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PRELIMINARY ANTHROPOLOGIST'S REPORT - BIKINI ATOLL SURVEY 1957

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Brief Historical Background

The Bikini people had lived on their atoll for many generations. They and their fellow Marshallese came under the domination of foreigners less than one hundred years ago. The German regime was succeeded by that of the Japanese at the onset of World War I. The Japanese rule was terminated by the American forces during World War II.

Contact with the Outside World

The people of Bikini Atoll were not the isolated twentieth century "Stone Age primitives" as described by sensationalist news reporters and other journalists. They were and are, however, less sophisticated than other more acculturated Marshallese, but they had been in contact with the rest of the Marshall Islands, and had been exposed to at least some of the aspects of Western culture.

Every two months a Japanese schooner visited Bikini to purchase copra and to sell food, clothing, and other goods. Every six months a Japanese official made a visit to the atoll. Some of the Bikini people visited other atolls, married out, and attended school elsewhere. Other Marshallese visited Bikini.

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The small Bikini community had developed a close in-group feeling during the years of relative isolation prior to the coming of the white man and found satisfaction and security in their closely knit personal relationships and communal life.

World War II and the Bikini People

The Bikini people were directly affected by World War II in that three of their young men who had been attending the Japanese government school on Jaluit Atoll were drafted as laborers and sent to Enewetak Atoll. They were later killed there in the American bombing and bombardment of that huge and important Japanese military base. There were only six Japanese soldiers at Bikini, however; wireless station operators also manned the ammunition stores. These men were all killed by American bombing and shelling. Little damage was done to Bikini, however, and the Bikini people were much better off than Marshallese in areas such as Jaluit, Enewetak and Kwajalein, where heavy fighting occurred. The Bikini people suffered as did the other Marshallese, from the cut-off of supply lines from Japan with the resultant cessation of imports of necessary consumer goods and exportation of copra. Communications were restored and wartime hardships were alleviated when the American armed forces captured the Marshall Islands early in 1944. The serious hardships of the Bikini people were yet to come however.

Evacuation of Bikini¹

Early in 1946 it was decided that Bikini Atoll was the most suitable location for the testing of atomic weapons. The Bikini people were asked to leave and, as might have been expected of a people of their historical conditioning to obedience, especially after more than a quarter of a century of autocratic Japanese rule, agreed to leave their ancestral home. The possibilities of resettlement in the Marshalls were very limited because land is scarce (only about 74 square miles) and very little of it is available for settlement. The Marshallese jealously guard their land rights and will not willingly part with them.

Problems of Resettlement

The 166 Bikinians were offered the choice of moving to either Ujae, Lae, or Rongerik, all atolls in the northwestern Marshalls. Ujae and Lae were already regularly inhabited, but Rongerik was only exploited by the people of neighboring Rongelap, who had land rights on the atoll. These people visited Rongerik to make copra, to fish, and to gather other foods. For this reason, presumably, as well as the fact that it was the closest to Bikini, the Bikini people opted to go to Rongerik rather than Ujae or Lae.

A village was built on Rongerik by Navy Seabees and a group of Bikini men, and all of the Bikini people were moved to that

¹ For a detailed report of the movements of the Bikini people from Bikini to Rongerik and to Kili, see Mason, Leonard "The Bikinians A Transplanted Population," Human Organization, Vol. 9, No. 1, Spring 1950, pp. 5-15.

atoll on March 6, 1946. Rongerik has a dry land area of 0.65 square miles, scattered over approximately 17 islands. It has a lagoon area of 55.38 square miles. This is much smaller than the 2.32-square-mile land area and 229.40-square-mile lagoon area of Bikini, with its 36 islands

The attempt to settle at Rongerik was a failure, allegedly due to the insufficient natural resources. A Board of Investigation convened by the Navy on June 2, 1947, recommended that the displaced Bikinians be moved again.

The Bikinians through their leader "King" Juda, as he was erroneously christened by romantically minded newsmen, accompanied by three leaders (alab) of Bikini, inspected Rongerik, Kili, Ujilang, Wotto and Ujae to try to find a suitable place in which to relocate their people. The Bikini people were interested in getting back to their ancestral home as rapidly as possible and had allegedly regarded the past and future resettlements as only temporary.

The period from June 2, 1947, to September 1, 1947, was spent in inspecting these possible resettlement areas. On August 26, 1947 the council of the ex-Bikini people on Rongerik sent the following letter to the American authorities:

(translation): "To the Office at Kwajalein:
Gentlemen: We the council have held a meeting to find the best place to go to. We have been to some other places to inspect and have considered them. In moving we find it quite a problem. The place we all agreed to stay on is Rongerik Atoll.

s/We, The Council"