SOCIAL JUSTICE, ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND
THE RELOCATION OF THE BIKINIANS, 1946 - 1978

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Through an environmental history perspective, this paper explores the resettlement of 167 inhabitants of the Bikini Atoll, Marshall Islands in 1946, affected by the U.S. Navy’s testing of nuclear weapons in the Pacific. The paper demonstrates the incompatibility of the resettlement sites on Rongerik Atoll and Kili island with the Bikinian traditional sustenance patterns based on the three pillars of agroforestry, fishing and gathering. Following exposure to radiation after the attempted return to Bikini in 1972, consequent malnourishment, social dislocation, culture degradation as well as a number of cancer-related deaths show an alarming level of negligence on the part of U.S. policy makers responsible for the resettlement. Further impediments of social justice—failure of U.S. officials to inform the Bikinian leaders of the presence of radiation on the atoll and inadequate financial compensation that discriminates Bikinians against American victims of nuclear testing—support the interpretation of the U.S. nuclear tests as instances of toxic dumping with quiet approval of the American media and the general public. The paper points out the consequent loss of self-reliance and environmental sustainability inherent in the traditional Bikinian lifestyle that is now replaced with dependence on imports and a continual flow of foreign aid.

Environmental history offers a myriad of examples in which marginalized groups of people had to leave their land for the “common good.” Removal and resettlement of marginal peoples often caused grave social dislocations within these communities, interfering both with indigenous cultures and long-established sustenance patterns. Historians of the environment have pointed out a number of examples in which resettlement put an end to sustainable relationships that had developed between these groups and their natural environs. Well-documented examples include large-scale development projects such as resettlement the Tonga tribe during the construction of the Kariba Dam in Zambia and Zimbabwe,1 the displacement of the Adivasis in India necessitated by the Sardar Sarovar project2 and the resettlement of over 40,000 Wopkaiman people displaced by the Ok Tedi copper mine in Papua New Guinea.3 What these projects have in common is a vision of economic gain that purportedly outweighs the suffering of the marginalized groups.

The case of the 167 Bikinians resettled in 1946 due to the American nuclear weapons tests in the Pacific departs from this pattern by attempting to justify the resettlement of the minority—the Bikinians—by strengthening a military rather than an economic sense of security of the majority—Americans and their allies in the Cold War. As this paper shows, however, this justification is not valid, as the actual negative out-

1 Ingrid Ahlgren, personal interview by author, Majuro, Marshall Islands, February 2010.

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comes of the resettlement significantly outweighed the projections the Americans used to convince the Bikinians to voluntarily leave their land. Indeed, the consequences are comparable to, if not exceeding, the suffering of the Tonga, the Adivasis or the Wop-kaiman: not only were the Bikinians exposed to major threats to their physical health and social structure as a result of the nuclear tests, but the sites to which the Americans resettled them were incompatible with their traditional ways of subsistence. As a result, the resettlement caused the Bikinians’ loss of self-reliance and increased their dependency on external aid.

**BIKINI BEFORE 1946**

Americans, the Bikinians managed to sustain themselves for at least a century and a half with virtually no contact with the outer world. Even though radiocarbon dates from the atoll suggest first settlement occurred as early as 2000-3500 B.P., most of the Bikinians resettled in 1946 considered themselves descendants of a man named Larkelan who belonged to a chiefly line of the Ijirik matriclan at Wotje; genealogical records show that he moved to Bikini in the years preceding 1800. Even though The Bikini atoll was most likely discovered by Spanish explorer Saavedra as early as October 1, 1529, “the descendants of Larkelon’s group… had little contact with outsiders up to and including European times,” anthropologist Robert Kiste concluded. He noted only one exception to this pattern: occasional visits to the community at Rongelap about eighty miles from Bikini. Except for a few marriages between the two communities, these encounters had little impact on the Bikinians. The fact that Bikinians developed minor variations in their language that distinguished them from the rest of the Marshall Islanders also attests to their prolonged isolation. The Bikinians were involved in virtually no trade and relied completely on the resources of their atoll and the surrounding ocean.

The sheer scarcity of these resources necessitated highly sustainable ways of sustenance. The coral atolls of the Pacific are, together with Polar Regions, among the harshest environments for sustaining a human population. This is especially true of the northernmost atolls such as Bikini, where annual rainfall averages as little as 1450 mm. Chief among the constraints of the atoll environment are poor soils that support virtually no crops. Furthermore, the prospects for constructing irrigation systems on these atolls are grim: with the highest point at 10 meters above the sea level, thus, the atolls were too low for mountain formation to occur. As a result, there are no rivers, lakes or other surface freshwater reservoirs. Rainwater is the chief source of freshwater. These factors add up to an environment inhospitable to human habitation that supports an extremely limited range of agricultural practices.

8 Ibid.
10 Ingrid Ahlgren interview.
11 Thomas, 3.
12 Ibid, 2.
The atoll environment thus forced the Bikinians to devise a sustainable way of subsistence. In these harsh conditions, every further diminution of the natural resources would significantly endanger the future of the community. Frank Thomas, a University of South Pacific anthropologist, argues that the first settlers were forced to refrain from their former agricultural practices, such as growing certain types of crops and keeping domestic animals. Instead, they developed ways of subsistence that were sustainable over time. Chief among these was agroforestry, especially growing breadfruit, coconut and pandanus trees. According to Thomas, “tree cropping is described as a sustainable system of food production by virtue of the relative permanence of land use providing a wide range of subsistence needs, with crops receiving little direct cultivation beyond occasional mulching and replanting.” The rest of the Bikinians’ diet consisted mainly of food obtained through fishing and gathering: reef fish and invertebrates from the lagoon of the atoll, sea birds, eggs, and turtle meat supplied the bulk of protein in their diet. The Bikinians used traditional Marshallese outriggers for fishing. These canoes were built by carving out trunks of coconut trees—the same trees that the Bikinians planted for subsistence purposes. Indeed, as Thomas concludes, food production systems that emerged from the process of adaptation to the coral atoll environment “may be regarded as sustainable.”

These systems relied on three principal ways of obtaining: fishing, planting tree crops and gathering. The land tenure system reflected the importance of all three sources to each member of the community. The system divided the islands of the atoll into narrow parcels (weto) that extended from the lagoon all the way to the ocean. Each weto was divided into zones that corresponded to the three sources of food (Fig. 1), and enabled the individual clans (bwij) to become self-sufficient units that secured their subsistence through all the three traditional methods of obtaining food.

Fig. 1: Marshallese weto

Land was thus central to the Bikinians’ way of life. As Jukwa Jakeo, one of the Bikinians removed from the atoll, described during his interview with Jack Niedenthal in 1987, “if you were Marshallese and you didn’t have any land, you would be considered a bum, a drifter or a beggar. Land is the Marshallese form of gold.” The Mar-

13 Ibid, 1.
16 Ibid, 3.
17 Ibid, 18.
19 Barker, 11. While this scheme includes a taro zone in the middle, taro was only grown in the southern atolls of the Marshall Islands. The low precipitation of the northern atolls made growing taro impossible.
Shallese leaders expressed a similar sentiment in their petition addressed to the UN in March 1956: “Land means a great deal to the Marshallese. It means more than just a place where you plant your food crops and build your houses; or a place where you can bury your dead. It is the very life of the people. Take away their land and their spirits go also.”

Indeed, Weto had a crucial role in defining Marshallese social units—clans—that are composed of matrilineages bearing a common name. The amount of land owned by an individual determined the social position within the clan.

To the Marshallese, giving up their land would mean giving up their identity. Isolated from the rest of the world for centuries and completely self-sufficient, the Bikinians had no reason, however, to think they would ever need to give up their land—until thousands of miles away, the post World War II global geopolitics convinced the Americans of the need to show the world the power of their nuclear weapons.

**Nuclear Tests on Bikini**

It was not until the escalation of the arms race in the early days of the Cold War that the atoll underwent irreversible transformations and attracted attention worldwide as the U.S. Navy chose it as the testing ground for its tests of nuclear weapons. The UN ‘strategic trusteeship’ in principle allowed the U.S. to use Micronesian Islands for military purposes: as an American naval officer put it, “the United States would keep the islands ‘in trust’—but reserved the right to make strategic military use of them.”

According to Frederick Ashworth of the U.S. navy, the atoll was chosen because “it had a good-sized lagoon, a few large islands for observing stations, good access through wide channels and a reasonably shallow area off the main island to anchor the target ships.”

The first bomb was detonated in 1946; the testing lasted until 1958. The total explosive power of these tests is estimated at 108 megatons, which accounts for 80% of the yield of all atmospheric tests conducted by the United States and corresponds to 1.6 Hiroshima nuclear bombs being detonated every day for the 12 years of testing. It would be inconceivable for the 167 Bikinians to stay under these conditions. In February 1946, Commodore Ben H. Wyatt, the military governor of the Marshalls, traveled to Bikini to ask the inhabitants if they would be willing to leave their atoll to make space for U.S. military test “for the good of mankind and to end all world wars.”

The people agreed, believing they were serving the world community.

**Rongerik: A Temporary Destination?**

The Bikinians settled on Rongerik Atoll, about 135 miles east of Bikini, as their temporary home. Given the role of land in Marshallese culture, it is not surprising that the Bikinians strongly preferred resettlement to an uninhabited island to an inhabited one. Rongerik Atoll was the only destination among the options offered by the Americans that met this condition; it thus became the choice for the resettlement of the Bikinians.

The natural environment of this atoll, however, was not compatible with the food production systems of the Bikinians. While the U.S. claimed that Rongerik was not only bigger than Bikini, but it also contained plenty of food to sustain the Bikin-
ians, the reality upon the resettlement in early March 1948 turned out to be very different. The food supplied by the Americans lasted only for several weeks and within two months after their arrival, the Bikinians became anxious about the insufficient resources on the island and requested to be returned home.\textsuperscript{28, 29} Their request was denied, in spite of severe food shortages, especially in the winter 1946-47. A U.S. physician who visited the island in July 1947 reported that the Bikinians were “visibly suffering from malnutrition.”\textsuperscript{30} Finally, the High Commissioner of the Trust Territory ordered a survey that was carried out in February 1948 by Leonard Mason, an anthropologist at the University of Hawaii. He found that the Bikinians were indeed suffering from malnourishment: their only sources of food were immature coconuts and pandanus fruit; there was no more arrowroot; the communal store had only a hundred pounds of flour and due to a lack of alternative food sources, adults were consuming small amounts of toxic fish found in the lagoon.\textsuperscript{31} In an interview with Jack Niedenthal, Lore Kessibuki described the early months of 1948 as a period of despair:

The first symptom was that we suddenly all had a very hard time sleeping. When we would finally manage to doze for a short time late at night, and afterwards, wake in the morning, we would find ourselves weak and dizzy and shockingly unable to stand… I used to lay on my mat in the mornings just wondering what was wrong with me until finally I would manage to find the strength to get up and move around enough to get a drink of water. It was then that we would be confronted with the strangest of feelings. By simply touching the water our limbs would be shot with pain as if thousands of needles were running up and down our legs.\textsuperscript{32}

An account by David Bradley, an American marine who served in the area at the time, confirms Kessibuki’s statement. On September 29, 1948 while fishing, Bradley spotted two Marshallese on the shore of Rongerik, sailed to the beach and visited the settlement.\textsuperscript{33} He learned that the people were starving and ate fish every day. “Nothing but fish. Some- day I think we all become like birds,” a Bikinian woman told Bradley in the village.\textsuperscript{34} These accounts suggest that the new environment made it impossible for the Bikinians to continue their ways of subsistence based on fishing, gathering and agroforestry.

This outcome is not surprising given the differences in the physical geography between the two atolls. The land area of Rongerik is much smaller than that of Bikini—the 17 islands of Rongerik add up to 0.63 square miles as opposed to the 36 islands of the Bikini atoll that comprise 2.3 square miles.\textsuperscript{35} The lagoon is about a quarter of the size of Bikini’s, and many of the fish living in it proved to be poisonous.\textsuperscript{36} Furthermore, life-sustaining coconut palms and pandanus trees on Rongerik turned out to be far less productive than expected. In his \textit{Study of the Relocation of Ex-Bikini Marshallese}, anthropologist Robert Kiste noted “an additional factor which affected both the quality and quantity of available food resources was that no population of any size or duration

\textsuperscript{28} Weisgall, \textit{Operation Crossroads}, 308.
\textsuperscript{29} Kiste, \textit{The Bikinians}, 79.
\textsuperscript{31} Kiste, \textit{The Bikinians}, 85.
\textsuperscript{32} Lore Kessibuki interview in Niedenthal, 54.
\textsuperscript{34} Bradley, 160.
\textsuperscript{35} Weisgall, \textit{Nuclear Nomads}, 80.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 80.
had inhabited the atoll and developed its resources in modern times.” The environment of Rongerik thus further constrained the already small range of practices the Bikinians could engage in. Poisonous fish made much of their fishing effort futile; insufficient land made agroforestry much more difficult and underdeveloped natural resources led to smaller yields of food obtained by gathering. Indeed, Bikini and Rongerik were far from being “as alike as two Idaho potatoes,” New York Times had described them in an article published on March 31 1946, quoting a U.S. military officer. 

The exodus to Rongerik not only affected the physical wellbeing of the Bikinians, but also transformed their social structure. Since they considered their settlement on Rongerik only temporary, the Bikinians did not restore their traditional land tenure system. The land on which they lived technically belonged to another iroij and the rights to land ownership by the Bikinians were left undefined. These new conditions together with the food crisis led to a total reorganization of the community. Rather than adhering to the traditional household and lineage organizations, the whole population started cooperating as a single unit, implementing a system of work and food rationing under the supervision of a communal council. Over time, the authority of chief Juda suffered as some of the islanders blamed him for his inability to improve their situation. Some Bikinians went so far as to propose terminating their subordinance to him, and instead institute the United States Government as the paramount chief. As Mason noted during his time on the island, “other Bikinians, however, feared the paramount chief’s magical powers and took a more conservative stance: ‘We cannot take another (paramount chief)... nor break with him, for if we did, something very awful might happen to us.’”

At any rate, the tension within the community escalated, causing the Americans to question the decision to move the Bikinians to Rongerik. When the American officials finally realized the severity of the situation, they decided to resettle the Bikinians yet again. They evacuated the community to Kwajalein Atoll on March 14, 1948 and then moved them to Kili Island, about 400 miles southeast of Bikini, in late September 1948.

**Kili: Another Attempt at Resettlement**

The Bikinians chose this island from among the options offered by the Americans because it did not belong to any of the Marshallese traditional chiefs (iroij). As Kilon Bauno described in his oral account of the move,

> we talked about moving to many places like: Wotho, Lae and Ujape Atolls. But we encountered the same types of problems with all of these islands. One major factor was that these islands already had people living on them and therefore we thought that we would have social conflicts with the inhabitants because they recognized the iroij of those atolls. We Bikinians did not. We were afraid they wouldn’t let us live by our own rules and so we began asking the Americans to find somewhere else for us.

The emphasis on the need to resettle to an uninhabited island points to the desire of the

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40 Ibid, 234.
41 Ibid, 87.
42 Ibid.
43 Kilon Bauno interview in Niedenthal, 68.
Bikinians to be able to restore their traditional land tenure system that had previously allowed them to be self-reliant. Kili Island presented the only opportunity to restore this system, but it would not be without a price. Kili, just like Rongerik, greatly differs in its physical features from Bikini. The island is surrounded by a fringing reef, which means there is no sheltered lagoon. The Bikinians thus had little use for their traditional outrigger canoes and could do very little fishing; this rendered many of their traditional skills virtually useless. Furthermore, the island covers only about 16% of the area covered by Bikini atoll and there are no islands inclose proximity. As Lore Kessibuki expressed in his oral account of life in Kili,

we feel that Kili is like a prison because we can’t sail to another island, or even take a long refreshing walk when life closes in on us. Many times even the ships refuse to stop and unload supplies for the island. There are many other things that simply cannot be done on Kili, because it is such a small island... The food we brought with us did not last very long. We again began to starve... We were full of worry and near death.

The harsh conditions perpetuated the communal system that had evolved at Rongerik for another five years, as collective effort was needed to build a new village. Even though the Bikinians experienced few subsistence problems during the first few months in Kili, the situation gradually deteriorated. Due to a general lack of vessels in the Trust territory, the islanders could not trade their copra for food supplies as they used to in the beginning of their life on Kili. This led to frequent periods of food scarcity; in 1952 the American government was forced to airdrop emergency rations onto Kili. In the late 1950s, a satellite community was started on Jaluit Atoll due to the worsening conditions on Kili, but the boat used for transportation soon “ran aground and sank because of high winds.” External supplies of food remained sporadic, partly owing to the fact that the island runs parallel to the northeast winds, “so it has no leeward side and is thus virtually inaccessible by sea from November to May.”

Apart from struggling to secure their subsistence, the Bikinians struggled to reconstruct their land tenure system. They could not reach an agreement during the first five years of the settlement. In 1954, the Kili Development Project began, with the Americans taking an active interest in trying to resolve the land tenure problem. Reinstituting the traditional arrangement was impossible, as there was less land than in Bikini, and more people with claims to land. After all previous discussion failed to produce a solution, Juda, the chief, devised a new scheme. Each household was to attain a proportion of land according to the number of individuals in each; “neither lineage membership not Bikini landholdings were considered.” This scheme created 19 landholding units assigned to newly created groups (bamle) that “had been derived through the modification and fragmentation of households.” This system had its obvious problems: rather than adhering to traditional clans, it created groups that lacked a

45 Lore Kessibuki interview in Niedenthal, 75.
49 Ibid.
50 Lore Kessibuki interview in Niedenthal, 76.
53 Ibid, 252.
clearly defined membership. What was to happen to the land rights of children whose parents did not belong to the same bamle? The “solution” was Bikinians with overlapping bamle memberships, an unsustainable system that “could not work if everyone attempted to actualize all of their potential rights as members of several bamles.” The new land tenure system was thus a largely artificial construct that led to an increase in tension among the Bikinians. This system also steered away from the traditional self-contained wetos, further undermining the ability of the Bikinians to live in a self-reliant, sustainable way.

Even though by this time the community accepted that their resettlement was not temporary, many Bikinians kept looking back to Bikini as their homeland. The continuing problems of the Kili settlement and the campaigning of the Bikinians for their rights eventually led to an attempted resettlement. After the Atomic Energy Commission determined that the islands of the Bikini Atoll were safe for habitation again, in June 1968 President Lyndon Johnson promised the Bikinians that they would be able to return to their homeland.

**An Attempted Return**

Instead of solving the increasingly pressing problems of the Bikinian community, the attempted return to Bikini added radioactivity-induced illnesses to the list of the community’s problems. Upon their return in 1972, the Bikinians saw an atoll that hardly resembled the Bikini they had left twenty-six years earlier. Three small islands and portions of others had vanished; most coconut plants had been destroyed and the whole atoll was covered in debris and equipment left from the nuclear tests. Yet, they did not give up and together with the Americans started working on a massive clean-up operation. “I worked on Eneu and Bikini planting crops, pulling weeds, and in general, refurbishing the islands. I felt so happy, peaceful and proud—and why not? It was our land, our islands and we were content to be working and living there,” Pero Joel later told Jack Niedenthal in an interview. Their happiness was, however, not to last long. Radiologic testing in June 1975 revealed increased amounts of radioactivity both in the air and in locally grown food, which led to restrictions on local food intake by the Bikinians:

> It was as if we were being told two totally conflicting rules that we had to follow at the exact same time: You know, ‘Well, it is safe for you people to live on Bikini, but there still is enough poison on the island that you shouldn’t eat more than one coconut per day’… Finally, the Americans and their scientists came back a few years later saying that we had to leave Bikini. They said we had ingested too much poison and that it wasn’t safe to live on Bikini anymore.

Eventually, the entire atoll was deemed unsafe for habitation and the Bikinians were resettled back to Kili in September 1978.

The fact that it took the Americans six years to realize that threats to human health were still present on the atoll brings into question the real intentions of the Americans. Were they genuinely trying to help the Bikinians rebuild their community, or did

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54 Ibid, 261.
56 Niedenthal, 10.
57 Kiste, *The Bikinians*, 175.
58 Pero Joel interview in Niedenthal, 106.
59 The Bikinians used the term ‘poison’ to refer to radioactivity.
60 Pero Joel interview in Niedenthal, 107.
61 Niedenthal, 13.
they use them as human subjects in an experiment investigating the effects of radioactivity on human health? A 2004 study of the National Cancer Institute estimated that the nuclear tests would cause 532 radiation-related cases of cancer among the 13,940 Marshallese alive in the 1950s. The recent release of formerly classified documents made it possible to investigate the extent of awareness of potential radiation-related hazards the U.S. officials had at the time. Historian Holly Barker argues “the U.S. government was fully aware of the persistent radiation on Bikini when it resettled people on their home islands. Once the U.S. government resettled the community, it treated the people’s exposure to radiation as an important scientific opportunity.”

To support this claim, she cites a 1958 report by Brookhaven National Laboratory, according to which “Bikini may be the only global source of data on humans where intake via ingestion is thought to contribute the major fraction of plutonium body burden… It is possibly the best available data for evaluating the transfer of plutonium across the gut wall after being incorporated into biological systems.” Giff Johnson, the editor of The Marshall Islands Journal and a human rights activist, agrees, citing evidence that radiation above the federal laws was detected on Bikini atoll as early as 1973, but the U.S. government waited for another five years before resettling the population. While neither one of these two accounts conclusively shows an intention on the part of the Americans to test the impact of plutonium on the human body, the declassified governmental reports they cite in support of their arguments point to a high degree of negligence on the part of the American administrators.

**MONETARY COMPENSATION AND “CULTURAL PROPERTY RIGHTS”**

Even though a number of tribunals, national and international, determined that this negligence indeed broke the human rights of the Bikinians, they never received just compensation. On March 5, 2001, the Nuclear Claims Tribunal of the Marshall Islands awarded the Bikinians a total of $563,315,500 on top of all the compensation paid by the U.S. to the Bikinians prior to 2001. The tribunal is, however, under-funded and so the money was not actually paid to the Bikinians. The activist group Harvard Law Student Advocates for Human Rights expressed its disagreement with the inadequacy of the compensation in their 2006 report entitled *Keeping the Promise*:

A comparison with the U.S. testing in Nevada (and subsequent compensation program) reveals that despite facing much higher levels of exposure and contamination, the Marshallese have actually been compensated at a lower rate. Realizing the significant disparity in the [Marshallese] exposure and compensation by the U.S. government in comparison to their American counterparts is helpful to understanding the need to revisit the U.S. duty to the Marshallese.

Giff Johnson’s quantitative analysis provides empirical backing for this accusation. Comparing the compensation paid to the victims of nuclear testing in Nevada with

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63 Barker, 45.
64 Conard, *Medical Survey of Rongelap and Utrik People Three Years after Exposure to Radioactive Fallout* cited in Barker, 45.
65 Johnson, 4.
66 Niedenthal, 14.
67 Ibid.
the compensation paid to the Bikinians, he concludes that the average payment to an American victim was $63,500 as compared to $34,556 to Marshall Islanders, despite the explosive yield at the Marshall Islands being ninety-three times greater than the combined yield of all the tests conducted in Nevada, with the affected territory as much as four times greater.69

While pointing out the injustices inherent in American attempts to indemnify the Marshallese, the debate about monetary compensation for the health defects caused by residue radiation does not take into account the trespassing of Marshallese “cultural property rights.” Anthropologist Stuart Kirsch raises the issue of “culture loss” of the Bikinians, including subsistence production, connections to place and local knowledge, thus further complicating the task of international tribunals in charge of compensating the Marshallese. As he points out, “legal forums that adjudicate claims of loss might be seen to further commodification by establishing monetary values for cultural property which previously existed outside of economic domains.”70 This observation brings out the question of whether just compensation is at all possible, considering the extent of damage American nuclear testing in the Pacific caused to the Bikinians.

**TOXIC DUMPING AND THE AMERICAN MEDIA**

The disparity between compensation awarded to the American victims of the nuclear testing and the Marshallese brings out the issue of toxic dumping. As nuclear testing became politically dangerous in the mainland U.S. after the Nevada tests, Bikini emerged as a viable substitute.

Shifting the burden of nuclear tests to the Bikinians was possible thanks to the American public’s disregard of the issue.71 While public opinion made testing in Nevada unfeasible, it did not prevent U.S. military from devastating Bikini. In her study of the *New York Times* coverage of the nuclear testing *News Zero*, Beverly Keever attributes part of this quiet approval to the role of American media. She argues that the newspapers failed to question why the yields of the tests were kept secret, why such a high number of tests was conducted and why the well-being of the Bikinians was largely ignored.72 Furthermore, *New York Times*, according to Keever, “neglected to include material facts about the millennia-long radioactivity and the carcinogenicity of the key ingredient of plutonium used in each nuclear bomb it described as being detonated in the Pacific.”73 These accusations, substantiated by the analysis of the articles published during and after the tests, suggest a quiet approval of the journalists with the practice of toxic dumping in Bikini.

69 Johnson, 31.
71 The “Lucky Dragon 5” incident offers an interesting comparison to the passivity of the American public. Lucky Dragon 5 (*Daigofukuryumaru*) was a Japanese tuna fishing ship that was exposed to nuclear fallout from the Bravo test on March 1, 1954. Public panic ensued after the tuna was unloaded and supplied to the Japanese market and *Yomiuri Shinbun* reported on the exposure of the crew to the nuclear fallout. Hiro Saito describes the crisis as “tuna-horror… newspapers were relentless in reporting medical conditions of the crew of Lucky Dragon 5 and objects contaminated by the H-bomb fallout, such as raindrops and vegetables. Groups of people flooded to Tokyo University Hospital to ask physicians for medical examination because they had eaten tuna… According to the opinion poll conducted by *Asahi Shinbun* (May 20, 1954), 70 percent of the population was afraid of exposure to radioactivity” (Saito, p. 368). Paradoxically, this incident led to an international crisis between U.S. and Japan that received a significant amount of media attention, unlike the direct exposure of the Marshallese to nuclear fallout.
73 Ibid.
Bikinians Today

Most Bikinians still live in Kili today, but have largely abandoned their traditional ways of life; many skills that had been passed from generation to generation have been lost hand in hand with their self-reliance. Thanks to the monetary compensation from the American government and the increased availability of foreign imports together with the difficulties involved in subsistence, they have become “almost totally dependent on imported goods.” Furthermore, the resettlement led to the fragmentation of the community as groups of Bikinians now live scattered on Majuro Atoll, Ejit Island, Jaluit as well as in a number of foreign countries. Aside from the loss of self-reliance and fragmentation, the community has also suffered from exposure to radiation, leading to a number of cancer-related deaths among the Bikinians.

Regardless of whether or not the U.S. nuclear testing program in the Pacific did anything for the “good of mankind,” it disrupted the sustainability of the Bikini community that now requires continued input of foreign aid to survive. This change occurred due to a number of impediments by social justice by the U.S. military. First, the relocation of the nuclear tests from mainland U.S. to Bikini with the quiet approval of the American media and the general public was an instance of toxic dumping by the Americans. Second, the officials who negotiated the resettlement with the Bikinians failed to inform the leaders of the community that the resettlement would be permanent. Third, the Americans failed to comprehend the relationship of the three pillars of Bikinian self-reliance—fishing, gathering and agroforestry—to the natural environment. A closer examination of these systems of food production would reveal that none of the localities suggested by the Americans for resettlement were compatible with the Bikinian way of life. Fourth, the American authorities were negligent of the impacts of radioactivity on the health of the Bikinians after their return to the atoll and despite having access to scientific data showing unacceptable levels of radiation failed to evacuate the Bikinian population, causing a number of cancer-related deaths in the community. Fifth, differential treatment for American and Marshallese victims of nuclear tests has led to inadequate compensation of the Bikinians for the dislocations they suffered as a result of the tests.

75 Niedenthal, 14.


