasure held in trust for the next generation by an anthropologist. Jack Tobin has been involved with Marshallese people for a lifetime. He has been a student, a participant observer, and an advisor, but always a recorder of culture. Now, through narratives, he opens a door to Marshallese identity and spirituality. We have been waiting many years for this work.

This volume is a collection of stories that were recorded between 1950 and 1975. Tobin arrived on Arno atoll in 1950, as a student working with Leonard Mason on the Scientific Investigation of Micronesia project. Later that year, he was hired as an anthropological field consultant attached to the Civil Administration

Unit of Naval Operations. Under the Trust Territory Administration, he was the one and only district anthropologist for the Marshall Islands. His work, from 1950 to 1957, included a report on the labor camp called Ebeye Village (1954) and pioneering work on land tenure (1958). After helping train the first class of Peace Corps volunteers for Micronesia, Tobin returned to the Marshalls as community development advisor from 1967 to 1975. His involvement with the relocated Bikini and Enewetak peoples kept him on the line between the United States and the Marshallese people.

All this sets the context for how and when the stories in this volume were collected. By Tobin's own account, many narratives were shared in relaxed moments after work when he could savor a different kind of anthropology, recording stories from the past (*bwebwenato in etto*). Tobin tells us where and when he heard each story and who the storyteller (*ribwebwenato*) was, including short biographies in Appendix A. What he does not give us is the living context (*sitz im leben*) in which these stories might be told to others. In this book, the message is in the texts themselves.

Tobin declares his main purpose to be "to record the stories for future generations of Marshallese" as well as to add to "the body of Marshallese folklore that has already been recorded—for the benefit of scholars and others who are interested in Marshallese culture" (xi). The deeper motive is the more noble: "my Marshallese orthography has been translated into the more recent official/standard orthography so

that it can be used in the government schools in the Marshalls" (xii).

The objective is also clear in the introductions that are occasionally provided by the storytellers themselves: that Marshallese values are being lost, but if children hear these stories, then they might learn to appreciate and practice Marshallese behavior. This was published in the United Nations Year for Cultural Heritage (2002), but these stories are about more than the past.

After a brief introduction, Tobin presents ninety stories, just over half of which appear also in Marshallese text. This makes the stories accessible at several levels. Tobin uses extensive footnotes to clarify the text (story 31 has 127 footnotes), but he rarely intrudes into the text itself. Occasionally, Tobin provides helpful comments after the story, but most of the stories stand on their own.

In a minimalist approach to analysis, Tobin follows Stith Thompson (through Bacil Kirtley) in identifying "motifs." Appendix B lists the motifs for most stories, coded with the appropriate category number, but this approach does not lead us very far. The motif of a cannibalistic ogre may be analogous to the Hansel and Gretel story (70), but once noting that we return to the richness of the Marshallese text itself.

Several versions are recorded for some stories, and thus Tobin resists the temptation to produce the one "real" version. Variations do matter, contrary to the opinion of Levi Strauss. Earlier, I used the word "traditioning" intentionally, because getting the "real" version and preserving it is not the issue. The treasure

that young Marshallese have been given is a set of tools that can be used to help form their identities, that is, to interpret their personal biographies with reference to larger Marshallese narratives. Narratives provide metaphors for the future.

Certain themes do come through strongly in the stories. One that anthropologists do not hear is that the material world is inextricably intertwined with the spiritual world. This perception pervades the Pacific, but is usually dismissed, as in Tobin's footnote: "The women who claimed to have flown away may indeed have believed it, or they may have lied in some cases to gain attention, which they obviously received. And the alleged sightings of flying women can be attributed to culturally conditioned misperceptions or delusions, and to crowd psychology" (269).

Another theme, a kind of "two brothers" narrative of the struggle of the "neglected and scorned younger sibling over others—his older brothers or an evil supernatural being" (209), captures something important about traditional society. Indeed, sibling ranking, conflict and success of the junior over the elder, may not be only a Pacific concern, but may even be a wider (and deeper) Austronesian template. One wonders, though, whether there might be an oppositional telling today, to portray the struggle of the Bikinians against the United States.

A common saying (*jabonkonnaan*) throughout the Marshalls is: "Our mother forever; our father and the father of others." This is part of the ideology of matrilineal descent. In story 31, for example, a boy's mother dies. The father takes two other women as wives, but they do not care

for the boy. He helps his father fish and prepares the food while they sleep, but he receives only bones and the smallest fish. He carries one side of the canoe ashore while his father and two wives have an easy time with the other side. Mercifully, his mother comes to him in the form of a bird and convinces him to come with her. The father chases after them, but dies in pursuit.

Though this is a widespread story that has historical depth (Tobin notes that another version of this story appears in Ermland in both German and Marshallese), the issue of descent had become a debate already in 1969 when I was doing research on Arno atoll. The discussion concerned what happens when a lineage dies out. The land goes to the children of the last surviving male, but what happens then? The traditional Marshallese answer is that, although the land passes from umbilical cord (*bwij*) to blood (*botoktok*), in the next generation the land is inherited by the children of the females of the sibling set.

However, the American story is different. At that time, the American administration was trying to conduct a cadastral survey. One could hear the following announcement on the radio. "Fathers, you want your children to inherit your land when you die, don't you?" Really! No wonder the survey was never completed. Nevertheless, some Marshallese, agents pressing a land claim, were listening. They began to argue that once land leaves the matrilineal system, it should pass from father to son from then on. If the Marshallese do not tell their story, then they will end up following someone else's story.

Other stories set the standard for

the proper social order. There is a formal order to society, but the stories also say that no one has the right to ignore or show disrespect to younger siblings, to children, or to those with a disability (a man with leprosy is the hero in story 14). Yet other stories show how undesirable behavior leads to an unexpected end. In the fight between good and evil, a common theme, the stories claim that even the lowliest, through ethical behavior or even trickery, can defeat the forces of evil.

Tobin also presents narratives of recent historical events, at the end of the volume. One of the most fascinating is an Ujae narrative of an encounter with an American ship that runs up on their reef. Tobin juxtaposes the people's story with a contemporary (1887) account from the perspective of the sailors on board. The perceptions were worlds apart and show the power of narratives to frame encounters between "natives" and "the white man."

Tobin has given us much material to work with, and that is the sign of good ethnography. He has also kept the promise of his dedication: "For the Marshallese people." They have been a people because they have shared the same stories. The question is whether or not this communal inheritance will be appropriated in the struggle to be Marshallese. Tobin has carefully recorded and handed over some valuable resources. He has made the case for storytellers to be heard in order that the people may have a chance to live their own story.

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Reimagining the American Pacific: From South Pacific to Bamboo Ridge and Beyond, by Rob Wilson. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. ISBN 0-8223-2523-3; xix + 295 pages, notes, index. Paper, US\$18.95.

That Rob Wilson's magisterial survey of Hawai'i's literature and culture is at once revolutionary and out-of-date is testimony to the volatility and strength of contemporary literature in this state. At the center of Wilson's book is a sympathetic history of the Bamboo Ridge group of writers, foremost among them Eric Chock and Lois-Ann Yamanaka. He argues that their brand of "local" literature resists the economic and cultural globalization so evident to anyone setting foot in Waikiki or Taipei (Wilson's other Pacific "center"). Wilson's theoretical imagining posits a "mongrel" poetics that unifies writers in Hawai'i against the outside forces of American imperialism, especially the US military. Where "regionalism" has often been considered a limitation in literature, Wilson points to the way in which Hawai'i regionalism is one that resists the larger forces that impinge on it, in literary and economic terms. That he puts himself in the mix, as a poet and critic, especially in his poetic chapter, "Postmodern X: Honolulu Traces," means that this book is as much autobiography as it is theory or history. This is the autobiography of a white critic's conversion into the local, if not his full acceptance into it. The book also partakes of fantasy; Wilson consciously *imagines* a world that is not local or global, but *glocal* (his neologism). Wilson's imagined community (echo of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*) does not exist, but