



Sacred Play

Yirona Jericho Saucedo

BEFORE YOU READ: Learn the vocabulary words: atoll, islet, sacred, garland, coronation, and inanimite. Find the Marshall Islands on a map and describe their location in the world.

Play Is Sacred on the Marshall Islands

On the Marshall Islands where I am from, there is not a hard line between sacred activities and play. Children naturally want to mimic what they see their elders doing, and children from the Marshall

Islands are no different. I come from the small atoll of Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands. There are 29 atolls and 5 islets. Discipline, chores, sacred ritual, and play are important aspects of our

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culture. Children are taught to respect the elders under all circumstances, even if the elders are from a different country. Play is considered a sacred

activity that helps shape a child's heart. Whatever shapes a child's heart, shapes a culture.

The Jobwa Dance: Our Most Sacred Ritual

The Traditional Jobwa Dance is our highest and most sacred ritual, and it is part of how children play. Because it is so sacred, it can only be performed by a High Chief and families of his choice. Therefore, many Marshallese have never seen the Jobwa Dance performed. However, I'm one of the lucky people who have seen the Jobwa Dance three times.

The first time was at the christening of the High Chief's new canoe. I was five years old, and it felt so scary when I heard the men blowing on the conch shells. The sounds made my skin crawl and my stomach tighten with excitement. The rhythm of the sticks pounding against each other was sacred. The most inspiring part was when the warriors do imitation stick fighting. The warriors wear grass skirts but no shirt and no shoes. The

women wear traditional outfits very similar to the men. After the Jobwa Dance, the women decorated the chief's canoe. They added garlands made out of dry coconut leaves. They also brought food, such as coconut, breadfruit, taro, fish, and other local food items.

After my first Jobwa experience, I was so inspired that I wanted to try the dance myself. I was too shy to practice in front of my friends, so I practiced in my kitchen where no one would see me. I got some sticks and hit them together and danced like the boy dancers.

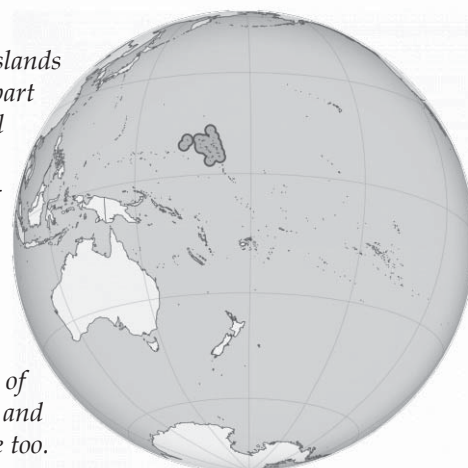
The other neighborhood children played Jobwa all the time, the boys hit the sticks together like the dancers. They practiced the dance steps all day long, the girls watched and clapped.

The next time that I saw the Jobwa Dance was when I was about 8 or 9 years old. The occasion was the christening of the High Chief's new house. It felt the same but less scary because I was older and because the ceremony was very similar to the christening of the High Chief's canoe. I understood what was going on. It felt familiar because I had been practicing. I was feeling more connected to my Marshallese community because I had been mimicking and learning the ritual.

The last time I saw the Jobwa Dance, I was 17 years old. The experience was very different from the other two times that I saw it. One difference was that the event was the coronation of the new High Chief, not simply blessing an inanimate object, like a canoe or a house. I could sense the

The group of islands in the shaded part is the Marshall Islands. What countries, continents, and oceans can you identify on this map? Label them.

Look up a map of Pacific islands and label them here too.



presence of my ancestors. I could also sense the spirit of the warrior, Lorenwa. I enjoyed the feeling of being surrounded by my culture, traditions, and memories.

Keeping Our Traditions Going

The new High Chief of the Marshall Islands is leading my people into the future by having his grandchildren perform the Jobwa at his coronation. Here in the U.S., our people live in various communities, and we are continuing Marshallese traditions. We get together, cook Marshallese food, sing Marshallese songs, and perform Marshallese dances. There's no High Chief out here in Arkansas, so we can't perform the Jobwa dance. I hope my daughter gets to see the Jobwa dance someday. I love being part of a culture that supports and values sacred ritual and play for all people.

AFTER YOU READ: How would you summarize the author's main point?

Pacific Islanders

Pacific Islands Americans are Americans who are indigenous to Pacific islands that are affiliated with the United States, such as Hawaii, Samoa, or the Marshall Islands. Learn more about Indigenous people by reading Issue #48 of *The Change Agent*.



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