

**Adopting a Marshallese Child:
American-White Mom (Mama Ri-palle), Marshallese kids (Ajri Ri-majol)**

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To Future and Current Adoptive Families

For starters, I am wildly under-qualified to write about Marshallese culture and all that adopting a Pacific Islander child entails. For most of my life, I was only vaguely aware that the Marshall Islands existed. I had read about US nuclear testing in the region and had some awareness that the Marshall Islands were involved in World War II. When we embarked upon adoption, we were open to a child of any ethnicity and went to a lot of effort to learn about the impact of adoption, both positive and negative, from adult adoptees' perspectives. I strongly recommend doing this if you are seriously considering adoption. I read plenty of books and articles about adopting African American children and biracial children. However, I never encountered information about adopting a Marshallese child, or even a Pacific Islander for that matter.

Over the past close to 5 years, we have, through trial and error, stops and starts, and through myriad and mildly bizarre efforts (that have even included leaving notes on cars with "Island life" and "Yokwe" stickers in the grocery parking lot), learned quite a bit more. We can never thank our local and international Marshallese friends and extended family for their grace and kindness in putting up with our clumsy attempts to understand.

The information I provide about culture should be understood in light of the fact that I am not a member of the culture myself and that every individual is unique and not representative of their culture's generalities. Also, if you the reader are a person of color, some of the more general information about race that I touch on you know better than I. So bear with me.

Marshallese History

I should probably mention that my husband and I are a bit of history buffs. So if that's not something you connect with, skip ahead to the *Marshallese Culture* section and *Final Points*. But keep in mind that the history of the islands—particularly their use as a thermonuclear testing site—has a huge impact on the Marshallese today.

A little bit about geography first. The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is located in the area of the Pacific Ocean called Micronesia, between Hawaii and Australia, an island country of scattered atolls, or ring shaped islands formed of coral. Most of the atolls are low-lying, rising sometimes just a few feet above sea level, and extremely narrow, with a lagoon and ocean side visible. The islands share water boundaries with the Federated States of Micronesia to the west, and Kiribati and Nauru to the south.

Probably about 4-5,000 years ago, the first peoples traveled across vast oceans from the areas that are now Taiwan, the Philippines, and Southeast Asia to populate the islands. Other waves of migrations came from other areas of Asia and Melanesia. Spanish and Portuguese explorers visited in the 1500s. English explorers followed, and John Marshall gave his name to the island after visiting in 1788.

Meanwhile, the Marshallese became known as some of the most advanced navigators in the entire world.

The Marshallese's indigenous religion was largely replaced when Christianity was embraced in the 19th century. Spain, then Germany, claimed the islands in the 1800s and early 1900s. After that came the Japanese occupation, which ended when the United States captured the islands in 1944.

Unfortunately for the Marshallese, the United States' assumption of control of the islands corresponded with the time of US nuclear testing and use, including their use in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The United States saw the Marshall Islands as a relatively isolated location with a small population, and saw an opportunity to use it as a test site. The US Navy met with leaders of Bikini Atoll and requested permission to test nuclear weapons for the purpose of peace. Because the US had liberated them from a brutal Japanese occupation, the leaders honored and trusted the US.

US Trust Territory of the Marshall Islands

The United States, meanwhile, produced propaganda videos which denigrated the local population and justified their plans. Although the military evacuated Bikinians downwind from their islands in 1946, they kept the local Marshallese people in the dark about what they were learning about acute radiation sickness and detrimental effects on animal life. Some islands simply ceased to exist after bombing. In 1954, the military detonated the "Bravo" test, which was the equivalent of one thousand Hiroshima-sized bombs. The US did not evacuate various Marshallese island communities, despite being aware that the wind would carry radioactive fallout directly to inhabited islands. Islanders, meanwhile, had no idea what was falling from their skies, watching in confusion as "snow flakes" fell from the sky. Many people suffered acute and chronic radiation poisoning as a result. The radiation released from this and other tests exposed every atoll in RMI to radiation. The US failed to provide medical care, and allowed Rongelap, Enewetak, and other peoples to continue to eat contaminated local foods, such as crab, coconut, and fish.

Large scale thermonuclear and nuclear testing continued until 1958, with 67 nuclear bombs detonated, the equivalent of 7,000 Hiroshimas of radiation.

On May 1, 1979, the Marshallese people formed their own government and in 1982 the official name became the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI).

Compact of Free Association

After years of negotiation, the U.S. and RMI approved the Compact of Free Association ("COFA"), a unique relationship in which the US provides defense to the RMI and allows Marshallese citizens to enter the US, to work and attend school here. Additionally, the Compact limited the people defined as "exposed" to radiation to certain people in the Rongelap and Utrik Atolls. Medical monitoring was to be provided to these people, numbered fewer than 200 people originally of those exposed. The Compact established the Kwajalein Atoll as the United States' military base. The US agreed to provide a one-time settlement of \$150 million dollars to the RMI government. In the 1980s, as

islanders became aware of the devastation to their islands, Marshall Islander Darlene Keju began speaking internationally about the effects of nuclear radiation on the people of the Marshall Islands. In the 80s, a Nuclear Claims Tribunal sought to address the class action claims brought by members of the Bikini, Rongelap, Utrik, Enewak and Ailuk islands (Wotho and other islands were also impacted). Its judgment of 2.2 billion dollars, however, was paid out only very partially, as the fund was not properly funded, nor managed, by a US company, and ran out of money. In the end, less than 4 million was awarded. Meanwhile, the US paid more than \$562 million to people injured as a result of nuclear tests in Nevada, which had far less radiation impact in terms of amount and numbers of people impacted than the Marshall Islands, as there were only 4 atmospheric tests conducted in Nevada.

Importance of Land in RMI

Traditional Marshallese society is built around land as a resource. Land rights are matrilineal, as land is passed from a mother to her older children and the land is shared by the entire extended family. There are three groups of people: the iroij, meaning the chief leaders who are responsible for caring for the people; the alap, the land managers who maintain the land; and the rijerbal, or workers, who work the land and provide products for export. The impact of nuclear testing was multi-fold, as sick and landless people were forced to seek shelter in radiologically safer islands, primarily Ebeye and Majuro. Ebeye, with 9,000 or more people living on 66 acres of land, became one of the most densely populated places in the world. Because radiation had entered the food chain through traditional foods (such as crab, fish, pandanus, taro, arrowroot, and coconuts), foreign foods such as rice and SPAM were imported, at prices far higher than one would pay in the states. In recent years, over 90% of foods are imported and sold for up to four times the cost in the US. These and other changes in diet led to further health problems, such as diabetes, obesity, and heart disease. And then there were the health problems directly related to radiation itself, such as miscarriage, “jelly fish” babies, and high rates of various kinds of cancers. Overcrowding resulted from the displacement, and lack of access to their home islands where they could produce copra, an economic staple, led to large-scale unemployment. Many Marshallese began to think about other employment opportunities overseas, and some joined the US military. The impact of global warming became an additional factor as time went on.

Migration to the US

In the 1980s, Marshall Islander John Moody moved to Springdale, Arkansas. Although migration had been a factor, following the COFA law, many Marshallese, sometimes related by distant blood, followed John, beginning a large scale migration. John began working for Tyson, one of the big chicken processors that employ large numbers of Marshallese, along with Pilgrim, George’s, and Peco Foods. Many Marshallese families will pay for one family member to get to the United States, then live in communal homes, saving up to 50% of their take home pay to bring one more family member to the US. Over time, much of the family is able to move to the United States. Gradually, Springdale and Northwest Arkansas began to notice women in floral skirts wearing flip flops and keeping the indoor heat at 80 degrees during the winter. It wasn’t always a warm welcome, as racial attitudes punctuated the community’s experience. Media emphasis was sometimes put on Marshallese criminals, even though the criminal rate

for Marshallese is far lower than the general population. There were also somewhat limited opportunities for the Marshallese in poultry processor management. In 2008, the RMI opened a Consulate in Springdale.

Marshallese Culture

Many Arkansas teachers, following their western culture, wondered why students weren't always showing up on time for class or why they were avoiding eye contact when spoken to. When we first met the birth family of our daughter, it was similarly awkward. No one would look at us. We didn't understand what was going on. It was uncomfortable, and we were confused. What weren't we understanding?...It turns out a lot...

Marshallese culture is significantly different than western-influenced American culture. It is a communal culture, where the value of family is primary, and significant decisions are not individual, but often made through elders and older family members. Family is viewed differently and more expansively than in the west, where the nuclear family is the primary unit. In Marshallese culture, the word for "mother" means your mother and aunts, and "father" means your father and uncles. Aunts and uncles help raise their nieces and nephews. Similarly, your siblings are honored as older siblings, or seen as younger siblings, and the word for siblings also refers to your cousins. Similarly, great uncles and aunts are seen as grandparents. In this beautiful way, each person in a family has more people who care about them and have responsibility for them. If your great uncle is your "jimma," or grandpa, he is someone you care for as your grandfather as he ages. Similarly, your uncles and aunts help provide for you as you have need when you are young.

Adoption is similarly culturally normative. Children are seen as a blessing. The shame that seems to mark adoptions in the west is missing, as adoption is traditionally considered by an extended family member who is able to care for the child, when the parents are not able to. More recently, economic conditions have led to more adoptions outside of Marshallese families. When a child is adopted he or she gains TWO families, who are permanently interconnected as extended family. This is why closed adoption is never a good choice for a Marshallese child. Even in the less common case of the relationship between adoptive parents and birth mother or father being strained for whatever reason, the child has a wealth of family members interested in connecting with and belonging to the child. Belongingness is part and parcel of Marshallese culture, and enriches the life of your child. Caring, kindness, and respect are cultural values. Marshall Islanders are members of large extended kin groups, or clans, and marriage is permitted outside of one's clan group. Because of the strong sense of communal responsibility and family as the most important thing, Marshallese care for their elders and respect them. Elders are lovingly cared for in their family members' home until their last days.

Respect for one's elders is another value of the culture. Honor, or "kautiej" is shown to elders, older members, and people able to help you financially. One sign of respect for those who have more power or are older than you is to lower your eyes when being

spoken to. Another sign of honor is to avoid walking in front of one's elders and, if the relative age or ranking of a person is unknown, one should always defer to the other. Different body language from the west is used to indicate "yes," such as raising the eyebrows, or "no," such as lowering eyebrows in reply. Sometimes no isn't said directly, but is communicated through lack of response. Sometimes no is communicated by indicating "perhaps later" or "ejanin alikkar," it's not clear yet.

Modesty is important, and clothing covering one's shoulders and thighs is typical. Similarly, talking about women's health issues or sexual health is not typical. This is considered something private. There is limited language for the private parts of one's body, although breastfeeding is supported.

Children are taught to respect their elders, and celebrated in their own ways. The kemem, or first birthday has traditionally been one of the biggest celebrations of one's life, a time to commemorate achieving a year of life, which harkens back to a time when infant mortality rates were higher. The kemem is a huge cultural celebration. In Marshallese communities, there is often one or more going on every weekend, and family members, often related somewhat distantly by western standards, but considered family in Marshallese terms, show up to celebrate. This is because the culture is inclusive, with the norm being an open invitation, rather than exclusive, or by written invitation only. It is not uncommon for 300-500 people to come, with the parents of the child and close family members wearing matching clothing, guams for the women, or matching t-shirts. The cake is usually personalized, and there are traditional dances, traditional foods, traditional gifts given to guests, such as blankets, and rounds of dollar bills given to the celebrating family as they sit on a traditional mat. Similar traditions, such as rounds of dances by individual island or church dance groups with dollars given in rounds, occur for other holiday celebrations, such as Christmas, Easter, Gospel Day, Constitution day (May day), and Manit (Culture) day.

These life celebrations are not rushed, and often happen on "island time." The pace of life in the islands is slower, and the value of taking one's time, not being in a rush, and of enjoying time together is on display, as events scheduled for 4pm are likely to start at 6-7pm and run for many hours, sometimes into the early morning.

Possessions are similarly seen in a different manner. Due to the interdependence of life on the islands, and particularly of the outer islands, possessions are held with open hands, always available to a friend or family member who has a need. Many things are shared, and this value is carried over to the US. At family celebrations, it is traditional that a guest may take something that they need or desire. For example, if your family has a computer, and you need one, you are free to take it and use it. This can be a confusing value for westerners, who don't understand how the gift they gave someone is no longer in their possession, but it is also a generosity of spirit that those of us from the west can learn from. Similarly, if a person has a need, it is not uncommon to let those who are able to help know of the need, for the community thrives together.

Since the missionaries came to the islands in the late 1800s, Christianity has become the dominant religion in the Marshall Islands, with more than 50% belonging to the

United Church of Christ and Assembly of God denominations, the rest being a mix of other Protestant and Catholic traditions, as well as some LDS (Mormon). There is a small minority of Muslim converts and other faiths in the islands as well. Church is often the place where the cultural traditions are transmitted and kept, with some church services going for 3-4 hours, and holidays having special celebrations and cultural dances by various island or church groups sometimes going well into the midnight hours.

There are large Marshallese communities in Arkansas, Hawaii, California (especially Costa Mesa) and Washington (especially Spokane), but smaller communities can be found in any US state.

Much of the culture is transmitted through language. There are two dialects, the Ralik (western) and Ratak (eastern). Older and ancient forms of the language are used by elders, but the language has evolved over time. Similarly, the orthography officially changed in 2010, formalizing a new spelling of the language. This is why you will find language books with dramatically different spelling than newer language learning booklets, and why you will find variety even between individual Marshallese and how they spell the words. Even the word for “hello” and “love” is spelled alternatively “Yokwe” (old spelling, but still often used), and “iakwe,” the new spelling.

Multi-Racial Family

Beyond learning about the culture, I found I had much to learn about being a multi-racial family. When we were adopting one of our children, the hospital had two categories on their record, a check box for “white,” and a check box for “not white.” It was a stark and eye opening introduction to the challenges we have since encountered on a regular basis as white parents of brown-skinned children. We had to prepare ourselves for raising children who will have different life experiences than we will have, different encounters with authorities, different job interview experiences, etc. Because to be honest, the concept of “colorblind” has really been about not being fully informed about what our brown brothers and sisters face. My husband and I have continually learned the importance of acknowledging the realities of color and the challenges that black and brown people in our country face due to our complex racial history. If you adopt children of another race, be prepared, as you will be asked things about your children that will raise your eyebrows and boil your blood. Your children will need you to fully have their backs.

Most Importantly...Final Points

So what would my take-away points be for potential future adoptive families and those new to adopting Marshallese children?

1. Be patient and humble in the learning process as you learn about a new culture and new ways of relating. It won't always make sense, but you are learning, and the Marshallese will meet you more than half-way as you make efforts.

2. Realize that by committing to a Marshallese adoption, you are committing to an **open adoption**, where you not only gain a new family member, but also gain a new extended family and culture. This is incredibly enriching, and shouldn't be taken lightly.

3. When you adopt a Marshallese child, you are adopting yourself into a culture, just as your birth family has entrusted their child into your culture. Talk to your Marshallese family (and by that I mean the Marshallese definition, which includes very extended family) about local Marshallese churches and communities for points of connection. If they don't know anyone, get to know connected Marshallese leaders online and they will connect you. Culture camps won't be enough. Don't stop until you are connected. It will bear dividends in your child's life.

4. This one may be a controversial point, but I'm hoping you'll hear me out. I think it is important to make a sincere attempt to learn the Marshallese language. Your children will be bicultural, part of both your culture and the Marshallese culture. Knowing (some or even fluent) Marshallese will give them access to their birth culture and families. If they are disconnected from their culture, they are in a way, disconnected from themselves. There are many ways to learn Marshallese now, including an online Marshallese-English dictionary, the accessible online booklet Practical Marshallese, by Peter Rudiak-Gould, and of course, interacting with Marshallese people on a regular basis.

5. Keep learning. There are so many great books and texts out there. I've listed some in my reference list for this article. Your child will thank you for it.

6. Realize that your child will have a different life experience than you. Again, be willing to humbly learn about how brown-skinned people in our country are often treated differently. Make sure your children will have health care providers, dentists, family friends, teachers, and schoolmates who look like them and can be mentors and role models. Learn from adult adoptee experiences (through books, blogs, and other sources) about what made their journey easier, and what made it harder. Stretch yourself, and get a bit uncomfortable so that your children can be more comfortable in their world.

Blessings (Jeramman) with your Ri-majol child(ren)!

Resource List

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