

Benign Neglect: The Foreign Policy Towards Ebjā of the Republic of Marshall Islands

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One of the most underreported and underrepresented regions of the world is in Oceania. More specifically, the states participating in the Compact of Free Association, a series of treaties negotiated between the United States of America and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and the Republic of Palau.¹ In the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the islet of Ebjā (Ebeye), of Kwajalein Atoll holds a particularly unique status as one of the most densely populated islands in the world.

Estimations describe Ebjā islet as roughly eighty acres in size and housing 15,000 people.² Imagine approximately sixty football fields containing every structure, vehicle, tree, animal, and 15,000 people within them. Applying the population density formula to Ebjā produces a region with twice the amount of people per square kilometer than Manhattan, New York.³ The living conditions and the future development of Ebjā can be described as substandard, inadequate, and even negligent considering the unsustainable population density, unstable access and functionality of basic utilities, such as electricity and water, conditions of mental and physical health, and lack of education. This research analyzes the living conditions of the population of Ebjā and attempts to expose justification for its current state.

Access to Ebjā is facilitated through the islet of Kwajalein on which a U.S. military base conducts intercontinental ballistic missile testing. Access to the base is strictly regulated; security processing of all personnel occurs on arrival. The only airport on the atoll is used for both military and commercial purposes. The underreported and unsustainable conditions of Ebjā are caused by mismanagement of the RMI government and U.S. military occupation of the region.

In 1944, U.S. troops captured Kwajalein Atoll from the Japanese, leaving Kwajalein's landscape, a former battlefield, destroyed by the bombings.⁴ Several hundred Marshallese and Ponapeans were recruited for reconstruction and clearing efforts after the occupation. A labor camp was established on the islet, and the arrival of wives, children, and dependants of the Marshallese

labor force led to the formation of a community known as the Kwajalein Labor Camp.⁵ Within a year the labor camp population swelled to 559 people, and "presented a squalid, shantytown appearance, contrasting sharply with the spick and span building of the adjacent military establishment."⁶ The decision was made to relocate the labor camp to nearby Ebjā Islet, and was planned to accommodate 370 Marshallese laborers.⁷ The relocation plan for Ebjā consisted of a clean-up, construction of water catchment systems, dwellings and service facilities, and the construction and establishment of buildings necessary for private enterprise, municipal government, and Civil Administration.⁸ In January 1951, the inhabitants of Kwajalein Labor Camp were relocated to Ebjā.⁹ The islet had officially become a permanent residence for the Marshallese and their future generations.

Ebjā's unique history and geographic dilemma made it attractive to Western scholars. When assessing the island in 1954, anthropologist Jack Tobin described it as having sparse vegetation and an apparent overcrowded housing situation with haphazardly constructed shacks made out of scrap lumber, metal, and canvas.¹⁰ On social aspects, Tobin described the educational facilities of the islet as being held in a well-constructed and well-kept wooden building, which was built by the Navy.¹¹ His description of public health was similar: a large, well-constructed and wooden building, superior to the outer island facilities, and when necessary, with medication and treatment obtained from the Navy Hospital on Kwajalein.¹² As for the economy of Ebjā, the majority of income was derived from wages earned from working at the military installation on Kwajalein. To this day, this has not changed.

Furthermore, Tobin's 1954 report of the "Problems of Ebeye Today," emphasizes the primary problem of overpopulation. He states that, "Ebeye with its heavy concentration of population presents serious social, economic, and sanitary problems to the Administration."¹³ He mentions the overcrowded housing as breeding grounds for disease and epidemics, and that most cooking is done in the single room dwellings, where all daily activities are performed, excluding bathing, washing clothes, and waste disposal.¹⁴ Additionally, he recalls one of the most serious problems of the island is the acquiring of fresh water. Ebjā does not have sufficient precipitation levels to fulfill the needs of such a large population, and the subsurface brackish and polluted water is not suitable for drinking. Aside

¹ "Micronesians in Hawaii: Compact of Free Association," University of Hawaii at Manoa Library, accessed November 29, 2017, <https://guides.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/c.php?g=105631&p=686651>.

² Onwuatuogwu N. Echezona, "Ebja-America's Secret Love Child: An Exploratory Study," *International Journal of Scientific & Engineering Research* 2, 11 (November 2011): 1.

³ Oliver Smith, "The World's Ten Most Overcrowded Islands," *The Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/lists/most-overcrowded-islands-in-the-world/> (accessed December 1, 2017).

⁴ Jack Tobin, "Ebeye Village: An Atypical Marshallese Community," *Monographs- Pacific Collection*, (April 2012): 2-3.

⁵ Tobin, 3.

⁶ Tobin, 3.

⁷ Tobin, 3.

⁸ Tobin, 4.

⁹ Tobin.

¹⁰ Jack Tobin, "Ebeye Village: An Atypical Marshallese Community," *Monographs- Pacific Collection*, (April 2012): 7.

¹¹ Tobin, 16.

¹² Tobin, 16-17.

¹³ Tobin, 19.

¹⁴ Tobin, 19.

from overpopulation and water shortages, there is an insufficient number of waste disposal areas, such as latrines, forcing people to defecate into the ocean.

According to Tobin, despite these conditions, hundreds of Marshallese were still attracted to the islet for economic reasons. The availability of imported foods, cigarettes, and various other foreign items are more attractive than what they would find on their home islands. Geographically, it was much easier to sail to Ebjā than Majuro, the RMI capital, therefore making it a commercial center for the Western and Northern Marshalls.¹⁵ Economic opportunity on Ebjā, combined with the promise of western novelties, kept attracting Pacific Islanders despite the crowded conditions. All of these observations were made by an anthropologist in 1954. Eight years before, the first successful missile interception was made in the sky above Ebjā, falling into the Kwajalein lagoon. Fast forward six decades, to the present day. What has changed?

Today, the Kwajalein lagoon where Ebjā is located is referred to as the "catcher's mitt" of the Pacific, due to the countless missiles that have been intercepted and have plummeted into the body of water, where the Marshallese bathe and fish.¹⁶ The colonial displacement is unlikely to be forgotten by the declining number of elders who are still alive, but the generation of kids under the age of 18, who make up over fifty percent of Ebjā's population only know of the segregation between them and the Kwajalein military base.¹⁷ Sixty-three years later, the islet is still facing its primary predicament of overcrowding conditions, a problem which has undoubtedly become more severe. Clean water scarcity is still an issue, and vegetation is more sparse than in 1954 as the whole island has been paved over to make infrastructure for housing, with the exception of a few palm trees and the coastline. In an interview with a 23-year-old Marshallese from the islet, who wishes to remain anonymous, who recalled seeing tourists visiting Ebjā; they would all visit the *kujiku*, or "country" area of the islet, as it was one of the few places left unpaved.¹⁸ The paving of the entire island has affected the food sources of Ebjā, leading to health problems and a dependence on imported processed foods. When asked about his diet, the Marshallese student confirmed that he ate lots of canned food.¹⁹ Compared to the rest of the Marshall Islands, Ebjā has the lowest prevalence of crops and livestock grown on household property, with only 10% of the population relying on local sources of

protein, fruits, and vegetables.²⁰ Reliance on processed foods imported from the U.S. results in diabetes-related illnesses in the elderly, making it the secondary fatality on the island behind septicemia, a blood infection.²¹

Likewise, the economy of Ebjā is still predominantly dependent on the 1,300 Marshallese workers who commute by a U.S. sponsored ferry to Kwajalein every morning, and who are obligated to leave by 4:45 every afternoon. The interview with the Marshallese student stated that his father also worked as a contractor and laborer on "Kwaj."²² Despite it being the main source of income for Ebjā residents, due to the global economic and financial crisis, the U.S. military has been pressured to reduce the Marshallese labor force, resulting in layoffs and causing even more tension between the two cultures.²³

In addition, education on the islet is available but is in need of improvement. According to the "Education For All 2015 National Review Report: Marshall Islands," there is an excessive number of students dropping out of school and failing to complete the primary cycle, an insufficient secondary school capacity to accommodate all eighth grade graduates, poor results on the third, sixth, and eighth grade MISAT, insufficient alternative programs for students who are not admitted to high school, and inadequate services for out-of-school and unemployed youth.²⁴ With the small amount of space and activities available on Ebjā, youth who are not in school and lack the resources to get educational support are at a high risk of getting into trouble and developing mental health disorders. Fortunately, my interviewee was not a part of this statistic and had successfully completed school up to the eighth grade on Ebjā, from which he continued his education on the island of Chuuk at Xavier Catholic High School, and returned home only during the summers.²⁵

In her 2016 political review, specialist on RMI and assistant professor at UH Mānoa, Monica C. Labriola states that due to the effects of the RMI government mismanagement, there was a shortage of essential medicines and supplies to Ebjā hospitals, as well as outer island dispensaries.²⁶ Government mismanagement has certainly affected Ebjā dramatically. The gross domestic product of RMI is mainly derived from payments by the U.S. under the Compact of Free Association. In the fiscal

¹⁵ Jack Tobin, "Ebeye Village: An Atypical Marshallese Community," *Monographs- Pacific Collection*, (April 2012): 12.

¹⁶ Lauren Hirshberg, "Nuclear Families: Producing 1950s Suburban America in the Marshall Islands," *OAH Magazine of History* 26, 4 (2012): 39.

¹⁷ Henry M. Ichiho et al, "An Assessment of Non-Communicable Diseases, Diabetes, and Related Risk Factors in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Kwajalein Atoll, Ebeye Island: a Systems Perspective," *Hawaii Journal of Medicine & Public Health* 72, 5 (May 2013): 77.

¹⁸ Anonymous in discussion with the author, December 7, 2017.

¹⁹ Anonymous in discussion with the author, December 7, 2017.

²⁰ Henry M. Ichiho et al, "An Assessment of Non-Communicable Diseases, Diabetes, and Related Risk Factors in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Kwajalein Atoll, Ebeye Island: a Systems Perspective," *Hawaii Journal of Medicine & Public Health* 72, 5 (May 2013): 77.

²¹ Ichiho et al, 77.

²² Anonymous in discussion with the author, December 7, 2017.

²³ Onwuatuegwu N. Echezona, "Ebja-America's Secret Love Child: An Exploratory Study," *International Journal of Scientific & Engineering Research* 2, 11 (November 2011): 2.

²⁴ "Education For All 2015 National Review Report: Marshall Islands," *Ministry of Education Republic of Marshall Islands* (June 2014): 58.

²⁵ Anonymous in discussion with the author, December 7, 2017.

²⁶ Monica C. Labriola, "Political Reviews: Marshall Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific* 28, 1 (2016): 199.

year 2011, approximately 62% of the RMI's \$132 million budget was from direct U.S. aid.²⁷ According to the World Bank, currently, the RMI has a gross domestic product of \$183 million, of which Ebjā seemed to receive very little of, given its ongoing negligent living conditions.²⁸ Furthermore, additional aid is given specifically to Ebjā from the U.S. government to address the special needs of the community, as a result of the effects from U.S. military presence, yet the citizens of Ebjā still feel that the U.S. Army Kwajalein Atoll (USAKA) military base can do more to help.²⁹

Clear communication between the leadership of Ebjā and the U.S. government is vital in order to bring change. In a study conducted by Dr. Onwuatuegwu N. Echezona, a professor in the Transportation and Logistics Department of the American Public University, four factors were identified in terms of what the people of Ebjā considered to be most important; in other words, the needs and expectations from the Americans. The questions consisted of the following criteria: (a) the layoffs are hurting the community, (b) infrastructure support is needed, (c) school and education quality need improvement, and (d) health awareness and hospital support are needed.³⁰ The results concluded that the most important need and expectation from Americans is training and education, such as the construction of schools and provisions of classroom equipment, as well as proper education in all fields to enhance the quality of life on the island.³¹ Secondly, this was followed by the need for infrastructure support, given that the island's state is bordering unsustainability, due to overpopulation, lack of waste and rubbish disposal, and lack of clean drinking water.³² How can the same negligent conditions still exist and be degrading after six decades of supervision? In 1977, Representative Ataji Balos of the Congress of Micronesia answered this question for the world:

Under the keepership of the Department of the Interior, Micronesia has for decades continued to suffer so-called advisers, consultants, and experts whether we want them or not. Many have good intentions. However, in most cases, they are inept and useless. Others have actually done great harm to the present and future course of Micronesian development. These are the theorists, the intellectuals, the Ph.D. biologists,

and the anthropologists who do nothing but make feasibility studies and produce nothing but reports....We do not need theories, research or needless studies. We require solid business fundamentals. We require development planning, funding, and financing of and for business.³³

The U.S. government's poor record of economic development in its territories can be seen worldwide. It is certainly safe to hold those individuals, who received payment to direct the development process, accountable for its poor results. The government of the RMI is not innocent, either. There is no other place in the Pacific that is facing the unsustainable predicament of Ebjā, and therefore they should make it a top priority for funneling funds.

Despite what secondary-source scholarship and reports have composed, there is always the primary source perspective, which contrasts and sheds a bright light on the community of Ebjā. A Marshallese student at UH Hilo who grew up on the islet recalls May Day, a celebration of independence for RMI on May 1st, during which lots of food is produced, and a long celebration takes place with singing and parade floats on flatbed trucks. He gave a cautionary smile as he mentioned that, although it is a time for celebration, one must always keep their eye out for the Chiefess of the island or the *Ieroij*, for she is very strict and does not tolerate misbehavior. He recalled the Chiefess's strict regulations on the appropriate length for girls' shorts. Unfortunately, the *Ieroij* has passed away since he left, and he has not had a chance to meet the new one.³⁴

In conclusion, Ebjā's predicament is not of its own accord. It is the result of U.S. military occupation and colonial displacement of the very people who helped construct the buildings, which now act as a domestic refuge for American military personnel, contractors, and their families. Segregated on an impoverished urban islet, and neglected by their own government, as well as their colonizers, the people of Ebjā still prevail, go to school, go to work, and start families, in hopes that their future generations will one day see the change they have been waiting for through six decades of promises, minor improvements, comprehensive capacity development plans, exploratory studies, and research projects, such as this.

²⁷ Ryder Cleary, Max Jenkins, and Kenneth McDonald, "Ebeye 2023: Comprehensive Capacity Development Master Plan," (Washington DC: Department of Systems Engineering United States Military Academy, 2012): 1.

²⁸ "Marshall Islands," *The World Bank*, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/marshall-islands> (accessed December 1, 2017).

²⁹ "Education For All 2015 National Review Report: Marshall Islands," *Ministry of Education Republic of Marshall Islands* (June 2014): 7. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002297/229722E.pdf>

³⁰ Onwuatuegwu N. Echezona, "Ebja-America's Secret Love Child: An Exploratory Study," *International Journal of Scientific & Engineering Research* 2, 11 (November 2011).

³¹ Echezona.

³² Echezona.

³³ David L. Hanlon, *Remaking Micronesia: Discourses Over Development in a Pacific Territory, 1944-1982* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 135.

³⁴ Anonymous in discussion with the author, December 7, 2017.

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