Pastor, Politician, Entrepreneur, Chief: Power and Leadership on Epoon Atoll Today

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Abstract: In analysing the various types of political figures and status positions on Epoon, an outer atoll in the Marshall Islands, this article sheds light on contemporary constitutions of hierarchy, authority and leadership. This leads to an argument about the context-dependent nature of power. No leadership figure on Epoon today is all-powerful in the sense that his or her influence is relevant across all political and cultural spheres. When the historical depictions of Marshallese chiefs are traced in a critical light, it will become clear that earlier ideas of the chiefs as autocratic power figures may have appeared to benefit German colonial administration and Protestant missionaries. Shifting the focus to the dynamics of contemporary leadership practices, the case of an El Salvadorian castaway illuminates the power plays various actors engage in to gain access to his boat. What we will see is that power is highly dependent on context to have effect.

Keywords: hierarchy, power, leadership, chieftainship, Marshall Islands, Epoon Atoll

Résumé : À travers l'analyse des diverses figures politiques et des différents types de statut à Ebon, un atoll périphérique des Îles Marshall, cet article jette un éclairage sur la manière dont la hiérarchie, l'autorité et le leadership se constituent aujourd'hui. Ce faisant, il affirme la nature contextuelle du pouvoir. Aujourd'hui, aucun leader n'est tout puissant à Ebon en ce sens que son influence s'étendrait à toutes les sphères politiques et culturelles. L'étude critique des représentations historiques des chefs marshallais montre clairement que les conceptions antérieures des chefs comme figures de pouvoir autocratique ont pu profiter à l'administration coloniale allemande et aux missionnaires protestants. En déplaçant la focale sur la dynamique des pratiques contemporaines de leadership, le cas d'un naufragé salvadorien met en lumière le jeu de pouvoir auquel se livrent différents acteurs afin d'avoir accès à son bateau. Nous verrons ainsi que l'effectivité du pouvoir dépend fortement du contexte.

Mots-clés : Hiérarchie, pouvoir, leadership, chefferie, Îles Marshall, Atoll d'Ebon.

Epoon (Ebon) Atoll lies in the southern periphery of the Marshall Islands, in eastern Micronesia.[1] As on other atolls in the nation, most chiefs, lineage heads and elected politicians have left the atoll in favour of urban life in Mājro (Majuro, the capital) or in the United States. As a result, everyday life on Epoon today is largely removed from national politics and chiefly influence, although both the mayor and one chief were present during my 2014 fieldwork. Therefore, an in-depth study of chieftainship and the role of chiefs in the contemporary Marshall Islands requires taking Mājro as the ethnographic basis of study. Both Carucci (1997a) and Walsh (2003) have done this properly, and I steer interested readers in their direction. Because of this situation, this paper deals with the various forms of power, hierarchy and leadership on Epoon today.

While seeking to identify and to make sense of the various contemporary political figures on Epoon, I aim to illustrate that power and authority are not a necessary result of social hierarchy and leadership positions. Rather, power on Epoon is largely context-dependent, in the sense that it is a capacity open to continuous contestation and negotiation. That is, power is a relational concept that, leaning on Lukes (2005, 34–35), addresses the outcomes of specific instances in their given social contexts. For a given social relationship or situation to be one of power, the powerful agent or agents must overcome, or at least have the capacity to overcome, a given set of obstacles. This means that an agent's exercise of authority along historically or contemporary acceptable lines of hierarchy does not mean an exercise of power, since there are no conflicts of interest. As Louis Dumont ([1966] 1980, 3) claims, hierarchy is not the same as "social stratification." Rather, following Serge Tcherkézoff (2009, 300), "peaceful relations of equality are located within the hierarchy," meaning that hierarchy is a realm of shared values and respect, albeit a fragile one. In such situations, even chiefs have certain behavioural guidelines and restrictions. The point is that

most people on Epoon accept and recognise traditional hierarchy, granting chiefs a special position on the atoll. For instance, chiefs have a special authority with respect to questions of custom, but they do not inhabit a position of absolute political power. In other words, chiefs can act with authority without exercising power if they act within traditionally accepted frames, but as soon as they act beyond their consensual authority, they are engaged in power play. A failure to act properly within a given context highlights relations of social inequality and a lack of mutual respect.

As on other Marshallese atolls, various forms of hierarchy make their mark on Epoon life. Social hierarchies on Epoon comes in several forms and levels, both hereditary and acquired: between lineages (from chiefly to commoner), within lineages (based on seniority and generational position), knowledge-based (for example, regarding custom), skill-based (for example, being an excellent diver), gendered, and occupational. Inhabiting a higher hierarchical position vis-à-vis another generally comes with certain rights, benefits, and advantages over that other person. However, even if such benefits might seem like an act of power demonstration or inequality, it is crucial to recognise that they are mutually accepted among the parties. An analysis of power and leadership on Epoon (and elsewhere in the Marshall Islands) needs to be attentive to such dynamics. Lukes's (2005, 35) analytical emphasis on consent is helpful in this respect because it stresses that an exercise of authority is not an exercise of power until there is a conflict of interest. This point was lost on early settlers and colonial administrations. However, it is important, as it allows an understanding of Marshallese hierarchy as highly contextual. For instance, being a respected elder might mean that people will grant you certain respect behaviours and secure you an honorary seating in public gatherings, but it does not entail political authority or power in disputes. Therefore, Marshallese hierarchy contains certain aspects of equality, as people generally do not invoke inequality in situations where relations follow customary accepted patterns. In such situations, people will downplay social differences and instead stress cultural unity. If, however, someone breaks the hierarchical circle of respect, power plays and disputes arise.

Inhabiting a relatively isolated atoll, ri-Epoon (people of Epoon) resemble Carucci's (1997b) depictions of Wūjlañ (Ujelang) and Āne-wātak (Enewetak) people in their emphasis on equality and a strong sense of togetherness (O. Berta 2015). That, however, does not inhibit political disputes and other forms of power play. On the contrary, social life on Epoon has room for a variety of different political actors and leadership figures. While these actors usually coexist peacefully by appealing to different social contexts and in different social relationships, they sometimes come into conflict. Before delving into the dynamics of contemporary leadership practices, however, I will give a brief outline of the chiefs of the past. This is important because chiefs used to be the primary (but not sole) agents of power and leadership prior to permanent settlement by foreigners in the form of missionaries, traders and eventually colonial administrations.

Chiefs Yesterday

The typical account of Marshallese ethnohistory says that, in precontact days, the Marshallese chiefs were both autocratic and violent. Both Spoehr (1949) and Walsh (2003) observe that the chiefs of the past could take a commoner's life for no particular reason. The high rates of inter-atoll warfare and quests for land supposedly called for chiefs to be aggressive. Among the chiefs in recorded history, Kaibuke from Epoon stands out as particularly fierce. He is often mentioned in the literature, from the writings of missionaries (Bliss 1906; Damon 1861; Pierson 1858), to works of history (Hezel 1983, 200–206; LaBriola 2013), to the anthropological material (Spoehr 1949; Walsh 2003). He is most famous for swearing revenge on all white men, promising to cut down their ships and murder their crews. For years during the early nineteenth century, traders and whalers feared the Marshall Islands, as the islanders had attacked many ships and murdered many men (see Damon 1861, 24–26). Kaibuke's hostility stems from the fact that, when he was young, whalers wounded him in the arm and murdered his brother (Hezel 1983, 200). As a result, he, or as Pierson (1858), among the first missionaries to settle on Epoon, would have it – his father, swore revenge against all white foreigners.

"In pre-contact times," writes Spoehr (1949, 74), "the Marshallese maintained a rigid class structure of nobles and commoners." In contrast to the commoners, the so-called nobles had two distinguished subdivisions: *irooj* (chief; of royal mother) and *bwidak* (also *irooj-iddik*; of royal father, but commoner mother).[2] Hage (1998; 2000) also maintains that "Lineages were ranked by a rule of primogeniture and divided into three classes: 'royal' or chiefly lineages (*bwij-in-[irooj]*), noble lineages (*bwij-in-[bwidak]*), and commoner lineages (*bwij-in-[kajoor]*)" (Hage 1998, 399). *Kajoor,* which also means strength or power, is the old word for commoner. Since the German protectorate times, it has gradually been replaced by *ri-jerbal* (worker). Meaning strength, *kajoor* reflects the interdependencies between the *irooj* (chief; *lerooj* if female) and the commoner: the strength of an

irooj was to a large degree measured by the number of commoners he was responsible for, both as warriors and as laborers. As Jack Tobin (1952, 5) observes, the chief had the theoretical authority to evict commoners from his land, but he had to have a "good reason" to do so, although it remains unclear what "good reason" means in this context.

For one to be among the paramount chiefs (*iroojļapļap*), or the so-called royals, one's mother must belong to the *bwij-in-irooj*. If ego's father is a paramount chief while the mother is a commoner, ego will be *bwidak*, or *irooj-iddik*, meaning a lesser chief (nobles). All others are commoners (*ri-jerbal*), and their lineages are governed by lineage heads (*aļap*). Although Leonard Mason (1947, 34–35), Spoehr (1949, 75), and the Marshallese–English Dictionary (Abo and colleagues 1976) refer to the *irooj* as "royal" or "king," I am hesitant. Not only is the analogy between the Marshallese hierarchic system and European monarchies a bad one, but also, according to Malinowski (1922, 81), it was first introduced as a condescending joke. Speaking of native canoes in comparison with European yachts, Malinowski writes that "cheap fun is made by speaking of roughly hewn dugouts in terms of 'dreadnoughts' or 'Royal Yachts,' just as simple, savage chiefs are referred to as 'Kings' in a jocular vein." According to Kabua (1993, 4), the primary role of the *irooj* is to settle disputes among the people and to take land for reassignment to the landless. The *bwidak*, on the other hand, is supposed to function as a mediator between the *irooj* and the *aļap*, whereas the *aļap* are responsible for managing the land under their lineages (*bwij*), distributing work, and looking after the wellbeing of their workers.

Several anthropologists working in the Marshalls have given great emphasis to land ownership when illustrating chiefly authority (for example, Kabua 1993, 8; LaBriola 2013; Mason 1947; Walsh 2003, 124). The common assumption seems to be that the chiefs are the primary landowners. Over the course of history, they have distributed land parcels (*wāto*) to individuals and their lineages for a variety of reasons, such as bailing water from the chief's battle canoe, loyalty, bravery in war, and nursing the child of a chief (see Kabua 1993, 9–10 for a complete list). Even if these lineages control and maintain the land distributed to them, they are still at the mercy of the chief. Two main points support this claim: (1) the regularly exercised food tributes (*ekkan*) to the chief, and (2) the copra tax, which on Epoon today ranges from three to five "mill" (0.3–0.5%) of all copra income, depending on the *irooj*. However, several anthropologists have challenged the notion of the chief as a primary landowner. Tobin (1952, 14–15), for instance, claims that the Marshallese (especially those of the Rālik Chain, which includes Epoon) hold joint ownership of land rights, in which the chiefs and the commoners both hold specific rights to given land. Carucci (1997a, 204), too, argues that the early colonisers of the Marshalls overlooked the mutual obligations between the chiefs and the commoners – exemplified among others by the *ekkan* and the copra tax – thus failing to see that the *irooj* ruled over rather than owned the land. This ruling consisted of both obligations and responsibilities toward the chief's subjects – underlining the interdependencies between chief and commoners. Interestingly, the common misconception of the authoritative Marshallese chief stems, to a large degree, from the interests of the colonisers and from the agency of the chiefs themselves.

In 1885, German officials gathered a group of Marshallese chiefs to sign a treaty of friendship, thereby aiming to end inter-atoll warfare and chiefly conquest. The German involvement and interest in the Marshalls had consequences, not only for land domination, but also for class dynamics, as both Walsh (2003, 165) and Kiste (1974, 59–62) point out. Together with missionary influence, German involvement altered the hierarchic system. Land became, to a larger degree than before, tied to specific lineages, thereby creating a smaller class of so-called royals of the upper class (Kiste 1974, 59–62; Rynkiewich 1972). The result was that the chiefs did not have to defend land rights and autocratic domination violently, as they had done in the past. Instead, the land they owned when the Germans pacified the Marshalls would be likely to stay within the lineage. In that sense, hierarchies were somewhat fixed, or at least altered in favour of a few specific families. Consequently, the German pacification not only stabilised the fluidity of land ownership, but also affected the chiefly role of the *irooj*. That is, the chiefs went from being enmeshed in webs of reciprocity with the lower classes to serving as mediators between their people and the colonisers. As Hoëm (2009, 253) observes from Tokelau, "the chiefly form of leadership was transformed and retained in a new shape." In the Marshalls, this transformation started with the German copra trade.

It seems that the depiction of the Marshallese chiefs as authoritative and autocratic figures was highly favourable for the early missionaries and copra traders there. By setting the chiefs in this position, the colonisers were able to extend their influence though them. According to Kiste (1974, 14), the Germans were able to develop large-scale copra production by "working through traditional chiefs who encouraged islanders to extend their plantings of coconut trees." Petersen (2009, 242–243),

moreover, notes that the early German anthropologists tended to describe Micronesian chiefs as if they belonged to a German feudal pattern. This was favourable not only to the colonial administrations, but also to the chiefs themselves, as it turned hierarchy into stratification. Cooperating with the Europeans paid off in terms of gifts, such as the sailing vessels given to Kabua, which, writes Carucci (1997a, 203), "enabled him to consolidate his rule of the southwestern [Marshalls] and to extend his influence to the atolls of the north." The German overemphasis on the chiefs' position in the Marshalls has likely led to misguided conceptualisations of the traditional *irooj* as an autocratic figure, dominating a rigidly stratified society. Today, such depictions are even further from the truth.

Chiefs Today

In relation to the old class system, there have been some changes. First, it is probably not accurate to speak of three distinct classes called *irooj*, *bwidak* and *ri-jerbal*, and it may not have been for some decades. Spoehr, for instance, stresses that the primary distinction was that between the *iroojļapļap* classes – who he argued were in the process of incorporating the *bwidak* – and the class of commoners – who he argued were in the process of incorporating what he called *jib* (Spoehr 1949, 76). I did not experience any clear distinction between what used to be the *iroojļapļap* (high chief) and the *iroojiddik* (lesser chief) while I was on Epoon. I never heard anybody mentioning any of these terms unless I asked specifically about them, and when I did, people usually answered with uncertainty. Even though a plaque from 1957 hanging in the Protestant church at Rupe on Epoon refers to Bwillej, the only chief living on Epoon at the time, as *iroojļapļap*, many disputed this title, and only referred to him as *irooj*. The disagreement regarding Bwillej's chiefly title conceptualises his power as context-bound in the sense of Lukes (2005, 75–76), meaning that his ability to act as an *iroojļapļap* depends on the conditions given there and then, in a specific time or place. That is, followers of Bwillej will be more likely to accept him as *iroojļapļap*, whereas others are more likely to contest this idea, thereby limiting his status and political influence as *iroojļapļap*. Even so, people seem happy to have an *irooj* at their atoll, as most political figures (*irooj*, *aļap*, mayors and senators) of other atolls move permanently to Mājro. One woman elaborated on the positive effects of having an *irooj* on the islet. In that way, young people could learn proper respect through food tributes, honorary singing and other customary signs of respect, such as women having to get off their bikes when passing the land tract (*wāto*) of the chief, or everyone having to back away from the chief before turning around.

When it comes to polity making on Epoon, the local government, elected for four-year periods, has largely replaced the *irooj*. The elected representatives consist of a mayor, a treasurer, a secretary, and a chief of police. Additionally, the appointed judge plays a vital role in the local government. The mayor is the main person responsible for mediating between Epoon and Mājro.[3] The local government also take care of local political issues, deal with small felonies, and distribute a taxi boat. During my fieldwork, all the elected representatives also had high positions in the Protestant church, the United Church of Christ (UCC),[4] and people told me that no members of other denominations had ever filled any of the positions. The local government calls for council meetings four times a year. In addition to the local government, the council consists of the two *irooj* of the atoll, as well as the 79 *aļap* or their representatives. Close to all of the *aļap* and *irooj* are members of the UCC, the dominant church on the atoll. During council meetings, people voice difficulties or disputes, suggest regulations or law changes, plan community projects and the like. Before ending the meeting, everybody eats and drinks coffee together. This helps emphasise the sociality and egalitarianism related to the political issues on the atoll. In 2014, the mayor would typically take the position of moderator after she had given a brief introduction. She thus downplayed her social position vis-à-vis others, by displaying equality in the sense that the council comes to final decisions together. This is important to maintain the circle of respect Tcherkézoff (2009, 300) claims hierarchy to be. Leaning on Hoëm (2009, 258), we can say that the principle of equality coexists with social hierarchy in Epoon politics, representing a governmental power of ascent rather than descent. Equality and togetherness are two important values underlying the social dynamics of everyday life (O. Berta 2015). However, because the large majority of council members and members of the local government are Protestant, the church and political life on the atoll interconnect tightly.

At the southwestern point of Epoon islet lies Rupe, one of the very few *wāto* withdrawn from the landowning system of the chiefs. Kaibuke gave Rupe to the first missionaries shortly after their arrival in December 1857 (Hezel 1983), and it now belongs solely to the UCC. Since the acting pastor (*rūkaki*) has sole authority on Rupe, he (there has never been a female pastor on Epoon) is in the peculiar position that he inhabits three different status groups simultaneously – *ri-jerbal*, *aļap*, and *irooj*. Thus, Leam, an elderly Protestant deacon, considered every acting pastor to be the most significant person

on Epoon, both religiously and politically. To be sure, he was not alone in his opinion, but was seconded by other Christians from different denominations. In many ways, the pastor enjoys more respect than Bwillej does.[5] Interestingly, people address him by the honorary title *reverend* instead of the descriptive *pastor*. Every fortnight people cook and bring food tributes (*ekkan*) to him. In earlier days, people often told me, there was a stronger emphasis on food tributes to both the *aļap* and the *irooj*. Spoehr (1949, 238) also notes that, during his fieldwork in Mājro in 1947, people usually gave food tributes to the *aļap* on a voluntary basis – as opposed to the 25% copra tax of today. The *irooj*, however, sustained himself primarily on such contributions. While I was on Epoon, most food tributes to the *irooj* were informal. The exceptions were his birthday, Christmas and Liberation Day. For the reverend, however, these were additions to his usual tributes. During my fieldwork, people were treating and talking about the Protestant reverend as if he was a true *irooj*, and he always played a key part in public gatherings, performing speeches or prayers or just dining at the honorary table. It was also noticeable that most Protestants demanded that members of other denominations than the UCC, too, treat the reverend with the amount of respect the Protestants saw as fitting.

During the past 15–20 years, there has been an emergence of religious diversity on the atoll. Christian denominations other than the UCC have established themselves on Epoon Islet. In 2014, the second largest religious group on Epoon was a Marshallese native church called BNJ (*Bukot nan Jesus*, meaning Looking for Jesus), a breakaway church from the Pentecostal Assemblies of God. One of the main worries for the Protestants regarding the BNJ is that its members seldom participate in the food tributes to the reverend. Most Protestants I spoke with perceived this both as a break with tradition and as a splitting of the community. Even members of the Latter-Day Saints (LDS, or Mormons) agreed that avoidance of food tributes to the reverend was a serious offence. Following Lukes (2005, 75–76), then, the reverend inhabits a context-transcending power capacity. That is, his context-transcending ability increases with the increasing resistance and obstacles he manages to overcome. By bridging religious boundaries and appealing to tradition, the Protestant pastor embodies the capacity for power beyond his denomination. As one Mormon woman told me, "My grandmother brought food to the Protestant reverend, so I do it too. That's custom [*ṃanit*], not religion." She went on to explain that her husband, an excellent spear fisher, usually helps when the UCC needs fish for feasting in large church events. Even so, she and other Mormons sometimes feel monitored by the Protestants. The pressure to contribute is high, and, for affiliates of churches other than the UCC, it can be extra pressing.

The fact that close to all *aļap* or representatives on Epoon are Protestant means that most people affiliated with other churches live on a Protestant's land, and therefore are at his or her mercy. As mentioned, the chiefs and the lineage heads have the authority to throw people off their land if they are very displeased. That does not mean that it happens frequently. In fact, I have only heard of one such incident, and it supposedly happened "a long time ago." Even so, the Protestants emphasise the possibility on a regular basis. Their power, as Lukes (2005) has argued, is in its potentiality. As on Tokelau (see Hoëm 2003), land is not for sale on Epoon. Therefore, one would need permission from the chief and lineage head to build a church. As the popular story goes, the BNJ first approached a lineage head on Tōkā (an islet in the northwestern part of Epoon Atoll) when they wanted to move to Epoon Atoll. "Feel free to build your church," said the *aļap*, "but when it's finished, I will burn it to the ground." An *aļap* is free to decide who can stay on his/ her *wāto*, unless the *irooj* or *lerooj* objects. However, there is tension between local ideals and governmental politics. Many years ago, the two chiefs on Epoon came together to sign a document stating that Epoon is solely a Protestant atoll. According to that document, no other denominations can establish churches there – as many Protestant repeatedly pointed out to me when complaining about governmentally imposed freedom of religion. Even so, religious diversity was very much a reality in 2014, with five different denominations for about 700 souls.

The BNJ did end up on Epoon islet in the late 1990s, after *lerooj* Neimata Kabua eventually gave her final permission. Many Protestants were frustrated, and they objected to her decision, but they could not do anything to stop it. When key figures from the UCC confronted the *lerooj* (who was Protestant herself), she allegedly said, "I fear God. If I stop the church, God will punish me." Thus, the personal belief of the *lerooj* prompted her to make a definite decision, resting on her position as chief. On Epoon, it is not common for any *irooj/lerooj* to make decisions like this alone. In fact, I do not know of any incidents other than this in recent years. Nevertheless, it is clear that in certain contexts, the chief has the required authority to rule – even with outspoken objection from both the affected lineage heads and other high-ranking Protestants. It is unusual for a contemporary chief to be as autocratic as *lerooj* Neimata Kabua was in this case. Her decision was particularly strange because it was a direct violation of the ruling of

her ancestors regarding religious life on Epoon. Even so, the potential for autocratic decisions is there, and, in some cases, it is legitimate to act on that potential. In this particular case, *lerooj* Kabua went beyond the consensual authority granted her in a powerful display of context-transcending leadership. Despite protests and dismay from the landowners and Protestants, the chief got her will through. While illustrating the occasional power displays of Marshallese chiefs, this story also confirms the Marshallese proverb stating that a mother's word is the law.

Although the BNJ is the second largest denomination on Epoon, its pastor does not enjoy remotely the same kind of overt or genuine respect. Instead, members of UCC accuse the BNJ reverend of taking God's place, putting himself in the place of worship. Whereas the Protestant reverend receives food tributes in the name of custom (*ṃanit*), from members of other denominations also, the BNJ reverend receives tributes only from members of his own denomination. We have also seen signs that the Protestant reverend enjoys more respect than the chief does. The fact that people point to every acting reverend as the most significant person on the atoll, dead or alive, is important here. People still pay tributes to the chief, and they still speak of him with respect, but it is the local government and the council that make most of the political decisions on Epoon. The mayor, pastor, and other well-positioned church people provide good examples of commoners gaining high social status despite their hereditary background. Before looking into some other ways commoners can climb the social hierarchy on Epoon, I will outline a case where neither the traditional chiefly hierarchy, age-determined status positions, nor modern day political power was enough to handle dispute.

The Case of José "Ivan"

On 30 January 2014, José "Ivan"[6] Salvador Alvarenga drifted ashore on Tile, a tiny islet on Epoon Atoll. He was in bad health and had nothing but ragged underwear to cover his body. As it turned out, he had been drifting on the open ocean for 438 days – from November 2012 – after his boat engine broke down off the coast of Mexico (see Franklin 2015). José and another young man had been at work as shark fishers when their engine failed. Unfortunately, the other man died after four months at sea, but José managed to hold on alone for another ten months before he finally hit the Tile islet on the eastern side of Epoon Atoll. Luckily for José, Emi and Russell, a couple staying on a neighbouring islet, Āne-eṇ-aetok, where they worked on copra production, took him in to feed and clothe him. They also sent a messenger to alert the mayor so that we could bring José to the main islet. She hurried up a small crew, of which I was a part, and set off to pick him up. Back on Epoon, we assisted him upstairs in the council house and gave him a mattress to sleep on. He stayed with us for three nights before the national police patrol finally came to transport him to Mājro.[7] In the aftermath of his arrival, conflict arose.

On José's second day on Epoon, a key political figure came to me with a worried look on her face. On our way to Āne-eṇ-aetok, we had stopped on Matson's land on the northernmost point of Epoon Islet to tow José's boat, which had drifted ashore there. One of the young men who was in the boat when we came there had gone to the politician the previous day with a confession. His story was that, contrary to Emi and Russell's claim, the boat had been where we found it since José arrived. Emi and Russell, however, claimed that the boat initially landed on their land on Āne-eṇ-aetok, and thus that the boat belonged to them. Custom on Epoon states that whenever something drifts onto a given land parcel, that thing belongs to the respective lineage head. The young man's confession therefore laid the grounds for a conflict. Upon hearing that the boat supposedly landed on his *wāto*, Matson instantly made his claim for it. The political figure, on her side, was torn: she felt that Emi and Russell could not make any rightful claims to the boat, but she also knew that Matson – being 87 years old at the time and enjoying a high social status – did not need it. Instead, she suggested a third option, namely that the council (the local government) should have it, thereby setting the stage for a three-way conflict of interest.

Although peaceful, the dispute went on for the remaining days that José was there. Since I stayed in the council house together with him, the politician wanted me to ask José about the boat, as well as to keep an eye out for what Emi and Russell might do. Matson did nothing visible to advance his claim. Knowing that she had no legal rights to the boat, the politician grew worried about the outcome. In her mind, the boat would come to better use in the hands of the local government, as she said it would benefit the entire people. I was inclined to agree with her, but did nothing to act or lobby for her wishes, as I felt uncomfortable with taking an active part in local feuds. However, I watched with great interest how the politics between the affected parties played out. Knowing that they had neither Matson's social status nor the politician's political influence, Emi and Russell took matters into their own hands. They came to visit José every day, and while they were there, they tried to persuade him to give them his boat. Whether he understood or not, José kept agreeing. When the politician eventually found out

about this scheme, she decided to try the same thing herself, drawing pictures in my notebook explaining her wishes (Figure 1). Once again, José agreed.

When the national police finally arrived on Epoon, the couple were quick to air their case, playing on the fact that they were the ones who found José. The police thus learned about the conflict, in which they took an active part, through interrogations. To my surprise, they did not seem to take interest in the boat as evidence – other than taking a few photographs – but instead served as mediators in the dispute. When they questioned me about José's arrival and physical condition, a large part of the questioning regarded the handling of José's boat – where did it land, and who had the rights to it? One of the officers even asked me what my opinion of the situation was, and whether I thought it right for the couple to have the boat. After all, he said, José had given it to them. Again, I tried not to take an active part in the conflict. However, I did ask about the original owner of the boat – José's Mexican boss, Willy – and if he had any say in this. The officer shrugged it off and continued speaking about tattoos instead (of which we both had a few). Before the police left the atoll, they went over to Āne-eṇ-aetok to look at the boat and to take pictures of it. Emi and Russell were with them. Upon embarking, the police decided that the boat should stay with the couple.

The point of this story is that power and authority come in many different varieties, and that they play out

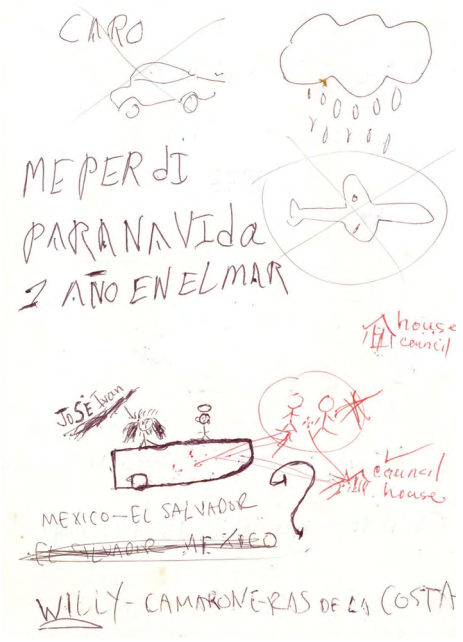

Figure 1: A drawing used to persuade José to let the local government have his boat.

differently in different contexts. Matson is an old *aḷap* with integrity, influence and a high social status. In this case, however, the other parties in the conflict neglected him – even though he had legal (or cultural) rights to the boat. Similarly, the political figure—a well-respected, strong woman with much political influence – could not affect the outcome to satisfy her wants. Both Matson and the politician represented a form of power that is context-bound (Lukes 2005, 75–76) and that does not apply in all situations. Instead, Emi and Russell ended up with the boat. Neither of them holds any strong position in the social hierarchy on the islet, but by being present and persistent, and by engaging the more effective authority, the national police, they won the dispute. The fact that Emi and Russell were present while the police were there is important. As Berman (2014, 583) has argued in relation to sharing and exchange in the Marshalls, physical presence and physical control can empower the relatively powerless. Representing governmental power, the Marshall Islands National Police overruled both traditional hierarchies (age and social position) and new forms of political influence (the politician). The police thus illustrate an example of context-transcendent power (Lukes 2005, 75–6), as they had the final word (thus far) in a dispute reaching beyond their usual power domain. Moreover, the national police played the part of conflict mediators traditionally belonging to the chief.[8]

Entrepreneurs and Elites

Kweet is in his mid-thirties and an entrepreneur in the Barthian sense. That is, he sees opportunities others miss, he is willing to take risks, and he is quick to make profitable connections (see Barth 1963). He is also the only person on Epoon islet who has earned a bachelor's degree (one of two on the entire atoll). After graduating from the College of the Marshall Islands, he took a semester abroad at Brigham Young University on Hawai'i to finish his bachelor's in education. In 2014, he held the position as both principal and teacher at the Epoon Elementary School, a position he already held for some time prior to my arrival. Teachers are among the highest-paid wage earners on the atoll, and being a principal alone is enough to reserve a spot among the wealthiest ten percent. Additionally, his high salary has made it possible for him to run a small shop from his home that secures an income that nearly equals his formal work. Through his contacts on Mājro, he can buy his merchandise relatively cheaply, which again enables him to sell it at a lower rate than his competition can manage. Having a private shop is also advantageous for his family, who can be sure that they will have stable access to highly valued foodstuffs such as rice, flour, sugar, instant

noodles and coffee, in addition to canned food such as mackerel and corned beef. Kweet's position on Epoon is nevertheless an ambiguous one.

Spoehr (1949) has noted that, during the early twentieth century, teachers, preachers, politicians and medical workers represented a hierarchy shift, which enabled commoners to gain relatively high social status. These people have become what Walsh (2003) has called "the high-ones." Thus, being a principal is enough to enjoy the respect of others. Moreover, since his shop ensures a steady supply of food and other merchandise that people on the islet cherish, he holds a position of power vis-à-vis most others. That is, he controls a valued resource in times of scarcity. Additionally, his wealth allows him to access consumer goods, which further demonstrate his position. He is also a capable English speaker and can thus access world news and receive updates on the newest electronic devices, products he can buy whenever he is in Mājro. His influence on local government politics is not significant, but he is both eager and able to provide for himself and his closest kin relations. However, he is also vulnerable due to his position, as he is a victim of jealousy and gossip.

Writing of Nukulaelae on Tuvalu, Besnier (2009) gives an outline of an ideological tension between what he calls a "discourse of nostalgia," which puts forth a hierarchical order, and a "discourse of egalitarianism." While still remembering and referring to the days of autocratic chieftainship, the Nukulaelae people often undermine or challenge present-day authority figures with gossip and negative characterisations. Besnier (2009, 76–77) writes that "Those whose actions or words suggest even remotely that they see themselves as wealthier, more powerful, better informed, or otherwise superior to others are greeted with scorn, mockery, and suspicion." This resonates well with ri-Epoon. As mentioned, commoners do have the opportunity for vertical social mobility. Ri-Epoon do not talk about being wealthy, powerful or informed as bad in itself, but once somebody acts as if he or she sees him- or herself in that way, it takes on a negative implication. Therefore, people often treated Kweet and others in similar position in the same manner as Nukulaelae people did their authority figures. Being in power as the principal, Kweet often had to make large or small decisions – decisions that people were quick to judge.

When organising the graduation party in late May 2014, for instance, Kweet made some last-minute changes to the seating arrangements and decorations. Until then, he had not played a part in the preparations, and now he was changing things, to the dismay of some of his colleagues. I went over to the school late in the evening, where I met one of the younger teachers. He was making things ready according to the new arrangements, and he was obviously upset. He had put in a lot of effort to plan the ceremony and to practice with his graduating class, but Kweet had overruled him at the last minute. The young teacher questioned Kweet's educational skills in light of his university education, before saying, "Talk about a wasted BA." This type of direct badmouthing is unusual on Epoon – unless someone displays the type of power play or gloating that Kweet just had. Having grown up and spent most of his life on Mājro, where he also worked as a teacher, the younger teacher continued, implying that he is more "up to date" or informed than Kweet. "Now I know what it's like to work here [on Epoon]," he said, before continuing with, "Next time I'll tell them to do it themselves." During our conversation, it became clear that he was angrier about Kweet's power display than about the actual changes, which really were rather minor. This teacher, too, enjoys a favourable social position, and so is used to having things his way. Thus, he might have reacted so strongly because Kweet was acting autocratically in an area of hierarchical meritocracy. In any case, it was evident to me that this was a clash between two power figures, which may have enhanced the young teacher's negative reaction. However, his reaction to Kweet's power display was far from unique.

Owning and running his own store also puts Kweet in a different position than most others. Since he often expects some form of immediate payment for his merchandise, be it money or other alienable objects, his store represents a break away from custom (*ṃanit*) and cultural values, one of which is sharing. Writing about another atoll in the Marshalls, Berman (2019) illustrates the lengths to which people go to avoid giving and sharing, while still acknowledging its cultural importance. Increasing reliance on imported goods, and therefore a monetary economy, plays a large part in the shifting patterns of interaction. For many families, their scarce copra income is barely enough to provide for the most basic needs. As a result, writes Berman (2019), most people must devise strategies to avoid giving, often restricting their ties of reciprocity to their immediate neighbours or kin. Thus, food exchanges often take place hidden away from public view, with children as carriers. However, it is important to note that people still expect others to share food with them if they know that they have food to share. Although I have not approached this theme as systematically as has Berman, her observations resonate well with my experiences from Epoon.

In Kweet's case – having secure access to store goods – people readily expect him to share his wealth.

He, for his part, is not prepared to distribute his stock free of charge. Because people know that he usually has a large amount of supplies, they frequently ask him for cigarettes, Copenhagen moist snuff (dip), coffee, or even money. However, since Kweet is trying to run a private store, he needs something in return. He accepts other forms of payment than money, making his trading akin to commodity transaction rather than long-term reciprocity relationships. For example, young men often come to his house with fish, clams or other kinds of fresh catch to trade for cigarettes. Both cigarettes and most kinds of seafood fit a category of goods that people demand shamelessly and expect others to give freely (see Berman 2012, 73). Accordingly, Kweet is supposed to give cigarettes freely upon request. However, having a store to run, he avoids giving away his merchandise for free, and thus accepts fish as payment. The young men, in return, are thus commodifying their catch by turning it into an object of trade rather than an object of sharing. What makes this particularly evident is the immediate exchange of goods, something that does not happen in reciprocity-based exchanges such as food sharing. More than representing commodity exchange, then, transactions such as these are noncustomary, as, following often-emphasised codes of custom, people are supposed to share food. One does not trade with fish as if it were a commodity, but instead shares it with one's close relations – upholding long-lasting ties of reciprocity. Moreover, people expect others readily to give up cigarettes whenever they ask, and refusing to do so, or asking something in immediate return, is uncommon.

When Kweet demands direct payment for cigarettes, he is illustrating an active withdrawal from custom. What is crucial here is the fact that he always has cigarettes for himself – also when out walking and participating in social gatherings – but that he nevertheless avoids sharing them. Moreover, the other men know that there is no point in asking him for it without giving some form of direct payment. Kweet is therefore showing that he has gained his material wealth by disregarding custom. His entrepreneurship gets him the wealth and the opportunities he needs, and he can easily do without wide-reaching reciprocity relationships. Once again, he is illustrating his power position, and once again, people are reacting with gossip and scorn in a manner resembling what Besnier (2009) explains from Nukulaelae. Moreover, Kweet is breaking with custom in a similar way to what, according to Martin (2013), some Matupit in East New Britain do to get away from *kastom* (custom).[9] Martin (2013, 132) tells the story of how one devout member of the Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) separated himself from *kastom* by paying off the people with whom he had had ties of reciprocal interdependence. To do this, he sought out all the people to whom he was still indebted to pay them off and thus mark the end of their relationship of reciprocity. In that way he publicly distanced himself from *kastom* and customary obligations, showing his independence.

Kweet's break with custom is far from being as outspoken as the man in Martin's story is. However, people do gossip negatively about his noncustomary ways. Once, a friend and I were in need of a paddling canoe (*kōrkōr*) to go fishing, and I suggested that we could ask Kweet to lend us his. My friend rejected my proposal, saying something close to "Everything costs money at Kweet's house." He was referring to the fact that Kweet largely avoided sharing his store-bought goods, and that he therefore has distanced himself from the webs of reciprocal interdependence on the atoll. This resembles what Perminow (2003, 157) explains from Kotu, Tonga. On Kotu, "the hand that lets go" represents the Tongan manner, while "the clenched hand" represents the Western manner, or greediness. However, it was not that my friend thought that he would have to pay Kweet actual money to borrow his canoe, but he did not want to owe him anything.

Many of the young men frequently told me stories of Kweet behaving in a noncustomary way. "He wouldn't even give five dollars to his own brother," they would say. However, various circumstances suggest that this kind of talk is an exaggeration meant to scorn him. For instance, one of his older brother's daughters is living more or less permanently with him, even though she still calls him by name instead of the more familiar Baba. That is, he has not adopted her, but he lets her stay there as if she were his own daughter (which she is in, classificatory terms). In 2014, his younger brother, who was single at the time, also slept and ate at Kweet's house most days. Once, when the flour supply on the atoll were running low, he still invited his wife's sister and her grandson for pancake breakfast. Everybody knew that he still had flour for his own family, but he did not want to show it publicly. Thus, the children had to finish eating their pancakes at home before going to school. It is true that Kweet and others in similar positions avoid sharing and giving to everyone at every time, but they still keep strong bonds with a restricted family group. In Kweet's case, this involves his birth parents and their children and his wife's adoptive parents and siblings. As Martin (2013) observes from East New Britain, we see a shift toward a stronger position of the nuclear family in family relations among people with great material wealth. In that way, Kweet and other entrepreneurs resemble the Matupit Big Shots. The influence and position these people have on the islet might be largely favourable, but they come

with a price. If they behave in terms of custom, they can make their position work in their favour. If, on the other hand, they demonstrate that they see themselves as above others in certain respects, the road to gossip and scorn is short.

Conclusions

While in many ways representing the symbol of Marshallese hierarchy, the political role of the chief has nevertheless undergone radical changes since the mid-1800s –from being involved in interdependent ties with the lower classes, to gaining an autocratic reputation in the German colonial era, to today's symbol of respect and old forms of hierarchy – although, as the example of *lerooj* Kabua shows, the chief still has the potential for autocracy. Simultaneously, the commoners have gained the opportunity to acquire rank in the social order through education, church position, entrepreneurship or involvement in formal politics. However, as Kweet's case illustrates, failing to act according to one's hierarchical position can result in gossip and scorn. One reason for this is that a failure to act within the realm of hierarchy also means engaging in power play, for which gossip and scorn serve to delegitimise such attempts at authority. Inequalities become visible and therefore unacceptable the instant someone steps outside of the circle of respect by acting in a way that emphasises differences in position and wealth. In this sense, Marshallese hierarchy contains aspects of equality that resembles the Nukulaelae discourse of egalitarianism. Therefore, to maintain relations of hierarchical respect, and not to set herself up for scorn, the mayor restrained herself from converting her political position into one of powerful authority in relation to José's boat. Having done so could have affected her political position and long-term respect among the people negatively. Instead, she chose a more indirect strategy by appealing to traditional hierarchy, a strategy that ultimately proved unsuccessful.

In terms of power and political influence, the Protestant pastor and the elected mayor – for the most part – have assumed the political role of the chief. Reflecting the political position of the Protestant church, the pastor also holds the title of chief, and people regularly bring him food tributes. Even so, he is not a political figure in the sense that he makes political decisions or mediates land disputes. When it comes to leadership practices, we have seen that discourses of egalitarianism are evident in the social life on Epoon despite its characterisation as a hierarchical society. The keyword here is "context." Even if the chief on Epoon inhabits a high position in the social hierarchy, his role as a political figure is limited. At best, his – or indeed her – political power only shines through in land disputes. In other contexts, people look upon him as a sign of respect. By adopting a power perspective from Lukes (2005) that emphasises context dependency, it has been made clear that leadership on Epoon today comes in a variety of forms. A leadership figure's given power depends on the situation at hand, and no authority can claim relevance across all political or cultural contexts.

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Notes

1 The ethnographic material presented in this article stems from seven months of fieldwork in the Marshalls Islands in the earlier part of 2014. Setting out to study hierarchy, equality and togetherness on Epoon Atoll, I used power and leadership as one of my thematic entry points. This article has also benefitted from a second period of fieldwork in the Marshalls in the earlier part of 2018 in which I was able to update some of the cases presented here.

2 Spoehr (1949, 75) also mentions a third subdivision, the *jib* (possibly *lejjibjib*, female of quarter royal descent). Even so, he acknowledged that, despite people's theoretical awareness of their position, the *jib* had "lost their grip," and were in the process of assimilation into the commoners' class during his fieldwork.

3 This is not true of all other atolls, as far too many mayors neglect their responsibilities to their home atolls after being elected. The mayor of Epoon is atypical for moving back to Epoon after her election in 2012.

4 In the Marshall Islands, the term *Protestant* refers strictly to members of the UCC. Pentecostals and members of the Reformed Protestant Church call themselves by the name of their church.

5 Bwillej passed away in 2016, at 92 years old.

6 José referred to himself as José Ivan while he was on Epoon. Therefore, we either called him that or simply Ivan. We did not learn his real name until we received the first newspaper, two weeks after he had left for Mājro.

7 The government initially decided not to believe us, and thus refused to come to Epoon to get José. At last, they gave in.

8 Emi and Russel have since migrated to the United States. After their departure, a close relative of theirs sold the boat to a man on Epoon on their behalf, but without their consent. The mayor had repeatedly tried to buy the boat from the couple for a sum five times the amount they received in the end. Here, too, physical presence was instrumental for the outcome. In 2018, the boat functions as a community boat on Epoon for fishing and copra production.

9 The word *kastom* usually translates as *custom*. However, as Martin (2013, 122) argues throughout his book, *kastom* is a contested term that invokes different meanings in different contexts, potentially covering "a wide range of social actions." He relates it to the similar Indonesian term *adat*, a term that A. Berta (2014) discusses at length.

The Matupit rendering of *kastom* largely overlap with the Marshallese *ṃanit*.

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