

## Review Article

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## Educational Colonialism and the Importance of Indigenous Decolonization in Promoting a Growth Mindset

Desmond N Doulatram

Master of Arts in Asia Pacific Studies with an emphasis in Humanities and Social Science, Social Science Instructor, College of the Marshall Islands Liberal Arts Department, Marshall Islands

### ABSTRACT

Educational Colonialism in the Republic of the Marshall Islands is very real where Marshallese ways of knowing and being remain on the margins. Institutional racism and structural violence in the academy and most importantly within the Marshallese education system is mainly to blame. Indigenous Decolonization focusing on cultural continuity and language maintenance can be the solution for promoting a growth mindset by decolonizing the mind of the existing student populace. This paper argues in brief, the “importance of cultural maintenance and language maintenance by Marshallese and for Marshallese” via their own ways of doing things (e.g. JiTDam Kapeel) and how this is crucial and needs to be culturally prioritized for the overall well-being of Marshallese and the Marshall Islands in general.

### \*Corresponding author

Desmond N Doulatram, Master of Arts in Asia Pacific Studies with an emphasis in Humanities and Social Science Social Science Instructor, College of the Marshall Islands Liberal Arts Department, College of the Marshall Islands, Marshall Islands. Tel No.: (692)-455-1416.

E-mail: desmondoulatram@gmail.com

**Received:** February 17, 2022; **Accepted:** February 22, 2022, **Published:** March 05, 2022

**Keywords:** Marshall Islands, Indigenous Decolonization, Growth Mindset, Fixed Mindset, Decolonization, Education for Sustainable Development, Culture

### Introduction

Education Culture in the Republic of the Marshall Islands is largely Americanized where indigenous knowledge systems continue to be marginalized. Since 1857, after the arrival of the American Boston Missionaries via the “Morning Star,” Indigenous Marshallese have been subjects of textual colonialism where the Bible remains to date, the only comprehensive form of Marshallese in the written vernacular wherein its language is depicted in the moral space derived from the Biblical teachings of the early missionaries and pushed to a population that is presently primarily Christian [1]. Hence, Marshallese have become absorbers rather than creators in many respects. Knowledge adaptation and knowledge curation has replaced knowledge innovation and knowledge creation. I argue from an auto- ethnographic stand point that this has led to a greater “fixed mindset” population as opposed to a “growth mindset” when judging the existing education statistics [2,3].

### Mental Colonization and the need to Decolonize the Mind via JiTDam Kapeel the Marshallese Way and not the Colonized Academic Structure Way

Pacific Scholars of color remind us that Modernity (the opposite of Tradition) came to the Marshall Islands through the Three Cs being Christianity, Colonization, and Capitalism [4]. Understandably, the idea of “High Culture” associated with the European poster child image of advanced civilization has degraded the Marshallese conscience. As renown Marshallese educator Dr. Hilda C. Heine bluntly puts “After years of colonization, many Marshallese

see themselves as they are seen by Westerners - as, ‘lazy, impoverished and undisciplined’ [5]. European Knowledge has thus replaced the formal academic structure where Marshallese indigenous knowledge systems cling on the margins and are constantly belittled in favor of Western Knowledge even within our own communities. The idea that Marshallese are incapable of theorizing knowledge and lack legitimate epistemology becomes central in the colonial/imperial narrative that internally lessens the value of Marshallese to themselves and continues to impede on their ability to be creators of their own academic/educational environments. As famous Black activist Malcolm X once stated, “As long as you are convinced you have never done anything, you can never do anything” [6]. Malcolm X goes further stating that this process is called the “science of image making” where educational colonialism cleverly conceals the true intent of reimagining a social hierarchy based on minority belittlement leading to students’ internal belittlement of one’s ethnic and cultural background. Hence, the implication is obvious for without “culturally democratic academic spaces,” Marshallese alongside other Pacific Islanders have a colonized sense of “knowing, belonging, being, and seeing” [7-9].

Education is often described by scholars such as Craft into two specific connotations [10]. The first being educate which means ‘to train or to mold’ which assumes the John Locke Latin approach in which an individual is a blank slate or more so a Tabula Rasa. This is where Western Academia tends to center its approaches where it assumes that indigenous Marshallese are a blank slate where teachers get to write on them. However, the second Greek root word of education educere, meaning ‘to draw out or to educe’ revolves around the Greek philosopher Plato’s ideal of individuals

being born innate with knowledge uniquely situated to contribute to the realms of knowledge. This is what JiTDam Kapeel can offer indigenous Marshallese students. It not only offers academic space but more importantly, it offers a safe space for them to feel validated where they can appreciate their indigenous rights and build upon their “customary forms of consciousness” without filter to retain their mental integrity to avoid further colonization of the mind [11]. As indigenous Fijian scholar Dr. Nabobo-Baba eloquently stated.

To say that we did not as a people research our own knowledge given our own evolving methodologies and methods is to ‘ignorantly assume/say’ that we did not have complex systems of education and philosophy as well as relationships and values that determine such conduct. Research outcomes are reflected through a variety of means and forms such as through paintings, art, cave drawings, spoken reports, craft and genealogical expositions, songs, poems and the like-though they may be not written as is expected in traditional academic institutions. Even today research findings are not always written; there are increasingly more ways of presenting research through drama and other oral presentations such as thesis viva and researcher reporting through ‘story-telling’ to villagers and community groups [12].

### **Institutional Racism and Structural Violence in the Marshall Islands**

As a Social Science Instructor that teaches Issues in Pacific Studies and Contemporary Social Issues in Micronesia at the College of the Marshall Islands, it is important to acknowledge what Dr. Trasks refers to as a noticeable ‘institutional racism’ case where indigenous Marshallese comprise ninety percent of the student bodies at the University of the South Pacific Majuro Centre and at the College of the Marshall Islands but the faculty are overwhelmingly expats [13]. This has assumingly led to greater ‘fixed mindset’ students as opposed to the ‘growth mindset’ and could jeopardize indigenous Marshallese students’ mental growth wherein we are always bombarded by images, scenarios, and situations where we are left on the margins as echoed by world renown poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner. Her exact words being “When Marshallese continue to be bombarded by this perspective, that we are nothing...we are merely problems that need to be fixed - then we are bound to begin to believe that perspective, to doubt ourselves and then to drown in a fatalism that confines us as a people” [14].

These kinds of situations has assumingly led students to the ‘fixed mindset’ persona through what Epeli Hau’Ofa refers to as ‘structural violence’ that leads to the ‘mental reservations’ of Marshallese people [15-17]. The key point is to reinforce what Ms. Jetnil-Kijiner eloquently stated and that is that “Marshallese literature holds the possibility of contribution to the survival of Marshallese culture and values in a world dominated by the presence of media and literature that privilege western principles and concepts which have a damaging effect on how we view ourselves” [18]. In education, it is not enough to be well endowed with the physical resources such as facilities and textbooks if they are not contextualized to the specific needs and characteristics of the population it serves. Indigenous people, especially Marshallese have sustained and maintained their own epistemologies evolving it over time and have passed it orally via JiTDam Kapeel and Bwebwenato (Talanoa/Story-Telling) from generation to generation. Indigenous Marshallese narratives called Bwebwenato are often overlooked in academic circles even within the Marshall Islands, in its traditionally Western inspired accepted academic literature and more so in the Western

traditions of knowledge taught to the current Marshallese student populace. Dr. Brandy B. Shufutinsky refers to this existing popular practice by expat educators in and outside the Marshall Islands as a “practice of institutionalized academic ignorance ‘that’ marginalizes indigeneity and the knowledge that is derived from it ‘which’ potentially ‘degrades’ truth and historical and cultural facts, resulting in cultural erasure” [19]. This has assumingly led to a fixed mindset populace wherein a sense of inferiority affects Marshallese students’ motivation to learn and better themselves by aiming higher beyond the colonial narrative particularly for those who lack proper “social capital.” The existing education system even here in the Marshall Islands has become the “Staging grounds for our mass exodus” to the United States as one indigenous Marshallese scholar writes where our schools are merely “preparation grounds to navigate the anxieties of globalization” wherein greater “labor mobility” echoes Epeli Hau’Ofa’s concept of the “Ocean in Us” [20-22]. This has led to a great “urban drift” of the Marshallese people Chasing the American Dream in the United States of America where currently one third of the total population has sought employment opportunities leading to a greater “brain drain.” However, this is but part of the colonial narrative. In fact, David Nevin, puts bluntly that the United States’ former handling of the Marshall Islands as former Trusteeship administrator of the Marshall Islands was a “disaster in the making” [23]. His exact words were we have educated these people, at least slightly, and that is the easy part. But we have done nothing about the hard part, which is to create an economic structure in which they can use a modern western academic education. To put it more starkly, expectations in “Marshall Islands (Micronesia)” have risen so far beyond the possibility of satisfying them as to destroy hope, and hope destroyed is the root of social misery. Thus grows the potential disaster...”

### **Possible Solution for a Growth Mindset and the Purpose of Cultural and Language Maintenance**

This begs the questions: So what is the Marshall Islands doing about its current education system and situation and how can we as a collective improve the current situation either as allies or as indigenous Marshallese? Recently, the Marshall Islands under the leadership of former President Dr. Hilda C. Heine has prioritized culture by renaming the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the “Ministry of Culture and Internal Affairs” to keep culture at the heart of our efforts towards economic self-sufficiency and sustainable development. “Cultural Continuity is the Pacific’s version of Sustainable Livelihood” because in the past people of the Pacific including “Marshallese were simply living sustainably” but now we are trying to develop sustainably in light of modernity which came to us through the Three C’s being Christianity, Colonialism, and Capitalism. Hence, we must revert back to the “Original C” being Culture that legitimizes the Marshallese narrative in our schools and in our due efforts to regain back our self- sufficiency [24-26]. We must “regain back our pride in our Culture of Voyaging and Navigation that was premised on a Subsistence Lifestyle” built on our natural “Subsistence Affluence” [27,28]. This requires “Cultural Maintenance and Language Maintenance.” The goal of cultural maintenance and “language maintenance” is not to live the same way our ancestors did culturally entirely nor is it to speak the same way our ancestors did for that is an impossibility given the “immutable law of change” [29]. The goal of cultural maintenance and “language maintenance” as renown linguist Dr. Genevieve Leung stated is to pay homage helping us feel whole again, helping us recover the memories and the experiences with our family members who ‘may’ or might not be here with us. And this is about recovering those memories and experiences through language ‘and culture.’ This is

why the Marshall Islands, as a country under the current leadership of President David Kabua, has listed inclusive education and culture as key priorities in its National Strategic plan specifically in goal 1.2 Education and Training calling for inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning opportunities for all and goal 1.4 Culture and Traditional Knowledge calling for an integration of Marshallese Culture, Customary Law, and Traditional Practices in all Facets of Development including but not limited to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

Generally speaking, despite the colonial narrative and imperial system impeding and lessening Marshallese identity and its general existence, Marshallese are proud of their culture and have become even more proud given global visibility after the “media feeding frenzy” of climate change, the nuclear legacy, and electing the first female President in an independent Pacific country. However, more needs to be done to boost this pride. The College of the Marshall Islands is but one institution in the Marshall Islands that attempts to do this. The Mission of the College of the Marshall Islands is to provide our community with access to quality, higher and further educational services, prioritize student success through engagement in relevant Academic, Career and Technical Education, and be a center for the study of “Marshallese Culture.” Two fine examples of how it achieves its mission is creating “exhibits” that feeds into its mission and integrating culture into its English speaking and writing curriculum via “auto-ethnography workshops” [30]. Giving adequate spaces in the academy helps with the process of decolonizing the mind and aids in a “Growth Mindset” which is known to “temper the effects of poverty on academic achievement”.

## Conclusion

To Conclude, I end by saying that “Decolonization is a two-way street” where we must not only educate the colonized but also the colonizer. We all must play our part in being a moral force. Decolonization is inexorably linked to the act of decolonizing the mind and this can happen through a culturally democratic education system that doesn’t lessen Marshallese identity because truth be told knowledge is not universalistic, it is “socially constructed” implicating that all peoples have epistemologies. As Davis perfectly states “The purpose...therefore is not to suggest that we have been doing everything wrong, but rather not to leave unexamined or undertheorized those core principles that ground the humanistic contributions”. Dr. Konai Helu Thaman makes a similar argument for cultural democracy as “most Pacific people are indigenous to the island nations in which they live and their cultures and education systems have existed for thousands of years, predating the introduction of schools by European missionaries and later colonial administrators in the 19th and early 20th centuries.” By situating indigenous Marshallese at the center and using their narrative and “their systems of knowledge and understandings as the basis for inquiry and investigation (e.g. JiTDam Kapeel), we open the possibility of dramatically extending the knowledge base of indigenous people and transforming their understanding of the social cultural world”. So why are people sent to help us here in the Marshall Islands, particularly expat educators and administrators, attempting to control a narrative that employs the will of a colonizer hence promoting educational colonialism by denying indigenous Marshallese people their agency to describe and create a narrative and an educational system “by Marshallese and for Marshallese?” They are guests here yet they act as if they aren’t which would never happen if it were the other way around and indigenous Marshallese were on their turf. Are we Marshallese too nice and humble and has our passive nature and fear of confrontation led to our sad state of being educationally

colonized or is it also a matter of asking our educational colonizer whether they are too aggressive and feel too self-entitled in nature and don’t feel the need to truly help indigenous Marshallese that comprise 90 plus percent of the population in the Marshall Islands and instead are seeking self-interest and career advancement? I leave this question for my readers to ponder and wander on for curiosity makes clever as “wonder is the beginning of wisdom” and this is the JiTDam Kapeel Way.

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