

Keeping Nuclear Memories Alive

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Preparing for the Journey

There is a Marshallese food called jankwun, similar to fruit leather, which is made from preserved pandanus fruit pulp. Prepared in the same manner for thousands of years, the fruit is cooked in an earth oven with the pulp, later extracted through a tedious process of scraping individual pandanus keys using a specially made tool. The fruit pulp is then strained and spread on a pandanus leaf mat and dried in the sun. Once dried, it is rolled and wrapped in prepared pandanus leaves and secured with homemade coconut fibre sennit called akwol. Properly prepared, jankwun can last for years; it is vitamin-rich and can be eaten as is or reconstituted. I was told by an Uncle that the reason jankwun is wrapped intricately with akwol is for the purpose of ocean voyaging. You see, Marshallese are Ocean people whose traditional canoes are crafted without the use of nails and are instead held together by grooves and akwol. Jankwun, then, was an important element of voyaging that embodied the efforts of preparation and nourishment along with being a tool with which to make repairs while at sea.

Every step of preparing jankwun is careful and tedious – from gathering the proper coral rocks for the earth oven to harvesting the best varieties of pandanus at just the right time, to the patience required for drying the fruit and rolling the finished product. Even the preparation of the sennit takes an immense amount of work – from soaking the husks in saltwater to preparing, hand-rolling, and braiding the fibres. Attention to process – or lack thereof – in preparing this integral tool determined the success of a voyage.

For our young Pasifika activists preparing for their journeys in disarmament discourse, it is first necessary to sit with history and take careful measures prior to setting out on the course to demand a nuclear-free and independent world, while being mindful that like a canoe voyage, repairs can be made mid-way. In this way, jankwun becomes a metaphor with which to decolonise the current state of nuclear justice advocacy while acting as a critical tool for our Pacific youth to revitalise the movement.

Pacific Histories and Global Disarmament

“We, the people of the Pacific want to make our position clear. We are rapidly regaining control of our lands, and the fact that we have inherited the basic administration system imposed upon by alien imperial and colonial powers does not imply that we have to perpetuate them and the preferential racist policies that went with them.”¹

Following the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States, Japanese mothers went house to house throughout the country gathering millions of signatures denouncing nuclear weapons.² In the 1950s, survivors of the bombings formed a collective called the Japan Confederation of A and H Bomb Survivors, or Nihon Hidankyo,³ which emerged from the Japan Council Against A and H Bombs.⁴ These two key NPOs protested US nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific and supported – still support – elevating the voices of Marshallese from affected islands, along with all global hibakusha.

Marshallese survivors organised as well, forming the RMI’s first nuclear collective called ERUB, representing the communities of Enewetak, Rongelap, Utrik, and Bikini. Rongelap women organised to form Iju In Ean, and Enewetak Irojilaplap⁵ tirelessly advocated for their people through protests and won a 1973 lawsuit⁶ against the United States to halt the bombings of their islands under the PACE program.⁷

By the mid-1970s, the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) movement found increased support from international disarmament groups and organisations like Greenpeace and World Council of Churches.⁸ Following the inaugural NFIP Conference in Fiji in 1978, a collective of Pacific peoples and allies met in Pohnpei “to discuss strategies to protect the Ocean and its people from the effects of French, American and British nuclear testing.”⁹ The outcome statement of the meeting was The Peoples’ Treaty for a Nuclear Free Pacific in which a call was issued “for an immediate end to the oppression, exploitation and subordination of the [I]ndigenous peoples of the Pacific.”¹⁰

1 Opening statement from the Preamble of the Peoples’ Treaty for a Nuclear Free Pacific, drafted in Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia, 1978, Author’s personal archives.

2 Petitions are housed at the Lucky Dragon Museum in Yokohama, Japan.

3 “Nihon Hidankyo,” accessed December 13, 2023, <https://www.ne.jp/asahi/hidankyo/nihon/english/>

4 “Gensuikyo,” accessed December 13, 2023, <http://www.antiatom.org/english/>

5 Irojilaplap is the Paramount Chief.

6 The People of Enewetak v Laird case, in which the people of Enewetak evoked the newly enacted NEPA Act (1969) to halt the bomb experiments. See: People of Enewetak v Laird, 353 F Supp 811 (1973), <https://www.casemine.com/judgement/us/59149735add7b049345ef888>

7 PACE stands for Pacific Atoll Cratering Experiment.

8 Nic Maclellan, “Nuclear Testing and Racism in the Pacific Islands,” In The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity, ed. Steven Ratuva (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0242-8_74-1

9 Tracey Banivanua Mar, Decolonisation and the Pacific: Indigenous Globalisation and the Ends of Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

10 Preamble of the Peoples’ Treaty for a Nuclear Free Pacific.

From the beginning, Pacific Islanders led global disarmament efforts through the lens of decolonisation that centred on Indigenous rights. Their powerful voices were then amplified by international supporters. Now, that model has been upended by current efforts that have all but erased the core aspects of Pacific nuclear resistance movements: decolonisation and independence. Contemporary large-scale centralised advocacy efforts are western-based and clearly modelled on systems underpinned by colonial frameworks which portray Pacific Islanders as victim constructs. In this way, those directly affected by radiation and their history of colonial resistance have been made invisible,¹¹ too often presented merely as tokens. Decolonisation is no longer central to the movement, its frameworks, and its key actors. Instead, the movement itself has been colonised by western approaches and squarely centred in the west.

Encouraged by the late Dr. Tracey Banivanua Mar's assertion that decolonisation must remain "an ongoing and necessarily recurring, mobile story of insistence and persistence in the face of imposed invisibility,"¹² we must then pause to unravel a strand of *akwol*, take some nourishment from our metaphorical *jankwun*, and make necessary repairs to our canoe.

Human Costs of Nuclear Weapons

"There are only 90,000 people out there. Who gives a damn?"¹³

"Decades on, some atoll and desert locations in Oceania are nuclear sacrifice zones, still contaminated by radioactive isotopes that are hazardous to human health but have a half-life of thousands of years."¹⁴

Prior to nuclear testing, the leaves and fruit used for *jankwun*, and the coconut husks used for *akwol*, were free from radionuclides. Now this tool and symbol for long journeys is wrought by half-lives¹⁵ of Strontium-90 and Cesium-137 and their respective daughter elements Yttrium-90 and Barium-137.¹⁶

Nuclear testing was highly racialised.¹⁷ The invisibility of Indigenous Pacific Islanders to metropolitan masses had – and continues to have – devastating impacts on survivors, descendants, and

11 Robert Jacobs, "The Radiation that Makes People Invisible: A Global Hibakusha Perspective," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 12(31), no. 1 (August 2014), <https://apjif.org/2014/12/31/Robert-Jacobs/4157/article.html>

12 Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific*.

13 The (in)famous declaration attributed to then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger during a discussion regarding the seizure of Micronesian islands held in trust, in Walter J. Hickel, *Who owns America?* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

14 Maclellan, "Nuclear Testing and Racism in the Pacific Islands."

15 A "half-life" refers to the amount of time that half of the radioactive isotope will decay and in turn produce what is called a "daughter element."

16 Strontium-90 is a byproduct of nuclear fission that remains indefinitely in the soil, concentrating heavily on coral atolls in pandanus fruits and leaves. It metabolises similarly to Calcium, depositing in our bones and teeth, and may actually replace bone, depending on absorption levels. A 1959 survey of Rongelap showed an average Sr90 concentration of 19 mg in sampled dried pandanus and 43.7 mg in pandanus leaves. Until now, 90% of radiation exposure for Marshallese living on affected islands is absorbed through the gut from consuming contaminated foods like coconut and pandanus. Moreover, uptake pathways differ from children to adults, women to men.

See: Cabrera, W.E., Schrooten, I., De Broe, M.E., D'Haese, P.C., "Strontium and bone," *Journal of Bone and Mineral Research* 14, no.5, <https://asbmr.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1359/jbmr.1999.14.5.661>

17 Maclellan, "Nuclear Testing and Racism in the Pacific Islands."

homelands. Systemic oppression under which western policies of nuclear racism thrived are the same colonial ideals that are all too often mirrored in current advocacy organisations where the space between positionality and relational agency has been blurred. In this respect, we now see our Pacific youth thrust into advocacy roles based mostly on their nationality – not their positionality. Meaning, simply being part of an affected community-at-large does not necessarily inform the proximity to direct effects of certain events¹⁸ like nuclear testing and its legacy.

In the Pacific, it is paramount to work through established relationships with both non-state actors and local communities to educate and influence with a moral imperative and humanitarian stance – principles inherent to Pasifika culture. As such, the Pacific must insist upon the enabling of independent collectives to frame security discussions through a decolonising lens of research and analysis – not simply tokenising citizens for testimonies and imaginings of a ‘peaceful Pacific,’ or encouraging increasing dependence on epistemic communities from the global north. The current disarmament movement must recentre on a decolonial fulcrum.

Informing and Inspiring Younger Generations

“We cannot dismantle the master’s house using the master’s tools.”¹⁹

“Whenever the colonizer states, in his language, that the colonized is a weakling [victim], he suggests thereby that this deficiency requires protection.”²⁰

The foundational Pacific anti-nuclear movement was home-grown and underpinned by indigeneity and decolonisation. Sadly, current campaigns are framed by western ontologies, presenting Pacific Islanders as passive victims needing western protection or worse yet, exotic inhabitants of faraway islands rendered powerless by their oppressors. By mirroring institutions underpinned by models of structural injustice, agency is stripped, and liberty denied through a “calculated invisible to hide the visible.”²¹ This depersonalisation is what Memmi refers to as “the mark of the plural” in which the colonised is “entitled to drown in an anonymous collectivity”²² of victimhood.

While some agents – for example, NGOs, donor partners, universities, and researchers – may be well-intentioned, if they themselves, or the institutions they represent, have not undertaken the work to decolonise their models of engagement,²³ they are simply replicating “dilemmas of oppression.”²⁴ More problematic still are our youth who unwittingly mirror these oppressive systems, thus reinforcing a “dependency complex” wherein they believe the legitimacy of the occupation, be it of their mind, body, island, or movement, further entrenching our collective communities in unjust systems.

18 Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, trans. Howard Greenfeld, (London: The Orion Press, 1965).

19 Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, ed. (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 110- 114.

20 Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*.

21 Luisa Tuilau, “I Walk BRAVO,” Asia-Pacific Leadership Network, September 27, 2022, <https://www.apln.network/projects/voices-from-pacific-island-countries/i-walk-bravo>. Originally composed by Luisa Tuilau at the Youngsolwara art camp, March 2017.

22 Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*.

23 This includes methodologies of scientific research and presentation of data.

24 Kate Jackson-Meyer, *Tragic Dilemmas in Christian Ethics* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022).

To better prepare our youth, we must then weave decolonial theory and history directly into the fibres of the akwol that binds our metaphorical jankwun, so that at any point in our journey, they can pull a strand and ask questions while making repairs to our “mobile story of insistence and persistence.”²⁵ Questions such as:

1. *What are the words you do not have yet?*
2. *What do you need to say?*
3. *What's the worst that could happen to me if I tell the truth?*²⁶

Reaching Our Destination

***“Every time that they run a fever, every time that they experience stomach pains, nosebleeds, and other common ailments, this anxiety rears up and they think – this is it, it’s finally got me. These fears extend to their parents, their children, and other loved ones. Every fever that a child runs triggers fears that one’s child will die.”*²⁷**

Undoubtedly, the entire Pacific is impacted by more than 300 nuclear and thermonuclear weapons detonated by colonial powers, yet we must recognise that certain communities continue to face the direct impacts of those tests more harshly than others. For some of us, our jankwun is more contaminated and the looming reality is that our children and grandchildren will be displaced for an eternity; our children will likely fall ill as we have little more to nourish them with aside from poisoned pandanus. For too many families of those directly impacted and displaced, intergenerational trauma is embedded in family bloodlines with an indiscriminate half-life.

I remember the first time an Enewetak elder, one of my boys’ grandmothers, shared her experience with me of living through the Battle of Enewetak, during the Second World War. What I remember most from that conversation was the look in her eyes as she was transported in time to when she was a little girl, and I could feel the amount of trauma she had carried through her life – trauma of war compounded with exile during the nuclear tests and continued internal displacement due to radioactive contamination.

When the TPNW was finally enacted, my first thought was to visit a Rongelap elder who had been instrumental in my mothering of nuclear-displaced children; so my boys and I went to tell her about the Treaty. That day, we talked about the impact of sharing testimonies, and how she was often left feeling depleted after re-telling her story. She told me that people would visit her, and she would share her story, but she was often unclear of their intention with the use of her testimony. More importantly, she said, nuclear was only a part of her story. It is undeniable that survivor testimonies played, and continue to play, a vital role in global disarmament efforts. However, there is a risk that constant re-telling of a story that reflects only half of a life will render the teller opaque.

²⁵ Mar, Decolonisation and the Pacific.

²⁶ Divya Victor, comment on “The Audre Lorde’s Questionnaire for Oneself,” Divya Victor Blog, accessed December 14, 2023, <https://divyavictor.com/the-audre-lorde-questionnaire-to-oneself/>, adapted from, Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” in *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco, CA: Spinsters Ink, 1980), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f9041916646405585001f1d/t/61c9fde75fa85b02c9fc321a/1640627687676/The+Transformation+of+Silence+into+Language+and+Action_by+Audre+Lorde.pdf

²⁷ Jacobs, “The Radiation that Makes People Invisible.”

We must not direct our youth to the side of responsibility, to take on moral agency of telling history for fear of them becoming invisible. Our youth are more than their intergenerational traumas and testimonies of elders: their moral agency lies within speaking truth to power. For their sake, the anti-nuclear movement and disarmament discourse must revisit its foundation and recentre itself on decolonisation, and independence for all peoples everywhere. Let us nourish ourselves and repair our canoe with this jankwun, and continue on our journey until we reach our destination of a nuclear-free and ***independent*** world.

About the Author

Brooke Takala is a Marshallese national and independent scholar with a background in Ethnic Studies and Education. Her policy work centres on the continued impacts of colonisation and nuclear imperialism including internal displacement, family violence, food sovereignty, and international humanitarian law. Brooke is a former Campus Lecturer and Regional Scholar at the University of the South Pacific, the former Secretary General of the Marshall Islands Red Cross Society, a founder and co-coordinator of an Enewetak-based community organisation, a children's book author, and, most importantly, a mother. Brooke is based in Majuro.

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