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## Translating Indigeneity

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### **Indigenous Peoples' Day: Opening Ceremony & Evening Session**

I planned on attending the *Indigenous Peoples' Day - Opening Ceremony* in person, but because of the rainy weather, it was moved to Zoom. At 10:04 AM on Monday, October 12, 2020, Bazile Panek, President of the Native American Student Association at Northern Michigan University (hereafter Northern), "Welcome[d] everyone to the first officially recognized Indigenous Peoples' Day... [which] celebrates our fortitude and resilience to continue our indigenous ways of life" (@14:59 Video Recording of "Indigenous Peoples' Day - Opening Ceremony"). The next two speakers, Northern's President Fritz Erickson and Northern's ASNMU (Associated Students of Northern Michigan University) President Emma Drever, helped contextualize the celebration. At 22:47 of the video recording, President Erickson said, "So this morning, I was spending some time reflecting back [sic] on that journey, and what led us to this. It seems to me that the key element that led us to this day [has] really been dialogue" ("Indigenous Peoples' Day - Opening Ceremony"). At 33:34, President Drever reflected on the effort saying, "... On Friday, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017 the Board of Trustees thanked Tristan and his fellow presenters and said they would take the resolution under advisement. So we kept trying. We kept having conversations. Ah, but please remember when I say 'we', I mean the people in ASNMU have collaborated with the Native American Student Association for years" ("Indigenous Peoples' Day - Opening Ceremony"). President Erickson's and ASNMU President Drever's words encouraged me and gave me hope. Here, I felt assured and confident that it is not only Presidents Erickson and Drever who not only aspire to become good allies, but also present remedies.

Later in the early evening of that day, I joined the Zoom conference for the *Indigenous Peoples' Day - Evening Session* to listen to the keynote speaker, Frank Ettawageshik. Ettawageshik brought up some fundamental concerns that resonate with me and the fundamental question regarding Marshallese existence in the future due to sea-level rising. Ettawageshik said:

... We have stories about the rising water level. We have stories about all kinds of things. So, you know, we have been around and have been through all of this [changing climate; rising river water level] for thousands of years. We have stories of the ice when the ice

was here... Our people have been here a long, long time; and we understand the land... Today we have a changing climate. We have to deal with all sorts of stuff from that... For instance, things that we have to think about are such things like the, as an example, maple tree. The maple tree is really important to us: maple syrup, maple sugar, and the use of this in our culture is really important. It's so important that the Anishinaabe word for maple is *ininaatig*. We have all kinds of stories about the origin of maple syrup, and having to boil it down - you know, all of these things. But, the way the climate is changing... the area that I live in... just below the bridge is no longer going to be the habitat. The natural habitat for the sugar maple. We could still grow them in our yards. Some of the older trees could still be there. The younger ones don't really want to grow there, and the trees are going to move north. So our tree is moving north. In previous climate changes, we would move north with it. However, we are fixed geopolitically now because of reservations, national boundaries and all kinds of other things. So this time, climate change is going to sweep over us. We're not going to be able to move with it like previous climate changes. What's that going to do to us when our tree is no longer here with us? When we have to drive long ways to get it... When this is happening, what does that do to our mindset?... ("Indigenous Peoples' Day - Evening Session").

Ettawageshik hit a lot of notes here as he evaluates and reflects on the maple tree and its cultural significance to the Anishinabee tribe. Similarly, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) are also "fixed geopolitically" in the northern Pacific (Frank qtd. 'Indigenous Peoples' Day - Evening Session'). When Ettawageshik raised the following fundamental questions...

"What's that going to do to us when our tree is no longer here with us? When we have to drive long ways to get it... When this is happening, what does that do to our mindset?" ("Indigenous Peoples' Day - Evening Session").

... a couple of things came to my mind as I reflected on Presidents Erickson and Drever's statements in the opening ceremony and Frank's words of wisdom in the first portion of the evening session. First of all, "Indigenous Peoples' Day" reminds me of two similar public holidays observed back home in the RMI: *Manit Day* (last Friday of September) and *Gospel Day* (first Friday in December). Much like "Indigenous Peoples' Day", "Manit Day" in the RMI celebrates Marshallese culture and heritage. "Columbus Day", as celebrated in the United States, is in many ways very similar to "Gospel Day" in the RMI because both days celebrate the intrusion of Western culture. Luckily there are no statues anywhere in the islands, but the first Friday in December is designated to celebrate the arrival of the missionaries and the Gospel which "marked the beginning of great changes in the lives of the Marshallese people... [and] brought peace and

harmony among both Marshallese people and their traditional leaders” (*Section 907, Lines 1 and 2: Public Holidays Act 1988*). Keeping the comparison between the arrival of the missionaries and Columbus in mind, there is a major difference between the RMI and the Indigenous North American communities: a second nation does not exist in the RMI. However, the RMI economy relies on the funding coming from allies such as the US, Japan, Taiwan. A majority of the money that keeps the RMI economy going is made possible through the established Compact Treaty between the US and the RMI. Unlike the RMI, in North America, there are nations coexisting within nations. The First Nations in Canada coexist within the geographic boundaries of Canada, and the Native American Tribes coexist within the boundaries of the US. For Marshallese, we have one social class that has sovereignty over the lands. It is the *irooj* (chief) class.

#### **A Win-Win For Both The ‘Lucky Ones’ And The ‘Unlucky Ones’**

On Monday, October 12, 2020, I attended the livestream of the “Youth in Action: Conversations about Our Future | Mascots, Monuments, and Memorialization”. I appreciated the ideas and thoughts shared by the young, indigenous panelists. I suppose the only part of the panel that I found asking myself “Which group of youth?” is when the panelists were asked, “What is one action youth can make (sic) in their own communities?”(1:06:30). The panelists suggested, “starting the conversation”, “speaking up”, “education”, “recognizing an accurate narrative”, and “creating a space”. At first, I thought the question about what actions youth can take aims at the larger youth population not just in the United States but across the globe. Later, I understood that the moderator posed questions tailored to indigenous communities in particular.

I will position the rest of this critique from the “Youth in Action” livestream on language. Language is of fundamental interest to me because the Marshallese language is heading towards “extinction”. There is a high rate of Marshallese out-migrating from the islands to diaspora communities in the US, Guam, and the Philippines partially because of climate change, but also to gain social and financial status. I learned

*Kajin Aelōn Kein*, Marshallese, from my parents, relatives, friends, and the people around me. I learned English starting in kindergarten. Marshallese, however, is not the language of institutionalized education (which *is* English). Marshallese is for socializing and networking (having a beer with friends, for example). I speak Marshallese at church, at home, at *kemeems* (first-birthday celebrations), and in other social functions. English, on the other hand, is used primarily for institutionalized education even in the Marshall Islands. If I want to graduate from high school or go to graduate school, I have to learn English. It is not a choice-- it is a must! Seeking higher education causes assimilation. I refer to my group as the “lucky ones” because we learn both languages.

I am lucky because I was exposed to Marshallese since birth unlike Marshallese who were born and raised in the United States and elsewhere. Marshallese born outside of the Marshall Islands are a group that faces the language loss dilemma. I would like to refer to this group as “unlucky”. In northwest Arkansas, for example, there are ethnic Marshallese youth who do not speak Marshallese. On the bright side, they are well-versed in English and are able to advocate for themselves. Their English empowers them at school, at work, and with non-Marshallese friends or co-workers. At the same time, the use of English removes them from their heritage.

After communicating with the Marshallese Ambassador and Consul Generals to the US, I learned that no language revitalization programs are currently in place in the Marshallese diaspora. What does this mean? It means a native-speaking Marshallese linguist will need to design a program for Marshallese who do not currently speak their own language. Ideally, the program would bring together revitalization resources, and the two groups in an agreed-upon plan which makes speaking the language something cool for young and eager Marshallese.

One resource that could be used for revitalization is a website that holds Marshallese legends and stories found at the website of the “Marshall Islands Storytelling Project” (2008). The project collected and preserved legends told by respected Marshallese elders. The stories are in both Marshallese and

English --spoken and written. Native Marshallese speakers got to learn the process of documenting (audio-recording, etc.) so they could provide content material from their personal experiences, while learners of Marshallese can listen to the spoken language and read the scripts. This project is a win-win for both groups.

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