

# Marshallese

also known as “Marshall Islanders”

Data source: eHRAF

Secondary source

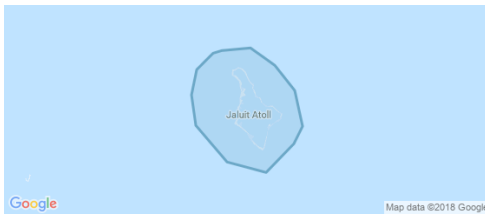
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*\* Secondary Source entry, prepared from a literature review by a Ph.D. RA*

Entry tags: Religion, Oceanic Religions, Micronesia, Syncretic Religions

The Marshall Islanders (or Marshallese) are a group of people who live in settlements across the atolls and coral pinnacles of the Marshall Islands (now an independent country known as the Republic of the Marshall Islands). This entry focuses on the Jaluit Atoll ca. 1900. At this time the Marshall Islands were under German control. The Marshallese have been in contact with missionaries since the mid-nineteenth century. A detailed ethnographic account of the Marshallese religious beliefs prior to Christian influence was not recorded, so much of the available information is reconstructive. Most of the information concerning the Marshallese religion is in the form of myths. With this in mind, this entry only answers questions when information on everyday beliefs (rather than mythical accounts) of the natives is available.



Date Range: 1880 CE - 1915 CE

Region: Jaluit Atoll

Region tags: Oceania, Micronesia, Marshall Islands

Jaluit Atoll of the Marshall Islands (Republic of the Marshall Islands) ca. 1900

## Status of Participants:

✓ Elite    ✓ Religious Specialists    ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

## Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Murdock, G.P. & Wilson, S.F. (Jul., 1972). Settlement patterns and community organization: *Cross-Cultural Codes* 3. *Ethnology*, 11(3), 254-295.
- Source 2: Divale, W. 2004. Codebook of Variables for the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample. *World Cultures: The Journal of Cross-Cultural and Comparative Research*.

Online sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=or11-003>
- Source 1 Description: Erdland, A., & Neuse, R. (1914). *Marshall Islanders: Life And Customs, Thought And Religion Of A South Seas People*. Anthropos Bibliothek Ethnological Monographs. Münster I. W.: [s.n.].
- Source 2 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=or11-002>
- Source 2 Description: Krämer, A., Nevermann, H., Brant, C., & Armstrong, J. M. (1938). *Ralik-Ratak (Marshall Islands)*. *Ergebnisse Der Südsee-Expedition 1908-1910*, li ; *Ethnographie: B. Mikronesien*.

Hamburg: Friederichsen, De Gruyter and Co.

– Source 3 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=or11-020>

– Source 3 Description: Mason, L. (1947). *Economic Organization Of The Marshall Islanders*. Honolulu: U.S. Commercial Company, Economic Survey.

– Source 1 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=or11-028>

– Source 1 Description: Nero, K. L. (1999). Accounting For Change: Bringing Interdependence Into Defining Sustainability. *Pacific Studies*, 22(s 3-4), 81-107.

## General Variables

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### Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

– Yes

Notes: "In 1852 the Boston Mission (American Board for Foreign Missions) extended its activities to Micronesia from Hawaii, and by 1857 an American missionary couple were set up at Ebon. Branch preaching stations in charge of native evangelists appeared in other atolls, and in 1906 Jaluit became the center for the Mission's work in the Marshalls, with a permanent European resident missionary" (Mason, 1947:14).

↳ Is there violent conflict (within sample region):

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 1654 indicates that the society was "pacified before the twenty-five-year ethnographic present", so warfare is absent (Ember and Ember, 1992; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

↳ Is there violent conflict (with groups outside the sample region):

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 1654 indicates that the society was "pacified before the twenty-five-year ethnographic present", so warfare is absent (Ember and Ember, 1992; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Does the religion have official political support

Answer 'yes' also in cases where the religious and political spheres are not distinguished from one another, but the religious group's activities are tied up with, and supported by, the functioning of the society at large.

– Yes

Notes: SCCS Variable 1745 (Religio-political Overlap) indicates that "officials at the level of maximal political authority are at the same time religious specialists" (Lang, 1998; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

↳ Are political officials equivalent to religious officials:

– Yes

Notes: SCCS Variable 1745 (Religio-political Overlap) indicates that "officials at the level of maximal political authority are at the same time religious specialists" (Lang, 1998; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

## Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):

– Estimated population, numeric: 1098

Notes: In 1958, the population of Jaluit was 1098 individuals (Nero, 1999:85). Population figures are not provided for Jaluit as an individual atoll at the specific time this entry focuses on.

Specific to this answer:

Date Range: 1957 CE - 1958 CE

## Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:

Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also "oral scriptures" (e.g. the Vedas of India).

– I don't know

Notes: There is no ethnographic evidence for the presence of scripture. However, oral mythology plays an important role in the transmission of religious beliefs and norms (see Krämer, Nevermann, Brant, and Armstrong, 1938 for detailed accounts of such myths).

## Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:

– No

Notes: "The most impressive structure (or type of structure) in the community is the residence of a category of influential individuals, e.g., a noble, a wealthy landowner, or the local headman" (Murdock and Wilson, 1972).

# Beliefs

## Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer "no" only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body.

Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

– Yes

Notes: "...the natives believe that the soul lives on for an indefinite length of time" (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:251). For more information on the soul, see Erdland & Neuse, 1914: 108, 248.

Belief in afterlife:

– Yes

Notes: "After six days have elapsed, the soul rises (jerkak) from the dead. It wanders towards Narikrik, approaching with noise. On the next morning a small piece of tortoise shell (jebage) from the necklace of the soul under the China hemp bush. Then across the southern reef, where Lörok lives, toward the north. If the evil Lajbuineamuen is on the way, it goes to the island of the dead, Eoerök, in the form of a large boat, jitöb, if it continues to live, or a small one, jitöbrara, if it dies. The former can reach the island by passing over the stone wall me (= fish weir) that surrounds the island. It lives on the spawn of red crabs (malanger); the latter feeds on holothurians (sea cucumbers) until it dies; the six days in the grave are explained in that twice three (= six) large waves must be preceded by six small ones if a boat is to be brought to land through the surf; therefore, the number six is sacred" (Krämer, Nevermann, Brant, & Armstrong, 1938:92).

↳ Is the spatial location of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: See questions below.

↳ Afterlife in vaguely defined horizontal space:

– Yes

Notes: "After six days have elapsed, the soul rises (jerkak) from the dead. It wanders towards Narikrik, approaching with noise. On the next morning a small piece of tortoise shell (jebage) from the necklace of the soul under the China hemp bush. Then across the southern reef, where Lörok lives, toward the north. If the evil Lajbuineamuen is on the way, it goes to the island of the dead, Eoerök, in the form of a large boat, jitöb, if it continues to live, or a small one, jitöbrara, if it dies. The former can reach the island by passing over the stone wall me (= fish weir) that surrounds the island. It lives on the spawn of red crabs (malanger); the latter feeds on holothurians (sea cucumbers) until it dies; the six days in the grave are explained in that twice three (= six) large waves must be preceded by six small ones if a boat is to be brought to land through the surf; therefore, the number six is sacred" (Krämer, Nevermann, Brant, & Armstrong, 1938:92). Also see Krämer, Nevermann, Brant, & Armstrong, 1938:373.

Reincarnation in this world:

– I don't know

Notes: Insufficient ethnographic information.

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses:

– Yes

Notes: Corpses are interred (Krämer, Nevermann, Brant, & Armstrong, 1938:295).

↳ Cremation:

– No

Notes: No evidence for the presence of cremation.

↳ Mummification:

– No

Notes: No evidence for the presence of mummification.

↳ Interment:

– Yes

Notes: "Formerly when a burial took place, the corpse was put in the sea or buried in a crouched position. Since the introduction of Christianity, burial in an extended position has generally been accepted. Wooden coffins lined with cloth and mats are now used" (Krämer, Nevermann, Brant, & Armstrong, 1938:295)

↳ Corpse is flexed (legs are bent or body is crouched):

– No

Notes: Krämer, Nevermann, Brant, & Armstrong, 1938:295

↳ Corpse is extended (lying flat on front or back):

– Yes

Notes: "Formerly when a burial took place, the corpse was put in the sea or buried in a crouched position. Since the introduction of Christianity, burial in an extended position has generally been accepted. Wooden coffins lined with cloth and mats are now used" (Krämer, Nevermann, Brant, & Armstrong, 1938:295)

↳ Corpse is upright (where body is interred in standing position):

– No

Notes: Krämer, Nevermann, Brant, & Armstrong, 1938:295

↳ Cannibalism:

– No

Notes: No evidence for the presence of cannibalism.

↳ Secondary burial:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 1850 (Secondary Bone/Body Treatment: Original Scale) indicates that "secondary contact with the body or bones of the deceased does not occur" (Schroeder, 2001; Retrieved from Divale, 2004)

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

– I don't know

Notes: There is ethnographic evidence for the presence of human co-sacrifices in a chief's burial, but it is unclear how far in the past this was practiced. See Krämer, Nevermann, Brant & Armstrong, 1938:296 for details.

Specific to this answer:

Date Range: 1800 CE - 1870 CE

Status of Participants: ✓ Elite

Are grave goods present:

– Yes

Notes: Grave goods are present in the graves of chiefs. These goods consist of valuable items, but the specific items vary from atoll to atoll (see Krämer, Nevermann, Brant & Armstrong, 1938:296).

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Elite



Personal effects:

– I don't know



Valuable items:

– Yes

Notes: Grave goods are present in the graves of chiefs. These goods consist of valuable items, but the specific items vary from atoll to atoll (see Krämer, Nevermann, Brant & Armstrong, 1938:296).

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Elite



Significant wealth (e.g. gold, jade, intensely worked objects):

– Yes

Notes: Grave goods could include items such as a boat, a bast skirt, clothing mats, whale teeth pendants, shells, and arm rings (see Krämer, Nevermann, Brant & Armstrong, 1938:296).

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Elite

Are formal burials present:

– Yes

Notes: For a description of a chief's burial, see Erdland & Neuse, 1914:249-251 and Krämer, Nevermann, Brant & Armstrong, 1938:296.

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Elite

↳ As cenotaphs:

– I don't know

Notes: Presumably the bodies are buried in a burial ground, but there is not enough information to know with certainty.

↳ In cemetery:

– I don't know

Notes: Presumably the bodies are buried in a burial ground, but there is not enough information to know with certainty.

↳ Family tomb-crypt:

– I don't know

Notes: Presumably the bodies are buried in a burial ground, but there is not enough information to know with certainty.

↳ Domestic (individuals interred beneath house, or in areas used for normal domestic activities):

– I don't know

Notes: Presumably the bodies are buried in a burial ground, but there is not enough information to know with certainty.

– No

Notes: "Common natives are buried without ceremony. They, as well as chiefs, were formerly buried at sea, the only difference being that the corpse of a common subject was simply put into the water, while that of a distinguished person was submerged. Once the body had been put into the water, the canoe immediately sailed away, and no one was allowed to look back. Although all dead are now buried on land, and to be sure on the family's piece of land near the shore, a land burial was reserved for the nobility prior to the introduction of Christianity, so that the subjects could mourn over the grave" (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:251).

Specific to this answer:

Status of Participants: ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

## Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

– Yes

Notes: Spirits and ancestral spirits are present in the Marshallese religious beliefs. The principal authorities (Krämer, Nevermann, Brant & Armstrong, 1938; and Erdland & Neuse, 1914) provide the mythology surrounding important deities. It is difficult to separate myth from the everyday religious beliefs of the people. Sub-questions below are based on the information pertaining to everyday

religious beliefs. Due to limited details concerning the supernatural beings, it is difficult to answer specific sub-questions with confidence. Questions are answered when sufficient evidence is provided.

↳ A supreme high god is present:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 238 (note, identical to Ethnographic Atlas column 34) indicates that "a high god absent or not reported in substantial descriptions of religious beliefs" (Murdock, 1962-1971; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

↳ Previously human spirits are present:

– Yes

Notes: "...the natives believe that the soul lives on for an indefinite length of time. They distinguish between those souls that manifest themselves after death – the so-called *jitöb* – and the souls that after the separation from the body no longer give any signs of life. The latter, as well as those that have ceased to appear, are called *jitöbrāra*. The former appear (*monamon*); the latter do not appear (*jimonamon*). The spirits that appear are capable of doing evil and good to men and for this reason they are both venerated and feared as family guardian spirits. Fear, however, predominates, and therefore there is a greater emphasis in the cult of the dead on appeasement and protection" (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:251).

↳ Human spirits have indirect causal efficacy in the world:

"Indirect causal efficacy" refers to not being seen as consciously, directly and actively intervening in the human world, but their overall well being or general attitude has effects on, e.g., quality of harvest, success in war, health, etc.

– Yes

Notes: "The spirits that appear are capable of doing evil and good to men and for this reason they are both venerated and feared as family guardian spirits. Fear, however, predominates, and therefore there is a greater emphasis in the cult of the dead on appeasement and protection" (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:251).

↳ Human spirits possess hunger:

– Yes

Notes: "The sacrifice consists of food thrown either upon the grave or in the hut toward the inaccessible side (*l□lo`n*), evidently in the belief that the spirits can eat the food. If the grave of the deceased is on the island, the food is tied to a pole which is planted on the grave; if it is not on the island, or if the body has been submerged, then before eating one throws a bit of food at the 'sacred' rear side of the hut" (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:253).

↳ Non-human supernatural beings are present:

– No

Notes: "The Marshall language has only two words for higher spiritual beings: *äkejab* (or *kejab*) and *anij*...In any case, whether they are time-honored spirits or transformed spirits, all without exception are thought of as real human beings (*armij käbdada*)" (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:238-



239).

↳ Mixed human-divine beings are present:

– Yes

Notes: "The Marshall language has only two words for higher spiritual beings: äkejab (or kejab) and anij...In any case, whether they are time-honored spirits or transformed spirits, all without exception are thought of as real human beings (armij käbdada)" (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:238-239).

↳ These mixed human-divine beings can be seen:

– Yes

Notes: "They are seen in dreams as human beings, particularly by curers and sorcerers" (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:239).

↳ These mixed human-divine beings have deliberate causal efficacy in the world:

– Yes

Notes: "The only advantage these higher living beings have is that evil spirits – the so-called anjīlik – are under their power. They send them out to bring illness to people and even to abduct the soul from the body" (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:239).

↳ These mixed human-divine beings possess/exhibit some other feature:

– Yes [specify]: Cause fear

Notes: "anij – The natives regard anij as specters who do evil to men or at least instill fear" (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:239).

↳ Does the religious group possess a variety of supernatural beings:

– Yes

↳ Organized by kinship based on a family model:

– Yes

Notes: See Erdland & Neuse, 1914:232-236 for a description of the god's genealogical organization.

## Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present:

This refers to surveillance by supernatural beings of humans' behaviour and/or thought particularly as it relates to social norms or potential norm violations.

– I don't know

Notes: Insufficient ethnographic information to make a decision with certainty. Because the majority

of the information on supernatural beings is found in the forms of myth, it is difficult to determine the everyday supernatural beliefs of the Marshallese.

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

– I don't know

Notes: Insufficient ethnographic information to make a decision with certainty. Because the majority of the information on supernatural beings is found in the forms of myth, it is difficult to determine the everyday supernatural beliefs of the Marshallese.

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards:

– I don't know

Notes: Insufficient ethnographic information to make a decision with certainty. Because the majority of the information on supernatural beings is found in the forms of myth, it is difficult to determine the everyday supernatural beliefs of the Marshallese.

## Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present:

– I don't know

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of messianic beliefs.

Is an eschatology present:

– I don't know

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of an eschatology.

## Practices

### Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require celibacy (full sexual abstinence):

– No

Notes: Evidence for limited sexual restrictions leads to the assumption that celibacy is not required (see Erdland & Neuse, 1914:89).

Does membership in this religious group require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods):

– Yes

Notes: "The natives have spirit-fish or totem-fish and also fish that may be eaten only by chiefs. None of these fish, however, is designated as "poisonous." The poisonous fish form a separate category, independent of any belief in spirits" (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:35).

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:

"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of human sacrifice among the Marshallese.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:

"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of human sacrifice among the Marshallese.

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of human sacrifice among the Marshallese.

Does membership in this religious group require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household):

– No

Notes: Erdland & Neuse (1914:245) indicate that private veneration of spirits is only incidental.

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:

i.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale "ceremonies" and "festivals."

– Yes

Notes: The Marshallese hold a pandanus celebration, in which all men of the atoll participate. The celebration is led by the master of ceremonies, who offers prayers and food sacrifices to supernatural beings. The celebration ends with a common meal, in which women participate as well. The celebration is held so that atolls will not lack food, there will be rain, fish and birds will come, and no tidal wave will devastate or destroy the island (see Erdland & Neuse, 1914:242-245).



On average, for large-scale rituals how many participants gather in one location:

– I don't know



What is the average interval of time between performances (in hours):

Performances here refers to large-scale rituals.

– I don't know



Are there orthodoxy checks:

Orthodoxy checks are mechanisms used to ensure that rituals are interpreted in a standardized way, e.g. through the supervisory prominence of a professionalized priesthood or other system of governance, appeal to texts detailing the proper interpretation, etc.

– I don't know



Are there orthopraxy checks:

Orthopraxy checks are mechanisms used to ensure that rituals are performed in a standardized way, e.g. through the supervisory prominence of a professionalized priesthood or other system of governance, appeal to texts detailing the proper procedure, etc.

– Yes

Notes: The sacrifices and prayers are led by the master of ceremonies (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:242-245).



Does participation entail synchronic practices:

– I don't know

## Society and Institutions

### Levels of Social Complexity

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):

This question refers to the wider society in which the religious group is located.

– A chiefdom

Notes: The Marshallese have one level of jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local community, which is indicative of a petty chiefdom (Ethnographic Atlas column 33, Murdock, 1967; retrieved from Divale, 2004).

### Education

Does the religious group provide formal education to its adherents:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Insufficient ethnographic information for the time of focus.

Is formal education available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Insufficient ethnographic information for the time of focus.

### Bureaucracy

Do the group's adherents interact with a formal bureaucracy within their group:

– No

Notes: The Marshallese have one level of jurisdictional hierarchy beyond the local community, which is indicative of a petty chiefdom, and not a bureaucracy (Ethnographic Atlas column 33, Murdock, 1967; retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Do the group's adherents interact with other institutional bureaucracies:

– Yes

Notes: "Germany, to strengthen her hand in the Pacific by assertion of sovereignty in an area as yet unclaimed by any Western power, in 1885 caused the German flag to be raised at seven atolls in the Marshalls and concluded treaties with nineteen local chiefs. Jaluit became the center of administration. The German officials supported Marshallese political institutions by dealing with the natives through their traditional chiefs. The latter lost power, however, when many of their autocratic privileges were shorn and their freedom to wage aggressive war was curtailed" (Mason, 1947:11).

## Public Works

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:

– No

Notes: According to SCCS Variable 20, food is stored in individual households (Murdock and Morrow, 1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Does the religious group in question provide transportation infrastructure:

– No

Notes: It can be assumed that transportation infrastructure is not present, as routes of land transport are "unimproved trails", according to Murdock and Morrow (1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004; SCCS Variable 14).

## Taxation

Does the religious group in question levy taxes or tithes:

– Yes

Notes: The Marshallese are subject to taxes to their respective chiefs (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:82).

Are taxes levied on the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: At the time this entry focuses on, the Marshallese were subject to taxes to the German administration (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:82).

## Enforcement

Does the religious group in question provide an institutionalized police force:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 90 (Police) indicates that police are not specialized (Tuden and Marshall, 1972; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Does the religious group in question enforce institutionalized punishment:

– No

Notes: "Punishment is inflicted according to the judgment of the chiefs. The most serious offenses are sexual intercourse by a kadjur [commoner] with a chief's wife, or an attempt at it, entering at the rear of a chief's house, rebellion against a chief, encroachment upon the chief's privileges by the common people, and theft of a chief's property. On the other hand the chief does not interfere when theft occurs among his subjects" (Krämer, Nevermann, Brant & Armstrong, 1938:293).

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:

– No

Notes: "The natives' unwritten law code has only a single paragraph, namely, that a common man may not touch the wife of a chief" (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:98).

## Warfare

Does religious group in question possess an institutionalized military:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 1654 indicates that the society was "pacified before the twenty-five-year ethnographic present", so warfare is absent (Ember and Ember, 1992; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

## Written Language

Does the religious group in question possess its own distinct written language:

– No

Notes: "The islanders had no indigenous alphabet. They transmitted their thoughts by word of mouth" (Erdland & Neuse, 1914:109).

## Food Production

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:

– Yes

Notes: The Marshallese rely primarily on fishing and agriculture for subsistence, with gathering supplying a supplemental food source. Source of information from Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962-1971), retrieved from Divale, 2004; Variables 203-207, 232.



Please characterize the forms/level of food production [choose all that apply]:

–Gathering

–Fishing

–Small-scale agriculture / horticultural gardens or orchards

Notes: The Marshallese rely primarily on fishing and agriculture for subsistence, with gathering supplying a supplemental food source. Source of information from Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962-1971), retrieved from Divale, 2004; Variables 203-207, 232.