

Nuclear Testing in French Polynesia: After Fifty Years of Lies and State Secrets How to Calm Our Anger and Rebuild Ourselves

Chantal Spitz

Tahitian author

Abstract The essay discusses, from an Indigenous perspective, the French nuclear weapon tests in the southern Pacific islands. It presents a vivid scenario of the detrimental effects and social inequalities produced by the dynamic of 'industrialization without industry' brought about by militarisation and extraction.

Keywords Nuclear testing. Militarisation. French Polynesia. Pacific islands.

Translated from the original French by Jean Anderson.



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2023-09-28
Accepted 2023-11-22
Published 2023-12-20

Open access

© 2023 Spitz | 4.0



Citation Spitz, C. (2023). "Nuclear Testing in French Polynesia: After Fifty Years of Lies and State Secrets. How to Calm Our Anger and Rebuild Ourselves". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(2), 247-256.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/02/006

247

On July 6th 1966, Aldebaran ripped open the skies above Moruroa.¹ Aldebaran was the first nuclear test carried out by the French State in its Pacific colony of French Polynesia, where 193 nuclear bombs would explode between July 1966 and January 1996.²

On that morning of July 6th 1966, the wind was blowing in the wrong direction and the radioactive cloud reached Mangareva³ instead of blowing far out to sea as had been predicted by the military command that believed that “with such a network of weather stations, under the control of technicians from the National Meteorological Service, [...] any inaccuracy in judging the conditions favorable to the firing is highly unlikely” (Meltz 2022).⁴ No preventive evacuation of Mangareva’s inhabitants was planned. “Secrecy is the order of the day and the danger is to be covered up for political and psychological reasons” (Meltz 2022).⁵ For the same reasons, no atomic shelters existed on the island. The inhabitants of Mangareva were unknowingly contaminated by the radioactive cloud and by the rain that was their main source of water at that time. A few days after the explosion scientists carried out analyses that showed food and water were contaminated. The report concluded “the degree of contamination and the actual numbers must be minimized so as not to lose the confidence of civilians” (Stadius, n.d.).⁶

On 17 July 1974, Centaure was tested. Military command believed that the explosion would reach the ideal altitude and that the wind would not be blowing toward Tahiti. The cloud did not rise above 5,200 meters and the wind pushed the radioactive cloud directly over Tahiti. Here again the silence was absolute and no information was passed on for the protection of the inhabitants, in particular about foods that absorb radioactivity and should be avoided. Cow’s milk and dairy products were ‘confiscated’ and withdrawn from sale without Tahitians having any idea of the reasons for this.

1 Atoll in the Tuamotu archipelago 1,250 km south-east of Tahiti.

2 From 1966 to 1974, 46 atmospheric tests (explosions in the open air) and from 1974 to 1996, 147 underground tests in the subsoil and beneath the lagoons of Moruroa and Fangataufa.

3 Island in the Gambier archipelago, 1,590 km south-east of Tahiti, with a population at the time of 500.

4 “[A]vec un tel réseau de stations météo, exploitées par des techniciens du Service de la Météorologie Nationale, [...] une estimation erronée des conditions favorables de tir est très improbable”.

5 “On est dans la politique du secret et on veut cacher la dangerosité”.

6 “[I]l faut minimiser la contamination et la réalité des chiffres pour ne pas perdre la confiance des populations civiles”. Interview with Tomas Stadius, co-author of *Toxique enquête sur les essais nucléaires français en Polynésie* (Toxic Inquiry Into French Nuclear Tests in Polynesia).

The only preventive evacuation took place in 1968 under great secrecy. The sixty or so inhabitants of Tureia atoll, the closest atoll to Moruroa, were moved to Tahiti at the time of the first megatonic test (Canopus, 2.6 megatons), without knowing why they had been moved.

Over the thirty years of its nuclear campaigns, and for twenty years afterward, in keeping with its techno-scientific arrogance, the military command⁷ maintained its practice of secrecy and multiple lies in order to prove the harmlessness of its nuclear experiments and to minimize their consequences.

The setting up of the Centre d'Expérimentation du Pacifique (CEP)⁸ is a part of the history of the irreversible upheaval that shook the population of French Polynesia on multiple levels, environmental, economic cultural, psychological, undermining their health and their identity.

The cracks caused by the vibrations of the underground nuclear tests were not mentioned for a long time. Three zones in the north of Moruroa are damaged and under surveillance by seismic monitoring equipment. If these zones should collapse there would be a tidal wave that would swallow Tureia, the closest atoll to Moruroa.

In just a few years, the society of the 1960s that was largely unsalaried became a society of mostly salaried workers with "a post-industrial economy [...] without having passed through the normal intermediate phase of industrialization" (Poirine 2022).⁹ The building of the infrastructures associated with the nuclear industry in Tahiti and the Tuamotus required a considerable number of labourers and resulted in the exodus of thousands of people from the archipelagoes to take up the local jobs created by this need. People left the primary sector and exports crashed. The economy developed around military spending and goods imported from outside; "the territory's budget became more and more dependent on this military spending that allowed for the lifestyle of an industrialized country but with no industry".¹⁰ In this context, social inequalities grew between the winners in the system (expatriate and local government employees, importers, distributors, business owners, promoters) and the losers

⁷ Military authorities, along with scientists, doctors and politicians were responsible for the nuclear testing program and all participated in the secrecy and official lies. There is a growing body of literature on the post-WWII military industrial complex and militarization. See, for example, McGranahan, Collins 2018. In particular, Ann Stoler's conversation included in the book's Afterword, "Disassemblage: Rethinking U.S. Imperial Formation", is helpful in thinking through the inconsistency of post-WWII militarization.

⁸ Responsible for the development of the French State's nuclear programme.

⁹ "[U]ne économie post-industrielle [...] sans passer par la phase normale d'industrialisation intermédiaire". In 1962, 46% of the population was active in the primary sector (food production, vanilla, coffee, fishing, mother-of-pearl, coprah...).

¹⁰ "[L]e budget du territoire devient de plus en plus dépendant de ces dépenses militaires qui lui permettent un niveau de vie de pays industriel sans industrie".

(under-qualified workers in the private sector and in low-security employment).

According to the 1962 census, 80% of those aged 15 and over stated they could read and write Tahitian. Only an urban elite were fluent in French; in the rest of the country French was not spoken. (Vernaudeau 2022)¹¹

In 1964, aware of the difficulties for the setting up of the CEP that could result from this situation, General de Gaulle decided to launch television in Tahiti,¹² so that “Polynesians might live in French with news from Polynesia from France from the world, in French, they must be bathed in France” (Vernaudeau 2022).¹³ Television, fluency in French, repeated contact with expatriates and climbing the economic and social hierarchy brought about major socio-economic changes and a disdain for Tahitian developed in people’s minds and in society at large. Doing well in French school and mastering French are from now on key to accessing the world of salaried employment, and this new society and families value school and give priority to French when they can.

Indigenous culture is also subject to this same disdain, and customary activities (fishing, growing crops, food, housing, ways of life...) are left to families that do not wish to Frenchify themselves or that live in areas far from town or from Tahiti. Over time, these families become the source of under-qualified labourers in the private sector or workers who are often undeclared or have little job security.

The thousands employed by the CEP are largely delighted to be part of the monumental adventure of building the nuclear test sites. These men are paid prodigious sums and are happy to spend them generously with their families each time they come home from work.¹⁴ As buildings are completed, many of the workers are hired by businesses profiting from the CEP manna while others stay on at the nuclear sites. These employees, like the French and Polynesian conscripts, are present without protection at the atmospheric tests, confident in the army’s lies. Many of them develop one or more radiation-induced diseases, some give birth to disabled children, and their pride in having been able to give their families an un hoped-for

¹¹ “Lors du recensement de la population en 1962, 80% des 15 ans et plus déclare savoir lire et écrire en tahitien. Seule une élite urbaine maîtrise le français; dans le reste du pays on ne parle pas français”.

¹² This would happen in 1965.

¹³ “[Que] les Polynésiens vivent en français avec des nouvelles de Polynésie de France et du monde en français il faut qu’ils baignent dans la France”.

¹⁴ Depending on the status of these workers, their on-site time varied from 15 days to six months.

standard of living sours into a deep feeling of culpability and shame. Of anger. At falling for reassuring speeches. At having created the disaster that is eating away at our country. At having contaminated their offspring. In addition, the men's long absences have broken apart many couples, just as they have produced a generation without paternal role models. This feeling of culpability is widespread among the broad sector of society that was in favour of the nuclear tests, particularly since the exposure of the French State's lies and since they too are physically affected by radiation-induced sickness.

The French government wipes out possible opposition in French Polynesia by hatching a plot against Indigenous parliamentary representative Pouvāna'a a 'O'opa, and by threatening to put its colony under a military regime.¹⁵ From the beginning of the nuclear campaign, there is evident resistance, but the speech given in 1966 by John Teariki in response to General de Gaulle's is quickly drowned out by the reassurances of local politicians in favour of the tests.¹⁶

But Mister President, I cannot help but tell you, in the name of the inhabitants of this territory, how bitter and how sad we are to see France [...] dishonoured by such an undertaking. [...] We wish, Mister President, that you would apply here in French Polynesia the excellent principles that you recommended from Phnom Penh to our American friends, and that you would round up and ship out your troops, your bombs and your planes. Then our leukaemia and cancer sufferers would not be able to accuse you later on of having caused their illness. And our future generations would not be able to blame you for the birth of monsters and retarded children. (Teariki 1966)¹⁷

This opposition would never cease, and would be carried on until the tests were completely stopped, in particular by John Teariki, Francis

¹⁵ Pouvāna'a a 'O'opa (1895-1977), Tahitian politician, elected to the French parliament from 1947 to 1958, supported a considerable degree of autonomy. He was unjustly accused of involvement in the arson attack in Pape'ete, and was sentenced to 8 years in prison and 15 years' exile; pardoned in 1971, he was elected to the Senate from 1971 until his death in 1977.

¹⁶ John Teariki (1914-1983) a Tahitian politician, elected to the French parliament, proponent of a considerable degree of autonomy for French Polynesia, opposed to nuclear testing.

¹⁷ "Mais je ne puis, Monsieur le Président, m'empêcher de vous exprimer, au nom des habitants de ce territoire, toute l'amertume, toute la tristesse que nous éprouvons de voir la France [...] déshonorée par une telle entreprise. [...] Puissiez-vous, Monsieur le Président, appliquer, en Polynésie française, les excellents principes que vous recommandiez, de Phnom Penh, à nos amis américains et rembarquer vos troupes, vos bombes et vos avions. Alors, plus tard, nos leucémiques et nos cancéreux ne pourraient pas vous accuser d'être l'auteur de leur mal. Alors, nos futures générations ne pourraient pas vous reprocher la naissance de monstres et d'enfants tarés".

Sanford,¹⁸ Daniel Millaud¹⁹ and Oscar Temaru,²⁰ accompanied by a percentage of French Polynesians who would take part in marches every year to demand that nuclear tests in their country be ended.

On 5 January 2010, the French government voted in a law²¹ creating a right to total reparation for harm caused to persons suffering from a radiation-induced illness potentially caused by the nuclear tests. This law recognised 23 such illnesses. It did not satisfy the associations for the defence of former nuclear workers who criticised the limited number of cases accepted by Comité d'Indemnisation des Victimes des Essais Nucléaires (CIVEN)²² where the French Ministry of Defence lists 353 instances of nuclear fallout over the whole of French Polynesia between 1966 and 1974 (Ministère de la Défense 2006) [fig. 1].

To this official total must be added Doctor Sueur's (2018)²³ "conclusion to a progress report of a research project carried out in Tahiti [...] between 2012 and 2016" that followed up on two observations. These included "the considerable number of clinical cases combining a pervasive developmental disorder²⁴ with morphological anomalies and/or mental retardation"; "among our patients, the majority of these clinical cases are found, in 'grandchildren', among the descendants of civilian or military veterans of the CEP, at the same rate as among the inhabitants of the southern atolls of the Tuamotus and the Gambiers" (Sueur 2018, 2-3). It is possible that the cases encountered are "third generation cases [...] probably related to the radiation exposure of their grandparents who worked for the CEP at the time of the atmospheric nuclear tests of the 1960s and 70s" (Sueur 2018, 6-7).

18 Francis Sanford (1912-1996), Tahitian politician, elected to the French parliament then first vice-president of the Council of Government in 1977, proponent of a considerable degree of autonomy for French Polynesia, opposed to nuclear testing.

19 Daniel Millaud (1928-2016), Tahitian politician, elected to the French Senate, proponent of a considerable degree of autonomy for French Polynesia.

20 Oscar Temaru (b. 1944) Tahitian politician, leader of the Independence movement and opposed to nuclear testing, President of the government of French Polynesia five times between 2004 and 2013, and leader of the party elected to power in April 2023.

21 So-called Morin Law relating to compensation for victims of French nuclear testing.

22 Cf. Comité d'Indemnisation des Victimes des Essais Nucléaires 2022, 6: 143 applications, 46 awarded, 84 refused, 13 out of scope.

23 Christian Sueur is a practising hospital psychiatrist in French Polynesia, head of the pediatric psychiatry unit at the Centre Hospitalier in Pirae.

24 PDD, now known in English as ASD, autism spectrum disorder.

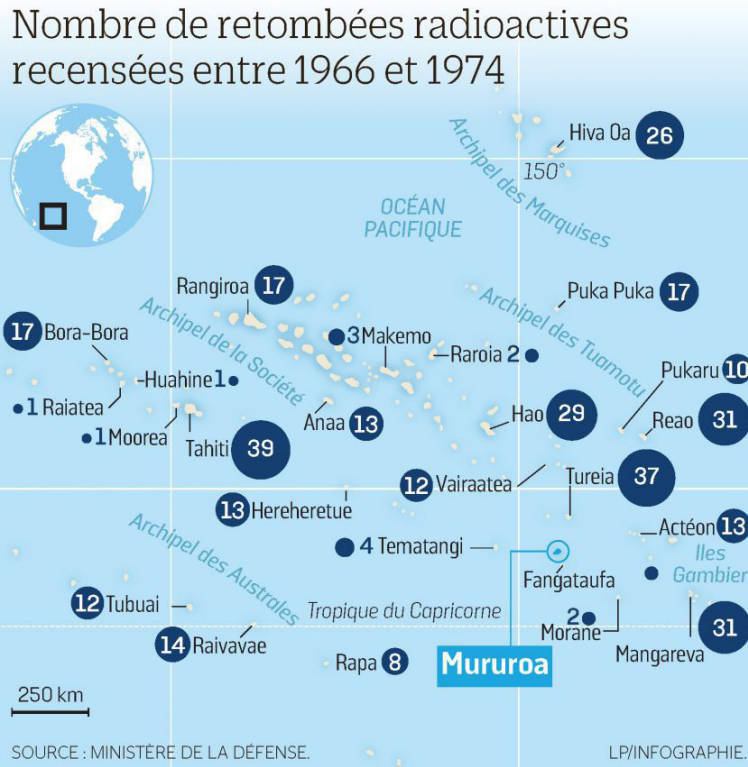


Figure 1 Instances of radioactive fallout in French Polynesia between 1966 and 1974

Fifty years of experimental tests of secrecy of lies and arrogance have deeply marked the collective intelligence of French Polynesians. Against official speeches that exhort them to ‘turn the page’ and look to the future, there stands a shared demand that the French State recognize its colonialism along with its multitude of consequences and write it into the constitution; that it pay out the compensations due to French Polynesians, that the Remembrance Centre²⁵ enable people to understand and to shine a light on that sinister era, take into account Indigenous memories and feelings, and that it make use of digital platforms to interest the young generations who often know nothing about this page in their history. A page that fear shame complicity lies propaganda intimidation censorship blacklisting have

²⁵ Pū Mahara, the Remembrance Centre for the nuclear tests, was requested by the government of French Polynesia in 2009 and agreed to by the French State in 2017; it is currently in the scientific, cultural and educational planning stages.

stified hidden silenced. A page that has burdened multiplied intensified the agitations injuries traumas of a history of violence of oppression of outrage, handed down from generation to generation from soul to soul from the first confrontation with the first European arrivals, written into the collective unconscious of a people full of self-doubt.

In French Polynesia as in every colony or occupied territory, official history is written with the conqueror's ink and does not tell of the furious encounters between Indigenes and European navigators, of the upheavals of an evangelization that took apart the foundations of a society and installed a disorder of beliefs and governorship, of colonization that struck the final blow in destroying awareness and intellects. The legacy of fifty years of nuclear abomination is concentrated in a society that is alienated altered twisted, into a daily life interrupted by radiation-induced illnesses, by epigenetic, transgenerational pathologies (Sueur 2018, 3), and a future that has been paid for in advance by a long trail of self-abasement and deadly self-abuse.

It is up to us, peoples of French Polynesia, to build together a positive perception of ourselves, anchored in what we possess in our intelligence, our collective memories, philosophies of life, interpretations of events, perspectives on the future, representations of ourselves and of others, and in what is tucked away deep in our entrails, emotions, injuries, aspirations, temperaments, processes of identification or unbelonging. So that we may all reinterpret ourselves in our humanness and in the way we are represented and live.

Bibliography

- Colloque Histoire et Mémoire du CEP: un 2° contact?* (2022) (Université de la Polynésie française, 11-13 mai 2022). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cm7Jlzu0dPU&list=PLIkB3z3tR8DQ__5LLn7FniGI-GF3KrY8dq&index=8.
- Comité d'Indemnisation des Victimes des Essais Nucléaires (2022). *Rapport d'activité du CIVEN 2022*. <https://www.gouvernement.fr/rapport-d-activite-2022>.
- Mc Granahan, C.; Collins, J.F. (eds) (2018). *Ethnographies of U.S. Empire*. Durham: Duke University Press,
- Meltz, R. (2022). "Le Gouvernement du risque pendant les campagnes atmosphériques: secret, dissimulations et adaptations". *Colloque Histoire et Mémoire du CEP: un 2° contact?*.
- Ministère de la Défense (2006). *La Dimension radiologique des essais nucléaires en Polynésie française*. https://www.francetnp.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/La_dimension_radiologique_des_essais_nucleaires_francais_en_Polynesie.pdf.
- Poirine, B. (2022). "L'impact économique du CEP". *Colloque Histoire et Mémoire du CEP: un 2° contact?*.
- Stadius, T. (n.d.). "Interview". <https://www.facebook.com/moearo.vanaa/videos/1448843995924790>.
- Sueur, C. (2018). *Les Conséquences génétiques des essais nucléaires français dans le Pacifique, chez les petits-enfants des Vétérans du CEP, et des habitants des Tuamotu Gambier*. https://www.obsarm.info/IMG/pdf/rapport_conse_quences_nucleaires_sueur_2018.pdf.
- Teariki, J. (1966). *Discours d'accueil au général de Gaulle*. <http://moruroa.assemblee.pf/medias/pdf/Discours%20John%20Teariki%20%C3%A0%20Tahiti%207%20septembre%201966.pdf>. Consulted 20 July 2023.
- Vernaudon, J. (2022). "Les Dynamiques sociolinguistiques à l'époque du CEP". *Colloque Histoire et Mémoire du CEP: un 2° contact?*.

