

Reviewed by *P. Schmitt* Date 4/29/97REPOSITORY P.N.N.L.  
COLLECTION Marshall Islands  
BOX No. 5685  
FOLDER Enewetak 1977HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND  
OF THE PEOPLE OF ENEWETAKANTHROPOLOGY

Most anthropologists are of the opinion that the Marshalls and other islands of Micronesia were settled by peoples who migrated from the area of Indonesia and into the insular Pacific centuries ago. Reflecting the ancient migration patterns in Oceania, the Marshallese language belongs to the large Malayo-Polynesian language family which is spread from Madagascar, through the Indonesian area, and across Micronesia, Polynesia, and most regions of Melanesia. With regard to physical type, Marshallese are relatively short in stature and of slender build. They have brown skin, brown eyes, broad flat noses, straight to curly black hair, and sparse body hair.

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According to their own legends, the people of Enewetak had always lived on Enewetak Atoll prior to their relocation to Ujelang; in their own words: "We were there from the beginning." Because of Enewetak Atoll's isolated location in the northwestern region of the Marshallese archipelago, the people had relatively little contact with other cultures prior to the European era. As a consequence, the language and customs of the Enewetak people became different from those of other Marshall Islanders, and the people ceased to identify themselves with the others. Rather, they thought of themselves as a people who were separate and unique, "the people of Enewetak" as opposed to the islanders to the east and south.

The past and current accomplishments of the Enewetak people reflect intelligence and qualities of ingenuity, self-reliance, and hardiness of the Marshallese which have allowed them to meet the challenge of the atoll environment which is quite restrictive in comparison to the high volcanic islands of Oceania. Long before the advent of Europeans, the Marshallese had developed a culture which represented a sophisticated adaptation to their ecological setting. They were skilled navigators, expert builders of sailing canoes and are among the world's best fishermen. In response to traders, missionaries, and the successive colonial governments which have dominated the islands over the past century, they have been quick to learn and adjust to the different categories of outsiders. Today, they have achieved a good understanding of the behavior and values of Americans, and several have distinguished themselves in government and mission schools.

CULTURE AND ECONOMY

Throughout the Marshall Islands, the traditional forms of settlement patterns and exploitation of the natural resources are characterized by several general features. First, the people of an atoll reside on one or

more of its largest islands. Secondly, the people are quite mobile and various fishing and collecting activities are extended to embrace every niche of the environment. Regular expeditions are made to all islands in an atoll to collect coconuts, breadfruit, pandanus, arrowroot, and other vegetable foods in season. The marine resources are also exploited, and a wide variety of marine animals are used. Special expeditions are made to catch fish, collect shellfish, capture turtles, and gather their eggs. Several species of birds are also captured as a food source. The Enewetak people may be expected to continue this way of life to some degree when they return to their home atoll.

#### SOCIOPOLITICAL PATTERN

Before their relocation to Ujelang, the Enewetak People were divided into two separate and distinct communities which were located on the two largest islands of the atoll. One was situated on Enjebi Island on the northern rim, and the other was located on Enewetak Island across the lagoon in the southeast quadrant of the atoll. The traditional settlement pattern of both communities was dispersed; residences were located on separate land parcels and were scattered along the length of the lagoon beach.

Members of the two communities intermarried and cooperated in certain economic activities. Each functioned, however, as a separate sociopolitical unit, and its members had their own identity. In contrast to the identity of "the people of Enewetak" by which they defined themselves in reference to all other populations, the people of the Enjebi community were identified as driEnjebi, "the people of Enjebi Island," and those of the Enewetak community were driEnewetak, "the people of Enewetak Island."

The sociopolitical structure of the two communities was identical. Each was headed by a hereditary iroij or chief, and succession to the office was patrilineal. Chiefs directed the affairs of their respective communities, arbitrated disputes, and consulted one another with regard to concerns of the entire atoll and the total population's relations with outsiders. Each of the chiefs had authority over one of the two domains into which the atoll was divided. The domain of the Enewetak chief began with the Islands of Kidrenen, Ribewon, Boken, Mut, and Ikuren in the atoll's southwest quadrant; extended counterclockwise around the atoll's south and western rims up to and including Runit Island; and also included Aomon on the northeast rim. With the exception of Aomon, the Enjebi chief's domain began north of Runit with Billae Island and extended counterclockwise around the atoll's northern and western rims up to and including Biken Island.

Relations between the two communities and the traditional separation of the people were altered with the invasion of Enewetak Atoll. Because Enewetak and Enjebi Islands were devastated by the warfare, the U.S. Navy resettled all of the people in a compact village on small Aomon Island which, as indicated above, fell within the domain of the Enewetak Island chief. After several months, the Enjebi people moved to the nearby and adjacent Bijire Island which was within the domain of their own chief. With these relocations within Enewetak Atoll, the Enjebi and Enewetak peoples were no longer separated by the atoll's large lagoon; and while retaining their dual political structure, they in fact became a single community.

The consolidation of the population into one community and the new compact settlement pattern were perpetuated with the islanders resettlement on Ujelang Atoll. It has only one sizeable island, Ujelang Island; and the entire population was resettled there. Navy officials established a dividing line at the midpoint of the island and allotted the western half to the Enjebi people and the eastern half to the Enewetak people. A compact village was constructed in the middle of the island with the Enjebi and Enewetak peoples occupying houses on their respective sides of the dividing line. Later, each group divided the land on its portion of the island. At a still later date, other islands in the atoll were divided among members of the two groups.

During the initial years on Ujelang, the traditional political structure remained intact. The chiefs functioned in their accustomed roles, and they resisted American efforts to introduce democratic institutions. (According to American designs, each atoll population was to be governed by an elected council of elders headed by an elected magistrate.) By the early 1960's, however, some change was observable. Both chiefs were by then aged men; and being men who matured in a former era, some contemporary problems required that the decision-making process be opened to include younger men who had attended schools and/or had some other experiences with the American administration. Meetings of all males were occasionally held, and some decisions about community affairs were decided by a majority vote. The authority and status of the chiefs further declined in the latter 1960s when the old Enjebi chief died and was succeeded in office by his younger brother who was also an aged man and suffered the disadvantage of frequent poor health.

The combination of the above events precipitated a major transformation of the political structure. The chiefs yielded to younger men who desired and had been gaining a greater voice in community affairs. Then, in 1968, a magistrate and a council of 12 men were elected; reflecting the traditional division of the population, the Enjebi people elected six councilmen from among their ranks, and the Enewetak people elected six. The magistrate became the head of the entire community, and the council became the legislative body governing the people's affairs. In a very recent election, however, the 12 councilmen were elected from the population at large and not from the two groups. Thus, the current

council reflects a demise of the traditional system and indicates that the old division between Enjebi and Enewetak peoples has lost much of its meaning. The council is now a representative body drawn from the entire population and reflects a unified community with acknowledged common goals. The chiefs, however, remain important figures as advisors and men of influence.

#### CHURCH AND RELIGION

The church is the focal point for many community social activities of the Enewetak people. The prevailing religious system is a conservative type of Protestantism in which church services, Bible classes, church group meetings, and hymn singing have replaced traditional intertribal wars, sports, games, and dancing.

The minister is the spiritual leader of the community and is supported and assisted by the chiefs of the clans. The church functions are time consuming and require a considerable effort from the membership. Sundays in particular are devoted almost entirely to church services and related activities. From this it is apparent that the church influences the life of the Enewetakese to a great degree.

#### LAND

The atoll soil is poor, thus agriculture is limited. For centuries subsistence has been marginal and precarious for the island inhabitants despite hard work. Nevertheless, the residents have always maintained a deep emotional attachment to their home islands and ancestral land.

The land parcels, or watos, on Enewetak Atoll were like those found elsewhere in the Marshalls. Most commonly, each was a strip of land stretching across an island from lagoon beach to ocean reef and varying in size from about 1 to 5 acres in extent. The resources of all ecological zones were thus available to the individuals who held right to the land. Less commonly, a parcel was divided into two or more portions with transverse boundaries. This usually occurred when an island, Enjebi for example, was very wide. Boundaries were usually marked by slashes on the trunks of coconut trees, or less commonly, ornamental plants. Also, other features of the natural topography, e.g., large boulders on the ocean reef and the very configuration on an island, were used to fix the position of landholdings.

One facet of Enewetak Atoll culture that differed from that of the rest of the Marshalls was the system of land tenure and inheritances. In contrast to the rest of the Marshalls were matrilineal descent groups known as bwij or lineage constitute landholding corporations, the land

tenure system at Enewetak was in ideal and in practice a bilateral one. In most cases, a married couple divided the land they had each inherited among their children, and a child usually received some land from both his father and mother. As younger islanders matured, they worked the land with their parents. As the parental generation died and as members of the next generation married and produced children, the process was repeated with parents allocating land among their offspring.

The islanders resided upon their landholdings on Enjebi and Enewetak Islands. In most cases, households were headed by males and were situated upon land held by them. Ideally, residence was patrilocal, i.e., upon marriage, females moved to their husband's households, although exceptions to the rule did occur.

Every individual possessed rights to some land on islands away from the settlements on Enewetak and Enjebi. All land in the atoll was held by someone with the exception of one parcel on Enewetak Island which was donated to the mission.

#### RELOCATION OF THE ENEWETAK PEOPLE

After the capture of Enewetak Atoll in 1944, the U.S. Forces removed the Enewetak people from their homes on Enjebi and Enewetak Islands and placed them on Aomon. Later the Enjebi community moved (at their own request) to Bijire Island because the latter was under the authority of the Chief of the Enjebi community. In 1946, when nuclear testing was first considered for Enewetak, the Enewetak people were moved to Meik Island in Kwajalein Atoll. Their stay there was short, and they were again moved back to Aomon where they remained almost a year. Late in 1947, they were again moved, this time to Ujelang Atoll.

#### COMPARISON OF UJELANG AND ENEWETAK

Ujelang lies 124 miles southwest of Enewetak. In preEuropean times, Ujelang was inhabited by a Marshallese population. In the late 1800s a typhoon decimated the atoll and killed all but a handful of people who moved to the southern Marshalls. The atoll was then developed as a commercial copra plantation during the German and Japanese colonial eras. During the plantation period, a small group of islanders from the Eastern Carolines served as wage laborers on the atoll. It was abandoned, however, during World War II and was thus uninhabited until relocation of the Enewetak people.

Ujelang is much smaller than Enewetak, both in size of the lagoon and in the total dry land area. A comparison of both atolls in square miles of area shows:

	<u>Lagoon</u>	<u>Dry Land</u>
Ujelang Atoll	25.47	0.67
Enewetak Atoll	387.99	2.75

From this comparison, it is apparent that the potential for production of food from the reefs and lagoon is considerably less on Ujelang than it is on Enewetak. The limited food potential on Ujelang has made it necessary to import more commodities than would normally be required on Enewetak.

#### LIVING CONDITIONS ON UJELANG

The U.S. Navy had constructed a village on the main island of Ujelang for the displaced Enewetak people and a brush clearing program was in progress when they arrived on the atoll. Coconut trees planted during German and Japanese administrations were still standing and bearing. Seedlings of breadfruit and pandanus were brought ashore and planted. After the Enewetak people had settled in, the Navy departed.

While on Ujelang, the people have been housed, supplied with a water system (including numerous rain catchments), a church, a council hall, a school, and a dispensary. Supply ships have brought in tools, clothing, and food to supplement the meager natural resources.

The people practice a nonintensive type of agriculture but utilize the environment to the maximum, using the plants that can survive and produce in the atoll environment. Coconut is converted to copra for cash sale to the visiting Trust Territory supply ship. Consumer goods are purchased from the ship with the proceeds of the copra sales. The interest payments from the trust funds provided by the TTPI administration also help buy needed commodities. Rice, flour, sugar, canned meats, and other canned goods are staple items of the diet and have been for many years. Fish, clams, lobster, turtles (flesh and eggs), seabirds (flesh and eggs), chickens, and pigs provide protein in the diet. The marine resources are extremely important in the diet of these people.

Coconuts, pandanus, breadfruit, and arrowroot are the main vegetable products used. Bananas, papayas, and squash are used to a less extent, probably due to the relative scarcity of the banana and papaya which do not seem to grow well on Ujelang.

The former Enewetak inhabitants attempted to adjust to their new location. They had, and still have, several formidable problems with which to cope. The most obvious problem, and one which they have uppermost in their minds, is the great disparity in the size of Ujelang and that of Enewetak. The traditional Marshallese pattern of habitation is for family units to live on their land parcels, not in a village cluster. While it is common for community buildings, church, school, dispensary, and warehouse to be centralized for convenience and access to all, dwellings are usually dispersed over the length of the lagoon beach of an island. This pattern is obviously desirable from the point of view of environmental sanitation and public health. As described, the traditional settlement pattern of the Enewetakese was disrupted because of their relocation.

#### DEMOGRAPHY

It is estimated that nearly all of the Enewetak people want to return to the atoll as their leaders have stated on several occasions. The few who have jobs and interests elsewhere may leave the atoll after a visit, but it is expected that they will want to reestablish old land claims and see how the atoll has changed in thirty years. These people will visit the atoll at intervals, just as they visit Ujelang today, and will eventually retire on Enewetak. Present planning anticipates the return of all the Enewetak people.