

MICRONESIAN

JOURNAL OF THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol. 4, n° 1

Dry Season Issue

June 2005

BOOK REVIEW

Barker, Holly (2004) *Bravo for the Marshallese, Regaining Control in a Post-Nuclear, Post-Colonial World*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth / Thompson Learning ISBN: 0-534-61326-8

reviewed by

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I reluctantly agreed to write a book review on *Bravo for the Marshallese, Regaining Control in a Post-Nuclear, Post-Colonial World* by Holly M. Barker (Thomson, Wadsworth Publishers). I say reluctantly, because I believe that technical books (which this book is not) deserve as knowledgeable a reviewer as possible, and other types deserve a reviewer that can simply react to the presentation and content in much the same way that any other interested reader would. However, the latter option is not possible for me and I tried to convince the editor of this journal that I knew too much to give *Bravo* an easy ride. What were my reasons? Well, first, Barker tells us that she lived in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) for 2 years; I lived there just shy of 6 years. Second, Barker describes her present work to be on “nuclear issues” but attempts to educate the reader from the point-of-view of her experience as a Peace Corp volunteer and as a recently trained anthropologist. In contrast, my training is as a radiation health physicist. As an outcome of scientific studies I conducted for many years, I have probably the most comprehensive knowledge of the radiological conditions in the Marshall Islands as any person

anywhere (more about that later). For these reasons, I can only give what I consider to be an informed review, and not just a gut-level review.

The series editor, John Young, tells us in the Foreword that the each book in this series is a “case study” and that the authors “write with a readable narrative style...”. I find that informality not to my liking, primarily because it allows for matters of opinion and inaccuracy to creep into the book unchecked, and I provide some examples of that later in this review.

My first quick read-thru of the book gave me a sense that Barker’s experiences in the Marshall Islands affected her profoundly. This doesn’t surprise me as I had similar reactions to living there. Moreover, it was clear that her experiences gave her a disapproving mind-set of everything that took place during the Cold War. I don’t quarrel with a critical reaction to the Cold War—to a point. A thorough case study, however, deserves more than only a single, one-sided viewpoint. The Cold War and the escalation of the power positions of the United State and the Soviet Union that was fueled by worldwide nuclear testing not only deserve some comment, but some understand-

This contribution is not peer-reviewed.

© *Micronesian Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* ISSN 1449-7336

Letao Press, PO Box 3080, Albury NSW, Australia

ing. Judging past events without that understanding is naive and is easily revealed to readers. Barker delivers no useable commentary to round out the case study, only criticism.

My first read-thru also convinced me that Barker believes in the cause of improving the conditions of the Marshallese people. I find that to be a noble effort and worthwhile. But we know the broader case is true as well. There are native and indigenous people around the world that need articulate and educated spokespersons to help them navigate through a confusing technocratic world. Successful navigation, however, requires tact, understanding, and accuracy that sometimes, in my view, Barker failed to deliver.

In my second read-thru, Barker's indulgences of over-stating harms to the Marshallese as well as to people around the world and her frequent accusations concerning different U.S. institutions for unethical behavior became grating—particularly when the author did not deliver proof, or even references, for her statements. Those allegations, true or untrue, simply revealed her anger at the many institutions, some that we know did cause harm. Nevertheless, not repressing that anger led her to making unsupported statements not worthy of an academic presentation.

Let me address some specifics. First, there were some things that I *did* like. For example, Barker reviewed the colonial history of the Marshall Islands to inform us, or to remind those who are knowledgeable, about the sequence of authorities that controlled the Marshallese and their islands. Those authorities included the Spanish (known for bringing clothes and the Christian view of God), the Germans (known for their economic exploitation), the Japanese (known for their ruthlessness during wartime occupation), and finally, the United States. Barker explained the multifaceted relationship of the U.S. to the Marshallese, telling us that the Bikinians originally saw the U.S. as a friend and ally for liberating them from the Japanese rule.

Following this, however, Barker's disparagement and condemnations began along with many statements that are presented as fact but that included no references to establish validity.

For example, Barker tells us that “the radiation released from the tests exposed every atoll in the Marshall Islands to radiation.” No references. No supporting information. No indication of the *degree* of exposure. And here, Barker makes a quite fatal error of judgment in establishing her credibility—the fault we call *omission*. As part of the RMI government's effort to regain control, particularly to the situation that Barker's repeatedly stated—that the U.S. always “controlled” all of the information—the RMI government sponsored their own radiological survey of their nation. That study measured radioactivity in all parts of the terrestrial environment including soil, water, coconuts, etc. from every atoll, including the 10 that were never traditionally inhabited, and compared the radiation levels with that that came from global fallout. The study delineated the geographic extent, as well as the degree of contamination, from the Bikini and Enewetak nuclear tests for the first time. The survey was conducted from early 1990 through mid-1995 from within the RMI's own Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Health and the Environment.

I know about that survey intimately because I directed it. But where is it mentioned? Where are its findings? Where is it acknowledged that the RMI government actually obtained information that the U.S. *never* even sought? Barker should know that purposeful omission of fact and relevant information is a fault that cannot be excused. Barker kills her own credibility by leading the reader only through information that she has filtered to her own liking.

Intermingled in a somewhat ping-pong fashion between a history of anthropology in the Marshall Islands and the history of the nuclear testing program is more of the same: accusation, no acknowledgement for responsibilities the Marshallese had for building an economy during the 15 years of the Compact of Free Association, and more critique of U.S. laboratories and institutions. Even the “American company that managed the funds” for the Nuclear Claims Tribunal, is indicted for irresponsible behavior.

One refreshing chapter was the one on the Marshallese language and how it was adapted to talk about radiation, for which it had no

precedent. This material was interesting even though I had heard most of it during my years in the Marshall Islands. I think it is useful material for a new reader and does indeed shed light on some of the challenges faced by cultures forced to deal with technologies with which they have no experience. It is the kind of subject that Barker should continue to study and write about, and not radiation physics and radiation health, in which she has no training.

There were two areas of this book that came as a surprise. First was Chapter 8 on the RMI's petition to the U.S. government under the "Changed Circumstance" clause of the 1986 Compact of Free Association (the treaty with the U.S.). That petition is a small and short-lived part of a much longer story and hardly deserves an entire chapter. Moreover, why outdate this book with discussion of an event that is so short-lived? The copyright on *Bravo* is 2004 and already Chapter 8 is outdated. Earlier this year, the Bush administration turned down the petition in its entirety.

The second surprise was Chapter 9, "Other Case Studies." The earlier diatribe about radiation tragedy in the Marshall Islands apparently wasn't enough so Barker embarked, in my view, on providing superficial and cursory information about other locations where nuclear testing or radiation releases and accidents have affected people, including Hiroshima and Nagasaki, French Polynesia, Chernobyl, Nevada, and Hanford. Unfortunately, Barker knows less about the real issues and the relevant literature for those locations than she does about radiation in the Marshall Islands. Moreover, there are tremendous amounts of solid informative material published elsewhere that she doesn't cite or even acknowledge. Not only did this chapter *not* fit into her mixed-bag writing on the purpose of anthropology and the attempts of the Marshallese to regain control, but not enough *real* information was provided about any of those locations to serve any real educational purpose. Barker ended this chapter saying: "Radiation has destroyed the lives and environments of millions of people on this planet..". MILLIONS? That is quite a body count to claim without any documentation. Moreover, it makes me wonder if Barker ever

had a medical x-ray, or knows anyone who received radiation to treat inoperable cancer. The image of radiation as the ultimate evil is easy to sell until one needs it to treat disease and prolong life.

Lest I go on too long, let me stop here and summarize my views. I found the book to be easy to read and generally well-written. I also found the subject to be relevant to the world today. On these combined qualities, I give it an "A." I also found the book to be over-indulgent in unsupported accusation, highly deficient in providing documentation, and seriously guilty of omission of important information. For those qualities, I give it a "D." These grades combined are in the realm of C+ in my view.

Now that I've left the reader of this review in a quandary about the value of *Bravo for the Marshallese*, I recommend that if they really want to understand the issues about nuclear testing and the Marshall Islands—which goes well beyond what Barker presents—that they read more than one source of information. That could include Barker's book, but must include others as well. The student of history and social causes, just like the student of any other subject, must take some responsibility for finding a variety of viewpoints to read and to consider. They must look particularly for sources that are well documented with appropriate references to the wide base of published literature. I've asked the editor of this journal to make available a reading list on the Marshall Islands and the consequences of nuclear testing to those that send an inquiry to: editor_mjhss@cs.edu.au.