

Jack A. Tobin, *Stories from the Marshall Islands: Bwebwenato Jān Aelōn Kein*. PALI Language Texts. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002. Pp. xvi, 405, maps, notes, references, appendixes, index. US\$55 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

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It is not easy to provide a collection of vernacular narratives without waxing overly romantic or failing to include enough context to make them meaningful. Jack Tobin has successfully avoided these pitfalls in *Stories from the Marshall Islands*, which places him among the great Pacific collectors and translators such as Grey, Beckwith, and Luomala. The publication of traditional lore has waned in recent years; it requires a great deal of tedious work and high language competency, and seems not to lend itself to the critical insights of contemporary scholarship. Ironically, however, in many ways good collections have always carried a postmodern quality centered in discourse and representation. Despite romantic embellishments that often obscure local culture, publications of oral culture have frequently provided a more-salient arena for voice than much of the ethnographic and historical writings. As a form of representation such collections also seem more transparent, avoiding the appearance of a mediating academic discourse, though this may only hide a subtle veiling of interpretive choices.

In giving voice to the Marshall Islanders, Tobin does extraordinarily well. Instead of composite stories (a standard practice in anthropology of blurring versions into one), he presents a copious collection of tales recorded directly from informants, transcribed and translated (both the Marshallese and English are presented). And much to his credit, he often provides more than one version of a story to reveal its life in oral performance and register important variations in performance patterns, stylistics, and regional significance. Although he does not attempt to render the texts ethnopoetically, he does retain important stylistic devices such as repetitive conjunctions, parallelism, tonal changes that signal chant, and deictics that form an essential part of Marshallese storytelling. Attention to these qualities is less a method of textual presentation and more one of very careful translation.

Tobin's translation is truly praiseworthy. There is a difficult balance to be maintained in translation: one hopes to translate at once literally enough to avoid taking culturally centric liberties and loosely enough to allow the storytellers to come across as lucid communicators and retain the flow and nuances of their language and poetry. This balancing act is not easy to achieve, yet Tobin finds a comfortable nexus. Part of this success lies in his profound competency with the lexicon and grammatical forms of the language. Trans-

lation is not indifferent to interpretive choices, but Tobin succeeds in keeping these choices as true to meaningful emic subtleties as is practicable for a non-native language user. Nearly fifty years of work with the Marshallese and their language becomes evident in his careful translation. And his apparent insistence that both the English translations and Marshallese transcriptions be included in the book reveals both responsibility to the islanders and academic integrity by opening his work to scrutiny.

In many ways Tobin's choices for representing the texts present a curious tension, which may be more indicative of the challenges of this kind of work than of scholarly oversight. The tension is centered in a dual desire of the author to render the texts in such a way that the individual storyteller is present while simultaneously providing generalized cultural and historical information. This tension is perhaps always a quality of ethnographic and historical writing, but documenting vernacular stories seems to accentuate the challenge. Tobin creates this tension through the course of his presentation. Following a preface that accounts for how he himself has been situated vis-à-vis the Marshall Islanders, an introductory chapter provides the essential descriptions of the cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts in which the narratives are embedded and through which they may (in part) be interpreted. This contextual framing is essential to the presentation of the narratives that follow. A glance at the table of contents reveals just how Tobin has provided etic labels to place each tale: "Stories of Beginnings," "Stories about Animals," "Stories about Evil Spirits and Flying Women," "Other Stories," "Historical Events." These categories are reasonable when one pursues the corpus, and like any collection it is limited to whatever tales the collector has procured. A collection is never exhaustive of the tradition but hopefully representative. Nonetheless, the labels do not represent indigenous categories or those of individual storytellers. I do not mean to suggest that Tobin's choices are simply idiosyncratic; in fact, he effectively creates a general context through careful identification of "Motifs of the Stories" (found in an appendix). Utilizing Bacil Kirtley's Pacific indexes (1955) developed from Stith Thompson's seminal classification system (1932–1936), Tobin presents one of the most thorough listings of motifs of Pacific oral stories. This kind of detail may seem superfluous to the immediate publication but reveals a generous responsibility to those who will follow, for it will prove an indispensable resource for comparative research locally, regionally, and globally.

In all the attempts to provide these general contexts, Tobin avoids any identification of the generic contexts of his stories, other than to explain that they fall within the indigenous category "*bwebwenato*" (talk, story). He resists utilizing indigenous genre terms such as *inoñ*, *bwebwenato in mol*, *bwebwenato in etto*, *bwebwenato bajjik*, and so forth, because, I am sure, he views

these categories as slippery and inconsistent in use. A study (Davenport 1953) that preceded Tobin tried to account for indigenous classifications but in the end simply translated them into Western analytical categories (i.e., myth, legend, folktale, etc.) and essentially obscured their local meaning. But to avoid the slipperiness of genre labels may distance us from how the narratives are employed by the *dri bwebwenato* (storytellers) in contemporary social life. The boundaries between genres are never stable in terms of content and form, but in the Marshall Islands case the terms do seem to register an attitude toward the status of truth about what is being said. Consequently, when the boundary between the discourses of fiction, history, metaphorical truth, sacred origins, and so forth is ambiguous and apparently context-dependent, I propose that this is the status of the past, or “the truth,” for the storytellers as they negotiate it.

What is missing in Tobin’s account is how each of his “informants” categorized their stories, and herein lies the other half of the tension: how to represent individuals in a cultural study. It is very easy in oral history, ethnography, and folkloristics to generalize from individual utterances to cultural and social patterns, systems, epistemologies, and so forth. When the primary objective, however, is to provide representative culture examples and general contextual information, the individual performers blur and disappear. They become seen as representatives of tradition rather than creative poets. At best, we would hope that both the parameters of traditions (motifs, culturally salient performance stylistics, tale types, cultural and historical contexts, explicated meanings) and the emergent qualities of performance and text (as the direct result of creativity and sensitivity to the performer and performance context) receive careful attention.

Admirably, Tobin identifies the name of the storyteller before presenting each narrative and provides an informative individual biography in an appendix. The range of tellers utilized is commendable; however, as with any of us who have attempted to study storytelling, clearly the overwhelming number of texts tend to come from one or two key individuals who are both knowledgeable and amenable to satisfying our requests. But *Stories from the Marshall Islands* represents an effort to place texts in broader contexts, and Tobin successfully provides a wealth of information through copious footnotes and commentary at the end of many narratives. Even so, in all this great contextual information our individual performer is lost, since the one context neglected is the performance context, which not only reveals the art of communication but shows how the tellers position themselves vis-à-vis the past, their culture, and even those present as audience (including the outside ethnographer).

While I do not fault Tobin for the lack of reflexivity (he is so good at showing his presence through translation), the lack of careful attention to the subtleties of performance may have actually led to a mis-presentation of Marshallese storytelling. In the preface he indicates that while the storytellers will use the present tense to render a narrative situated in the past, he has translated the actions in the past tense when it is more “meaningful” and “clearly the intent of the narrator to be past action” (p. xii). This was an unfortunate choice for two reasons: first, he is assuming much about the choice of the narrator; and second, the performance of the narrated event (past) in the narrative event (present) by using the present tense is a salient poetic device used by Marshallese storytellers to bring the past into the present, and in this way an important dialogue ensues between the two time frames. It makes the past present, and in the process permits reading the present through a past lens. And at the level of experience, it is just more fun and engaging. Use of the present tense allows the action to move as we listen and come to feel part of it. It borders on mimesis (especially with reported speech), a participation in the past, and provides an alternative to the diegetic telling, or simply looking “back at” the past. Manipulating tense obscures one of the ways the stories become meaningful for the Marshall Islanders.

Despite this choice in representation, Jack Tobin has provided a monumental collection of oral stories that will prove a useful resource for education in the Pacific Islands and for scholarship. He has presented Marshallese voices with grace and conviction, and has represented their culture with depth and insight. If more collections could be as thorough in coverage, competent in translation, and ethnographically rich, the study of vernacular tradition in Oceania will achieve a most significant renewal and productively engage islander voices with ethnographic and historical discourse.

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