

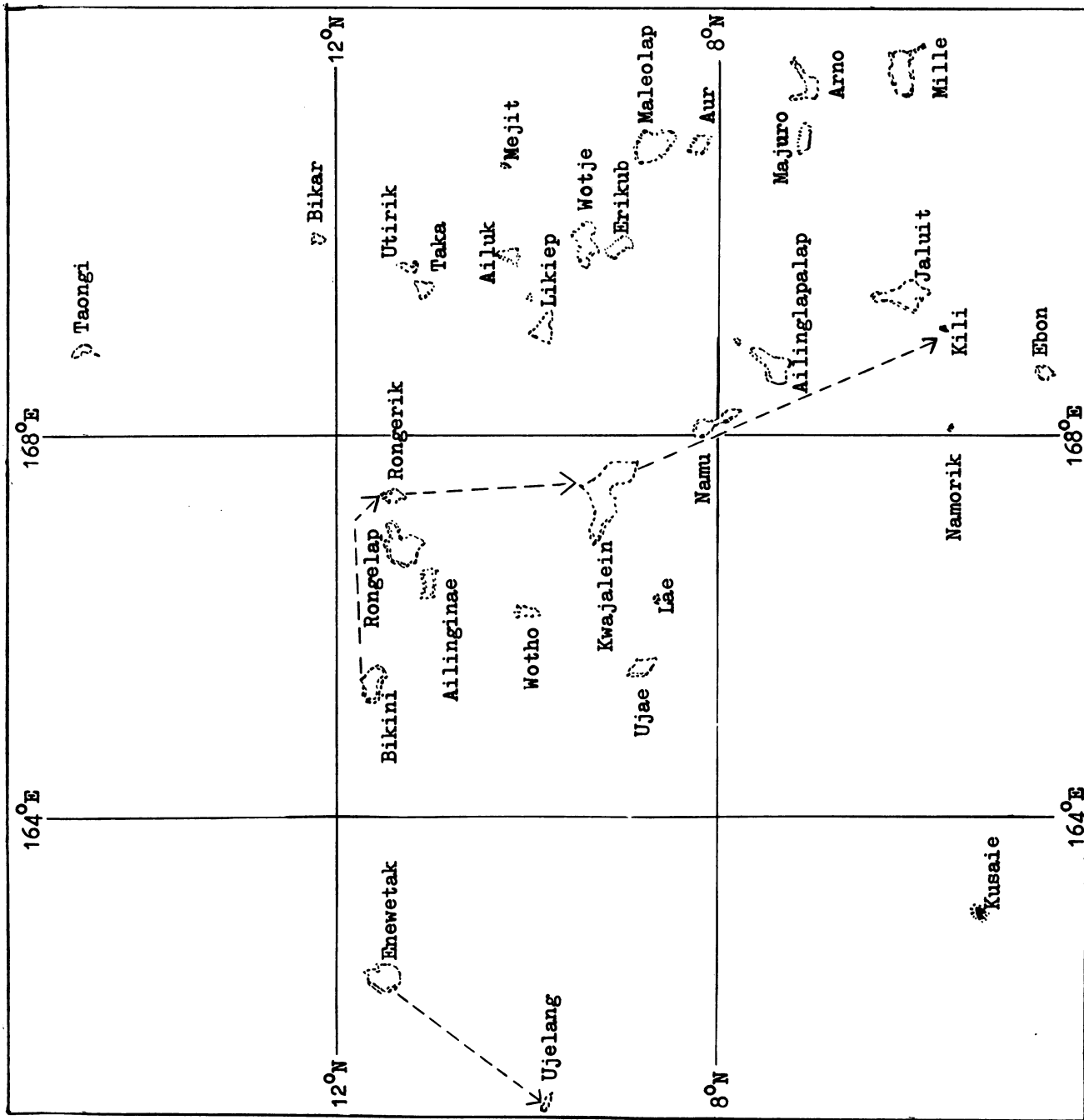
A STUDY OF THE RELOCATION
OF TWO MARSHALLESE ATOLL COMMUNITIES

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The effects of forced relocation on Bikini and Enewetak populations of the Marshall Islands are compared. The problems of adaptation to different environmental conditions are discussed. Administrative insistence on speedy resettlement and its failure to realize aspects of the relocated peoples' ecological, political, and social relationships are seen as contributing to the failure of the Bikinians to make a successful adaptation. (Bikini, culture change, ecology, Enewetak, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, relocation)

Early in 1946, the Atomic Energy Commission decided to use Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands as the site of controlled atomic bomb explosions and the U.S. Navy, administrator of the area, was given the responsibility of relocating the atoll's 167 residents. The decision to use Bikini was based on the atoll's distance from heavily populated areas, air routes, and sea routes; its small population; and the predictability of winds in the area (Kiste 1968:1). About a year later, it was decided that the residents of neighboring Enewetak Atoll would also have to be relocated. This paper will compare and contrast the processes and effects of the relocation of these two populations and will attempt to discuss the causes of some of the problems encountered.

Bikini Atoll is the northernmost atoll in the western chain of the Marshall Islands. Enewetak Atoll lies about 150 miles almost due west of Bikini (see map). Three other atolls or islands are significant in the relocation story of the people of Bikini and Enewetak. Ujelang Atoll,



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lying 124 miles to the southwest of Enewetak toward the Caroline Islands, became the new homeland for the displaced Enewetak people (Tobin 1967:6, 55). Rongerik Atoll, also in the Northern Marshalls, served as the first resettlement site for the Bikinians. Two years later, in 1948, this group was evacuated to Kwajalein Atoll, where they remained for 7 1/2 months until their final destination was selected. At that time, after a vote had been taken, the group was deposited on Kili Island (not an atoll) in the southern Marshalls (Kiste 1968:3, 9-10,12).

The former Enewetak people made a generally successful adaptation to Ujelang. The Bikinians, however, faced starvation conditions after two years in Rongerik and spent their seven months on Kwajalein among Americans and highly acculturated Marshallese. Their subsequent adaptation to Kili was generally poor, blocked for the most part by their hope for an eventual return to Bikini.

There are several crucial factors that relate to the degree of success of each of these two relocation projects. The most important involves atoll ecology and traditional subsistence patterns. Both Bikini and Enewetak, since they are located in the northern Marshalls, have dry seasons with little or no rainfall (Tobin 1967:50). This climate limits potential subsistence foodstuffs to coconuts, pandanus, and some arrowroot. It also creates a strong dependence on marine foods for subsistence. The existence of a large lagoon in each of these two atolls is the essential factor that allowed almost 200 people on each atoll to subsist on a few square miles of dry land broken up into scores of small islands. The

traditional subsistence pattern of both the Bikini and Enewetak people was that of a fisher-gatherer population efficiently exploiting the marine resources of the large lagoon areas. Ujelang, the new home of the Enewetak population, and Rongerik, the first destination of the Bikinians, have both smaller land areas and proportionately smaller lagoons than the original settlement sites (see Table I). Kili, final settling place of the Bikinians, is a single island with a reef that is so different as to eliminate the possibility of traditional marine subsistence patterns.

It is important to remember that atolls and islands such as Ujelang, Rongerik, and Kili are usually uninhabited for good reason, their resources being insufficient to support a community of any size. This fact points up the most severe problem which faced these relocations: traditional subsistence food sources must be augmented with outside imports. The differences in area outlined in Table I have had the greatest single effect on the resettlement and have, in the case of the Bikinians, necessitated continual administrative handouts to make survival possible.

As has already been noted, the traditional subsistence pattern of both relocated groups was that of fisher-gatherers. This fact has operated to the detriment of the administration's attempts to develop an additional income source in the form of copra production (Kiste 1968:84, 329, 343; Tobin 1967:195). Both Kili and Ujelang were former copra plantations and supported large stands of coconut palms at the time of relocation. Although the administration attempted to educate the relocated populations in the latest scientific methods of copra production, there was consistent resistance

Table I: Comparison of land-lagoon areas for different sites.

		Dry Land Area	Lagoon Area
A. (1)	Bikini	2.3 square miles	243 square miles
	Rongerik	.63 square miles	55 square miles
	Kili	.32 sq. miles + .06 sq. miles/Jaluit*	none!
B. (2)	Enewetak	2.26 square miles	387 square miles
	Ujelang	.67 square miles	25.4 square miles

(1) (Kiste 1968: 28-9, 46-7, 62, 76, 82)

(2) (Tobin 1967: 57)

* The 48 acres on Jaluit Atoll were used only from 1956-8.

to wider spacing of trees and periodic re-planting to increase productivity (Tobin 1967:196; Kiste 1968:345). This resistance made subsistence for an increasing population a mounting problem, since the income from copra was needed to allow the purchase of rice and flour as food staples to augment a fish-and-coconut diet. The absence of a tradition of taro cultivation or agriculture has also resulted in the failure of extensive administrative attempts to establish a taro swamp on Kili. The failure of this effort was further hastened by the regular cash income supplied by the land settlement agreement of 1956 (Kiste 1968:341, 358). In any case, it is true that the fisher-gatherer orientation has been a significant stumbling block to developing the agricultural orientation that an increasing population and over-exploited environment demand.

Differences in the atoll environments produced other adaptive problems. The communities had to re-evaluate their potential food resources. This was especially critical on Rongerik, where fish of a kind that was safely

eaten on Bikini was found to be poisonous and the supply of coconuts and pandanus was significantly smaller. The coconuts themselves were much smaller, the husks were of too poor a quality to be made into sennit for lashing, and the pandanus were too poor in quality for handicraft manufacture (Kiste 1968:51-52). Thus, relocation involved relearning what was edible and, in the case of the Bikinians on Rongerik, coming to the realization that the atoll's resources were of poorer quality and smaller quantity than had been expected.

The remote location of Rongerik and Ujelang also affected resettlement. Copra trade, administrative activity, and public health work were carried on during visits of the field trip ships operated by the administration. Both Rongerik and Ujelang are extremely isolated, being at the tail end of the routes of these ships. The result was irregular and infrequent service, which meant that there were no regular supply shipments, and even less incentive for copra production by the time a ship finally arrived, since the stored copra might no longer be marketable (Tobin 1967:202; Kiste 1968:306). Kili's isolation is comparable in effect, although it is a result of particular reef conditions rather than distance. Although located close to the district center at Majuro, the point of origin of field trip ships, and therefore having a potential for regular visits every three months, it is isolated by high seas for six months every year and the lack of a safe, reef-protected anchorage makes loading and unloading impossible when the sea is rough (Kiste 1968:145). Therefore, Ujelang, Kili, and Rongerik are comparable in their lack of regular ship

contacts, a factor which has had a negative effect on all three resettlement attempts.

Relocation success was also affected by traditional relationships between the original and resettlement sites. In the case of the Enewetak people, their moderately successful adaptation to Ujelang was partially based on their traditional ties with that atoll, so that for some individuals relocation to Ujelang was in fact a homecoming. Links between Enewetak and Ujelang were further strengthened in the period of Japanese administration, since both were administered from Ponape in contrast with the rest of the Marshalls (Tobin 1967:24, 37-38, 40-41). The ethnocentric attitude of the Enewetak people probably would have made their resettlement in any other part of the Marshalls much more difficult (Tobin 1967:16).

Rongerik, the original site of Bikinian resettlement, had the advantage of being close to home, so that the Bikinians had had previous contact with Rongelab, the atoll that would become their nearest neighbor (Kiste 1968:40). However, as Kiste points out, ". . . Bikinians viewed the atoll with a certain distrust. Rongerik has a bad reputation among Marshallese because of its association with Libokra, an evil female demon who dealt in poisons" (1968:4). This distrust seems to have helped the relocation get off to a bad start and to have played a constant negative role in the Bikinians' adjustment.

Also, in the case of the Bikinians, traditional isolation played a significant role in the process of relocation. Before leaving Bikini,

they had been among the least acculturated of all Marshallese. The southern Marshallese considered them to be a "crude and backward people" and openly made fun of their speech and behavior. The Bikinians generally accepted this negative evaluation and held themselves in low esteem, finding contact situations uncomfortable. In the process of relocation they were necessarily exposed to new ideas, behavior, and material items and, by the time of their settlement on Kili, had "come to pride themselves on the fact that they were becoming more like other Marshallese" (Kiste 1968:160-162). Therefore, one of the most important social consequences of relocation for the Bikini people was a change in self image and a closer integration with the rest of the Marshall Islands. In fact, this new belief that they were "equal to other islanders in ability and worth" can be seen as one of the few positive effects of relocation. For the Enewetak people, relocation only reinforced traditional isolation from the rest of the Marshall Islands.

Other social effects of relocation were quite different for the two groups. The Enewetak people made a fairly stable and tradition-oriented new life. As Tobin notes, the traditional authority and control of the chiefs remained stronger on Ujelang than in most other places in the Marshall Islands. Their church, a strong factor in their positive adaptation, "functioned without a break", thereby offering at least one form of continuity to the relocatees. No one from Ujelang, in spite of the difficult conditions there, left to seek employment elsewhere. In summary, local leadership managed to maintain a firm base, and a fairly traditional subsistence way of

life evolved (Tobin 1967:125, 133, 209, 227). The people's attitude was one of "patient resignation" but, at the same time, a strong community feeling helped them resist the formation of the "dole psychology" that plagued Bikinian resettlement attempts (Tobin 1967:204, 230).

In contrast, relocation for the Bikinians meant a whole series of changes which definitely did not result in an integrated, much less a tradition-based, way of life (Kiste 1968:319). Perhaps most significant is the "dole psychology" already mentioned. The Bikinians became "aware that the United States could provide for them indefinitely" and came to "feel helpless about their situation on Kili and believed that the administration was their only hope" (Kiste 1968: 328, 371). A series of natural disasters coupled with shortsighted planning and mistaken appraisals on the part of the administration, resulting in the need to donate emergency food and supplies, have made the Bikinians quite dependent on government handouts. The fact that the Bikinians never considered their removal from Bikini permanent also contributed, as did the fact that a formal relocation agreement involving land titles was not negotiated until 1956 (Kiste 1968:13, 340).

Continual changes in administrative policy concerning further relocations also worked against resettlement stability. Until 1959 the necessity of making a "permanent adjustment" to Kili was stressed. In 1959 and 1961, as a result of difficult conditions on Kili, the possibility of another relocation was discussed. In 1963-1964, the administration returned to its original position (Kiste 1968:330-331). Having experienced three earlier moves, the Bikinians came to view further relocations as

the solution to any problems. This lack of a definite commitment to remaining in one place was especially important since adjustment to Kili necessitated an agricultural orientation, a pre-requisite for which was a long-term outlook.

At no time did the Bikinians really believe they would never be returned to Bikini. In fact, land division on Kili was delayed in part because they feared that such an action would be "interpreted by the administration as a commitment on their part to remain on the island" (Kiste 1968:243). Another unsettling factor was the people's response to the tests on Bikini. Prior to the actual bomb explosions, no one was certain whether or not the entire atoll would be destroyed. The actual tests resulted in little visible damage to the atoll, and the full impact of radiation danger was never understood by the Bikinians. In 1946, less than a month after the first test, the traditional head of the Bikini community was flown from Rongerik to Bikini in an effort to convince the people that their return would be impossible.

The idea completely backfired. Juda's impressions were just the reverse of what was anticipated. While the bomb had wrought considerable damage upon the naval vessels, its visible effects on the atoll itself were negligible. Coconut palms were still standing, everything appeared to be growing well, and the fish in the lagoon appeared healthy (Kiste 1968:14).

A subsequent trip produced a reinforcement of this impression, and the Bikinians were always aware that scientific personnel were residing from time to time on their former islands. This picture of plenty -- unpicked pandanus, the ground laden with coconuts, and more fish visible than

ever before -- remained in the minds of the relocated people (Kiste 1968:14-15). Bikini's plenty contrasted with their scarce reality on Rongerik and bad times on Kili. The idea of taking Bikini leaders back for a look proved to be a serious mistake on the part of the administration.

Changes have been far reaching. Since all resettlement villagers were built by the administration, they did not conform to traditional patterns (Kiste 1968:49, 238, 240). Furthermore, the extended household units of Bikini and Rongerik were not reduplicated at Kili since, after the seven-month period in the highly acculturated atmosphere of Kwajalein, many of the young men insisted on establishing their own independent households. The main change from Bikini tradition to Kili reality was that for a number of years households were not linked to land rights, since the Bikinians were reluctant to divide the land (Kiste 1968:241).

When the land was finally divided, it was in terms of a new social unit, the bamle (from "family"), and completely new rules were needed to define these units and establish inheritance patterns. The division of land on this basis also increased the number of alabs, traditional family heads whose authority was based on land ownership. Those chiefs who had not been land-holding heads before were not accepted as equals by the traditional chiefs. This resulted in internal problems in the functioning of the village council in which the alabs participate (Kiste 1968:244, 246-247, 251, 255, 261).

Another important area of change was the organization of the community for work. A "communal" system was developed by the Bikinians while on

Rongerik in a desperate attempt to cope with near-starvation conditions. This communal organization was reinstated on Kili and survived the initial period of emergency until it was no longer an effective means of organization. Its continuance for five and a half years acted to impede commitment to the resettlement (Kiste 1968:242). In contrast, land on Ujelang was divided promptly and according to traditional patterns (Tobin 1967:244).

Organizational change on a large scale occurred in the relationship between the Bikinians and their traditional paramount chief. When the Bikinians were moved to Rongerik, they were moved from the district of one paramount chief to that of another. Such a move was without precedent. American laissez-faire policy was based on the assumption that by doing nothing they would "neither confirm nor deny the traditional political hierarchy". Wartime isolation removed the need for rendering tribute, and by 1946 the Bikinians seriously questioned the rights of that far-distant chief. When the U.S. administration did not re-institute the chief's right to collect a copra tax (as in Japanese times), the Bikinians felt that his authority was no longer sanctioned. The final step in crystallizing their sense of autonomy from the chief was their realization that the U.S. government, not the paramount chief, was responsible for their relocation and their welfare at the new site (Kiste 1968:125-127). In 1957, the head of the Bikini community declared the group no longer under the control of the paramount chief. The matter was further established when the administration reached a land use agreement with the Bikini

community itself and attempted to negotiate a separate agreement with the paramount chief. The effect of this severance was to make the Bikinians align themselves more firmly with the administration (Kiste 1968:337).

Relocation on Kili was further hampered by social conflicts arising from the island's small size and lack of a lagoon. Because of Kili's small size, there was no way for people to escape from one another. On Bikini, sailing to a deserted part of the atoll had provided such an escape, as well as offering a sense of adventure and change. A general lack of recreation on Kili added to the people's discontent with the island and led to illegal drinking bouts. As a result of increased interpersonal tensions, it seems that "social pressure and the action of kinsmen are obviously no longer very adequate mechanisms of social control, and the Bikinians have not yet developed new methods which effectively deal with such problems" (Kiste 1968:70, 298, 320). Ujelang, since it is an atoll, did not create this sort of problem.

It should be obvious from the foregoing discussion that the effects of relocation on the Bikini and Enewetak people have been quite different. In summary, these differences seem to be caused by the following factors:

(1) Environment: The Enewetak-to-Ujelang move was to a poorer, though very similar, ecological environment. The Bikini-to-Kili move was to an environment which was both poorer and completely different ecologically and geographically, necessitating a great deal of adaptation and change.

(2) Number of moves: Enewetak people moved only once, to Ujelang. The Bikinians made three moves: Rongerik, Kwajalein and Kili, and only the stay at Kwajalein was considered temporary at the time.

(3) Interaction with outsiders: Both Enewetak and Ujelang are isolated spots, and the relocatees had little more contact with outsiders on Ujelang than they had had previously on Enewetak. The Bikinians, however, at their camp on Kwajalein were in daily contact with the most acculturated Marshallese and with many Americans. Throughout their relocations, their constant problems resulted in steady contact with the administration.

(4) Degree of change from traditional ways: On Ujelang, land tenure, political authority, village layout, and livelihood generally followed a traditional pattern augmented by some copra production. There were no large community development programs. For the resettled Bikinians, land tenure and resulting political authority changed their social basis to non-traditional units, and village layout as well as household size and composition changed radically from the traditional system. Interest from the Bikini land settlement provided them with the highest per capita income in the Marshalls. The administration-initiated community development programs, in an attempt to induce change from a fisher-gatherer way of life to an agricultural one, were not really successful.

Also very important was the attitude of the second highest ranking man in the Bikini community, whose authority and support have been steadily increasing. He feels that "the Bikinians have been victimized and have suffered a great wrong" and has been behind much of what has come to be

called "the usual Kili recreation: going to District Headquarters at Majuro without money, asking to be provided for, and making complaints about everything in general" (Kiste 1968:292, 364). His attitude has adversely affected community development plans and the limited stability the community has managed to achieve. No such attitude has developed in Ujelang, though its distance from the administrative center may be a partial explanation.

In assessing the administration's role in effecting the relocation of these two peoples, several administrative mistakes can be noted. By far the most significant is the administration's failure to realize the very slim margin that permits survival on an atoll. As Kiste points out, the Navy personnel who were required to move the Bikinians "had neither the training nor the experience in the islands as of 1946 that would have enabled them to accurately evaluate [sic] the agricultural potential of various atolls or the number of inhabitants they could support" (Kiste 1968:53). Second, they failed to take into account the traditional orientation of the atoll dwellers to subsistence fishing and gathering, or to have anticipated the difficulty in initiating a pattern of copra production. Thirdly, the grave problem of population increase was not taken into account. Ujelang, barely sufficient for its 1947 population of 142 persons, was faced with a population of 174 by 1955, a nine percent increase in 18 years (Tobin 1967:65-66). In 1964, Kili had 282 inhabitants, an increase of 75% over the 167 Bikinians relocated to Rongerik in 1946

(Kiste 1968:2, 382). This huge population increase on Kili may be related to the people's acceptance of a position of total dependency and their consequent relaxation of previous population controls. Furthermore, since half of the people residing on Kili were children or adolescents, a heavy drain was placed on the relatively small number of able-bodied men to provide fish and coconuts for the rest of the community (Kiste 1968:384). Deciding to move these groups to atolls and islands a small fraction the size of Bikini while attempting to maintain a relatively traditional life style and lack of dependency seems to have been unrealistic.

Aside from the problems that resulted from inexperience, there were problems that resulted from the need to relocate in a hurry to meet Atomic Energy Commission deadlines. The Bikinians, for example, were moved barely one month after they first received word of the possibility of such a move (Kiste 1968:2-3). In this haste, all commitments and agreements were verbal. Not until 1956 was a written land settlement, exchanging the community's formal title to Bikini Atoll for formal title to Kili Island and some of Jaluit Atoll, negotiated between the administration and the former Bikinians (Kiste 1968:13). The Enewetak people also did not sign a land settlement until 1956 (Tobin 1967:211). Postponing this formality for nearly ten years resulted in instability and a lack of commitment to the new "homes", especially on the part of the former Bikinians. The need for speed in the removal of the Bikinians also resulted in crossing paramount chief boundaries, and it seems that

little official thought was given to the possibility of problems resulting from that unprecedented action (Kiste 1968:332).

In summary, it would seem that in relocating these two communities the administration was more concerned with accomplishing its task than in carefully evaluating the resettlement proposal. Perhaps this is just another example of the difficulties inherent in the administration of one group of people by another group of people. In any case, it is certain that in their forced relocations, the people of Bikini and Enewetak became "further casualties of the Atomic Age and the Cold War; helpless victims of circumstances beyond their control and of forces beyond their understanding" (Tobin 1967:30). Although the initial Bikinian relocation occurred prior to the United States assumption of Trusteeship responsibilities, the Enewetak resettlement occurred afterwards. To what extent these "forced migration" can be equated with promoting the "economic advancement and self-sufficiency of the islanders and protecting them against the loss of their lands and resources" (Kiste 1968:5) is both a good question and a possible topic for further research.

NOTE

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