

Together Through Life

*An Ethnographic Study of Hierarchy, Equality, and
Togetherness on the Epoon Atoll, Marshall Islands*

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Abstract

This thesis deals with everyday manifestations of hierarchy, equality and togetherness on the Epoon [Ebon] Atoll on the Marshall Islands. More particularly, it investigates some of the ways in which people on Epoon evoke and invoke hierarchy and egalitarianism, depending on context. People on Epoon have a striking tendency to stress equality and togetherness among themselves, in public speeches as well as in their cooking hut conversations. This emphasis on egalitarian values is visible in most social dynamics on the atoll. Interestingly, these egalitarian ideals often stand in direct opposition to a hierarchical form of social structure. Anthropologists have typically described the Marshallese social structure as a class-based hierarchy, ranging from commoners to high chiefs, with hierarchical differences within each class. Having some forms of hierarchical organization, however, does not necessarily mean inequality regarding social life on Epoon. On the contrary, I argue that, even with the presence of hierarchy, equality stands out as an encompassing cultural value. Through four ethnographic chapters, I seek to illustrate some of the ways in which this plays out in daily life. By taking an in-depth look at family life and inheritance; leadership and changing authorities; Christian politics and denominational conflicts; and the relationship between cooperation and togetherness, I illustrate that ideas of hierarchy and egalitarianism can, and often do, coexist. As my argument goes, hierarchy does not necessitate inequality any more than egalitarianism necessitate equality. By conceptualizing equality as “of equal value,” I aim to show that ideas of both hierarchy and egalitarianism works to constitute equality as an encompassing value on the Epoon Atoll.

Keywords:

Hierarchy, Kinship, Christianity, Cooperation, Equality, Epoon [Ebon] Atoll

Acknowledgements/Naan in kom̩oolol

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Table of Contents

Abstract	v
Acknowledgements/Naan in kompoolol	vii
Table of Contents	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction, Motivations, and Method	1
Aim of the thesis: What to expect.....	6
Why and where: The spirit of adventure and serendipitous events	9
How and what: Methods, shortcomings, and a fresh start.....	11
Some notes on language	16
Chapter 2: Kinship, Land Distribution, and Land Inheritance	17
Navigating the waters of lineage, clan, descent, and kinship systems	18
Land distribution and settlement patterns	25
Models of inheritance.....	29
Complicating the models	32
Conclusions	34
Chapter 3: Leadership, Power, and Changing Authorities	35
Notes on traditional hierarchy	35
Chiefs today	38
The case of José Ivan	44
Entrepreneurs and elites	47
Conclusions	51
Chapter 4: Christian Politics and Denominational Conflicts	53
The anthropology of Christianity	56
What is an Epoon Christian?	58
Who is a Christian?.....	63
Denominational conflicts	67
Conclusions	69
Chapter 5: Cooperation as a Means of Togetherness (and Vice Versa)	71
<i>Mande</i> : Monday morning clean up.....	73

Doulul: A day in the life of a copra worker..... 77
Declining cooperation in church activities..... 82
Final discussion 88
Appendix A: Census of the Epoon Islet, March 2014..... 91
Appendix B: A Glossary of Marshallese Words 93
References..... 95

Chapter 1: Introduction, Motivations, and Method

It is difficult to convey the feelings of intense interest and suspense with which an Ethnographer enters for the first time the district that is to be the future scene of his field-work. Certain salient features, characteristic of the place, at once rivet his attention, and fill him with hopes or apprehensions (Malinowski 1922, 39–40).

“Hello, this is Epoon,” Arbi, the telephone operator said on the other end of the line. It was early January 2014, and I had been on Mājro [Majuro] about three weeks. I had called to Epoon because I needed to get in touch with Ione DeBrum, the Honorable Madam Mayor of the Epoon Atoll, to get her permission to conduct fieldwork there. Unlike most other Mayors on the Marshall Islands, Ione stayed on Epoon as much as she could. In effect, she was a relatively active Mayor with a good grip on the present workings on her atoll. I thus needed only her permission, as opposed to some other atolls, where I would need the acceptance from the *irooj* (chief; traditional leader) as well. Arbi told me that someone would summon her, and that I should call back in a couple of minutes. The communication central on Epoon at the time consisted of two telephone lines, an inter-island radio, and a broken-down Internet line. The latter had not really been functioning since its installation, and with the accompanying laptop damaged from the salty, humid air, Internet was yet a Mājro-thing.

Ione answered the phone when I called back. Although she was welcoming, she was hesitant to accept my request to stay on Epoon for six months. She had mistaken me for an archaeologist, and thus told me “Epoon is done.” It turned out that a team of governmentally employed archaeologists had been on the atoll some years before. There was no need for any more archaeology work on her atoll, she told me. I later found out that a previous chief archaeologist on the Marshall Islands and his colleagues had conducted excavations on Epoon without proper consent. Moreover, the group had allegedly taken artifacts away from the atoll, which, apart from being ethically questionable, had angered the people. She was thus skeptical about me doing research there. Luckily, I managed to explain that I was a social anthropologist, and that I had no interest in excavations, and that, when leaving, I would not take away anything other than gifts. Instead, I was interested in studying everyday life on Epoon. I told her that I wanted to study the Marshallese culture of today. My catchphrase for the following weeks would thus be *Ikōṇaan ekkatak kajin Majeļ, mantin Majeļ, im jermal in Majeļ. Ikōṇaan ekkatak mour in Epoon* (I want to learn Marshallese language, Marshallese

custom, and Marshallese work. I want to learn about life on Epoon). The Mayor accepted my request, and welcomed me to the atoll. Two weeks later, I was on my way there.

Despite the fact that Air Marshall Islands has weekly flights scheduled to most atolls in the nation, inter-atoll traveling can be challenging. Air Marshalls has two planes in their fleet, a relatively stable Dash 8 and a not so stable Dornier. The airline as a whole has a reputation for being unstable—earning it the popular nickname Air Maybe—but the Dornier plane especially has a tendency to remain grounded for months at a time. Since Epoon is among the atolls that can only fit the Dornier, people there know not to take flight transportation for granted (see also O. G. Berta, in press). The governmentally regulated ship, moreover, has an ideal interval of three months, rendering inter-atoll travel challenging. When I arrived on Mājro on December 21, I had just missed the ship to Epoon, and, thus, had to rely on the plane. Luckily, the plane went as scheduled that particular week, and on January 23, I was on my way to the Epoon Atoll, the southernmost atoll on the Marshall Islands. I did not appreciate my luck until I some weeks later realized how unstable the flight communication was. After my arrival, only three planes landed on the atoll. The last plane during my stay on the Marshalls left Epoon on March 6.

Coming to or leaving a low-lying coral atoll by plane is an experience to remember. Arriving on Mājro for the first time, I realized just how unprepared I had been about what to expect from atoll living. When, one month later, I was looking out of the window on my way to Epoon, I saw nothing but the ocean, until I finally noticed a tiny strip of land, ranging from 10 to 450 meters wide. Getting closer, I could see the coconut palms and breadfruit trees that cover most of the ground, as well as the white sandy beaches that mark the borders between land and reef. Epoon is a circle-shaped atoll that encloses a turquoise lagoon, some eleven–twelve km in diameter. During low tide, it is possible to walk around the entire atoll on the reef, with the exception of a channel on the southern side big enough for ships to enter the lagoon. On most days, you can see men out on the lagoon, fishing from their dugout canoes (*kōrkōr*). The water is clear enough—on the ocean side as well as in the lagoon—to see the bottom twenty meters below when spear fishing. Before going into landing, the atoll disappears out of sight, and there is nothing else to do than to trust that the pilot knows what he is doing. The atoll is only about 50 meters wide by the runway, so there is nothing but water outside of the window as the plane approach its bumpy landing.

As usual whenever a plane arrives, the airport was full of people when I arrived. As I got out of the plane, the Mayor greeted me as she came toward me. She introduced me to some of the people standing close by, before we started to load the 24 foot engine boat that laid on the shore.



Figure 1. The Ane-ḡ-aetok islet on the eastern side of the Epoon Atoll as seen from the plane.

The walk from the airport to the populated area of the Epoon islet is just short of an hour, so most people ride their bicycles or sail their canoes to get there. The local government has the engine boat at their disposal, and uses it to ship goods, luggage, paying costumers, and newly arrived anthropologists. Now, for the rest of this section, I want you as a reader to imagine yourself coming to Epoon. Since ethnographic writings give a unique peek into a given world—in this case the Epoon Atoll—I consider reading ethnographic accounts as a short trip to that same world. As a reader, you are therefore about to visit Epoon, if only for a brief glance. Thus, I would like to give you the proper Epoon welcoming.

As you make your way over the sand and coral rocks, going from the boat that brought you from the airport and up to the dirt road, you see the curious faces of children all around you. Most likely, the boat has landed on the lagoon side of Almenon's house because of the easy access to the council house. The council house is where the action will be the following hours, with people showing up to cash out their shipped goods. Approaching night time, the women on the islet prepare for your welcoming party, as they do with every visitor. A few days earlier, they have had a meeting to discuss the division of labor for the food preparation. When they are ready, usually around 8 p.m., they will gather at the house you are staying to present food and sing for you. Before singing, they will create a large circle around you. One of the women, perhaps Nani, will give a speech on behalf of all *RiEpoon* (Epoon people), saying how much they appreciate you coming to visit. After her speech, Nani will start strumming her ukulele, and everyone will join in singing in high-pitched voices from the top of their lungs. While singing, the women will come up to you to hand over their food, which is likely to consist of grilled fish, different varieties of taro and breadfruit, rice, and coconuts to drink. Some of the women will probably tie a string of flowers in your hair. For the women, these welcoming parties are among the proudest moments of the life on Epoon, and it is not without reason that they have a reputation for being among the best in the nation. As the singing continues, one song keeps dragging out, repeated continously: *Ieen Emman* (This Good Moment). Because this is a song that touch upon one of the overarching subjects of this thesis—togetherness and sense of community—I will present it in its full length:

Ieen emman, emman
Jouj ej lo doon
Eto aō jañ-
uwaade tok eok
Kwon jijet tok
Ijo ijo ituru ilo
Mool in am mool

This moment is good, good
Because we are together
For a long time my soul has been
Lonesome for you
Come here and sit down
Sit down here next to me
Trust in your honesty

Añ jenjen im bobo
Waj kūtuon je
Im deel-deel waj kom ilo
Mool in am mool

The breeze lights a fire and assembles us
The wind blows toward us
And fans us so we gather
Trust in your honesty



Figure 2. Map of the Epoon Atoll. The southernmost and largest islet is the main islet, Epoon, whereas the westernmost islet is Toka.

Eventually, the party will fade out. Some will return to their respective homes, while others will stay behind to chat, taking advantage of the cool night. Now that you have been welcomed, you can relax before going to bed with a full stomach.

To be sure, I am well aware of the critique raised against anthropological ideal of “the field” (e.g. by Gupta and Ferguson 1997), or what Mary Louise Pratt (1986, 35) has called “the classic Polynesian arrival scene.” Pratt goes a long way in her postmodern deconstruction of several types of arrival scenes. In her view, “the authority of the ethnographer over the ‘mere traveler’ rest chiefly on the idea that the traveler just passes through, whereas the ethnographer lives with the group under study” (Pratt 1986, 38). She thereby reduces ethnographic fieldwork to long stays, neglecting the anthropological toolbox of concepts, gaze, comparative analysis, and interpretation and thick description (Geertz 1973, 6–10). At the very minimum, what separates the “mere traveler” from the ethnographer is the latter’s highly disciplined subjectivity (Scheper-Hughes 2000, 132; Kolshus 2014, 172). Similar to Niko Besnier (2009a, 29), I too, present such an opening scene “at the risk of subjecting myself to [...] severe criticism,” but, like him—and, in fact, Malinowski (1922) before him—I, too, am the main narrator and one of the characters of this story. Another reason for choosing this kind of opening scene is the fact that, unlike most field sites, the arrival on a coral atoll leaves no doubt as to where and when you “enter” the field. From the moment I stepped foot out of the plane, I was there, and I realized that my time on Mājro had been a mere preparation.

Aim of the thesis: What to expect

This thesis deals with everyday manifestations of hierarchy, equality and togetherness on the Epoon Atoll on the Marshall Islands. To do that, I will look closer at some of the social dynamics that were most visible to me during my five-month stay on the atoll, with an additional ten weeks on Mājro (five before and five after). More particularly, I will investigate some of the ways in which RiEpoon evoke and invoke hierarchy and egalitarianism, depending on context. Additionally, I will relate this issue to a wider discussion of local values, such as equality, togetherness, and sense of community. RiEpoon have a striking tendency to stress equality and togetherness among themselves, in public speeches as well as in their cooking hut conversations. It did not take long for me to notice, and take interest in, this emphasis on egalitarian values. What became especially intriguing to me was the ways in which these egalitarian ideals often stand in direct opposition to a hierarchical form of social structure. Anthropologists have typically described the Marshallese social structure as a class-based

hierarchy, ranging from commoners to high chiefs, with hierarchical differences within each class (Spoehr 1949a; Mason 1947; Kiste and Marshall 1999; Walsh 2003).

It is important to emphasize that I do not understand hierarchy as inequality. Serge Tcherkézoff (2009, 299) points to two different forms of inequality, that of stratification and that of hierarchy in its etymological sense. On Samoa, he says, stratification signifies the realm of inequality of power relations, whereas “peaceful relations of equality are located within the hierarchy, understood as a space organized by belonging to the same whole” (ibid., 300). In the context of Epoon, we will see that most power figures—such as the chief (*irooj*), lineage head (*a!ap*), and the Mayor—gain their strength through the commoner (*rijerbal*). Similar to what Tcherkézoff (ibid., 309–10) explains from Samoa, the hierarchical system on Epoon takes form of a unidirectional interdependence between people of status and commoners—in stark contrast to a stratifying autonomous political oligarchy. This is where the distinction between stratification and hierarchy comes in. Tcherkézoff (ibid., 324, original emphasis) notes that hierarchy contains a circle of respect, whereas “stratification is a gradation of *having*.” However, the circle of respect that hierarchy encompasses is fragile. A failure to act properly within a given context can put you out of the realm of hierarchy and respect, and thus into the world of stratification. In light of this, one could perhaps argue that I am dealing with the tensions between hierarchy and stratification, rather than the tension between hierarchy and equality. On a one-to-one level, that might be correct. As we will see, however, egalitarian ideals and values are strong on a group level.

In addition to class and status, the hierarchical system on Epoon is also visible family life, as land and title inheritance usually are two sides of the same coin. Thus, I will discuss family life and the dynamics of land inheritance in Chapter 2. Even though life on Epoon still has clear signs of hierarchical organization, one of my main arguments in this thesis is that these forms of hierarchy coexist with an emphasis on egalitarianism and equality. More importantly, it is not an encompassing value in the same sense as equality is (c.f. Robbins 1994). Marianne Gullestad (1992, 184–5) has pointed out four different translations and understandings of *equality* in Scandinavian languages. The two most important are equality as sameness or similarity, and of equal value. Whenever I address equality in the context of Epoon, I mean equality as of equal value. As mentioned, however, I do not understand equality as a contradiction to hierarchy. The *irooj* (chief) is no longer an autocratic power figure (nor has he been the past century), and most people meet obvious power displays with gossip

and scorn. That way, life on Epoon resembles what Besnier (2009a) has illustrated from Nukulaelae, Tuvalu. I will elaborate on status hierarchy and power relations in Chapter 3.

Despite the fact that sense of community and togetherness are such strong values on Epoon, some feel that their community is breaking apart. These are the *Būrotijens* (Protestants), which is the emic term for members of the United Church of Christ (UCC). The Epoon Atoll was religiously homogeneous for a period of 140 years (1857–1997), and the *Būrotijens* are not necessarily enjoying the new religious diversity. Thus, the denominational conflicts are the most visible forms of conflict on the atoll. The best description of the church on Epoon is probably that of a key factor in social structure. Denominational conflicts are thus key to understanding both the enforcement of, and threat to, the sense of community and togetherness *RiEpoon* so often emphasize. These conflicts will be the main topic of Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, however, I will argue against the *Būrotijen* claim regarding the dissolving community (as a whole). Everyday life on Epoon is riddled with different kinds of cooperative projects, ranging from small-scale cooperation based on reciprocity to large-scale institutionalized projects. Once again, we will see the church as a social institution that is crucial in building a sense of community.

Although all chapters speak to the tension between hierarchy and egalitarianism as it manifests itself through everyday politics, power, and ideas of togetherness, I have tried to let each chapter have an individual character as well. While dealing with the relationship between family organization, power and hierarchy, for instance, Chapter 2 also engages critically with the mainstream understanding of Marshallese kinship structure. Put bluntly, I will argue against the common idea of Marshallese matrilineality. Chapter 3 will follow the changing power structures that Chapter 2 makes visible. Doing that, I will work comparatively within in the larger Pacific region, most notably with the writings of Besnier (2009a) and Keir Martin (2013). While Besnier explores the tensions between hierarchy and egalitarianism in everyday life on Nukulaelae, Martin offers rich ethnographic descriptions of conflicts resulting from cultural change—changes that often affect local and national hierarchies and authorities. Chapter 4 will go into dialogue with a relatively newly emerged anthropological sub-discipline, the anthropology of Christianity. In my experience, Christianity on Epoon resonates with Émile Durkheim's ([1915] 1965) writings to a large degree, regarding its social component. I believe Durkheim's perspective is an important one in relation to Christian politics in Oceania the way they are presented in Matt Tomlinson and Deborah McDougal's (2013) edited work. While trying to nest together some of the treads spun throughout this thesis, Chapter 5 is

largely empirical. However, it builds up to the final discussion, which will deal with the overarching questions and conclusions.

Except for this introduction, all chapters will have strong emphasis on empirical data and emic perspectives. Writing my project proposal, I leaned on Besnier (2009a), when I wrote that, “I believe that our connection to human beings’ everyday life is one of the great strengths of anthropology as a discipline. Moreover, our attention to ‘ordinary’ people presents us with an important insight into the everyday production of politics.” I still hold that belief. In fact, it is among the few things I wrote in my proposal that are still valid today. Thus, I have tried to let the empirical reality I have lived with guide me in my work, building theory on empirical data, not trying to make my empirical material fit a given theory. However, I will touch upon some familiar economic and sociological theories, as well as anthropological perspectives. In this respect, I second Gregory Bateson ([1972] 2000, 244) in stating that, “Every science, like every person has a duty toward its neighbors [...] to lend them its tools, to borrow from them, and, generally, to keep the neighboring science straight.” As will be evident, however, I will argue on empirically anchored grounds.

Limited space prevents me from elaborating on, or theorizing, gendered aspects of social life on Epoon. However, some of these dynamics will be evident through ethnographic descriptions. The reader will gain insight into the gendered division of labor and social norms, as well as some brief glimpses of gendered interactional patterns. No doubt, social life on Epoon is gender segregated, but, as I see it, gender is not a primary issue in the dynamics I seek to explain. Even so, I will include the question of gender in my final discussion.

Why and where: The spirit of adventure and serendipitous events

To be brutally honest, I ended up choosing the Pacific as my area of study for the simple reason that I wanted an adventure. The Oceanic islands as a whole have beckoned me ever since I was young, but it was not until I heard an introductory speech by Thorgeir Kolshus—now my supervisor—when I first started my anthropology studies, that I knew that I had to get there. To be sure, I am not concerned with alterity—I am not interested in so-called radical difference or strangeness in other humans. On the contrary, what attracts me is the geographical and environmental difference people live with on a Pacific island or atoll, which is radical compared to what I live with in Norway. Moreover, I have read so-called anthropological classics with great interest ever since I started my studies, many of which have their origin in the Pacific. Writing from an East African perspective, Mwenda Ntarangwi (2010) has argued forcefully that anthropologists have been preoccupied with

alterity and Otherness. In his opinion, anthropology as a whole suffers from an implicit pursuit of the exotic. Valuable as his argument is, he seems to put too much emphasis on geographical distance as alterity, and thus confuses overt differences with exotic Otherness. Instead, I will argue that the diversity of anthropological subjects of study, exotic though they might seem, has given us a unique insight into something generally human. Although it is important to reflect upon the anthropological pursuit of the Other, I think it is equally important to remember the adventurous and wondrous spirit that often drives individual anthropologists—myself included. In that way, we can see beyond the overt differences between us to better illustrate human sameness.

When I first started to plan my project, I wanted to follow my supervisor by doing fieldwork in Vanuatu in the Western Pacific. Due to new political regulations, I had to abandon my plan, and therefore decided on the Polynesian island state of Tonga. A month or so into my preparations, however, my supervisor forwarded an email from the ASAONET¹ mailing list to me, calling for anthropological research in Micronesia. I skimmed through the list, and quickly found something to fit my interests. When reading up on Tonga, I had come across Besnier (2009b; 2011; 2009a), and I was especially intrigued by his works on modernity and globalization. My supervisor put me in contact with Mac Marshall, and through inspiring conversations with both him and Julianne Walsh, I eventually decided to go to the Republic of the Marshall Islands. I was now a long way from my starting point, and next to a passing knowledge of the 1954 Bravo bomb on the Bikini [Bikini] Atoll, I knew next to nothing about the Marshalls. After some basic Internet research, I knew that I wanted to get to Epoon Atoll, although I already knew that transportation could be difficult. My two main reasons for choosing Epoon, was 1) that it was the first atoll the missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) settled down on in the Marshalls in 1857, and 2) that there had been no social anthropological fieldwork done there before.² My first reason would later prove to be far more interesting for most of the Marshallese people I met than I could have foreseen, whereas my second reason has been more ambiguous. Knowing that I was the first to conduct a social anthropological fieldwork on Epoon was a crucial motivator for me to do thorough work. Having no substantial literature or no experts to lean on, however, can be a bit intimidating. I have thus kept one more point from my project proposal alive: comparison. There, I

¹ ASAONET is the Bulletin Board for Oceanic anthropologists, primarily but not exclusively for members of ASAO, the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania.

² There exists a few archaeological and demographical surveys from Epoon, and also a few historical notes made by other scholars, such as Francis X. Hezel, SJ (e.g. 1983). Additionally, I have accessed some writings from the early missionaries and traders that lived on Epoon in the 1800s. However, time and resources prevents me from digging into this.

write about being inspired by Fredrik Barth's (1999) methodological approaches with regards to internal comparison and seeking out diversity. "In my view," I write, "anthropology is a comparative discipline." I still second that thought today.

Most social anthropological literature from the Marshall Islands revolve around post-colonialism among the northern atolls. Both Robert C. Kiste and Laurence M. Carucci are pillars of anthropology from the Marshalls, and they have both done important work on the aftermath of the US nuclear era: Kiste with Pikinnians (e.g. 1974), and Carucci with people from Wūjlañ [Ujelang] and Āne-wātak [Enewetak] (e.g. 1997; 2004; 2011). Others, such as Julianne Walsh (2003), have worked with the impact of modern politics, based on fieldwork from Mājro, the capital city/atoll, primarily—whereas Elise Berman (2012) has explored the changing values of giving on an anonymous atoll. Even though the anthropological literature is relatively extensive, most studies I have read have had a narrow scope. Of course, anthropology will usually present a story in a context or in a somewhat holistic sense, but when reading up on the Marshalls I felt the need for more classic (or traditional) social anthropology. One notable exception is Alexander Spoehr's (1949a) old monograph about Mājro in the late 1940s—a valuable source I will use extensively throughout my thesis. I have tried to invoke the old anthropological ideal of holism. However, I agree with Gullestad (1992, 25) that holism as "the complete study of discretely bounded entities" is problematic. I am not seeking a totalizing analysis, but "*search for interconnections* between phenomena normally treated as separate and distinct in common sense understandings" (ibid., original emphasis). In that way, I hope to contribute with detailed ethnography from the Marshall Islands, as well as providing others with field hypotheses for further work on the Epoon Atoll.

How and what: Methods, shortcomings, and a fresh start

Writing about anthropological method, it is tempting to take the easy way out and to claim participant observation. However, that term strikes me as vague and somewhat hollow. I have often read anthropological texts where the author, referring to Malinowski, makes a few notes about long stays, learning the local language, documenting ritual and ceremonial behavior, and adopting local customs and behavior. Although these are key points to anthropological fieldwork, they are not sufficient to explain what the anthropologist has been doing.

For me, doing fieldwork on Epoon meant a lot of walking, sitting and waiting. Atoll islets are typically long and narrow, which means that distances can be long even if the landmass is relatively small. On Epoon, most of the daily activity takes place in close proximity to the one road that

stretches from end to end. With the exception of twelve households, all permanent housing on Epoon lies within a three km stretch that incorporates two districts, called the Jitto-en and Jittak-en districts. On a typical day, one has to walk up and down parts of that stretch in order to run errands, visit family, go to church, gather or buy food, or to work. During the early parts of my stay, I usually walked around to familiarize myself, with both the place and the people. I was grateful to Odd Are Berkaak, who during a methods course at the University of Oslo, often emphasized the importance of walking in the early stages of fieldwork. I also did a household survey (Appendix A), and often went for visits and introductions. Although the main islet only has 315 inhabitants, social life sometimes felt overly intimate coming from Norway—a country which values privacy and solitude. Thus, the ocean side (*likin*) of the atoll became a place of refuge throughout my stay, and I often went there during low tide, collecting shells at the reef for reflective silence.

Most RiEpoon spend a large portion of their day sitting. During mid-day, the blistering sun makes work unpleasant. Therefore, people often take cover in the shadows of large breadfruit trees, in their cooking huts, or in hammocks on the lagoon side (*iarin*), where the breeze is cooling. On days of heavy rain, people usually stay inside their houses or in their cooking huts. Sitting in groups, we would have long sessions of *bwebwenato* (chatting; conversing; storytelling) and *kōmman kajak* (joking). It was also a time where I could practice language, inquire missing details, tie together loose ends, map family relations, and otherwise bother people with an endless row of questions in informal interviews and directed conversations. I imagine being an element of annoyance more than once. Late afternoon hours is when the islet comes to life, with young men playing basketball on the court outside of the school, while teenage girls and young women and men, as well as the anthropologist, play volleyball on the grass. Older people usually sit close by to watch and converse. At around 9 p.m., when most people had finished their dinner, young men would often take advantage of the cool night air by gathering on the grass outside of the council house or outside someone's home to *bwebwenato*. Alternatively, they stayed home with their families, grating coconuts (*raanke*) or other household activities. Many nights, I went to bed with an aching back and sore hands from sitting on the low stools, grating coconuts or cleaning taro for the following dinner.

Waiting, of course, also involves sitting and *bwebwenato*. Therefore, waiting was an important part of my fieldwork. *Awa in Majeļ* (Marshallese time) is a much-used expression on Epoon, as meetings and events have a tendency to start a couple of hours later than the given time. That way, waiting provided an important insight into the dynamics of interactional patterns. For instance, it hinted at the relative importance of a given event because there were some instances where people

were punctual (cf. Kolshus 2007, 282). Especially evident in this regard was the Monday morning clean-up (*Mande*, see chapter 5) and the supposed arrival of a plane (see O. G. Berta, in press).

In order to be useful, take part in, and learn about everyday life on Epoon, I tried to participate in as many projects and work tasks as possible—generally lending a hand where I thought they needed my help. However, I had to push for this myself, and even though I repeatedly expressed my desire for people to call upon me whenever something needed doing, people seldom asked me for help. This persisted throughout my fieldwork, and I came to realize that people did not want to bother me with that sort of work. Some even hinted that they would not be able to help me back. I tried to make them understand that it was my job to participate in the society, and that people asking me to help would be a payment for my work in itself. To me, them avoiding asking me for help, as they would ask other men in my age group, was an indication that I was a guest, and not a member of society—even though they repeatedly told me opposite. I had not been long on the island before people started calling me RiEpoon or *laddik in Majeļ* (Marshallese man/boy). People that knew me well would brag about me to people who did not, telling them about me husking coconuts, fishing, making coconut sap (*jekaro*), walking barefoot and the like. Whenever I did or learned something that people considered typically Marshallese, word would spread around the islet, and people would tell me how Marshallese I was. Similarly to what Carucci (2011, 19, n. 3) explains, I soon learned that this was context dependent. For instance, I would always get a seat at the honorary table in social gatherings, and often, when I joined a group of men chatting, one of them would offer me his chair—which I steadily refused. This, too, was an indication of me retaining my status as an outsider—at least I was not a commoner.

From an early stage on, I became a sporadic member of a large group of young men that worked together to husk coconuts (see chap. 5). The group took turns working for each other, receiving food and the promise of help in return as payment. Toward the end of my stay, I had participated enough in the copra group, and therefore had sufficient of reciprocal bonds, to host my own work party. With the permission of my host family, I summoned a small group to husk coconuts on the *wāto* (land tract) where I stayed. This allowed me to partake in the entire copra process, from husking coconuts to selling finished copra when the copra ship arrived. During my stay, I also helped husking for different non-members of the copra group, as well as for the Būrotijen church. Apart from copra work, I was involved in various cooperative and individual tasks, such as Monday morning clean-up (*Mande*, see chap. 5), building ladders, collecting *jekaro*, gathering taro and breadfruit, cooking and so forth. Fishing is another major male activity in the atoll life. Together with

Arnold, my fishing partner and teacher, I spent hours out in the lagoon, bottom fishing from his *kōrkōr* (small paddling canoe with sail). There, we would share secrets and gossip, and he would teach me valuable lessons in *kajin im mantin Majeļ* (Marshallese language and custom). Coming back, I would share my catch with my host families, friends and neighbors, thereby strengthening our relationship. Sometimes, we would also go net fishing on the reef or spare fishing in the clear waters on the ocean side of the atoll. Once, Arnold and I even sank in his canoe while hurrying back ashore to beat the heavy winds and rain that was coming in. With nobody around to help us, we simply had to sit put while waiting for the currents eventually to bring us to one of the reefs so we could drain out our canoe in order to sail back. Surely, it was an experience to remember.

To be sure, both copra and fishing are mainly male activities performed by men in their late teens throughout their forties. However, learning and performing male activities gradually earned me access into the female domains as well. As mentioned, word spread rapidly of my behavior, and I believe me constantly expressing an eagerness to learn and adapt was favorable to me in regards to building trust. When I eventually started spending time in various cooking huts to *bwebwenato* or help cooking, it did not take long before the women too opened up to me. Although men considered it somewhat strange for a man of my age to take interest and to participate in the daily activities of the women, the women seemed to appreciate it. Sometimes, they would jokingly call me *kōrā in Majeļ* (Marshallese woman), and many of them loved to joke about sexual contents in a manner that far outdid the men. Typically, the women alone would arrange and participate in ceremonial activities, such as singing and presenting food tributes on Liberation Day to the four men on the islet who were alive during the Second World War, when the American military beat off the Japanese soldiers there. They also arranged two welcoming parties for the Mayor when she returned to Epoon from Mājro. In every case, I would tag along with them. Finally, I often participated in a UCC-based women's group called *rādik doon* (cooperative) when they were doing small projects, such as weeding and cleaning an area for somebody. Overall, I divided my time in an almost even split between being with the women and being with the men.

In terms of close connections, I had an especially strong bond with three different families, two of which I call my host families. The first is the family of the then acting Mayor, Ione DeBrum. Ione took it upon herself to take care of me from the moment we hung up the phone after our first call. Although they never adopted me, she told me early on that I was to consider them my “family away from home,” something I still do. The Mayor had originally arranged for me to stay with her mother's oldest brother, 87 years old at the time. However, when I met him on my first day on the

atoll, he offered me his bed, saying that he was happy to sleep on the floor while I was there. I knew that he was sincere in his offer, but I could not dream of taking it due to his old age. Instead, I chose my second option, to sleep in one of the rooms in the council house. My second host family was the family living on Mūdu, the *wāto* where the council house stands. They consisted of Almenon and Menono; their four children; Almenon's youngest brother; and his older brother's daughter. This is where I ate most of my meals, and where I spent countless hours of *bwebwenato* in the house or in the cooking hut. Almenon was an invaluable friend, teacher and caretaker, and we would often relax in his hammock behind the house on the lagoon side. Menono and I also grew close, and once my Marshallese improved, we had long conversations daily, either sitting down to wash clothes or preparing food in the cooking hut. They never adopted me either, but told me to consider them family in the same way Ione did. The last family with whom I had a strong connection was the in-laws of Arnold, my good friend and fishing companion.

As final remarks to methodological contemplations, it is relevant to mention that I have rejected my project proposal almost entirely. When I left Norway, I planned to study cultural change resulting from what I called “modern anxieties” in an age of global interconnectedness. I had read and enjoyed the works of Anna Tsing (2005), James Ferguson (2006) and Besnier (2011), and I expected to find something quite similar to what the latter illustrates from Tonga. When I arrived in Mājro, I felt I was on the right track, but once on Epoon it did not take long to understand that my research premise was off the mark. Moreover, the conflicts I will outline here are of a different nature than the ones we typically read about in the globalization literature. In many ways, Epoon is left out of the interconnected world, rendering the atoll on the edge of the edge of the global, to say it with Besnier's (2011) terms. Instead, I had to start anew, building a fresh project on empirical data. Starting with the painstaking job of writing detailed notes about something I could not begin to imagine the relevance of I gradually saw connections where, at first, I did not. Eventually, I had a myriad of field hypotheses I would try to falsify, dismissing one after the other. I tried in vain to connect the dots and tie loose ends, but when I left Epoon, I still felt ill at heart about my data. It was not until I began the process of writing up that I discovered patterns previously out of reach.

Some notes on language

Like most scholars working on the Marshalls, I will follow the new spelling as the *Marshallese-English Dictionary* ([MED] Abo et al. 1976) and the revised online edition (MOD)³ represents it. However, most other scholars opt for the old spelling when writing place names, commonly because of familiarity. For the sake of consistency and closeness to my field, I have nevertheless chosen to use the new spelling also for place names. Because I know that the old place names are more familiar, I will put the old spelling in brackets the first time I mention an atoll or an islet. Thus, I wrote “Mājro [Majuro]” when I mentioned the capital above. Following Bateson ([1936] 1958, note p. 5), I will also use the English plural form, *s*, for Marshallese terms. I will also use the English possessive forms. However, my English suffixes will not appear in italics. Thus, I will write “one *wāto*,” but “two *wātos*.” Before continuing, let me present a simple model of pronunciation of foreign letters for English speakers. My model is a simplification of both the MED model (Abo et al. 1976) and the one developed by Peter Rudiak-Gould in *Practical Marshallese* (2004). Please consult Appendix B for a glossary of the most important Marshallese words and concepts in this thesis.

Marshallese letter	Sounds like (good enough)	Example
Ā/ā	The e in “p <u>e</u> t”	Wāto (land tract)
B/b; P/p Used interchangeably	Like Eng. p at the end of words or if bb/pp, but like Eng. b everywhere else	Pako (shark), iiep (basket), Epoon Atoll
D/d; R/r	Like a rolled <u>g</u> , like the tt in “g <u>o</u> ttā”	Doulul (circle), rarō (clean up)
J/j	Like a soft <u>sh</u> , or like a soft g in garage	Jabōt (Sunday/Sabbath)
Ō/ō	Sometimes “b <u>u</u> ck,” sometimes “b <u>o</u> ok”	Tōkā (islet on the Epoon Atoll)
Ñ/ñ	Like the <u>ng</u> in an English -ing sound	Meroñ (authority)
Ū/ū	Like the <u>oo</u> in “b <u>o</u> ok”	Kūrjin (Christian)

Table 1. Table for simple Marshallese pronunciation.

³ The online dictionary is available here: <http://www.trussel2.com/mod/med2i.htm>.

Chapter 2: Kinship, Land Distribution, and Land Inheritance

Alfred arrived at his office fifteen minutes later than we had scheduled. I was back in Mājro after five months on Epoon, and had arranged a meeting with Alfred to tie up some loose ends regarding land tenure and inheritance. Throughout my stay on Epoon, I had tried to unravel a form of land inheritance system, but had had no luck. After having gone through my notes, I realized that I had three different systems, each one carefully mapped out by different sources. Each system had many advocates, but the different systems did not overlap more than a little. Although I acknowledged that this was interesting in itself, I was frustrated with the lack of agreement. I knew that the government had established a traditional court in order to deal properly with land right feuds, so I expected a more rigid system. Therefore, I sought out Alfred when I returned to Mājro, after numerous people had urged me to do so. He has been involved in the establishment of the traditional court, and had worked with these issues for years. Consequently, people refer to him as the leading cultural expert on the Marshall Islands. I presented my findings in hopes that he could clarify them for me. He could not. Instead, he smiled to himself before uttering, “Yes, that’s the problem, we just don’t know. This is one of the main problems in the traditional court, and it would be really nice if you could figure this out for us.”

In this chapter, I will take on Alfred’s challenge. As will become evident, however, I will not single out any kind of rigid inheritance system. That is, this is not a task of creating order out of chaos (Evans-Pritchard 1940). On the contrary, I wish to illustrate the high rate of flexibility the Marshallese show regarding both their inheritance system and their settlement patterns. I want to show how ideas about a system often conflict with real life practices in various confusing ways—confusing not only for the anthropologist, but also for the people involved. When mapping out practices regarding inheritance on Epoon, I struggled to create a “structured cosmos from empirical chaos” (Kolshus 2007, 62), when really, I should have known better. Today, 60 years have passed since Ward Goodenough wrote his groundbreaking article, “A Problem in Malayo-Polynesian Social Organization” (1955), where he argues that anthropologists have been too preoccupied with rigid kinship systems to account for the vast flexibility in the empirical reality. In it, he illustrates the high level of flexibility embedded in kinship organization. Of course, the reality is much more complex than any structured cosmos can ever account for, and I want to follow this complexity.

In that sense, this chapter follows John Law’s (2004, 2) attempt to deal with messiness, as I intend to do what Donna Haraway (2008) urges, and stay with the trouble and complexities. That,

however, does not mean an absolute neglect of order. I believe that anthropologists, being the cultural interpreters we are (Geertz 1973), have an obligation to make the complex realities we encounter understandable through our analyses—while holding on to the complexities of real life practices. In my opinion, a dedication to messiness and trouble in a fieldwork situation is what characterizes good anthropology. Continuing that messiness in a written form, however, does not. As anthropological writers, we cannot, as Matti Bunzl (2008) so thoroughly argues, make Borgesian maps that perfectly fit the terrain.

Before dealing with the complexities of land distribution and settlement practices, I will give a brief presentation of the family as a social unit. Of course, kinship structure (or lack thereof) connects closely with land distribution and inheritance. Moreover, it is crucial to have some knowledge of the importance of family as a means for belonging in order to understand some of the conflicts I will present in later chapters. I also wish to show that, although the ideal kinship system on the Marshall Islands is quite easy to comprehend, it can be confusing and, in fact, close to impossible to keep perfect track of one's relatives. This confusion might be the source of land right conflicts, or it might be the cause of incestuous sexual relations (cf. Kiste and Rynkiewicz 1976).

Navigating the waters of lineage, clan, descent, and kinship systems

The Marshallese word for lineage is *bwij*, but, according to the *Marshallese-English Dictionary* (Abo et al. 1976), the word refers primarily to the matrilineage. Julie Walsh (2003), too, uses *bwij* as a term for the matrilineage exclusively. In the initial phase of my fieldwork, most people I spoke with—both native Marshallese and American expats—emphasized the matrilineage as the most important aspect of relatedness. However, these conversations were typically quite shallow, without much reflexivity either from my interlocutors or from me. They nevertheless guided my approach and understanding of Marshallese relatedness—and so did the anthropological literature.

In an article concerned with Marshallese chiefly lineages, Per Hage (1998) stresses matrilineal bonds. Similarly, Robert Kiste and Michael Rynkiewicz (1976, 213), claims that the Marshallese are born into an unalterable belonging to their matrilineage. Although that might be true, it does not rule out the fact that they simultaneously belong to their patrilineage, as we shall see below. Interestingly, Alexander Spoehr (1949a, 155), too, notes that the Marshallese are matrilineal by descent—even when he himself demonstrates a high rate of flexibility in both settlement patterns (see below) and kinship. In fact, in an article published in the same year, he states that, “Kinship is extended bilaterally among both mother’s and father’s kin to all those individuals to whom an actual

genealogical relation is known” (Spoehr 1949b, 110). No doubt, a person’s matrilineal ties are important, for instance in determining clan membership, but it is not the sole way of determining kin. On the contrary, “the father’s lineage, the mother’s lineage, and the spouse’s lineage are all considered as kinfolk” (ibid.). Even so, the Marshallese also belong to segmentary matrilineal clans (*joni*), which are, with a few notable exceptions, exogamous (Spoehr 1949b; Kiste and Rynkiewich 1976; Walsh 2003). Kiste and Rynkiewich (1976, 214) name only two clans where exogamous norms do not apply, Ijjidik [Jirikrik] and Mōkauliej [Makaoliej], but, while speaking of Epoon, Dwight Heine names yet another one, RiPit, in an unpublished interview with Leonard Mason (n.d.).⁴

In my own fieldwork experience, it was true that many people voiced the importance of their maternal lineage. However, the same people often echoed what Dwight Heine told Spoehr (1949, 155) in stating that they belonged “half [to their] father’s *bwij*.” As will be evident when dealing with land inheritance below, two main categories on inheritance exists: *bwij* (navel), where one inherits land from one’s mother, and *botoktōk* (blood), where one inherits from one’s father. Even though most people emphasize their maternal lineage, they do not neglect their patrilineal relatedness. Take last names as an example. Following the rapid interaction with, and permanent settlement of European and American sailors, traders and missionaries, the Marshallese eventually came to adopt the custom of last names. Moreover, they also adopted the Euro-American tradition of inheriting one’s last name based on patrilineal descent. Several of the most influential foreigners in the 1800s took Marshallese wives when they settled down. Today, many of these names are still prominent ones in the Marshallese elites.

There is, of course, a crucial difference between descent and relationship. Unilineal descent groups can also have strong relationships with their non-descendant people in their kin group. As Bronislaw Malinowski illustrated long ago regarding the matrilineal Trobrianders, the biological father (etic term) strived to be accepted as a social father, “exposing himself to difficulties or danger for the child’s sake, [the father] would undergo all the hardships needed, and never the maternal uncle” (1922, 55). W. H. R. Rivers defined descent as membership of a social group—be it class, clan or lineage. In order for *descent* to be a valuable term, Rivers wrote, it had to apply to exogamous, unilateral groups, and not bilateral groupings. However, he also points out that “our own family system” may be an example of patrilineal descent, as “we take the name of the father.” Likewise was the German class system—where children of noble fathers were “always noble, and took the prefix

⁴ I am grateful to Alfred Capelle for lending me the interview manuscript while I was on Mājro.

‘von’” (Rivers 1924, 86). As mentioned above, the Marshallese belong to exogamous clans of matrilineal descent. However, they also receive their last names from their fathers, a belonging to which further exogamous regulations apply. Thus, the Marshallese exhibit signs of two coexistent sets of kin-groups, one matrilineal and one patrilineal, which, according to George Murdock (1940, 557), is a satisfactory criteria for what he has dubbed *double descent*.

Double descent differs from bilateral descent as it does not treat all possible connections equally, but instead emphasizes only the matrilineal and the patrilineal lines. That is, one is a descendant of only two of four grandparents, one’s maternal grandmother and one’s paternal grandfather. Murdock refers to the Ashanti as a well-known example of a double descent group that inherits blood from their matrilineage and spirit from their patrilineage. Similarly, Marshallese land inheritance goes through two main categories. The *bmij*, which also means navel or umbilical cord (Walsh 2003), is a matrilineal inheritance system, while the *bōtōktōk*, which means blood, is patrilineal. Therefore, whereas the Marshallese inherit their clan membership strictly through the matrilineage, they also inherit land and elite positions through the patrilineage. The two types of descent manifest themselves in a clan name and a last name respectively. It is not my aim to make bold statements such as “the Marshallese are an example of a double descent group.” However, I do wish to challenge the idea of unalterable membership of the matrilineage (Kiste and Rynkiewicz 1976, 213), that the matrilineage necessarily supersedes patrilineal affiliations (Walsh 2003, 122), or that the Marshallese are solely matrilineal by descent (Spoehr 1949a, 155).

During my fieldwork, I witnessed many signs that has led me to believe that the importance of the clan is decreasing—given that anthropologists have captured its relative importance accurately in the literature. Interestingly, anthropologists have had a tendency to present a solid social structure based on clanship, while simultaneously hinting, albeit discreetly, at its informal nature. Walsh (2003, 123), for instance, notes that, “Clans define the structure of authority, inheritance, and use of shared lands.” What is surprising here is that she, in a *footnote* five pages earlier, explains that knowledge of the clan system is decreasing rapidly. The fact is that, in a 1999 survey that tested children (10–17) and young adults (18–25), the majority “not only were not aware of their clan, but one-third did not know the word *jomi*, and over half believed that clan membership was inherited from their father, rather than their mother” (Walsh 2003, 118). Since sexual play and intercourse typically begins in early adolescence on Epoon and elsewhere in the Marshall group (Kiste and Rynkiewicz 1976), most people in Walsh’ sample should be sexually active, and should therefore be well aware of sexual taboos. The lack of clan knowledge thus indicate a lack of importance in practical matters as well. If

there are no practical consequences in breaking the exogamous norms of the clan, then it is likely that its importance will decline. During my fieldwork, the surveyed generation were way into its adult years, and their lack of knowledge and rigidity seemed persistent.

Bōro-Aō and her partner belong to the same clan. Still, they had been together for ten years while I was on Epoon, and they had four children. Despite their apparent relatedness, nobody ever mentioned their relationship with disgrace or other negative implications. The couple also told me that they did not know their respective partner's clan membership when they first got together. When I asked them whether it bothered them having the same clan affiliation, they denied this. They were more interested in last names, they told me. An overwhelming majority of people I spoke with regarding clanship said more or less the same thing: "We do not ask our sexual partners about clan membership anymore. Last names are more important to us." When later I discovered that Dwight Heine had told Leonard Mason (n.d.) that RiPit, Bōro-Aō and her partner's clan represented a break from the exogamous norms, I immediately told her partner, who was on Mājro with me at the time. In response, he gave a satisfied laugh before replying, "*Emman!* [Good!]" This new knowledge did nothing to alter his relationship with his wife, but served instead as a joyful fun-fact. Clan membership was not something people emphasized in daily life, but most people I spoke with could nevertheless name their own clan. Their spouse's clan, however, was not something people knew or cared to know. Even so, I need to stress the fact that both RiPit and Mōkauliej people were numerous on Epoon, and that this may have had an effect on the relaxed attitude people demonstrated toward sexual clan endogamy, being that both clans represent a break with the exogamous norms. I will thus not argue too firmly about the relationship between clan and sexual relations—even though, as the story of Bōro-Aō and her partner showed, people are not necessarily aware of the sexual norms of their clan. For some, it might be difficult enough to navigate the sea of kin relations to find a sexual partner.

As a system drawn down on a piece of paper, the ideal Marshallese kinship maps are easy for the anthropologist to comprehend and follow. An ego counts her siblings from her parents and from their same-sex siblings—that is, they classify parallel cousins as siblings. In addition, the children of the cross cousins of ego's parents are ego's siblings. Thus, the Marshallese kinship system closely resemble the Hawai'ian generation type, as ego typically class the grandparental generation of collateral lineage with their grandparents. In the descending generations, ego class nephews and nieces with his/her own children, and their children again as grandchildren—irrespective of side and parallel/cross distinctions (Spoehr 1949b, 107–8). Cross cousins of the opposite sex are suitable,

albeit not necessarily preferable, marriage partners, except in the chiefly lineages (Hage 1998) or when other options are few (Kiste and Rynkiewicz 1976). People typically group same-sex cross cousins as siblings, even if they do not belong to the same clan (Spoehr 1949b). I did not fully comprehend this fact during my fieldwork—although one of my main caretakers emphasized the lack of classificatory difference between a same-sex parallel and cross cousin, while we were at a *keemem* (birthday party) toward the end of my stay. However, as anthropologists have known for many years now, classificatory terms are not determinants for interactional patterns, obligations or rights (Spoehr 1950). Take the example of cross cousin marriage:

Cross cousin marriage is an acceptable practice on the Marshalls, but that does not mean that it is common. Spoehr (1949a) highlights this point in his monograph from Mājro, and in a later article, he is arguing against a tendency among his contemporary anthropologists to have too much emphasis on systems and classificatory terms in their descriptions. Instead, he calls for a “convincing demonstration of statistical frequency” (Spoehr 1950, 7). Without making any references, this is exactly what Kiste and Rynkiewicz (1976) do in their comparative study of incest and exogamy among two different Marshallese populations. Their conclusions—which is supported by both Spoehr’s (1949a) and my own material from Epoon—is that cross cousin marriage is rare on relatively populous atolls (say, 500 and up) with high inter-island interactions, while increasing in frequency on less populated and more isolated ones. In that vein, they are—again without reference—echoing Goodenough’s (1955) old arguments about the relationship between kinship flexibility and ecological and demographic factors. Goodenough is famous for arguing against the anthropological preoccupation with rigid kinship systems and terminology, as Spoehr (1949b; 1950) did five and six years before him. Their point is that people will find ways of adapting to changing environments (in a wide sense) to keep their population sustainable. Flexibility, then, seems to be an important survival mechanism in Micronesia, or, as many of the contributors in a 2008 special issue of *Pacific Studies* on adoption show (e.g. Kolshus 2008; but see also M. Marshall 2008), probably the Pacific region as a whole.

This flexibility, combined with strong bilateral tendencies and generation type kinship, makes it close to impossible to account for all of one’s classificatory siblings. When mapping out the siblings of Almenson, my host and caretaker on Epoon, the high amount stunned us both. Counting down from the male children of Almenson’s paternal grandfather and *one* of the latter’s (biological) brothers we exceeded eighty names. When adding the other brothers’ grandchildren along with the descendants of his maternal grandmother’s same-sex siblings, we exceeded several hundred—

although we never accounted for everyone's name. If we had mapped the children of both of his parents' cross cousins (which, by classification is ego's siblings), along with his own male cross cousin (since Almenson is male), we would have exceeded a thousand siblings, scattered all over the Marshalls and the US. Consider, then, that we should also remember the descendants of his parents' (and maybe even grandparents') classificatory siblings, his adoptive siblings, and all the other people he can call brother or sister—such as the children of his father's/mother's best friends, his own best friend's siblings, or his fellow clan members. As is easy to imagine, the amount of classified siblings can be confusing to the extent that the concept becomes useless (c.f. Schneider 1984, 36–9). I will thus argue that anthropologists need to focus on patterns of action and interaction instead of classificatory terms. As to this confusion, it is worth noting that Almenson displayed a much stronger certainty toward who his paternal relations were than was the case with his maternal kin. Nor was he alone in having knowledge of and emphasis on his paternal relatedness. That, however, is not to say that people did not know or care about their maternal relations—they obviously did. I simply want to illustrate, along the lines of my previous discussion, that people placed great importance on their patrilineal affiliations as well. As we have seen, this flexible and bilateral relatedness can be a great cause of confusion. In certain cases, this confusion may result in what RiEpoon classify as incestuous sexual relationships.

One of my close connections on Epoon was married to his classificatory sister by the fact that their paternal grandfathers were (biological) brothers, meaning that their fathers, too, were (classificatory) brothers. Together they had four children. When I was there, they had been and lived together for nearly eighteen years, following a viri-patrilocal settlement pattern. I never spoke directly with the couple about their classificatory incestuous relationship, but had longer conversations with his brother and some of his friends. It was a general feeling that the parents were to blame in this and other such relationships due to their failure to teach their children who is or is not kin. Despite this close relatedness and the fact that they have grown up in close geographical distance, none of the involved knew that they were classificatory siblings when they entered into their sexual relationship—or so others around them claimed. The man's brother told me that their parents had reacted negatively when they first learned about the affair, but that they quickly grew to accept it. Nobody I spoke with had anything bad to say about it, and the fact that the couple had close familial ties seemed to be out in the open. That was not the case with one of the other couples on the islet. Although I do not have sufficient knowledge of how, this couple were classificatory father and daughter—a fact agreed upon by several independent sources. Even so, they had had a sexual

relationship going on for some time while I was there. What separates this from the other case, however, is the fact that the couple involved knew of their relations and, thus, tried to keep it a secret, especially from the man's older brother. Several people knew of the affair, but all knew not to go to his brother with the information, and we took great care to speak in codes when addressing the matter. The ones who did know about the relationship—of which was the man's sister in-law—did not mind, but found it amusing instead. It is also curious to note that their relatedness was through maternal affiliation, although I cannot account for the genealogy.

Without going into further detail, Spoehr (1949a; 1949b) mentions joking relationships as an interaction-based way of moving beyond classificatory categories when explaining relatedness. As Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1940, 200) has argued, such joking relationships often work as modes of organizing systems of social behavior. On Epoon, a male ego is not supposed to make jokes with sexual contents to any classificatory sisters or mothers. Nor can he make such jokes while in the presence of another male and his classificatory sisters or mothers. However, if the people at hand are exceptionally close, they can, and often do, disregard these norms—at least in private. As mentioned in the Introduction, many of the women used to make sexual jokes with me at an almost daily basis when no other males were around. Some of these women continued their joking relationship with me even when their brothers were there. In most of these instances, they shared the same house and the same parents, and had an otherwise close relationship. It thus seems that sexual content joking is a way of marking classificatory kinship and incest taboos where such relations are proper, but where their personal relationship is more peripheral. It also seems that people abandon the norms regulating sexual joking where the relatedness are either obvious—as with siblings of a nuclear family—or where the threat of sexual tension seems unlikely—as with a grandchild and a grandparent. For instance, a male ego's is not guided by joking restrictions in his relationship to his classificatory grandmother. One of my friends told me that he gladly would make sexual jokes with his grandmother. His example was, "Hey, *Bubu*, how are your breasts today?"

In this section, I have addressed the never-ending complexities that is kinship and family relations. As we have seen, there is no such thing as a straightforward system of social organization waiting for the anthropologist, even if some give the impression that there is by demonstrating a preoccupation with ideal types of "traditional" views. Instead, the anthropologist faces a world of empirical chaos that can be difficult to transfer to paper without neglecting relevant information, that is, to paint a detailed picture with a too broad pencil. The discussion in this section will underline the

rest of the chapter, as I now turn to discuss land distribution and settlement before closing in on land inheritance.

Land distribution and settlement patterns

The Epoon Atoll has two main districts, Rālikin-to (west of the pass) and Wetaan-to (east of the pass). Of permanently inhabited islets, the Rālikin-to district encompasses Āne-ko-ion, Tōkā and Āni-look, while Wetaan-to covers the Epoon islet. In terms of population, the two districts are close to a 50/50 split. The Wetaan-to district has two lesser districts within its borders, Jitto-eṅ (*jitto*, head westward) and Jittak-eṅ (*jittak*, head eastward). Both districts have 28 *wātos* (land parcels) each, a division which some attribute to the time of “the missionaries,” meaning Congregational Protestants from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in the 1805s-60s. Some of these 28 *wātos* lie uninhabited, and have been for some years. Jitto-eṅ, for instance, stretches past the Epoon islet, incorporating both the Āne-armeṅ and the Emmeeṅ islets, both of which people use for copra production. The *riḡerbal* (commoner), whose lineage distribute such copra *wātos*, usually has a house on the main island, but commutes by *kōrkōr* (paddling canoe) to work the land. Each *wāto* can have an unlimited amount of houses, but only one person controls it. Although I will elaborate on the traditional hierarchies in the following chapter, a few notes on the different terms and statuses are necessary here.

Two chiefs, each called an *irooj*, are primary owners to all land on the Epoon Atoll. During the course of history, the *irooj* has given away parcels of land (called a *wāto*) to individuals for them to distribute and control as a de facto owner. Pre-contact Marshall Islands had a high rate of inter-island war and long canoe voyages. Therefore, it was important for the *irooj* to have both brave and skilled people on his side. Before going to war or on long voyages, it was common for the *irooj* to rely on soothsayers or fortunetellers, both male and female. These would use magic to predict when and how to strike. If the fortune was good, they would receive a *wāto* in return. For men, bravery in war had the same reward, as did the bailer, the man who would bail out water from the canoe during inter-island voyages. Women, on the other hand, were rewarded with a *wāto* for nursing and breastfeeding an *irooj*' child, or for bathing it in special preparations to make the child brave or smart. The *irooj* also gave another form of land gifts to men whose wife he had taken for sexual purposes for longer than occasional visits, or as a wife. In the latter instance, the *irooj* considered the *wāto* as a “heart-balm” (Mason n.d., 10–30–1949).

Having received a *wāto*, it stays within the individuals' lineage through inheritance down in generations. The one who inherits the *wāto* is typically the lineage head, and has the title *aḷap*. S/he is ideally the oldest living within the lineage, and thus distributes the *wāto*, granting other family members permission to live on and off the land. Julie Walsh argues in her Ph.D. dissertation from Mājro that the *aḷap* is a mediator between the *irooj* and the lineage. In fact, she writes that, “the [*aḷap*’s] primary role is to enact the dictates of the chief” (Walsh 2003, 124). Her argument does not hold ground on Epoon, a point I hope to demonstrate thoroughly in both this and the following chapter. Even so, the *aḷap* is not a momentous authority. Other members of the lineage also have their say in large decisions, making the question of whether the *wāto* belongs to the *aḷap* or the lineage as a whole a difficult one to answer (Spoehr 1949a). The common name for other lineage members is *rijerbal*, workers. They work the land by husking coconuts, keeping the *wāto* clean, and gathering taro, breadfruit and other foodstuff. The *rijerbals* do not have any significant influence on the *wāto* as individuals, but have power in numbers. When united, they can affect the course of inheritance, better to fit their interest. For instance, if the *rijerbals* do not trust the person in line to take over (for any amount of reasons), they can consult the *aḷap* in order to convince her to find another heir, preferably one of their choice. The *aḷap* might then consult the *irooj*, or s/he can make a decision herself based on the *rijerbals*’ consent. Thus, it is evident that the *wāto*, to some extent, belongs to the lineage as a whole, granted the influence of the workers. However, the *aḷap* has the direct link to the *irooj*, putting her in a key authoritarian position vis-à-vis the *rijerbal*.

As mentioned, one *wāto* can host several houses, and, spanning from one to five houses, the *wātos* in Jittak-eṅ average around two. A house does not necessarily constitute a household, although it can be an important factor of belonging or separation. For instance, most people carefully lock their door whenever they leave their house, even if they are doing something elsewhere on the *wāto*, thereby denying others, even close relatives, access to their home. A single house often holds nuclear families, meaning a mother and father and their children—adoptees included—and sometimes one set of grandparents as well, depending on the size of the house. On *wātos* hosting numerous houses, an adult ego’s siblings often occupy neighboring houses. However, people occupying the same *wāto* do not have to belong to the same lineage. Anybody can live on any given *wāto* as long as the *aḷap* has given her permission. People from other atolls or islets who live on Epoon often live on *wātos* belonging to a lineage other than their own. Even so, they can be part of a greater household than what their own unit constitutes.



Figure 3. A typical house on the lagoon side of the road. The cooking hut is to the left in the picture, while the canoe is safely resting on dry land to the right.

I will define an Epoon household as all those housing units that share a cooking hut (see also Burton, Nero, and Hess 2002). Even though people sleep, or even eat, in different houses, a large portion of their everyday interactions happen in the cookhouse. There, they gather to prepare meals, take shelter from the rain or from the sun, to tell stories, or to gossip. Many people also eat most of their meals there (cf. Besnier 2009a, chap. 2). Some *wātos* may have several cookhouses, while others have none. In those cases where the different housing units lay on the opposite side of the road, they usually have a cooking hut each. In one case, a family living alone on a *wāto* cooked and ate most of their meals in the cooking hut on the neighboring *wāto*, even though they had a cooking hut of their own. The act of sharing a cookhouse symbolizes a strong sense of relatedness and kinship. One of the two host families also shared one cooking hut across three housing units from two different *wātos*. The two senior males were brothers and occupied one *wāto* each, older sister's daughter occupied the last house. Staying with this household, I wish to illustrate the flexibility of the Marshallese settlement patterns.

Writing in 1949, Spoehr struggled with what he perceived to be a lack of a formalized system of household organization based on a lineage principle. He found no consistencies in terms of

matrilocal or patrilocal settlement patterns, but found both bilateral and unilateral tendencies. He also doubted that the Marshallese ever had been particularly rigid (Spoehr 1949a, 113–14; cf. Goodenough 1955). During my own fieldwork, I witnessed the same type of flexibility as Spoehr. Consider Jeiū: He and his wife (from another islet) and their children followed a viri-patrilocal pattern, living on his father's *wāto* together with his parents. His sister, Aļkōnar, on the other hand, followed an uxorilocal residence pattern, living with her husband and their children in her paternal uncle's (classificatory father) house on the neighboring *wāto* to take care of him. Thus, the two opposite sex siblings both live on their family's land with their respected nuclear families. Jeiū's wife and Aļkōnar both had children from previous relationships living with them while I was there. In this case, it seems that convenience and acute family needs were determining factors for their settlements. In fact, Aļkōnar and her husband also used to represent a third option regarding settlements, neolocal residence, moving away from both of their families to settle in a house of their own. However, when Aļkōnar's uncle, an old man, moved back to Epoon from overseas, they settled with him in order to cook and care for him. Jeiū, on his side, has no brothers left on the atoll, a fact that makes his help crucial for his parents. Jeiū and Aļkōnar's paternal aunt lived in the third house together with her son, Yanjing, and his son again.

These household thus illustrate the complexity and flexibility of residence patterns on Epoon. Firstly, Jeiū and Aļkōnar are brother and sister from the same parents, but only one of them, the son, lives with their parents on their father's patrilineal land. Aļkōnar, the daughter, lives with her paternal uncle (classificatory father) on land that he inherited from his mother—that is Aļkōnar's father's matrilineal land. Secondly, whereas Jeiū's wife moved in with him, Aļkōnar's husband moved in with her. Thirdly, we saw that young, newly established couples have the opportunity of moving away from the immediate family to settle in a house or a household of their own. Finally, whereas both Jeiū and Aļkōnar lived with family from their father's side, Yanjing lived with his mother. Thus, on Epoon, settlement largely depends on the situation. One might have family obligations, one might expect to inherit land, maybe one wants to settle on a different islet than one's own, or there might be an opportunity to make extra money by working on copra. Thus, choice, opportunity, and affection are key terms in determining residence patterns on Epoon. Some may have a wide range of possibilities or choices, yet others may not. Notwithstanding these high rates of flexibility—and, for the anthropologist, confusion—regarding settlement patterns and kinship system, many people on Epoon still gave the impression of being somewhat rigid or formalized in their inheritance system. In

the following section, I will sketch out two of the different inheritance models people presented me with during my fieldwork, before I complicate the picture with illustrations of the empirical chaos.

Models of inheritance

The Marshallese typically refer to their land inheritance as matrilineal. “We inherit land from our mothers,” they say, men and women alike. I got this simple answer when I first looked into inheritance of land. However, it did not take long to expand this picture. As I eventually learned, there are two different kinds of *wāto*, one with matrilineal inheritance (*bwij*) and one patrilineal (*bōtōktōk*). The way most people I spoke with see it, the *bwij* (female) inheritance system is the “correct” one. Originally, they say, we inherit land from our mothers. Thus, the *bōtōktōk* (male) system only exists as an emergency solution when a lineage has no more female successors. If there are no more female heirs to a *wāto* belonging to a *bwij* lineage, the *wāto* will switch into a *bōtōktōk* inheritance. On this point, people advocating different systems agree. The disagreements starts when a *wāto* has turned *bōtōktōk*. While some argue that the *wāto* turns back to *bwij* once there is a female heir from the original lineage, others claim that the *wāto* will stay *bōtōktōk* until the lineage has no more male successors. Staying with the second option—the one most people I spoke with on Epoon opted for—we can say that women inherit land if the *wāto* is *bwij*, while men inherit land if it is *bōtōktōk*. Thus, a man will not inherit land from his mother if there are any women alive in her lineage, but, as a *rijerbal*, he will have use rights on the land.

Following the inheritance within a *bwij* system, other disagreements arise. I will give an outline of the two main models of inheritance that disagree with each other, *the horizontal* (fig. 4) and *the vertical* (fig 5). In any given *bwij wāto*, the oldest sister, X, will be *aḷap*. When she dies, the horizontal model says, her younger sister, Y, will become *aḷap*, before Y’s younger sister, Z, and so forth until X has no sisters left. After X’ last sister is gone, the *wāto* will go to her oldest daughter, x, who will then become *aḷap*. Having passed through all of X’ daughters, the *wāto* goes to Y’s oldest daughter, y, then to y’s younger sisters, before Z’ oldest daughter become *aḷap*, and so forth until x’ oldest daughter gets her turn. The horizontal model, then, explains how a *wāto* passes horizontally through one generation before the next. Age is a determinant, but only in the “first generation,” meaning the oldest generation people can remember. Because X is the oldest sister in the model above, her oldest daughter will inherit the *wāto* before Y’s oldest daughter, even if the latter is older than the former. For two sisters (parallel cousins), their mothers’ relative age sometimes matter more than their own age difference: Although y is older than x, x will inherit the *wāto* first, because her mother is older

than y's mother is. This form of age differentiation is visible throughout Micronesia (Hezel, SJ 2013a).

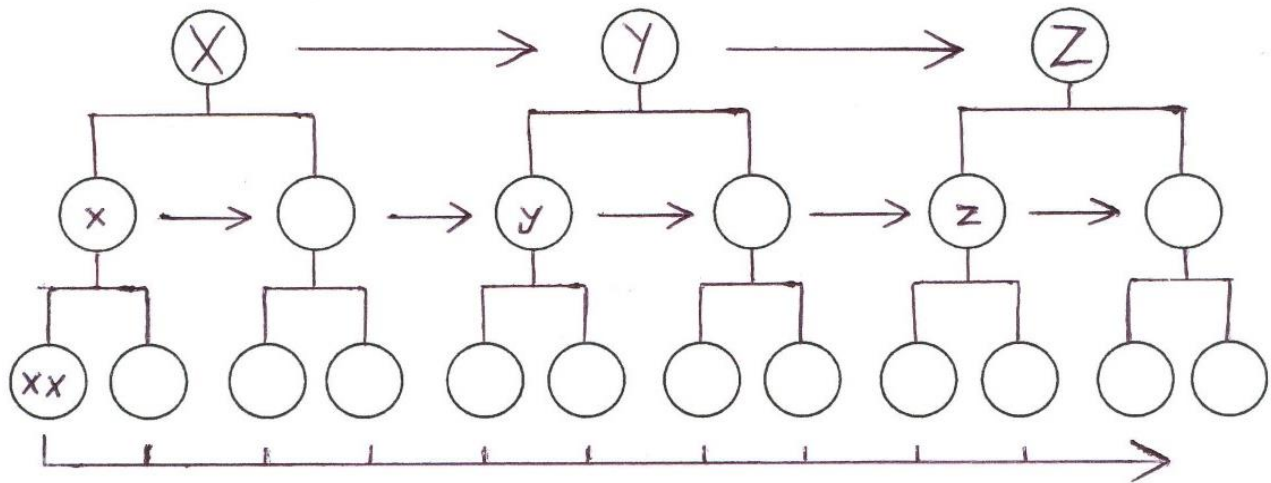


Figure 4. The horizontal model of a bwij wāto.

In the vertical model, the *wāto* passes through all of X's sisters before x becomes *aḷap*. Having passed through all of X's daughters, the *wāto* does not go to Y's daughter, but instead continues downwards in X's lineage, to x's oldest daughter, xx, excluding all of Y and Z's descendants. After all of x's daughters have had their turn, xx's oldest daughter becomes *aḷap*. When drawn out, the inheritance pattern in the vertical model zigzags downward, whereas the inheritance pattern in the horizontal model reads like lines on a paper. Note that the two models are an outline of the *bwij* system, that is, matrilineal inheritance, where women only inherit their mothers' land. In the *bōtōktōk* system, the patterns and models are the same, with the sole difference being that only men inherit

their fathers' land. When people say that they inherit land from their mothers, they thus overlook the *bōtōktōk* system.

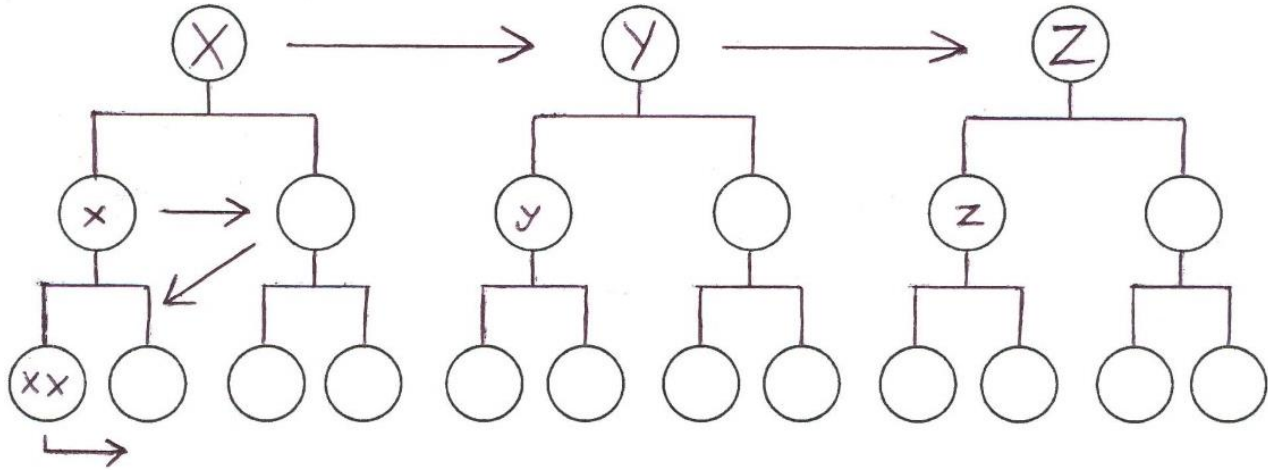


Figure 5. The vertical model of a bwij wāto.

A factor that complicates the smoothness of these inheritance models is the fact that there are various reasons for skipping the next in line to become *aḷap*. Among the reasons are physical and mental incapability, geographical distance (e.g., due to migration), feuds, or personal want. If members of the lineage (the *rijerbal*) agree that the next in line to become *aḷap* is incapable, they can go to the present one with their complaint. If the *aḷap* agrees, the next step is to involve the *irooj*. Together, they have the authority to point out a new heir. If, on the other hand, the *aḷap* disagree with the *rijerbal* from her lineage, they will present their feud to the *irooj*, who will have the final say. Dwight Heine tells Leonard Mason (n.d., 1949–11–06) about several land disputes that the *irooj* had to resolve. I am not aware of any such feuds going on while I was there.

Because of the continuously high rates of out-migration from the Marshall Islands (Hezel, SJ 2013b), it is common that the next in line *aḷap* lives overseas. In those cases, it is usually unproblematic to skip the given person. However, prodigal or forgotten daughters or sons may return to make sudden claims to the *wāto*. Considering the migration rates and the mobility that follow, as well as the fluidity of the kinship system described above, it is not always easy to keep track of all the members of one's lineage. People born on other atolls or overseas might thus face feuds if they return to their family's land to claim it as their own. The *rijerbal* who has worked and tended the land for years, and thus feel like the righteous heir, might object loudly. Again, I need to stress that no such incidents occurred while I was on Epoon. I base the sketching of these inheritance models on numerous conversations with different people of varied social status, along

with historical second hand sources, such as Leonard Mason’s unpublished interview with Dwight Heine. By presenting these models, I simply aim to represent the various and conflicting ideas people on Epoon (and probably throughout the Marshalls) have concerning inheritance. In what follows, I will illustrate how real-life practice makes a more complicated reality than these models account for.

Complicating the models

Born in 1926, and thus now in his late eighties, Enta is an old man. During my time on Epoon, he was one of only two “real” *aļaps* (see below), and had been for some years. After World War II, when the United States had government power in Micronesia through the UN Trust Fund, he got the opportunity to go to medical school in Guam. He eventually ended up studying dentistry in Fiji, where he graduated in 1952. Since then, he has been back and forth to his home atoll, but he lived several years in Arizona, USA. After his wife died in the 1990s, he returned to Epoon to have her buried on the *wāto* in the Jittak-eŋ district belonging to his mother’s lineage, the same one where he is *aļap*. He became *aļap* after his older sister died, who again had inherited the *wāto* from her mother. Being his age, Enta has already started planning his heir. Instead of relying on a rigid system, he has plans of taking the matter in his own hands. He wants his son to take the *wāto* and, thus, the *aļap* title when he dies. Enta still has a younger brother living close by, but none of them seem to consider him an optional heir. Moreover, his deceased older sister has surviving daughters, one of which lives on Epoon—on the *wāto* in question. Even so, he seems set to pass it on to one of his sons, the one he sees most fit for the task. Enta is also *aļap* on two additional *wātos* in the Jitto-eŋ district, on the main islet on Epoon. These *wātos* belong to his father’s lineage, but, as he says, he has no idea how he became *aļap* there. “I don’t know how I became *aļap* in Jitto-eŋ, I just am,” he told me. He has asked one of his daughters if she is interested in moving to Epoon to be *aļap* there.

When viewed in the light of the inheritance models, Enta’s story is puzzling. First, he inherited his *wāto* in Jittak-eŋ from his older sister, after she had inherited it from their mother. The *wāto* thus switched status from *bwij* to *bōtōktōk*, even when there were female heirs living. However, his younger brother—born in the 1950s—will not inherit it from him. In fact, his younger brother has repeatedly told me that he cannot be *aļap* there, because it was his mother’s *wāto*. Second, Enta has taken on the task of planning his heir himself. The way I have understood the situation, there are no candidates that stand out as more natural than others do. I am not aware of anyone in Enta’s family who still lives on Epoon having expressed a wish to take over. Finally, it is the fact that he wants to pass the *wāto* from his matrilineage to his son, and the *wātos* from his patrilineage—the ones

he inherited without knowing how—to his daughter. This means that he will pass his mother’s *wāto* on as if it now follows a *bōtōktōk* system, but still skip his little brother—who is more than capable—in the process. At the same time, he wants his daughter to take over the *wāto* from his father’s side, turning that into a *bwij* system. It might be that his story presents an empirical evidence for saying that once a *wāto* turn *bōtōktōk* it stays that way until there are no more male heirs. However, it may also be an account of extreme social mobility due to personal influence and social status. Whatever the case is, any signs of a rigid system have vanished completely.

The total number of *aḷaps* on the Epoon Atoll is 79. However, only two of those are what they call “real *aḷap*,” all others are representatives of the real ones. In practice, the representative functions as a de facto *aḷap*: The representative distributes the land, guides the *rijerbal*, and collects the copra taxes. Moreover, the representative participates in the quarterly council meetings, where the *aḷaps*, *irooj*, and the politically elected local government meet to address pressing political issues on the atoll. The key point regarding the representative is that he has not inherited the land he lives on. Most likely, there is a close relatedness between the real *aḷap* and the representative, but it does not have to be so. In any case, there has to be trust between them, as the *aḷap* chooses her representative herself. In Bōro-Aō’s case, one of the many representatives on Epoon, her uncle called on her husband one time when he was in the capital for the summer. The uncle asked him if he and Bōro-Aō would like to live on his *wāto*, so that Bōro-Aō could be his representative *aḷap*. Magdalena, on the other hand, represents her sister, Mary, who lives on Mājro. The two have a close relationship, and Magdalena’s daughters usually stay with her sister whenever they travel to the capital. That way, Mary still has a close eye to Epoon, which enables her to express her wishes for the *wāto*. Because Mary is the real *aḷap*, the *wāto* will pass from her, and not from her representative.

Another point that further complicates any form of model is that brothers often act as de facto *aḷap* on behalf of their sisters. For instance, in a *bwij* system—where the oldest sister is supposed to inherit her mother—the oldest son will often govern the *wāto*, even if he is younger than his sister is. Since males are usually more capable of hard physical labor, and because they have experience with tending the land, most people consider them more apt for the *aḷap* role. However, the fact that they have more knowledge about the practical doings on the *wāto* does not mean that they necessarily have more power. People will often refer to the brother as *aḷap*, but at the same time recognize and respect his sister’s authority. The sister can tell the *rijerbal* in her lineage to perform tasks she needs done on the *wāto*, and she will have her say in large decisions. When one such woman I know wanted a chicken coop built next to her house, she simply told one of the *rijerbal* to take care

of it. He then rounded up a couple of young men, and went to work. It seemed a common opinion among RiEpoon that “the sister is lucky, because she can sit back and do nothing, while her brother tends to her wishes.” She will have authority even if people refer to her brother as the *aḷap*, and the *wāto* will pass from her when she dies.

Conclusions

Because the empirical accounts given here regarding land inheritance hint at the power play that lies behind it, I will examine the power relations in everyday life more thoroughly in the next chapter. The discussions presented here are thus relevant in order to understand the importance of social status and social mobility in the everyday political arena. Similarly to what Richard Feinberg (2002, 21) illustrates in relation to Anutan chieftainship, we have seen that land inheritance on Epoon is affected by an “opportunity to override genealogical priorities on the basis of overt agreement and appropriate behavior.” The high rates of flexibility and improvisation related to kinship, land distribution, settlement and land inheritance overlap and intertwine in ways that can be difficult to understand, not only to the anthropologist, but to the people involved as well. I have tried to take on Alfred’s challenge—on behalf of the traditional court—of mapping out the way the inheritance system (and therefore also kinship system) “really” works. Unfortunately, I do not think I have provided an answer that will please him. Instead of finding a theoretical cosmos, I have found an empirical chaos. However, that is not to say that this chaos is impenetrable to ethnographers. Although it is true that the world is messy and complex, we, as anthropologists, have to make that complexity understandable through our empirical accounts in order to sustain one of the great strengths of the discipline: comparative research. By mapping out and illustrating practices related to kinship—such as the sharing of households, settlement patterns, sexual norms, inheritance and so forth—we are better equipped to make cross-cultural comparisons about social organization and kinship systems (M. Marshall 1977). Even though I am careful not to be too firm in my statements regarding the Marshallese and double descent, I hope my arguments and empirical accounts have been sufficient to illustrate that it is too simple to contend that the Marshallese are matrilineal, or even guided by matrilineal social organization. In that sense, this chapter has been yet a sustainment to the important point of minding what people do in relation to what they say.

Chapter 3: Leadership, Power, and Changing Authorities

In this chapter, I aim to illustrate the changing hierarchical structures and authority on the Epoon Atoll. By contrasting the ethnographic present anno 2014 with accounts of ethno-history and earlier ethnographic descriptions, I wish to show how RiEpoon evoke and invoke traditional forms of hierarchy differently in different contexts. The role of the *irooj* (chief), for instance, has undergone a number of changes since European and American ships first made contact with the Marshall Islands. As we saw in the previous chapter, the flexibilities and social mobility tied to land rights and settlement patterns often interconnect with power and personal influence. Recall Enta. Not many people can do what I explained him to have done, when he changed the inheritance system of his lineage's *wāto*, from having an all-female (*bvij*) to getting an all-male inheritance system (*bōtōktōk*). Enta is only a commoner, but still enjoys respect on the islet, both due to his high age and his dentistry education. Even so, his influence is not all encompassing. As I will illustrate in the following section, there will be instances where his wishes will go un-granted. Commoners nevertheless have the opportunity for vertical social mobility in terms of influence and respect, sometimes even resembling elites. However, the road toward power can be a rocky one, as individual entrepreneurship often comes into conflict with cultural ideas of egalitarianism.

I will disregard any aspects of national and international politics and polity, as this was largely invisible on Epoon during my fieldwork. Instead, I turn interested readers toward Julie Walsh (2003), who has written extensively about the complexities of the political landscape and power relations on Mājro.

Notes on traditional hierarchy

The typical account of Marshallese ethno-history says that in pre-contact days, what Julie Walsh (2003, 78) has called “traditional times,” the chiefs were both autocratic and violent. Both Spoehr (1949a) and Walsh (2003) note that the chiefs of the past could take a commoner's life for no particular reason at all. 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 the missionaries (Pierson 1858; Damon 1861; Bliss 1906), to works of history (Hezel, SJ 1983, 200–6), 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 the crew. For years during the former part

of the nineteenth century, traders and whalers feared the Marshall Islands, as the islanders had attacked many ships and murdered many men (see Damon 1861, 24–6). The reason behind Kaibuke’s hostility was that, while he was a young man, whalers wounded his arm and murdered his brother (Hezel 1983, 200). As a result, he or—as Dr. George Pierson (1858), among the first missionaries to settle on Epoon and the Marshalls, will have it—his father, swore revenge against white foreigners.

It is a common assumption, among ethno-historians and scholars alike (e.g. Hezel, SJ 1983), that the missionaries were crucial in ending this long-standing blood feud. As Damon (1861, 20) notes, however, Captain Handy, the man responsible for bringing the first missionaries to the Marshalls, had befriended and traded with Kaibuke seventeen years prior to missionary contact. On grounds of the relations between the number of ships attacked and the rate of interaction, Walsh (2003, 156) also argues that the fierce reputation of the Marshallese was and is exaggerated. “Significantly,” she writes, “only twelve attacks are recorded to have occurred in over one hundred landings over the course of twenty-four years (1831–1855).” However, if one in every ten landings resulted in violent conflict, it should be more than enough reason for both parts to be anxious toward one another. Even so, it is meaningful to emphasize this exaggeration because it has been an important colonial tool ever since the first missionaries settled. Taking the moral high ground, the missionaries were eager to tell the Marshallese of their barbarism and evil ways. From the missionaries through various colonial powers, up until today, foreigners on the Marshalls have typically demonstrated what they have thought to be a superiority regarding morals, technology, civilization, and knowledge systems. Resultantly, most people I spoke with and knew on both Mājro and Epoon imagine their pre-contact ancestors as fierce, warlike barbarians (cf. Rudiak-Gould 2010). I will return to the colonial implications of Marshallese hierarchy and power systems later.

“In pre-contact times,” writes Spoehr (1949a, 74), “the Marshallese maintained a rigid class structure of nobles and commoners.” Contrary to the commoners, the nobles, had three subdivisions: *irooj* (chief; of royal mother), *bwidak* (also *iroojiddik*; of royal father, but commoner mother), and *jib* (possibly *lejjibjib*, female of quarter royal descent). However, Spoehr (1949, 75) also argued that, despite people’s theoretical awareness of their position, the *jib* had “lost their grip,” and was in the process of assimilation into the commoners’ class during his fieldwork. Per Hage (1998; 2000) never mentions the *jib*, but still 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]*)” (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 *rijerbal* (worker). Since it also means strength, *kajoor* reflects the interdependencies between the *irooj* (chief) and the *rijerbal* (commoner). In the days of war, an *irooj*' strength was to a large degree measured by his commoner warriors, whereas today, their interdependencies are reflected through land tenure (see also Walsh 2003). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the *rijerbals* have power in number, and can thus be able to affect an *irooj*'s decision in land inheritance. Simultaneously, they are aware of the fact that the *irooj* have the (theoretical) ability to throw the *rijerbal* off his land.

As Hage (1998) has demonstrated, inheritance of so-called royal status, be it *irooj* or *bwidak*, followed a rigid matrilineal system governed by strict marriage alliances. "In the Marshalls," he says (2000, 298), "the ideal successor is the eldest son of the eldest sister." However, as we saw in the previous chapter, this is not always the case—even among the so-called royals. When Kaibuke died, for instance, two of his sister's sons, Loek and Kabua fought each other for the seat (Hage 1998; Spoehr 1949a; Walsh 2003). In a more updated case during my fieldwork, conflict regarding chiefly inheritance was visible, although it was non-violent. *Irooj* Kabua of Epoon died in late February–early March 2014, but the decision regarding his heir was still out when I left the country in late July.

In order to be among the paramount chiefs (*irooj!ap!ap*), or the so-called royals, one's mother has (or rather, *had*) to belong to the *bwij-in-irooj*. One's mother has to be *lerooj*, which is the female equivalent to the *irooj*. If ego's father is a paramount chief while the mother is a commoner, ego will be *bwidak*, or *iroojiddik*, meaning lesser chief. Today, people refer to both types simply as *irooj*. Note also that, especially today, women can also be acting chiefs. I am reluctant to use the words *royal* or *king* to describe the chiefly status, even though the dictionary lists it as a possibility, and despite anthropologists having used it in the past. Not only is the analogy between the Marshallese hierarchic system and European monarchies a bad one, it was, according to Malinowski (1922, 81), first introduced as a condescending joke. Speaking of native canoes in comparison with European yachts, he writes that, "cheap fun is made by speaking of roughly hewn dug-outs in terms of 'dreadnoughts' or 'Royal Yachts,' just as simple, savage chiefs are referred to as 'Kings' in a jocular vein." I thus use *paramount chief* when speaking of chiefs of so-called royal status. Here, the distinction has been necessary to separate the *irooj* and the *bwidak*. Both Leonard Mason (1947, 34–5) and Spoehr (1949a, 75) refer to the *irooj* as royalty and the *bwidak* as nobility. As we will see, this distinction is probably unnecessary today.

Inter-atoll warfare largely determined the dynamics of the upper classes in the class system explained above. As the example of Kaibuke's succession showed, one would have to earn one's

place as *irooj* through fearlessness. Ambitious brothers of lower status would wage war against their rivals for the chiefly seat. That was the case with Loeak and Kabua, with Loeak originally succeeding Kaibuke on the grounds of being his eldest sister's son. However, Kabua—Kaibuke's youngest sister's son—challenged and eventually beat Loeak (Hage 1998, 405–6). The quest for land and domination thus served to make a rigid system of hierarchy more fluid in the sense that domination and land ownership was challengeable. Thus, one had to earn and defend one's power. This changed with the introduction of foreign colonial administrations, and especially the German protectorate.

Contrary to the popular myth, scholars often stress that the most radical changes the Germans imposed on the Marshallese was the banning of inter-atoll warfare. In 1885, German officials gathered the most important chiefs of the Marshalls to sign a treaty of friendship. The German involvement and interest in the Marshalls had consequences, not only for land domination, but for class dynamics as well. In fact, Walsh (2003, 165) writes that, “The German pacification of the Marshalls fixed the Marshallese hierarchy forever.” This is a truth with modifications. First, it did not *fix* anything, but rather tightened it, and, second, it certainly did not fix it *forever*. Even so, the alternations on the Marshallese hierarchy infused by the Germans did have major consequences in the time to come. To give a more generous interpretation of Walsh, I think what she is trying to say is that the German involvement fastened some of the fluidity of 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. The result was that the *irooj*es 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 family. In that sense, hierarchies were somewhat fixed, or at least altered in the favor of a few specific families. Interestingly, the German pacification not only fastened the fluidity of land ownership, it also affected the chiefly role of the *irooj*. Put bluntly, the *irooj* went from being an autocratic figure to serving as a mediator between his people and their colonizers. Similarly to what Ingjerd Hoëm (2009, 253) explains from Tokelau, “the chiefly form of leadership was transformed and retained in a new shape.”

Chiefs today

Today, all land mass on the entire Epoon Atoll belongs to two *irooj*es, Kabua and Bwillej Jibas, divided between them in about a 70/30 split. As we saw in the last chapter, however, that does not mean that they distribute or rule the land autocratically. Over the course of history, they have given away parcels of land to deserving servants and other affiliations. We can thus say that each *wāto*

belongs to different lineages, with the *aḷap* being the commoner's lineage head. S/he is the mediator between the *irooj* and the *rijerbal*, but still belongs with the commoners. Together, the *irooj*, *aḷap* and *rijerbal* make up the land authority, *maroñ*. In daily life, I will argue, the *aḷap* is the one with the most authority. The *aḷap* tells the *rijerbal* what tasks to do, and the *rijerbal* has to consult the *aḷap* before using any of the resources available on the *wāto*. The *rijerbal* also pays tax to the *aḷap* (20–25%) and to the *irooj* (0.3–0.5%) of the copra income. Most people held that the *aḷap*'s copra tax is a sign of status and respect, and based mainly on *manit*, or custom, although the amount is rather substantial. Either way, it is a sign of gratitude for having access to valuable resources. The same is true for the copra tax paid to the *irooj*. For the individual *rijerbal*, the amount is insignificant, but for the *irooj*es—owning the large number of *wātos* that they do—the sum total is more than enough to make a living. The chiefly authority over the *wāto* is limited, but the *aḷap* needs to consult him/her before making any big decisions—such as building churches or throwing people off the land—or in case of land disputes.

In relation to the old class system, we see that there has been some changes. First, it is probably not accurate to speak of three distinct classes called *irooj*, *bwidak* and *kajur* (commoner), and it might not have been for some decades. Spoehr, for instance, stresses that the primary distinction was that between the *iroojḷapḷap* classes—who he argued was 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 1949a, 76). I did not experience any clear distinction between what used to be the *iroojḷapḷap* (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. Despite the fact that a plaque from 1957 hanging in the Būrotijen church at Rupe refers to Bwillej as *iroojḷapḷap*, many only refer to him as *irooj*. The disagreement regarding Bwillej' chiefly title conceptualizes his power as context-bound in Steven Lukes' (2005, 75–6) sense, meaning that his abilities to act as an *iroojḷapḷap* 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 *iroojḷapḷap*, whereas others are more likely to contest this idea. Even so, people seem happy to have an *irooj* at their atoll, as most status people (*irooj*, *aḷap*, mayors and senators) of other atolls usually move permanently to Mājro. One woman told me that she was happy to have the *irooj* on the islet. 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 *wāto* of the *irooj*, or everyone having to back away from the *irooj* 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 consists of a Mayor, a Treasurer, a Secretary, a Judge, and a Chief of Police. These are the ones mediating between Epoon and Mājro. They also take care of local political issues, deals with small felonies, and distribute a taxi boat. During my fieldwork, all of the elected representatives also had a high position in the Būrotijen church, 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*es of the atoll, as well as the 79 *aļaps* or their representatives. Close to 100% of the *aļaps* and *irooj*es are members of the Būrotijen church. During council meetings, people voice difficulties or disputes; suggest regulations or law changes; plan community projects and the like. Before ending the meeting, everybody eat and drink coffee together. This helps emphasize the sociality and egalitarianism related to the political issues on the atoll. After a brief introduction, the Mayor goes on to act as moderator. She thus downplays her hierarchical position vis-à-vis others, as she is displaying equality in the sense that the council comes to final decisions together. Leaning once more on Hoëm (2009, 258), we can say that the principle of equality is a clear contradiction to the underlying social dynamics of Epoon politics, thereby representing a governmental power of ascent rather than descent. As we have seen, the struggle for honor and respect among the Marshallese chiefs has been a violent one. However, as we shall see in chapter five, equality and egalitarianism are important values underlying the social dynamics of everyday life. Similarly to what Annelin Eriksen (2009) illustrates from Ambrym, Vanuatu, the church on Epoon is an arena for sociality and cooperation. With nearly 100% of council members and members of the local government being Būrotijens, the church and the political life on the atoll interconnect tightly.

On the southwestern point of the Epoon islet lies Rupe, the only *wāto* withdrawn from the land owning system of the *irooj*es. Kaibuke gave Rupe to the first missionaries shortly after their arrival in December 1857, and it now belongs solely to the UCC or the Būrotijen church as people call it throughout the Marshalls. Since the acting reverend (*rikakē*) has sole authority on Rupe, he (there has never been a female reverend on Epoon) is in the peculiar position that he inhabits three different status groups simultaneously, that is, *rijerbal*, *aļap*, and *irooj*. Thus, Leam, an elderly Būrotijen deacon, considered every acting pastor to be the most significant person on Epoon. To be sure, he was not alone in his opinion, but seconded by other Christians from different denominations. In many ways, he enjoys more respect than Bwillej does. Interestingly, people address him by the

honorary title *reverend* instead of the descriptive *pastor*. Every fortnight people cook and bring food tributes to the reverend. In earlier days, people often told me, there was a stronger emphasis on food tributes to both the *aḷap* and the *irooj*. Alexander Spoehr (1949a, 238) notes that, during his fieldwork on Mājro in 1947, people usually gave food tributes to the *aḷap* 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 Būrotijēn 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 Būrotijēns demanded that also members of other denomination than the UCC would treat the reverend with the amount respect the Būrotijēns saw fit.



Figure 6. The Burotijen church at Rupe, the only *wāto* withdrawn from the traditional land system.

People give the reverend his contributions on rotation, four *wātos* at a time. They usually bring cooked rice, grilled fish and a small variety of local foods, and they distribute the different tasks among themselves. The amount of households varies from *wāto* to *wāto*, but the average is about two. Each district on Epoon has sub-divisions that function as cooperating units regarding food tributes, large celebrations and so forth. Jittak-eŋ, for instance, has four mini-districts—Nauru, Chile, Holland

and Kiribati—whose names are most likely picked up from geography books found in the mission schools during the German times (Mason, n.d., 1949–11–20). During the past 15–20 years, there has been an emergence of religious diversity on the atoll. Christian denominations other than the Būrotijēn church have established themselves on the Epoon islet. The second largest religious group on Epoon is a Marshallese native church called BNJ (*Bukot nan Jesus*, Looking for Jesus), a breakaway church from the Pentecostal Assemblies of God. One of the main worries for the Būrotijēns regarding the BNJ is that its members seldom participate in the food tributes to the reverend. Most Būrotijēns I spoke with perceived this as both 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 Steven Lukes (2005, 75–6), then, the reverend inhabits a context-transcending power capacity. That is, his context-transcending ability increases with the increasing resistance and obstacles he is able to overcome. As one Mormon woman told me, “My grandmother brought food to the Būrotijēn reverend, so I do it too. That’s custom [*maniŋ*], not religion.” She went on explaining that her husband, an excellent spear fisher, usually helps when the Būrotijēns need fish for feasting in large church events. Even so, she and other Mormons sometimes feel monitored by the Būrotijēns. The pressure to contribute is high, and, for affiliates of other churches than the UCC, it can be extra pressing.

The fact that close to 100% of all *aŋlap*s or representatives on Epoon are Būrotijēns means that most people affiliated with other churches live on a Būrotijēn’s land, and therefore are at her mercy. As touched upon above, the *aŋlap* and the *irooj* (him, too, a Būrotijēn) 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 Būrotijēns emphasize the possibility on a regular basis. Their power is, as Steven Lukes (2005) has argued, in its potentiality. Similarly to Tokelau (see Hoēm 2003), land is not for sale on Epoon. Therefore, one would need a permission from the *aŋlap* in order to build a church. As the popular story goes, the BNJ first approached an *aŋlap* on Tōkā when they wanted to move to the Epoon Atoll. “Feel free to build your church,” said the *aŋlap*, “but when it’s finished, I will burn it to the ground.” An *aŋlap* is free to decide who can stay on his/her *wāto*, unless the *irooj* or *lerooj* objects. However, there is a tension between local practices and governmental politics. Many years ago, the two chiefs on Epoon came together to sign a document, stating that Epoon is solely a Būrotijēn atoll. According to that document, no other denominations can establish churches there—as many Būrotijēns repeatedly pointed out to me. Today, this is in direct violation of the governmental policy

of freedom of religion. A general statement in that regard was, “freedom of religion is fine on Mājro, but not here on Epoon. Epoon is supposed to be a Būrotijen atoll.” Even so, religious diversity was very much a reality while I was there, 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 Būrotijens were frustrated, and they objected to her decision, but could not do anything to stop it. When key figures from the Būrotijen church confronted the *lerooj* (who was a Būrotijen 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. It is not common for any *irooj/lerooj* to make decisions like this alone any more. 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 the outspoken objection from both the affected *alap* and other high-ranking Būrotijens. It is unusual for a modern day chief to be so 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.

Although the BNJ is second to the largest denomination on Epoon, its reverend does not enjoy remotely the same kind of overt or genuine respect. As we shall see in the next chapter, members of UCC accuse the BNJ reverend of taking God’s place, putting himself in the place of worship. Whereas the Būrotijen reverend receive food tributes in the name of *manit* also from members of other denominations, the BNJ reverend only receive tributes from members of his own denomination. We have also seen sign that the Būrotijen reverend enjoys more respect than the *irooj* 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 him, and they still speak of him with respect. Even so, it is the local government and the council that makes most of the political decisions on Epoon. Both the Mayor, reverend and other well-positioned church people provide good examples of commoners gaining high social status despite their class 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 were enough to handle dispute.

The case of José Ivan

On January 30 2014, José “Ivan”⁵ Salvador Alvarenga drifted ashore on Tile, a tiny islet on the Epoon Atoll. He was in bad health, and wore nothing but a pair of ragged underwear to cover his body. As it turned out, he had been drifting on the open ocean for thirteen months—starting in December 2012—after his boat engine broke down off the coast of Mexico. Born and raised in El Salvador, he had lived illegally in Mexico the past fifteen years, working as a shark fisher. José and another young man had been at work when their engine failed. Unfortunately, the young man died after four months at sea, but José managed to hold on alone for another nine months before he finally hit the Tile islet on the eastern side of the Epoon Atoll. Luckily for José, there was a couple staying on a neighboring islet, Āne-eṅ-aetok, where they worked on copra production. Amy and Russell 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. We 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 police patrol finally came to transport him to Mājro.⁶ 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-eṅ-aetok, we had stopped on Enta’s land on the northern most point of Epoon islet to tow José’s boat, which had drifted ashore there. One of the young men who were in the boat when we came there had gone to the politician the previous day with a confession. His story was that, contrary to Amy and Russell’s claim, the boat had been where we found it since José arrived. Amy and Russell, however, claimed the boat initially landed on their land on Āne-eṅ-aetok, and thus that the boat belonged to them. *Manit* on Epoon states that whenever something drifts onto a *wāto*, that thing belongs to the respective *alap*. The young man’s confession therefore laid the grounds for a conflict. Upon hearing that the boat supposedly landed on his *wāto*, Enta instantly made his claim for it. The political figure, on her side, was torn: She felt that Amy and Russell could not make any rightful claims to the boat, but she also knew that Enta—being 87 years old at the time—did not need it. Instead, she suggested a third option, namely that the council (the local government) should have it. She pitched her idea to me, as she wanted my input. I had only been on the atoll for a little more than a week, and did not know how to position myself. Moreover, I had,

⁵ 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.

⁶ The government initially decided not to believe us, and thus refused to come to Epoon to get José. At last, they gave in.

perhaps naïvely, thought that the police would take an interest in the boat—that is, if they would ever come to pick José up.

Although peaceful, the conflict went on for the remaining days 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 Amy and Russell might do. Enta 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 great interest how the politics between the affected parts played out. Knowing that they had neither Enta's integrity nor the politician's political influence, Amy and Russell took matters in 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 3). Once again, José agreed.



Figure 7. A drawing used to persuade José to let the local government have his boat.

When the national police finally arrived on Epoon, the couple were quick to air their case to them, 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 a mediating part 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—a man José kept referring to as 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-eṅ-aetok to look at the boat and to take pictures of it. Amy 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 comes in many different varieties, and that it plays out differently in different contexts. In the previous chapter, I showed that Enta—by virtue of his integrity, influence and high-ranking social status—was able to put his own interest first regarding inheritance. Choosing his son as his heir, he made a deliberate break with tradition, something he was able to because of his social position. In this case, however, the other parts 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 Enta and the politician represent a form of power that is context-bound (Lukes 2005, 75–6). Instead, Amy and Russell ended up with the boat. Neither of them hold any strong position in the social hierarchy on the islet, but by being persistent, and by engaging the more effective authority, the *national* police, they won the dispute. Representing governmental power, the Marshall Islands Police overruled both traditional hierarchies (age and social position) and new forms of political influence (the politician). The police thus illustrate an example of a context-transcendent power (Lukes 2005, 75–6), as they had the final word in a dispute reaching beyond their usual power domain. The *irooj*, moreover, was never even involved in the case, as would be likely in the past. Dwight Heine tells Leonard Mason (n.d., 1949–11–06) about several occasions where the *irooj* take on a mediating role in disputes like this. In case of land disputes or the like, the *irooj* would

listen to both sides before making an informed and final decision. In what follows, we will look closer at some of the relatively recent emergence of new power figures.

Entrepreneurs and elites

Almenson 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 the 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 the Brigham Young University on Hawai'i, to finish his bachelor in education. During my fieldwork, he held the position as both principal and teacher at the Epoon Elementary School, a position he had had 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 is able to buy his merchandise relatively cheaply, which again enables him to sell them 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 (*ramen*) and coffee, in addition to hermetic food such as mackerel and corned beef. Almenson's position on Epoon is nevertheless an ambiguous one.

Spoehr (1949a) has noted that, during the former part of the twentieth century, teachers, preachers, politicians and medical workers represented a hierarchy shift, which enabled commoners to gain a relatively high social status. These people have become what Walsh (2003, chap. 5) has called *ri utiej* ([*ruutiej*] the high-ones). Thus, being a principal is alone enough to enjoy the respect of others. Moreover, since his shop ensures a more 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 economic wealth allows him to access both basic and 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 capable 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 from others.

Writing of Nukulaelae on Tuvalu, Besnier (2009a) 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 the present-day authority figures with gossip and negative characterizations. Besnier (2009a, 76–7) 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.” For RiEpoon, “see themselves” are the key words. As mentioned, commoners do have the opportunity for vertical social mobility. RiEpoon do not talk about being wealthy, powerful or informed as bad in itself, but once somebody acts as if they see themselves in that way, it takes on a negative prefix. Therefore, people often treated Almenon and others in similar positions in the same manner as Nukulaelae people did their authority figures. Being in power as the principal, Almenon often had to make large or small decisions—decisions that people were quick to judge.

When organizing the graduation party in late May 2014, for instance, Almenon made some last-minute changes to the seating arrangements and decorations. Up until that point, 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 Almenon had overruled him in the last minute. Since Almenon had sent the students home before giving the new instructions, the young man was worried that his students would be confused when they arrived the next morning. He questioned Almenon’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 Almenon had just done. Having grown up and spent most of his life on Mājro, where he also worked as a teacher, he continued with implying that he is more “up to date” or informed than what Almenon is. “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 Almenon’s power display than about the actual changes, which really were rather minor. This teacher, too, enjoys a favorable social position, and so is used to having things his way. Thus, he might have reacted so

strongly because of the fact that Almenson 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 Almenson's power display was far from unique.

Owning and running his own store also puts Almenson in a different position than most others. In many ways, the store represents a break away from *manit* and cultural values, one of which is sharing. Writing of another atoll on the Marshalls, Elise Berman (2012) illustrates the ways in which people go to lengths to avoid giving and sharing, while still acknowledging its cultural importance. The increasing reliance of 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 the most basic needs. As a result, writes Berman, most people have to narrow down their reciprocity relations, only to contain their immediate neighbors or kin. Thus, food exchanges often takes 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 seem accurate for Epoon too. In Almenson's case—having the secure access to store goods he has—people readily expect him to share his wealth. He, on his side, 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 dipping tobacco/moist snuff (*dip*), coffee, or even money. However, since Almenson 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. Young men often come to Almenson's house with fish, clams or other kinds of fresh catch to trade for cigarettes. Transactions such as these are non-customary, as, following often-emphasized codes of *manit*, people are supposed to share food. One does not trade with fish as if it was a commodity, but instead share 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 Almenson is demanding direct payment for cigarettes, he is illustrating an active withdrawing from *manit*. He is also showing that he has gained his material wealth by disregarding custom, and that he is powerful enough to live without it. 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 (2009a) explains from Nukulaelae. Moreover, Almenon is breaking with *manit* in a similar way to what, according to Keir Martin (2013), some Matupi in East New Britain do to get away from *kastom* (custom).⁷ Martin tells the story of how one devoted member of the SDA (Seventh Day Adventists) separated himself from *kastom* by paying off the people of which he had had ties of reciprocal interdependence. To do this, he sought out all the people he still were indebted to, and paid them off in order to mark the end of their relationship of reciprocity. That way he publically distanced himself from *kastom* and customary obligations, showing his independence. Almenon's break with *manit* is far from being as outspoken as the man in Martin's story is. However, people do gossip negatively about his non-customary ways. Once, a friend and I were in need of a *kōrkōr* (paddling canoe) to go fishing, and I suggested that we could ask Almenon to borrow his. My friend rejected my proposal, saying something close to, "Everything costs money at Almenon's house." He was referring to the fact that Almenon largely avoid sharing his store bought goods, and that he therefore has distanced himself from the webs of reciprocal interdependence on the atoll. This resembles what Arne Aleksej Perminow (2003, 157) explains from Kotu, Tonga. On Kotu, "the hand that lets go" represent the Tongan manner, while "the clenched hand" represent Western manner, or greediness. However, it was not that my friend thought that he would have to pay Almenon 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 Almenon behaving in a non-customary way. "He wouldn't even give five dollars to his own brother," they would say. However, various circumstances suggests 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 permanent with Almenon, even though she still calls him by name. That is, he has not adopted her, but he lets her stay there as if she was his own daughter (which she is in, classificatory terms). During my fieldwork, his younger brother, who was single at the time, also slept and ate in Almenon'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

⁷ 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 which Anne Erita V. Berta (2014) provides a lengthy discussion of.

school. It is true that Almenson 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 Almenson's case, this involves his birth parents and their children, his wife's adoptive parents and siblings. Similar to what Martin (2013) explains 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, Almenson and other elite entrepreneurs resemble the Matupi "Big Shots." Their influence and position these people have on the islet might be largely favorable, but it comes with a price. If they behave in terms of *manit*, they can make their position work in their favor—as did Enta with his inheritance. If they, on the other hand, demonstrate that they see themselves as above others, the road to gossip and scorn is a short one.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have dealt with some of the many manifestations of hierarchy, power and authority on the Epoon Atoll. We have seen that the role of the chief has undergone radical changes since the mid-1800s up until today—form being an autocratic and much-feared figure, mainly to being 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 for climbing the hierarchical ladder, through education, church position, entrepreneurship or involvement in formal politics. We have also seen that discourses of egalitarianism similar to the ones Besnier (2009a) explain from Nukulaelae have evident in the social life on Epoon. It is probable that the strong position of equality as a social value is a result of the transformations in the traditional class system. At least, I will suggest that the two are interconnected. Interconnected are also the church and the political life on Epoon. In the following chapter, I will delve into one of the most visible social conflicts during my fieldwork, namely the ongoing picketing between members of different religious denominations. Moving from traditional and formal politics, the next chapter will have an emphasis on the "everyday production of politics" (Besnier 2009a).

Chapter 4: Christian Politics and Denominational Conflicts

A long, long time ago, there was a good spirit that lived here on the Epoon Atoll. A spirit is a being without a body. There are both good spirits and bad spirits that live in this world that we live in. One day, a bad spirit came to the Epoon Atoll, and she saw the good spirit and her beautiful island. The bad spirit said to the good spirit, “Please, give me your island,” but the good spirit refused to give it up. Therefore, the bad spirit said, “I will come back and eat up your island.” The good spirit was terrified from the words she had just heard from the bad spirit. In her fear, the good spirit hurried up something we call bubu. Bubu is a kind of magic for calling on secret forces in order to get advice for the future. The answer from the bubu was, “Put the island inside the mouth of a büb [a black triggerfish] and hang it up in the sky above.” When the bad spirit came back to Epoon, she could not find the atoll anywhere. She searched all over without luck, before she returned home. Now, the real island of the Epoon Atoll is safe in the mouth of the büb above in the sky.

This story is telling something concerning religion on the Epoon Atoll. Büb means death, and cross means death. Westerners call the Bübwin Epoon “the Southern Cross.” (Edited from a recording made 13.02.2014.⁸)

Why does Leam, the raconteur telling me the story (*bwebwenato*) of *Bübwin Epoon*, feel the need to explain that his story has to do with religion on the Epoon Atoll? More importantly, why does he use this story to teach me about “the real Epoon,” as he said?

I had only been on the atoll for two weeks when I first heard the story above. I was having a conversation about spirits with Leam, an older Būrotijen—a man people commonly acknowledge as a cultural expert. His aim was to teach me about his interpretation of culture, and he wanted to introduce me to the “real” Epoon. A few days earlier, when we were cleaning up the forest area on his *wāto*, he had told me (in English) that everything and every place on the atoll have “ties to theology and to God.” “Our way of life is the Christian way of life,” he said. The story of *Bübwin Epoon* was his way of exemplifying this statement. To Leam, the story says something about a dark past and about an ideal present. It relates to religion, and it tells him that there are strong parallels between Epoon and Jesus Christ—as hinted to in his comparison with the *büb* and the cross.

⁸ I have made some grammatical changes from the recording of this story. The man who told me this was reading from a paper he had written earlier in the day (see Appendix A). I have later heard this story numerous times, from numerous people. It only happened once that the raconteur specified beforehand that the spirits are gendered female. Others, like the man I recorded here, imply that the spirits are male by saying “he.” However, since the Marshallese version of he/she/it is the same word (*ē*), many people confuse them when speaking English. Therefore, I gender them female.

The name *Epoon* stems from the Marshallese word *iiep waan*, a wastebasket, probably because of its shape (Abo et al. 1976, 525), which is circular. As the ethno-etymology states, however, the link between Epoon and the *iiep waan* illustrates a dark past. As Leam told me, the atoll used to be a filthy place, and its people were bad people—hence, the wastebasket. The popular Marshallese account is that people in the past were vicious killers without moral or regard for other peoples’ lives (cf. Rudiak-Gould 2010). Some even told me that people of the past were vampires that drank each other’s blood. All this changed once the first Protestant missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) arrived on Epoon the first Friday in December 1857. When the Gospel came to the Marshalls, Leam told me repeatedly, they chose Epoon because it was a bad place in need of salvation. He is thus echoing the Būrotijen ethno-theology, meaning “the indigenous theological speculations and projects, not only of trained clergy and intellectuals, but also of laypersons and even whole congregations or local communities” (Scott 2007, 301). Upon the arrival of the Gospel, Epoon and the Marshall Islands had their rebirth. For Leam, this is the first parallel between Epoon and Jesus, as Jesus, too, was born in a filthy place. They both started out as waste, but rose to greatness. The second parallel lies in their death and resurrection. As Leam points out, the *būb* is a symbol for death. If an angler dies at sea, people say, the *būb* eats them first. When the good spirit hung the *būb* up in the sky, she gave Epoon its resurrection, and thereby an eternal place in heaven. Today, both Jesus and Epoon have their place in heaven through the same constellation bearing different names: the Southern Cross and *Būbwin Epoon* respectively. Embedded in this is the idea that the real Epoon—its spirit and its community—is in heaven. That is, in the church and in the Gospel.

The fight between the good and the bad spirit in the *Būbwin Epoon* story symbolizes the moral fight the missionaries had to take to establish the Gospel. The Marshallese, along with the Chuukese, had a reputation among seafarers to be particularly hostile toward foreign ships. Additionally, continuous inter-island war had made its mark on society in the Marshalls. Despite this, the missionaries succeeded in their work on Epoon (Hezel, SJ 1983). It is therefore a common assumption among the Marshallese that the Gospel brought peace to their islands. “The Gospel is a protecting circle around our atoll,” Leam often told me. He would then usually continue with a proverb that builds on the *Būbwin Epoon* story: *Rupe likin Epoon, ak eban rup*, which loosely translates into, “[You can try to] break the ocean side/circle of Epoon, but it will not break.” Because Epoon’s spirit and community is in the Gospel, Epoon is unbreakable—even if one destroys the material Epoon. Jesus and the Gospel form the circle that protects Epoon, a circle that symbolizes the

resurrection. However, many of the Būrotijens pointed out that the material Epoon is also under God's protection. They explain this by emphasizing the low rate of typhoons, tsunamis and other natural disasters, despite the fragility of the low-lying atolls and islands in the country.

The “real” community and church that Leam is referring to, is the United Church of Christ (UCC), that is, the Būrotijen church. After the missionaries from ABCFM left church matters to the Marshallese, the church quickly became Congregational. Following the former Congregationalist church in the US, it became UCC in the 1950s (Tenten 2006, 491). The Būrotijen church represented the sole religion on Epoon for 140 years, until the late 1990s. Therefore, the older Būrotijens emphasize the church as community and as a place where their spirits unite. The establishment of other Christian denominations in recent years has diversified the religious homogeneity on the atoll. Most Būrotijens old enough to remember this religious homogeneity address the recent diversity as something negative. To them, the religious diversity is a breaking up of unity and togetherness. That is, a breaking up of the community. The older Būrotijens worry about this because, to them, it represents the first genuine threat of actually breaking the “real” Epoon. As we now have the necessary background to approach an answer, we may return to the opening questions in this chapter.

When Leam stresses that the story of *Būbwin Epoon* has to do with religion, his aim is to legitimize the Būrotijen hegemony. Leaning on Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney (1995), we can say that the links between Jesus and Epoon help the Būrotijens naturalize their power, as their connection to the atoll becomes God-given. Because I was an outsider, someone unfamiliar with the way things used to be, Leam felt the need to teach me about the way things “really” are. As became evident during my five-month stay on Epoon—during which time Leam was the *aḷap* of one of the three families that cared for me—he regularly stressed that the new religious diversity was a bad thing, and that it threatened the community as a whole. It thus became important for him to teach me about the “real” Epoon, thereby guiding me in my anthropological work—consciously or not.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will go into dialogue with the relatively newly emerged anthropological sub-discipline dubbed “the anthropology of Christianity.” I will address two key questions within that sub-discipline—what/who is a Christian? At the same time, I will illustrate the interconnectedness of Christianity and politics, inspired by Matt Tomlinson and Debra McDougall's recently edited work (2013). I am especially intrigued by Michael W. Scott's (2013) contribution, where he draws inspiration from Mikhail Bakhtin and his notion of “hidden” and “internal polemic discourse.” Bakhtin understands hidden polemics as a discourse that “is directed toward an ordinary

referential object, naming it, portraying, expressing, and only indirectly striking a blow at the other's discourse." Internal polemics, on the other hand, is a "word with a sideward glance at someone else's hostile word" (Bakhtin 1984, 196). During this chapter, it will also become clear that, when it comes to Epoon, I support Émile Durkheim's (1965, 22) assertion that "religion is something eminently social." That does not mean that I view religion in solely functional terms. Like Marianne Gullestad (1988, 26), I hold that my perspective neither implies that "religions always or in all respects are functional for the individual or society," nor that it is "possible to point out functional alternatives to religion in any strict positivistic sense." When studying Christianity on the Epoon Atoll, however, the social aspect is crucial.

The anthropology of Christianity

In the last decade, an ever-growing group of social and cultural anthropologists has been concerned with establishing an anthropology of Christianity as an anthropological sub-discipline. Joel Robbins has been a key figure in this respect, with his turning-point article, "What is a Christian?" (2003), not to mention John Barker (1992), who raised many of the same concerns more than a decade earlier. Robbins' main concern is that anthropologists lack a common project or a common forum, where anthropologists working with Christianity read and are in dialogue with each other's works. Robbins stresses that earlier anthropology dealing with Christianity has been a study of Christianity *in* itself, meaning that it has been the ethnographic topic of study. However, these ethnographic accounts have not been set in relation to a larger body of data, one with the same intellectual goal, or a common set of questions. Instead, Robbins expresses the need for an anthropology of Christianity *for* itself, or, as Barker (1992, 145) would say, an anthropology that takes "Christianity seriously as an ethnographic subject." Based on the premises for a common project, Robbins hopes to see a comparative anthropology of Christianity, where scholars working in different regions and with different Christian denominations can draw on each other's insights (Robbins 2003, 192; 2007, 5; Garriott and O'Neill 2008, 348).

Robbins points to two main reasons why it has been difficult to establish such an anthropology earlier. As he sees it, Christians and anthropologists are too similar because they draw on the same broad cultural traditions. At the same time, Christians are too different because they draw on a part of that tradition that has been in a "critical dialogue with the modernist ideas on which anthropology is founded" (2003, 192). Fenella Cannell echoes this claim in stating that anthropologists have been focusing on the advances of global modernity and secularism, viewing

Christianity as a secondary aspect of such changes. Moreover, they have had a tendency to take Christianity for granted, as something that “does not require a fresh and constantly renewed examination” (Cannell 2006, 2–3). Robbins (2003, 193) cites Susan Harding’s article, “Representing Fundamentalism” (1991), as an important inspiration in the development of an anthropology of Christianity. Harding’s main point is that academics all too often have a tendency to adopt an analytical frame where fundamentalists and so-called moderns enter into a dichotomous relationship. Thus, fundamentalists and Christians—as Robbins will have it—become a (backward) cultural Other. The problem with this othering, notes Harding (1991, 392), is that it places fundamentalists in the same conceptual and political space as women, gays, and ethnic minorities, amongst others. Contrary to the aforementioned groups, however, anthropologists have neglected Christians as subjects of study. According to Robbins, this is because the two are simultaneously too similar and too different.

For cultural theorists such as Robbins, the similar-yet-different problem poses a challenge to the anthropology of Christianity. The reason for this is that these scholars typically emphasize cultural orders (or cultural logics) as a means to approach Christianity (Scott 2005, 102; Garriott and O’Neill 2008), and thus have to argue that Christians make sense in their own terms. Making this claim is “at least to admit that it is possible to argue in a reasonable way that anthropologists [themselves] do not make sense” (Robbins 2003, 193). However, too much emphasis on coherent logic among any human group might be problematic. As Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1937) famously showed, seeming irrationality—such as witchcraft belief—might be perfectly rational within a cultural logic system, but that does not mean that this system is coherent. Moreover, emphasizing cultural logic connotes cultural essentialism (see Baumann 1999). As Scott points out, Robbins’ model of Christianity “looks more like an artefact of the co-development of Protestant Christianity and European modernity than the portable social scientific understanding of Christianity he identifies as the goal of comparison” (Scott 2005, 104). Chris Hann (2007), too, takes a somewhat skeptical stand, when he argues against Robbins (2003) and Cannell (2006), amongst others. One of his arguments is that scholars working within the anthropology of Christianity has a “regional bias,” and that they predominantly “deal with Christian communities that result from missionary encounters in locations remote from the religion’s home territory” (2007, 384). Hann also warns against the creation of a sub-field, as such sub-fields may be a hindering to comparisons (406). I think this is a crucial point, but I also think that more recent anthropology focusing on

Christianity—such as a recent special edition of *Current Anthropology* (see Robbins 2014), where Hann (2014), too, contributes—has taken a major step in dealing with comparison.

Robbins (2007) argues that cultural anthropologists have a tendency to fall into a kind of continuity thinking that drastically contrasts the non-Western Christian notion of time. His point is that, for many non-Western converts to Christianity, the adoption of new values and ideas represents a dramatic change, and therefore a break with continuity. In this process, people often completely discard old ideas. He thus argues against what he calls an anthropological truism, that groups of people always perceive the new through the old (*ibid.*, 10). In short, this means that anthropology is a discipline that largely theorizes endurance rather than radical change. He points out that recent decades of anthropological studies of modernity and globalization should have rendered that kind of continuity thinking obsolete, but that, in fact, this has not been the case. Although I agree with Robbins that too much emphasis on continuity can render anthropologists blind to interesting dynamics, I will be cautious to neglect it completely. As many scholars of modernity and globalization have shown (e.g. Besnier 2011; T. H. Eriksen 2007; Ferguson 2006), certain intersecting arenas between the old and the new are important causes of tension. People can easily discard certain values or ideas, at the same time as they hold on to others—even if the wrappings are new. As Thorgeir Kolshus (2005) illustrates, a seemingly modern device, such as a telephone, can find its way into old systems of power and male dominance. While it is true that Christian converts often emphasize discontinuity (Robbins 2007), it will become evident during this chapter that old practices sometimes affect the way people conceptualize and think about new institutions. As Robbins (2009, 67) makes clear in a later article, however, the relationship between the number of new and old ideas people have is not sufficient to explain cultural change. Regarding Christianity, we should rather ask whether “Christian values (...) have become the primary values organizing the relations between elements.” However, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this thesis. In what follows, I will keep the debate about the anthropology of Christianity in mind, while taking a closer look at the Christian politics on Epoon Atoll.

What is an Epoon Christian?

I was sitting with a friend, talking about religion. At one point in our conversation, I called one of the young men from the Būrotijen youth group a Christian, taking for granted that all believers in Jesus are simultaneously Christians. However, my friend interrupted me, saying, “That guy is not a Christian.” This puzzled me, and I inquired to know why. The man we were talking about is an

active churchgoer, he is a member of the youth group, and he is open in his belief in Jesus. The simple answer I got was, “He smokes.” I tried another name, knowing that this man too, is a firm believer in Jesus, but the answer was the same: “He is not a Christian, he smokes.” I was confused. The reverend’s assistant, a man who, at the time I was on Epoon, had been studying to become a priest for five or six years, also smokes—surely, he is a Christian? My friend refused this claim too. It turns out that the term *Christian* is reserved for a special group of people. Because the Marshallese conceptualize this term differently than any other ethnographic accounts I have read, I will use the emic *Kūrjin* when discussing it in the Marshallese sense for analytic purposes. *Kūrjin* is the Marshallese word for *Christian*, but because it has such a place-specific meaning, I will separate the two to avoid confusion when I address Kūrjins, in the Marshallese sense, and Christians in a broader sense. RiEpoon use both terms interchangeably—as they are directly translatable—but I will argue that the distinction between them is analytically fruitful.

In order to become a Kūrjin on Epoon, one has to make a promise of devotion and commitment toward God. People who take on this commitment become what they call “reborn.” To fulfill one’s promise of devotion, one has certain duties and responsibilities, as well as regulations that differ from other churchgoers. If one fails, their status as Kūrjin might be suspended by the reverend (for varying lengths, depending on the case), and they would have to undergo the process of being reborn anew. Formally, no maximum limit to the number of promises one can make exists, although it might be harder to achieve a high position within the church if one makes and breaks too many of them. However, I am not aware of any such cases.



Figure 8. Inside the Būrotijen church at Rupe. Above the altar we see the only glass painting on Epōon. To the right, a painting of the Morning Star, the ship that brought the first missionaries in 1857.

The duties and responsibilities, apart from being a loving and caring person, refers to life in and around the church. Within the church organization, there are several committees, which all have different responsibilities. There is the *kamiti in jar* (church comm.), *kamiti in lale* (supervising comm.), *kamiti in nañinmej* (sickness comm.), and the *kamiti in karreo* (clean-up comm.). These committees meet regularly, and they engage in different responsibilities as needed. When someone is sick, the *kamiti in nañinmej* notify the *kamiti in jar*, and the Kūrjins go together to help the family and to pray for the victim. Likewise, the *kamiti in karreo* help organize in cases when the church needs painting, or when it is time to husk coconuts or clean the outside area (*raro*) at Rupe, the main Būrotijen church. Additionally, the Kūrjins play an important part in the afternoon services on Sundays. Every week, six of them get one theme each to address through a given bible text—one for each day of the week, Monday through Saturday. On Sunday afternoons, they read these texts aloud in church, while the *rikkatak* (learner/all non-Kūrjin churchgoers) listens. One thus has a duty, not only to contribute in church activities, but also to teach (or educate) the learners. Part of that education is to be a good

role model for the *rikkatak*, and the Kūrjins, therefore, have certain regulations they have to follow regarding behavior and lived life.

In order to live as a Kūrjin, one has to follow the Ten Commandments. This is only a basic guideline, and is not something that belong to the Kūrjins exclusively. However, what separates the Kūrjin from the *rikkatak* in this respect is that the Kūrjin might have to face (earthly) consequences if s/he fails to obey them. A *rikkatak*, if caught stealing, will face judicial and moral punishment, but will not lose status within the church community. A Kūrjin, on the other hand, will not only face judicial and moral punishment, but also suspension from his status within the church. Of the Ten Commandments, people commonly emphasize four of them when they list the special regulations Kūrjins have to live by. These are the ones concerning murder, stealing, lying, and coveting your neighbor's wife. Most people did not list these points as commandments, but as part of various regulations. Additionally, Kūrjins on Epoon have restrictions against drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco, using bad words (words with sexual content and most words for reproductive organs) and badmouthing other people. People often explicitly mention that they are supposed to love everybody and everything, regardless of their beliefs or their faults. Love, some say, is the passport to heaven, a point I will elaborate further below. Kūrjins also need to constitute their love, or at least commitment, toward their spouse through marriage. That is to say, they should not engage in sexual relationships without being married. In cases where single Kūrjins fall in love, they either must marry before moving in together or before their relationship has any sexual content, or they must renounce their promise until they marry.⁹ A failure to do so will lead to temporary suspension from their status as Kūrjin, and they will have to renew their vows to God. The church meets all violations of the regulations mentioned above—from murder to smoking—with suspension, but with varying lengths.

This brings us back to the conversation I was having with my friend. When he refused my suggestion of calling the reverend's assistant Christian, he was referring to the assistant's status within the church and not his personal belief. Throughout my stay on Epoon, I never once met a person who expressed the least doubt in Jesus or God's existence.¹⁰ Even the ones who seldom went to church would express a firm belief in the Christian God (*ilukkuun tōmak ilo Irooj*). Many people who stayed home from church did not belong to any of the five religious groups on the atoll, because, as they said, their church is in their *bōro* (throat, which is the seat of emotions). Būrotijens

⁹ There were, to my knowledge, no such cases while I was on Epoon, but I have asked several different people and they all said the same thing.

¹⁰ That, however, is not to say that they do not exist.

who had yet to take their vows to God did not refer to themselves as Kūrjins, but as Būrotijens or *rūkkatak*. To be a Kūrjin on Epoon is to be a Christian of work (*Kūrjin in jermal*): one who has promised eternal devotion, and who shows this devotion through participation in church and church activities, as well as in daily life. Many of the *rūkkatak* often referred to Kūrjins as fearless in the sense that they were safe in their God's hands. The Kūrjins do not fear death, these *rūkkatak* said, because they know that they will be with their God when they die. However, I never heard any Kūrjins express such peace of mind themselves. As we shall see below, being Kūrjin is not in itself an assurance of an eternal life in paradise. A personal belief in God or Jesus is something that most people on Epoon take more or less for granted. Therefore, people are more concerned with which church one attends.

I base this model of the Epoonese Kūrjin on the Būrotijen conceptualization of what it means to be Christian. The reason I do this, is that the Būrotijens far outnumber the members of all the other churches put together, even on Epoon—the main islet. There are four other religious groups on the atoll—three of which has their church on the main island—and these differ slightly in their conceptualizations. However, the Būrotijen church was the sole church on the atoll for more than 140 years—from the missionaries' arrival in 1857, until other churches finally got their permission in the late 1990s—and, in this particular case, their conceptualizations have influenced the other churches too. However, as we shall see, RiEpoon have a tendency to emphasize their denominational differences, thereby downplaying similarities. Before I go on to discuss William Garriott and Kevin Lewis O'Neill's (2008) question, who is a Christian? I will give a brief outline of two other denomination on the Epoon islet.

One of the first churches to arrive on Epoon in the 1990s was the BNJ (the anagram is pronounced in English, but it stands for *Bukot nan Jesus*,¹¹ which means searching/looking for Jesus). BNJ is a Marshallese church that broke off from the Assemblies of God (AOG). In 1988, the Pentecostal Church International approached one of AOG's pastors to form a new church (Tenten 2006, 493; Garret 1997, 432). BNJ is thus a Protestant church too, but in the Pentecostal tradition. Like the UCC, they reserve the term *Kūrjin* to a special group of people. BNJ also have a christening ritual where one promise devotion toward God and Jesus—with Jesus being the main emphasis—while their minister blesses them and their fellow believers pray for them. What separates BNJ members from Kūrjins of the Būrotijen church is mainly the fact that members of BNJ do not need

¹¹ The church name follows the old spelling. Following the new spelling (as in, Abo et al. 1976), the name would be *Pukot nan Jesus*.

to be married before they become Kūrjins. Other than that, their conceptualization seems to overlap. BNJ stress the importance for Kūrjins to involve themselves in the organization of the church, to care for the sick, and to teach the learners—although their use of the term *ruk̄katak* does not seem to be as widespread as it is in the Būrotijen church.

The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (the LDS or the Mormons) is a relatively new addition to the growing religious diversity on Epoon. They established themselves there in 2010, but did not establish a permanent presence until late 2012/early 2013. Since then, they have had at least two missionaries stationed at all times. The LDS has a baptism practice that separates them from the other churches on the atoll. The other churches baptize too, but the difference is in the age at which they do it. Because children baptized into LDS are older than the Būrotijens are when they baptize, they count as members of the church at the end of the ceremony. From then on, they have to renew their promise to God every Sunday—if they feel they can fulfill it. The Mormons do not have the same christening—or rebirth—ritual that the other churches practice in order to be ordained. Thus, their members are typically younger than members of the Būrotijen church are. The presence of missionaries is likely to affect conceptualizations and praxis regarding the term *Christian*, making the LDS stand out as radically different in many respects. The Būrotijen church has been a dominant force on the Marshalls since the 1860s, and during the past 150 years, it has been subject of what we can call a *marshallization*—in terms of praxis and devotion. For instance, personal relations outweigh the theological aspect of religion more often than not. This marshallization has its mark on other churches in the country too, such as the native BNJ. However, as we shall see, the LDS represents a crucial break from this marshallization.

Who is a Christian?

I met Aaron out on the reef on the lagoon side by Rupe during low tide. He had been fishing for a while without luck, and now the tide was coming back in. We went ashore to sit down and talk on one of the fallen coconut palms that lay spread out on the beach. During my time on Epoon, Aaron was one of the deacons in the Būrotijen church, a Kūrjin. He and his wife—who had left for Mājro for the summer—live close by Rupe, the church *wāto*, and they spend a lot of their time there. Aaron and I were discussing the religious diversity on Epoon, a diversity he did not like. At the time of our conversation, Aaron was old enough to remember the time when the Būrotijens had religious monopoly on the atoll, as most people over 40 years old did. Moreover, he remembers the many conflicts that arose in the community shortly after the arrival of other denominations, about 15 years

earlier. As most people who remember these days will have it, the large-scale conversion that happened then divided families and old alliances alike. Even today, he said, we are many who will not socialize with people from other churches. The reason they avoid talking to them, he said, is that “we don’t believe them [members of BNJ].” People from BNJ always call out to welcome their brothers and sisters in church, he explained, but they do not speak to their real brothers and sisters. The way Aaron and other Kūrjin Būrotijens see it, this does not only reflect a breaking up of the community as a whole. It is also a sign that members of BNJ lack the most fundamental part of Christianity—love.

In order to move beyond the challenges anthropologists face when trying to adapt a dialogic approach to Christianity, Garriott and O’Neill (2008) claim it is necessary to address the question, who is a Christian? This is a question that most Christians themselves have a reflective relationship with when contemplating both other members of their own church and other denominations. For Garriott and O’Neill, it is crucial that anthropologists make a shift away from the problems posed by Christianity to anthropology, toward problems posed by Christianity to Christians themselves. This is exactly what Aaron and other Būrotijens on Epoon do when they question whether members of other denominations have the ability for compassion, and for loving their neighbor. Aaron thus illustrates what Ruth Marshall (2014, S351) reminds us of, namely that the question “Who is a Christian?” is increasingly politicized. I will demonstrate this further below.

Love, or rather, *iqkwe*, is a keyword for Christians on Epoon—Būrotijens and followers of BNJ alike—in determining whom the Kūrjins are. In this respect, people refer to the Ten Commandments and love for one’s neighbor as a central guideline. Love, as they say, is the passport to heaven. Most *rukatak* who attend afternoon services in the Jittak-eṅ district are familiar with the following story:

Once, a priest lived here on Epoon Atoll. He was a good man, and a good Christian. He never said any bad words, he never stole or cheated, and he never abused tobacco or alcohol. While on his deathbed, he had lots of family and friends around him. When he died, he went to the pearly gates, where he met the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper knew of all his good deeds in life, but even so, he could not let him into heaven. He told the priest that he had one fault and one fault only—he had not loved his neighbor. The gatekeeper gave the priest a second chance regardless, and sent him back to earth to correct his error. When the priest awoke, he called for his neighbor to beg forgiveness for his mistake. He told him that he loved him, and that he had been at fault not to tell him earlier. After this, the

priest returned to the pearly gates once more, where the gatekeeper was waiting to let him into paradise. (A reconstruction of the several versions I have heard.)

This story serves as a reminder for all churchgoers that love is the most important thing in life. I first heard this story from a *rikkatak* friend when we were sitting in his cookhouse cutting out copra meat from coconut shells. We were talking about heaven and the different means of how to get there. Seeing that the *rikkatak* separate themselves from Kūrjins, while still being Christians in the etic sense, I was interested in their understandings of the afterlife: Do they envision a place for themselves in paradise? This was a hard question for many male *rikkatak*, seeing that many of them both smoke and drink. However, my friend emphasized the importance of love when he told me that there is a place in heaven for the *rikkatak*, even if he smokes, as long as he has *elap iokwe* (lots of love). In his opinion, *elap iokwe* will make up for smoking cigarettes, but not drinking alcohol. Others drew the line at stealing—thus making both tobacco and alcohol ok—while some felt that one should live like the Kūrjins, and steer away from it all. As I show in the introduction to the last section, RiEpoon typically distinguish Kūrjins from non-Christians by means of behavior and traits. In that particular instance, my friend pointed to the fact that smoking cigarettes is by itself enough to make one a non-Christian—even for the reverend’s assistant. The many norms attached to being a Kūrjin is a key factor in creating an age perspective when considering who is Christian on Epoon.

Through fishing and participation in a copra circle on the atoll, I gained many friends among the young men. Most of these were Būrotijens, and many were active in the church—both as regular churchgoers and as members of the church youth group. Whenever we discussed religion and their relationship with the church, I often asked them whether they wanted a rebirth in order to become a Kūrjin. Nearly every man said that he wanted this, but that he still wanted to wait a few years. When I inquired to know why they wanted to wait, they all had similar answers: they wanted to continue their tobacco and alcohol use for a few more years, and they wanted to keep chasing girls—meaning that they did not want to get married. Men typically smoke or chew tobacco throughout their thirties, and even though it is illegal, most of them drink alcohol too. The norms and regulations following Kūrjins on Epoon does not fit the life of most young men. Therefore, most people stay *rikkatak* at least throughout their thirties.¹² For women, on the other hand, it is easier to adapt to Kūrjin life. With a few noticeable exceptions, women do not use tobacco or alcohol—two of the key factors that keep young men from going through with their rebirth. However, one should marry in order to be

¹² Interestingly, there were almost no men in their forties on the main island during my fieldwork. This probably connects to the large wave of out-migration in the early 1990s.

reborn, as Kūrjins do not accept premarital sex. Marriage, of course, is a Christian practice, and, typically, something only Kūrjins do. It is more common for the *rūkkatak* to enter into what people know as Marshallese marriages. Simply put, a Marshallese marriage means that a couple (and their children) live together as if they were married, but without having gone through the Christian ceremony. Most Būrotijens couples hold off their Christian marriage until they are both ready to become Kūrjins.¹³

The age perspective regarding who is Kūrjin is important because it relates to local practices of age differentiating. It is thus an aspect to remember when considering Robbins' (2007) warning against continuity thinking. As in other places of Micronesia, like Chuuk (see M. Marshall 1979), the Marshallese commonly enter young adulthood after finishing (or dropping out of) high school. For women, this typically means having children and more responsibilities around the house, while men go into copra production. This is also the age where men start their tobacco and alcohol use, although many drink and smoke during high school. They have lots of physical work to do, not only for their own nuclear family, but for their parents and in-laws as well. Generally, the period of young male adulthood last throughout their thirties (see footnote 12)—or until their own children are old enough to take on some of the responsibilities themselves. Since women are more bound to the home than men are, they have a shorter (or at least different) period of young adulthood. Therefore, they are usually ready to become Kūrjins at an earlier age than are men. Marriage and personal wants are more or less their only barriers. For the Būrotijens then, being Kūrjin is a specified thing. One has to reach a certain stage in life before one is ready to commit to the promise of devotion and the responsibilities that go along with it. However, being Christian in the etic sense is not a question of belief and devotion, as the *rūkkatak* is deeply involved in the church too (through service, youth groups and other church activities). People do not expect young adults to be reborn until their personal responsibilities and family obligations are less pressing. Therefore, people do not see the *rūkkatak* as bad Christians, even though they are not Kūrjins. When viewing other denominations, however, the Būrotijens are more critical.

¹³ In some instances, it might happen that only one of the two wants a rebirth—sometimes because only one of them is ready, sometimes because they belong to different denominations.

Denominational conflicts

As one of the newest denominations on Epoon, the LDS is under constant evaluation. The presence of uniformed missionaries, their strict regulations—as the prohibition of coffee—their “two bibles,” and their baptism practices all make them stand out from the crowd. Additionally, there is the prophet and founder of LDS, Joseph Smith. Most Būrotijens and followers of BNJ that I spoke with were concerned about the Mormons’ relationship with their prophet. Many Būrotijens felt that the Mormons broke the first amendment, as they perceived the LDS to worship Smith as a godly figure. “They say they are Christians, but they have two gods,” a friend told me once, when we were out fishing. “They say that Joseph Smith is a God,” he said, echoing what I had already heard others say before him. The “two bibles” is also a concern for many of the Būrotijens. One of the central figures in the Būrotijen church once explained his skepticism to me. He did not like the fact that the Mormons have a “bible” of their own, one speaking about “America” (the USA). “Our bible, the *true* bible, is from the Middle East,” he said, “but their bible is from America.”

Aaron, too, voiced his skepticism when he told me that he once had gone to a bible study hosted by the LDS. There, he had challenged the “two bibles.” The missionaries had told him to pray to God for an answer, and they agreed to meet the next day. When the missionaries arrived at Aaron’s house, Aaron had an answer from God to them: their bible is wrong, he said, and God had told him to stick with the *real* bible, the *true* bible. The missionaries never came to his house again. As Aaron was telling me this story, his face broke into a wide smile, and he was pleased with the way he had handled the Mormons. He further told me that the Mormon practice of going from door to door preaching was something “we Marshallese don’t like.”

The two American missionaries from LDS (both men) often experienced hostility from people belonging to other denominations. During numerous conversations, they explained that many tended to simply get up and leave once the Elders reached an assembly of people talking. Some would turn their backs to them, and only a few people would voice their displeasure with them. However, the hostility toward the missionaries were usually passive aggressive (cf. Rudiak-Gould 2009, 209–11). As elsewhere in Oceania, the church on Epoon is tightly interconnected with social and political life (Tomlinson and McDougall 2013), and people often stress their belonging and togetherness in a way fitting to Durkheim’s (1965) analyses. Moreover, people often emphasize religious boundaries using what Bakhtin (1984, 196) has called “hidden,” or “internal polemic discourse” (cf. Scott 2013, 50–2). As outlined above in the Būrotijen discourse about the Mormons’

alleged devotion to Joseph Smith, and their use of the “two bibles,” people commonly point out the significant religious other. By emphasizing religious differences, people also create and mark social boundaries. No wonder, then, that the number one reaction people had when learning that Norway has a large population of atheists or agnostics was, “But how do they organize then? Where do those people go to meet?”

When considering the age perspective for Kūrjins in the Būrotijen church, it becomes clear that the LDS represent a crucial break with tradition. The becoming of Kūrjin Būrotijen involves a process of being born again, and thus functions as a clean slate after leading a somewhat sinful life—by smoking, drinking and having pre-marital sex. Therefore, the Kūrjin status overlaps largely with the non-religious status of the respected elder common throughout the Pacific. The LDS, on the other hand, do not only expect involvement from baptized children during services, their religious leaders are also considerably younger than Būrotijen leaders are. The Mormon missionaries, bearing the title “the Elders,” are typically young men in their early twenties. Even so, they have religious authority. They conduct church services, they baptize, and they teach and preach to their members. The respect that follows the missionaries’ religious authority contradicts the age based respect hierarchy common in the Marshall Islands. By passive aggressively turning around when approached by the Elders, people are silently demonstrating that they do not want to grant the missionaries the same respect as they would their own church leaders.

During my time on Epoon, the Elders also struggled with the aftermath of previous missionaries’ unfortunate behavior. About a year before my arrival, there had been a missionary couple on the island who went about their teachings in a very un-Marshallese and aggressive way. As most people recalled the many incidents, the missionaries had repeatedly poured out peoples’ coffee and stomped on their cigarettes. The memories were still fresh in peoples’ heads, resulting in a bad reputation for the Elders. As mentioned above, the missionaries who were on Epoon while I was there struggled to overcome the hostility most Būrotijens had toward them, and people often reminded them of their predecessors’ misbehaviors.

The Mormons, on their side, had their own opinions of the Būrotijens, and they often characterized them as *riab* (liars).¹⁴ “They say one thing, but then they do another,” was a common complaint. One example is the Būrotijen’s relationship with tobacco. Many Mormons felt that the Būrotijen practice of letting the *rikkatak* use tobacco is hypocritical. “They say that smoking is bad

¹⁴ The word *liar* was a common label to put on “the others,” and not something the Mormons used alone. All the Christian denominations had an emphasis on *truth*, and were thus quick to accuse other denominations of lying.

when they are in church, but they do it anyway,” one Mormon complained to me. The inconsistency of preaching and practicing that people from LDS assigned to the Būrotijens, told them that Būrotijens are nothing but liars.

Concerning BNJ, the Būrotijens were vaguer in their critique. In general, people considered them *nana* (bad), but when I pressed them for reasons, they were not as definitive as when regarding the Mormons. Even so, there was one complaint (other than the lack of love mentioned above) that most Būrotijens I discussed the theme with were coherent about. In the Būrotijen opinion, followers of BNJ do not believe in God, but in their pastor. To enhance their argument, they point out that BNJ membership dropped drastically when their pastor left the atoll for Mājro. From what people of all denominations have told me, the amount of BNJ followers was relatively high shortly after the church arrived on Epoon, with an estimated 50 adults. When I was there, the amount of followers had dropped to less than half, about 20 adults. The Būrotijens linked this to the pastor’s leaving, which told them that BNJ followers go to church because of their pastor, and not because of their devotion to God. Aaron discredited the Mormons’ faith in a similar way when he once said, “people don’t believe in God any more, they believe in money.” He believes that the Elders from LDS are buying followers with money and goods.¹⁵ To the Būrotijens, then, the BNJ and the LDS are both liars because they lie about their faith in God, when “really” they believe in their pastor and in money, respectively.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have dealt with the most visible and encompassing conflicts on the Epoon islet during my fieldwork, and, from what I understand, the past 17 or so years. New religious denominations have made it possible for people deal with old conflicts in new ways. By changing denominational membership, people have the opportunity to flag their alliances and belonging in more visible ways than in the past. As the example with the establishment of the BNJ showed, the breaking off and establishing of new denominations typically does not happen without some degree of personal conflict. Following this ethnographic account of the dynamics of denominational politics on Epoon, it is reasonable to suggest that this is often the case with church affiliation as well. Having a certain church affiliation can be profitable in relation to family relations, political position or land

¹⁵ I have no data to support his claim. Moreover, this claim is similar to what I heard in Mājro when people were speaking of the “Muslim church” that was established in the capital in the mid-2000s—a claim I cannot verify.

inheritance. In the previous chapter, I mentioned that members of the Būrotijen church dominate the political life on Epoon. As Aaron once told me, “I would never vote for a Mayor candidate from any other churches than the Būrotijen, and I don’t believe any other Būrotijens would either.” The church is thus an important political factor—both formally and on an everyday basis—as well as an eminently social institution. In many ways, the church represents belonging.

For most Būrotijen Kūrjins, the *Būbwin Epoon* story is a reminder of the way things ought to be on the Epoon Atoll. It is a representation of the “real” Epoon, of sense of community and sameness. The Būrotijen emphasis on sameness also invokes equality and egalitarianism among RiEpoon. The introduction of new denominations is threatening to this equality in the same way entrepreneurs and other power-striving figures are. Despite the conflicts I have elaborated on here, however, Epoon people still have a strong sense of community and togetherness. Focusing on cooperation, I will give an outline of some of the ways in which people manifest this sense of community to themselves and to others.

Chapter 5: Cooperation as a Means of Togetherness (and Vice Versa)

In reading the account which follows, it will be seen clearly that [a public emphasis on togetherness] puts order and sequence into the various activities, and that it and its associated ceremonial are instrumental in securing the co-operation on the community, and the organisation of communal labour (Malinowski 1922, 125).

This chapter will discuss the role of cooperation as a means of togetherness on Epoon Atoll. Despite the conflicts I have addressed in earlier chapters, and despite the Būrotijen's concern about the breaking up of community, I will argue that the high rates of cooperation in daily life on Epoon is crucial for a strong sense of community and togetherness. My aim is to illustrate a few different areas of daily life on Epoon where cooperation plays an important part. The main title of this chapter is "Cooperation as a Means of Togetherness," but it might just as well be the other way around—as implicated by the parentheses. It is true that RiEpoon show a high rate of cooperation in a myriad of different aspects of daily life, and that this is something most people point out as key to their sense of community. However, it is also true that virtually every public speech—be it from a politician, teacher, elder or reverend—contains the phrase *ippān doon*, which translates to both *together* and *cooperation*, but that mostly refers to the former in such settings. Specifically, whenever public speakers use the term *ippān doon*, they also emphasize same- and togetherness within the community—often to build spirit before or after cooperative projects. Based on the anthropological literature (e.g. Carucci 2003; Allen 2002; Rudiak-Gould 2010; LaBriola 2007), as well as my own experience from Mājro, this type of public discourse is visible throughout the Marshalls.

Based on his fieldwork from Nukulaelae on Tuvalu, Besnier argues that such "idealized depiction of the society as a peace-loving, cohesive, and consensus-driven is central to the [...] communally ratified self-representations that Nukulaelae Islanders provide to others and, in many contexts, to themselves" (Besnier 2009a, 45, my emphasis). I emphasize "representations" and "themselves," because this indicate that we are speaking of more than a mere self-presentation. In his critique of Clifford Geertz' understanding of the Balinese and "Western" self, Melford Spiro (1993, 122) separates self-presentation from sense of self, or self-representation. When facing foreigners, the Marshallese welcome party (illustrated in chapter 1) and the Nukulaelae people's dance performances (Besnier 2009a) function as a form of self-presentation. That is, the way they want to present themselves to foreigners or outsiders. The same might be true of a number of public

speeches. When facing themselves as they do in the cooking huts and in cooperative work, however, they are demonstrating an act of self-representation. In this particular case, the presentation and self-representation are largely overlapping, but this is not always the case, as Spiro so powerfully argued. Spiro's distinction is closely analogous to the anthropological preoccupation with the difference between what people say and what they do. As anthropologists, we pay close attention to patterns of social interaction and, thus, are concerned with what people do. In this chapter, I will show empirically that, far from being a one-way street, the relationship between cooperation and togetherness is one of mutual interdependence. In that small sense, I widen what I perceive to be a too narrow opinion within much evolutionary theory, namely that cooperation is the determinant of sociality and togetherness (e.g. Boyd and Richerson 2005a; Boyd and Richerson 2005b; Henrich and Henrich 2007; West, El Mouden, and Gardner 2011). It might be that what started out as a form of self-presentation vis-à-vis foreigners—especially missionaries and colonial powers—have gradually turned into social fact. Leaning on Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 38–9) term *officializing strategies*, that is indeed what Besnier (2009a, 45) seems to say.

Similarly to Epoon, and the Marshalls as a whole (cf. Rudiak-Gould 2010), Besnier explains that Nukulaelae Islanders operate with a distinct contrast between life in pre-Christian times and life after Christianization (for a similar case from PNG, see Martin 2010). Slavery and other meetings with the colonial powers during the 1800s had its effect on the atoll society—both in terms of demographics and social organization—making values such as those mentioned above crucial for their sense of togetherness. Thus, Besnier (2009a, 45) states, as if he were speaking of Epoon, that, “These are the values that Nukulaelae people tirelessly celebrate today in songs and speeches, kitchen-hut conversations, and interviews with ethnographers.” His ethnographic observations closely resembles my own experience from Epoon. The Epoon people had an especially fierce reputation during the former part of the 1800s due to their frequent attacks on foreign ships (Hezel 1983, 200–6). Today, violence and barbarity is something people attribute to the pre-Christian life, whereas peace and cooperation are traits of the present life with Christianity. As an elderly man told me once during *Mande* (see below), “These customs that you see here, they are not our way of life. They are the Christian way of life, and that is how we live now.” Likewise, the public speaker's emphasis on *ippān doon* implicate (or explicate) these “Christian values,” or this “Christian way of

life.” His point is that RiEpoon gained their morality and emphasis on cooperation through Christianization. By taking up Christian values, they abandoned their old “barbaric” ways.

To illustrate the sense or embodiment of togetherness on Epoon, I have chosen three distinct cases. The first one, *Mande*, is an institutionalized (and somewhat enforced) cooperative work with long historical roots. The second case depicts a Darfur-like cooperative work-party (see Barth 1967) consisting of a group of young men working with copra, the main source of economic income on Epoon. Finally, I address cooperation related to the Būrotijen church. This case will provide insight into one of the main sources for religious conflict on the atoll, at the same time as it illustrates that cooperation and togetherness intertwines in intangible ways.

***Mande*: Monday morning clean up**

Apart from the rest of the Marshalls—where *Mande* only means “Monday”—on Epoon it is also a verb: on Epoon, you do *Mande*. Every Monday morning 9–11 a.m., people have to clean the road and the area around their houses. Interestingly, this is one of the few happenings I witnessed during my stay, where people do not operate with *awa in Majel* (Marshallese time), but with strict time regulations. Usually, any event starts about two hours later than the given time, so when there are exceptions, it is usually because it is important. At 9 a.m. sharp, one of the three police officers rides his¹⁶ bike through the most populated area of the islet, blowing his whistle to remind people that it is time for *Mande*—and then again when it is over. Unless it has been planned otherwise beforehand, people clean (*raro*) their own areas and the road on their own *wāto* only. The rule is that one should keep the area reaching from the road down to the lagoon clean (most houses lie on the lagoon side of the road), as well as 100 feet into the jungle toward the ocean side. During my first two days of *Mande*, nobody had yet properly introduced me to the family living on the *wāto* where the council house is situated. Therefore, I walked over to the Mayor’s house to work there. After all, she had welcomed me into her family, and I felt an obligation toward her. However, she eventually told me that I should clean outside of “my own house” on *Mande*, and that I should help the family on my “home *wāto*.”

There are several occasions where large cooperative projects replace the home-based clean up. On the Monday prior to the only council meeting held while I was on the atoll, for instance, most of the work-able people on the islet came together to *raro* the area surrounding the council

¹⁶ While I was there, the police force on the Epoon Atoll were all-male.

house. Among the different tasks in projects like this, is the pulling of weeds, trimming branches, picking up fallen breadfruit leaves and garbage, and bringing pebbles from the ocean side beach to spread around the house. Most houses on the islet, except for the ones with a grass lawn, have a relatively large area outside covered with pebbles. This helps prevent people from dragging sand into their houses, as well as to keep the rapidly growing weeds under control. Gender segregated work is the general tendency, with men doing the hard physical labor—such as chopping of trees, mowing with machetes, and pushing the wheelbarrows—while the women do most of the weeding. However, the female work probably causes more wear for their bodies, as they spend long periods in squatting positions or sitting directly on the ground. Consequently, many women have trouble walking. However, it is not the squatting itself that tear on the women’s bodies. Squatting is, of course, common throughout the world, and is simply a matter of getting used to—it is a body technique (Mauss 1973).¹⁷ The problem arises because about 65% of the women are overweight or obese. This number comes from a report I have gained access to, made after a visit to Epoon from the Ministry of Health during my fieldwork. During these large cooperative projects, the ones arranging the party serve coffee, Kool-Aid, and some kind of food—typically rice with flour-based gravy or soup with doughnuts. To get as much as possible out of such workdays, the arrangers hold the food as long as possible, as people tend to drift home once their stomachs are full.

Another example of pre-arranged large-scale projects was the time the Ministry of Health came to visit Epoon in early May. Prior to their arrival, the council decided that we should clean and redecorate the outside area of the health clinic. Everybody went straight into their common roles, with the men mowing the lawn and trimming the trees with their machetes, while the women were pulling weeds. Whereas the men’s work were finished in a relatively short while (1.5–2 hours), the women’s work dragged out. Instead of helping their female counterparts, most of the young men sat lounging in the shadows of a breadfruit tree, where they told jokes and gossiped. A similar scenario occurred when we were cleaning outside of the school prior to the examination party in late May. The project replaced the regular *Mande*, and most able-bodied people helped. Once again, the men finished “their part” early, while the women still had much to do. In both cases, mealtime interrupted the workday, and no one returned to work after having eaten. Food is, as we shall see, a common payment for having people helping. Although all sorts of cooperative work on Epoon is voluntary, it is unacceptable not to serve food for the ones participating. In that way, most work-parties resemble

¹⁷ One can actually trace this specific body technique in the human skeleton, as its markers are “characterized by variations in bone morphology and by supernumerary articular surfaces” (Boulle 2001, 50).

the ones described by Barth (1967), even though they seldom have economic interests—gathering taro being an exception. For a work-party to replace *Mande*, it typically has to be for the benefit of the people, and not just for one family or household. At any other time, however, anyone is free to arrange small or large groups to help with specific tasks—ranging from *rarō* (clean up) to spear fishing to food gathering.



Figure 9. Doing *Mande* outside of the health clinic in anticipation of a visit from the Ministry of Health in May 2014.

The *Mande* has a long history on Epoon, and a number of people told me that it stems from the missionary times in the 1860s. *Mande* was supposedly one of three rules the missionaries introduced to the atoll, the other two being the dividing of Jitto- and Jittak-eŋ, and caging of pigs. In 2014, about 150 years later, the local government and the council still adhered to all three rules. Although the tradition is old, I heard numerous times that the acting Mayor while I was there has been a key figure in rekindling the spirit behind it. Even though the police blow their whistles to remind everyone that it is time to *Mande*, people mainly participate due to moral codes. That is, the government does not have any means to enforce the law, as no legal punishment exists. I once asked a group of council members whether people who avoided working would be fined (which is a much-used form of punishment), but the answer was negative—but they did think I had raised an

important question. However, gossip and other forms of moral punishment seem to be sufficient to keep repeated offenses at a minimum.

Pride and sense of community, too, seems to be important motivators for many people. During several conversations—whether in the cooking hut with the women or in the shadow of a breadfruit tree with the men—people emphasized *Mānde* as a crucial part of Epoonese uniqueness. As most people put it, Epoon is the only atoll in the Marshalls on which they do *Mānde*.¹⁸ This pride was exceptionally clear when the ship bringing copra, cargo, and people from Epoon to Mājro stopped on Namdik [Namorik], a neighboring atoll, on the way. A group of us coming from Epoon went ashore to have a look around the main islet, and when we came back on the ship, the gossip started right away: “Did you see how messy their atoll is?” they asked me, “People on Namdik don’t know how to *rārō* [clean an area], they don’t have *Mānde* like we do.” Men and women alike were obviously proud of how clean they keep their homes and public areas on Epoon, and they emphasized *Mānde* as an important contributor to that cleanness. *Mānde* also brings about a keen sense of community. Even though people usually work on their own *wāto*, they are out in the street together, working side by side. Moreover, they know that their individual contributions help the community as a whole.

Although *Mānde* is an institutionalized form of cooperative work, the government does not enforce it in any way other than to remind people when it is time to start. Instead, fear of gossip and moral punishment, as well as a keen sense of pride and community all have great motivating effects. Similar to the Norwegian *dugnad*, people work on a voluntary basis, and, as Kjell Arne Brekke, Snorre Kverndokk and Karine Nyborg (2003) argue in this respect, introducing fines for not participating will probably have negative effect. The *Mānde* and the *dugnad* are similar also in the way they both emphasize egalitarian togetherness. In the same way that the “spirit of *dugnad*” (*dugnadsånd*) has been an important symbol for the “Social Democratic reconstruction of Norway in the aftermath of World War II” (Bruun 2011, 74), the *Mānde* is a key factor in making a distinctive sense of Epoon pride, both in the meeting with foreigners, and with people of other Marshallese atolls. As we saw above, the RiEpoon I traveled with to Namdik highlighted *Mānde* and the resulting tidiness on their home atoll as a key factor that separated them from Namdik people. In this respect, *Mānde* is an embodiment of togetherness that enhances social trust to straighten the cooperative spirit and sense of community. That way, *Mānde* constitutes both cooperation as a means of togetherness and

¹⁸ I have no means to verify this claim, but on Epoon, it is a truism.

togetherness as a means of cooperation. In the next case, I will present a different form of cooperation through a concentrated group of young men that arrange work-parties to husk coconuts for each other. Work-parties like this differ from the *dugnad*-like *Mande* in that they straighten personal reciprocal bonds rather than the overreaching sense of community. Of course, they still affect social trust, albeit in a more indirect way than *Mande*.

Doulul: A day in the life of a copra worker

At present, coconut products have been the number one source of income on Epoon for close to 160 years. That is, it seems that some traders had been exploiting the archipelagos for coconut oil for some years prior to the missionaries' arrival (Damon 1861, 20). A German named Adolph Capelle settled down in the wake of the missionaries as early as 1859. By 1861, an estimated 100 barrels of coconut oil left the atoll. Not yet incorporated into the monetary economy, the islanders sold their products in exchange of tobacco (*ibid.*). The establishment of the gospel on Epoon also brought traders and seafarers, many of them stayed for several years, and some of them married Epoon women. Ironically, the missionary settlement also enabled traders to settle there—the very traders whose influence they wanted to protect the Marshallese from in the first place. Capelle established his soon-to-be region-wide company, A. Capelle & Co., on Epoon in 1864, and remained there for about a decade (Young in Spennemann 2005). Capelle and his trading partner, Anton José DeBrum, would later buy Likiep atoll, which they used as their coconut headquarters. Since then, coconut has been one of the most important resources for many of the Marshallese atolls and islands, and Epoon is no exception.

Today, the outer islanders typically deal with copra. However, while I was on the Marshalls, the government owned coconut company, Tobolar, had just launched a new priority area: virgin coconut oil on the Namdik Atoll. According to one information agent and another central figure in the firm, they are hoping to expand their virgin oil production to several other atolls within the coming years, including Epoon. Until then, most outer islanders will continue their work with copra—that they have sold for a more or less stabilized price at around \$.23 per pound for the past recent years. At average, the rough estimates from the copra workers in the *doulul* says that the current price lands them a yearly \$2500–3000. The *doulul* (literarily, circle) is the common name for a group of young men working together with copra, husking (*eddeb*) coconuts. As is true for every copra worker on the Marshalls, nobody employs them, and they are not members of any form of

union. Instead, they organize their work themselves, as they take turns to work for each other without payment—hence, the metaphor of a circle. This means that their paycheck will differ from time to time, depending on the amount they have prepared when the ship arrives, which, ideally, is every third month. The workers sell their product to the captain of the ship, a representative from Tobolar, as free agents without paying any governmental tax on their income (but the reader will remember the taxes discussed in chapter 3). The *doulul* totals about 22 young men. The reason for this specific estimate, is that the whole group seldom (if ever) contribute at the same time. However, the 22 members that were active in the circle while I was there had all been members for a while—long enough for people to be consistent about the *doulul* having 22 members. In addition to the permanent members, a few other men participated—strategically—on an irregular basis. They know that by helping out in the *doulul*, they have a good chance of having the favor returned when they want to husk their own nuts. Therefore, they participate in the *doulul* whenever close friends or family relations host the work-party. As for me, I did not choose strategically when to participate in



Figure 10. Waiting to load the final copra bags in the bombom.

the *doulul*, but I knew that I could count on the ones I had helped when time came for me to arrange my own party.

Since the members of the *doulul* organize themselves, they do not operate with regular working hours or workdays. However, they can only sell their product when the ship comes in, and so, they try to regulate their work thereafter. In effect, the first week or so after they ship has been there, copra work is more or less at a standstill. Because of *Mande*, they do not work on Mondays, and, of course, Sundays are devoted to the Sabbath (Sunday = *Jabōt* on Marshallese). Unless the ship is due within the next couple of weeks and they still have a lot of work to do, they will not do copra work on Saturdays (*Jādede*) either. Saturdays are when RiEpoon fish, gather, and prepare food for the Sabbath. Hence, the word *kōJādede* (the prefix *kō* indicating an active form), frequently used on Saturdays, means something resembling “Saturday’s chords.” Thus, we have four weekdays left apt for working with the *doulul*. As mentioned, the work usually intensifies as the date for the ship approaches, but there are still a few factors affecting the regularity of the work. First, of course, is the amount of ripe, or rather, available nuts. Second, they rely on a motorboat, called *bombom*, to access several of the copra *wātos*. The *bombom* is an open 24 feet glass fiber boat with an old engine ready to burst at any minute, as it sometimes does. If the *bombom* is broken, they cannot access these *wātos* on the northeastern side of the Epoon islet or other islets, and will thus have to do something else. Luckily, the large amount of group members also means that they have a large amount of different *wātos* to work on, some of which are on the main island. This allows for valuable flexibility, both because having different *wātos* to work on means that at least one of them will have enough available nuts, and because they can work on some of the *wātos* on the main island without need of the *bombom*.

A typical day of *eddeb* (husking) starts around 8 a.m. with breakfast consisting of rice with gravy—served on braided palm-leaf plates—coffee and cigarettes. The man arranging the work-party is the host, but it is his wife, sister or other close female relation who braids the plates and cooks the food. I seldom (if ever) experienced more than ten men present during breakfast. Many of the workers prefer to get an early start so that they can finish as soon as possible—either to go fishing, to help their families at home or to relax. Arriving early also provides the possibility to choose the best spots for husking. The ones who do eat breakfast together usually have a good time telling jokes

and laughing, while waiting for everyone to arrive. Before leaving, the workers gather empty coconut bags, the spikes used for husking (*doon*) and the leftover food.

Arriving at the scene, the workers moor the boat and wade ashore before finding their respective spots. Except for the *eddeb*, most people leave the copra *wātos*, at least the ones only accessible by boat, pretty much to themselves. Even so, there are usually an intricate network of paths and other sign of previous work-parties, such as old piles of coconut shells. Since coral rocks and fallen down branches lay spread out over the forest floor, most workers use sandals when they work. Normally, everybody pairs up to find a suitable place, but if the coconut palms grow in concentrated areas only, they team up in larger groups. It is crucial to find cover from the blistering sun, as the work is physically demanding in itself, and close to intolerable without shade. After rigging up the *doon*, everybody heads off into the jungle to gather fallen, brown coconuts. One trip will bring around twenty nuts, and each worker needs about 200 a day \pm 10%, which means two stuffed bags of husked coconuts. For the anthropologist struggling to keep up, they lower the bar—only once did I manage to husk the quota of two bags.

The husking starts once one has collected a satisfying amount of nuts. The approach differs depending on whether one works in pairs or groups. Working in pairs, the men usually husk a large amount of nuts each, putting them in individual piles. They throw the empty peels in a separate pile, which slowly but surely grows into a small hill.¹⁹ Every now and then, someone might walk by, and when that happens, he usually stop to help fill up the empty bags with coconuts. After finishing their quota, the men carry the heavy bags out of the jungle to where they moored the boat earlier. Each bag weighs about 55–65 kg. (120–140 lb.), but most of the men nevertheless choose to carry it over one shoulder only. When I started my career as a mason in Norway in 2005, we worked with mortar bags weighing 40 kg. (88 lb.). Due to high rates of injuries resulting in increased health and safety regulations, 25 kg. (55 lb.) bags replaced the heavier ones a year or so later. Although the copra workers sell their products to Tobolar, a government-owned company, they have no such regulations. As a result, many men have back pains that rapidly increase when they approach 40 years old. I was having some troubles with my own back one night after a series of heavy lifting earlier in the day. While having dinner, the whole family I was eating with laughed heartedly at my struggles to find a comfortable position to sit in. “You are really turning into a RiEpoon,” they said, “we too

¹⁹ When working on their home *wāto*, the men usually collect and bring back dry peels for fuel.

have a lot of back pains.” The risk of long-term injuries is extra high when working in groups because there will typically be a few men collecting and carrying coconuts all day, while others husk.

Returning home, we carry the bags up to the house, where the same women who cooked breakfast earlier in the day now have prepared dinner. Once again, we eat cooked rice with a flour-based gravy from freshly braided plates. The conversations are usually lighthearted, as the men jokingly summarize the day. The few women present also join in the comedy routine, and they are quick with their remarks and characterizations of the men, which makes everyone laugh loudly in high-pitched voices. In-between the joking, the men plan the next work-party. They commonly have the next two or three parties planned out, but they often have to make changes. For instance, if the *bombom* breaks down—which it irregularly does—they have to work on a *wāto* that does not necessitate its use. Therefore, they have to regroup and agree on where to work the following workday. Having finished their meal, the men gradually break off to head home. The work-party ends with the meal, and the group as a whole has no further obligations to help the arranger with the remaining tasks in the copra production. The man who arranged the work-party will have to rely on other kinds of help to execute the last stages, which is *ruprup* (breaking open the nuts), *karkar* (cutting the dried meat from the shells), and packing. The *doulul* work-parties are only concerned with *eddeb*.

After a normal day of *eddeb*, one is typically left with about 3000–4000 husked coconuts. In order to produce the finished copra product, one has to break each nut open, dry the meat and cut it out of the shells, before further drying and packing. These tasks are all work-intensive, but they are less physically demanding than the husking is. Therefore, women and children contribute to these tasks to a larger degree, and this work, too, has a high cooperation rate. Both women and men bring out their large knives and get together in a shadowy spot on the *wāto* to break open the coconuts. There, they sit down on boat buoys, provisional chairs made out of coconut peels, or directly on the ground. While working, people might stop by for varying lengths of time to help. It might be that they happened to walk by and want to exchange a few words; they might have come in a different errand, but decide to work a little while they are there; or they might come just to help. For the ones staying for longer periods, the key reason is probably *iu* (coconut sprout/apple). Large parts of the coconuts the men collect have begun to catch root when they pick it, rendering the inside with an edible sprout. Most people love to eat *iu*, but it is also a valuable food for their pigs. Therefore, people come to help *ruprup* carrying empty rice bags or buckets to fill with *iu*.

Children usually play around such work-groups, climbing the piles of nuts searching for the ones containing sprouts. When they find it, they ask some of the adults to crack open a nut for them,

or they simply ask to borrow a knife to open it themselves. They would often laugh at my clumsy ways when I was still learning, and they enjoyed being in the position to teach me. As usual also among adults on Epoon, the children were not afraid to tell me just how terrible my technique was: they laughed, pointed and shook their heads, and all the adults laughed with them.

Since it is easiest to do the *karkar* (cutting copra meat) within a few hours of *ruprup* (breaking open coconuts), the latter usually starts after breakfast. That way, the copra can dry out in the sun before the *karkar* starts in the evening. However, since Epoon is as far south as it is, it rains a lot there compared to other atolls in the Marshalls. Of course, this makes it an especially lush atoll, but it is also the reason why most copra workers often have to rely on a smoke oven to dry the copra meat properly. Epoon is among the few atolls on the Marshalls that have to rely on this method, something many of the workers point out as negative. Copra dried with smoke ovens typically have a poorer quality than sun dried ones, something the workers know. As became evident toward the end of my fieldwork, when a Tobolar representative came to the atoll in an informative mission, the quality of Marshallese copra as a whole have been relatively low. Therefore, Tobolar sent this man to the different atolls in the nation to inform copra workers that there will be more information on how to improve quality coming soon. Meanwhile, the smoke oven will remain a useful instrument in the copra production on Epoon. When using the smoke oven, it is easier to work continuously with both *ruprup* and *karkar*. In such cases, it is common to call on friends for a small-scale work-party. These do not have the same rhythm or formality as the *eddeb*-parties do. Instead, a group of about four or five men sit together in a circle with the dried copra in the middle. They each have their own knife that they use to cut the coconut meat from the shell. Meanwhile, two others crack open more nuts to put in the burning oven—which is usually fueled with coconut peels—and they also spread the cut-out copra out over long aluminum plates. There, the copra can dry under the sun before packing. During such parties, the arranger—be he *irooj* or *rijerbal*—supplies the workers with cigarettes, coffee and, sometimes with a light food when finished working.

Food is a key word in most cooperative work-parties on Epoon. The fact that the copra workers start their day with a meal expresses the tightness of the group and the strong reciprocal bonds. Returning home, they once more seal this bond with a meal and light-hearted jokes.

Declining cooperation in church activities

Although I can point to a number of areas where cooperation is widespread and emphasized as a means of togetherness on Epoon, certain forms of cooperation are in decline. The reason for such a

decline lies at the root of one of the main social conflicts on the atoll. My argument is that the Būrotijens experience a general feeling of distrust and displeasure toward members of other denominations because of the declining participation in cooperative tasks related to the Būrotijen church. I have already elaborated on the declining participation in the food tributes to the reverend that take place every fortnight, and will not dwell on that here—a note of its importance in the sum total will do. Instead, I will describe a cooperative project that is key to understanding the place of the church as a social arena and a builder of community in a Durkheimian sense, namely the building and remodeling of the church house. Before that, however, let us look briefly on a comparative case from another Marshallese atoll.

In an article concerning the people of the Wūjlañ and Āne-wātak Atolls in the northwestern Marshall Islands, Larry Carucci (2003) writes about the church as expression of community. He explains how the building of a new church house on Wūjlañ Atoll became an important event for the entire population. The project was both economically expensive, time-consuming, and physically demanding so people expected every able-bodied person to contribute. As on Epoon, the men did most of the physically hard labor while the women served drinks and food. Interestingly, when the people started the building, they already knew that their time on Wūjlañ were coming toward its end. They were only relocated to Wūjlañ from Āne-wātak by the US government due to the latter's nuclear test bombing, and when they started their building, they were approaching their long awaited return. Leaning on Durkheim (1965), Carucci argues that the church was an expression of community, and so, that the building of a new church served as its embodiment. Before relocating the Āne-wātak people to Wūjlañ, the US colonial powers had designed a centralized village with the church in its logical center. This, claims Carucci (2003, 63), “increased the iconic connections between the church's physical position and its symbolic position as the center of the social and moral community.” Although the church on Epoon does not have the same geographically centralized position as on Wūjlañ, it has had the same social centrality.

As previously mentioned, the Būrotijen church was the sole religious denomination on Epoon for 140 years. As the religious diversity grew on Mājro and other atolls since the 1950s onward (Garret 1997), Epoon remained religiously homogenous for four more decades. During the first half of 2014, when I was on the atoll, many elderly Būrotijens still remembered and longed for the days of one sole religion. To them, the unification around one sole Christian denomination represented a strong community. As one elderly man told me, “We need to be united in one church, uniform, like the army.” As we saw in chapter 3, however, not only the Būrotijens equated practices

related to the Būrotijen church, such as the presentation of food tributes to the reverend, with *manit*. Another cooperative project, that I took part in during my fieldwork, was the renovation of the small Būrotijen church at Maṇe *wāto* in the Jittak-eṅ district.

When I arrived at the church around 9.30 am, I found a small group of mostly men finishing the preparations needed to start painting. Eager to start, I grabbed a roll and went to work. When I arrived, we were about seven people, but our numbers grew rapidly as both men and women joined in. While the men painted, the women were picking weeds on the area around the church. Some of them also put out tables covered with packages of 3in1 coffee, regular instant coffee, milk powder, and sugar. Someone had also made a large container of ice-cold *jekmai*, syrup made from coconut toddy mixed with water. While I was there, there was one freezer on the islet, powered by the numerous solar panels on the school building, and it usually stored blocks of ice. The freezer belonged to a private family, but they were Būrotijens, and thus donated their ice for the purpose of the church. Additionally, and atypical to what I usually experienced on Epoon, the women had sat out pans of *pilawā* (bread).²⁰ I had been baking with some of the women living on Maṇe the previous night, preparing for the big workday. As mentioned above, people usually leave after having eaten, but this time we all ate to keep us going while working, knowing that we would also get a final meal when we were finished.

Although we were plenty of people working, we had a good flow going—nobody crashed into one another, and nobody stepped on each other's toes. The young and able climbed ladders up to the roof and the other places that were hard to get to, while the elderly stayed on the ground. While some painted with big rolls, making large sweeps across the walls, other would go with brushes to paint the windowsills. To me, it all looked like total chaos at first glance, but eventually I saw the system and symmetry between the workers. It was like watching a large group of graffiti artist painting their way through a subway train. With so many people working in one place—we were about 25–30 women and men—large portions of the workday goes to pauses. Sometimes, it is necessary to take small breaks because of the burning sun, but other times, people pause to let others work. Of course, many workers (mostly men) have a tendency to sneak off to *bwebwenato* (chat; talk) in the shadows during gatherings like this. However, some of the men realized that we were too many waiting in line for a paintbrush, and thus resulted to help the women in their weeding. The tone is cheerful while working and conversations flow easily. In this particular instance, the main

²⁰ *Pilawā* translates to both flour, dough and bread. However, this sugary, white flour-based pastry closely resembles what English speakers call *buns*.

conversation revolved around my relationship with one of the women. We had been friends for a while, and had recently planned to go for a bike ride once we got hold of a suited bike. The word had gone out, and now, the rest of the women were teasing us, making fanciful stories of what our future would be like. Reaching the maximum stage of embarrassment, the dinner bell—calling for rice, bread and hermetic mackerel—saved me at last.

Before eating, we all gathered around in a large group, men and women close together, for a prayer. Leam, the main deacon in the Būrotijen church at Maṇe, where he is also *aḷap*, held the prayer. He also thanked everybody for showing up to help and for *jerbal ippān doon* (working together). As usual, the emphasis of his speech was on togetherness and unity. It was obvious that the renovation of the church was an important event in the community. Although the ABCFM missionaries established the Būrotijen church at Rupe in 1858 (they arrived in December 1857), the church at Maṇe is the oldest building on the Epoon islet. The church has rested on the same foundation since the 1930s, but, just like a human organism changing its cells every seven years, most of the boards have been replaced over time due to humidity and other weather damage. People had put in a lot of effort for this renovation, both in food preparations, organizing, and working hours. Many people had shown up to help—among them, the church’ neighbor, a man old enough to be alive at the time of construction—but to the Būrotijen’s frustration, the workers were mostly Būrotijens. Only two men represented other denominations, a clear sign for some that the community was breaking apart.



Figure 11. The newly painted Būrotijen church at Maṅe in the Jittak-eṅ district.

In the not-so-distant past, people told me, the renovation of the Būrotijen church would have generated large-scale cooperation among the people of Epoon. It is true that the renovation illustrated above involved the church at Maṅe, and not the one at Rupe. Had it been the latter, it would most likely have brought out a stronger workforce. However, judging from my own

experience with working at Rupe and Maṅe, as well as people's account of church-based cooperation, I have reason to doubt that more people from other denominations would participate. For instance, I have participated in coconut husking at Rupe with a workforce consistent of Būrotijens only. The copra production at Rupe is an important source of income for the church community, as most of their money stems from individual contributions—perceived by some of the deacons to be in alarming decline. As with other projects, the husking plays out with a gendered and fluid division of labor—among the men, some husk, some gather nuts and some *bwebwenato*, all on rotation—while the women cook and serve food. The church use the money they raise by selling copra to buy building material and paint for the church, food provisions for large gatherings (e.g. Christmas, Easter, and Mother's Day), and other goods to benefit the church community as a whole.

In many ways, the remodeling of the church differs from other cooperative and community work projects. First, it started relatively early. Apart from the food preparations, which started the night before, the first workers began their task around 9 a.m. Except for *Mande*, projects like this would usually start an hour or so later, but this day, it started on time. As mentioned previously, punctuality is an indication of relative importance. Second, the women had set out food, coffee and iced drinks—even *jekmai*, a syrup boiled down from *jekaro* (coconut sap)—from the very beginning, a one-time happening during my stay. Third, a number of the men were doing typical women's work, such as weeding. Instead of withdrawing to a shadowy spot while waiting for a turn with the paintbrush, many of them chose to squat down next to the women, helping them in their work. Although weeding is a familiar task for elderly men as well as women, it was rare to see so many young men participating. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, some of the workers carried on with their work after we had had a prayer and a meal. Again, this was a one-time event during my stay. As mentioned, serving food is usually the point where work is over and people go home. This particular day, however, the work was too important for people to leave unfinished.

This latter case, then, serves to illustrate, on one hand, one of the ways in which the church can work as an embodiment of community, and how cooperative projects can be an embodiment of togetherness. On the other hand, this case provides another glance into the ongoing denominational conflicts on the Epoon islet. To many Būrotijens, the lack of inter-denominational cooperation in church related work is yet another example of their community breaking apart. However, as we have seen in this chapter, there is a number of instances where people do cooperate across

denominational boundaries, not only serving to enhance togetherness, but also because togetherness and sense of community are such strong cultural values on Epoon.

Final discussion

Throughout this thesis, I have illustrated some of the different ways in which hierarchical and egalitarian values coexist on the Epoon Atoll. As presented here, the most obvious sign of hierarchy goes through the various authorities and respect positions, such as the *irooj*, *aḷap*, Mayor, teachers, elders, the reverend and other church figures, and the Kūrjins. Additionally, we have seen the emergence of a new form of elites in the entrepreneurs. Building on Louis Dumont, most contributors in Knut Rio and Olaf Smedal's (2009b) edited work point to the interconnectedness between hierarchy and values. To take the Būrotjien Kūrjins as an example, I have made clear the distinction between mere believers in Jesus (the *rūkkatak*) and the emic conceptualization of proper Christians, Kūrjin. In terms of the structural dichotomization of the pure and unpure that Dumont held, the Kūrjins represent the pure, as they are supposed to lead sin-free lives with *eḷap iḷkwe* (great love) for their fellow humans. The *rūkkatak*, on the other hand, live sinfully (in the emic sense) by smoking, drinking alcohol and being promiscuous. Although they are not breaking any social norms in this way—the manner is rather contrary—their hierarchical position vis-à-vis the Kūrjins is evident. Being a Kūrjin is a value-laden status position, and, as we have seen in Chapter 3, the Būrotjien reverend inhabits a status position that often supersedes that of the *irooj*.

Even if hierarchy is visible in many aspects of everyday life on Epoon, we have also seen some examples of how people sometimes oppose and delegitimize hierarchical differences through gossip or scorn. In these cases, as with Almenson in Chapter 3, a too eager demonstration of one's wealth, position or knowledge often comes into conflict with egalitarian values that run parallel to the hierarchical organization. By emphasizing *manit*, people discredit that sort of behavior as non-customary because it comes into conflict with such cultural values as sharing and equality. To be sure, hierarchy does not constitute inequality in itself. Therefore, Almenson represents inequality in the sense of stratification by acting autonomous, an inequality that breaks with both hierarchical and egalitarian values (Tcherkézoff 2009, 299–300).

As we have seen in this thesis, equality is an encompassing value in the social life on Epoon, conceptualized mainly through the emic term *ippān doon* (together; cooperation; togetherness). As mentioned, I have used *equality* as meaning of *equal value*. This differs from equality as sameness in crucial ways. For instance, it reflects the ways in which RiEpoon interact in social life. As I have

shown without further emphasize through ethnographic descriptions throughout this theses, Epoon is gender segregated, both in terms of division of labor, social norms and interactional patterns. No doubt, women are more tied to the home sphere than men are, and, no doubt, they do nearly all the domestic work in a household. That, however, does not constitute any kind of male power, and it does not reduce the gender dynamics to a private/public dichotomy. On the contrary, we have seen that women, too, can be, and often are, landowners, chiefs or Mayors. In fact, the gendered and age-based division of labor serves to enhance the notion of equality as equal value, as each task complement each other. Again, this shows the importance of togetherness and cooperation—“Together, we are fantastic!” as Kolshus (2010, 408) phrase it based on his reading of Durkheim (1965). His point is that the sum of human sociality is much greater than the parts. Since we are well aware of our own human faults, we let the power within our collective amaze us. On Epoon too, the joint efforts put into cooperative tasks seem to blur out individual shortcomings to emphasize the power of togetherness. Rio and Smedal (2009a, 23) note in their introduction that, “values always indicate the presence of hierarchy.” That, however, does not mean that the concept of equal value is problematic in a society with certain hierarchical differences. On the contrary, Robbins (1994, 21–2) deconstructs the anthropological bias toward uncovering inequalities by arguing that the presence of certain forms of inequality does not rule out equality as more than an ideology. As I show in this thesis, equality is not only a cultural value on Epoon, in many contexts it is a social reality. RiEpoon work to be and to treat each other as equals (Robbins 1994, 57). Put in a hierarchical value system, equality thus outrank hierarchy as an encompassing value.

From my understanding of social life on Epoon, it is clear that we are not dealing with an either-or situation in terms of hierarchy and egalitarianism. Instead, we see the coexistence of two parallel ideals that sometimes clash, but that people usually evoke and invoke in different aspects of social life. Of course, egalitarianism and equality does not constitute a social world without conflict. The key issue in this respect has been the denominational politics I addressed in the previous chapter. Moreover, the high rate of flexibility in terms of land inheritance is also a source to conflict on the individual level. Even so, I have argued that the constant emphasis on togetherness and cooperation is an important factor in establishing a keen sense of community—despite the denominational conflicts on the atoll. In small-scale face-to-face communities such as Epoon, this is crucial to sustain social harmony.

Appendix A: Census of the Epoon Islet, March 2014

The Jittak-eᅇ District, Epoon

	Females	Males
0-4 years old	9	18
5-13 years old	27	18
14-17 years old	2	1
18-40 years old	26	41
41-60 years old	19	15
61 years old or older	3	7
Sum	86	100

TOTAL NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN THE JITTAKE-Eᅇ DISTRICT: 186

The Jitto-eᅇ District + Rupe, Epoon

	Females	Males
0-4 years old	11	5
5-13 years old	17	18
14-17 years old	7	5
18-40 years old	15	15
41-60 years old	11	14
61 years old or older	5	6
Sum	66	63

TOTAL NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN RUPE AND THE JITTO-Eᅇ DISTRICT: 129

TOTAL NUMBER OF PEOPLE ON EPOON, EPOON: 315*

* Note that, as any population at all times are fluid (due to migration, births, deaths and other demographic factors), one should consider the total number of people with an error margin of 5%, with the possibility of the given number being a little shy. This is so, because some people tend to stay more or less permanent on *wātos* (land tracts) with the special purpose of producing copra. However, I have tried to include as many of these as possible in the households in the two permanent villages

(Jittak-en and Jitto-en) of which they also reside. There was also signs of confusion regarding household demographics among some of the participants in this census.

Some demographic analyses

*Gender balance for people under 18 years old**

	Of a total of 138 people	% of demographic group
Total number of females	73	52,9%
Total number of males	65	47,1%

Gender balance for people 18 years old or older

	Of a total of 177 people	% of demographic group
Total number of females	79	44,6%
Total number of males	98	55,4 %

Gender balance of total population

	Of a total of 315 people	% of demographic group
Total number of females	152	48,25%
Total number of males	163	51,75%

Age balance of total population

	Of a total of 315 people	% of demographic group
Total number of people under 14 years old	123	39,0%
Total number of people under 18 years old	138	43,8%
Total number of people 18 years old or older	177	56,2%
Total number of people 61 years old or older	21	6,66%

* Note that I base this dualistic gender model (with only two possible options, *male* or *female*) on emic conceptualizations of gender. In fact, I met with some resistance in my efforts of translating various other categories. The idea of multiple genders does not seem to sit well with the Epoonese. That being said, this does not rule out the possibilities of discovering a more nuanced view if digging into this particular topic.

Appendix B: A Glossary of Marshallese Words

Aļap – Lineage head	Jowi – Clan
Bōb – General term for pandanus	Kajak – Joke
Bōtōktōk – Male-based land inheritance	Karkar – Cutting copra meat from shell
Būb – Black triggerfish	Keemem – Celebration; (First) Birthday
Būrotijjen – Protestant	Kōmman – To make; To do
Bwebwenato – Story, conversation	Kōrā – Woman; Female
Bwij – Female-based land inheritance	Kōrkōr – Small paddling canoe with sail
Doon – Spike for husking coconuts	Kūrjin – Christian
Doulul – Circle; An all-male copra team	Lerooj – Female chief
Eddeb – To husk coconuts	Lik – Ocean side
Emmaan – Man; Male	Mā – General term for breadfruit
Emman – Nice; Good; Well	Mānde – Monday; Monday morning clean-up
Eḡñōd – Fishing	Manit – Custom
Iar – Lagoon; Lagoon side	Meroñ – Land authority
Iaraj – Taro	Mōñā – Food; Eat
Iiep waan – A wastebasket	Ni – General term for coconut
Iḡkwe – Love; Hello	Rādik doon – Cooperative
Ippān doon – Together; Cooperate	Rarō – To clean an area; Clean-up
Irooj – Male chief	Rijerbal – Worker; Person who works
Jabōt – Sunday; Sabbath	RiPālle – (White) Foreigner; American
Jambo – Travel; Go for a walk	Rūkaki – Teacher; Preacher
Jekaro – Coconut sap/toddy	Rūkkatak – Apprentice; Learner
Jekmai – Coconut syrup	Rupe/ruprup – To break; Break it
Jidik – A little	Waini – General term for copra
Jimañuñ – Fermented coconut sap	Wāto – Land tract

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