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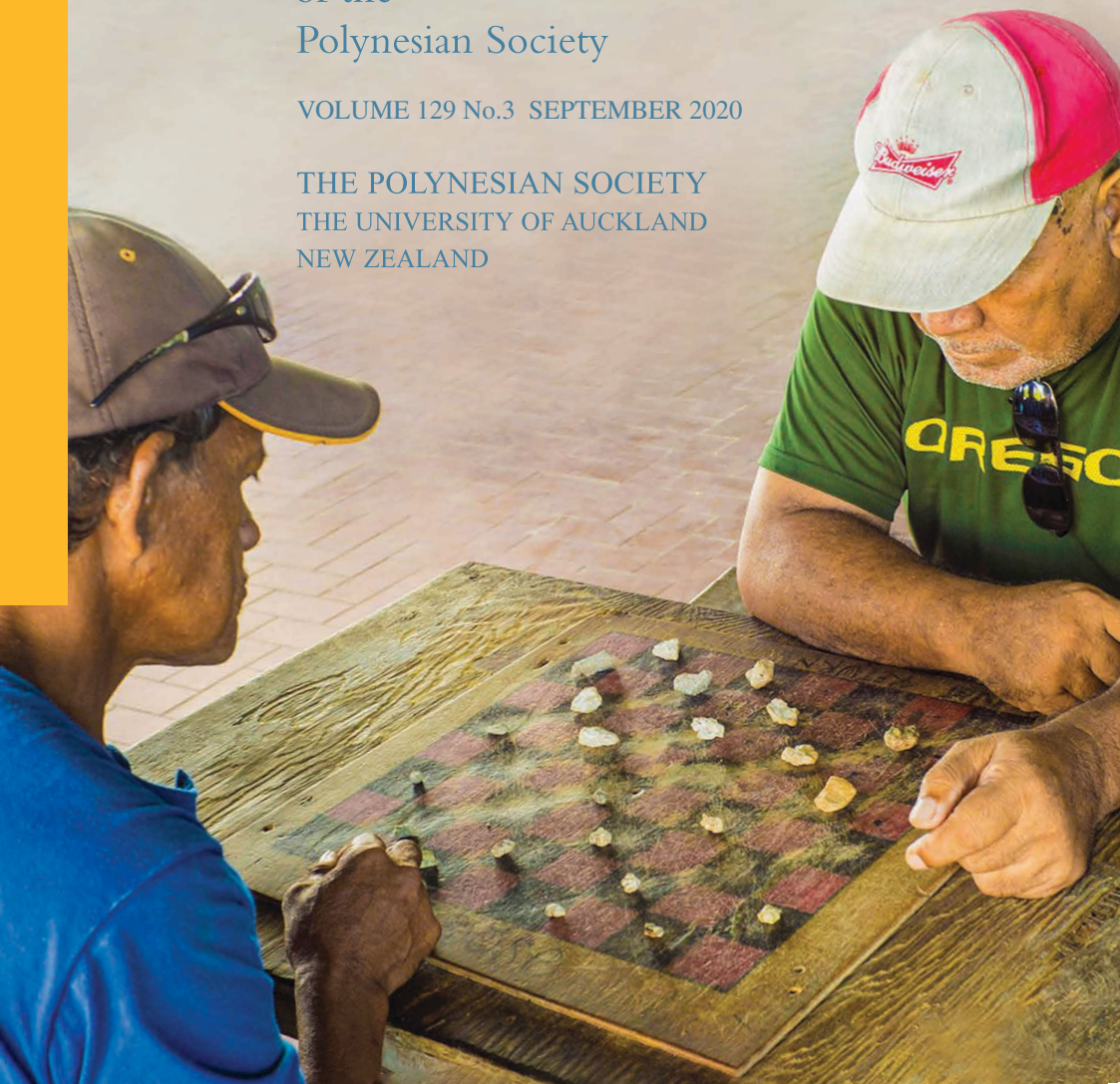

THE ROLE OF CHECKERS (JEKAB) IN THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

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ABSTRACT: The Marshall Islands have an active community of competitive players of checkers (jekab) who use a rule set that is particular to the region. This game is featured in tournaments held during cultural celebrations on multiple islands in the archipelago, while the activity is considered an integral part of public life as it is witnessed on the islands. Marshallese checkers is shown to create a liminoid space in which a diversity of players in terms of age, language and socioeconomic circumstances interact across the playing board. Marshallese checkers supports the idea of board games as social lubricants that helps to explain how board games cross these borders so effortlessly historically as well as contemporaneously. The public presence, the rules and the diversity of players exhibited in the Marshall Islands point to a rich history of and a continuing future for abstract board games in the Pacific Islands.

Keywords: checkers (jekab), board games, social lubricant, horizontal transmission, anthropology of play, Marshall Islands, Micronesia

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In his thesis work, Walter Crist, an anthropological archaeologist who focuses on social complexity in ancient Cyprus, introduced the idea that board games act as "social lubricants" (Crist 2016). He subsequently expanded on this idea in an article that included a series of examples from antiquity (Crist *et al.* 2016). These two studies suggest that games, specifically board games, may function like wine and feasting in that they facilitate interaction, particularly between distinct cultural groups. More specifically, the abstract nature of board games allows people with different sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds to interact in novel ways. Unlike physical sports (e.g., West 2014), they require little organisation, may involve only two people and require few physical materials, which are often reusable.

In the work on social lubricants the concept of liminality, as introduced by Victor Turner (1974), is central. Liminality is a state whereby people can step outside normal social practices and bend familiar cultural elements and societal structures (p. 60). The *liminal* state is mostly part of an obligatory transition, as is often seen in "rites of passage" (Van Gennep [1909] 1960). Turner contended that play, or more generally "leisure", created an element

of "optionality" where going outside the norm happens in what he termed a *liminoid* space that is neither transitional nor mandatory. The liminoid is distinguished from the liminal in that more freedom is allowed. "It is less serious, and actions are not as proscribed" (Crist *et al.* 2016: 180). Turner mentions chess as an example of a liminoid activity that also "seems to need no goals or rewards outside itself" (Turner 1974: 68). Liminoid states also can be entered through the use of social lubricants. For instance, liminoid states created by intoxicating substances may allow for interactions otherwise not permitted in society (see also, e.g., Dietler 2010).

Game play, according to Brian Sutton-Smith (1997: 93), creates "a metaphoric sphere that can conjoin what is otherwise apart and divide what is otherwise together". This resonates with the idea that people can step outside normal social practices. Thomas Malaby (2009: 211) speaks of play as "an attitude that is totalizing in the sense that it reflects an acknowledgment of how events, however seemingly patterned or routinized, can never be cordoned off from contingency entirely". His view goes beyond the idea of meaning-making as the central role of play in society (p. 207). Instead, play and games introduce contingency; the participants accept an uncertain outcome of a cultural practice. In the case of Majuro checkers players, examined herein, a gardener may dominate a director in a series of games with both players having entered the game accepting this uncertainty. Play, and specifically abstract board games (Danilovic and de Voogt 2020) such as checkers, facilitate this interaction since not only is the outcome uncertain, it is not governed by chance as in gambling games (e.g., Festa 2007) but by the cognitive abilities of the players.

Playing checkers is not so much meaningful in the sense that the status of the winning player is at stake. The status of a player outside of the game is irrelevant and often unknown to the participant. If by acting in a liminoid space players are agents in the history of games, which means that they interact across boundaries both within and between societies, then evidence of this agency should be present in contemporary gaming practices. Unlike organised play, such as sports or board game tournaments, which could affect one's status in society, and unlike gambling where stakes or debts are exchanged (see, e.g., Oxfeld 1993), playing board games may result in interactions that are mostly, although not exclusively, meaningful as a "social lubricant". It offers participants, in this case Marshallese players, a possibility of interacting competitively with individuals from other social groups.

With the concepts of liminoid spaces and social lubricants in mind, the current distribution of games attested both in archaeology and anthropology is better understood. This distribution process is characterised as horizontal transmission, i.e., from peer group to peer group, crossing multiple

boundaries—in this case, geographic, socioeconomic and linguistic boundaries—with identical playing rules found across time and space (de Voogt *et al*. 2013). The ways in which board games facilitate contact between players and hence advance the distribution of board game rules and practices is little understood. Contemporary ethnography, as opposed to the archaeological evidence discussed by Crist *et al.* (2016) that mainly consists of material culture, may better inform this process of transmission and do so in more detail.

I evaluate the idea that competitive checkers (*jekab*) in the Marshall Islands serves as a social lubricant and creates a liminoid space in which players can interact with those with whom they would not interact otherwise. I suggest that some players are motivated to play in order to access this social interaction while for others the play needs to have no goals or rewards outside itself. In addition, the playing practice has become part of Marshallese cultural identity through its visibility in central Majuro and in yearly festivals. These aspects were explored by examining the public playing practices of competitive checkers in Majuro during fieldwork in 2017 and 2018.

METHODS

During a stay in Majuro in December 2017 and January 2018, the public checkerboard near the Robert Reimers Hotel was observed at different times of day. Videos were made of games to record specific rules and playing practices. Short interviews were conducted with some of the lead players conversant in English to confirm game rules and explain situations in the game. This was followed by interviews with staff at the Alele Museum, an institution also responsible for cultural festivals on the island. Their staff facilitated additional conversations on different days, both at the Robert Reimers site and at the nearby senior centre, that focused on the history of the game and the contexts of expert play as well as individual players' personal experiences with checkers. Only players active in these locations were approached.

The study concentrated on competitive play and largely excluded the role of checkers at home or in other contexts. Competitive game play allows for a precise description of game rules and usually features a well-defined and relatively small community of players, a practice which has been widely documented (see, e.g., de Voogt 1995, 2005; Herskovits 1932; van Beek and Dorgelo 1997). Competitive play may occur in different spatial contexts but is characterised by the intensity with which the game proceeds and the need for specific rules.

The game rules, as well as changes in rules over time, were documented in detail through interviews with individuals as well as a group of players. For instance, in group conversations it was possible to determine who had

the longest experience in the game and who had been teaching who. Senior players were asked about changes in playing practices during their lifetimes to determine historical developments.

Linguistic information on checkers terminology from the Marshallese-English Online Dictionary (MOD 2009) was confirmed with players on site, while a visit to the Waan Aelon in Majel in Majuro served to collect information on the practice of making checkerboards, which was also discussed with players active at the public playing board.

CHECKERS IN CONTEMPORARY MARSHALL ISLANDS SOCIETY

In a study intended to confirm Roberts *et al.*'s (1959: 600) assertion that "simple societies should not possess games of strategy and should resist borrowing them", Garry Chick (1998) included games from the Trobriand, Fijian, Māori, Marquesan, Sāmoan, Gilbertese, Marshallese, Trukese, Yapese, and Palauan societies. Chick's analysis only included games of strategy for Māori and Yapese. However, recent research in Kiribati (de Voogt 2018) challenges Chick's description of the distribution of "games of strategy" as he overlooks checkers playing in Kiribati. In addition, the Trobriand Islanders are also known to play checkers, a game widespread and popular in these islands (Sergio Jarillo de la Torre, pers. comm., 2017). The current study also identifies checkers in the Marshall Islands. Chick found few board games or "games of strategy" in the Pacific, even though the Trobriand, Kiribati and Marshall islanders have played strategy games for at least half a century. For instance, Alexander Spoehr (1949: 213), in his ethnography of the Marshall Islands, states, "A form of checkers has been played by all ages since German times, and playing cards are in use", but apart from this one sentence he does not elaborate. Chick excluded the game of checkers as it was introduced after contact with Westerners, but the presence of games of strategy does go against the idea that some societies resist borrowing them.

The game of checkers is now widely known throughout the Marshall Islands and played informally and competitively, although not necessarily by all islanders on each island. It is found in public places, giving the game broad exposure in the communities in which it is found. The game is present and appropriated by society with local terminology, self-produced boards and locally sourced pieces. On Majuro, there are three occasions or holidays on which there are tournaments—May 1, February 15 (Memorial Day) and September 29—and this tradition goes back for at least a decade. The September date coincides with a cultural festival that includes canoe paddling, basket weaving, coconut husking and fire making. Up to four checkerboards are used in a knock-out tournament with cash prizes for the winners (see Fig. 1). No other board or card games feature in this festival,

and together with ludo (*jikere* or *jekidri*, similar to American parcheesi), it is one of few board games that is often homemade. The Waan Aelon in Majel (WAM), a group of artists in Majuro known for their canoe making, also produce handmade checkers and ludo boards using locally sourced *lukwej* or *luwej* (*Calophyllum inophyllum* L. [Guttiferae]; known as *tamanu* in Polynesia) wood, while homemade boards are commonly made of plywood with a painted checkered pattern, as confirmed by players on Majuro as well as on neighbouring Kiribati.

Checkers is set apart from proprietary games such as Candyland and Monopoly, which are also known but only in their commercial form. The Marshallese language has adopted a few terms specific to checkers, often cognate with English, and others for games in general (see Table 1). The words for "game" and "checkers" are adapted to Marshallese phonology, the latter transformed in a way that the English etymology is no longer recognised by the Marshallese. Other terms are common words used in other contexts, with the exception of *jaṃtiltili* 'to capture many pieces', which appears specific for a games context and is particularly appropriate for checkers.

Table 1. Marshallese words used in checkers (source: MOD 2009)

Marshallese	English
bar jinoe	'to draw a game/begin again'
bōke	'to take' (to capture); e.g., *bōke im etal* 'take it and go'
iroij	'king'
jaṃtiltili	'to capture many pieces'
jebo	'draw/tie'; e.g., *keem eo inne jebo* 'yesterday's game was a tie'
jekab	'checkers; to play checkers'
jekaboot	'checkerboard'
keem	'game'
wa	'playing piece'; 'something that moves'

Since it is played in public places as well as in the home, the game of checkers has become part of the cultural environment, as witnessed by outsiders as well as noted by the Marshallese themselves. A twenty-first-century blogger writes, "The gentlemen play checkers at Robert Reimers every day. Apparently they hold a tournament and according to Jabby, the

winner gets 'bragging rights and meat' " (Gersh 2005). A recent guidebook notes: "Next to Robert Reimers Enterprises (RRE) is a covered table area that pretty much serves as the town square. Old men play *checkers* (coral vs. pop-tops). It's the easiest place in town to sit down and get to know locals—everyone is quite friendly" (Levy 2003: 58; emphasis in original). They both mention Robert Reimers, the hotel next to which the only regular public checkers play takes place on Majuro. In the imagination of the Marshall Islanders themselves, the scene of men playing checkers is equally salient. In a 2017 poem by Marshall Islander Randon Jebro Jack (*Ta in "Marshall Islands?"*), written while in Hawai'i, one of his couplets reads: "What do *I* think of, / When I hear the words, *Marshall lslands?* / Greeting others, / "Ah *iakwe waj! Ejet am mour?*" / "*Emman emman!*" / Friendly smiles to total strangers / Having Kopiko coffee with fresh doughnuts / With the uncles playing checkers / Outside on the take-out's tables / Smoking USA Gold cigarettes / Going to work 30 minutes to an hour, / LATE /…" (Enright 2017).

Figure 1. Checkers tournament during the 2016 Cultural Festival in Majuro. Photo courtesy of the Alele Museum, Majuro, Marshall Islands.

The checkerboard near the Robert Reimers Hotel (Figs 2 and 3) shows only part of this cultural practice. The tournaments in Majuro, three a year, include players that do not play in public, and according to those at Robert Reimers, they occasionally include women. Outside of Majuro, the most consequential tournament is found in Kwajalein Atoll, on Ebeye Island, during their February 9 Memorial Day festivities. Cash prizes are much higher there and Ebeye players are recognised as some of the best in the country. Team play is featured, with each island putting forward its lead players for yet another prize. The regular players in Majuro defend their home islands, further emphasising the countrywide exposure. But while players may remember the name of last year's champion and the cash prizes are welcomed, the next day near Robert Reimers any champion may have his winning streak interrupted at some point. The game is high-paced and the loss of just a single game will force a player to leave the table and possibly even a tournament; these conditions guarantee that most single players cannot dominate the game for long. Banter, intimidation and laughter keep all participants engaged. This dynamic has both historical significance and contemporary implications.

A PRELIMINARY HISTORY OF CHECKERS IN THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

Geographic Origins

Checkers has many variations, each with a distinct distribution around the world (Murray 1952; Parlett 1997; Van der Stoep 1984). The movements of the king, the possibility of capturing backward, mandatory captures of multiple pieces—they all point towards select properties that are highly distinctive and historically relevant. Even though independent innovation cannot be ruled out, it is clear even the most detailed rules remain in place across time and space for both card and board games (de Voogt *et al.* 2013). Any situation in which the rules clearly diverge requires explanation in terms of historical contact rather than assuming independent innovation.

In the Marshall Islands, the checkers game rules point in one direction. Their version is similar to American "pool" checkers, especially popular among African Americans and in the American Southeast; it is distinct from traditional American checkers and easily recognised. American or "straight" checkers allows pieces to move and capture only in a forward direction. The players capture by jumping over an opponent's piece. Once a piece reaches the other side of the board, it is promoted to king and may move and capture backwards. In pool checkers, pieces only move forward but may capture backwards. Once a piece reaches the other side, it is promoted to king and may cross multiple empty squares at a time; it becomes known as a "long" or "flying" king. Straight checkers has been the dominant version in United States tournaments, while pool checkers was favoured only in some of its regions.

While an American version of checkers reaching the Marshall Islands is hardly a historical surprise, it is of interest that it was checkers, as opposed to chess, that became established (although some Marshall Islanders refer to checkers as "chess" when speaking English). There are two possible reasons. First, the abstract nature of the game and the limited gaming implements make checkers both easier to adopt and easier to manufacture locally than chess. Second, pool checkers is particularly popular as a street game because it can be played much faster than straight American checkers. The adoption of pool checkers suggests American soldiers or whalers were more likely to have introduced the game than missionaries, tourists or colonial officials.

Checkers as played in the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Kiribati and Nauru has one particular rule that is different from contemporary American pool checkers. This rule makes Marshallese checkers identical to what is commonly known as Russian draughts. Elsewhere in the world when a checker piece reaches the far end of the board it becomes a king, but if there are more captures to be made, either the crowning of the king has to wait while the piece continues capturing or the piece will have to rest on the far side before it can make captures as a king in a subsequent move. In Russian and Marshallese checkers, the piece transforms into a king mid-move and will continue as a "flying" king as soon as it has passed the far row. There are very few places in the world where the rule is applied this way, and it is a curious sight for any player who is unaccustomed to it. An independent innovation in the Marshall Islands is unlikely as this Russian rule is also present in the Trobriand Islands (Sergio Jarillo de la Torre, pers. comm., 2017), with whom the Marshallese do not engage. What is historically more likely is that this set of rules was common among American soldiers, even though we have no records of their specific game rules to confirm this. As American pool checkers did not become standardised until the 1960s, this Russian variation may date from the early 1940s.

The introduction of pool checkers does not preclude an earlier introduction of checkers by missionaries or other foreigners. On the contrary, the possibility that missionaries introduced the game to the Pacific (e.g., Austen 1945) would make the adaptation to the specific rules of pool checkers equally understandable. In other words, Pacific islanders' initial familiarity with the game makes interactions (competitions) with American soldiers or whalers even more likely and a region-wide adaptation of the American rules especially plausible. The modern vocabulary predominantly supports an English-language influence since the French (*dames*), German (*Damen*) and Spanish (*damas*) names for the game are not attested.

The suggestion by Spoehr (1949) that the game rules have a German heritage is, however, less likely. Two Marshallese rules differ from the rules of the German game. Apart from the absence of a crowning of the king mid-

move, German pieces cannot capture backwards. It is possible to play many games before witnessing a piece that becomes king and continues capturing in the same move, but if pieces cannot capture backwards everything changes, as this would greatly affect the strategies that can be employed throughout the game. Such a change would not constitute a mere local innovation but would lead to a significantly different game. Thus, it is unlikely that Marshallese checkers has a German origin; additionally, this is supported by the fact that the rules are identical in so many Pacific places that do not have connections with Germany.

Timing of Introduction

Players in Majuro remember the names of great players of the past who were active as early as the 1950s. Depending on the island they were from, individuals recalled names of at least one generation before themselves. One of the older players (age 73) recalled a name that happened to be the grandfather of one of the players on the scene, two generations removed from a man now 50 years old. This suggests that competitive play existed as early as World War II. It also indicates a continuous history of competitive play since at least the 1950s, when the game was apparently already widespread among the Marshall Islanders. However, oral histories could not confirm that American soldiers had introduced the game, as in the minds of these players the game had always been in the islands. Several elderly players were asked whether players had interacted with soldiers at any point in time, but could also not confirm so; they had started to play after the war when they were in their teens. There was no storytelling about how the game had come to the islands or whether the rules had changed—the game and its rules had always been there. The long-term presence of competitive play, perhaps from its first introduction, suggests that much of the appeal has been its competitive aspect. It was the game's fast-paced nature that had made pool checkers popular on the streets of American cities; checkers appears to have been adopted in the Pacific for similar reasons, but its historical origins have been forgotten. Today Marshallese playing rules are different from those of the German, French, Spanish and British colonial powers in the Pacific; there remains some historical but no longer a conscious connection with an American introduction.

FACILITATING INTERACTION IN MAJURO

> On a Sunday morning in Majuro, the public checkerboard near the Robert Reimers Hotel sits idle. Among the tables set on a sidewalk between pillars, with an overhang protecting it from the elements, the checkerboard is permanently nailed to a tabletop. Its squares are painted in black and red, 64 times. The street corner has people, mainly men both young and old, smoking,

> resting, alone or in groups. During this particular rainy Sunday, the place was abandoned, until ten in the morning when two nine-year-old boys started playing checkers. They were applying some rules but not others, frequently forgetting to capture, but mostly enjoying their time, laughing and posing for pictures when asked. Soon the place was abandoned again. At noon one man sat behind the board, grooming, smoking, but not playing. The pieces were not arranged but abandoned in a huddle. There were at least two other empty tables to sit at, but he chose the one with the checkerboard. Perhaps a fellow player would show up—but he left not much later. The rain poured more incessantly, and some people rested at the other tables, men and boys, the occasional woman. A slow day for the checkerboard. (Author's fieldnotes)

Despite the scarcity of action on this Sunday in December, it illustrates the life of the board, the activity surrounding a place of play. It is an optional activity, always there but not always used. A fleeting occurrence in the day of two boys. Elsewhere in town people were also pausing, sitting on benches, together or alone, drinking coffee or tea, or just resting. One activity is not more popular, comfortable, convenient or meaningful than the other, as that would instil too much of a judgment. Note that the children did not play for hours but just a couple of games before they continued their day with other things. Unlike Roberts *et al.* (1959) and Chick (1998), who hypothesised that strategy games would be disruptive in egalitarian societies as one player would be better than another, it has since been shown that competitive games are commonly played in egalitarian societies as in any other (see Chick 2017; de Voogt 2017; Sbrzesny 1976). In the Marshalls, there is a winner of the day as opposed to a winner in society. Such observations are also not specific to the Marshall Islands. Game boards may be used in passing without the pretence of a tournament and without the prestige of a sculptured or ornamented game board (e.g., Walker 1990), or any rules that indicate a gambling purpose.

What the context and the playing practice in Majuro shows is that the Marshallese play board games with informal and optional participation, as we also find elsewhere in the world. The game is appropriated to the extent that the board is an integral part of the furniture, the pieces are both small and large pieces of coral and the language of the game is local.

When observations continued in the evening, twice there were players who took advantage of the electric lighting to engage in a game. Two young male players in their late teens or early 20s played a few games and left an otherwise deserted corner. Twenty minutes later, a man age 35 and a boy age 15 played a few games as well. The morning, the afternoon and the evening only saw players without an audience, without a single person present other than themselves and, briefly, the researcher. The boy and man

Figure 2. A pair of checkers players during the evening on an otherwise deserted street corner in Majuro, Marshall Islands. Author's photo, 2017.

were not relatives but just friends, and the older one said that his family was elsewhere and he was teaching the boy to become a better player. The space in which these games took place allowed for encounters between players of different backgrounds, but outside the gaze of society. There was no audience to praise the winner; the games took place almost invisibly and had no reward other than the game itself.

Monday morning presented a different scene. A breakfast kiosk opened up next to the benches. Five or more people would hang out, often alone, sometimes in groups, mostly avoiding the checkerboard. Drinks and food as social lubricants are well attested and, just as in archaeological contexts (Crist *et al.* 2016), the game board is an appropriate addition to a place of liminoid activity. Although the literature mostly refers to psychoactive substances, such as alcoholic drinks, as social lubricants, feasting practices include all types of food and beverage. In the Marshall Islands, no alcohol was served in the public space where checkers was played. More specifically, the players rarely combined drinking or eating of any kind with their game of checkers; coffee or sandwiches were mostly if not exclusively consumed after a game had been completed.

Around noon the scene attracted seasoned checkers players. After a game, the one who loses makes room for the next player. Games take between three and ten minutes; there is banter and laughter; pieces hit the board or are scratched forward with force; players even move pieces if it is not their turn, pointing out their threatening next move; sometimes a bystander will interfere and play, though his move is commonly reversed. While, according to the men, there have been competent female players who competed in tournaments, no women frequent the public playing board. This is also true for the semi-public board housed at the senior centre behind the Alele Museum. The men at the senior centre are commonly retired, but at Robert Reimers they come from different age groups. Players commonly enter matches in their late 20s, and are regularly present, often continuing to compete, well into their 70s. On any one occasion, there are players with an age spread of some 20 to 30 years.

When asked about their champion, they said none of them was the best player as they all would have their good and bad days. That afternoon was a long sequence of games. From 12 o'clock onwards there were about six onlookers at any one time, including young children attracted by the

Figure 3. Two competitive players during a checkers game. Note the scars on the checkerboard made by forcefully sliding the coral pieces across its squares. Author's photo, 2017.

excitement. At the end of the afternoon, just after four, at least 25 people had gathered near the kiosk: women with children, groups of men—but only five were watching the checkerboard. These five were all players waiting their turn, not yet tired of an afternoon of checkers. All others sitting around at different tables and on ledges around the coffee shop were neither paying attention nor showing any interest in the checkers scene. The players had become as isolated as the pair of players on the Sunday night before.

No bets were placed, no drinks or food accompanied the men; they would eat after a game was finished in order not to be distracted during the match. These players are a different group from the earlier pairs that sat across the checkerboard. These men competed, they raised the game to a battle of minds, they added a social dynamic that is particularly relevant to show how a board game facilitates interaction along multiple dimensions: age, geography and socioeconomic background. Again, the game did not offer "rewards outside itself", but created a liminoid space in which highly diverse individuals interacted competitively.

FACILITATING INTERACTIONS IN THE REGION

Majuro has a particularly diverse checkers community, and a brief inventory established that players had come from all over the Marshall Islands. One afternoon, there were seven players, 23 years apart, from seven different atolls: Kwajalein, Rongelap, Ailinglaplap, Ebon, Maloelap, Ujae and Arno. They had all learned their playing skills outside of Majuro in their early 20s. They said that work or school had brought them to Majuro where they now interacted with fellow players from around the country. Their professions ranged from schoolteacher and museum director to fireman, policeman, small-business owner and gardener.

Although two players were cousins, competitive play is rarely a family matter. One player recalled that his uncle was a famous player before him, but they never played; he had not even asked, although it was not considered improper. Another player had learned the game from his father, who "had been a player himself once". His father was taught by a player from a different island. When it comes to competitive play, it is more common to be taught by peers rather than family members. According to the players interviewed, it is better to learn one's playing skills from multiple people who come from different islands or countries. Players meet at the board and family relationships are happenstance. Unlike games played in the home, which are almost exclusively played among close friends and family, the competitive game creates a community that overarches families, islands and, to some extent, neighbouring countries in the Pacific.

One of the younger competitive players was asked if he ever played people from outside the Marshalls and he mentioned good players from

Kosrae and Nauru who had visited and had given him a "good game". But these foreigners did not visit regularly as they were "busy men" and it was a hike from the airport into town. Other players attested to US Peace Corps members interacting with the Marshallese through a game of checkers in the past. An elderly player, age 79, when asked about the generation of players before him recalled that on his island of Arno, the chief of the island, by the name of Tobo, would play long hours with a man from Kiribati who had married a woman from Arno. These stories suggest that international connections through migration or occasional travel are frequently cemented through checkers and have a long history in the region.

An elderly player from Tuvalu, living on the islands for the last 20 years, was particularly well travelled. He was familiar with other checkers variations but confirmed that only one set of rules was played in the Pacific, whether you were in Tuvalu, Kiribati or the Marshall Islands. He said with a laugh, "Very funny. I don't speak the language but I hear that everyone is contributing [to the game of his opponent]. When the guy loses, he gets angry at someone in the audience." Language barriers did not impede his participation. In his words and with a smile: "This is the only place other than going to the bar. But you cannot play when you are drunk." He pointed out the few men he knew and with whom he chatted before, during or after a game. One day, he was found reading a newspaper at a table next to the board. It was 11 in the morning, a little early for play, but 20 minutes later he had found the first player for the afternoon, just the two of them, soon to be joined by others. He would then leave the scene for a few hours, but at four in the afternoon he was back and played his second set of games for the day, laughing at every win. He actively sought the social interaction offered by a good game of jekab.

The game of checkers facilitates interaction beyond age and socio-economic background. Players who were taught the game on different islands or even in different island countries meet at the playing board in Majuro. They play the same rules and compete with equal enthusiasm. Tournaments or cultural events facilitate such interaction at a grander scale, but Majuro also captures those who are traveling through, those busy men from distant places equally eager to compete when they happen to be in town.

* * *

The answers to the question of why people play are diverse and resonate with theories from evolution to frivolity without any satisfactory consensus, as Sutton-Smith (1997) has demonstrated at length in his aptly titled book, *The Ambiguity of Play.* But the presence of the game of checkers in cultural festivals and its visible practice in the centre of Majuro has added a social

identity. Playing checkers is part of being Marshallese: even if not all Marshallese participate, they are all aware of its presence.

The players active at Robert Reimers compete when playing checkers, using well-defined playing rules that point to a specific history. For the individual player, jekab does not seem to need "goals or rewards outside itself". The reward is the game itself, not the possible outside status or cash prize. In addition to this autotelic aspect, board games facilitate interaction. Players may seek the possibility to interact and compete with people outside of their social-economic environment, of different age groups and from different geographic locations. Even linguistic differences do not prevent such interaction.

The game of jekab is closest to American pool checkers, which may have been introduced during World War II. Since then the game has become part of public life. The name of the game now adheres to Marshallese phonology, while the boards are locally made. The coral checker pieces make it more challenging to keep track of a king while the movements of the king itself still derives from its largely forgotten American origins. The game is given a visible place in society. The board is centrally placed in Majuro, nailed to a table in the main square, for all to see and for a select few to play their competitive games. Each year, the best players are part of locally organised tournaments during national holidays and featured alongside canoe paddling and coconut husking at a yearly cultural festival.

Checkers in the Marshall Islands provides evidence that the role of board games in society includes that of a social lubricant, an observation that aids understanding of the presence of a social activity that often only includes two people using limited resources with seemingly little wider social significance. The international dynamic of the game of checkers in the Pacific is illustrative of horizontal transmission as it is understood for board games. The game is found across linguistic, cultural and geographic boundaries and has remained unchanged across time and space. But beyond what archaeological evidence could show, the Pacific islanders give evidence that this process is not only true for the design of the board but also for the details of the rules. The highly specific and somewhat unusual rule for the crowning of the king is consistently seen across the region. Despite the many possible variations of checkers, the Marshallese and several of their neighbours insist on this particular rule set.

The idea of social lubricant helps explain how board games cross the borders of society so effortlessly and has found further evidence with Marshallese checkers. The game creates a liminoid space in which players from multiple generations and socioeconomic backgrounds interact. This interaction is found across islands and island countries. The continued presence of jekab in the centre of town and in cultural festivals also affords

the Marshallese a visible part of Marshallese culture and identity. Individual players may participate to access this liminoid space for social interaction, they may engage in what they perceive as a culturally specific activity, or they may play without requiring a goal or purpose outside the game itself. In each case, jekab in the Marshall Islands continues a history of cross-border interaction and cultural celebration at the checkerboard.

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