

Ta'ata, Tuna, and Concrete: Reflecting on Nuclear Tests Through Circulations

Conference in Pape'ete, October 8–10, 2025
Call for Papers

This conference seeks to historicise the Centre d'Expérimentations du Pacifique and other nuclear test sites in the Pacific through a series of circulations (biota, experts, labour or technologies for instance).and spatial relations The goal is not to describe exchanges related to the CEP solely from two poles—the mainland and the entity created by the colonization process, "French Polynesia"—but to move beyond the diffusionist model of linear, unidirectional transfers from Europe to the Pacific. Instead, it will account for more complex and enriched interplay of scales and circulations, incorporating feedback effects and reciprocal movements.

This approach seeks to bring nuance to an exceptionalist view of nuclear activities, which reduces them to overarching but vague explanatory indices, indiscriminately attributed to all historical phenomena affecting Polynesia during the CEP era. We propose four themes to explore these circulations, blending tangible and intangible, institutional and natural elements:

- Technical and productive systems;
- The family;
- Non-human living beings;
- Ideas, knowledge, and beliefs.

This proposal does not disregard the political framework that characterizes the context of these circulations, shaped by colonial history. We aim to include this perspective in a comparative analysis of British and American nuclear test sites in the Pacific.

Imperialism, Colonialism, and Nuclear Imperialism

The paradox of the CEP's establishment in the early 1960s lies in its alignment with the end of the French Empire, which necessitated relocating facilities from the Sahara—now part of an independent Algeria. How should this moment in French Polynesia, concurrent with decolonization, be characterized and contextualized alongside British and American nuclear test sites? While the United States operated outside a formal empire, they exploited islands of the British Empire (Kiritimati) as well as UN Trust Territories (Marshall Islands). Should we speak of resurgence, renewed imperialism, or other terms like rebound or renewal? The term "imperial" may not fully capture the nuances of France's actions in Oceania but remains useful when adopting Frederick Cooper's framework. Cooper distinguishes imperial modes (intervening in another government without directly governing), hegemonic modes (setting the rules others must follow), and colonial modes (governing the internal affairs of a subordinate government)¹. This concept of renewed imperialism highlights how, amid decolonization, the French state engaged for the first time with Polynesian spaces neglected by colonial science and administration, particularly in the Tuamotu islands. It calls for examining the question of nuclear colonialism.

When the military chose French Polynesia for the CEP in 1962-63, the territory had been institutionally decolonized since 1946 with the equalization of rights (abolishing the distinction between subjects and citizens). Polynesia opted to remain part of France in 1958, albeit with less enthusiasm than elsewhere, against a backdrop of covert political manipulations by Foccart and Gaullist networks. Beyond nuclear imperialism, emphasizing the imperial dimension of nuclear test

¹ After George Steinmetz and Jack Snyder, in Frederick Cooper, « La modernisation du colonialisme et les limites de l'empire », *Labyrinthe*, 35 | 2010, 69-86.

sites and the nuclear aspect of Cold War-era empire struggles, what remains of colonial legacies during the CEP era? An independent French nuclear force was presented as a way to escape imperial logic, offering security to citizens in Polynesia and mainland France amid the Cold War. Yet, such a view, combined with the coexistence of this nuclear imperialism with decolonization created confusion, complicating the categorization of processes at play with the CEP.

Why continue to use the notion of colonialism despite the formal decolonization of French Polynesia? First, because both terms—imperialism and colonialism—were central to the discourse of those protesting against nuclear test sites. Early African independence movements contested the continuation of French nuclear tests in Algeria, a country transitioning to independence and later fully sovereign but which still granted a five-year lease to French military and engineers. Hill highlighted the dual usage of these terms during the birth of the CEP. Ghana's first independent leader, Kwame Nkrumah, referred to a "new nuclear imperialism" when discussing French nuclear tests in the Sahara. He later interpreted this "new nuclear imperialism" as a manifestation of "neocolonialism," defined as an alliance of British, French, and American bankers dominating the financial and economic sectors of [...] newly independent States².

The utilization of island environments and oceans as scientific laboratories reflected a resurgence of a colonial mindset of appropriation but also a drive for modernization. The civil administration's mobilization to develop agriculture, tourism, vocational training, and more alongside the CEP echoed the "modernization moment" of the early 20th century—a phase that European metropolises could no longer sustain after World War II. Should the CEP be seen as a revival of this modernization moment, which had been exhausted within the Empire during the 1950s but remained viable on the scale of the "confetti of Empire"? In this sense, the CEP embodied in the Pacific the utopian vision of "technical colonization," a concept formulated between the wars for Africa and Asia.

Colonial attitudes were still evident among actors involved. Military personnel, like Camussot, a naval officer who led the initial phases of the CEP's construction, spoke of "the exaltation born from the feeling of participating in the creation of a great enterprise"³. Civilians, like Governor Grimald, expressed similar sentiments: "On this millennia-old coral now devoted to atomic science, I rediscovered the zeal and faith of those planters I once knew in the marshy plains of the Cochinchina delta, arriving at the dawn of colonization. Planters of the past, engineers, and technicians of today—such is the race of founders of the future!" Even lower-ranking soldiers were not immune to this perspective. Fiction captures this awareness, shown for instance through the words of a CEP worker's son, reflecting on his arrival in Tahiti in 1968: "The nuclear authorities wanted to give newcomers the feeling of being modern pioneers, conquerors"⁴. Michel Debré, the Prime Minister when CEP was designed, discussed his vision of overseas territories in his memoirs, although he did not dwell on Polynesia in particular. He evoked Guyana, marked by another quintessential example of scientific and technical imperialism: the Kourou space center. Debré's words explicitly conjure colonial imagery and practices when describing the SMA (Military

² Christopher Hill, Britain, West Africa and 'The New Nuclear Imperialism': Decolonisation and Development during French tests, *Contemporary British History* (2019) 33:1, 274-289. See also G. Hecht, "According to those narratives, splitting the atom promulgated a new world order that replaced imperialism with "the bomb" But it was clear that colonialism remained central to the nuclear order's technological and geopolitical success. Even a short list of atomic test sites makes the point: Bikini Atoll, Semipalatinsk, Australian Aboriginal lands, the Sahara, French Polynesia » *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade* p. IX.

³ Service Historique de la Défense (SHD), Camussot 267 GG², report from 14th February 1964., p. 1 and 4.

⁴ Pascal Martin, *Le seigneur des atolls*, Presses de la Cité, 2011.

Adaptation Service) and its “core idea”: “Clearing and equipping Guyana to populate it with new settlers to develop its economy.””

This question intersects with that of entering modernity—a transition in which the CEP became an opportunity for a Polynesia largely overlooked during the colonial modernizing projects of the early 20th century. This necessitates distinguishing between the modernization that directly stemmed from the CEP and that which predated it and was merely accelerated by the influx of people and capital brought by nuclear testing.

From Imperial Denial to Health Denial

The military presence established with the CEP eventually withdrew but left behind an enduring association between Polynesia and France. This arrangement represents an alternative to the classic colonial system. It avoided overt colonial terminology during decolonization while granting French Polynesia an unprecedented centrality within French imperial history, as French empire starts dissolving and as other islands in the region gained independence and witnessed widening disparities in income and living standards.

This way of using Polynesia as an imperial fringe and relaunching colonization through things and minds without saying so goes hand in hand with denying the health effects of nuclear testing. This dual denial—of imperialism and health risks—invites scrutiny of French imperial culture. It highlights the naturalization of French presence in Polynesia through new institutional forms. It shows the political culture of Polynesians themselves for whom the aspiration for decolonization often took the form of sovereignty claims. These demands were fuelled by opposition to the CEP and its associated health risks. As a result, the state's minimization, euphemization, and concealment of health hazards converged with accusations of the aforementioned dual denial—imperial and sanitary.

These taxonomic questions are essential. However, to avoid theoretical speculation, they must engage with the historical realities of circulations under U.S., British, and French nuclear imperialisms. This is why we propose analyzing circulations to illuminate relationships between metropolises and sites, among the sites themselves, and within French Polynesia and the broader nuclearized Pacific.

Circulations

In 1961, the inauguration of Tahiti's international airport marked a new phase in French Polynesia's accessibility. It signaled a reorganization of flows: the harbour specialized in goods transport while the airport focused on passengers. This period witnessed accelerated long-distance movement and the increased integration of Tahiti into a global circulatory network. However, French Polynesia remained at the fringe of this system, absent from major maritime routes and limited by costly air travel.

From 1963, the French government's decision to establish the CEP paradoxically strengthened ties to the region while exerting direct control over part of the territory during a broader decolonization and decentralization context. At the scale of French Polynesia, a new infrastructure system emerged: construction of airstrips in other archipelagos, opening passes where the CEP established bases (testing sites, rear and advanced bases, and peripheral sites), and where development projects were started in parallel.

Transportation infrastructure expanded significantly in the 1960s, marking a turning point partly, but not solely, attributable to the CEP's establishment. This phenomenon has even spurred scientific debate. Regardless of that, the development of transportation infrastructure goes hand in hand with what some authors have termed the "nuclearization of the territory"⁵, a concept that considers how the circulation of nuclear-related objects, as well as the people involved in the various stages of designing and producing a nuclear weapon or generating nuclear energy, contributes to extending the domain of nuclearity beyond spaces and minerals directly affected by radioactivity. Gabrielle Hecht, for instance, emphasizes the idea of "nuclearity among things," rather than "nuclearity of things," to highlight how the influence of nuclearity extends beyond the presence of radioactive material itself⁶. In the case of French Polynesia, nuclearization involved the physical realization of nuclear tests—referred to as "essais"—and the accompanying, highly controlled circulations (materials, technologies, personnel, protective measures for populations in high-risk areas): no one could be absent during the tests; it was essential to secure the workforce (while adhering to geopolitical considerations that, for instance, prohibited the use of workers from the Cook Islands, as had previously been the case with phosphate mining on Makatea); the transportation of the bombs used was itself a complex process.

Nuclearization also introduced other flows (machinery, materials, consumer goods) unrelated to nuclear specificity but reflecting French Polynesia's development and modernization. However, this growth was "regressive," driven less by deliberate policy than by massive CEP-related expenditures. Consequently, early projects aimed to stimulate autonomous growth that could eventually replace CEP-driven activity. Like some nuclearized African countries⁷, French Polynesia remained a fetishized territory⁸, perceived as "natural", "exotic" or "traditional" in European (decision-makers) narratives, with modern dynamics erased or reset to zero upon the CEP's arrival. This view ignored pre-existing processes such as urban growth, wage labor, and professional mobility linked to phosphate mining on Makatea⁹.

The concept of circulations offers a nuanced lens to understand the CEP's legacy. It moves beyond caricatures of change during this period without minimizing its impact. Circulation studies reflect a broader "mobility turn" in social sciences since the 2000s, challenging static views of social phenomena. The very act of speaking about circulations allows for a renewal of scientific discourse. In the humanities, the concept of a "mobility turn," emerging in the 2000s, has often been invoked to challenge fixed and static approaches to social phenomena. Within this mobility turn, the circulatory approach was developed to replace the migratory framework and the notion of transfers, both of which tend to envision flows as linear and unidirectional, moving from point A to point B. Such frameworks fail to account for the maintenance of ties with the territory of origin, let alone the implementation of more complex mobility patterns that involve other spaces, return effects, or back-and-forth movements¹⁰. This approach to flows thus been criticized for fostering certain forms of dramatization—raising concerns, for instance, about the capacity of so-called host territories to absorb these flows, or fears of uprooting and disconnection from original spaces.

⁵ Teva Meyer, « Allez contaminer chez vous! » Stigmatisation territoriale et production de la nucléarité spatiale à Hao (Polynésie française) », *Annales de géographie*, 2023. p. 91-117.

⁶ Gabrielle Hecht, *Being nuclear, Africans and the Global Uranium trade*, 2012, p. 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁸ Jean-François Staszak, *Géographies de Gauguin*, 2003.

⁹ Nicholas Hoare, *Re-Mining Makatea: People, Politics and Phosphate Rock*. PhD thesis, The Australian National University, 2020, 330 p.

¹⁰ Geneviève Cortes and Laurent Faret, « Introduction: La circulation migratoire dans «l'ordre des mobilités» », *Les Circulations transnationales. Lire les turbulences migratoires contemporaines*, 2009.

In the context of the CEP, circulations were often viewed as one-directional projections of continental France onto French Polynesia. For instance, European personnel's mobility was designed to be temporary, whereas Polynesian internal mobility was interpreted through rural exodus models without questioning their applicability. Some scholars offered more nuanced analyses, taking returns into account, though these were often reduced to push-pull migration models and hide a more complex agency among Polynesian. Scientific and technological transfers, but especially the flow of materials and other consumer goods, appear as the counterpart to the experiments, which, while being deplored for their effects, remain associated with the flattering idea of modernization. This new name for the civilizing mission is no longer seen as a duty but as inevitable and, nonetheless, desirable in order to avoid falling behind.

Four Types of Circulations

1. **Polynesian Families:** From individual to family group scales, decisions about relocation corresponded to life stages, involving back-and-forth movements across territories.
2. **Non-Human Living Beings:** Circulations linked to the CEP also impacted non-human life. While species movement preceded the CEP, nuclear tests played a direct role in such dynamics within the context of globalized integration.
3. **Technical and Productive Systems:** Accelerated flows of materials, goods, and capital transcended diffusionist models (Europe exporting, Polynesia receiving). This included local actors' roles, adaptations, resistances, and Pacific-specific flows.
4. **Ideas, Knowledge, and Beliefs:** Intersections between the CEP's modernization project and cultural renaissances, as well as the networking of anti-nuclear movements across sites, merit exploration.

Submission Details

Proposals should be submitted by **February 15, 2025** (including a one-page abstract and short bio-bibliographic profile).

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