

**ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

KORA LEJMANJURI: WOMEN ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

Desmond Narain Doulatram, Social Science Instructor and Co-Chair at the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI)

20 January 2025

Women have played an instrumental role as peacemakers in the Pacific Islands. In the Marshallese society, especially, women are intrinsically connected with the concept of peace, and therefore to the idea of Nuclear Justice. This essay highlights the story of indigenous female strength within the Nuclear Justice discourse in the Marshall Islands—a narrative often overshadowed by white privilege narratives. The essay focuses on the power of women in the Marshall Islands who are key figures in promoting a “Peaceful Society.”

Lejmanjuri – The Peacemaker

There is a term uniquely attributed to indigenous Marshallese woman: *Lejmanjuri*, which literally means “Peacemaker.” *Lej* means “fearless,” *man* means “the front” or “the lead” (and it is how we refer to the eldest woman, e.g., *Manje*), and *juri* means “to stomp” or “to step on.” Together, the term signifies a woman who has the final say, symbolised by stomping her foot down to end conflicts between warring clans, warring brothers, and warring relatives, thereby initiating a cessation of hostilities. This concept is tied to the story of how Majuro Atoll was split into two halves. It recounts the story of a *Lejmanjuri*, or peacemaker, named LiWeman from the Rimwejoor Clan, who intervened to prevent the Raano Clan Paramount Chieftain, Kaibuke Tobinwa, from slaying his maternal relative, the lesser chief Jebrik Kapelle, in Majuro. The three matrilineal genealogical charts below signify the matrilineal families of Marshall Islands, including the matrilineal heritage of LiWeman who was a Chieftain of Arno and Majuro.¹

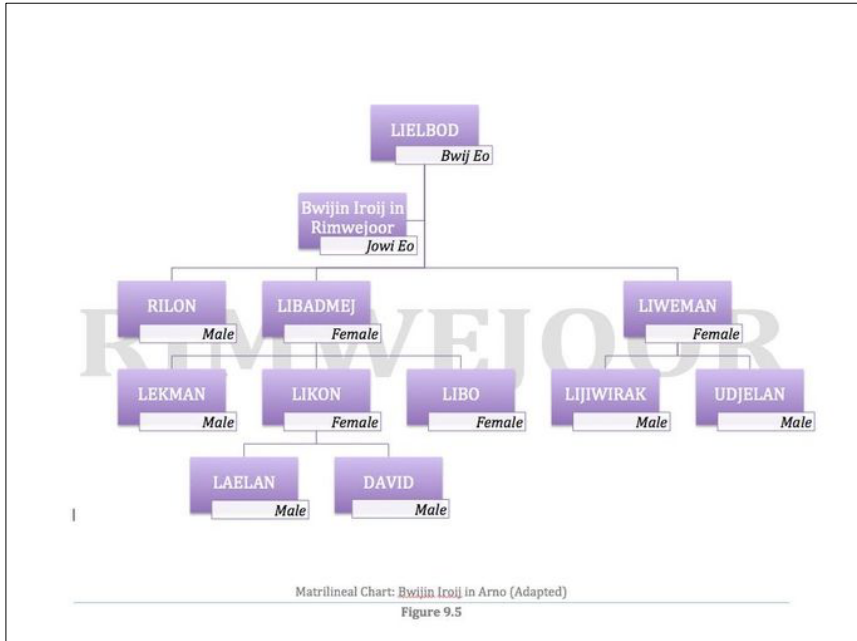


Figure 1: Matrilineal chart of the Rimwejoor Chiefs of Arno Atoll that LiWeman descends from.

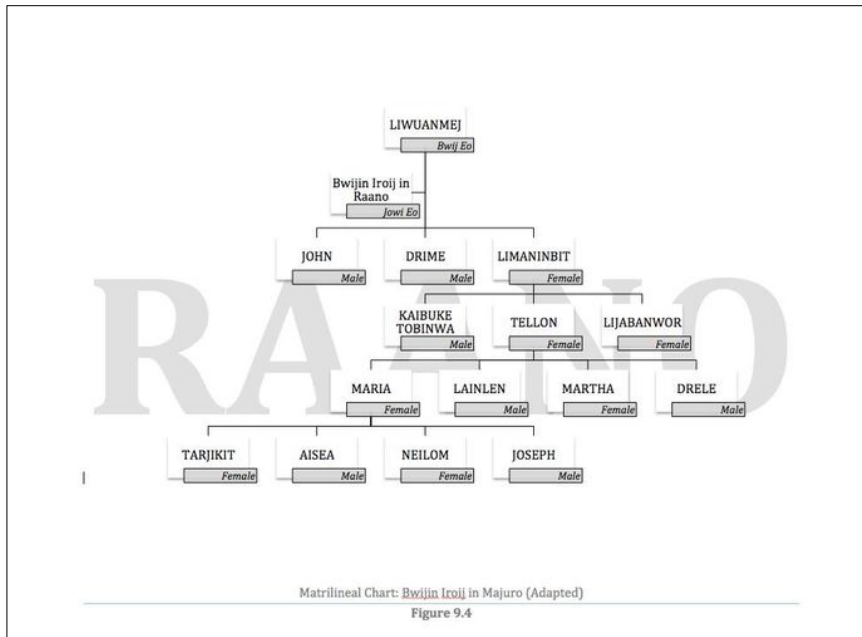


Figure 2: Matrilineal chart of the Raano Chiefs of Majuro Atoll that Kaibuke Tobinwa descends from.

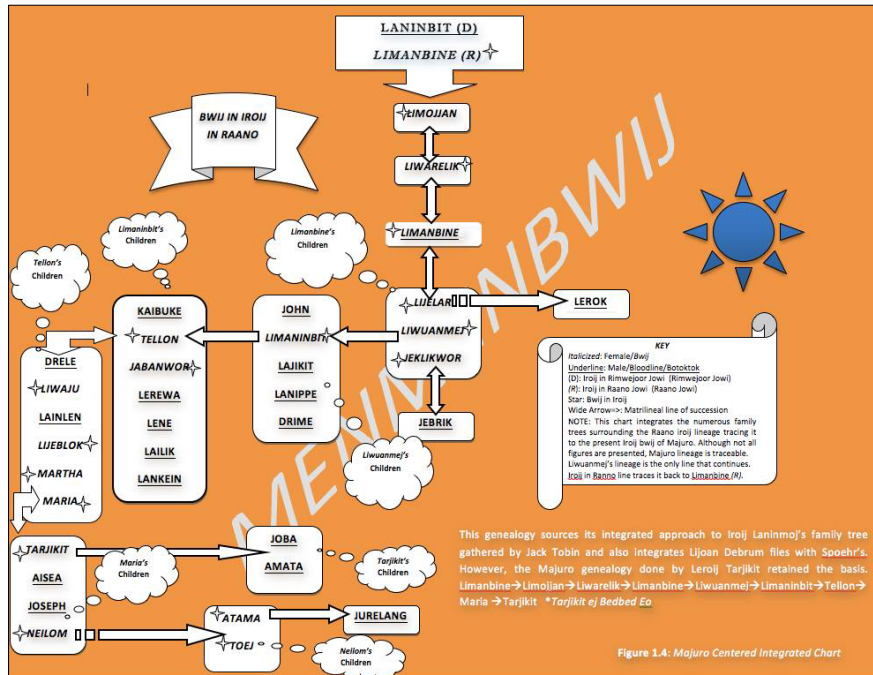


Figure 3: Eastern Chain matrilineal chart that Kaibuke and Jebrik descend from.

Role of Lejmanjuri

Why is this role of peacemaking important in the context of Nuclear Justice? It is because Marshallese women in our society literally resemble the word “peace.” Another story tells of a transfiguration goddess named LiTakBoK, who would feed and share her blessings with others in the form of a white bird, just like the dove signifying peace. She is forever etched on the Majuro Atoll flag, symbolising Majuro, the capital of the Marshall Islands, as the metropolitan city leading the conversation of Peace in various platforms—from traditional to modern, from commoner to chiefs, and from government to non-government spheres of influence. This echoes the enduring tale of the *Lejmanjuri* Peacemakers.





Figure 4: *LiTaKBoKi* – A transfiguration goddess representing peace, depicted in the Majuro Atoll flag. She symbolises sharing and giving, similar to the white dove commonly featured in peace emblems, particularly those associated with the United Nations.

Gender Roles of Lejmanjuri

Women play important gender roles in Marshallese culture, which is matrilineal, with clan names derived from our mothers. For thousands of years, Marshallese have sustainably managed resources based on their creation stories. Jelibor Jam, an elder (landlord) called Alap, tells us within his *Bwebwenato* (story) that the people learned how to cultivate their thoughts and became enlightened by a female goddess named Jined Ilo Kobo, who taught the Marshallese people environmental sustainability. This led to food sovereignty, forming the foundation of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, known as Aelon Kein Ad.ⁱⁱ *Ae* means “current,” *Lon* means “sky,” and *Kein* refers to “plants” and “things.” An equally reputable character is Liwatuounmour,ⁱⁱⁱ whose name means *Li* (iterative affix), *weto* (land parcel), *in* (for), and *mour* (life). She signifies the Mother Earth goddess, a life-giving land parcel, where the land is tied to the idea of nourishment, for it is a place to eat.

Ethnolinguistics of Peace

The Pacific means peaceful, and it encompasses one-third of the world’s surface. The word for Peace is literally *Aeineman*—*Ae* meaning “current,” *in* meaning “for,” and *eman* meaning “good,” signifying peaceful currents. I share this cultural lens because it was a Marshallese woman from Majuro Atoll, Dorothy Tarjikit Laelan Kabua, who led the petition in the 1950s^{iv} to stop nuclear testing in the Pacific in the name of peace and freedom for her people. As early as 1953, she submitted an original request at the United Nations Trusteeship Meeting,^v to cease nuclear testing, but her plea fell on deaf

ears.^{vi} A year later, at the sight of the horrific destruction caused by Bravo’s atomic test on the Marshall Islands, Dorothy Kabua, alongside three others, lodged another petition before the United Nations in 1954. The petition read: “If you take away their land, you also take away their spirit.” It signified the spiritual connection Marshallese have with their land. Dorothy Kabua went on to say that land, sea, and sky provide many years of life, feeding and clothing us with the talents we uniquely possess to exploit a healthy, sustainable environment. This is the indigenous truth that bestows me with my intellectual capital, as Dorothy is whom my mother is named after, and it is a story of indigenous resistance against textual colonialism.



Figure 5: Photograph of Leroij (Chieftain) Dorothy Litarjikit Kabua of Majuro Atoll, a vocal female leader in advocating for an end to the Nuclear Testing Program at the United Nations in the 1950s.

Today’s Reality

Recently, US Congresswoman Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagon paid tribute to my nuclear heroine great-grandmother, as well as to other individuals and families of the Marshall Islands who have suffered from the US nuclear testing program, by reintroducing the apology resolution that would make the United States responsible for paying reparations.^{vii} The resolution aims to “apologize to the people of the Marshall Islands for the effects of US nuclear testing over more than a decade during the Cold War.”^{viii}

I bring my female family members to the forefront of this discourse in response to the unfair interpretation of certain facts by foreign writers – mostly white people – who ignore the realities of economic pragmatism in indigenous societies. Indigenous peoples realistically fight the structural violence embedded in capitalism and imperialism through cultural resilience, adapting and indigenising foreign resources to live to fight another day, due to the technologies and systems of oppression at play. White authors often rely on written documents and circulated narratives that drown out indigenous voices in favour of a Western framework that borders on a victimhood mentality.

As many Marshallese people have experienced, unidimensional depictions of Marshallese people as victims detract from their admirable story of resilience and self-reliance.^{ix} There exist untold narratives in chiefly households, particularly those that are female-led, because of general misconceptions of Marshallese women in the anthropological field, where writers often adopt an ethnocentric lens rather than a culturally relativistic one based on cross-cultural empathy.

White scholars have fallen victim to a white saviour mentality where Western ideals forego matrilineal clan dominance in culturally attuned writing. They forget that Marshall Islands is a matrilineal society, where final decisions rest with the Lejmanjuri, the eldest female clan leader, who is always consulted and, in many ways, held “soft power” in her “final say.” Women in the Marshall Islands have always dictated the cultural configuration of the nation, but this is often missed, especially by white male authors.

Some factual clarifications need to be made in this context as a counternarrative to the dominant Western narratives that promote white saviourism stories, which are often told in service of the special interests and core ideologies of the dominant social group (i.e., White people). These narratives frequently achieve dominance in written literature, which is widely circulated to mentally colonize and indoctrinate our indigenous kin. The clarifications are as follows:

1. It was already predicted that the Ene Wetak dome would leak, and that the Ene Wetak natives were told not to go there prematurely, or they would suffer the same fate as the Rongelapese.^x
2. Dorothy Kabua warned the United Nations to end nuclear weapons testing in 1953,^{xi} as oral records state,^{xii} but they did not listen, and the Castle Bravo test still happened.^{xiii}
3. Emlain Shizuko Kabua, First Lady of the Marshall Islands, stated that Jeimata Kabua was the real chief of Bikini and that his permission to bomb his islands was not fully granted, as he never gave his full informed consent. The United States had already created divisions between the chief and his commoner kin.^{xiv}
4. Bravo survivor Nerje Joseph^{xv} stated that the first president of the Marshall Islands, Amata Kabua, always had the deepest respect for the Rongelap people despite his support for the Compact of Free Association (COFA), hence why he suggested adding a Changed Circumstance Petition^{xvi} to the US-drafted 177 agreement to address the structural violence against a global superpower on practical terms.
5. The fight for the limited compensation agreement was rushed so that those living at the time could at least have some form of reparation, as many of the Rongelap elders were dying after the 32-plus year-fight from 1954 to 1986, with a Changed Circumstance Petition added to this end.^{xvii}

- One of these nuclear heroines fighting for peace is a young *Lejmanjuri* named Ariana Tibon^{xviii} from Majuro, who excels in amplifying the stories of the struggles of the female nuclear victims at the Human Rights Council^{xix} in collaboration with Marshallese President Hilda Heine.^{xx}

In this light, I write this interpretative essay because I owe my voice to the wonderful Marshallese women from the NGO REACH-MI—specifically Rosania Bennet, Lani Kramer, Tarjo Arelong, and Angeline Heine—who co-founded REACH-MI so that I, too, can help amplify their voices. REACH-MI (Radiation Exposure Awareness Crusaders of Humanity for the Marshall Islands) conducts advocacy work and played an active role in pushing the Marshallese government to be more active, partially through the creation of the National Nuclear Commission.^{xxi} This has included political activism and continuous outreach to key leaders, audiences, and local, regional, and international media to push the nuclear justice issue.

I also write this essay as a respectful response on behalf of my Marshallese tribal family to the defamation they endure due to Western viewpoints that diminish the indigenous cultural voice. There is immense potential in uplifting indigenous Marshallese women,^{xxii} who represent half of the population. Their untold stories showcase their immense capabilities, as they lead their men – often from the shadows – shaping the course of their communities with wisdom and strength that deserve recognition and respect.



Figure 6: Poster by REACH-MI showcasing the power of *Lejmanjuri* for International Day of Peace.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

This essay is also published on the [APLN website](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Desmond Narain Doulatram is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Pacific Studies at the University of the South Pacific (USP). He is also employed as a Social Science Instructor and is the Co-Chair at the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI) Liberal Arts Department where he teaches and has taught History of the Marshall Islands, Contemporary Social Issues in Micronesia, Issues in Pacific Studies, World History, Introduction to Sociology, Pacific Geography, Upward Bound Creative Writing and Fundamentals of Speech. In addition to his teaching responsibilities at CMI, he is and has been a member of the Curriculum Committee, Learning Support Committee, Executive Council, Enrollment Management Committee, Institutional Review Board, and the Social Justice Taskforce. Additionally, he was a National Board Member for the Marshall Islands Public School System (PSS) representing the interests of Parents, Guardians & Students. He is also a Co-founder to two NGOs being Jo-JiKuM (Jodrikdrik in Jipan ene eo Ekutok Maroro) translated as Youths for a Greener RMI and REACH-MI (Radiation Exposure Awareness Crusaders for Humanity-Marshall Islands) which deals with the nuclear issue. He has previously worked on Climate Change under the Marshall Islands Office of the President. He also worked as an educator at Marshall Islands Ministry of Education before obtaining his MA degree in Asia-Pacific Studies with a Social Science and Humanities concentration from the University of San Francisco. He obtained his BSc in Social Science with an emphasis in Pre-Law from Southwestern Adventist University (SWAU). He has also obtained a Professional Certificate in Online Education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

ⁱ The Rimwejoor Clan of Arno Atoll in the Marshall Islands fathered the Raano Clan of Majuro from which Jebrik and Kaibuke come from matrilineally. See page 7 of Amata Kabua, *Customary Titles and Inherent Rights: A General Guideline in Brief*, (Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Islands), February 11, 1993.

<https://shorturl.at/bkoJc>

ⁱⁱ Maria Kabua Fowler and Irene J. Taafaki. "Women's roles, attributes and health in the Marshall Islands," In *Traditional Medicine of the Marshall Islands: The Women, the Plants, the Treatments* by Maria Kabua Fowler, Irene J. Taafaki, and Randolph R. Thaman, (Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 2006), 11-18.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dorothy Kabua. "Liwatuonmour," In *Stories from the Marshall Islands* by Jack A. Tobin, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 53.

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- ^{iv} Nic Maclellan, “MANUSCRIPT XLIII: Petition to the United Nations Trusteeship Council from the Marshallese People, 20 April 1954,” *The Journal of Pacific History*, Volume 59 (1), 2023: 106–12, doi:10.1080/00223344.2023.2285475.
- ^v Julianne M. Walsh, *Etto nan Raan Kein: A Marshall Islands History*, (Honolulu: Bess Press, 2012), 305, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gLGuslclSNi3np-1PiDSCJe2mecNLe62/view>
- ^{vi} Desmond Narain Doulatram, “Marshallese Downwinders and a Shared Nuclear Legacy of Global Proportions,” Presentation to Human Rights, Future Generations and Crimes in the Nuclear Age Conference, University of Basel, 14–17 Sept. 2017.
- ^{vii} See Radwagen Press release: <https://shorturl.at/kSqjw>. See Porter Press Release: <https://porter.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=671>
- ^{viii} Anita Hofschneider, “Resolution Would Apologize To Marshall Islands For Nuclear Testing,” *Honolulu Civil Beat*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.civilbeat.org/beat/resolution-would-apologize-to-marshall-islands-for-nuclear-testing/>
- ^{ix} ^{ix} Desmond Narain Doulatram, “An Enduring Injustice: Book Review of *Blown to Hell: America’s Deadly Betrayal of the Marshall Islanders* by Walter Pincus,” *Arms Control Association*, May 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-05/book-reviews/blown-hell-americas-deadly-betrayal-marshall-islanders>
- ^x Amata Kabua, “Interview: President Amata Kabua,” *Pacific Magazine*, March-April 1983, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/16pCA3jXPwS8nurLI-Gs5bREpe3mTpUej/view>
- ^{xi} Julianne M. Walsh, *Etto nan Raan Kein: A Marshall Islands History*.
- ^{xii} Linda Marie Richards, Jacob Darwin Hamblin, *Making the Unseen Visible: Science and the Contested Histories of Radiation Exposure*, (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2023), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.119293>
- ^{xiii} This was told by former Ambassador Amatlain Kabua during a Peaceboat side event. See here: <https://www.facebook.com/PeaceBoatUs/photos/a.439288992763603.117451.435717949787374/1916823301676824/?type=3&theater>
- ^{xiv} See Bikini Act: https://rmparliament.org/cms/images/LEGISLATION/PRINCIPAL/1994/1994-0086/1994-0086_1.pdf
- ^{xv} This was said during an interview that REACH-MI’s first President Rosania Bennet and I as its first secretary did for Kyoto news. Part of this interview can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYapoPn2hN8>
- ^{xvi} This Changed Circumstance Petition was mentioned by Congress Woman Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagan during a Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing led by Chair Katie Porter (D-Calif.) that held an oversight hearing titled, Runit Dome and the U.S Nuclear Legacy in the Marshall Islands. See here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RURtu7Z0Q1E>. It was also mentioned by former Marshall Islands Parliament Speaker Kenneth Kedi of Rongelap Atoll during Compact III hearing, see here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPB8fdcfJRO>
- ^{xvii} “User Clip: Rep. Porter 1-Minute on 75th Anniversary of Marshall Islands Nuclear Tests,” *C-SPAN*, June 25, 2021, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4967949/user-clip-rep-porter-1-minute-75th-anniversary-marshall-islands-nuclear-tests>
- ^{xviii} Ariana Tibon-Kilma is the chairperson of the Republic of the Marshall Islands National Nuclear Commission. She addressed the Human Rights Council at its 57th session during an enhanced interactive dialogue on the nuclear legacy in the Marshall Islands.
- ^{xix} UN Human Rights Council, “The horrific legacy of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands is laid bare at the UN | HRC57,” *Youtube Video*, October 4, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K87MkXo9POs>
- ^{xx} UN Human Rights Council, “President Hilda Heine of the Marshall Islands addresses the Human Rights Council in Geneva | HRC57,” *Youtube Video*, September 27, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9mwx5HWNZM>
- ^{xxi} National Nuclear Commission Strategy for Justice, Marshall Islands National Nuclear Commission, June 25, 2021: 21-22, <https://rmi-data.sprep.org/dataset/national-nuclear-commission-strategy-justice>

ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organization and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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