The stories and other cultural material presented here were collected by me over the years 1950–57 and 1967–74, and part of 1975, in the Marshall Islands. My duties as District Anthropologist in the first period and Community Development Advisor in the second gave me the opportunity to learn the language and the culture of the Marshallese people. Indeed, this was necessary in order to do my job properly. I returned to the Marshalls in early 1975, after the termination of my employment there, to collect additional folk tales and related material.

When I first came to the Marshall Islands, I met with traditional leaders individually, explained my official role, and told them of my interest in learning Marshallese culture. Without exception, I was able to obtain their assistance. They gave me valuable information, and also identified and referred me to other knowledgeable people and specialists in different activities. Other Marshallese helped me in this manner as well. I was able to gather folk tales and ethnographic, historical, and other data in many locations and situations during the course of my daily routine, and on field trips to the outer islands of the archipelago, while at sea and ashore, and at appointed times and places at the informants’ convenience, usually in their homes or nearby. Information was also collected during casual conversations with friends and acquaintances.

In many instances, an informant would volunteer information or tell a story or a proverb (jabönkennaan) in order to make a point that he or she wanted to get across, or to educate me in some aspect of Marshallese culture. Often I just asked informants to tell me some stories of the past (bwebwenato in etto), and a free flow of narrative followed.

My requests for specific information, no matter of what kind, were never refused by anyone. Of course, I avoided asking anything that I thought might cause the particular person or persons with whom I was speaking any discomfort for personal, cultural, or political reasons. All of my informants seemed to like giving me information, and all of them agreed that it would be beneficial to record the stories for future generations of Marshallese as well. Indeed, this was my main purpose in collecting this material, as well as to add it to the body of Marshallese folklore that has already been recorded—for the benefit of scholars and others who are interested in Marshallese culture.

All translation was done by me, except where indicated. I have identified the interpreters in these cases. Words and expressions in the ancient language (kajin etto) and those of a specialized nature with which I was unfamiliar, as for example, canoe language (kajin wa), fishing language (kajin eqūwd), navigation language (kajin meto), and the like, were explained to me by my informants in the course of the narration.

Each story is preceded by the name of the person who told it to me, or other identification, followed by the place where and year when the story or information was obtained. I use the term “informant” to refer to this person. It is a term that has had long and widespread usage among anthropologists and other social scientists to refer to an individual who provides information to the researcher from his or her stock of knowledge. The Marshallese equivalent is ri-bwebwenato ‘storyteller’. Bwebwenato means ‘talk’ (both verb and noun) or ‘story’. The ri-bwebwenato is one who is knowledgeable in the oral tradition of the Marshall
Islands—more so than others. Such individuals are well known and respected, and are, in effect, living repositories and transmitters of traditional Marshallese culture. They can be described as the native historians. Their role in preliterate Marshallese society and on up to the present time will be discussed in more detail later. The term ri-bwebwenato is also used for one who has given information, a speaker who may or may not be a specialist, so to speak, endowed with a great store of traditional knowledge.

As I have indicated, there are stylistic differences among informants in the telling of tales, and there are some dialectical differences as well. This will be apparent in the Marshallese texts to those who know the language. I have tried to translate as literally as possible and yet avoid stilted or clumsy language, and not sacrifice clarity.

Those conversant with the Marshallese language will recognize the use of the present tense to describe past actions in some instances. As linguists Carr and Elbert (1945:xxii) point out: “In vivid narrative style the present is used for the past except for direct quotations.” They describe this as “the narrative present.” In the stories told to me, the present tense was sometimes used as Carr and Elbert have described. However, I have used the past tense in the English translation when it was more meaningful and was clearly the intent of the narrator to be past action. I did not change tenses in the Marshallese text, however. The Marshallese equivalent of the English conjunction “and” is frequently used in the Marshallese narrative style. I have translated it in every case, although it may appear superfluous to those not conversant with the Marshallese language.

I have identified and listed the motifs in the stories, using Bacil Kirtley’s (1955) motif-index as a model. This work analyzes and classifies Oceanic narratives according to the system developed by Thompson (1932–36).

Marshallese folklore, indeed the folklore of any people, cannot be more than superficially understood or appreciated without some knowledge of the particular culture. The more one knows, of course, the better one can understand and appreciate the references and nuances in these stories. For this reason, some basic information is presented for the benefit of those who may be unfamiliar with the Marshall Islands and the Marshallese people. I have also included explanatory notes for most of the stories. Many of them are from my unpublished field notes.

I have included more than one version of several of the stories to show the variation in content and style that exists in Marshallese folk tales.

The orthography used by me was in common use when I recorded the stories. It is based on the Protestant Bible translation orthography. However, my Marshallese text has been transcribed into the more recent official/standard orthography so that it can be used in the government schools in the Marshalls.

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Nan Ri-Majel remour im ilo ememej eo en ro remej: Korin kanooj in eprpool kon ami jipa im jouj elap.

J. A. T.
Honolulu 1996

“... like all other elements of human culture, folktales are not mere creatures of chance. They exist in time and space, and they are affected by the nature of the land where they are current, by the linguistic and social contacts of its people, and by the lapse of the years and their accompanying historic changes.”

Stith Thompson (1951:13)