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Erasing the Empire through the Restitution of Military Land: Military Bases and Processes of Re-appropriation in French Polynesia

Abstract

Following several years of tense worldwide protests against nuclear testing, the French campaign in the Pacific ended in 1996. In the years that followed, military facilities in French Polynesia, at least those most strictly connected with nuclear activities, shut down. After the exploitation and detonation of the atolls Moruroa and Fangataufa (and symbolically of the Polynesian minds and bodies), land is finally being given back to French Polynesians. Military bases are closing and military personnel are returning to France. Some of these building complexes are now property of local towns. The questions raised in this article revolve around the symbolic power of military bases' dismantlement, which can be interpreted as the erasure of the French empire. What do such erasures of military facilities represent? Is it just an economic reorganization of the national defense or does it represent the will to materially erase colonial and nuclear history? Moreover, I argue that these ongoing processes can be analyzed as a form of re-appropriation of land by the Polynesian communities and a new form of sovereignty.

Keywords: militarization, restitution, nuclear testing, military bases, sovereignty, French Polynesia, Tāhiti

Tāhiti is unmade as it is made.
— Jean-François Baré¹

Introduction

Despite transitioning from being a French protectorate in 1842 to a colony in 1880 and then to an Overseas Territory following the Second World War, status changes in French Polynesia nominally gave Mā'ohi (the Indigenous people of French Polynesia) more rights while continuing the asymmetry of power between the French empire and these Polynesian islands.² From the 18th century, first explorers such as Bougainville and Cook viewed French Polynesia as a garden of Eden, an isolated and empty land. The Western imaginary built around the presumed remoteness

and isolation of the Pacific Islands had two major outcomes: on the one hand, the perception of these islands as pristine and beautiful (precisely because they are isolated and remote) made possible the metaphor of the garden of Eden. On the other hand, their remoteness and emptiness condemned them as expendable, precisely because they were considered far from the metropole, contributing to the creation of a nuclear hell.

This particular rhetoric of isolated islands goes hand in hand with that of finite spaces as perfect island laboratories, making possible the French nuclear project during the Cold War.³ For instance, Moruroa and Fangataufa, the two detonated atolls in the Tuamotu archipelago located south of Tāhiti, were uninhabited when they were “graciously” given to the French government for nuclear purposes, but this does not mean they were empty.⁴ In fact, they had a symbolic role in Mā’ohi life as fishing grounds and places for foraging. The French army gained access to other lands through leasing directly from private land owners, as is the case in Hao, or through land purchase, as in Tāhiti.

The wider aim of my research is to investigate the militarization process that took place in French Polynesia beginning in the 1960s and its impact on Mā’ohi practices of place-based sovereignty, specifically in relation to a spatial analysis of French military bases and structures associated with these. The sudden military infrastructural development by the French contributed to the upheaval of the economic and cultural life of local indigenous communities. Some of these bases were progressively shut down as nuclear testing came to an end in the 1990s, while other bases are still being restructured or dismantled, while restitution processes continue to this day. These processes are consequential and top-down: after the end of the nuclear era, the French army was reduced in numbers, the remaining soldiers reassigned among the Polynesian islands and moved primarily to Tāhiti. Many existing military sites were dismantled and the military infrastructures emptied. In a next phase, as will be explained later, some of the military-occupied lands were given back to the respective local municipalities.

This study looks at the deconstruction of French military sites in Tāhiti and the subsequent transformation of the land. While the lands have legally been returned to the towns, the actual restitution process has left the terrain visibly untouched, still bearing its original military fencing and with little to no public access (Fig. 1). Walking around Pīra’e and ‘Ārue, the sites of two military bases still present in Tāhiti today, one can see barbed wire and fences all along the military perimeter and signs informing people that the area is restricted to military personnel. Yet, what is striking is the easy accessibility to other sections of the bases: the gates are open, there are no armed soldiers defending the entrance and indeed,

there is a surprisingly active recruitment section in 'Ārue open to the public (Fig. 2). In addition to the lax security, there appear to be few soldiers in uniform inside the base and the open spaces are well maintained and can be viewed from the outside, with coconut palms, mango and papaya trees, and wild chickens singing in the fields. This is not the usual background for a military setting.



Figure 1. Restitution plan posted by the local municipality in 'Ārue, June 15, 2021. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 2. 'Ārue military base entrance, June 15, 2021. Photograph courtesy of the author

This material erasure of any military presence, although not complete, represents both a physical and symbolic reconfiguration of the relationship between France and French Polynesia. Nevertheless, this Pacific scene contrasts with the recent arrival of the French fighter jets that will be discussed below. The fighter jets stopped in French Polynesia before moving on to Hawai'i for a joint mission, a further example of the deep-seated colonial connections throughout the Pacific Islands.

While this research is specific to the importance of the military presence, I believe that sovereignty practices go beyond the restitution of the land and can be seen in everyday life through the enactment of cultural expression. Throughout this Research Note, I aim to connect military spaces and their symbolic and spatial role to contemporary and new forms of sovereignty, intended here not as a mere mode of survival, but instead as an art of living. Building on what Ann Laura Stoler defines as ruination, my research questions revolve around the less spectacular forms in which colonialisms leave their mark. More specifically, I investigate the enduring memory of what the land and the infrastructures built on it represent

and how communities are forging new forms of sovereignty.⁵ What is the historical and colonial heritage that these bases leave behind?

Building Sovereignty Practices in the Wake of Militarization

Before discussing these spatial dis-positions and re-appropriation processes and practices, it is useful to briefly summarize the establishment of the bases and to present the history of militarization and its impact on French Polynesia. Militarization, and defense more broadly, is a core mechanism used to allow nation-states to maintain their power and become hegemonic forces—that is, to exert their sovereignty.⁶ It was precisely in order to protect this sovereign power that French President Charles de Gaulle decided, at the end of the 1950s, to empower France with the nuclear bomb—it was an attempt to preserve the image of the once prevalent but rapidly vanishing French Empire.

The 1960s marked the arrival of so-called modernity in French Polynesia in the form of French soldiers and military infrastructures that were at the core of the French nuclear strategy. The process of militarization started with the construction of an airport in Fa'a'a. Officially inaugurated in 1961, it expanded Tāhiti's connections to the outside world and made possible the arrival of people—both soldiers and tourists—and different kinds of machinery. Pape'ete's port was enlarged in order to accommodate larger shipments of supplies for military construction projects and infrastructural development. Shortly after, the military base in 'Ārue was built, the Commissariat à l'Énergie Atomique (CEA) was brought to Māhina, and the headquarters of Centre d'Experimentation du Pacifique (CEP) was established in Pīra'e. This work was done in part by French soldiers and in part by the local population, although the French were largely white-collar workers while the local population made up the blue-collar workforce. The construction of the military infrastructure involved measures such as clearing coconut fields and dredging stretches of the lagoon, drastically changing the socio-environmental landscape. These alterations were accompanied by restricted access to the new military properties; Mā'ohi were now prohibited from utilizing their customary fishing and farming lands. Moreover, the influx of money had significant social and cultural effects, and prompted changes in the locals' appetites, aspirations, and desires. Indigenous landowners began selling their properties for small fortunes, while the middle class, due to an influx in jobs from the nuclear testing, began building family houses using concrete and other Western techniques.

Today, what 1960s military structures remain are faded versions of what they used to be, despite the fact that French President Emmanuel Macron recently

described French Polynesia as the core of the French Indo-Pacific military strategy.⁷ Nevertheless, the impact these bases and infrastructures have on the landscape and the lives of local communities is not debatable. For instance, in July 2021 three fighter jets, two refueling planes, and two other military planes landed on the airstrip in Fa'a'a, their deafening thunder reminding the islanders of the lasting military presence in Tāhiti. Beside their acoustic pollution, their visual impact did not pass unnoticed; when they were not training in the air, they were visibly parked at the military airport, next to the commercial one, with its airstrips adjacent to the water (Fig. 3).⁸



Figure 3. Fighter jet (left) and fuel tanker plane (right) at Fa'a'a International Airport, Tāhiti, June 24, 2021. Photograph courtesy of the author

Despite this strong contemporary assertion of the French presence in French Polynesia, I argue that the ongoing restitution of military land might represent a new opportunity for local communities to reclaim lands as a means of exerting new forms of sovereignties. Drawing on studies of non-self-governing territories, my understanding of sovereignty is wider than the classical Westphalian definition of the concept. In particular, I highlight the central importance of per-

ceiving sovereignty *beyond* the state.⁹ This is very important today, for it is a period of effervescence and of active (re)articulations of sovereignty as enacted through the everyday engagements with the built and natural island environments.¹⁰

Preliminary research

My preliminary research indicates that military bases and, more broadly, the militarization process are a particular material heritage left by nuclear testing and its related infrastructural development of the 1960s. This infrastructural development not only changed economic and social dynamics for the local population, but also altered geographical space, as is clearly visible with the installation of the CEP in French Polynesia.

After the end of the French nuclear program in the 1990s, adjustments were necessary to facilitate the transition from a nuclear to a normalized economy. Territories once occupied by the French army for military and nuclear purposes are now experiencing renewed attention and a process of restitution. In the case of the closure of nuclear military structures, the rehabilitation of the environment is needed. One way to regenerate the space is the partial or total reconversion of a site. Another way is the patrimonialization of a site—its preservation as a historical and symbolic monument. Usually, the rehabilitation process of a site goes through three phases—landscape requalification, reintegration of the structure into the city, and economic reconversion—often performed simultaneously.¹¹

In France, processes of restitution began in 2008 with a budgetary law that proposed cuts to the army and addressed military sites that were redundant; this resulted in reduced numbers of troops and the reassignment of forces. In French Polynesia, land areas that had been claimed by the French military were not legally returned to their towns until 2017. Such a delay is the paradoxical consequence of the special legislation sanctioned by Article 74 of the French Constitution, according to which French laws do not apply automatically to French Polynesia unless specified in the law itself. In other words, the ample sovereignty and administrative autonomy acquired by the territory after long negotiations with the metropole was, at least in this case, an obstacle and the cause of the impasse.

A further example of the impasse is demonstrated by the incomplete restitution in Fa'a'a, which hosts the commercial and military airports and the Résidence Bopp-Dupont, a military barrack that was partially restituted to the local

municipality. The Résidence Bopp-Dupont is a small structure that is not very visible; the fence, barbed wire, and “restricted area” signs that surround it are almost completely covered by vegetation. The name of the area itself does not indicate that it is a military residence. Along with its unassuming gate, which I only saw open a handful of times so that resident cars could pass through, the site blends in with the surrounding area, as demonstrated by one of the numerous local food stands selling roasted chicken at the entrance (Fig. 4). The juxtaposition of the elite community inside with the fried chicken stand on the corner is a clear example of the asymmetry of power embedded in daily life.



Figure 4. Food stand in front of the entrance to the Résidence Bopp-Dupont. Interestingly, the residence bears the name of the family who owned the land before it was sold to the French Army. Fa'a'a, August 8, 2021. Photograph courtesy of the author

This military site in Fa'a'a is a clear example of how complex the restitution process is. First, the parcel of land that is now owned by the local municipality is

completely enclosed within a surrounding military residence, with no public entrance. City hall officers and technicians need written permission from the military to enter the residence to access the returned land, even if just to assess the feasibility of a project. Second, and this is true for the majority of the restituted land, the space was not cleaned and remediated by the French before it was returned, meaning that the town of Fa'a'a has to pay for the cost of clean-up. The chemicals present in the majority of the restituted sites are mostly asbestos and lead; the costs of the clean-up vary from town to town and more than once the mayors of the towns involved asked the French state to pay, since it was the army who polluted the land. As of this writing, the town of Fa'a'a is ready to begin an aquaponic greenhouse project, but they must come to an agreement with the army to obtain the entry permission. The responsible person for the process told me that the town does not want to spend public money on a project that might not be beneficial for the community.¹² Beside these problems, products of a never-ending tug of war over sovereignty and autonomy between the Polynesian government and the French state, I argue that the project itself bears the potential for new forms of re-appropriation and new practices of local sovereignty. After an earlier proposal to build a community market was discarded, a new project to build an aquaponic greenhouse was approved. Its main goal is to achieve food sovereignty and to improve nutrition for the local population¹³. Although the project has been on hold for the last few years, during his visit to French Polynesia in July 2021, President Macron stated that the French government will pay for the clean-up costs, giving new hope to the mayors and communities.¹⁴

The city of Fa'a'a is itself a meaningful amalgam. Unlike the nearby capital city of Pape'ete, Fa'a'a is a densely populated town and it is known to be the headquarters of Tāvini Huirā'atira nō te Ao Mā'ohi (Mā'ohi Liberation Front), the local independentist party, whose president, Oscar Temaru, has been the mayor of Fa'a'a since the 1980s. Marches to commemorate the loss of sovereignty and protests against the upcoming visit of French president Emmanuel Macron utilizing customary and new forms of aesthetic representation took place in June and July 2021 on the streets of Fa'a'a. A march to the Tavararo memorial dedicated to the Fa'a'a residents who died in 1844 defending their land and independence against French soldiers took place on June 29, 2021. The demonstration was designed to



Figure 5. Oscar Temaru, mayor of Fa'a'a and President of the independentist party Tāvini Huira'atira, in front of the Tavararo Memorial, founded in 1985. Fa'a'a, June 29, 2021. Photograph courtesy of the author

commemorate the Polynesian loss of sovereignty and consisted of a funeral simulation to celebrate the death of the Mā'ohi sovereignty. At the same time, the protesters were emphasizing Polynesian cultural identity and heritage and expressing discontent with the French government through the use of Mā'ohi rhetoric (in its etymological sense, as art of the speech) and the presentation of woven and flower offerings to a symbolic tomb, meant to mourn the sovereign kingdom of Tāhiti before it was colonized (Fig. 5). As for Macron's July 2021 visit, Tāvini Huira'atira activists organized a protest on July 25, the day of the president arrival, during which they unveiled a Polynesian Statue of Liberty—adorned with a blue and white robe and their party's flag waving over her shoulder—in front of the airport (Fig. 6). One of my local interlocutors told me during the protest that this use of blue and white—the colors of the independentist party as well as of the Virgin Mother—represented the dual-relationship between the party and the church. The statue also has a double meaning, symbolically representing Mā'ohi's quest for freedom from the colonial yoke while reiterating the local relationship with the United Nations General Assembly in New York.¹⁵ The importance of the party's link to the UN is demonstrated throughout each Tāvini Huira'atira gathering, including the June 29 protest, when the UN flag was draped over the lectern (Fig. 5).



Figure 6. A Mā'ohi Statue of Liberty was unveiled in Tāhiti to greet French president Emmanuel Macron and his entourage. Fa'a'a, July 25, 2021. Photograph courtesy of the author

Conclusion

Considering the colonial history of French Polynesia, it is particularly important to analyze the concept of sovereignty and specifically question how it is interpreted by the populations affected by the restitution process of military bases. Uncanny practices of sovereignty can be seen through the re-appropriation of public spaces, like that of the roasted chicken stand in front of the military residence gate. Its fading military presence in the Pacific notwithstanding, France is still symbolically and materially very present in French Polynesia, developing a new form of soft power through the militarization of civilian tasks. An example of this is the expansion of the Régiment du Service Militaire Adapté, an educational military program tailor-made for the struggling young indigenous population.¹⁶ This form of power is not, of course, just related to French military and national power; it is also exerted through cultural and economic influences, often subtle and invisible, exercised by the French government on the local communities. Symbolically, the erasure of military bases in French Polynesia could be read as the material erasure of the French empire, but also as the symbolic erasure of colonial and nuclear memory. Yet, social memory cannot be erased and will re-emerge through social practices. This research originates from the assumption that colonization and the consequent militarization of French Polynesia brought structural violence. This is linked to nuclear testing but goes beyond that and includes the violence of the colonial situation more broadly, embodied by the Mā'ohi in their daily living spaces and in the ways they assert renewed claims to their lands and culture. The situation has shaped—and continues to shape—the natural and social environment of Tahitians while simultaneously translating into the emergence of new cultural practices and forms of expression, as we can see through these restitution projects.

Claudia Ledderucci is a PhD candidate at the University of Florence and the University of Turin. Her current research focuses on militarization and the nuclear legacy in French Polynesia, specifically on processes of restitution and re-appropriation of military bases on the island of Tāhiti. She is also interested in new forms of sovereignty in non-self-governing islands and territories. She earned a master's degree in cultural anthropology from Sapienza University of Rome in 2018. Her dissertation examined the social construction of climate change and Indigenous narratives and was based on her fieldwork in New Caledonia.

Notes

¹ “*Tahiti se défait à mesure que Tahiti se fait*” (author’s translation). Jean-François Baré, *Le Malentendu Pacifique* (Paris: Edition des Archives Contemporaines, 2002), 99.

² While the term “Polynesian” is very broad, and “Tahitian” is very narrow, Mā’ohi is a term used to highlight ancestral culture and heritage. For a discussion of the ethnonym, see Bruno Saura, “Dire l’autochtonie à Tahiti,” *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 119, no. 2 (2004): 119–137, <https://doi.org/10.4000/jso.126>.

³ Elizabeth DeLoughrey, “The Myth of Isolates: Ecosystem Ecologies in the Nuclear Pacific,” *Cultural Geographies* 20, no. 2 (October 2012): 167–184, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1474474012463664>.

⁴ “Graciously” is the term used in the law itself, meaning the two atolls were donated from the Territorial Assembly to the French government for defense purposes. (Assemblée Territoriale de la Polynésie française. *Délibération n° 64-27 AT du 6 février 1964 portant cession gracieuse, par le territoire, des atolls de Moruroa et Fangataufa (Tuamotu) à l’État français*).

⁵ Ann Laura Stoler, “Introduction: ‘The Rot Remains’: From Ruins to Ruination,” in *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 1–38.

⁶ Following Catherine Lutz’s definition, “militarization is simultaneously a discursive process, involving a shift in general societal beliefs and values in ways necessary to legitimate the use of force, the organization of large standing armies and their leaders, and the higher taxes or tribute used to pay for them. Militarization is intimately connected not only to the obvious – the increasing size of armies and the resurgence of militant nationalisms and militant fundamentalisms – but also to the less visible deformation of human potentials into the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and to the shaping of national histories in ways that glorify and legitimate military action.” Catherine Lutz, “Militarization,” in *A Companion to the Anthropology of Politics*, ed. David Nugent and Joan Vincent (Wiley Online Library 2007), 320, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470693681.ch20>.

⁷ Macron’s speech is available at <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2021/07/28/discours-du-president-emmanuel-macron-depuis-papeete>.

⁸ It is interesting to note here that even the construction of the airport itself had a huge impact on the local land- and seascape. In fact, it was necessary to build an embankment in the lagoon and the airstrip was built on an islet in front of the coast, which was then linked to the land by a man made land-bridge.

⁹ Godfrey Baldacchino and Eve Hepburn, “A Different Appetite for Sovereignty? Independence Movements in Subnational Island Jurisdictions,” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 50, no. 4 (November 2012): 555–568, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2012.729735>.

¹⁰ Alexander Mawyer and Jerry Jacka, “Sovereignty, Conservation and Island Ecological Futures,” *Environmental Conservation* 45, no. 3 (September 2018): 11–15, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S037689291800019X>.

¹¹ Michel Deshaies, “Introduction: Réhabilitation, Reconversion et Renouveau des Espaces Industriels et Urbains Déggradés,” *Revue Géographique de l’Est* 46, no. 3–4 (June 2006): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.4000/rge.1384>.

¹² Interview with the Fa’a’ā technical services officer, July 21, 2021. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of the interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ The presidential speech is available online: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2021/07/28/discours-du-president-emmanuel-macron-depuis-papeete>

¹⁵ On May 17, 2013, Resolution 67/265 on the self-determination of French Polynesia was adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly. With this resolution, the General Assembly “affirms the inalienable right of the people of French Polynesia to self-determination and independence.” <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N12/494/50/PDF/N1249450.pdf>.

¹⁶ The Régiment du Service Militaire Adapté, or RSMA, is a professional military device used to introduce the youth to the workforce. This program exists in all French overseas territories and dependencies. Each branch is tailored to its specific location and population. The RSMA branch in French Polynesia is designed to teach struggling youth a specific trade, such as lagoon navigation, and skills related to the tourism industry and accommodation.