

Power of tradition provides a platform for modern times

GIFF JOHNSON

In the 1990s, a representative of a donor agency visited the Marshall Islands researching possible projects to support with grant funds. Looking down a checklist of worthwhile opportunities seeking funding, the official came to one item under the heading “culture and identity.” “No,” he said, “we’re looking to the future. Cross culture off the consideration list.”

How wrong he was. It may seem odd that Kyoto, Japan’s most traditional of cities, has connections to the Marshall Islands and other Pacific islands. But the traditions that underpin the lives of many citizens of both Kyoto and Pacific islands provide a foundation of national pride and identity that spins off into many aspects of life. Despite the encroachment of modern technology, architecture and fast-paced city life, Kyoto showcases centuries old traditions and religious practices that do more than simply engage visitors in a unique part of Japanese life — they offer business opportunities, particularly for women, and perpetuate cultural traditions for new generations of Japanese.

Marshall Islander Alson Kelen, who has managed an outrigger canoe building and cultural life-skills training program for two decades, says his experience confirms the key to creating a sustainable future for a troubled generation of urban youth is a strong cultural foundation. “A hundred years ago, everyone had a position in life as fishermen, weavers and local medicine experts,” said Kelen recently. “Today, kids are lost. They don’t know where they fit in.”

The passion Michi Ogawa and



Michi Ogawa (top left) and Emiko Ashida of WAK Japan Co. demonstrate a traditional Japanese tea ceremony. Bottom right: A traditional Marshallese canoe helps RMI youth rediscover the richness of their culture.



her team of women bring to sharing cultural practices with visitors in Kyoto is invigorating. Ogawa runs WAK Japan Co., an umbrella company that oversees a number of businesses including one that provides hands-on cultural learning experiences for visitors such as kimono wearing and traditional tea ceremonies.

Since founding the company in 1997, she has empowered dozens of Japanese women to become knowledgeable in their own culture in order to share it with others. During a recent visit to a wooden house in downtown Kyoto from which WAK Japan Co. operates, a group of Pacific island journalists

were outfitted with kimono and joined in a traditional Japanese tea ceremony. Emiko Ashida took her guests on a step-by-step tour of the 450-year-old tea ceremony, a ritual requiring participants to show respect and humility toward one another by bowing and offering thanks, and to park the day’s difficulties and events outside the entrance door to fully appreciate the ceremony and the camaraderie

of the activity.

The island journalists attending the tea ceremony immediately saw similarities with kava and sakau ceremonies in the islands.

Ashida explained that the tea ceremony emphasizes purity, harmony, tranquility and respect, virtues often in short supply in the race of modern urban life.

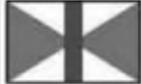
Indeed, while Marshall Islanders have handed down customary

practices on their low-lying coral atolls for two thousand years, the pace of westernization and out-migration to the United States is stripping the younger generation of its roots. “Some see the outrigger canoe as a thing of the past,” said Kelen. “But it’s a tool that has survived two thousand years and it will survive two thousand more.” Canoe culture, he said, gives Marshall Islanders their identity and a foundation for sustainable development.

Tourism development in the Marshall Islands is minimal — Kyoto gets more visitors in a day than the Marshall Islands sees in a year. Yet just as tourists flock to temples and castles of shoguns in Kyoto or participate in more intimate cultural exchanges such as Ogawa’s tea ceremony, visitors are drawn to the canoe building program in the Marshall Islands for cultural tours and energized by lagoon rides on outrigger sailing canoes built and captained by young people in Kelen’s program. Learning the cultural practices that underpin canoe building in the Marshall Islands — the art of building, sailing and navigation without instruments — provides a sense of place and pride for Marshall Islanders in much the same way it does for Japanese women who perform a five centuries old tea ceremony.

The Pacific nations of Fiji, Cook Islands and Palau, for example, have large-scale tourism industries that employ thousands in hospitality work and motivate islanders to develop and maintain cultural ceremonies and practices that translate into jobs and income for the local community. Cultural norms in smaller islands with scant visitor numbers, however, quite possibly are being lost at a faster pace to westernization of the younger generation who see their culture as an anachronism to ignore. Without tourism to drive a financial interest in maintaining their culture, preservation is left to non-government groups such as Waan Aelon in Majel (Canoes of the Marshall Islands) to fight the tide of westernization.

Against this backdrop of modern urban life, the cultural innovations of Ogawa and Kelen have dramatically changed the lives of the people who work with them, and the thousands who have participated in their cultural learning programs.



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