



Kilom

MARSHALLESE NOBLE
NOT LEAVING THE ISLAND

When Kilom was eight years old, he enjoyed listening to the stories that the old man would tell him in his cabin by the sea. In Majuro few houses are not by the sea: Majuro is an atoll, a coral island formed by a circle of narrow and spotty land around a lagoon. From coast to coast, the width of Majuro is usually no more than one hundred meters: it is 40 kilometres long but its surface area is not even 10 square kilometres.

Majuro is the capital of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, in Micronesia, thousands of kilometres away from any continent. The Republic consists of a group of 29 atolls that include more than 1200 islands and islets whose total area of solid ground is no more than 200 square kilometres. Only 70,000 people live in the Marshall Islands. A few years earlier, when Kilom was six years old and in first grade, he, like all the other children, had to march down the main – and only – street on the island with many others; flags were waving and music playing: that day, October 21,

1986, the Marshall Islands became independent, a republic in free association with the United States.

The old man would tell him stories about the islands, their myths and customs. One afternoon, the old man told Kilom that he, Kilom, may inherit all the land one day. He told him that he was an “allab”, a noble, because his mother, Takbar, was a “le-iroij”, a queen, and so he had to be all the more loyal to his land and respectful of its traditions. Kilom’s father, Molik, was the son of a Japanese merchant who had come to the Islands in the 1920s – when Japan occupied them. After the defeat of Japan in 1945, Kilom’s grandfather decided to go away for good. But in Marshallese culture, blood and possessions are passed on through the mother, and his mother was a “le-iroij”. In Marshallese, that word means “everyone”: the king or chieftain had to take responsibility for everyone else. Kilom found out that, centuries before, his mother’s ancestors had come from an island, Mili, which still belongs to the family. They had conquered

lands in Majuro and in other islands in the archipelago. Kilom already loved his country but, from then on, he felt bound to it in an almost supernatural level.

I feel so attached to this land. Land is very important to us, it is a precious gift. Our land is very limited, so we really have to take care of it, to fight for it.

Kilom grew up; life was quiet. In those years, there were fewer inhabitants and fewer houses on the Island. Kilom used to go to a beach directly in front of his house, where there is now a warehouse and a dock. During the week, Kilom went to school, played basketball or baseball, studied. On Saturdays and Sundays he would not only go to the church, but also fishing on neighbouring islands or hang out with friends, occasionally with a girl. But he had to be back home by 10 pm: the authority of the elders, at that time, was fairly strict.

With no computers and little television, the outside world was quite distant.

But there were, from time to time, jolts, like those days in 1990 when the Gulf War began and the Marshallese were frightened: their largest atoll, Kwajalein, is a major part of the US missile system and, for some weeks, they feared an attack.

Later on, Kilom came across other words that would mark his life. He was in his final years of elementary school when, for the first time, he heard the terms climate change and sea-level rise, but he didn't think they were important. Those foreigners who said that the Marshall Islands would sink into the sea must be joking. Years later, when

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he was finishing high school and trying to decide what to study, he came across those terms again, but this time they did seem important. If it was true, as some believed, that the ocean was rising, his country would certainly end up disappearing. Kilom felt he

had to do something; to start, he decided to study marine biology.

I realized that the sea level rise was a matter of life and death for us: if the Island sinks, we just disappear as a country, as a people, as a culture.

One year later, when he was 20, Kilom found out that the Japanese government offered scholarships. He was interested; it was a good opportunity to learn new things and to find out about the other culture that he carried in his blood. He was selected; he travelled and studied civil engineering. Life in Tokyo was not easy; he had to learn the language and, moreover, how to live in a highly technological, work intense society, in a huge city where he had a 45-minute commute to the university every morning on a crowded train; in a country where there was such a thing as, for example, cold. But there were rewards; he saw snow for the first time; he learned a great deal, and he met Jane, a young Samoan woman also studying in Japan. When they graduated, Kilom and Jane went to Samoa, where they got married and had their first son. Six months after he was born, they were in Majuro.

When Kilom went back to the Islands, he had taken enough distance to recognize

the changes that his country and its culture had undergone in the previous decades: the most visible example was the food. For many years, the Marshallese just ate what they had: fish, shellfish, breadfruit, taro, coconut, sweet potato, banana, cassava, sugar cane, chicken, pigs. But from the Japanese they had gotten used to eating rice and noodles, and from the Americans bread, and now they had to import these things, and almost any other: foods, beverages, clothing, notebooks, safety pins, cars, detergents, televisions, dishware, medicines and, mostly, fuel for transportation and electricity.

Mostly, Kilom thinks, what changed the Marshallese culture was the advent of money: before, it did not exist on the Islands. People used to share what little they had – a fish, some vegetables, the labour required to build a house or a canoe – but then they grew greedier. He also noticed other problems:

The island has developed and that's good, but it wasn't properly planned, so now we are facing sanitary, environmental and health issues. The demographic growth has been very quick and the infrastructure can't handle it. But I'm still proud to be Marshallese. We are inventive people who

came to this island long ago and created new ways of living here. We are considered among the top navigators in the world; our people were able to sail hundreds of miles in their canoes, with no instruments whatsoever. We Marshallese are a part of this land and of this sea.

And Kilom became obsessed with his old issue: climate change and sea level rise. Kilom joined an NGO with whom he had worked, the Marshall Islands Conservation Society. So he started to address the issue full time:

Part of my work consists of advocating for protection of the reef and the marine resources we have. If we lose them we're doomed: we lose our source of revenue and the possibility of increasing tourism. But, most of all, when the reefs are healthy, they build up really fast, maybe faster than the sea level rises, so they could prolong our time above water.

Do you really think that the Islands might sink?

Well, until now the experts can't say how fast the sea-level is rising, so basically what we can do for the moment is help the reef



grow healthier and faster to provide us with shelter from the waves, and more food. But I don't know... It's only small stuff that's not going to make any difference if the sea level increases rapidly.

One common way to stop the land from eroding is planting trees on the coast; in Majuro that is very difficult because on almost the entire shoreline there are houses and families, and not much room left for trees. Near the airport, the government has built a few seawalls to hold back the water, but they use limestone that, with dynamite, they blast out of the coral reef. As the struc-

ture of the reefs is debilitated and reduced, the Island is further exposed to winds, storms and floods. In December 2008, for example, a surge in ocean waters flooded the Island. Thousands were forced to leave their homes and, on Christmas Day, the government declared a state of emergency. Now, scattered in the sand along the beach, are the gravestones of a cemetery that was washed away.

On the island, there are no construction materials, so if you want to reinforce one part of the island you have to sacrifice another.

Further, there are cement blocks called rib raps, which are strong and efficacious but expensive, and the government doesn't have money to buy them. In any case, these are temporary solutions that could work for just a few years.

I know there is going to be a time when this Island will be underwater. I don't know what's going to happen to our people, our way of life. There will no longer be a Marshallese language, a Marshallese culture, and for me that's really hard, because I feel so bound to this place. I love it and I consider it my own.

But you think it's inevitable?

It is inevitable. It is happening; the polar caps are melting rapidly and the sea level is rising accordingly. You can delay the process, but in the end we'll be underwater. Maybe in a hundred, maybe in two hundred years, who knows. But for me, if this happens in my lifetime, I'd rather die with this island than go elsewhere. I'll sink with the ship, because I feel this place is part of me and I'm part of it. It's sad for me to imagine that, but it's going to happen: in the present situation there's not much we can do. Imagine if your country was going to disappear under water.

The highest point in Majuro is three meters above sea level. Here, the threat is felt all the time.

What do you think about the people from other threatened islands who are looking for land elsewhere, like the Tuvalu or the Maldivians?

Well, there are even some Marshallese who would prefer to go to the United States. Not everyone's the same.

In the Marshall Islands there is a great deal of poverty and unemployment, and many young people don't think the way Kilom does; they prefer to get out while they can and – thanks to the free association – they have the right to live in the United States. In recent months, for instance, there was a program by which North American hotel companies hired 800 young people from Majuro to work at their establishments. In a population of 25,000, the sudden departure of 800 young people is a major blow.

But for me, this is the place where I'm going to die. My grandma, my great grandma, they are all buried here, so I'll be buried here too. I can't imagine living in another country for long. But it's hard to

think that all the things you work for, you fight for, are going to disappear. Sometimes I ask myself, "Why am I doing this, why am I doing that?"

And what do you answer?

That it's better to do something, even in these conditions, than nothing at all. And, anyway, I'll do as much as I can to delay my land's sinking. At least, I will have tried, and that's my obligation.

SMALL ISLANDS

RISING SEAS AND CHOICES

While climate change is projected to affect all countries in some way, Small Island States face some of the greatest challenges. The people living in low-lying areas and smaller islands might indeed find their homes unliveable within the next century, due to rising sea-levels, tropical storms, and other climate change induced phenomena.¹ While facing these risks, many Small Island States are also developing countries with small populations, meaning that their abilities to prevent, mitigate and adapt to the projected climate change scenarios are severely hampered.

Rising sea-levels, which will partially or wholly cover Small Island States in the Pacific in water, has sprung up as one of the most frequently discussed climate change impacts. Some countries have already begun planning relocation of large portions of their populations, and as we see in Kilom's story, many who move away choose not to return.

Islands disappearing before the year 2100 are, however, not the only concern for people living in Small Island States. Already existing challenges are likely to be enhanced by climate change, and cause grave situations, before small islands become inhabitable due to rising sea-levels. Further, not all small islands are projected to be covered in water, but will face new challenges nonetheless. This means that long term solutions to the potential problems need to be developed, if Small Island States, that are not projected to disappear under rising seas, are to be inhabitable in the future.

One challenging issue shared by Small Island States across the world today relates to water supplies and access to freshwater. In general, access to water is scarce, and managing the limited supply is part of daily life. Projections are that climate change will further compromise the available water resources. This threat comes from rising sea-levels and changes in rainfall, which risk tainting the freshwater reserves with salt.² Some of these reductions may not be reversible.

Salinization also poses a threat to soil used to grow crops. In Micronesia, where Kilom lives, the staple food taro is grown in low-lying swamp areas, vulnerable to flooding by seawater containing dissolved salts. When the soil has been tainted by saltwater, cleaning the soil with normal rainfall takes up to two years, and the taro plant itself needs another two to three years before it is ready to harvest.³ If saltwater intrusion through wave surges, rising sea-levels and precipitation occurs more frequently, the soil will have more difficulties recovering. Such loss of crops is a severe blow for economies of Small Islands States, many of which already rely heavily on food imports.

As many small islands lie in tropical or sub-tropical zones, diseases such as dengue, diarrhoea and malaria are a pressing concern for some Small Island States. While it is uncertain if, how and where climate change will lead to future increased disease incidence, this is an area of concern if temperatures rise, access to freshwater is compromised

and wet seasons change.⁴ Other factors such as poor waste-management and lack of infrastructure also contribute to the spread of disease.

For small islands in higher latitudes, climate change is predicted to affect biological diversity. Iceland, a country partially dependent on its fishing industry for export incomes, will need to adapt to a possible collapse of the capelin stock, a forage fish preyed on by whales, seals and other predators that are part of the catch in the waters surrounding Iceland.⁵

Young people living in Small Island States face difficult decisions in the face of forthcoming climate change. Will they stay and do what they can as Kilom has decided to do, or will they leave to settle somewhere else? Regardless, climate change will likely have impacts on the lives of young people living on small islands, negatively affecting their livelihoods as well as their physical and psychological health. Whatever decisions young people living on Small Island States take regarding their future lives, we should ensure that the options are not hampered by lack of access to education, livelihoods and health services.