



PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Reordering Nuclear Testing History in the Marshall Islands

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"History is culturally ordered...according to meaningful schemes of things." So begins *Islands of History*, Marshall Sahlins' classic homage to events, meanings and referents in Pacific Island societies. This anthropological wisdom continues to animate a long-running and still-unfolding drama being played out in another corner of the Pacific.

From 1946 to 1958, the US conducted 67 atmospheric nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands, delivering a combined yield of 108 megatons, roughly equivalent to that of 7,000 Hiroshima bombs. In the 50 years since testing ceased in the Marshalls, many narratives of "what happened" when bombs with names like Romeo, Nectar and Mike were detonated at Bikini and Enewetak Atolls have emerged. Some of these narratives were shaped by US government officials seeking to frame limits on American liability for the consequences of the nuclear testing program. Other narratives were coaxed out of survivors seeking to convey what it was like to live in a radioactive world. All of the narratives now figure in decisions and judgments on how to provide some measure of restorative justice to the Marshallese.

AAA Member Involvement

For years, a number of AAA members have been involved in the work of providing supporting research to the Nuclear Claims Tribunal, the judicial body established in 1988—under the terms of the Compact of Free Association, a sovereignty agreement between the Marshall Islands and the US—to render final determination on all past, present and future Marshallese claims related to nuclear testing. The anthropologists, Glenn Alcalay (Montclair State U), Holly Barker (with the Marshall Islands Embassy), Larry Carucci (Montana State U), Barbara Johnston (Center for Political Ecology) and Robert Kiste (East West Center), have been instrumental in collecting the narratives of Marshallese victims from Bikini, Enewetak, Rongelap and Utrik—four atoll communities that have pursued reparations claims against the US, through the tribunal. They are unanimous in the view that anthropology empowered the Marshallese to be proactive and vocal in setting the historical record straight.

As Barker sees it, anthropology not only gave voice to the communities impacted by the nuclear testing program, but it amplified this voice by documenting the lived history of this experience in great detail and *on the terms* of the Marshallese. She noted how cathartic it was for the Marshallese to tell the highly personal, painful stories of how contamination impacted every dimension of life on the atolls—from basic subsistence activities, to practicing traditional medicine, to childbirth. For example, Barker cited the saga of a paramount chief whose ability to carry out his ascribed duties as protector of and provider to the people were severely undermined by nuclear testing. The chief's intense sadness at being marginalized in this way—not being able to safeguard the health of his people and not being able to secure uncontaminated food—was an extraordinary burden to him. Barker's success, in this case and in scores of others, in getting the Marshallese to "situate" the harm caused by nuclear testing and giving it individual context, lent the stories a profound and compelling moral tone.

In a similar way, Alcalay's interviews with more than 1,000 Marshallese affected by the 15-megaton "Bravo" blast in 1954 yielded penetrating narratives of how they (still) perceive the latent effects of radioactive contamination on their islands and in their bodies. Some recalled the skin peeling off the animals on their island, Utrik. Some recounted how frequently women were giving birth to stillborn creatures resembling jellyfish, intestines and grapes. Some described their bouts with thyroid cancer and surgery. And many others shared their fears of future health problems that they attribute to exposure to radioactive fallout. Alcalay observed that his use of emic perspectives representing the Utrik people's beliefs and understandings about the health consequences of Bravo enabled him to distinguish accounts of what happened using Marshallese referents and categories from those advanced by doctors from the Brookhaven National Laboratory medical program set up to treat the Marshallese. This dramatically strengthened the argument that the nuclear testing program had fundamentally altered the quality of life on Utrik and elsewhere.

Johnston, who teamed with Barker to research aspects of the damage claims filed by the people of Rongelap, helped elicit exquisite narratives that captured the vital relationship between the Marshallese and their land. Seeking to build the case for a more culturally-inflected compensation principle to guide tribunal claims decisions,

Johnston and Barker drew out Marshallese views of land as the most important source of meaning and identity in their lives and as the organizing tenet of their society. These views reflected not only a spiritual reverence for the natural world around them but a commonly-held responsibility to be good stewards of all terrestrial and marine resources. Put differently, land for the Marshallese is *the* means to sustain a self-sufficient way of life that is shared and cherished. These narratives challenged conventional Western valuations of property, premised as they are on different cultural categories. As a result, the tribunal was provided with an alternative lens through which to assess "what was lost" in the aftermath of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands.

Helping the Marshallese to Be Heard

Mining the meanings that the Marshallese people assign to their experience afforded Barker, Johnston, Alcalay, et al opportunities to pose powerful epistemological questions, the kind of questions that could easily give a thoughtful



Following the explosion of Bravo at the Bikini test site, islanders acutely exposed to radioactive fallout were enrolled in a long-term research program conducted by Brookhaven National Laboratory with funding from the Atomic Energy Commission. In this 1970s-era photograph, Robert Conard examines a Marshall Islander for thyroid abnormalities. AEC photo, provided courtesy of Brookhaven National Laboratory

government official pause. How, for example, is a compensatory dollar figure established when an entire way of life is destroyed? How are damages (of every conceivable type) from nuclear war repaired? And, how do people come to terms with injustice on this scale? Answers to these questions, of course, will never be complete.

On April 17, 2007, the Nuclear Claims Tribunal issued a decision in the Rongelap claims case, calling for payment of just over \$1 billion in compensation to the claimants, a figure reflecting costs for remediation and restoration of Rongelap (and associated islands/atolls), future lost property value and consequential damages from nuclear testing. This award follows previous decisions in the claims cases of Enewetak (\$323 million in 2000), Bikini (\$563 million in 2001) and Utrik (\$307 million in 2006). The decision was notable for the terms by which it framed the assessment of damages—as "loss of a way of life" and "loss of the means to live in a healthy fashion." The framing can be traced

directly to the work of the anthropologists, all of whom helped build a trajectory of international case law. Each claims case "telescoped" the next, according to Johnston, in terms of expanding the scope, legitimizing the research methods and establishing causal linkages in the totality of a way of life in the Marshall Islands, before and after the nuclear testing.

While the Rongelap decision was gratifying on some level—principally because it affirmed the Marshallese experience and recalibrated the "history" of "what happened"—it is unlikely, according to the AAA members interviewed for this article, that these awards will ever be paid for reasons that are briefly noted here. First, the tribunal lacks the funds to pay the awards and is unlikely to receive additional funds from the US Congress. And second, the current Bush Administration has rejected arguments advanced by the Marshall Islands in a Changed Circumstances Petition, submitted in 2000, that requested additional

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compensation—beyond what has already been paid, roughly \$531 million between 1958 and 2004—based on new information, for loss or damages related to nuclear testing. At present, the four local governments—Bikini, Enewetak, Rongelap and Utrik—are now pursuing compensation through the US Court of Claims, requesting that the court enforce the claims decisions of the Nuclear Claims Tribunal. The political, constitutional and legal dimensions of these matters are described elsewhere in much greater detail.

Although a final resolution of these claims is a long way off, the anthropologists involved in helping the Marshallese tell their story express some satisfaction that the Marshallese have finally been heard. Culturally, Barker noted, "being heard" is extremely important in this case, where the degree of exploitation has been extreme. Johnston has written that the injustices suffered by the Marshallese have been acknowledged. And all are grateful for the opportunity to apply the discipline on behalf of the Marshallese people. ❧