

# THE COLONIAL LEGACY

## Can Traditional Leadership Improve Quality of Life in RMI?

By Kanchi Hosia

**T**he traditional leadership system in the Marshall Islands came about when the chiefs declared battle on each other to gain control over the land, the people, and the surrounding sea. As the winning chief captured each island, the land came into his possession and the people became his followers.

Historical records, including the logs and journals of foreign explorers like Otto von Kotzebue, tell us that before foreigners arrived the people lived in a traditional society governed by iroojlaplap (paramount chiefs). Von Kotzebue's scientific expedition took place in 1816-7. At that time, the iroojlaplap ruled and took care of the kajoor, or commoners. With the help of the alap, or major landowners, the iroojlaplap led the people in all island activities, judged disputes, maintained the manot (customs), and most importantly, took care of the people. In return, the iroojlaplap received the best food and had the right to the best land.

According to the Close Up Foundation's *Micronesia: A Guide Through the Centuries* (2000), the first two prominent leaders of the islands were Lomadre Juen and Kaiboke Lobadeo. In 1823, Lomadre Juen became the first iroojlaplap of the Ratak Chain and part of the Ralik Chain. Kaiboke Lobadeo assumed power as iroojlaplap of the southern part of the Ralik Chain of islands and atolls in 1842.

Lawrence Carucci's 1997 article "Chiefs in the Marshall Islands" (in *Chiefs Today*, edited by Geoffrey White) further illustrates three ways the Marshallese describe and interact with chiefs. The first is the likeness between chiefs and gods, both of whom are termed irooj in the Marshallese language. Both are sacred, surrounded by taboo (mo), and held to exemplary standards not expected of ordinary humans. The second is the power of high chiefs to bring goodness to bear on the wealth of the land and to provide for the people in time of need. The third is the chiefs' ability to maintain manot.

Carucci emphasizes the manot of continuing exchange of food and worldly goods between chiefs and commoners. Chiefs bless the lands to make them productive and receptive to commoners' labor. In this arrangement, the continuity of the exchange is guaranteed since the commoners and chiefs depend on each other. This is captured in the saying, "The chief's strength is his kajoor's strength." The chiefs were highly respected figures, but also depended on the commoners to fight for them during battles and ensure that the lands were productive and the harvests plentiful.

Today, the chiefs continue to fulfill their three important roles. How do these functions play out in the midst of a

changing society? How are these functions utilized or incorporated into the current Western leadership structure? These are important questions that must be considered so that the two systems can work together to provide maximum service to the people and especially to the school systems.

Although European contact began in the 1600s, it was not until the 1800s that foreign influence began to affect practices in the Marshall Islands. As foreign influence increased, so did



▷ Relocation of Marshall Islanders due to U.S. nuclear testing had a devastating effect on social relationships and cultural practices.

the need to balance the power so that development could take place in harmony and especially so that the traditional leadership would be maintained.

With the increase in economic development during the German colonial period (1885-1914), the role of the chiefs became more important since they controlled the land where development was to take place. There was a related shift in the value of money and status. Early traders like Adolf Capelle and Anton de Brum knew that they needed the support of the chiefs. They established their first trading station on Ebon, the atoll where the most powerful chiefs, Kaiboke and Loek, resided.

The money economy in the Marshall Islands began with the copra trade. People began planting, harvesting, and selling copra in exchange for foreign goods like food, tobacco, iron tools, and clothing. The islanders' exposure to Western commodities continued under Japanese and American administration.

The Japanese administration (1914-1945) and the

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American administration and period of influence (1945-present) brought an influx of changes, including different leadership systems. Since Japan's interest was in labor for industrial development, their focus was training Marshallese citizens as laborers. Schools were established, but limited to grades 1-3. The goal was to teach Islanders the Japanese language. During this period, a lot of Marshallese learned the Japanese language and were immediately placed in supervisory roles in different fields, including agriculture and carpentry.

It is not really clear what role the traditional leaders played during this period, but as Japan made plans to go to war with the U.S., the Japanese military government took over. The military used Islanders to build military facilities and began mistreating the people. Conflicts between the Japanese and the Marshallese began to erupt, and in some cases, like the battle of Mili, the traditional leaders led the people in battle against Japanese soldiers. When Japan lost the war to the U.S. in 1945, the U.S. Navy took command of Micronesia, including the Marshall Islands.

The American administration brought in the democratic system of governance and Western ideology. At the same time, the U.S. began the major development that had the greatest impact on the Islanders and traditional Marshallese society. Democratic ideology, the concepts of independence and individualism, and American lifestyle continue to slowly and silently erode Marshallese customs and the traditional way of life in which people live together, work together, think together, and do things for the sake of the whole group. The U.S. obligation to safeguard democratic ideology brought more devastating blows to the survival of the traditional society and the traditional leadership system. Two distinct examples are the legacy of the atomic bombs dropped on Bikini and Enewetok Atolls, along with the mid-corridor evacuation.

In the case of the bomb, the whole community on Bikini was asked to leave the atoll so the tests could be conducted. In the course of their relocation, their traditional way of life was interrupted. They depended less and less on the land and the sea for survival. Instead, they were moved around and remained in exile for 50 years. Although they are cared for

and are provided food surplus and monetary compensation, the people are sad and don't have a place they can call home (kabijuknen). Their elders, who had hoped to return to their homelands, died and were buried in strange ground. The four aspects of the traditional society and the role of the chiefs changed dramatically.

The same is true with the installation of the military base on Kwajalein. When the missile base began operation, the people in the island communities surrounding the Kwajalein lagoon were in the danger zone and they were asked to move to Ebeye, a one-mile island near the base. As people were relocated from their island communities in the Kwajalein lagoon or mid-corridor area, they were sad as the feeling of togetherness was lifted from their minds. I can still remember the experience vividly, as I must have been four or five years old. I was in the preschool or kilaaj jimetan at the one-room school when my family joined the relocation and left our small island of Onmak and all our belongings behind and were moved to live on Ebeye, where we were put into crowded rows of concrete buildings (mon loan ailin keir).

The important aspects of traditional society and the role of traditional leaders changed dramatically as the chiefs became less dependent on the commoners. The custom of continuing exchanges of foods from the land and worldly goods between the chiefs and the commoners decreased until they eventually stopped.

Should the current democratic leadership system, especially in the schools, reconsider its approach and look at how the traditional leadership can help bring about changes in the school communities? Would placing more accountability on the traditional leadership bring about better cooperation? In the beginning, the traditional leadership was responsible for maintaining customs, judging disputes, leading the people, and taking care of them. Is this the right time to turn to our traditional leaders to help improve the quality of life in communities and the quality of educational services in the schools?