

Coral and Concrete: Remembering Kwajalein Atoll between Japan, America, and the Marshall Islands

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Coral and Concrete: Remembering Kwajalein Atoll; Between Japan, America, and the Marshall Islands, by Greg Dvorak. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. ISBN: 9780824855215, 314 pages (hardcover).

Since my first experience in the early 1980's with the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), I've been stunned by the irony of the ignorance of the average American - including myself - regarding RMI relative to the actual significance of this complex portion of the Micronesian Region to US interests. Now, closing in on almost 75 years since the end of a world war that brought the US and Japan into savage combat in this constellation of hundreds of small islets and islands, RMI continues to quietly move forward, coping in its own culturally determined ways with the hideous impacts of the atomic and environmental assaults generated by the far larger, noisier powers. Today, RMI reaches its own decisions about how to cope with the challenges coming its way. Greg Dvorak, who grew up as an American kid living in the seclusion of the heavily fortified American missile range on Kwajalein Atoll in the RMI in the early 1970's, opens his childhood memories, as well as his current academic analysis, of this special and secret Pacific Island preserve of the US military. *Coral and Concrete* is worth the attention of students and scholars of Micronesia and other Pacific Islands, and for the majority of the US reading public who have not heard of Kwajalein nor even the Marshall Islands.

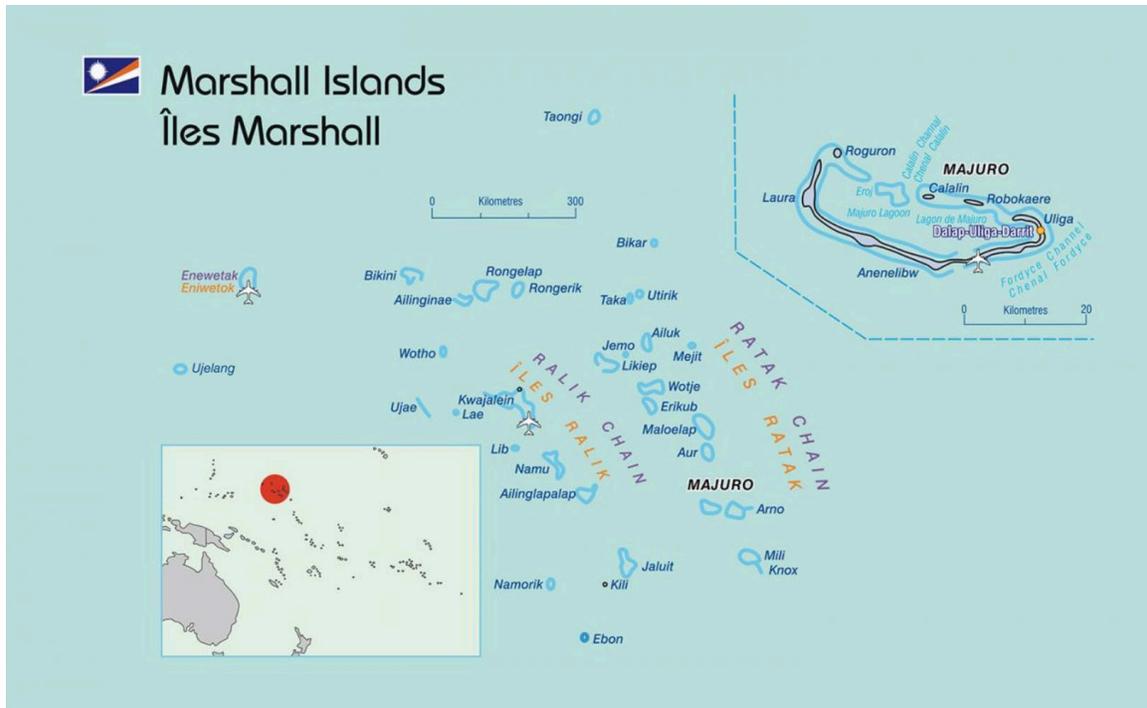


Figure 1. Map of the Republic of the Marshall Islands. *On the World Map*

For some readers, hearing the name - "Kwajalein Atoll" - brings to mind nothing more than an inconvenient landing and enforced wait within the plane on a tarmac about halfway between Kosrae and Honolulu. The non-Marshallese travelers murmur: "Why did we land here? Why can't we get off? After a few passengers are permitted to disembark and a few more board, the plane swivels and takes off again. Few on board will realize that they have just visited the "largest inhabited atoll on earth" (Dvorak, 2018, p. 1). Many aboard will also be unaware that they are leaving one of the most heavily secured US military installations in the world; officially named "US Army Garrison-Kwajalein Atoll (USAG-KA)." Dvorak describes Kwajalein's World War II history with the US, its endurance of occupation and control by Japan, and relations with the Korean laborers imported by the Japanese, as well as its continuing legacy of US military occupiers/lease-holders.

Coral and Concrete

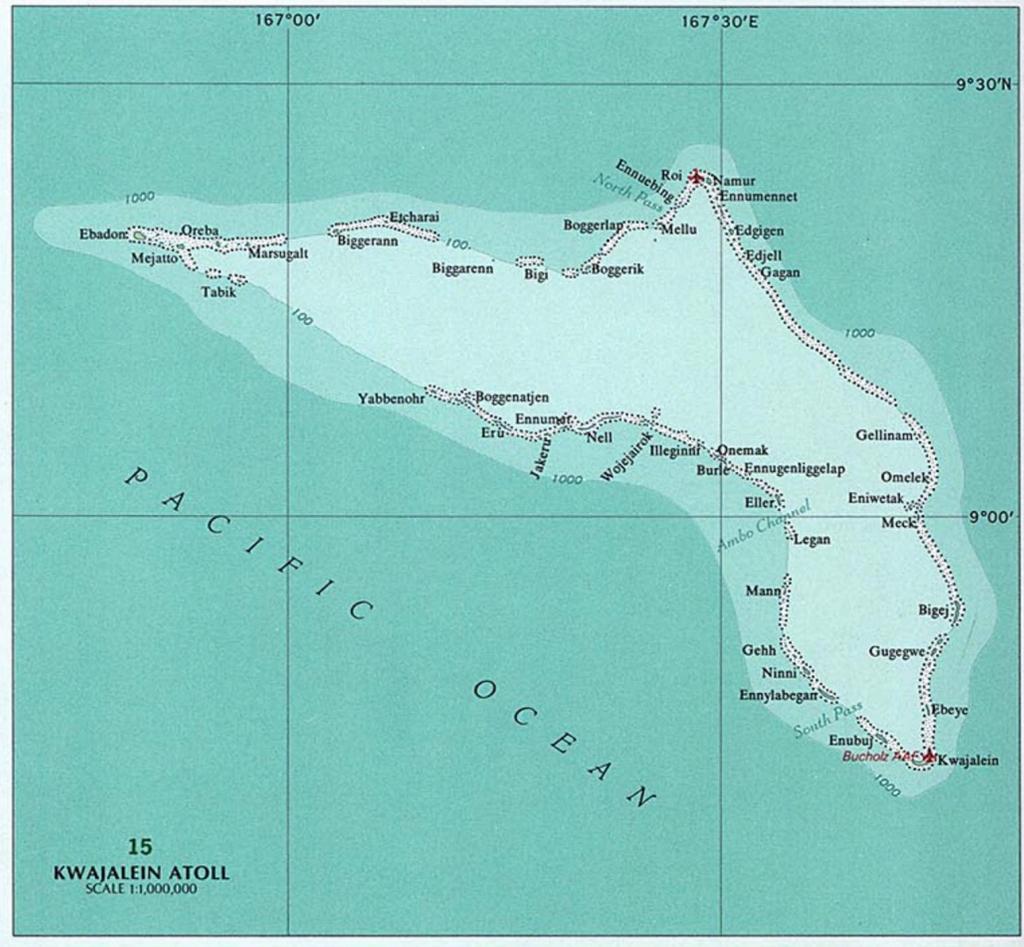


Figure 2. Map of Kwajalein Atoll. *US Department of the Interior*

For the context that would help orient readers, consider the following: The Republic of the Marshall Islands consists of 29 atolls and 5 islands with a population exceeding 58,000. It is arranged into two loosely configured vertical swaths above the equator; *Ralik* on the West and *Ratak* on the East. Kwajalein Atoll is just above center in the *Ralik* group, 2,449 miles from Honolulu and 1,562 miles from Guam. It consists of 97 islands, 11 of which are leased by the US until 2066, part of the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site. One of the world's largest atolls, Kwajalein Atoll is 6.33 square miles in land area, of which Kwajalein Island on the southern tip where the airport is located, is the main setting for Dvorak's commentary. It is 1.2 square miles with a population of approximately 1,000, most of whom are Americans. To the east and approximately 45 miles north of Kwajalein is the Island of Ebeye, where more than 15,000 Marshallese live on 89 acres - recognized as one of the most densely populated places in the world. More than half of the Ebeye population is below 18 years of age. Many of the Ebeye residents originated from other parts of the Marshall Islands, but relocated in order to find work on the base. A ferry operated by the US Army, running 10 times a day-six days a week, shuttles Kwajalein base workers between Ebeye and

Kwajalein Island. The Kwajalein economy is based primarily on the 20-year \$1.5 billion US aid agreement, ending in 2023.



Figure 3. Ebeye beach Mary L. Spencer, 1990)¹

The RMI has been a self-governing independent nation since 1986 - one of the Micronesian island states with a negotiated freely associated status with the US. Readers who are not familiar with the Marshall Islands should note that despite Kwajalein's central focus in this book, it is only one small part of the country. This physical relationship comes into better focus in Dvorak's later chapters where he relates the inter-island political process surrounding negotiation of RMI's Compact of Free Association with the US. Dvorak updates this history by relating details of the inter-group planning and debates among the Kwajalein-Ebeye Marshallese communities as they strategically negotiated with US representatives for the creation and renewal of leases for 11 Kwajalein islands. Included were land, air, and sea properties - for military and research use, and the testing of intercontinental ballistic missiles. He updates and considerably extends the historical background on Kwajalein that he provided in his earlier *Pacific Asia Inquiry* article, where he described Japan's role (2011). For example, he reveals a continuous thread of involvement of indigenous Marshallese women in the historical and political stories of Kwajalein; e.g. Hilda Heine's and Kathy Jetnil Kijiner's activities (p. 245-246), and the stories of women with chiefly power who were engaged in the lease negotiations.

¹ Harley Manner digitized the negatives and prints used in this article.

Coral and Concrete



Figure 4. High density characterizes housing on Ebeye, as shown in the path between homes (left). (Mary L. Spencer, 1990).



Figure 5. Ebeye children spend much time on the nearby beach. They are frequently seen collecting snails and tiny fish in depressions such as this (Mary L. Spencer, 1990).

Dvorak presents a compelling argument against the misconception that Kwajalein is too small to be important - "the middle of nowhere" (p. 1). Rather, he says, Kwajalein is "the middle of *both* now and here, not nowhere but now-here." He constructs a metaphor in which Kwajalein is likened to coral, allowing readers to reflect

on “many of the pasts that are sedimented into the present,” making it possible to “voyage through the *atollscapes* of Kwajalein.”

As expected of any contemporary author writing about RMI, Dvorak analyzes the colonization issues so intrinsic to Marshall Island histories. He brings depth, heterogeneity, and personal experience to his rendition, and much grounding with indigenous lives across multiple time periods of multiple Marshallese communities. His vantage point opens some of the stories of Marshallese strategy, persistence, inter-island and inter-clan competition and cooperation across this long horizon of time to which outsiders rarely have access. He addresses the “mythmaking” of the cartography of the Marshall Islands and other Pacific islands, reminding readers of the personal motives of the explorers who developed the maps; e.g., the case of Kiribati and Nauru – once construed Micronesian, but split off at the equator in the early 20th century to suit the political arrangements of Britain, the US, and Japan. Nevertheless, the Marshallese are aware of their sub-equator ties to these island nations (p. 38-39).

In Chapter 3, Dvorak takes a deep dive into the history and significance of a Japanese song he heard about from Ato Lankio, an indigenous historian of Ebeye. Lankio learned it at school on Kwajalein and heard it sung by Japanese soldiers who had come to defend the atoll from Americans. Dvorak traces the history of *Ai Shucho no Musume* (The Chieftain’s Daughter) from a time when it, “...could almost have been a theme song for Japanese colonization in the Marshall Islands;” and later, to the larger colonial push into the region, “...the southern advance.” The underlying notion is that colonialists would do well to seek the favor of the Chief via romantic liaisons with his daughter. The song evolved along more extreme racist and sexist lines and spread to Pohnpei and Chuuk. Versions of it live on today on the internet.² Dvorak places his analysis in the context of feminist commentary on the “dusky maiden” stereotype in tourist advertising and Hollywood, citing the work of Margaret Jolly (1997), Teresia Teaiwa (1999), and others.

In reviewing the racial imagery and verbalized characterizations of Marshallese women and men by the Japanese, Dvorak included representations in photography, advertising, linguistics, and public commentary. He explained how these reflect not only Japanese colonial racial stereotyping from the early 1900’s, but also attitudes that stubbornly continued into the future, dwelling on skin color and erotic qualities. He introduces readers to two racial categories that he found present in colonial Japanese discussions: Chamorro³ (*Chamoro-zoka*, lighter skin color) and Kanaka (*Kanaka-zoku*, darker skin color such as that of the Marshallese) (p. 74). He cites a Japanese educational film produced by the Japanese Navy in 1936 – *Waza Nanyū* – in which individuals in the Kanaka-zoku category were represented as darker and of a lower cultural level.

² Harley I. Manner identified several websites where readers can hear renditions of the old song: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YScBsTKxIQA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YScBsTKxIQA;);
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxdBMhUHBqM>

³ For further information on the debate regarding competing spellings, Chamorro versus CHamoru, readers should refer to: <https://www.guampedia.com/chamorro-vs-chamoru/>

After re-reading this section several times, I am still not clear on the facts regarding the presence of Chamorro people in the Marshall Islands, on Kwajalein specifically, and the use of these terms. Dvorak maintains that Chamorro is, "...a term taken completely out of context from the Mariana Islands." He explains that it is used by Japanese to mean "of mixed race" or "of lighter skin." He continues, "...Chamorros were thought to be more intelligent, sophisticated, and advanced, and they were admired for their beauty." Questions remain about how the terms originated, what attitudes and conditions surrounded the emergence and use of the Chamorro term, and whether or not it actually referred to ethnic Chamorro people. The inclusion of the views of indigenous scholars of Chamorro history would be essential to clarifying these issues.

Consideration of ethnic origin continued, focusing on the Japanese-Marshallese inter-marriages during the Japanese occupation of Kwajalein. Dvorak explained that due to the matrilineal nature of Marshallese culture, the pairing of Japanese men with Marshallese women worked out fairly well; i.e., these men were not threats to the orderly inheritance of Marshallese authority and they fulfilled the expectation that marriages not be made between closely related individuals. Moreover, such marriages enhanced the power of the Marshallese women and their children within the developing Japanese authority systems in the RMI and with Japan.

"Crushed Jewels" (*gyokusai*) was the Japanese term for the devastated post-World War II remnants of the Japanese Pacific empire, and in fact decisions to actually sacrifice parts of it. Dvorak leads the reader through the rationale of Japanese expectations for American targeting of Jaluit and Mili because they were more populated and had been more intensely fortified; and then the unexpected reality of the powerful American attacks on Kwajalein: "As American plans became apparent to Japanese commanders, the order was given for the Marshalls to be 'sacrificed' for the empire on behalf of the rest of the Fourth Fleet and ultimately the Japanese home islands." (p. 103). This intended massacre entailed the deaths of thousands of Japanese soldiers and support personnel. But it was the logical outcome of the overarching strategy of using Micronesia as a protective buffer zone for the Japanese homeland.

Woven through Dvorak's chapters are glimpses of his childhood on Kwajalein. He was taken there by his parents when his father began employment as an engineer in the US missile testing program. He shares a photo of himself with his mother in 1976 as he clambered over an old bunker (p. 93), and in one of his earlier publications he includes a family photo at about the same age with both parents (2016, p. 102). Remnants of the artifacts of the American and Japanese war on Kwajalein live on in his childhood memories. Even as a child he wondered about various vacated buildings and bomb craters, thus facilitating adult recognition of many of the landscapes that appear in the American military photos of victory on Kwajalein. He remembers being taken to annual events celebrating the US victory of Operation Flintlock (the US invasion of Kwajalein Atoll), in which a tent was set up with a photo display of the various stages of the invasion. In Chapter 4 Dvorak provides his systematic analysis of many of these war-time photographs, and in so doing he illustrates a research method that could be appropriately used to a greater extent in research throughout

Micronesia. Although also used effectively by other researchers (e.g., Higuchi, 2013), the method would be appropriate to the study of contemporary impacts of historical events in Micronesia on earlier as well as on today's younger generations. By combining the historical military photographs with other historical media, including contemporary interviews with some of the actual participants or their descendants, it was possible for Dvorak to explore questions regarding the presence of propaganda, of participant identity, environmental and cultural impacts, and other key aspects of historical events.

Dvorak notes (p. 96) that, with the benefit of knowledge of the continuing American military development on Kwajalein since WWII, Marshall Islanders may view the US role as part of an endless war: Atomic bomb tests, missile testing, mobilization for the Korean and Vietnamese wars, and the War on Terror. Citing another scholar of Marshall Islands life (Carucci, 1989), Dvorak suggests that the US atomic bomb tests at Bikini and Enewetak, and the missile testing at Kwajalein, are evidence of RMI's continuing legacy of proximity to US war.

In Chapter 5, *Capturing Liberation*, Dvorak displays and interprets many of the archival WWII War Images at the point of the American victory. Readers see images and their military interpretations during the early days and months following the US invasion, and read of island-wide celebration. Dvorak goes further to try to interpret the other side of this coin: The collapse of, "...thousands of years of 'free' Marshallese civilization into the brief span of American history, rendering that earlier memory obsolete. Thus, this fanfare marks the beginning of an era of American quasi-colonialism in the Marshall Islands and throughout Micronesia, in what policymakers aptly titled 'strategic trust' " (p. 154). Dvorak continues by reminding us that even now Marshall Islanders demonstrate their connection with the United States by joining the US military and being part of US forces fighting in actions such as the Iraq War. This is certainly not the first instance in world history when one country's posture with another has flip-flopped (e.g., consider the US WWII relationship with Russia versus their post-WWII positions). But Dvorak's point is well taken that: "...we are not asked to remember the mass graves where Japanese, Korean, and Okinawan bodies were buried by the thousands, not implored to know where the houses of Marshallese chiefs once stood, and not reminded that this is Marshallese land. When the US Army digs new trenches to repair its water pipes or replace a street lamp, the public rarely learns about all the bones they find." (p. 156).

In his final three chapters, Dvorak paces readers through the excruciating history of "displacement, replacement, upheaval, and change" visited upon the Marshall Islanders of Kwajalein by Japan and the United States (p. 167). These experiences include people losing their lands without compensation, having their families separated, having the fabric of their lives torn asunder; and perhaps worst of all, being exposed to radiation. This is a critical history for students of Pacific Island history and culture to know and use as they examine other ages and dimensions of indigenous Pacific Islander life. I wondered if the author was speaking tongue-in-cheek when he then mentioned that the American bomb tests, "...gave geologists the opportunity to test Charles Darwin's theories about atoll formation." Dvorak explains that up to that

time, the scientific community had never been entirely convinced; however, when the bombing exposed basaltic volcanic material below the coral, Darwin's explanation gained more credibility. Should the reader feel that at least one good thing came out of the devastating bombing?

Dvorak follows with examples of how Marshallese history is written, given that the name of each *wato* (parcel of land), carries that history (p. 180). Note his inclusion of the commentary of other noted Pacific Island scholars on this foundational point (e.g., Epeli Hau'ofa, 2000; and Carucci, 1997). Perhaps the effort of writing poetry and documenting the cultural history of a place will keep it alive in some way; i.e., in Dvorak's words: "*Writing back*" the Land.



Figure 5. The friendly children of Ebeye enjoy some spare time at this seaside store. Many of their parents travel on the boat that shuttles between Ebeye Island and Kwajalein Island each weekday to work at the base. Others are teachers, full-time parents or caretakers, while ocean activities provide vocations for many others (Mary L. Spencer, 1990).

In his penultimate chapter, Dvorak reviews the contentious tug-or-war between the Kwajalein Atoll Marshallese and the US military in the unending preparations for negotiations, actual negotiations, and renewed political struggles – within all of the various sectors of the indigenous Marshallese authority structure, as well as those of the Marshallese with the Washington and Kwajalein seated military establishment. He brings us into his experiences and observations of modern Marshallese political and cultural leaders as they plan their strategies and campaigns for public support. Readers

have the rare treat of learning of the women's resistance against US military use of their lands (e.g., p. 210-218). In the early 1980's, the RMI government negotiated a very disappointing 50-year lease of Kwajalein to the US for \$4 million. Marshallese opposition took the form of an invasion - a *jodik* - staged by a crowd composed mostly of women and children engaged in a sit-in. Such actions reflect the Marshallese matrilineal social structure - *alaplap* - in which women inherit the land. Dvorak explains *lejman juri*, which he translates as: "When a woman speaks, the men must give way;" and the related cultural principle in this context - *maman maronron* - "women are the protectors of the land."

In his final chapter Dvorak overviews his and others' remembrances of Kwajalein, each forming a fragment analogous to the tiny coral polyps that, through their collective accretion, form a coral atoll. The current Republic of the Marshall Islands-US Compact of Free Association ends in 2023. In May 2020 the US Department of State and the Republic of the Marshall Islands began negotiations on agreements to amend the Compact of Free Association between RMI and the US. Recently elected President of the RMI, David Kabua (succeeding Hilda Heine, first woman President of RMI) indicated that the renegotiation is one of his top priorities (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

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Coral and Concrete

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