

## **MAINTAINING MARSHALLESE FUNDAMENTALS WITH CHRISTIAN FUNDAMENTALISM**

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From 1902–1903 Emile Durkheim offered a series of lectures at the Sorbonne in which he suggested that participation in a “moral community” compels us to recognize ourselves in the collectivity and to commit ourselves to moral goals of the group. This essay discusses the formation of a Durkheimian community by migrants from the Republic of the Marshall Islands to the midwestern city of Enid, Oklahoma, and attempts to identify the political and economic factors that made the community’s formation possible. More important, however, this essay explains why this particular moral community became essential for the social and psychological survival of the Enid Marshallese group.

### **The Role of the Christian Church in Maintaining Ethnic Identity and Community Viability in the Enid Transmigrant Milieu**

In Enid, Oklahoma, teachings of the Assemblies of God church have been employed to structure obligations and responsibilities needed to maintain a Marshallese ethnic identity. Boundaries defining aspects of Marshallese ethnic identity have been drawn by disapproving “all unscriptural teachings, methods and conduct” deemed inappropriate for Assembly of God churchgoers (Oklahoma District Council of the Assemblies of God n.d.:18). To be a member of Marshallese society in Enid, participants are obligated to practice and maintain the traditional customs of the Marshall Islands as reinterpreted by church doctrine. In Enid, this practice consists primarily of par-

ticipation in the Pentecostal fellowship of the Marshallese Assembly of God Church. Such participation is not only requisite for inclusion in the community, but it also provides prima facie evidence of one's ethnicity. Nevertheless, Marshallese custom reinterpreted according to Assemblies of God church doctrine does not merely represent an "unreflectively inherited legacy" passively received (Linnekin 1992:251), but rather it illustrates custom fashioned and observed in the present as a response to the exigencies of life in the urban migrant milieu and essential to the maintenance of the Marshallese ethnic community in Enid.

To this end, the establishment of a separate Marshallese Assembly of God church facility can be viewed as a first step in the process of ethnic identity formation for Marshallese migrants to Enid. The First Marshallese Assembly of God Church symbolizes "continuity with the past" (at least the past since missionization) and "an image of a better future for its members" (De Vos 1975:17). As De Vos suggests, "Ethnicity in its deepest psychological level is a sense of survival" (*ibid.*). The formation of an ethnic church, separate from the larger Assemblies of God organization, has been a means for Marshallese transmigrants to ensure individual survival by assuring group survival via the creation of a sacred ethnic space in the Enid urban environment.

Moreover, by participation in an exclusively Marshallese church, transmigrant "believers" in Enid attempt to resist external forces that threaten to obscure their identity and contribute to a decentering of subjectivity (cf. Levy 1973:251–255 for a discussion of Tahitian subjective thought). Through a synthesis of their experiences of many different places, Marshallese migrants from several communities of origin have collectively created a cultural identity in Enid. They have accomplished this through the formation of an *essential community* in the idealized context of the Marshallese Assembly of God Church (see Table 1).

The community formed by Marshallese migrants to Enid is essential for two separate but related reasons. First, unlike Micronesian migrant communities formed by college students living in the United States during the 1970s, the Marshallese community in Enid currently contains a stable migrant population of approximately 189 individuals living in twenty-five households. And, like the New Zealand Samoan communities discussed by Macpherson (this volume), most of the Marshallese households are in daily communication, and they compose the social core that is essential to the maintenance of community viability in Enid. Moreover, multilateral linkages within this core of households provide a network for the exchange of essentials (e.g., information, social, and material resources) among households and to new immigrants entering the Enid Marshallese community. Thus, I

TABLE 1. **Enid Marshallese Population by Island of Birth, November 1994**

Island of Birth	Number	Percentage of Total
Majuro <sup>a</sup>	63	41
Kili	32	21
Kwajalein-Ebeye <sup>a</sup>	29	19
Ailinglaplap	5	3
Ebon	5	3
Namu	4	3
Ailuk	3	2
Jaluit	3	2
Likiep	3	2
Arno	2	1
Bikini	2	1
Wotje	2	1
Mili	1	1
Total	154 <sup>b</sup>	100

*Source:* Author's community census.

<sup>a</sup> Majuro and Kwajalein-Ebeye are the "urban areas" of the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

<sup>b</sup> This number differs from the total Marshallese migrant population figure given in the text, because thirty-five members of the community were born in Enid, Oklahoma.

have chosen the polysemic term "essential" to refer to the Enid migrant group to convey the fundamental nature of the community form for the maintenance of the social/psychological and material well-being of its members.

Nevertheless, to appreciate the centrality of the role of the Assembly of God Church for the Enid Marshallese, it is important first to review the significance of the Christian church and theology for people of the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

### **A Brief Overview of Christianity in the Marshall Islands —Yesterday and Today**

#### *Yesterday*

Buoyed by their success on the islands of Pohnpei and Kosrae, in November 1857 the missionaries George Pierson, Edward Doane, and Hiram Bingham, from the Congregationalist American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, ignored warnings to steer clear of the "dread of seamen" and sailed

to the Marshall Islands to spread the message of the gospel (Hezel 1983:201). Well received by Kaibuke, the then powerful paramount chief of the Marshalls' southern Ralik Chain, the missionaries encountered few difficulties in establishing a mission on the chief's home island of Ebon. Sabbath services were soon attended by great numbers of Marshallese, and the missionaries were greatly encouraged by the "polite and obliging" behavior of the islanders on Ebon (*ibid.*:202).

Within three years, however, the mission was all but abandoned. Pierson, Bingham, Doane, and their families, plagued by disease and discouraged by hardship, fled the Marshalls to regain their health. Fearing that the "race for souls" had been lost in the Marshalls, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions quickly staged a final attempt to salvage the mission by sending Hezekiah Aea to Ebon in 1860. Aea, an energetic Hawaiian missionary who had won recognition for his role in establishing a successful indigenous mission in the Gilbert Islands (now Kiribati), was determined to do the same in the Marshalls. Within nine months of his arrival, Aea became fluent in Marshallese, and, with the assistance of additional Hawaiian missionaries sent by the board, he established mission schools on three islands in the Ralik Chain by the close of his first year on Ebon (Hezel 1983:207). Aea also began the process of training Marshallese to be teachers and "emissaries for the new religion" within months of his arrival in the Marshalls (*ibid.*:209).

Encouraged by Aea's efforts, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions sent the Reverend Benjamin Snow to act as supervisor for the growing mission. Snow, who had been successful in establishing a mission on Kosrae, was less than enchanted with the efforts of Hawaiian missionaries during his tenure there (Hezel 1983:316). But, after witnessing the Hawaiians' success in establishing churches on seven islands throughout the Ralik Chain by 1875, Snow was forced to "admit that the mission could not have been carried on successfully without them" (*ibid.*:207).

More important to the church's success, Snow acknowledged, were the native Marshallese mission leaders and teachers. Working side by side with the Hawaiian missionaries, the Marshallese missionaries and teachers helped to extend the church's teachings to the Ratak Chain and became "the backbone" of their own mission just fifteen years after it was founded" (Hezel 1983:209).<sup>1</sup>

### *Today*

In contemporary Marshallese society, participation in the Christian community remains a salient part of daily life. This is especially true in the rural

areas of the Marshalls, where members of the religious community view church participation as “one of the principal bases of social identification” in Marshallese society (Heine 1974:34). But Marshallese religious affiliation has not been limited to the brand of Christianity introduced by American Congregationalists (now the United Church of Christ) in 1857. In fact, since the end of the nineteenth century, a number of mainline churches as well as sect-type religious groups have gained footholds in the Marshalls. For example, since establishing a mission on Jaluit in 1899, the Catholic Church, with over four thousand current members, “has grown in size and esteem to become an accepted feature of Marshallese life” (Hezel 1991:288).

Since the 1970s, however, a number of sect-type religious groups, including the Assemblies of God, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormon Church), Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Baha’i, have prospered at the expense of the mainline denominations by focusing their efforts on establishing local churches under Marshallese leadership. Most of these sects have small congregations numbering a few hundred each, but with thirty-eight churches, a Bible school, and ten thousand members, the Assemblies of God church is, by far, the largest sect-type religious group and a growing threat to all other religious denominations in the Marshalls.

Church affiliation and participation have also come to represent forms of resistance to the impact of secularization and Westernization throughout Micronesia (Heine 1974:35). In a number of churches in the Marshalls, members, as a “community of believers,” have responded to the forces of modernization by constructing a “lived space” infused with the experience of tradition and protective of contested village “place” (Rodman 1992:642). The compound of the Assembly of God Church in Majuro, the capital and urban center of the Marshall Islands, is illustrative of this kind of constructed social arena. While carrying out religious duties and daily social activities within the confines of the compound, church members resist the intrusion of modern Western influences by attempting to construct an urban “village” community. Markers of “traditional” life such as modest dress for men and women, and foods obtained locally and prepared according to custom are chosen by congregation members to signify resistance to the effects of modernization that threaten to destroy cultural identity and social solidarity in the Marshalls. The church compound, “as an effective ideological backdrop against which to deplore the present” functions as what Scott calls a “remembered village” (1985:178).

The church compound is also the site of elaborate religious ceremonial activities that provide congregation members with spiritual solace in the Marshalls’ rapidly changing social milieu. Participation in the “remembered

village” affords congregation members a sense of social solidarity in the face of growing social class distinctions based on money and is evocative of intra-group ties lost with the rise of individualism in the Marshalls.

Church members in the urban areas of the Marshalls have also attempted to resist the impact of modernization/Westernization by organizing regional and national conferences to highlight the need to apply Christian teachings to social concerns. One such national conference, jointly sponsored by the World Council of Churches and Women United Together/Marshall Islands, was held in 1990. Conference participants called on all churches in Micronesia to join forces with island governments to stop the loss of traditional patterns associated with caring for others and to stem the rise of social problems in the urban environment by empowering communities with the principles of Christian faith (Johnson 1990).

### **The Role of the Assembly of God Church in the Formation of the Enid Marshallese Essential Community**

The Assemblies of God is a Pentecostal Protestant religious body organized at Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1914. The denomination is doctrinally structured by the beliefs of Jacobus Arminius, a sixteenth-century Dutch theologian who challenged the teachings of Calvin on the points of free will and predestination. In addition to the tenets of Arminianism, the Assemblies of God draw on the principles of Congregational and Presbyterian doctrine to ensure the spiritual status of all human beings as brothers and sisters in the Holy Spirit and the sovereignty of local congregations. The Bible is recognized as the all-sufficient rule for faith and practice, and emphasis is placed on new birth, baptism in the Holy Spirit accompanied by the sign of speaking in tongues, divine healing, and the premillennial return of Jesus Christ.

The Assemblies of God is a dynamic organization with thousands of churches located throughout the United States and missions in over seventy countries. And, although the Baptist denomination has the largest following in the “Bible Belt,” the church is growing at a steady rate.<sup>2</sup> In Oklahoma alone, there are sixty-three Assemblies of God churches, with ten of these churches located in Enid.

#### *The Enid Marshallese Assembly of God Church*

Most of my Marshallese consultants suggested that intracommunity tensions have been reduced and non-kin transformed into *bamli* not through the formation of secular kin ties in Enid, but rather by being based on the fundamental Assemblies of God belief that all congregation members ultimately

belong to the true family of “believers.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, congregation members assert that, within the lived space of the Marshallese church, distinct groups have been fused through rebirth in Christ to form the essential core of the migrant community.

Moreover, unlike Samoan migrants living in the United States whose “good standing” in the community is predicated on both giving support to a Samoan church and attending to the needs of their families (Janes 1990: 164–165), members of the Enid Marshallese Assembly of God Church need not choose between household and church obligations. According to church dogma, the Marshallese church *is* the locus of the true Marshallese *bamli*. Spiritual and physical needs are addressed through the Marshallese Assembly of God Church in many of the same ways that the *bamli* attends to the needs of its members. For example, requests made by new migrants for assistance in finding food and shelter are met by a congregation-wide outpouring of support. Individuals and families may sponsor one or more needy persons at any given time, often at the cost of substantial hardship for their own households in the process. Indeed, one family lost their small, two-bedroom rented home, because their household grew too large (approximately twenty-six adults and children) as a result of taking in needy congregation members. Their landlord, fearing structural damage to his property, forced the family to leave by serving an eviction notice. With few resources available to secure a new home large enough to accommodate the entire household, members were forced to stay in the homes of others in the essential community until suitable housing could be found. Eventually, household members were reunited when they accumulated sufficient resources to rent two houses on adjacent lots near the edge of town, but not before they had precipitated similar kinds of financial crises for a number of the households in which they had been given emergency shelter.

In his position as religious leader for the Enid Marshallese community, Assembly of God pastor Makolok has played a key role in maintaining the congregation *bamli*. In addition to dispensing spiritual guidance, the pastor, in concert with his assistants and the church women’s group, is responsible for making certain that congregation members receive whatever material assistance the essential community can provide. The pastor has also assumed the role of family patriarch for the Enid Marshallese Assembly of God Church community. In this role, he is regularly consulted for his opinion on topics that range from matters of church doctrine to advice on how to apply for public assistance.

Pastor Makolok and his household are not only responsible for directing community support activities, but they also frequently provide material solace from their own meager resources to aid migrants who are unable to

provide for themselves. In fact, within the span of two months during summer 1994, the pastor's household grew to include twenty-eight adults and children. Household residents included one paroled convict, a variety of migrant newcomers and their children, and several community members who had recently become unemployed. However, unlike the large household discussed above, the pastor and his household were able to lay claim to church resources and locate two homes directly across from the First Marshallese Assembly of God Church in which to house all of these people.

*The Role of the Enid Marshallese Essential Community  
in Creating a Context in Which to Be Marshallese*

The Marshallese Assembly of God Church is also the lived space in which migrants can express their difference by defining how they, as congregation members, are similar. For example, a behavioral variation practiced at first predominantly by the less-urbanized Kili Marshallese in Enid centered on wearing conservative attire when attending religious services or during church-sponsored functions. This practice subsequently has been redefined as a "traditional Marshallese custom" and is now observed by all Enid Marshallese community members.

A similar situation has occurred in regard to foods consumed by members of the Marshallese migrant community. After returning from an Assemblies of God conference in Majuro held during the first three weeks of July 1994, many congregation members expressed sadness over what they perceived to be the rapid loss of tradition in their homeland. Citing the increased consumption of so-called fast foods or junk foods as an example of this alarming trend in the Marshalls, congregation members banned all "junk foods" from their church celebrations in Enid. Only foods that they consider to be traditional to Marshallese culture were declared acceptable for preparation and consumption at church gatherings. Determining which foods would be acceptable and what style of preparation would be practiced by everyone, however, required many hours of discussion among members of the church women's organization before a consensus was reached. The decision to eat only "real Marshallese food" resulted in considerable additional financial expense for the community, because it meant that congregation members frequently had to drive ninety miles south to Oklahoma City to purchase fresh and dried fish at a large seafood outlet there. Such foods were unavailable in Enid.

The lived space of the Marshallese Assembly of God Church has also provided an important context in which the collective fears of the migrant community might be expressed. For example, during several congregational meetings community members raised concerns over their children's inability to



speak competent Marshallese. The problem, they posited, was particularly acute for Marshallese children born in the United States. Suggesting that they felt language loss was the first step in a process that would ultimately lead to loss of their “Marshallese way” of life (or, in other words, toward assimilation), many migrants called on the church to take action. Ultimately, the church responded and Marshallese Assembly of God church dogma was changed to state that in the future all church services would be conducted only in the Marshallese language (rare exceptions were made for visiting non-Marshallese Assemblies of God officials). Congregation members were also encouraged to use only the Marshallese translation of the Bible for service readings and to discard all English versions they may have acquired while living in the States.

In hypercathecting ethnic identity in the Enid essential community, other relevant aspects of identity have been drastically changed or reduced in importance (Devereux 1975). For example, social class status, a long-standing and increasingly salient component of individual identity in the Marshalls, has undergone an unexpected alteration in Enid.

In traditional Marshallese society, a strict division was maintained between *iroij* (nobility) and *kajur* (commoners) classes (Spoehr 1949). Following European contact, an additional class composed of individuals of mixed Marshallese-European ancestry arose. Termed “mixed-bloods,” this group has enjoyed a marked level of prestige in Marshallese society (Mason 1947). This has been especially true for the descendants of three nineteenth-century traders, Carl Heine, Anton DeBrum, and Edward Milne, who married island women and formed the basis for a European “caste,” initially on Likiep Atoll but now on other atolls in the Marshalls as well (Chave 1948). In more recent years, members of both the mixed-blood and *iroij* groups have gained status in the new Marshallese nation-state by acquisition of college degrees and government employment.

In the Enid Marshallese Assembly of God Church, these indicators of social class back home are of little significance. In fact, aspects of elite class status or educational attainment are often deemphasized in the migrant community. This erasure of class markers has occurred primarily because members of the Enid Marshallese Assembly of God church *bamli* believe that status can only be acquired by becoming a member of the clergy in the ethnic church. Selection for these positions, however, is strictly controlled by the pastor and, according to him, is based on an individual’s commitment to “Marshallese custom” (as defined by the Enid Assembly of God community) and suitability to serve God. Pastor Makolok, a self-described member of the Likiep Atoll *kanaks* (native Marshallese or lower class), asserts that all members of the community are equally eligible for clerical positions if they meet

these criteria. However, with only one or two exceptions, most persons selected for the clergy have not been college graduates or from the mixed-blood group. In fact, most assistant pastors and deacons have been selected from the pastor's extended family or from among the more culturally conservative Kili Marshallese.

The pastor's selections caused dissent to surface among some members of the Enid Marshallese community with mixed-blood heritage. When a downturn in the Enid economy made wage work difficult to secure or keep for many members of the Marshallese community, acquiring a position in the church hierarchy guaranteed both a salary and high status in the community. As a result, more aspirants professed to have received a "calling" to perform sacred service to the church (especially among those of mixed-blood heritage). Mixed-bloods even went so far as to suggest that there was some bias in the selection process to gain access to desired positions in the Marshallese church. But when I pressed for examples of favoritism on the part of the pastor, they quickly retreated from any suggestion of possible impropriety by stating that, whatever the pastor's decision, it would still be "God's will" that was performed.

Whatever their level of commitment, Marshallese migrants view their participation in the Assembly of God Church as vital to the maintenance of the essential community. Each community member is required to commit a substantial amount of time and resources to the church. Commitment varies by gender and age. For instance, adolescents and young adults (up to thirty years of age in Enid) participate in the Marshallese Assembly of God youth group, which meets, at a minimum, five evenings per week. These meetings usually consist of one to two hours of Bible study, followed by an hour or so of hymn singing, and when preparing for religious events, they may last until dawn. Girls and young women also prepare for ceremonial and celebrational activities through the church women's group Jar in Ebolmen. In combination, these church-related activities require that Marshallese teens and young adults allocate at least sixteen hours per week to devotional and service activities in the Assembly of God essential community. Little time is left to socialize outside the church group, and this isolation allows Marshallese youth to "maintain their identity despite proximity to others" (De Vos and Romanucci-Ross 1975:367). Marshallese teens suggest this situation is "good," since they claim they do not feel happy "when we are with *ripalle* [white persons]." This emblematic contrast is further reinforced by the responses of non-Marshallese youth of the larger Enid community, who describe Marshallese as "strange" or "different." In fact, most American young people in the Enid community stated they had few opportunities to get to know them outside of the educational setting, because "those Marshallese always stick together."

Adult members of the Assembly of God Marshallese community must also display strong commitment to the church. Tithing 10 percent of all income is required for adult congregation members, and frequent additional fund drives for new materials or building projects result in additional contributions that sometimes exceed hundreds of dollars for each household per year. These demands often create financial crises for Marshallese households. With at most only one or two adults employed at what are usually minimum-wage jobs, it is a struggle to make ends meet. Households are often forced to make flour and water pancakes to feed their adult members and to thin down soy-based milk formula with excessive amounts of water to extend food supplements for infants and toddlers. Support from U.S. government entitlement programs is limited to coupons for formula and some supplemental food for small children, as Marshallese are not eligible for food stamps or other forms of public assistance.<sup>4</sup> Most households send requests for supplemental funds to their relatives back in the islands, but these funds may take weeks to arrive.

Still, for most congregation members the economic hardships incurred as a result of church demands are far outweighed by those exacted through stringent devotional and service requirements. Typical adult church service consists of devotional attendance three times per week, weekly men's and women's group responsibilities, periodic all-night prayer vigils, impromptu Bible study groups, planning meetings to host visiting clergy, and frequent aid missions to nearby Assemblies of God congregations in Springdale, Arkansas, and Neosho, Missouri. Any and all of these activities may require individuals to cancel household plans and leave work at a moment's notice. Such unexplained work absences result in lost wages and often in loss of employment, making it extremely difficult for Marshallese migrants to fulfill their financial obligations at either the household or the church level.

Moreover, like Enid Marshallese youth, most adult migrants have had little contact with the larger Enid social environment since the formation of the essential community.<sup>5</sup> Ritualized Marshallese Assembly of God religious acts require specialized knowledge that is embodied in the ethnic identity of Enid Marshallese.<sup>6</sup> Members of the larger Enid community, as "outsiders" to Marshallese society, cannot possess this knowledge. Consequently, non-Marshallese visitors are welcomed as "guests" in the Marshallese church, but many Marshallese migrants assert, "They don't need to know Marshallese people and our customs."

Thus, the religious doctrine of the Assembly of God Church has served as an "ethnognomonic trait" for Enid Marshallese (Schwartz 1975:108). It is a cultural totem, "at once emblematic of the group's solidarity and of the group's contrasting identity" (ibid.:108).

### **New Problems, Old Solutions: Managing Intragroup Tensions by Reinforcing Group Ties**

Fundamental to the formation of the Enid Marshallese essential community has been the reconstruction of social networks or links between groups. In many ways similar to the patterns of interisland assistance actualized among islands following natural disasters in Micronesia (Lessa 1986; Marshall 1979; Nason 1975; Schneider 1957), these links in Enid have facilitated the transfer of information, social support, and material resources (the “essentials”) vital to sustain the physical and psychological well-being of migrants in the Enid context. Transmigrants to Enid have sought to reduce or downplay intracultural differences and to ensure intragroup dependency by employing three relational mechanisms that have been practiced for centuries in the Pacific Islands: marriage, adoption, and familial obligation.

#### *Marriage/Dating in the Enid Marshallese Community*

With only three exceptions, all Marshallese married in Enid have selected partners from within the migrant community (Table 2). These marriages have all been sanctioned by the Marshallese Assembly of God Church and are a cause for elaborate celebration in the community.

**TABLE 2. Current Marital Status of Enid Marshallese, Ages Sixteen and Older, October 1995, by Sex**

Marital Status	Males	Females	Subtotal	Total
Currently married				54
To Enid Marshallese spouse	16	16	32 <sup>a</sup>	
To Marshallese spouse	11	7	18 <sup>b</sup>	
To American spouse	2	1	3	
To Chuukese spouse	1	0	1	
Never Married	27	15		42
Formerly Married				6
Widowed from non-Enid Marshallese spouse	0	3	3 <sup>c</sup>	
Divorced from non-Enid Marshallese spouse	0	3	3 <sup>d</sup>	
Total				102

*Source:* Author's community census.

<sup>a</sup> Note that Enid Marshallese–Enid Marshallese marriages appear twice, under both males and females, if both spouses are in Enid.

<sup>b</sup> Majuro = 6; Ebeye = 3; Arno = 1; Likiep = 1; Ebon = 1; Unknown = 6.

<sup>c</sup> Kili = 2; Wotje = 1.

<sup>d</sup> Kili = 1; Wotje = 1; Unknown = 1.

Marriage or dating outside the Enid Marshallese community is not enthusiastically acknowledged and supported. In fact, in those instances where migrants have engaged in relationships outside of the Enid Marshallese community, the reaction of the migrant group has been consistently negative in tone. For example, any migrant who dates outside of the Enid Marshallese community will immediately become the subject of substantial community gossip. The migrant's family members may attempt to dissuade her/him from continuing the relationship by reminding her/him of one's *nukwi* (duty to one's relatives) to the Marshallese community. In most cases, such community-wide disapproval provides sufficient social pressure to convince her/him to end the relationship. But, on more than one occasion, an individual has ignored public opinion and continued dating an outsider. In fact, in four such cases migrants have elected to marry the non-Marshallese partner and settle in Enid (see Table 2). Their decision to wed does not, however, lead to a softening or a "live and let live" change of opinion in the Enid Marshallese community. In fact, the couple may find themselves even more marginalized as a result of their behavior. They will receive little recognition and support from the Marshallese community, and only on rare occasions will they be invited to attend community affairs.

I was able to observe an example of one such situation firsthand when I attended the wedding of a Marshallese man and his American fiancée in July 1994. The services, held in the backyard of the couple's rented home, were conducted by a Baptist minister selected by the bride's family. With the exception of Pastor Makolok, of the Enid Marshallese Assembly of God Church, his wife, and the groom's immediate family, few members of the Enid Marshallese community were present. Moreover, only Pastor Makolok, the mother of the groom, and five young Marshallese males and females who participated in the nine-member wedding party wore formal attire.<sup>7</sup> All other Marshallese guests, including the pastor's wife, wore very casual clothing. Uncharacteristically, no one from the Marshallese community brought a present to place on the gift table. In fact, at the close of the ceremony, one Marshallese male hurriedly passed around his ball cap to collect donations of money from other members of the community. In a hushed tone of voice, he explained that they had not brought gifts because the groom was "not with the Marshallese" and "liked to be with *ripalle*." The collection, placed in a folded piece of paper, was laid on the gift table.

Eventually a few Marshallese guests joined Pastor Makolok and his wife in shaking hands with the newlyweds and the wedding party, but most of the Marshallese guests returned to their vehicles, parked haphazardly on the newlyweds' lawn, and exited the situation as quickly as possible. When I stopped one young Marshallese woman and asked her why so few Marshallese attended the wedding, she replied:

It is a *ripalle* wedding. Only Sisa's family are here with him. It is not like our weddings. Pastor Makolok was not asked to do the service. The men did not even have a party for him. He does not come to the Marshallese church, and he only visits his mother, Ruth. There are other things about him. He used to have parties for all the boys in the community and give them beer and cigarettes, but no one will go to his house now.

One other Marshallese male was said to be married to an American woman, but he and his family did not attend any Marshallese functions during my research in Enid.<sup>8</sup> Most Enid Marshallese considered him a snob, because, it was frequently suggested, he did not "live like Marshallese people."

Marriages between Marshallese women and American men have occurred even more infrequently. In fact, to date, there is only one example of such a marriage in the Enid Marshallese community. The couple, David and Rona, met while attending a nearby community college and married as soon as they graduated. They have one child, a girl, born shortly before my arrival in Enid in April 1994. Rona was frequently teased about her *ripalle* husband, who was referred to as a "nerd" by the Marshallese males in the community. She was also teased about her baby, Mary, who was called a *ripalle ninnin* (literally "white baby") because of her light brown hair and blue eyes. But since Rona was Marshallese and frequently attended the Marshallese Assembly of God Church with her daughter, the child was acknowledged to be a part of the Marshallese community. Rona also participated in the women's church group and other community celebrations, but David was conspicuously absent. As Rona suggested, this was a point of disagreement for the couple. David, she said, felt she devoted too much time to the demands of the Marshallese church/community group and would benefit from more frequent contact with his family. Rona said she tried to please David, but she stated, "I need to be with Marshallese people, to be like at home, and it is good for Mary."

Marshallese disapproval of relationships formed with non-Marshallese also extended to those made with members of other Pacific Islander groups. I learned of this view as the result of an incident that occurred one Sunday morning after church services. I had been visiting with the pastor and two of his deacons at the Marshallese church when one of the pastor's children burst through the open office door to announce that his lunch was prepared. The child's announcement also served as a reminder to everyone present that it was nearly 2:00 P.M., and evening services were scheduled to begin in just four short hours! We quickly completed our discussion of the plans for a new Sunday school room in the church and then walked outside to our vehicles to begin our respective journeys home.

Parked nearer the church entrance, the pastor and his assistant deacons made their way to their vehicles and drove off in a matter of seconds. But, since I was one of the last to arrive for morning services, I had been forced to park some distance from the church on an empty nearby dirt street rarely used and nearly overgrown with wild brush. Walking down the deserted road to my pickup truck, only the muffled sound of my footfalls on the soft red dirt surface broke the silence of the early spring afternoon. As I slipped my key into the locked door of my truck, Betina, a Marshallese teen, appeared as if from nowhere along the driver's side. Startled, I stepped back and yelped, "Betina, where did you come from?" She placed her finger to her lips to signal silence. I looked around and there was no one else in sight. I asked her what was wrong, and she responded by asking if I would take her home. I told her I would be happy to, and she climbed into the passenger side of the truck's cab. We rode in silence for about ten minutes, when she suddenly asked if I wanted to know why she was still at the church after the rest of the congregation had left. I told her I was a little curious, but I had assumed she had overslept and arrived too late to hear the pastor's morning sermon. "No," she giggled, "not Marshallese time, Linda!" Betina then described how she had arrived with her auntie and uncle for the 9:00 A.M. Bible study class. But, she said, as soon as most of the rest of the congregation arrived for the regular 10:00 A.M. Sunday services, she left. She explained that she had walked up the street to a nearby convenience store to place a telephone call and had lost track of time.

I didn't know church was over. I went up to the store to call my boyfriend in Springdale. I left the church so my uncle would not know I was talking to him again. He is from Yap and Uncle does not want me to see him.

When I came back, you were the only one there, and I was so afraid that Uncle would know I did not go to hear the pastor talk. I don't know what to do now. He will beat me if he finds out that I called my boyfriend. What can I do, Linda?

Noting the look of fear in her eyes and her extremely anxious state, I sensed she believed she was in real danger. "Why," I asked, "would your uncle beat you for just talking to your boyfriend on the telephone?" Wiping tears from her cheeks with the sleeve of her aloha-print dress, Betina slowly related an account of a series of events that had occurred a few months earlier when she ran away from her uncle's home in an attempt to elope with her Yapese boyfriend, Sam: "We left to get married. We stayed at a hotel in Blackwell for a week, but my uncle found us. My uncle said he told my grandpa that I wanted to marry a man from Yap. He said grandpa was angry

and I should come home with him. I did, and my auntie beat me with a broom. I was not allowed to go out after school for a month, and Uncle said I could never talk to my boyfriend again.”

In subsequent interviews with other members of the Enid Marshallese community, I learned that, although it was recognized that Marshallese teens had occasionally dated teens from outside the Marshallese group in the past, this would no longer be considered acceptable behavior. Community members pointed out that there were now many Marshallese young people in Enid and made it clear that they wanted Marshallese singles to date within the community. Intracommunity dating, they stated, would help “keep the customs” and ensure that Marshallese young people did not emulate the lifestyle of American youth, who were perceived to be disrespectful, all too often tempted to use drugs and alcohol, and possibly involved in gang activities.

#### *Kaajiriri—Marshallese Adoption in Enid*

Adoption is very common in the Marshall Islands, as it is elsewhere in Oceania (Brady 1976; Carroll 1970; Kiste 1974; Rynkiewich 1972; Spoehr 1949). But, unlike Western or “legal” adoption that serves to separate an adoptee from her/his biological parents and genealogical identity, Pacific adoption traditions emphasize the importance of maintaining kinship ties between family groups and other relatives (Kiste 1974; Marshall 1976; Ritter 1981; Spoehr 1949).

According to tradition in the Marshall Islands, *kaajiriri* (adoption) may only occur after a child’s *kemem* (first birthday party) has been held. A few months before the birthday, close relatives of the child’s mother and father organize the party that is as much “an expression of family solidarity” as it is a celebration of the first stage of a “child’s growth toward adulthood” (Spoehr 1949:209). After the *kemem*, the child may be adopted and leave the household. The adopter is usually a sibling of one of the child’s parents or a grandparent. As a consequence, the adoption “becomes a solidifier of the kinship system” (ibid.:211).

Recently, however, the traditional *kaajiriri* restrictions have been obviated as the result of “foreigner” adoptions. Marshallese infants and toddlers have become increasingly popular with Americans who are looking for a child to adopt but have little patience with the red tape associated with adopting a child in the United States and other countries. Marshallese children have even been depicted on an Internet website sponsored by one of the half a dozen U.S. adoption agencies involved in this practice (Johnson 1999). The government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service have announced plans to impose stricter



regulations governing the adoption of Marshallese children. Some observers, however, suggest that these actions have been instrumental in the creation of a black market for adoptions.

In the Enid Marshallese community, *kaajiriri* remains an important means of bringing families together. In fact, three children born as the result of intracommunity marriages have been adopted.<sup>9</sup> Enid Marshallese suggest these adoptions further reinforce intragroup solidarity through the creation of kin ties between previously unrelated family lines. But, as the comments of Marshallese parents listed below suggest, the practice of *kaajiriri* is not without emotional trauma. For instance, during lunch one Sunday afternoon, my Marshallese companion, the biological mother of a six-year-old boy, confided: "I miss that boy. I still love that boy. He calls her 'Mom' and he calls me 'Tia.' But it is good, because we are all *bamli*. We are close now, because we gave that boy to them. I see him at church, and he comes sometimes to play with his brothers, but he doesn't live with me now. It is our way."

In another discussion of the practice of *kaajiriri* in Enid, Harold, a Marshallese father of two, explained his frustration over his sister-in-law's adoption of his eleven-month-old daughter, Melena. Holding Melena in his lap, he tearfully explained: "They are kidnaping my daughter. I don't want to give her up. They have other children, but they want Melena. We have our new baby boy, but Melena is our only daughter. My wife cries, but she says her sister will take good care of our daughter. I don't like this Marshallese custom. Is it like this for you in America? Can someone take your child if you don't want to let her go?"

Fortunately, Harold's sister-in-law changed her mind and returned to the Marshall Islands without his child, but whenever her name was mentioned after that, he became visibly agitated.

In recent years, intragroup marriages and kinship ties based on adoption have increased as the population of the Enid Marshallese migrant community has grown. Stronger than the "informal friendship networks" that developed during the early years of the Enid community's existence, these kin-linked social networks have tied groups of households together and intensified rights and obligations within the Marshallese essential community (cf. Janes 1990:63 for a similar situation in Samoan migrant communities). As yet, however, these kin links are relatively few in number and lack the structural complexity that would be necessary to bind the Enid Marshallese migrant community together more intensively.

### Conclusions: Why?

I posit that the Enid Marshallese migrant essential community has been based on Assemblies of God fundamentalist doctrine for two reasons. First,

the dogma of the church has facilitated the translation of intracultural differences and aided in the formation of intracommunity ties. Within the Enid Marshallese Assembly of God Church, variations in custom among migrant groups from Majuro, Kwajalein-Ebeye, and Kili have coalesced into a single, true Marshallese tradition. Congregation members have become *bamli* in both real and symbolic terms in the essential community. As a “community of believers,” Enid Marshallese Assembly of God Church members have drawn on church teachings to evoke an idealized community that was lost in the migration process.

A second, related reason why Christian fundamentalism has played an important role in the formation and maintenance of a Marshallese essential community in Enid concerns the impact of assimilation/acclturation processes on Marshallese culture and tradition. Return visits to the Marshall Islands have exacerbated Enid migrants’ fears that their homeland is undergoing irreversible change. Social and cultural stresses associated with acculturation are evidenced “back home” by high crime rates, the loss of kinship ties, and the ubiquitous presence of Western food and clothing. These factors are observed by Enid migrants during their visits to the Marshalls. When they return to Oklahoma, most Enid Marshallese express a fear that traditional lifeways have been lost in their homeland. Their concerns become even greater as pressures to assimilate in the migrant context evoke resentment at the implied inferiority of their culture. Compelled to find a solution to “salvage” their cultural selves, Marshallese migrants have turned to the socially peripheral sectarian Assembly of God Church with its doctrinally conservative perspective to resist culture loss and to foster a sense of autonomy by creating an exclusive moral community in Enid.<sup>10</sup> The Enid Marshallese essential community, as that moral bastion, has provided a standpoint from which they can maintain resistance to culture loss in the face of threatened indiscriminate assimilation.

## NOTES

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1. Within fifteen years of their introduction to Christianity in 1857, Marshall Islanders became leaders in their own churches. Today, being a “Christian person” is considered a traditional role in Marshallese culture. Participation in the Enid Marshallese Assembly of God Church is, however, a relatively recent traditional custom, since the church was founded in 1993.

2. There are 396 Baptist churches in Oklahoma. Thirty-three of this number are Baptist churches located in Enid.

3. The term “*bamli*” was adapted from the English term “family” and refers to a family group or a household.

4. In conversations with social workers at the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, I learned that the Marshallese are specifically prohibited by U.S. federal law from receiving most forms of U.S. entitlement or medical supplemental assistance. According to the Compact of Free Association (Article 4, Section 141c), Marshall Islanders may not become naturalized citizens of the United States. They may acquire permanent resident alien status in the United States (or “green cards”), but they may not receive health and other entitlement benefits allocated exclusively to U.S. citizens or eligible aliens.

5. Marshallese adults do have contact with coworkers, but they rarely socialize with coworkers outside of the workplace.

6. These ritualized religious acts are similar to those discussed by Emile Durkheim in his work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915).

7. The pastor wore a black business suit made of polyester double-knit material, a white shirt, and a red and black striped tie. The mother of the groom wore a Western-style dress and high heels. In contrast, the pastor’s wife and all other Marshallese females in attendance wore muumuus and zoris. Marshallese males wore jeans, T-shirts, zoris or athletic shoes, and ball caps. With the exceptions noted, the casualness of the Marshallese attire was striking. I had attended a number of less formal occasions (e.g., first birthdays or reunions for lineages living in other migrant communities in the United States), and all Marshallese in attendance were dressed in their best Sunday or party outfits. Even babies and small children attending these functions were beautifully dressed, often with new clothing purchased especially for the event.

8. The Marshallese man, his American partner, and their two children reside in a middle-class housing development on the edge of Enid. They are both longtime employees of a local food-processing firm, and their social activities predominantly focus on activities with family and friends of the wife.

9. At the time of my field research, three children (two males and one female) had been adopted within the Enid Marshallese community. However, one of the children (the female) was born anencephalic and died within the first year of life.

10. I am not suggesting that the formation of an essential community is dependent on religious affiliation/organization. I feel the Enid Marshallese essential community is structured by the Assembly of God Church primarily because this was the organizational form that allowed community members to find consensus and strength in the transmigrant milieu. In other contexts different forms of organization may prevail. For example, from his research conducted among Marshallese living in Costa Mesa, California, Jim Hess has suggested that migrants to that community have formed complex networks based on a number of organizations (for example, common interest associations, community clubs, and churches) (personal communication, July 1994).

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