

# Free the marshallese: coping with the deluge of nuclear weapons testing essay exa...

[Environment](#), [Disaster](#)



## **The Marshall Islands**

The Marshall Islands, now known as the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), a self-governing nation with assistance from the United States, is a series of islands and atolls located north of Pacific Ocean midway between Japan and Hawaii. It is a part of Micronesia, a series of nations and islands located on the Pacific. The Marshall Islands looks like a series of islands and atolls forming two parallel lines which are called Ratak (the chain of islands forming the east side) and Ralik (the chain of islands forming the west side) (Barker, 2004, p. 4).

Although the Marshall Islands have been inhabited since the 2nd century BC, the discovery of the islands was not until 500 years ago. The history of the islands comes with a chain of colonization from the Spanish, the Germans, the Japanese and the Americans. After seizing the islands from the Japanese, the Americans became interested to the islands' geographical location as it is well suited for nuclear testing (Barker, 2004, p. 15). This led to the contamination of Marshall Islands with radioactive wastes and toxins and exposing its natives to radiation putting their health at risk, and damaging their social and political paradigm. Also, the testing itself made a devastating aftermath to the environment and ecological systems of the islands and the surrounding ocean (Barker, 2004, p. 17-23).

## **Social and Political Impact, Health Implications, Environmental Issues and Intercultural Conflict**

The arrival of the Americans in the Marshall Islands brought challenges for the Marshallese people as well as the Americans. Foreign visitors often

create confusions and misunderstandings to the natives and vice versa. For example, upon the seeing the arrival of the anthropologist in the area, the young Marshallese girl ran in the other direction implying that it must have been her first time seeing a white person. As for the anthropologist, she was in fear and didn't know what to do after she was transferred into the house. When the Americans confronted the natives of the Bikini Islands for the use of their land, the Bikinians agreed. This was because they see the Americans as their ally. Furthermore, they believed that if it is necessary to bring peace and end all wars, the use of their land is a sacrifice they were willing to do (Barker, 2004, p. 19).

During the nuclear testing of the US in the Bikini Atoll, the Bikinians were forced to evacuate to other islands such as the Kili Island. When the Bikinians arrived at the said Island, they refused to recognize Kili chief's right to rule over the entire Kili Island. The refusal of the Bikinians is to the reason that the paramount chief does not own any of the land in the Kili Island (Barker, 2004, p. 26).

The exposure of the nuclear testing itself also cause changes to the tradition of the Marshallese people. For example, the people of the Enewatak changed their Christmas rituals to themes about nuclear bombs and missiles.

Moreover, because the community receives food from the US government, their Christmas diet had to change, too (Barker, 2004, p. 27).

During nuclear test programs, the number of detonations that the US make destroys islands and atolls, damages the coral reefs, and pulverizes the entire coral islands. The crushed corals, ashes and radioactive materials form giant mushroom clouds that fall in the islands. The fallout from these tests

destroys the ecology of the region as it contaminates the waters and the lands (Barker, 2004, p. 19-23).

The nuclear test programs introduce huge amounts of radioactive chemicals to the entire environment of the Marshallese people, as well as to the entire Earth. The radioactive fallout from nuclear bombs and missiles spread throughout the nation. The whole Marshall Islands is contaminated with radioactive toxins, especially, the islands near the testing site (Barker, 2004, p. 21).

The US detonated 67 thermonuclear bombs in the Marshall Islands from 1946 to 1958 (Barker, 2004, p. 20). These tests produced a huge amount of radioactive fallout that spread through the entire nation. The exposure of the Marshallese people from radiation imposed medical threats. These radiations became infected the air, contaminated their food, and mixed with their water. Therefore, the health of the Marshallese is compromised, not just because of direct contact of radiation to the body, but also because of the illnesses brought by the effects of radiation such as cancer and thyroid problems (Barker, 2004, p. 22-23).

### **Strategies for the Marshallese people**

The introduction of Anthropologists to the Marshall Islands helps in the peoples' long process of coping with the risks associated to nuclear weapon testing. Because of the challenges brought about by the nuclear testing programs in the Marshall Islands, the Marshallese learned to adopt different strategies to mitigate the effects of the nuclear weapons testing. Difficulty to reestablish social and political systems, international problems and

starvation are just some of the challenges they had to endure. Moreover, the US government was forced to halt the weapon testing operations in the Marshall Islands (Barker, 2004, 23-24, 29).

The exposure of the Marshallese people to radiation and weapon testing had negative consequences. Nevertheless, it also served as an opportunity for the Marshallese to become aware of how they control their lives, and to be conscious about their communities and their society (Barker, 2004, p. 24).

The assistance of the anthropologists had a significant contribution in the formation of the government of the Marshall Islands. Their arrival in the islands brought understanding and enlightenment for the Marshallese people. They helped the people to understand why the arrival of the Americans was necessary. They even brought peace because they helped the people to regain their lands. But most of all, they assisted in creating a very well balanced intercultural interactions (Barker, 2004, p. 24-28).

The people of the Marshall Islands faced starvation due to the loss of resources brought about by United States' weapon testing programs. Aside from the loss of resources, the remaining foods in the islands were not safe to be eaten because of contamination with radioactive fallouts. The starvation was very serious that the people had to cut down coconut trees to eat the core. The people of Bikini Islands, with constant assistance from anthropologists, have convinced the US to help them. With the help of the US Government, the food shortage was averted by giving foods rich with sodium. The action helped in abating the starvation imposed by the nuclear tests (Barker, 2004, p. 22).

Since the end of the nuclear weapon testing operations, the people of the

Enewatak community returned to their island atoll, and reestablished their original settlements. This was made possible with help of the anthropologists to report to the tribunal the hardships of the Enewatakese during the relocation. They rebuilt the community from scratch. This rebuilding includes intensive programs to restore the lost resources such as soil and trees that were destroyed during the nuclear tests (Barker, 2004, p. 27).

After the end of the testing program in 1958, the Marshallese started to discuss their actions to regain their autonomy. By 1978, the Marshall Islands have their own constitution. On May of 1979, the government of Marshall Islands was formed and was named the Republic of the Marshall Islands (Barker, 2004, p. 29). Nevertheless, the Marshallese people are a proof of perseverance through the hardest hardships.

## **Conclusion**

Getting back on track or coping from the deluge caused by nuclear weapons testing was not an easy task for the Marshallese. Great lessons can be learned from this group of people. Accordingly, these lessons or coping tactics include: working collectively as a nation and not as segregated tribes of villages; acknowledging that help is needed from experts, such as the anthropologists; and being aware of the past, present, and future events in the society - in other words, awareness.

## **Reference**

Barker, H. (2012). *Bravo for the Marshallese: Regaining Control in a Post-Nuclear, Post-Colonial World*. Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning.