

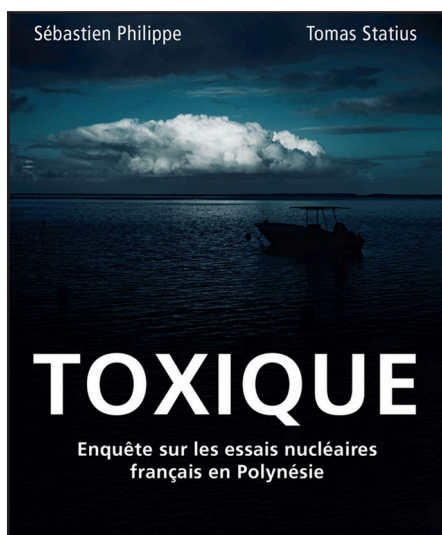
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Moruroa: The files, the book and the lies

Toxique: Enquête sur les essais nucléaires français en Polynésie, by Sébastien Philippe and Tomas Stadius, and the Moruroa Files microsite. Paris: PUF/Disclose, 2021. 192 pages. ISBN 9782130814849 <https://moruroa-files.org/>

THE COMBINATION of nuclear expertise (Sebastien Philippe), inquisitive journalism (Tomas Stadius) and the investigative approach by *Interprt* (a collective of architects specialising in the forensic analysis of environmental crimes) of around 2000 declassified French government documents in 2013 called the *Moruroa Files*, resulted in the explosive book *Toxic* about what was already known to the Ma’ohi Nui (French Polynesia) people. That since 1966 (55 years ago), the French government has consistently lied about and concealed the deadly consequences of their nuclear tests, which they now seem to acknowledge (French admit nuclear test fall out, 2006), to the health of the populations and their environment.

The book went into great detail to divulge to what extent those lies were maintained by analysing 3 nuclear tests: *Aldébaran*, *Encélade* and *Centaure*.



The population of Mangareva were the first to be subjected to radioactive fallout during the very initial atmospheric nuclear test codenamed *Aldébaran* on 2 July 1966. On 12 June 1971 *Encélade* was the most devastating nuclear test to the 68 people living on Tureia who were not evacuated even though they were at the heart of the exclusion zone established by the military.

A member of the population publicly vented his anger to the elected Tahitian parliamentarians and French representatives on a visit in 2018 by holding a very controversial banner (*Disclose*, 2021a) branding De Gaulle as a war criminal. Equally worrying, the last atmospheric nuclear explosion carried out on 17 July 1974 codenamed *Centaure* was the most powerful blast and showered nearly 110,000 people mostly in the Society archipelago with radioactivity, including Tahiti the main island.

The French authorities could have warned Tahitians about the approaching fallout two days in advance, but they did not. The spread of radioactive contamination in Ma'ohi Nui covers an area as vast as Europe and an estimated back payment compensation would amount to US\$850 million with future cancers costing about US\$29 million per year, according to Philippe et al. (2021b).

The *Moruroa Files* are the fundamental core that binds the book which revealed that the French Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) and its other agencies went to great lengths to keep secret the true level of radioactivity experienced by the Polynesian populations. The book has exposed the woeful arrogance and the haughtiness of unaccountability adopted and displayed by successive French governments up to the present day.

The dismissive attitude over data on radiation levels and sealed lips in the military ranks due to *secret défense d'Etat*, appeared to be a current practice according to the authors. Such military silence gives grounds to Polynesians for believing the shameful findings from the authors.

The computer animated simulations of those nuclear tests extracted from the declassified documents and in particular the *Aldebaran* test, is hard to watch for Mangarevans like me who at the time were witnesses and/or victims. I commend the book for its pursuit for the truth and for publicly exposing it to the world.

Further comments are made here on the Mangarevan population's plight

and resilience during and post-nuclear testing era along with debate of the untold danger of nuclear wastes leaks.

An experimental subject

Like in the case of *Centaure*, the Mangarevan population were not warned about the dangers of the detonation of the *Aldébaran* nuclear bomb apart from the fact that something would happen in the sky, as far as my mother recalled it. She also confirmed that it was *business as usual* during and following the day of the test as people carried on with their daily tasks, a statement corroborated by the declassified documents.

The mayor at that time, Tepano Teakarotu, had scant information and gave the population the official and reassuring message from the military that nothing toxic would happen. The military personnel and the French *gendarmérie* (national police) on the island knew about the fallout but feared the level of radioactivity: all were worried (Barillot, 2011).

No radioactive proof shelter was built to protect the populations before the atomic blast but days after, an inflatable tent suddenly appeared by the wharf of Rikitea and the building of some kind of shelter was started.

In theory, the radioactive cloud according to the AEC weather forecasts was planned to go west, but it changed its course and headed directly for the islands of Mangareva. Panic seized the military brass who came to see the first nuclear test but left precipitously the same night of 2 July 1966 without in-

forming the population: Mangarevans did not understand.

Any Mangarevan, especially fishermen or farmers would have informed the AEC that during the cooler weather season (June to September), winds were predominantly blowing south-easterly, a fact that the military weather experts acknowledged in their report three days before the test.

Still, data were intentionally ignored, and the test was carried out.

Could it be because no one wanted to disappoint the French Foreign Minister Billotte and the many elected officials of the Tahitian Parliament who wanted to see this powerful fireball? The outcome of this blatant genocide resulted in the formation of a 'cluster of cancers' (*Disclose*, 2021a), in particular cancers of the thyroids among young children, women and older people: many died.

Women gave birth to deformed babies and the local cemetery is unusually interspersed with small tombs and young deceased.

My parents' experience was to flee Mangareva for Tahiti in order to protect the life of my older sister who showed symptoms of radioactivity contamination.

To date only 454 victims (Polynesians and French) were compensated and 80 percent of the cases submitted were rejected by the organisation CIVEN (French Compensation Committee), making the compensation process at times impossible and largely unsuccessful. It was only in July 2016 that France recognised its first nuclear

test victim (France recognises, 2016).

Some of the Mangarevan women interviewed in the book, were my family relatives, friends and I have seen the scars left by thyroid cancer surgery. Today it is not unusual to see in the early hours of the morning, people from all ages queuing by the entrance doors of the small and ill-equipped medical centre in Rikitea.

France still has a lot to answer for.

Untold emergencies

What could have been developed further in the book is the issue of restitution to the Ma'ohi Nui government of Moruroa and Fangataufa. For the process of returning those atolls turned into CEP (Pacific Experimentation Centre) nuclear sites, the French government need to hand over a safe and clean environment for people to live on.

It is however very unlikely that those two atolls would ever be returned because, according to Moetai Brotherson, a Tahitian parliamentarian at the French National Assembly, both sites are showing signs of collapsing and are unsafe. France have invested a huge amount of money (US\$100 million) to install a system dubbed Telsite 2 that will monitor Moruroa (Moruroa nuclear site, 2019).

The monitoring of the atoll was begun in the 1980s to help issue warnings to nearby islands in case Moruroa collapsed because of damage caused by the atomic blasts. The collapse of Moruroa is likely to provoke a tsunami that would threaten neighbouring atolls, but the most dangerous effect is the leak

of nuclear wastes into the lagoon and then the sea.

In November 2018, the French National Assembly voted to gift the Polynesians a building that was a former command complex located in the middle of the capital Pape'ete in Tahiti. It would be a memorial site for the shared history of the French nuclear tests for people to remember (France gives Tahiti site, 2018) and by the same token a sign of reconciliation between colonisers and colonised.

What was untold was that the alleged gift was rife with asbestos that would cost millions to the local government to clean and build anew. It also transpired that if the French were to clean the complex, it would decide on the material to be displayed in that memorial centre and that all meetings for the construction of the building would be held in Paris.

Once more, the French want to continue to impose a colonial perspective after 30 years of nuclear testing, numerous ongoing radiation-induced deaths and irreversible environmental damage. This quote by parliamentarian Moetai says it all: 'I am pretty cautious of anything free coming from France—these are very often deadly gifts' (France gives Tahiti site, 2018).

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