Perilous Pearling: A Japanese Junk that Never Made it Home | Greg Dvorak

News has been brought to this port … of the murder of the crew of a Japanese junk under peculiarly cruel circumstances, the vessel having been blown out of her course, and the men apparently in a starving condition …

So begins the text of a neatly handwritten Japanese government report filed in Yokohama in August 1884, the 17th year of the Meiji Emperor.1 It is a second-hand story related by Captain Walter Hardy of the British schooner *Ada*, a trading ship that frequented the trans-oceanic route from San Francisco to Yokohama and numerous islands in between. Along the way, Hardy and his crew—many of whom were Japanese stevedores—called upon Ujae Atoll in the Marshall Islands, where representatives of *irooj* (chief) Labon Kabua and other Islanders told them the tale of a ‘sampan’ whose crew was ruthlessly slaughtered when it ran upon the reef in nearby Læ Atoll.

It is not hard to imagine how in 1883, in the black of night, a small Japanese junk with its one mast might get lost on its way back to Japan from Western Australia. The boat, having delivered a load of Japanese pearl divers and other labourers to Broome or another coastal locale, was in all likelihood blown by the turbulent winds and waves of the windy season and wandered far from its planned route. Emerging in the choppy waters of the Central Pacific north of the Equator, the six Japanese sailors on board found themselves starving and lost in a vast maze-like sea of over 2,500 flat coral islands, amidst what is now known as the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

At the time, the Marshalls was known to its inhabitants as the Ratak (Sunrise) and Ratak (Sunset) archipelagoes, two long and impressive chains of twenty-six atolls divided by a treacherous void of ocean known as Lolle Laplap—‘The Great In-Between’. Marshall Islanders, among the greatest masters of Oceanic navigation,
had for thousands of years used outrigger canoes to bridge this divide and create an elaborate network between islands and atolls. But to outsiders unfamiliar with the ocean swells and the shallow lagoon entrances, these turquoise-fringed rings of coral were deadly traps that threatened to ensnare any ship that drifted upon their reefs. Even schooners like Ada that dared to moor in smaller atolls were quite rare.

So the tiny junk, tattered from weeks lost at sea, stumbled upon Rongelap Atoll in the northwest area of Ralik, where the desperate and starving sailors were plied with fruit before setting onward on their journey. They had no use for the barrels of sake they carried below deck, and they had no luck catching fish in the stormy winter waters, despite their hopes of hooking at least a katsuo skipjack or two, enough to feed them for a few days. To make matters worse, instead of heading north-west to Japan, they accidentally headed south-east to Lae Atoll, where their junk was finally destroyed when it was ripped apart by the sharp reef and surf surrounding the main islet of the small atoll. When they came ashore, the Islanders—who had not encountered Japanese previously—presumed they were shipwrecked Chinese, having seen the cooks who worked for the European copra plantation at nearby Likiep Atoll.

According to Hardy's retelling of Kabua's story, a jealous and sly irooj named Larrelia was waiting to greet the pearlers at Lae when they arrived. He wasted little time in tying them to the trunks of coconut palms, and proceeded to help himself to whatever was on board the ship, getting 'gloriously drunk' with his companions on sake. After a while, he set the junk on fire and then went back into the bush to slit the terrified Japanese men's throats.

Like all histories, this is no doubt one that was told from multiple perspectives and compacted into a simple storyline, with its own political intent. Perhaps Irooj Kabua's tale was meant to frame Larrelia and his other adversaries in hopes of gaining support from foreign visitors in their inter-atoll battles. Perhaps the Japanese and British sailors embellished their tale with their own fantasies of a South Seas riddled with miscreants and cannibalistic 'natives'. Or perhaps, as a chiefly descendant of the Kabua line remarked when asked about this particular story, 'Ah, well, things like that happened all the time back then—how can you feed six extra mouths when you barely have enough food to feed the community?'

Regardless of what actual events unfolded in Lae, this incident compelled the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to send a delegation to investigate. Yokohama Governor Oki Morihata swiftly commissioned Hardy and the Ada to carry two young, rather eccentric, diplomats back to the area. Peattie argues that the whole mission was really a guise for a swiftly modernising nation like Japan to survey the Pacific islands in hopes of expanding its territory, as evidenced by the way in which envoys Suzuki Keikun and Gotō Taketarō proceeded to spend more time on their journey taking ethnographic field notes and observing local customs than they did investigating the murder in question. Yet Nakajima, in his foreword to Suzuki's accounts of his travels through the Marshall Islands (1983) points out that in fact some of Suzuki's record of his travels aboard the Ada through the 'South Seas' is fanciful fiction largely fabricated from imagination, and that in fact Suzuki liberally mixed and matched observations from various Pacific locales to suit his narratives.

Indeed, Gotō and Suzuki's prose is rich with many of the same stereotypical
dreams of tropical delights and dangers that appear in European travel literature in the 1800s, and his watercolor illustrations painted on thin paper are even more ornate. His original drawings of lush jungles and lagoons and his maps of the various Marshallese atolls are richly coloured and look almost like *ukiyo-e* sketches. Oddly, in one illustration that appears in a later published version of his memoirs, Marshall Islanders are portrayed hunting for birds using a boomerang—an Aboriginal Australian weapon that was likely unknown by Marshallese.

Such conflations, in fact, reveal how globalisation was already taking place in Oceania even before the twentieth century. The incident at Lae is the result of a convergence of transoceanic crossings—between Japan, America, and Australia—all in the Great In-Between of the Marshall Islands. It is a symbolic intersection of multiple worlds upon a reef—or, as the late Greg Dening might imagine, a complicated dance upon a beach, in which colonisers and Natives, Japanese migrant labourers and upper-class elites are forced to make sense of each other.

The fate of the Japanese pearlers, however, is something we may never know. These were poor but hearty souls who crossed the enormous Pacific Ocean in small junks for weeks and months between Japan and Australia, only to labour under harsh conditions once they arrived. Though the story of their demise is well documented, sadly we may never even learn their names.

![Suzuki Keikun’s watercolour sketch of an American schooner stuck on the reef outside Ujae on January 2, 1884, drawn to illustrate how ships capsize when they hit the coral shallows of an atoll at low tide. (Image courtesy of Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Records Office.)](image)
An Enduring Friendship

Notes

1 Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Record Office. 1884,'Mission Report of the Gotō-Suzuki Expedition.’ Archive no. 4.2.5.89 (160 leaves, 27 watercolor drawings).

2 Personal communication, Phillip Kabua, September 20, 2005.


5 ibid.