'Because of the missionaries': The ambiguous presence of past missionaries in the Marshall Islands

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ABSTRACT
This article analyzes the contemporary presence of pioneering missionaries to the Marshall Islands by looking at how conventional conversion narratives construe them as agents of radical transformation. Ridden with ambiguity, conversion is a recursive factor in social and political life, a fact that point to the context-dependent nature of this specific narrative. While rupture often serves as a useful metaphor in folk-models of conversion, it reflects a perspective with a clear political goal and therefore glosses over its inherent ambiguity and dynamism. In the Marshall Islands, the conversion narrative (where the past was horrid while the present is harmonious) is only one way of addressing contemporary challenges through the past. Running parallel to this is another narrative that speaks to a perceived moral degradation in the present, a discourse that relies on a harmonious rather than horrid past. By contrasting the contemporary presence of past missionaries with a historical analysis of the conversion era, this article argues that, more than a moment in history, cultural change is a discursive tool in which the people populating the ethnographic present use distinct representations of the past to address what is at stake here and now.

Stepping into the Protestant church at Rupe on Epoon (Ebon) in the Marshall Islands one quickly notices a painting hanging above the alter. The painting does not have a strictly religious motif but holds great cultural and religious significance in the Marshall Islands in general and Epoon in particular. It depicts the missionary brig Morning Star as it makes its way through the waves to bring the Gospel to Epoon in 1857, having travelled all the way from Boston, Massachusetts. That is at least what the painting evokes for the local churchgoers, whose thoughts are drawn to that crucial Saturday afternoon in December when the first Christian missionaries settled on Epoon. In reality, the depicted ship is the barkentine Morning Star IV, which served the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) from 1884 until 1900 (Baker 1945), three decades after the original Morning Star first sailed the Micronesian seas.
During that time, waves of change had swept the area, turning many Marshall Islanders towards Christianity in a Congregationalist form modelled after Calvinist puritans from New England. In fact, the ABCFM had stepped back from the atolls at that point, leaving the local population in charge of their own church. Marshallese ministers, many of whom were trained on Epoon, ran the local churches and Marshallese missionaries were travelling across the vast ocean that unites the atolls to preach the gospel. Never severing its tie to their American forebears, the Marshallese Congregational Church followed the U.S. movement of uniting several Congregational denominations into the United Church of Christ (UCC) in 1957 (Garret 1997, 431). In 2020, the UCC was still the largest denomination in the Marshalls, its members known as Būrotijen (Protestants), and the church at Rupe still held a special place.

While this rapid and cumulative historical sketch, with its carefully selected milestones, takes some time to communicate in writing, it flashes through every Marshallese church-goer at Rupe in matter of milliseconds from seeing the Morning Star painting upon arrival. In an instant, this painting reminds the Būrotijen of the way in which the missionaries from Boston overcame their own fears to ‘enter in among a people lost, depraved, exposed to endless ruin, and tell them of the way to life’, as one missionary put it (Doane 1858, 186). This is a story from the past that lives very well in contemporary self-representations among Būrotijen and other Christians on Epoon and the Marshall Islands. The imagery of the first missionaries has a special place in the national Gospel Day (every first weekend of December), in local Christmas celebrations, and, for Epoon Būrotijen at least, Friday morning church services at sunrise. Each of these events commemorate the coming of the missionaries from Boston and, by extension, Christianity to the atolls some 160 years ago. Such commemoration also takes place in everyday life, especially in encounters with foreigners (such as anthropologists), through storytelling sessions, regular conversations, and discussions of origin.

This is an ethnographic account of the ways in which the early ABCFM missionaries to the Marshall Islands still figure in everyday life and ritual settings on Epoon. I analyze how Marshallese Christians continue to remember, relive and re-enact the initial conversion as a rupturing moment occurring more than 160 years ago. While these forms of remembering use the language of rupture to evoke a clear break with a dark past (see also Meyer 1998; Robbins 2007), it is clear from the very need to remember that the conversion experience is an eternal process that still holds relevance for contemporary Christians. Indeed, Debra McDougall (2020, 205) has recently argued that Christianity derives its distinctive character from the ‘way it continues to focus adherents’ attention upon that which came before, compelling them to renew their faith, repent and seek redemption’. In other words, it requires a continuous relationship with the past to remember what one distances oneself from and orient oneself towards because the past can come back to haunt you with temptations of sinful ways (Harris 2006, 72). Therefore, rupture is recursive. In order to have potency for the generations that follow the initial conversion era, it must be relived and re-enacted.

In the Marshall Islands, the conversion narrative has come to function as an origin story (Berta 2021). By pointing to a specific event at a specific moment in history, the initial arrival of the missionaries, as the point in which the islands were born again in Christ, contemporary Marshall Islanders are constructing a story of radical cultural change, a story that places Christianity firmly within culture (McDougall 2020). When evoking or re-
enacting this event, individuals can hinge onto this moment of rupture to relive or reconfirm it for themselves. In seeking their own personal salvation, Būrotijen on Epoon find comfort and inspiration in what they perceive to have been a radical transformation that affected their entire culture, so that today, ‘everything on this atoll is rooted in theology’, as one deacon put it. By this, he meant that such things as place names, local legends, atoll regulations, and, indeed, the origin of the atoll itself could be traced to the era of early missionisation.

However, this particular narrative is context-dependent and only discusses one particular mode of historicity. It is a positive story that emphasizes cultural transformation in ways that conflate Christianity and culture (usually called manit). Running parallel to the conversion narrative is a narrative of moral decay. This is construed as a critique of modernity and serves to comment on the contemporary social life, which is perceived to be wrought with selfishness and moral decay – the very opposite of what manit entails. This narrative also imagines a break with the past, but in negative terms, as a transformation from a harmonious pre-contact past to a socially cold present. While these mirroring narratives rely on contradicting historicities, they both address the morally good, albeit in different terms and in different contexts.

Together, these narratives and representations convey a more complex view of the recent history of the Marshall Islands than any of them can manage on their own. However, they both gloss over the complex cultural landscape that characterizes this recent history in important ways. First, the missionaries were far from the only foreigners to settle in the Marshall Islands in the mid-1800s. Traders both preceded and followed in the wake of the Morning Star, and they established a vibrant coconut trade soon after the first mission station was in place. Second, the early missionaries were not just American, but Native Hawaiian as well, people whose parents had been converted by pioneering ABCFM missionaries to Hawai‘i. Third, Marshall Islanders did not comprise one coherent group, but were increasingly pulled in different directions by different actors. While chiefs played a key role in welcoming the missionaries to their atolls, they also played a key role in the resistance against them once they realised that they had more to gain by collaborating with traders (LaBriola 2019).

**Methodology**

This article builds on two periods of fieldwork on Eponon and Mājro (Majuro) in the Marshall Islands, the first in 2014 the other in 2018. Doing fieldwork on Eponon in 2014, I received training similar to a rūkkatak, a pupil learning about the Christian way, under a Protestant deacon and recognized cultural expert I will call Kanpil. As a testament to how religious practice and belief gain culturally specific expression, the conventional Marshallese conceptualization of a Christian, Kūrijin, is not merely one who believes in Jesus Christ, but a person who has given an explicit promise to God, akin to a confirmation. Once a Kūrijin, one must give up using alcohol, tobacco, and other substances, live either in marriage or celibacy, refrain from badmouthing others, and lots of other behavioural norms, lest one faces suspension. Therefore, most people make their promise sometime after turning forty. Before that, one is a rūkkatak. Through in-depth conversations and explicit lessons from Kanpil (and other deacons) and loose and more exploratory (edgy even) conversations with fellow rūkkatak, I
learned about the interrelations between *manit* and Christianity and how that ties back to ‘the missionaries’, meaning the pioneering American couples operating in the mid to late 1800s.

Through two archival stints at the Hawaiian Mission Houses Historic Site and Archives in Honolulu and the Hamilton library, University of Hawai’i at Mānoa, I have collected and digitized from microfilm and original papers several thousands of pages of missionary letters written about or from the Marshall Islands between 1855 and the 1920s. In this article, I focus on the early days of missionization on Epoon so that the missionaries’ accounts can complement, challenge, and expand that of my interlocutors 160 or so years later. Together, this material allows for an analysis of cultural change that builds of ethnohistory and folk-models, but that nevertheless challenges their level of complexity and urges scholars to investigate the ambivalence embedded in such models to reach a deeper understanding of the dynamics of cultural life.

To a certain extent, then, I will scrutinize or even deconstruct certain of my research participants’ claims about the past to highlight alternative representations. I do this in two specific ways. One is by using missionary letters to reconstruct a perspective that reflects their own. This amounts to a reconstruction that centres on the emotional rollercoaster that was the missionary experience in words that they used themselves. The other is by using the same missionary accounts to extrapolate a picture of the larger social context in which the early missionization took shape. My purpose for doing so is to illustrate the nitty gritty dynamics of the conversion process as it unfolded in the early decades after the initial missionary settlement. This will provide a deeper appreciation of the social complexity that characterized Epoon at this point in history. While this approach leads me to challenge my research participants’ representations of the past, it is also what allows me to take people seriously in the sense that I use their situated representations of past events as an analytical starting-point to understand what is at stake for them today (see also Thomas 1989). I am not concerned with the truth value in such representations. Indeed, I do not understand any of the narratives of historicity presented here as truth claims and I am not concerned with constructing an account of what really happened. Rather, I am concerned with how ‘the past is resurrected into the present’ through such representations so as to address or deal with contemporary issues (Neumann 1992, 25). Therefore, I begin in the present by outlining two parallel and seemingly contradictory narratives of historicity.

**Narratives of ambivalence**

During fieldwork, I often encountered ambivalent statements about the past and present, often from the same individuals. For example, the same person could emphasize the virtues of the Marshallese way of life vis-à-vis the American by comparing murder rates, before complaining that Marshall Islanders have become just like Americans by putting personal gains over family obligations. What I have come to understand is that these are statements that comments on the morally good from the vantage-point of two separate narratives about historical transformation. The first statement emphasizes the Christian way of life and how the initial conversion turned Marshall Islanders from a violent to peaceful people. The second statement identifies a perceived moral decay following from ‘modernity’, a transformation that turned Marshall Islanders from a generous to a selfish
people (see also McDougall 2016, chaps. 4–5). The dual existence of these parallel understandings of the contemporary Marshall Islands is visible in two official holidays. These are Manit Day, which celebrates a nostalgic past as it lives in the present, and Gospel Day, which re-enforces a break from a vicious past by celebrating the Christian present. In what follows, I will flesh out the contours of the dual narratives of historical transformation as they exist today.

Rupture is an important part of the ri-Epoon folk model of conversion. Kanpil, for instance, explained that the missionaries had saved Marshall Islanders from their 'old way of life' that consisted of nothing but ‘war, war, war’. Echoing this notion, many Marshall Islanders share an idea about their non-Christian forebears as violent savages that needed saving (see also Rudiak-Gould 2010). One man even told me that ‘they [people of the past] not only killed each other but drank each other’s blood, like vampires’. By spreading the gospel, the missionaries presumably put a stop to that. In Kanpil’s understanding, which all Būrotijen I discussed this with later confirmed, the missionaries had chosen Epoon because it was a bad place, filthy and populated by dark (heathen) people, or savages. As he put it, this is visible in the etymology of the atoll's name that stems from iep waan, a basket meant for garbage.1

While past violence is the most powerful and most commonly invoked image, the garbage of yore includes much more than that. The rhetoric of the Christian transformation includes the abandonment of old customs (like taboos, tattoos, and funeral rites) a changing appearance and attire (new hair styles and other types of clothing), and the disappearance of all kinds of sorcery and black magic. The common understanding is that conversion was an all-encompassing experience in which evil was conquered by good. According to the contemporary Būrotijen imagery, the Christian rebirth of the Marshall Islands that began on Epoon is a direct parallel to the birth of Jesus Christ himself. Jesus, too, was born in a filthy place, a horse’s stable, a place stripped of dignity, just like Epoon used to be. Like Jesus, Epoon had to undergo a battle between good and evil before it could be resurrected and take its place in eternity.

The story of Būbwīn Epoon recounts how, in an effort to hide Epoon from an evil spirit, a good spirit hid the atoll in the mouth of a triggerfish (būb) and hung it up on the sky where it now forms a constellation called Būbwīn Epoon, in English called the Southern Cross (a powerful symbol for missionaries across Oceania). Like the cross, the triggerfish is a symbol of death, as these are thought to be the first to eat those who perish at sea, but they are also thought to be symbols of eternal life as they have found their place in heaven. From there, the gospel sends its protecting force around Epoon so as to keep it safe and righteous. According to this interpretation, the missionaries chose to settle on Epoon precisely because it was a filthy place so that they could provide salvation by being born again in Christ.

Note that this version of events only recounts one of several existing interpretations of why the missionaries ended up at Epoon, the aim being to stress the rupturing effect of the gospel. Another story explains that the arrival of the Morning Star had already been prophesized among ri-Epoon, so that they were quick to accept the newcomers and receive their message (Tobin 2002, 157–58). I have previously documented how George Pierson had several meaningful encounters with Marshall Islanders between 1855 and 1857, after a whaler named Ichabod Handy introduced him to the powerful chief Kaibuke during on their way to the mission station in Kosrae. Captain Handy, who had
been trading in the area for more than a decade, had agreed to take Pierson through what was then known as the Gilbert and Marshall Islands with the aim of finding suitable islands for new mission stations. Kaibuke, who was already on good terms with Captain Handy, and who likely saw an opportunity for some kind of personal gain, urged the missionaries to come to his home atoll, Epoon. After their initial meeting, Pierson met, aided, and became friendly with no less than three separate groups of castaways from Epoon, which enabled him to learn the language and to give introductory lectures on the gospel. When Pierson arrived in Kosrae, he was determined to return to Epoon as soon as possible (Berta 2021).

The conversion narrative is not meant as an accurate historical analysis, but to convey a sense of shared religiosity and a common trajectory. Rather than historical nuance, it places emphasis on simple categories like good and evil to present a story of social transformation among a uniform people. However, for most ri-Epoon, the past is more ambiguous than that. Running parallel to the conversion narrative is another version of the past, a nostalgic version, that emphasizes contemporary moral decay. This narrative does not challenge the conversion story, nor does it charge the coming of Christianity as an acculturation factor. Instead, these narratives work independently of each other, meant to serve different ends in different contexts.

While the conversion narrative addresses religiosity, the modernity narrative deals with more recent issues (albeit with an equally long history) of money dependency, urbanization, out-migration, health issues, nuclear legacy and so forth. In this narrative, the ancestors were healthier and stronger, and often lived as long as 150 years or more. They were not warlike savages, but generous, kind people who really knew how to live according to manit, how to respect each other, and how to co-exist peacefully. This stands in contrast to the perceived moral corruption, stinginess, and selfish ways of today. Therefore, the modernity narrative could be understood as a grassroots critique of the perceived cultural degeneration that follows modernity and urban life. This is a kind of life thought to threaten key elements of manit such as generosity (jouj), togetherness/solidarity/cooperation (ippăn doon), and food sharing (aikiu). In this understanding, money has replaced chiefly and kin-based assistance, leaving people to fend solely for themselves (tıa wòt, only me), ‘like Americans do’.

As George, a young man from Mājro, asked me during a conversation about Marshallese culture and tradition, ‘Do you know where the Marshallese freezer is?’ Admitting that I did not, he exclaimed, ‘In the ocean!’ However, his happy facial expression changed quickly when telling me that, in fact, it was not like that anymore. He explained that, now, there is not enough food to go around and that people do not share what they have anymore. ‘It used to be that if I had a fish, another had rice, and a third had pandanus, we would share what we had between us. It’s not like that anymore’. Instead, he said, people think that ‘what’s mine is mine’. As is evident from such statements, true manit resides in the past, stemming from a time before Euro-American settlement. Contemporary Marshall Islanders often told me that the people that populated that era were taller and stronger, lived longer, could run faster and dive deeper, and that they knew how to take care of each other.

While the idealized past of the modernity narrative seems to contradict the hellish past of the conversion narrative, people do not conflate them but use them for different means to address different issues in different contexts. They both speak to the moral good, but
they address separate issues, each fixating on one side of the ambiguity. In addition to explaining a religious transformation, the conversion narrative contrasts contemporary life in the Marshall Islands favourably to that of ‘the West’ because it holds that Marshall Islanders live in accordance with a Christian way of life. The modernity narrative, on the other hand, portrays life in the Marshall Islands negatively because of a perceived moral corruption stemming from money dependency and other sources of ‘Westernization’. Seen in this light, they clearly rest on the same set of values and ideas about the moral good, and even a shallow analysis reveals that there are major moral overlaps between the Christian present in the conversion narrative and the blissful past in the acculturation narrative.

These parallel narratives, then, should not be seen in isolation or as contradictory. Just like the rupturing conversion moment keeps reappearing in the present, so the modernity narrative addresses a set of social issues with a local history as long as that of Christianity. In fact, it is doubtful that the conversion narrative would have had any effect had it only been speaking to the past, as it presumably does. Rather, it should be seen as a distinct way to use the past as a guide for the present. Likewise, the modernity narrative needs an idealized past devoid of moral conflict so as to make the contemporary issues more poignant, even if they have been contemporary for some 160 years. These narratives should therefore be seen as differing but complimentary ways of dealing with ambivalent understandings of the past and present. Emerging from these narratives is an equally ambivalent relationship to Americans. In their missionary guise, Americans are framed as the bringers of salvation, but in their modern form, they are bearers of moral decay. This article puts emphasis on Americans as missionaries, but will address their more ambivalent characterization towards the end. Before that, I will go back in time to analyze the conversion process.

The conversion process documented: a slow train coming

The ABCFM was a non-denominational Protestant organization from Boston that officially began its missionary activities in the Marshall Islands on Saturday 5 December 1857, when Sarah and Edward Doane and Nancy and George Pierson arrived on Epoon aboard the Morning Star. The ABCFM had branched out to Micronesia from their base in Hawai‘i in 1852 and the establishment of the Epoon station marked the fourth in the region. The organization aimed to accomplish what it had done in Hawai‘i over the preceding decades, which meant to establish strong local churches governed by indigenous converts (Anderson 1845; Hezel 1978). To accomplish this, the missionaries sought to acquire and teach in the local language. This was in accordance with the ideal of ABCFM secretary, Rufus Anderson (1845; 1869), who saw the establishment of self-sufficient local churches governed by native pastors as the ultimate goal of the foreign missionary. Anderson (1869, 113–14) argued that, even if education, schools, and the press should be ‘held in strict subordination to the planting and building up of effective working churches’, they were vital to secure proper self-governance and self-propagation. A key step in the missionization process, then, was to establish a mission school on Epoon aimed at training local missionaries and ministers.
This strategy had proved successful in Hawai‘i. In fact, the Micronesia mission had a tight cooperation with the Hawaiian Evangelical Association (HEA) that sent native Hawaiian missionaries to foreign fields. These were talked about and paid as assistants or helpers, even when ordained, but many of them proved invaluable to the missionary efforts across Micronesia (Morris 1987). This was particularly true of the missionization in the Marshall Islands, where numerous native Hawaiian couples toiled on for many years throughout the southern atolls (Berta 2021). The first native Hawaiian couple to arrive on Epoon was Hezekiah Aea and his wife Deborah. They arrived in July 1860 to replace the Piersons who had been forced to leave the year before due to illness. Aea quickly acquired the local language and was able to hold his first lecture in the Marshallese by December. That same month, he and Doane began the first-printings of the Bible in Marshallese translation (Aea 1861).

On January 5 1861, after three years of teaching and preaching, the Epoon church received its ‘first fruit’, its first member, into the church: ‘Martha’ Lurito, a domestic with the Doanes (Aea 1861). By November 1864, the church, with the help of native Hawaiian missionaries, had branched out to the neighbouring atoll, Namdik, and they had installed several Marshallese deacons spread over three Epoon islets, received more than thirty members into the church, and had a school attendance exceeding 300 pupils (Aea 1864c). Aea had a small group of local teachers to assist him (Aea 1865b), and one man had travelled in the company of chiefs to the northern Râlik and back to Epoon, holding church services and prayer meeting along the way (Aea 1866; Snow 1868, 157). This man, Moses Lakajaj, became the first Marshall Islander to run an atoll station by himself when he moved to Jâlwôj in 1867. Six years later, they had set up mission stations on four additional atolls, meaning that they had reached most of the southern Marshall Islands at that point. In 1879, the mission school moved from Epoon to Kosrae, which meant that the American missionaries moved too. In 1883, the last permanently settled missionaries left the atolls, leaving the church in the hands of Marshallese preachers.

In some respects, the missionization worked swiftly, considering that the everyday administration of the church was left more or less in local hands after some twenty years. Scholars like Francis Hezel (1983, 210) has even argued that Marshall Islander converts had ‘become the backbone of their own mission just fifteen years after it was founded’. Even so, it is worth pointing out that it took three years to receive the first church member and three more to receive another thirty. Indeed, a report in the Missionary Herald (1886, 335) noted that the Marshall Islands only had some 600 church members and 1200 regular Sunday school attendants in 1885, a far cry from the spread of Christianity today. However, the ABCFM did not aim at a short-term rupture, but had a long-term strategy of building self-reliant local churches. The missionaries were not interested in having superficial members, but wanted their followers to be fully committed to the faith. Therefore, they had no quarrels about evicting or suspending members if they failed to live by their promise to God.

It is also important to note that, while foreign missionaries left their stations in the Marshall Islands, the ABCFM did not abandon the field. From the main base in Kosrae, the Morning Star made annual trips throughout the atolls until the 1920s, and they continued to train local missionaries. Around the turn of the century, the American Micronesia veteran Jesse Hoppins settled on Jâlwôj. In the early 1900s, she was joined by the
Australian trader cum missionary Carl Heine who served the church until his decapitation by the Japanese military in 1944 (Garret 1997, 128). Through this active engagement, the Marshallese church grew steadily both in numbers and importance throughout the 1800s, standing firm throughout Japanese colonization, 1914–1944. Indeed, American missionaries were among the few foreigners from outside the empire allowed to live in the Marshall Islands during the Japanese era. Representatives of the ABCFM had visited Japan to establish friendly relations in a successful attempt to further their work in the region (Garret 1997, 125). Upon U.S. conquest during the Second World War, one of the first requests at both Mājro and Kuwajleen (Kwajalein) was for permission to hold church service and for American missionaries to return (Richard 1957, 335, 401–2). In fact, the Marshallese church did not become completely independent of foreign missionaries until 1972 (Garret 1997, 431).

The missionization effort in the Marshall Islands was far from a rupturing event, but a slow process that involved several trials for the missionaries to overcome, including individual converts falling from grace, chiefs mounting resistance movements, and foreign traders bringing material allures to distract from the spiritual salvation. At the extreme, this led to the missionaries fighting a war on two fronts, struggling at once against what they saw as local savagery and the savagery of traders.

The missionary perspective: a war on two fronts

My use of the term war is not meant to be hyperbolic, but as a reflection of the language used by the missionaries themselves. Aea, for example, used war metaphors to address the epic battle between good and evil, especially after the outbreak of civil war back in the U.S. As he put it, ‘[The Lord’s] strong arm has stretched out to them here [Epoon] and lifted them up from the deep blue [sea] of the bitter current of eternal death under their General Satan Devil the commander of the eternal deathly shade and become captive of General Jesus Christ, the strong commander of eternal life’. Speaking of Doane and Pierson, he continued, ‘They two first sent out the bullets bursting on the center of Gen. S. Devil’s strong fort. The bursting of the bullets soon brought Gen. S. Devil’s powder house and blew it up and his young soldiers fled for fear of death placed fearfully upon them. They became soldiers to assist the two companies of Gen. Jesus Christ that were sent’ (1864b).

Whether experienced as war or not, the missionary effort seem to have been an emotional rollercoaster of successes and setbacks. For many individual converts, the light from the lamp might have faded and relight several times, so to speak, as the converts struggled to adapt themselves to their new faith – and to adapt their new faith to their own cultural understanding. The missionaries typically wrote about expanding numbers in one breath, only to lament how parts of the congregation was falling from grace in another (Aea 1864c). A summary in the Missionary Herald (1865, 26) reports how local interest in the church decreased in the wake of an epidemic, before slowly ‘beginning again to manifest their former interest’, only to have it supressed by a group of chiefs returning from a voyage further north. The positionality of chiefs was a major concern, especially for Aea, who was keenly aware of the part played by chiefs in the missionization efforts in his home islands. In 1862, he reported that ‘the chiefs are turning hither’, being ‘tame at a place near the gate of
the sheepfold of the Lord’ (Aea 1862). However, two years later, he was sad to report that they had ‘turned again to sin – dancing, adultery, stealing, lying, etc.’, elaborating that, ‘None of the chiefs have kept the faith, all having fallen into the works of the Devil’ (1864a).

Shortly after their arrival, Doane (1859a) and Pierson (1858) praised the local chiefs, and especially Kaibuke, for helping them to establish their mission station. After Kaibuke passed away in 1863, the missionary Benjamin Snow (1864, 43) recounted his significance for the local church, noting that ‘we shall never know how much the establishment and growth of the mission on the Marshall Islands has been owing, under God, to his powerful influence and favouring hand’. However, his relationship with the missionaries had been ambiguous. Doane and Pierson (1859) explained that nobody else ‘greet[s] us with a more cordial ‘love to you’ [iokwe eok]’, but that this was largely a public display. ‘Secretly he has wounded us’, they continued before explaining that his deceptive character obliged them to watch him closely. Overall, chiefs remained ambiguous characters for the missionaries, not just because they shifted between open support and open resistance, but because they frequently moved about, bringing hundreds of people with them at the time. The missionaries perceived this ‘migratory character of the people’ at once as an obstacle and assistance to their work. Obstacle because it meant that large parts of the population would be gone for months at the time. Assistance because it meant that word of their teaching would travel ahead of them, as it had before their initial arrival in 1857.

While Pierson had explicitly hoped to spread the gospel to the Marshall Islanders before the cursed whalers and traders could get to them (Pierson 1855), the missionary settlement on Epoon had made the later entry of such foreigners easier. Doane (1859b) complained that, ‘You will see that we are closely followed by traders. Hardly are we gotten in here, ere these come. And they come not, on the whole, to do our people much good – for tobacco is to be the article traded off. We are to have here tobacco eaters and smokers. We are to have, I fear, a tobacco cursed island’. In their first proper report from the Epoon mission station, from October 1859, Doane and Pierson (1859) note that two foreigners had settled on the atoll to deal in coconut oil.³ By the end of the 1860s, foreign traders had settled on several Marshallese atolls, and by 1880, some thirty different vessels made more than 100 calls a year at Jâlwôj alone (Hezel 1983, 290), which was then in the process of becoming the commercial centre in the Marshall Islands. This made it more difficult for the missionaries to reach through to the islanders, and especially to the chiefs who had much to gain from establishing political alliances with traders rather than missionaries (Hezel 1983; LaBriola 2019).

These alliances eventually led to the German annexation of the Marshall Islands. After the invention of copra in the late 1860s, German firms came to dominate trade in the region. Representatives of these firms managed to persuade both chiefs and an unwilling Otto von Bismarck to establish a German protectorate in 1879 as a first step towards full colonization (Hezel 1983, 304; van Dijk 2015). In 1885, two years after the last permanently settled missionary left the islands, Germany formalized its annexation of the Marshall Islands, putting trade and exploitation of natural resources at the centre of the colonial enterprise. This reign lasted until the outbreak of the First World War, when Japanese forces moved into Micronesia in a peaceful takeover. Despite such influence, the Protestant church held sway through two colonial eras and the Second World War. During this time, the Protestants had developed a religious and cultural identity that was intimately
tied to the early missionaries and in opposition to colonial administrations and new church societies.

**A complex social landscape in a tumultuous time**

The late 1800s was a period of rapid social and cultural change in the southern Marshall Islands. Christianity and the copra economy grew in tandem, sparking distinct but equally important forms of change, especially in peoples’ relationship to chiefs. The copra economy altered labour relations so that the untitled eventually came to serve as labourers for, rather than political supporters of, chiefs, a change that corresponded with a semantic shift in the conceptualisation of untitled from *kajoor* (strength; power) to *ri-jerbal* (worker). This was accompanied by another shift that saw what has once been food tributes of first harvest, which chiefs in turn redistributed, turn into taxpayment made in cash (Yanaihara 1940, 75–76).

Meanwhile, the church opened up new status positions tied to new forms of knowledge, status positions that entailed new forms of social mobility for the untitled. This not only meant that converts could escape the tyranny of chiefs, but that they could even come to dominate chiefs themselves. The ultimate example of this comes from Jālwōj (Jaluit), where the Epoon teacher Moses Lakajaj meant to scold a chief who had been ‘leading some of the younger girls in the school to ways of wickedness’. However, upon hearing of Moses’ intentions, they chief promptly hid from him. As Snow (1870, 150), who recounted the story, sums it up, ‘That a Marshall Island chief should stand in moral fear of a common native, can be regarded as little less than a miracle of grace by those who know this people’. However, the relationship between chiefs and converts were not merely oppositional. In the same account, Snow mentions that ‘one of the highest chiefs’ were indulged to seek out Moses after ‘failing to secure obedience’ from two of his church members. ‘Moses went to the delinquents, and through his influence they were induced to yield to the wishes of their chief, and thus amity was restored’.

While chiefs were able to capitalize on their relationship with both missionaries and traders, they were also caught in an awkward situation where they were sometimes subordinate to both. In an insightful essay, Aea (1865a) explains how a chief called Kaibuke II sought to institutionalize a set of laws on Epoon on behalf of his illiterate father Jeimata, ‘the chief king of the land’, and the original Kaibuke’s father’s sister’s son. Doing so, he required advice from Aea and the trader Adolph Capelle. The law borrowed heavily from the Ten Commandments, forbidding such things as manslaughter, adultery, stealing, lying, and working on Sundays. More importantly, it explicitly forbade women from boarding visiting ships for fornication. This was highly controversial, since chiefs, including Kaibuke II himself, had been known to use women as trade currency to obtain tobacco and other goods. The sailors, on their part, had come to expect it and objected loudly upon learning these new laws against onboard fornication. Despite complaints and opposition, Kaibuke II stood firm as the first ship visited. Aea explains how the chief was torn between the wishes of his fellow chiefs and visiting sailors on the one hand and what he and Aea knew to be righteous on the other.

However, the opposition became too strong at the arrival of the next ship, when even Jeimata was set to persuade him to abandon his restrictions of onboard fornication on account of the high-quality tobacco they carried. Kaibuke II finally gave in, but he did it
in a way that played on what the missionaries had taught him, stating that ‘All the laws are suspended because you broke some laws, therefore this is the breaking of all laws. As I have heard from the missionaries concerning the ten laws of God, ‘Whoever shall keep the whole law and get offend in one point, he is guilty of all.’’ Thus ended the period of the law, but not the conflicts it had sparked. The defeated chief was upset with Aea for not standing by him as the conflict intensified. Moreover, the resident traders, including Capelle, blamed Aea for what they understood to be a premature departure of the visiting ship. They accused him of presenting the captain with false rumours of an imminent attack on his ship by the local population, prompting Aea to write the cited essay as his defence. While this account is coloured by Aea’s need to defend himself, it illustrates the complexity of the social field on Epoon in the 1860s, where tensions easily arose between traders and missionaries and where chiefs were pulling and being pulled in opposite directions.

Finally, it is worth pointing out the social complexity of the missionary landscape itself. For example, the ideal of building indigenous churches had begun in Hawai‘i in the decades leading up to the Micronesia mission. As Kealani Cook (2015, 891) puts it, the Hawaiian converts ‘adapted existing Hawaiian concepts to understand their new beliefs’, thereby altering ‘both sets of understandings, Hawaiian-izing Christianity while Christianizing Hawaiian understandings of time and space’. Moreover, many of the pioneering missionaries to Micronesia had grown up in Hawai‘i as missionary children, and had a keen understanding of island life. Others, like Pierson and Doane, had joined with the ABCFM in the early 1850s. In the early years after the Morning Star arrived on Epoon in 1857, then, the Protestantism introduced by the ABCFM contained a mix of influences from New England, a generation-worth of Hawaiian mission experience, and the particular Christian understanding of native Hawaiian missionaries. The Marshallese converts were exposed to all of this, at the same time as they had to adapt this new religious belief to their own rapidly changing understanding of the world. However, the conversion narrative omits this complexity in its emphasis on rupture so that, today, the initial arrival of the Morning Star represents a specific moment of all-encompassing transformation with lingering implications said to have happened ‘because of the missionaries’.

‘Because of the missionaries’: the missionary presence today

When ri-Epoon use the phrase ‘the missionaries’, it sums up the entire missionary era of the late 1800s, but it does so by anchoring one’s thoughts to the pioneering couples. ‘The missionaries’ are understood to have been Americans from Boston. Their invocation is made in a way that denotes radical transformation. On my first Monday morning on Epoon, I was helping Kanpil to clear an overgrown area at the edge of the forest. Like every Monday morning, we were doing Mande (which also means Monday), a community cleaning project where everyone cleans the area at and around the road and outside their homes. The aim is to keep the atoll tidy, and ri-Epoon take great pride in maintaining a pristine environment, something they often use as part of their identity construction by contrasting themselves favourably to people of other atolls, like the neighbouring Namdik. While working, Kanpil explained how ‘It was the missionaries who gave us Mande’. This had been part of
their general transformation of Epoon from a filthy to a pure place, a transformation that ‘gave us our new way of life – a Christian way of life’. This ‘new way of life’ had reached far beyond the theological realm as the missionaries had set in motion a variety of secular activities and laws, including Mande, an activity we were rehearsing that January morning some 160 years later.

In 2014 and 2018, everyday life on Epoon was full of reminders of the first missionaries. Some of these surfaced during regular conversation as an explanation for contemporary behavioural norms and regulations, so that people could ask, ‘Do you know why alcohol is illegal here on Epoon? Because of the missionaries!’ Similar explanations accounted for why Bürotijen deemed tobacco use severe enough to warrant a suspension from church membership, it was an inheritance from the missionaries.

Other reminders were material, like the painting of the Morning Star described in the introduction. When walking along the road, people would often point to the rocks that line its sides to say ‘Do you know who put those rocks there? The missionaries!’ Outside of the church at Rupe, right by the reconstruction of the old missionary house, sits an old cast iron church bell. While a recent archaeological report reveals that it stems from a Tennessee company established in 1889 (Terlep 2014), it still serves as a material reminder of the early missionary days. One story that circulate among the Bürotijen says that the bell is so heavy that the crane from Mājro that came to take it down from the old church tower broke when it tried to lift it. Despite this, ‘the missionaries’, managed to install it without the use of modern machinery, a clear testament to the power of God. Today, it rests on the ground in full view for everyone approaching the church on their way to service.

These invocations of the pioneering missionaries are important because they legitimize the Christian origin story in the Marshall Islands. Therefore, they serve as contemporary reminders of past transformations, transformations that in many ways created the contemporary Marshall Islands, reborn in the Christian faith. Often, these invocations serve as conversation starters, as it did for Kanpil during our Mande experience. Such conversations centre on stories of salvation, of a transformation from darkness to light, from savagery to piety, and of evil being conquered by good. In the contemporary imagery, all credit in this respect is due to ‘the missionaries’, meaning the pioneers. Therefore, the contemporary presence of the missionaries is important not only to remind people of past transformations but also to guide people’s behaviour today and into the future. In other words, people consciously use the missionary arrival story and the perceived rupture that followed its wake to address the moral good.

This is what Olivia Harris (2006) calls ‘the eternal return of conversion’, a continuous return that makes the old and the new, the heathen and the saved, mutually constitutive. This is important for keeping the message embedded in the rupture narrative alive. While the conversion narrative is one of salvation, contemporary Christians know that there is an ever-present possibility of falling from grace, which means that they are continually fighting the image of the heathen. The perceived break with the past is never final as the past is forever looming in the background. Therefore, the everyday reminders of the early missionaries serve to keep the past in the present as a continuous reminder of what to distance oneself from.

In addition to figuring heavily in everyday life, the arrival of the first missionaries also features in ritual celebrations in the Marshall Islands as lively re-enactments. In what
follows, I will outline and discuss two ritual re-enactments of the first time the Morning Star entered the Epoon lagoon, Thursday 10 December 1857.

Re-enacting the event

The Morning Star anchored on the ocean side of Epoon in December 1857, in the middle of the trade wind season when the sea in this part of the Pacific Ocean is rough. Therefore, Captain Samuel Moore wanted to enter the lagoon, an event that has gone down in Marshall Islands history as the official arrival of the missionaries. After obtaining the necessary permission and waiting a few days for calmer seas, the Morning Star was guided through the Epoon pass by about 150 islanders who used ropes to drag the ship. Upon entry, it laid anchored in the lagoon for about two weeks, before leaving the two missionary couples behind at Christmas (Moore 1858, 13).

One hundred years later, in August 1957, everything was rigged to celebrate the centennial jubilee of the missionary arrival. After one year of preparation, 600 participants from all over the nation stayed on Epoon for three weeks. After witnessing the three-week celebration, the Micronesian Reporter (1957, 21) conveyed that, at its climax,

A “Mock-Up” of “No. I MORNING STAR” was pulled forward by fifty men and women, garlanded and singing a festival song. Upon arrival, a dozen “savages” in black paint, wearing grass skirts and brandishing spears, set upon the craft. Another fifty men and women then dragged the ship backwards a few yards. This performance was repeated three times, until the “savages” joined in welcoming the newcomers. At this point the onlookers were invited to help themselves to the hand-made gifts which were piled high in great profusion in and on the “ships.” Not only had the Ebon people supplied vast quantities of food, but they also had prepared souvenirs for their visitors – gifts of pandanus mats, hats and similar items.

As is evident from this excerpt, the good versus evil and the dark versus light dichotomies were central in 1957. The perceived savagery of the past was emphasized, rejecting the missionaries three times, before finally welcoming them and with that, the Gospel. More than a generalized struggle between good and evil, this re-enactment also lends credence to an alternative interpretation of the arrival myth that emphasizes how ri-Epoon had been set on attacking the Morning Star to murder its crew. Depending on interpretation, these were either stopped by the chief Kaibuke or conquered by the Gospel itself.

Fast forward another 46 years to Ujae in the north-western Marshalls, where Peter Rudiak-Gould was well into his teaching stint as a WorldTeach volunteer. The event he describes (2009, 119) was a celebration of Gospel Day with the UCC:

The men [...] led me outside to the model ship’s hiding place. They stuck a Bible into my hands and told me to sit in the hull. As they had promised, the vessel was fully arrayed with imported goods [...] With the congregation looking on, first in surprise and then in amused approval, the men pulled the ship and its Caucasian passenger into the church, through the door, over the floor, and finally in front of everyone. The men had tied up the dollar-bill seals so they could be released and surprise the onlookers. Now they pulled the strings and the sails unfurled in a flash of money.

Exciting as this moment was, it was soon overshadowed by something happening out on the lagoon,
where three men from the other church [Assemblies of God], wearing nothing more than 
grass skirts, were paddling another fully decorated model ship, this one built out of a 
bright yellow kayak. They disembarked on the beach and pulled the kayak-ship out of the 
water with ropes, then up the beach, and finally, triumphantly, into the church, where the 
singing was now louder than ever (2009, 119).

Again, the arrival of the *Morning Star* represents the beginning of a new era, a break 
with a past represented by the coming of the Gospel.

However, these celebrations of a Christian rupture also show the coming of something 
more, as features of their contemporary everyday also played a part in the celebration. In 
1957, there were gifts of hats and other crafts – merchandise that was relatively new and 
an important part of a recently re-established local economy (Mason 1947). In 2003, the 
*Morning Star* replica was full of imported goods like matches and bags of rice, things 
thought to have been useful introductions from the outside, as well as tied-up dollar 
bill seals representing the ‘new’ cash economy. It even featured a white man holding 
the Bible, the perfect representative of a pioneering missionary (Rudiak-Gould 2009, 
117–18).

These celebration resemble contemporary Christmas celebrations in which Christmas 
stands for ABCFM Christianity on the one hand and a distinct similarity between Marshall 
Islanders and Americans on the other (Carucci 1997, 173). In this understanding, the 
Americans did not only bring the Gospel in 1857, but also an era of modernity. This 
makes Americans inherently ambiguous characters, because modernity itself is ambigu-
ous.4 This is also where the ambivalent narratives about historicity converge. As I have 
argued, the temporality of each narrative is only construed that way to make a specific 
point. The past that the conversion narrative is addressing and distancing itself from 
holds many of the same qualities as the dystopic present of the modernity narrative. 
This is why the missionaries are still important in the present and why their coming 
needs to be re-enacted in ritual celebrations, to keep their force alive and their transform-
ation of society eternal. The message is that the Gospel can conquer the moral decay of 
modernity as it conquered the savagery of yore.

**Conclusion**

There can be no doubt that the period between 1855 and 1885, the thirty years of sustained 
and ever-increasing settlement of Euro-American foreigners leading up to the formal 
annexation to Germany, saw rapid and partly radical changes in the Marshall Islands. The 
introduction of Christianity (and therefore new ideas about proper conduct), the copra 
economy (new forms of livelihood and modes of production), the feudalization of chiefly 
authority in relation to land (a weakening of the interdependency between divine chiefs 
and earthly commoners), and new status positions tied to education and priesthood 
becoming available to the untitled (new forms of social inequality and stratification), all 
played their part in this changing cultural landscape. Simultaneously, overt cultural traits 
such as hair and clothing fashion, tattooing, funeral rites, and food preferences changed 
as well, albeit differently across the region and social strata.

This ever-shifting cultural landscape has led to a variety of different interpretations of 
what really happened. Culture is inherently ambiguous and cultural beings are
predictably ambivalent in their interpretations of just what their cultural essence consists of. While described as flourishing in one moment, everything could easily be going down the drain in the next; it all depends on context and whatever point the speaker is trying to make. This is a point captured by the co-existing discourses about the Christian rupture that turned the grim past to a harmonious present on the one hand and the disruptive modernity in which a harmonious past has become a grim present on the other. Historically minded anthropologists are particularly well equipped to unravel this ambivalence and to illustrate the creative ways in which the people populating the ethnographic present use particular constructions of the past to address what is at stake here and now. Sometimes, that obliges us to challenge the narrative representations of our research participants, so as to take seriously their own attempts to cope with ambivalent understandings of the contemporary world.

Notes

1. One reviewer suggested an alternative etymology that links Epoon to the legendary ancestral homeland Ep/Uap, which could have played into the identification of the atoll as a “dark” place representing those things of the past that need to be upended and abandoned. This is an interesting thought, but not one that resonate with any local legends I am aware of, either from Epoon itself or in the literature. It is common to place Ep/Uap far to the west (which is more in line with how the initial colonizers moved into the Marshall Islands), and people like Jack Tobin (2002, 11n2) toys with the idea that it could have been Yap.

2. “Martha” Lurito left the atoll in June 1860 to accompany the dying Sarah Doane to Honolulu, and it is not known whether she ever returned after Sarah died later that year.

3. While they do not mention any names, this is likely to be Adolph Capelle and his companion Herman Caplan from Hoffschlaeger & Stapenhorst. Capelle’s exact arrival date to Epoon is uncertain, and Monica LaBriola (2019) puts it to 1861. Doane (1862) mentions Capelle by name in May 1861. However, this station report indicates that Capelle might have arrived as early as 1859, which is the year Francis Hezel (1983, 210) reports, though without any specific references.

4. The ambiguous nature of Americans concerns much more than the question of modernity. American are at once celebrated as liberators for their defeat of what had then turned into a violent and oppressive Japanese empire during the Second World War (commemorated in annual Liberation Day celebrations) and feared and detested for their abuse of Marshall Islanders during and after its nuclear weapons testing programme (commemorated in the annual Nuclear Victims Memorial Day) (see also Carucci 1989; McArthur 2000).

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