

**ISSUES OF CONCERN TO ROTUMANS ABROAD:
A VIEW FROM THE ROTUMA WEBSITE**

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THE ISLAND OF ROTUMA is relatively remote, located 465 kilometers north of the northernmost island in the Fiji group, and only slightly closer to Futuna, its nearest neighbor. Rotuma has been politically affiliated with Fiji for more than a century, first as a British colony following cession in 1881 and since 1970 as part of the independent nation. Rotuma's people are, however, culturally and linguistically distinct, having strong historic relationships with Polynesian islands to the east, especially Tonga, Samoa, and Futuna. Today, approximately 85 percent of those who identify themselves as Rotuman or part-Rotuman live overseas, mostly on the island of Viti Levu in Fiji, but with substantial numbers in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, and England.

Although this article is based primarily on postings from the Rotuma Website, which was created by Alan Howard in 1996, it is informed by research begun by Alan in 1959 over a two-year period on the island of Rotuma and among Rotumans in Fiji. Jan's first visit was in 1987, and we have returned ten times since then for periods ranging from a week to six months. For the past two decades, we have also made multiple visits to all the major overseas Rotuman communities in addition to keeping in touch with Rotuman friends from around the globe via home visits, telephone, e-mail, and, most recently, Facebook. Over the years, we have published a number of articles concerning the Rotuman diaspora and Rotuman communities abroad (Howard 1961; Howard and Howard 1977; Howard

and Rensel 1994, 2001, 2004; Rensel 1993); our focus in this article is on postings that reflect expatriates' views on issues that implicate their relationship to Rotuma as an ancestral home and as a key icon of their cultural identity.

The Rotuman Diaspora

Like many other Pacific Islanders, Rotumans began emigrating from their home island as soon as the opportunity presented itself. To be sure, voyaging was an integral part of their cultural tradition prior to European intrusion, but European vessels provided a wider range of opportunities to visit, and settle, in distant lands. From early on, Rotumans were favored as sailors aboard European vessels as the result of a well-earned reputation for diligence and trustworthiness. The remarks of Joseph Osborn, aboard the whaling ship *Emerald* when it stopped at Rotuma in 1835, are typical:

They love to visit foreign countries & great numbers of them ship on board the English whaleships. . . . On board a ship they are as good or better than any of the South Sea natives: diligent, civil & quiet, 3 very necessary qualities. They soon learn to talk English & there is but few of them but what can talk a few words. (Osborn 1834–1835)

John Eagleston, captain of the *Emerald*, echoed Osborn's sentiments: "They make good ship men," he wrote, and "for a trading vessel are preferable to any of the other natives which I am acquainted with, they being more true & faithful & more to be depended on" (Eagleston 1832). Eagleston noted that he had had a number of Rotumans aboard as crewmen in the past, as well as other Islanders, but found Rotumans to be the best. Commenting in 1867 on the extent of emigration, Rev. William Fletcher, the first European Methodist missionary to be stationed on Rotuma, wrote that upwards of 700 young men were known to have left the island in recent memory (Fletcher 1870).

While many of the men who left the island—either as sailors or to take employment abroad (for example, pearl diving in the Torres Strait)—returned home after some time away, a significant number did not. They left the ships in Australia, New Zealand, England, or elsewhere and took employment, married local women, and settled into a new life. Rotuma's isolation made it difficult for emigrants to keep in contact with their home island, and most of them more or less disappeared as far as their home-bound relatives were concerned. For whatever reasons—limited literacy

curtailing letter writing; transportation into the Pacific being too complicated, sporadic, and unpredictable; or Rotumans being extraordinarily adaptive to and successful in new environments—communication was extremely limited at best. We have many testimonies from second- and third-generation diasporic Rotumans concerning parents or grandparents who over the course of their lives imparted nothing to their descendants about their Rotuman past; they had simply eliminated that part of their heritage from their social world.¹

As members of the Fiji polity since cession, Rotumans have been able to move freely about the archipelago and have taken advantage of the possibilities this has offered. The flow of this migration path accelerated markedly during the last half of the twentieth century as young Rotumans moved to Fiji's urban centers to pursue education and employment opportunities. Also stimulating out-migration was a rapid increase in the population of Rotumans resulting from a dramatic decrease in the death rate following World War II while the birthrate remained high, which strained the island's carrying capacity. Thus, whereas the 1956 Fiji census found 68 percent of Rotumans living on their home island, by 2007 the figure had dropped to 19 percent. The overall number of Rotumans in Fiji increased during this time span from 4,422 to 10,137.

Furthermore, Fiji has been a way station for many Rotumans who have emigrated elsewhere, including Australia and New Zealand, where substantial identifiable communities have developed, often around Rotuman-oriented churches. Rotuman communities of lesser size and varying cohesion have developed elsewhere, including Hawai'i, the San Francisco Bay Area, Vancouver in British Columbia, and Fort McMurray in Alberta, Canada. In addition, a substantial number of Rotumans emigrated to England, where they are widely scattered, making organization impractical. A few families with Rotuman members settled in other places, including Sweden and Norway, for example. While no figures are available for Rotumans outside of Fiji, we estimate their numbers to be 2,000 to 3,000.²

Improved transportation and telephone services following World War II helped to relieve Rotuma's isolation, resulting in a substantial increase in the volume of visits to and from the home island and telephone contact with kin in far-flung lands. However, such contact remained episodic until the last decades of the twentieth century, when an airstrip was built on the island and a modern telephone system installed. It was still difficult for Rotumans abroad to keep abreast of happenings and conditions on the island, however, until Alan created the Rotuma Website in 1996. The website became a central place in cyberspace where people with access to the Internet could read news posted from Rotuman communities around

the world, including the home island. The news was sent to us for posting in the form of e-mail or letters from Rotuma, where Internet access was not available until late 2008.³

The Rotuman diaspora, insofar as the concept applies, corresponds to the “atopic mode,” as defined by Stéphane Dufoix:

This is a transstate mode, but it does not seek to acquire a physical territory. It refers to a way of being in the world between states that is built around a common origin, ethnicity, or religion that does not reduce one to being a subject of a host country. This identity is best expressed in dispersion itself. It presents two aspects that Emmanuel Ma Mung considers to be the main criteria of a “diaspora”: multipolarity—a presence in several countries—and interpolarity, the existence of links between the poles. This is a space of more than a place, a geography with no other territory than the space described by the networks. It is a territory without terrain. (2008, 63)

In effect, despite an abiding concern for the island of Rotuma as its origin, there is no political epicenter to the global Rotuman community, which exists primarily in cyberspace, where it has been recently reinforced by interactive applications on the Web such as Facebook.⁴

Being able to keep informed about happenings and conditions on Rotuma has resulted in a heightened interest on the part of diasporic Rotumans about conditions on the island and what could be done to improve them. To provide an opportunity for Rotumans to express their views on these and other matters that concern them, we created the Rotuman Forum (hereafter cited as “RF” in the quotation source notes) on the website, where they could post their opinions and respond to one another’s postings. This article provides a summary of the issues that have preoccupied expatriate Rotumans who have posted their views in the forum over the past decade. It also draws on news reports and other expressions of views posted by Rotumans.

About the Rotuman Forum

When Alan created the Rotuma Website in 1996, he included a message board on which visitors could post messages and respond to previous postings. It was well used for a number of different purposes, including locating friends and relatives, announcing upcoming events, expressing views on various issues, and engaging in humorous banter reminiscent of family

gatherings on Rotuma. Individuals and groups made their presence known from such faraway places as Hong Kong, Laos, and Sweden as well as from places with well-established Rotuman enclaves—Australia, New Zealand, Canada, England, and the United States. Messages were mostly in English, although many contained a mix of Rotuman and English, and some were exclusively in Rotuman. It was heartwarming to see friends and relatives who had been out of touch rediscover one another and exchange messages.

However, the message board ultimately proved a disappointment. While the majority of the interactions were benign and bore the unmistakable stamp of Rotuman cultural patterns, especially in the role that humor plays, the venue came to be dominated by a small group of anonymous users who posted offensive messages marked by foul language, nasty personal attacks, and disrespect for Rotuman customs. When repeated pleas for civility failed to have an effect and in response to complaints from a number of regular Rotuman visitors, we reluctantly decided to remove the message board and replace it with two other venues: (1) a bulletin board for posting messages of interest to the global Rotuman community (this is a place to ask questions, to make announcements regarding events, to share information, and to find lost relatives, friends, schoolmates, and so on) and (2) the Rotuman Forum. The home page of the forum includes the following statement:

The Rotuman Forum is a webpage where viewpoints on Rotuman history, culture, language and politics can be posted. The purpose of the Forum is to give Rotumans, and other interested parties, an opportunity to share their views regarding matters of concern to the global Rotuman community. The Forum is managed by Alan Howard and Jan Rensel who ask that submissions be respectful to the views of others. We will not post views that indulge in name-calling or use insulting language. With those exceptions, we will post submissions in either Rotuman or English. In order to avoid embarrassment, we edit English submissions for spelling and grammar and post them after the edited versions have been approved by the author.

Both the bulletin board and the Rotuman Forum require users to send messages directly to us for posting. We have taken an active role in screening messages for unsuitable language and personal attacks but have otherwise posted messages without regard to the opinions expressed or biased information. And although we edit every submission for grammar, spelling, and clarity, we check with authors to make sure we have not distorted their meaning before posting items.⁵

The Rotuman Forum therefore deviates significantly in form from other Pacific websites on which views can be posted directly (Kava Bowl, Planet Tonga, Kamehameha Roundtable, and Samoalive, to name a few). On those sites, submissions are often posted anonymously (using pseudonyms) and may use language that would be unacceptable in normal conversations or oratory. In contrast, in addition to civility, since 1999 the Rotuman Forum requires submitters to provide their actual names and places of residence. Our rationale for this requirement is based on a notion of community (in this case, a virtual community; see Howard 1999: 160–62) that requires people to take responsibility for their actions and opinions. It also allows others to evaluate postings based on who the author is and where (both actually and metaphorically) they are coming from.⁶

There are other ways in which the Rotuman Forum differs from sites based on message boards or blogs. For one, postings tend to be much less frequent. Weeks may go by without a submission. For another, submissions are generally brief essays in which opinions are spelled out rather than cryptic comments. Finally, the individual forums, though topically coherent, are not the precise equivalent of “threads” in open postings. In some cases, we allocate submissions to a particular category even though the author may not be responding directly to any previous posting. In short, the Rotuman Forum has more in common with letters to a newspaper editor than with the spontaneous conversations that characterize most message boards and blogs.

In part related to format but also reflecting differences in diasporic experiences, Tongans participating on the Kava Bowl website have tended to focus on issues of adaptation abroad (see Morton 1999; Lee 2003, 80), including the burden of sending remittances back home (Lee 2007: 163–64), whereas Rotuman submissions have almost exclusively focused on issues relating to the home island. Our research in Rotuman communities abroad give almost no indication of problems associated with adaptation. In fact, all the evidence at our disposal suggests that Rotumans have been remarkably successful everywhere they have migrated, with virtually no manifestations of poverty. We have heard few complaints regarding remittances, perhaps because these are seen as essentially voluntary by Rotumans rather than based on cultural obligations.

Another interesting contrast concerns the posting of genealogies. In their essay in this collection, Michael Lieber and his coauthors report that diasporic Kapingamarangi use their section of the website Tarobuzz to upload genealogical information, which on the home island would be closely guarded. Such genealogical information is vital in both Kapingamarangi and

Rotuma in land disputes, but Kapinga abroad seem to be more interested in using such information as a means of constituting and negotiating key aspects of Kapinga history. Likewise, Helen Lee (2004) reported that genealogy was a popular topic in Tongan History Association Internet discussions in 1999. The focus there seems to have been on facilitating recognition of kinship ties as a means of strengthening a sense of community among diasporic Tongans. Rotumans, for whatever reason, have never shown an interest in making genealogies public.

Requiring authors to provide their names and place of residence provides some idea of the range of submitters. Social class does not appear to be a factor, in large measure because there is no apparent Rotuman underclass in any of the diasporic communities we have studied. Submitters range from professionals to office workers to housewives and students. And although a significant proportion of contributions are from first-generation expatriates, their children and grandchildren have freely contributed to the forum, sometimes based on visits to Rotuma, sometimes in response to issues that bear on their identity as Rotumans. For many of these second- and third-generation individuals, the Internet has provided an opportunity to explore their cultural roots in ways denied them by parents and grandparents who made no effort to transmit Rotuman cultural knowledge. In general, we have not detected any particular biases distinguishing submitters by gender, age, occupation, or place of residence.⁷

A more important variable affecting contributions to the Rotuma Forum has been access to the Internet, which until late 2008 was absent from the island of Rotuma, effectively keeping people living there from participating.⁸ But over the past decade, the scope of participation has clearly expanded, including recent submissions from residents on Rotuma. And it is very common for Rotumans abroad to have access to a computer and the Internet (or to another Rotuman who has such access) at work or at school if not at home.

One might pose the question of how much the Rotuma Forum parallels discussion of similar issues on Rotuma. Although there has been a definite trend over the years toward more openness, the frankness of opinion expressed in forum postings goes well beyond what we have observed in public meetings on Rotuma. People on the island express their opinions more freely in less public settings where arguments over issues may occur but always at the risk of alienating one's neighbors or kin. The Internet provides a relatively low risk environment for expressing contentious views. As managers of the forum, we have further reduced the risk of social consequences by editing out personal affronts.

Issues of Concern

To date, forty-five topical forums have been generated on the Rotuma Website. They can be grouped into seven major categories: (1) concerns for transportation and communication facilities, (2) environmental concerns, (3) development issues, (4) land issues, (5) Rotuma's sovereignty, (6) idealization of Rotuma, and (7) Rotuman identity.⁹

A wide range of issues has been discussed in the forum related to conditions on Rotuma, ranging from those that directly affect migrants who wish to maintain access to the island to those perceived as important for the well-being of people on the island. Foremost among the concerns of Rotumans abroad is the unreliability of transportation to and from Rotuma.

Transportation

Transportation irregularity has been a problem for Rotuma dating back to 1881, when it became politically united with Fiji as a British colony. One result of cession was that Rotuma was closed as a port of entry, so that all transportation to the island had to come through Fiji.¹⁰ Rotuma's relatively small size and its considerable distance from the rest of Fiji (more than 400 kilometers) has made shipping a costly proposition for private companies. Expatriates (and others) find it difficult to plan visits. Konousi Aisake, an artist who lives in Canada, visited Rotuma with his family in August 2007 and reflected on the problem:

We have made it a goal in our life to visit Rotuma every four to five years—it has been 5 years since our last visit. This trip has been the hardest for arranging transport; the plane and boat are rarely operating, making it difficult for Rotumans overseas to visit home. We got lucky at the last hour—something came through for us and we spent five weeks on the island and with three days to spare made our overseas connection back to Canada. In today's global world it is hard to believe that rather than making it easier to go to Rotuma Island, it is harder, and fraught with tension. (news archive, August 2007)

And to potential returnees for the Christmas season in 2007, Sanimeli Maraf, the wife of the highest-ranking chief on the island, issued the following warning:

For those of you who plan to come over for the holidays at Christmas time, please make sure you allow for delays both coming to and leaving Rotuma, especially if you are taking the plane. It's a shame we don't have competition for the air service. (news archive, August 2007)

In addition to suggestions that the government of Fiji subsidize transportation to Rotuma, a popular solution suggested and debated by contributors to the Rotuman Forum is that the Rotuman people purchase and run their own vessel. Victor Jione Fatiaki, for example, reported on a scheme developed by people from the district of Itu'muta:

What our 'Otou Itu'ta Itu'muta committee established was that the Rotuman community could not rely on outside shipping companies to provide this essential service because the shipping companies that currently service Rotuma have higher priorities, i.e. servicing their home base first and then Rotuma as a commercial afterthought.

The 'Otou Itu'ta Itu'muta committee strongly supports the proposition that our relatives living on Rotuma will only receive the required level of logistical support when a Rotuman-owned and operated boat provides the "service."

Very often we heard from our relatives on the island that there is shortage of essential items on the island. There are two reasons why there is shortage: (1) our people do not have the cash to stock them for a month or more, and (2) the Rotuma route is only serviced once a month. The first reason is hard to solve but the second reason is what we are currently addressing—to have a boat capable of making at least two trips per month to Rotuma. . . . Getting a boat that is owned and operated by a Rotuman Company is a dream that we in Itu'muta have had for many years, and I am sure that any other like-minded Rotuman will agree that the number one priority for Rotuma is a boat, which is capable of efficiently (both operationally and financially) servicing Rotuma. (RF: A Boat for Rotuma, February 7, 2005)

Purchasing a vessel was adopted as part of Sosefo Inoke's platform during his campaign for the Rotuma seat in Fiji's parliament during the 2006 election. A Rotuman lawyer who had moved back to Fiji from Australia, he had a novel proposal that directly involved Rotumans abroad:

In my campaign I have suggested that there must be about 1,000 Rotuman families in Fiji. If each family sends a member of their family to Rotuma once a year on the boat, paying a fare of say \$150 that adds up to \$150,000 each year towards the purchase and operation of the boat, just on fares alone. If that member takes \$100 to spend in Rotuma that is another \$100,000 for the economy of Rotuma. This is the total Fiji Government 2006 allocation for development in Rotuma and you wonder why our roads and water and the wharf are in the neglected state that they are in. Many Rotumans go to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, US and Europe and spend probably \$5,000 there. No benefit to Rotuma at all. Why don't we think "Back to Rotuma for a holiday" and spend only a fraction of that so the money stays there and helps our poor brothers and sisters in Rotuma. Our people talk about tourists going to Rotuma but we don't think that we should be the tourists. This will also address our concerns about losing our culture and identity. This "Back to Rotuma for a holiday" is one of the messages that I have pushed in my campaign. (RF: A Boat for Rotuma, April 19, 2006)

Other Rotumans also endorsed this means of both reinforcing Rotuman identity among expatriates and facilitating development on the island.

A special hardship for expatriates abroad has been the inability to attend the funerals of close kin on Rotuma. Rotuman custom requires the burial of a corpse within twenty-four hours of death, which makes it nearly impossible for relatives abroad to get there in time. As a possible solution to this dilemma, Tevita Katafono suggested the possibility of a morgue at Rotuma Hospital to preserve bodies long enough for overseas relatives to make it to the funeral:

To all Rotumans who have family back in the island, which in a sense is everybody who has a drop of Rotuman in him/her.

I would like to put forward a topic for discussion: Do we need a morgue at the Rotuma hospital?

Given the isolation of Rotuma, and the infrequency of transportation to the island by sea or air, we often hear of distraught family members who have to go through more heartbreak and anguish because they cannot attend the burial of their loved ones who have passed away in the island.

This experience I know too well for it has happened to our family quite recently. There are few words that can explain the

added grief put on the family members who were living in Fiji and couldn't attend the funeral. The option of chartering a plane was out because it was a Sunday. After this sad event, I started to think of why we don't have a morgue in our hospital. (RF: Should the Rotuma Hospital Have a Morgue?, April 2, 2002)

Dr. Eric Rafai, the physician in residence on Rotuma at the time, responded to Katabono's question by pointing out several reasons why a morgue on the island would not be practical, including prohibitively high maintenance costs given the low death rate; excessive costs to the families of the deceased on the island; and the fact that given the Fiji government's hospital development, it would likely be a very low priority. He suggested instead that it would make more sense to acquire lifesaving machines such as a defibrillator and a ventilator. "These machines will improve resuscitation and should raise life expectancy," he wrote, with a result that the timing of funerals would become more predictable and give more time for preparation (RF: Should the Rotuma Hospital Have a Morgue?, undated).

Although it is nearly impossible for people abroad to get to Rotuma in time for a relative's funeral, they often will return for the *höt'ak hafu* ceremony on the first anniversary of the death when a headstone is put in place on the grave. Because modern headstones must be made abroad and are expensive, they are usually provided by returning relatives. This at least gives expatriates the opportunity to pay ritual homage to their deceased relatives on the island.

Communication

Communication between Rotumans abroad and their kinsmen at home is a related issue. Contact with the outside world was limited to mail until 1933, when a radio-telephone facility was installed at the government station on Rotuma. This made it possible for telegrams to be sent, whereas previously a letter had to be written and sent on one ship with a wait until the next one arrived, often involving a period of many months. Still, the radio-telephone was noted for its erratic reception and transmission and for all practical purposes was limited to communication within Fiji. In 1990, it was replaced by a new, more powerful and reliable radio-telephone. Telephone lines were laid around the island during the 1990s, and a switchboard was installed at the government station with a trained operator in attendance. This made it easier for people to keep in contact with their kin abroad. Telephone contact thus became a major source of information exchange between Rotuma and the outside world, transmitted on a daily

basis. It also provided a ready vehicle for requesting money and assistance, a source of some concern for wage-earning Rotumans overseas. In 1995, Fiji Post and Telecom installed a satellite earth station and digital telephone exchange, making Rotuma accessible by direct dialing and greatly improving the quality of voice transmission. Making a telephone call, expensive though it may be, seems to be much more congenial to Rotuman styles of communication than the more tedious process of writing letters.

Still, there have been problems and complaints having to do with the cost of calls, which has resulted in unpaid bills and subsequent disconnections. In response to such complaints, Tomasi Sumasafu laid the blame on the abuses of his kinsmen back home:

The 250 disconnections eventuated not because of the high costs as claimed, but because of the abuse. You know and I know that the current telephone service in Rotuma is as good as anywhere in the world. Years ago, when only a Radio Telephone (RT) system was available, one had to shout at the top of his/her voice in order to be heard. I was in Malhaha last year, and I noted that parents no longer send a child to relay a message to a family in either 'Elsio or Pephaua [sections of Malhaha district], or even a couple of houses away. The message is relayed by phone. Kids ring one another at night to discuss the homework for the next day. An expensive exercise indeed.

From my experience, many people on Rotuma want a telephone "because every other household has one." The attitude is that if we don't have a phone, then "amis to kaunohoag kelea' 'e hanis ta" [we'll be the family that is to be pitied]! A typical Rotuman mentality. But someone will have to cut a lot of copra to pay the bill. We have to have a phone in Suva because it is a necessity, but most importantly we earn a salary and can afford to pay the monthly bill. Phones are being disconnected in Rotuma because people amass huge bills that they cannot possibly pay, which proves beyond reasonable doubt to the community that "aus ta kaunohoag kelea' 'e hanis ta." I understand that most of the phone bills in Rotuma are paid by "the children in Fiji," which is a burden they can do without. (RF: Issues of Concern, undated)

A new wireless system was installed in 2010 that allows for the use of mobile phones on the island, but the cost of overseas calls is very high by international standards. The installation of radio towers for mobile phones facilitates access to the Internet, but aside from Rotuma High School and

the government station, where an “Internet café” was established at the post office, access has been limited by a lack of personal computers and high access costs. Nevertheless, the increased ability of people on the island to ask for support from relatives abroad has generated some friction, as evident in Sumasafu’s posting on the Rotuman Forum, but expressions of concern for conditions on the island far exceed such complaints.

Environmental Concerns

Visitors to Rotuma have frequently expressed dismay over what they see as a pollution problem and a lack of concern for the fragile environment. Yvonne Aitu, a young Rotuman woman who spent her childhood on Rotuma before attending high school and university in the United States, posted an article on the Forum after a return visit in 1999. Regarding the problem of pollution, she wrote,

Plastic bags were all over the place, *e ufa se sasi* [from inland to the sea]. There were batteries on the ocean bed rusting slowly, although I’m sure the amount of lead leakage to the sea is minimal. I spent afternoons in the beach area in front of our house picking up batteries and cans and plastic bottles; I dug holes and buried them. Some of this debris floated in from other villages, or from the monthly boat that visited the island. Our front yard will be full of buried garbage by the time I reach middle age. The famous plastic bottles of fizzy water/juice which is sold by the local supplier could be found lying all over the island. Not too much of hazard at the moment, but one that is growing steadily. Oh, and the number of flies is just incredible. (RF: Thoughts about Rotuma by a Returning Daughter, March 2000)

And Sefo Avaiki, who lives in Nanaimo, Canada, posted the following on the Rotuman Forum:

Rubbish and the environment is the primary issue we Rotumans living outside of Rotuma should be concerned about. Decades of careless discarding of refuse and abuse will eventually take its toll on the land if we do not begin implementing sensible solutions towards this obvious problem. Glass, tins and other debris polluting our beaches and “*fa’ ri*” [household debris] should be cleaned up. . . .

Rusty metal, including tin cans, should be collected in containers and shipped to Fiji for recycling or reuse. I am sure the increase in motor vehicles has added to the waste metal problems in our villages. Glass can be ground into finer particles and mixed with cement for use. New and improved composting technologies can be introduced and participation encouraged through education. Teach the children and parents about the simple things that could be done to help. Cardboard, newspaper and other recyclable materials can be collected and shipped to Fiji. Whatever is left hopefully can be incinerated.

Rotuma cannot afford to centralize rubbish collection. Encouraging households to participate in composting would be a better alternative. The lack of land in Rotuma should always be a primary issue when looking for solutions to solving our rubbish problem. Educating our people on how to RECYCLE, REUSE, REDUCE AND COMPOST will surely help. (RF: Environmental Concerns, March 14, 1998)

Avaiki was in the waste/rubbish management business at the time and expressed a willingness to discuss this issue with anyone who might be interested in initiating a program of action. In a later posting, he drew attention to what he regarded as a cultural key to the problem:

The idea that what I do on my land is my business cannot and must not be entertained. We Rotumans must realize that what is dumped into the soil, if hazardous, will in time seep through and destroy either our marine livelihood or worse yet our drinking water. So, we need to understand that as caretakers, guardians of our ancestors' gifts, it is our moral obligation to leave the land healthy and pollutant free for our descendants. (RF: Environmental Concerns, January 24, 2007)

Expressions of concern for the environment play off images of Rotuma as a still relatively pristine and extremely beautiful island. Rocky Peter's posting is characteristic:

I was born in Fiji and live abroad. I recently took my first trip to Rotuma and found the island beautiful; it is like a paradise. The only drawback is the lack of cleanness, which creates lots of problems with flies. People on the island need to be educated to take responsibility for the environment. (RF: Environmental Concerns, March 4, 1998)

It has been heartening to see that a group of young, educated Rotumans in Fiji have organized to actually take action to increase environmental awareness on Rotuma. Led by Monifa Fiu, a marine biology student at the University of the South Pacific (USP), the group, which formed in 2002, was initially concerned with the deterioration of the reef surrounding Rotuma—hence its name, LājeRotuma (reef + Rotuma) Initiative (LRI). At the request of Ms. Fiu, we devote a section of our website to the activities of the group, have posted their reports and announcements of events, and have assisted with their fund-raising projects.

In its environmental education and awareness development program, LRI aims to provide service to the island community under the following programmatic themes:

- Community outreach, including projects that range from the environmental education in schools to coordinated annual coastal cleanups to facilitation of communities in the development of their management plans.
- Building community resilience to climate change, including projects that encompass a range of adaptation measures to coastal erosion, monitoring the health of reefs, and climate witness awareness activities that enhance the island community's understanding of potential impacts of global climate change on Rotuma Island.
- Integrated fisheries management, which focuses on revival of the traditional use of the canoe. Fiu notes that canoes are being replaced by the use of outboard motors, which are totally dependent on external fuel supplies and engine parts. This is an added cost that creates an adverse impact on the island ecosystem in terms of engine parts disposal and fishing intensity.
- Sustainable livelihoods options: According to baseline information collected by LRI, there is a need for alternative income options in order to persuade communities to make informed decisions regarding the development and proper management of their natural resources.
- Research and capacity building, including activities that range from the experimental removal and reuse of *kama* (coral overgrowth), training and internship opportunities for local youth, and research on Rotuma's flora and fauna.

The group has been successful in gaining support from the global Rotuman community, government agencies, and funding agencies such as WWF (formerly known as the World Wildlife Fund).

Development Issues

Concern for the development of Rotuma is implicit in much of the discussion on the Rotuman Forum, but it was explicitly introduced by Fuata Jione, a Rotuman living in Australia, in May 1999. Jione began by presenting his credentials:

I was born in Itu'muta, Rotuma, in 1960. My parents are Tiu Jione and Sulu, who passed away 18 months ago. I was educated at Motusa primary and Malhaha high school till 1976, then completed high school at Queen Victoria School 1977/78. In 1979 I attended USP. I qualified with a Ship's Captain's Certificate from the Australian Maritime College and have worked in the Australian Maritime Industry since 1980. I've achieved a personal goal to become a Master of a vessel in Australia. My last visit to Rotuma was in 1998/1999 during Christmas for a period of 4 days.

Regarding the development of Rotuma and incorporating concerns about transportation to and from the island, he wrote,

I do not believe that major development in Rotuma is the way to go. Rotuma is too small and any major development cannot be sustained without significant population growth. But population growth will lead to major damage to the natural environment. The Rotuman Council's decision to ban tourism is not only sensible but very responsible. Wherever there is tourism crime has increased. Money as a prime motivator is a failure because it contradicts traditional values. The culture and the skills to live off the land are fading away slowly. I say this because my observation is that people in Rotuma are now becoming too dependent on money for their own survival. Rotuma certainly needs development in education and health. Diabetes and heart disease seem to be widespread and the way people live and eat in Rotuma now is a major contributing factor. . . .

We Rotumans have to look at ourselves as individuals and as a group and ask ourselves what has changed over the years and how we have managed to respond to changes. I do not think people are adjusting to change very well because in many ways I see the divisions among Rotumans stemming from old beliefs our forefathers had during their days of internal warring and cannibalism. We Rotumans have to distinguish between modern western values and

traditional values. It appears that Rotumans in Rotuma and Fiji are steering aimlessly and without control of their destiny. . . .

Development of a transport service between Rotuma and Fiji via sea and air should be set up by Rotuman corporations, preferably with an existing business organisation to reduce running costs from the use of the already established infrastructure. An aeroplane and a suitably sized vessel can be purchased and joint leases with either Air Pacific or Blue Lagoon cruises or Marine Pacific can be established to spread the cost of operations. I say this because I know there are a lot of influential Rotumans flying aeroplanes for Air Pacific and lots of marine management expertise in Fiji.

A united front is the only way to influence changes for the benefit of all Rotumans. We Rotumans are such a diverse group of people and I am sure one day our vision for Rotuma will come as one; however, we cannot ignore changes that are within our control and management. Once this is achieved the big picture will become clearer for all Rotumans and believe me it can be done only by the power of the people. (RF: *Developing Rotuma*, May 1, 1999)

This emphasis on self-reliance has been a constant theme in Rotuman history (see Howard and Rensel 2007). As a man named Fereti put it in his response to Jione's posting,

Maybe we ought to stop thinking about how to solicit goods and services from others but more in the line of what can we do about it as a people, for our island.

I am sorry if it offends anyone but I, personally, don't believe in handouts. It is very Rotuman to be proud to say, "We earned it." (RF: *Developing Rotuma*, July 19, 2000)

Sarah Mellado, who lives in Perth, echoed these sentiments:

After reading the various issues, one question springs to mind: what's happened to the hard-working Rotumans I grew to think we were? There was a time when our people lived happily without electricity and flushing cisterns, and computers!

Please don't get me wrong, I am not saying to keep Rotuma in the dark ages, what I am saying is that we can update our way of life without sacrificing our way of life. (RF: *Developing Rotuma*, March 18, 2004)

The ambivalence toward development in Jione's and Mellado's postings should also be noted. Like many other expatriate commentators, they stress the necessity of preserving central Rotuman traditional values and urge that development be selective. It is our observation that Rotumans abroad are more concerned—or at least more vocal—about preserving traditional values than people who live on the island. This we attribute to the iconic role that Rotuma and conceptions of traditional values play in the cultural identity of Rotumans abroad (see Howard and Rensel 2004).

Ambivalence toward development is also clearly expressed in the posting of Yvonne Aitu following her return visit in 1999:

When those of us who live in a “developed” environment visit Rotuma we often think, “Oh, if only we could have this or that on the island it would make life so much easier.” But I think I rather enjoy Rotuma as it is, with its flies and mosquitoes and pigs at the *pa puaka* [pigsty]. It's the special uniqueness that I hope we would all want to keep. Imagine for a second, that one day we had one of those high tech *pa puakas* with a loud speaker calling your pigs when it's feed time!! No more calling of “*lo lo*” for the pigs with the clanging of an old pan but rather a high tech loud speaker! (RF: Thoughts about Rotuma by a Returning Daughter, March 2000)

What most people agree on is that the schools, hospital, and roads need to be upgraded. In this regard, many commentators have expressed dismay that the government of Fiji has not done more to upgrade those facilities. However, the theme of self-reliance—that these are problems that are the responsibility of Rotumans (including those abroad) to resolve for themselves—is a pervasive theme in the Forum postings. The comments of H. F. Thompson are characteristic:

The lack of funding from the Ministry of Education, the PWD [Public Works Department] doing its own thing, and the need for upgrading and renovating the old hospital are three of the most important problems facing the people on Rotuma, and every Rotuman should be paying close attention.

The high school is where our future lies. Those youngsters are the ones who will take care of the island when we are gone. They are our legacy. So, every avenue should be explored to make sure that the high school has everything they need. It's a top priority. The hospital is another top priority. It's the only place sick people can go for treatment on the island.

The Rotuma Council should be doing a whole lot more instead of depending on outsiders and Fijians to take charge of Rotuma. Rotumans should be taking care of the problems in Rotuma. It's your island, so take charge. . . .

I know that there are lots of Rotuman communities all over the world who have been raising money to support projects on the island. The seven districts have representatives and should put some effort into raising funds for the high school and the hospital. Do not wait for the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health. Rotumans have little power and not much say in these Departments. Non-Rotumans are in positions of authority and it seems like they give you the runaround and excuses. These are Rotuman problems and Rotumans should stop sitting back waiting for miracles to happen. Thousands and thousands of dollars are being raised by these districts; try and put some into the high school and hospital. (RF: Developing Rotuma, May 26, 2003)

In fact, there have been numerous fund-raising projects by Rotumans abroad to upgrade the hospital and schools, and much has been done. The Rotuma Website has served as a vehicle for mobilizing such efforts.

One of the more heated debates concerning development involves tourism. Rotuma has had very limited experience with tourism to date. The island has no hotels, restaurants, or other commercial facilities catering to tourists, although individual families have provided accommodations for visitors on a more or less regulated basis, sometimes blurring the line between guests and tourists. Three visits by the Australian cruise ship *Fairstar* in 1986, 1987, and 1989 and one by the MS *Society Explorer* in 1987 gave Rotumans on the island a taste of what large-scale tourism would be like when the ships disgorged up to a thousand people for a day. As we noted in a previous publication,

Tourism became a hotly debated issue in 1986 over the proposed visit of the *Fairstar*, an Australian tourist ship. Opposition, led mainly by the Methodist clergy, was based on the anticipated changes in Rotuman lifestyle that large numbers of tourists might provoke. Several influential ministers, in Fiji as well as Rotuma, argued that young Rotumans would be susceptible to corrupting influences, and that sexual modesty would give way to bikinis and promiscuous sex. They also expressed fears that greed would replace neighborly cooperation in the scramble for tourist dollars. Many people on the island were persuaded, but others saw no harm in such a brief (one-day) visit. . . .

One of tourism's underlying dilemmas was the question of who would benefit financially from such visits. Visiting vessels paid substantial docking fees, and the tourists spent significant sums on food, handicrafts, shells, and other souvenirs. The money from the 1986 and 1987 visits went to landowners of the beach area at Oinafa where the ships docked, to workers who helped prepare for the visits, to dancers who entertained, to handicraft makers, and other direct participants. Later tourist-ship visits were cancelled when different parties could not reach agreement over the allocation of landing fees. Also, no plan was formulated for using a portion of the money to benefit the island as a whole. (Howard and Rensel 2007, 315)

The discussion of tourism on the Rotuma Website was initiated in April 1998 (when the site included an open message board) by a contributor using the pseudonym Coolie:

While we don't trust tourism in Rotuma, I believe there's a safe way of handling outsiders who want to come to our island and experience its beauty. My best shot is to allow families willing to play hosts the freedom to do so at their own expense. They should also be given the freedom to charge their guests for accommodation if they feel necessary, provided it's legal. Also, there should be a limited number of medically healthy guests allowed per family per year. On the other hand, these families should be held responsible in making sure that their guests abide by the laws and customs of the land.

Several people responded positively to the idea of confining tourism to hosting by families, although many contributors expressed concern about drugs, immodest dress, pornography, sexual promiscuity, crime, and the erosion of Rotuman culture and values.

The issue lay dormant on the Rotuman Forum until a posting in April 2009 by a Rotuman woman by the name of Selina in Perth, Australia, whose family is planning "a very small scale 'holiday getaway,'" based on a selective customer base managed and controlled in Australia (RF: Tourism, April 7, 2009).

Henry Enasio, who retired to Rotuma three years ago after spending most of his adult life abroad, endorsed the plan but warned of the hurdles ahead based on previous experience. He noted that Fiji Unit Trust and Marriott Hotels wanted to build a hotel with an eighteen-hole golf course

on fifteen acres of prime land, but that the project was scuttled by a single individual who had rights in the land. He wrote,

The reason for her objection was basically the same old narrow-minded view of a traditional lay preacher—worried that tourism would erode our fundamental values, tradition and culture. However, Rotuma has long been influenced by videos, radio, Pacific Sky TV and by islanders who have traveled overseas. Although tourists may wear revealing clothing, have decorated belly buttons and weird hairdos, our own young girls in Rotuma have adopted those trends without harm. (RF: *Tourism*, May 25, 2009)

Enasio expressed the view that if the project had gone ahead, Rotuma would not be in such a predicament regarding air travel and that the benefits would have been “massive” for Rotuma as a whole.

H. F. Thompson responded with a rather vitriolic attack on expatriate Rotumans who advocate developing tourism on the island:

I would like to be able to take my family to visit my homeland and not be bombarded by tourists just because some greedy Rotuman who lives in some adopted country decided that life on this paradise island should be changed for the Mighty Dollar. I am just amazed at all the schemes and plans being hatched all over the world by Rotuman Tourists to exploit and bring chaos and crime to our homeland where we can go and visit and not have to worry about anything. (RF: *Tourism*, April 15, 2009)

Gloria Eno, an eighteen-year-old part-Rotuman woman living in Invercargill, New Zealand, echoed Mrs. Thompson’s sentiments:

Rotuma is everything to me. It’s a place in the world that I can go to get away from everything that I despise overseas. Rotuma is very special and unique in so many ways. I didn’t grow up with many island kids, and all of my friends who have listened to endless stories about Rotuma tell me how lucky I am to have a place like that in the world—a place where my children and grandchildren can go to see the simple beautiful things in life and be taught true Rotuman values and traditions, and they can learn more about living than kids who only know the modern world. . . .

I enjoy modern conveniences as much as the next person and I enjoy staying in hotels, but I would be sad to see one on Rotuma. I look at Rotuma Island as paradise . . . in a way *my* paradise, even though it may sound selfish; I don't want to share it with strangers. Not all tourists are bad of course! But how will we protect our island from the ones who are? It only takes a few minutes to think about what tourism and too many westerners have done to other places. I'm sure they, too, may have been paradises once upon a time, but with one bad move everything can change. Some tourists, when visiting Rotuma, will love and respect it for being so different and unspoiled, but others will see it only as an experience they have paid for. Those who see Rotuma in this way won't understand our ties to the land, or our respect for our ancestors who fought so hard to make Rotuma what it is. Our history lies in every single square metre of land. They will not honour the beliefs and traditions that our people have been taught since the beginning of time. And last but not least, they will not appreciate our simple love for each other and for our home. (RF: Tourism, May 28, 2009)

The most eloquent opposition to tourism was posted by Pasirio Kitione, a resident of Nadera in Fiji. His opinions take the form of a poem:

May Rotuma be protected from 5 star international hotel brands,
18 hole golf courses and mass tourism forever
So there is no stench with the sea breeze at the turn of the tide
That there is no excess seaweed on the beaches and in place of
once thriving coral colonies
So that there is no 24 hour room service and work on Sundays
May the bounty from the sea and harvest from the land be fresh,
abundant and toxic free
May the occasional lobster be shared by family and not sold to the
hotel
Alas, thus a can of Koro Sea will suffice for dinner
That there is no power house with a set of generators
Nor are the effluents from hotel operations recycled, carted and
dumped. Where?
May future generations be proud and thankful for the wise
decisions made yesterday
To preserve and protect
So that their culture and traditions be their identity

Of which they are proud to practice and know completely
 May the dreams and aspirations of a teenager from Invercargill
 live on
 That our leaders and elders find alternative green means for
 business
 So villages, forlorn and trying, can thrive once more
 May traditional respect and trust be ever strong influences and
 values
 So that a way of life and a “gem of green” be forever preserved
 For all Rotumans

Land Issues

Land issues are of special concern to those Rotumans abroad who envision returning to live in Rotuma some day or who wish to protect the rights of their offspring to do so. Rotumans inherit rights to land via bilineal descent (through both the mother’s and the father’s sides). Thus, all descendants of an individual holding rights in a parcel of land have legitimate claims to it. However, several contingencies complicate the matter, leading to a proliferation of disputes. To begin with, the land has never been surveyed, nor is there an official registry of land entitlement. In response to an escalation in disputes during the 1950s, when the population of Rotuma reached a twentieth-century peak of more than 3,000, the Rotuma Land Act (RLA) was passed in Fiji, and a land commission was sent to Rotuma in 1959 to implement it. Unfortunately, as a means of trying to simplify what they saw as a messy set of inheritance rules, the British colonial administration incorporated into the act a provision rendering inheritance strictly patrilineal, following the Fijian *mataqali* system. Not surprisingly, Rotumans on the island forcefully rejected the commission and threatened violence to stop it. As a result, no action was taken, and the lands have remained unsurveyed and unregistered to this day. However, the RLA has never been repealed and technically remains in force.¹¹

Contesting land rights involves the mobilization of testimonies before the district officer, who acts as magistrate and is frequently neither Rotuman nor competent in the Rotuman language. Another complicating factor for expatriates is the informal principle that one’s rights weaken if one does not remain actively engaged with that part of the kin group that exercises hands-on stewardship over a parcel of land. Keeping relationships “warm” requires periodic visits to the island, sending remittances, providing building supplies and other land-associated gifts, and the like. Even under the best of circumstances, however, Rotumans living abroad are at a distinct

disadvantage, and the island is full of partially built homes that were left unfinished when disputes arose after expatriates began construction. To begin with, even if the returnees are knowledgeable, island residents are in a much better position to mobilize support for their claims and to manipulate relevant information. Often returnees can visit for only brief periods, while land cases can drag on for months or longer, giving local claimants greater opportunities to argue their positions. Furthermore, according to Rotuman lore, disputed land is likely to result in bad luck, so even if one prevails in a lawsuit, one still risks ill fortune. Given the cost of building a modern home today, it is no wonder that projects are abandoned when disputes arise. Part-Rotumans—the offspring of a Rotuman and a non-Rotuman—are additionally disadvantaged by having fewer possible claims through only one side of their family. The fact that most of them are deficient in the Rotuman language also places them in a much weaker position when it comes to disputes. (For a land dispute in Samoa resulting from return migration that involve some of the same issues, see Van der Ryn 2012 [this issue].)

Contributors to the Rotuman Forum have expressed their concerns about these matters in several postings. Sosefo Inoke, residing in Australia at the time, initiated a forum discussion with an article highlighting the issues involved:

One of the things that we must do is to fix our land ownership problems. It is a fundamental requirement for development. Until we can resolve our land issues and set up the processes and procedures for the proper settlement and resolution of our land disputes I believe we cannot effectively progress. It is a problem that we must face up to now and deal with. . . .

Some of us, maybe a lot of us, would prefer to let “sleeping dogs lie.” But the trouble I see with sleeping dogs is that they are likely to wake up at the most inconvenient time, vicious and uncontrollable. . . .

Some of us that have dealt with or been involved in land disputes know of the unsatisfactory situation that exists at the moment. Disputes are not being fairly and properly resolved with any certainty and finality. Some disputes are left up in the air and unresolved. Quite often the situation is worse than it was before the attempts to resolve it. There is confusion as to how disputes are to be commenced as well as to the appropriate tribunals or forums to hear them. The procedures as to appeals are also uncertain and ineffective. There are also in my view unresolved

fundamental issues as to the powers and jurisdictions of the tribunals and forums that are making decisions at the moment. If all these problems exist then it is no wonder that disputes are not resolved fairly, properly and with certainty and finality.

To resolve these issues, Inoke urged that a land commission be appointed anew:

I am not an alarmist but I believe land ownership will be in chaos unless something is done now. The appointment of the Rotuma Lands Commission must be done immediately as it is vital to the effective resolution of land disputes. Equally as important is the registration of land ownership and dealings which is the other function of the Commission. So long as we choose to ignore it I believe our social, political and economic development will be hampered. The little land that we have will be tied up in unresolved feuding and will not be used to its full potential, or worse, benefit only the few that have access to good lawyers and powerful political friends. (RF: Land Disputes, April 5, 2002)

But there remains a fear among many Rotumans that the original RLA will be put into force, thereby substituting patrilineal for bilineal inheritance of land. Henry Enasio, who lived in Sydney at the time, expressed his apprehension in a forum posting:

There must remain a dual ownership right for every Rotuman on the basis of both paternal and maternal lands. Otherwise we'll find ourselves in a situation where there are more clan members with less land who are stuck and unable to settle on their maternal lands as per the basis adopted by the Fijians. Also the reverse can occur where all the clan members are dead and no one is left to claim or inherit the land. Though hypothetical, such an extreme situation would result in ownership of the land being relinquished to Government. Such a drastic situation is contemptible and we Rotumans must not allow it to happen. (RF: Rotuman Land Commission, April 3, 2004)

Inoke made his view on this issue clear as well:

I, like many of us, don't understand why the push for registration of Rotuma land ownership to be the same as that for the Fijians.

There is no basis at law for such a one-sided land ownership system these days.

If anything, it is against the anti-discrimination laws and the provisions of the Constitution. . . .

Unfortunately, for the Rotumans the Rotuma Lands Act remains in the law books as law. Whilst the Rotuma Lands Commission remains nonexistent it has no real impact. It should not be difficult to change the Act because it seems most Rotumans do not accept the law as it stands. All it needs is our parliamentary representative to lobby the Government, through the Attorney General, to pass a bill amending the provisions in the Act dealing with land ownership. (RF: Land Disputes, June 17, 2005)

In the meantime, Rotumans abroad continue to be confronted with a host of practical and legalistic barriers to exercising their rights in land on the island.

Rotuma's Sovereignty

Of all the topics discussed in the Rotuman Forum, none has generated more debate and more heat than the issue of Rotuma's sovereignty. As background to the issue, one must appreciate a number of circumstances and events that have affected Rotuma's relationship to Fiji over the years.

Following a war in 1878 between the French-backed Catholics and the English-backed Wesleyans, the victorious Wesleyan chiefs petitioned Queen Victoria of England for cession in 1879. In his letter to Sir George William des Voeux (who was acting high commissioner of Fiji in the temporary absence of Sir Arthur Gordon), Gagaj Maraf, the paramount chief of Rotuma, wrote that "it has also long been apparent to me that we (Rotuma & Fiji) should be under one Govt." Cession officially took place in 1881 (seven years after Fiji's cession), and Rotuma was made part of the colony of Fiji for administrative purposes.

We know of no publicly voiced opposition to this arrangement during the colonial period, and despite widespread dissatisfaction among Rotumans with their meager representation in the postcolonial legislature (initially one senator and no representatives), there were no serious calls for Rotuma to secede when Fiji was granted independence in 1970.

The military coup that took place in May 1987 in Fiji, when Sitiveni Rabuka overthrew the Bavadra government, sparked a change in attitude among a vocal minority of Rotumans and part-Rotumans. The Rotuma Council, composed of chiefs and representatives from the island's seven

districts, voted to remain with Fiji. But objections were raised by a small group of dissidents led by a part-Rotuman karate master from New Zealand who had been given the title Lagfatmaro. Lagfatmaro claimed to be “king of Rotuma,” and his followers agitated for Rotuma to declare independence from Fiji and for Lagfatmaro to be made king. They even went so far as to declare Rotuma a sovereign nation. Although the movement never gained traction, it stirred controversy regarding Rotuma’s sovereignty and the island’s relationship to Fiji.

The declaration of Fiji as a republic and its expulsion from the British Commonwealth following a second coup by Rabuka in September 1987 further fueled the debate about independence, with advocates basing their case on the fact that Rotuma had ceded the island to Great Britain, not to Fiji; hence, they argued, there were no longer any legal or historical grounds for Rotuma to be considered part of Fiji.

The issue was introduced to the Rotuman Forum by Saumaru Foster, a Sydney resident, in January 1998:

I have nothing but admiration and good will towards Fijians—and I include amongst them ethnic Indians and other minority groups. I believe that peace and friendship and justice amongst all the different peoples of Fiji should always be encouraged.

I therefore believe that it is precisely for these reasons that the question of Rotuman independence deserves to be seriously discussed— not the least because it is so intertwined with the notions of Rotuman culture and identity.

This “Rotuman Forum” is an ideal venue for such a discussion.

No one should oppose such a discussion either. Not the international community because it is a crucial point of the UN charter that independence for a group of people in such a situation should be supported. Not the Fijians because they have endured two coups in an attempt to assert their own indigenous identity and independence. And certainly not the Rotumans themselves who have lived unconquered by any other nation for centuries. (Of course, I am not implying here that conquest automatically confers on the conqueror the right to absorb the conquered.) In any case, it was by a treaty that Rotuma was ceded to the British. Fiji had its own treaty.

To suggest that Rotuma should be independent is not a flippant flight of fancy. Anyone who knows world history will understand that more unlikely propositions have come to fruition. And I dare

suggest that as the world shrinks with the increased internationalisation of its means of communication, the more likely and easier it will be for such a proposition to be actualised.

By independence for Rotuma, I'm not necessarily suggesting secession from Fiji. There are many types and levels of independence for a people and the nation-state is not always the best option at a given time.

However, what I certainly mean by Rotuman independence is this: Rotumans, as a distinct indigenous group (within the Fijian nation), should have the ultimate say in matters which affect their culture—the law (especially those governing land and its ownership and use), the language and customs and the chiefly system.

I would suggest that, given the present Fijian constitution and the way Rotumans, as such, are represented or not at the supreme decision-making bodies of the republic—Parliament, the Council of Chiefs and the Public Service, such independence is far from being the case! (RF: Rotuman Independence, January 26, 1998)

A dialogue ensued between Foster and an anonymous commentator who used the pseudonym “teenager.” In a highly articulate response to Foster’s posting, “teenager” argued that it was not for Rotumans abroad to decide what would be best for those living on the island:

It is truly amazing how so many folks who are unwilling to live the hard life of Rotuma think that they know what is best for Rotuma. What I am saying is without any particular opinion either way—whether Rotuma should have independence or not. It is not that I don't care what happens to my family, BUT as THEY have to live there—NOT me—it is for THEM to decide what they want. And contrary to the pedantic attitude of “more highly educated” individuals, regardless of lack of “formal” education, people living in Rotuma are very aware of what they want and need—it is NOT for those of us who are not willing to live there and be there to decide! (RF: Rotuman Independence, January 28, 1998)

Foster took issue with the notion that only those living on Rotuma would be affected by a change in Rotuma’s status and that therefore they should have the exclusive right to decide. He argued that Rotumans in Fiji should have a say in the matter as well since they would be directly affected by any change in Rotuma’s political status. He also located the heart of the issue in a concern for the continuity of Rotuman culture and identity:

I think that for many of us who talk about Rotuman independence our main concern is that Rotuman identity and culture, changing as they are, be preserved forever. This simply cannot depend on the goodwill of another race. Control must be in the hands of Rotumans (legitimately representing the interests of ALL Rotumans regardless of where they live). Also . . . by independence we do not necessarily mean an independent nation state. Although, even if this is what eventuates, there is no reason to suggest that we cannot coexist with Fiji in some very special way, e.g. it is perhaps possible that Fiji look after our defence and foreign relations portfolios. All these possibilities need to be discussed and pursued. (RF: Rotuman Independence, March 5, 1998)

In a subsequent forum, Sosefo Inoke, writing from Australia, reaffirmed the right of expatriate Rotumans to have a say in the matter:

To suggest that this is solely the prerogative of those who live at home is, in my view, a very blinkered and destructive outlook on how we could work together. Rotumans who live abroad have a very worthwhile contribution to make. Don't forget many if not all of us abroad have legal as well as social rights and obligations in respect of land and other matters in Rotuma. Let us not stifle healthy, well-meaning and constructive discussion.

Finally, I for one sought refuge overseas . . . to give my children the opportunities that I never had. Out of sight but certainly not out of mind. I believe I speak for most of the Rotumans overseas on this point. Hopefully, our children will continue our contributions to our home island in a bigger and better way. So please do not shut us out. We can make a real and valuable difference. (RF: The Coup in Fiji, ca. April 2002)

The discussion gained momentum following the declaration of sovereignty by Lagfatmaro and his followers and an aborted attempt by an American entrepreneur, David Korem, to absorb Rotuma into his Dominion of Melchizedek, a sovereign "country" whose only existence was on the Internet. Korem formed an alliance with Lagfatmaro's contingent and went so far as to draft a "constitution for the Republic of Rotuma." Several Rotumans on the island were tempted by Korem's promise of infusing Rotuma's economy with millions of dollars, but when it was discovered (from Internet sources consulted by friends off island) that he had served prison time for fraud and was under investigation by the FBI, he was deported from Fiji, much to the relief of most Rotumans.

Reactions in the Rotuman Forum to these radical attempts to declare Rotuma's independence from Fiji were overwhelmingly negative, with a number of commentators pointing to the economic benefits of Rotuma's association with Fiji. Among those opposed to secession, there was a range of opinion. Some argued for greater political and economic autonomy for Rotuma—in effect, a loosening of ties; others argued for tighter integration, including the suggestion by some that the name of the country be changed to “Fiji and Rotuma.”

Idealization of Rotuma

An ambiguity prevails among diasporic Rotumans regarding attitudes toward and images of Rotuma. One frequently hears complaints about environmental pollution, a lack of facilities (especially concerning the hospital and schools), the frequency of land disputes, the decline of traditional values associated with caring and sharing, and so on. Listening to such complaints, one can get the impression that expatriates in general have a rather negative image of the island. But in the next breath, they are likely to paint an idyllic picture in song, in poetry, or in shared reminiscences. This tendency toward idealization is reflected in many of the forum postings. Henry Enasio's posting in April 2004 is representative:

As I reflect and reminisce about those vivid moments growing up in Rotuma, it reminds me of the good old days, of the kinship and life of peace and tranquility I have sorely missed.

From a distance I see the holistic beauty of Rotuma:
 an island in the sun, given to me by my father's hands
 with its emerald green and lush rain forest, cupped in leafy
 hands
 its white sandy beaches, soft as maidens hands
 with its sky blue crystal waters, bound by reefy hands
 abundant in fish, like an exotic dancer's twinkling hands
 that calls to me by the most seductive sunset I have ever seen
 from Ahau through Maka Bay to Uea.

From a distance I feel the soothing effect of Rotuma:
 that calls me all the days of my life
 from Lagi te Maurea with its cool and enchanting effect
 to the tranquility that captivates my senses

with the security that I can sleep at night with my doors and
windows open
with no worries of being robbed or mugged,

From a distance I smell the fragrance of Rotuma:
the *Tieri* and *Ragkari* that graces the maidens heads
to the *Sea* and *Kori* that also anoints their heads
the fragrances that permeate, I have longed for in my head¹²

From a distance I hear the call of Rotuma:
carried to me by the wind of my imagination
with laughter of women and joy of children
free of worries
that begs me home

With these in mind, I know for certain the meaning of *Rotuma Hanua Aier 'Ontou* [Rotuma my true home]. For wherever I go, I will always long for and miss Rotuma all the days of my life.

It is there that I promise that I will one day return to retire and live for the rest of my life. To rekindle the kinship and repay Rotuma for what I owe it, and to be buried with the rest of my loved ones. (RF: Thoughts of Rotuma, April 25, 2004)

In fact, a small but steady stream of expatriates does return to Rotuma following retirement. Some play an active role in political affairs and have become community leaders, while others are content to settle into a quiet, comfortable existence.

Submissions to the website's literary section frequently resort to romanticized imagery, with particular places featured. Here is a portion of a poem by a seventeen-year-old Rotuman girl who spent her first ten years growing up on Rotuma before moving to Fiji. She sent the poem from Al Ain in the United Arab Emirates, where she and her father recently joined her mother, who is employed as a nurse there:

So many good times I've spent on the island
ten whole years
I did spend my childhood
in a place that is always
PARADISE to me
ROTUMA I call HOME
Traveling abroad is always a clear view
but the best view

is standing at the *ka'ta*
a rocky bridge
where Lulu Beach facing
Split Island
Oh! What a beauty

Or the view of
Islepi
in Motusa
With every reason to fall in love with the beauty
of the beach

Or the view at
Oinafa
the white clear sandy beach
with a glimpse of Haua Island

Such amazing sites
I would love to see one more time

I miss the Christmas holidays
when the clock strikes 6
we all disappear with our *hafali*¹³
ready for *fara*¹⁴
how much fun we'd have
roaming from place to place
cheering each family with a *fara* song

Or the times we'd run just to escape
the buckets of water
coming towards our way
good times . . . good times

I really miss the sea
when every afternoon
we'd gather at the '*aita*¹⁵
at Pep Haua
for a swim
joking with each other
telling sorts of funny stories
What a life I will always treasure (Youth Corner: Good Old Days,
April 2007)

This kind of nostalgic imagery plays a key role in preserving the cultural identity of Rotumans abroad.¹⁶ But Rotumans not only are blessed with a truly beautiful island to nourish their sense of themselves as a privileged people but also can point to the success of so many Rotumans in cosmopolitan arenas. The long-term reputation of Rotumans for diligence and hard work—harkening back to the days when Rotuman sailors were favored by European ship captains—has served to promulgate a positive image that serves as a solid, unambiguous foundation for Rotuman cultural identity.

Cultural Identity

What is interesting about conversations regarding Rotuman identity on the website is the importance accorded to dance performances.¹⁷ This should come as no surprise, as dance is perhaps the most significant public representation of Rotuman culture to the outside world. (See also Wolfgang Kempf 2012 [this issue] for examples of the importance of music and dance for cultural identity.) The discussion focuses on the authenticity of particular performances. For example, in a letter to the editor of the *Fiji Times* posted on the Rotuman Forum, Monifa Fiu criticized a dance performance in Noumea, New Caledonia, by the Rotuman contingent:

Referring to the Festival of Arts preview on Sunday's *Dateline* Program,¹⁸ which featured cultural items performed by the Fiji troupe at Noumea, it is disconcerting to see a cultural dance performed by Rotumans to be a hip-swaying *tautoga*. I expressed my dismay at the absurdity of the Rotuman dance being mistaken for Hawaiian hula and got a somewhat strange reply to my inquisitiveness: "Du! Ka 'ae ma sei hanue?" Translated, it means: "Where have I been, things have changed!" Of course change is inevitable; however, for culture and traditions, it encompasses the very essence of a Rotuman, I believe! For many, they are proud of whom they are and succeeding in life. As an involved young Rotuman, I am proud of who I am. I come from a small island some 465 km north of the Fiji Islands. Despite the mixed Polynesian ancestry, Rotuman culture is different with similarities to sister Polynesia. It is not acceptable that for a Pasifika audience, where a platform is created solely for the interchange of culture and education, Rotumans representing Rotuma falsely portray a cultural dance for a hula. As an involved young Rotuman, I urge young people to be proud of who they are! For the three "sina" who performed, it was a good show, but don't kid yourselves that it was

Rotuman at all. It is unacceptable, especially when you represent not yourselves but the Rotuman family for the world to see. (RF: Rotuman Identity, November 26, 2000)

In defense of the performance, David Rigamoto replied in a letter to the *Fiji Times* (December 5, 2000) that a learned Rotuman elder had been approached but declined to coach the troupe on the grounds that there were too few participants and too little time before the performance, so they opted for a “contemporary” over a “traditional” dance style, but even he admitted that the troupe was “the second fiddle.”

A second discussion of Rotuman identity likewise focused on what was regarded as a misleading performance. The topic was introduced in January 1998 in response to a documentary by David Gardiner titled *Rotuma: Our Identity*, which was aired on Australian television. A forum contributor named Sani initiated the conversation with an expression of dismay over the song that introduced the video:

I for one was ready to give the documentary “a fair go”. Well, we were all in for a shock—big time! What a way to introduce OUR island Home—with a song praising Sa‘moa!!! (What the *fara* song actually means I have no idea, only that it is supposed to be a Samoan song. I know nothing about the Samoan language but I won’t be surprised if they find offence to the way their language is sung.) We were put off and disgusted and had to endure this outrage for what seemed a real long time. (RF: Rotuman Identity, January 8, 1998)

In response, Saumaru Foster replied,

Whilst it’s true that introducing a documentary called “Rotuma: Our Identity” with an incorrectly sung Samoan song might seem crass, it in fact is not. Let’s face it, that particular song (and the way it was sung incorrectly) is for all intents and purposes a Rotuman song. It’s been a popular song on the island for at least fifty years. So, perhaps it is part of the Rotuman identity to incorrectly sing that particular Samoan song! (RF: Rotuman Identity, January 26, 1998)

To this, an anonymous contributor responded that “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” and “London Bridge Is Falling Down” are also well known on Rotuma

but could hardly be considered parts of Rotuman identity. In fact, the commentators were highly critical of the entire documentary, which they considered to be superficial and misleading. This was neatly expressed by another anonymous contributor who commented,

I thought my Rotuman identity stems a lot deeper than fifty years.
I guess the song is quite fitting to a program covering a skin-deep
identity of Rotuma. (RF: Rotuman Identity, January 28, 1998)¹⁹

The issue of language and identity comes up in another context, that of teaching Rotuman language to children growing up abroad. Thus, Sefo Avaiki, who lives in Nanaimo, Canada, posted the following commentary:

Who am I? Where am I from? When my wife and I moved to Canada in 1981, our two older children were 6 and 2 years old. Upon arrival we made it a rule that there will be no English spoken in the house. Those educated in Rotuma will remember the strict rule of English only in the school compound, especially Malhaha High. Anyway, it wasn't easy after the birth of our third child because of the daily exposure to Canadian culture and language. It was worse when the children grew older, but we were firm in our decision to enforce the house rule. Today, though they speak Rotuman with a Canadian accent, they will not blame us for not teaching them the language. They have been back home and have realised the value of understanding and communicating in the language. Does their ability to speak make them more Rotuman than those that don't? I don't think so, but I think it enhances their ROTUMAN-NESS. We have always explained to them the importance of their identity, that it is inside, and be proud because that is all they will ever be—ROTUMAN. I know that I'm more Rotuman now than I was growing up in Rotuma. Why, you ask? I have now realised the value of what I have always taken for granted, my island Rotuma. I know I'm lucky, I have the best of two worlds. (RF: Rotuman Identity, March 14, 1998)

Conclusion

What we have tried to highlight in this article are the issues that are of special concern to diasporic Rotumans as seen primarily through the filter of their contributions to the Rotuma Website. In one way or another, each

of the issues discussed implicates a living connection to Rotuma, either tangibly or symbolically. We do not mean to imply that all diasporic Rotumans have the same concerns, but we do believe, on the basis of our research among overseas Rotumans, that the themes we have documented are broadly representative. One further caveat: We have cited only a small portion of the entire corpus of postings from the Rotuman Forum. Many other, more specific issues have been raised and discussed in addition to those we have selected for this article. A full appreciation of the range of concerns would require surveying the entire forum, which can be accessed at <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum1.html>.

If there is one theme that stands out in the postings, it is the tendency to promulgate an image of Rotuma as a pristine paradise that existed in an imagined past and is threatened by contemporary trends. The imagery is of a beautiful, bountiful island unsullied by rubbish of any kind, of a people who freely share and care for one another, of customs that are uniformly uplifting. It is against this image that complaints about environmental pollution, economic development, land issues, the authenticity of cultural performances, and many other expressions of concern need to be understood. While idealization of one's homeland is not an unfamiliar theme among other Pacific Islanders, it appears to be particularly prominent among diasporic Rotumans.

We suggest that the Internet, including such vehicles as the Rotuma Website, greatly facilitates the construction of such an idealized, iconic image. The presence of a common electronic space for nurturing such an image—a space in which the image is continually reinforced by selectively beautiful photographs, odes to the island in poetry and song, and effusive reports by visitors of the Islanders' hospitality—easily lends itself to a utopian perspective. The motivation for diasporic Rotumans to latch on to such an image is clear enough. It provides the foundation for a favorable cultural identity, one that helps to support a positive self-image. If our roots are so distinguished, we have a firm basis for feeling very good about ourselves.

The Rotuma Website nurtures a positive cultural identity in another way as well. It is full of reports of Rotuman successes not only economically and occupationally but as athletes and artists as well, with whole sections of the site devoted to such accomplishments. There is very little evidence on the site of failures among diasporic Rotumans or of social problems. In part, this is undoubtedly a matter of selectivity with regard to what is reported, but it also is a reflection of the considerable success expatriate Rotumans have enjoyed in the places to which they have migrated.

NOTES

1. We use the terms “diasporic Rotumans” and “Rotumans abroad” in reference to individuals who have emigrated from Rotuma and their descendants. We specifically have avoided using the term “migrant” because it implies movement and does not include the offspring of emigrants who were born abroad.

2. For an overview of Rotuman emigration, see Howard and Rensel 1994; 2007: 324–29. Because Rotumans have had an extremely high rate of marriage overseas, many of those we include in this estimate are the children of mixed marriages and may not identify themselves primarily as Rotumans, although our experience suggests that most take considerable pride in their Rotuman heritage.

3. For background information about the Rotuma Website, see Howard 1999, 2002. The URL for the site is <http://www.rotuma.net>.

4. As of May 19, 2011, there were 1,450 members in the Rotuman Facebook group.

5. For an extensive discussion of online power relations, of which our exercise of control of the Rotuma Website is but one example, see Franklin 2004, chap. 7.

6. For a more general contrast between the Kava Bowl and the Rotuma Website, see Clark 2005: 36–37.

7. Clark’s survey of Rotuma Website visitors in 2005 yielded 151 usable responses. Ninety-seven percent of respondents indicated that they considered themselves part of the Rotuman community. Most respondents were born in either Fiji (47 percent) or Rotuma (37 percent). They accessed the website mainly from Australia (33 percent), Fiji (23 percent), or the United States (16 percent), but other countries of access included New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom, Norway, Sierra Leone, Egypt, Bahrain, Tonga, Scotland, and Jamaica. Most respondents fell into age brackets of twenty-six to thirty-four (25 percent) or thirty-five to forty-nine (39 percent), but a good percentage were also fifty years or older (24 percent). Some 13 percent of respondents did not reveal their age (Clark 2005, 24).

8. See Ogden 1999 for a discussion of issues associated with the introduction of the Internet into Pacific Islands.

9. These categories are to some degree arbitrary, although our fieldwork experience among diasporic Rotumans confirms their significance. In our assessment of the forum postings, thirty of the forty-five topics relate directly to one or more of these categories. The remaining fifteen topics address specialized issues, such as a proposal for having a Rotuman gallery at the Fiji Museum, the use of the Rotuman language, and so on.

10. Rotuma was declared a port of entry in 2010 as a prelude to facilitating an export trade with Tuvalu. At the time of this writing, customs and immigration facilities were in preparation. However, transportation to and from the island remains problematic.

11. In 2009, a Rotuma Legislation Review team was appointed to receive submissions regarding amendments to the act. However, land issues are now much more complex as

a result of the potential commercial value of land. Proposals to build tourist accommodations, including a hotel, and the promise of a lucrative trade agreement with Tuvalu in which Rotumans would export produce from the land have raised the stakes. In addition, the rights in land of Rotumans, particularly part-Rotumans who reside abroad, have made the issue of defining who is a Rotuman of central importance. See Howard 2011.

12. *Tieri*, *ragkari*, *sea*, and *kori* are names of fragrant Rotuman plants. For a revealing example of the significance of fragrances for cultural identity, see Kuehling 2012 (this issue).

13. *Haʻfali* are sarongs.

14. *Fara* is a custom during the Christmas holidays in which youths go from village to village and sing and dance for the entertainment of selected households.

15. *Aita* means “the tree.”

16. Recent psychological research into nostalgia suggests that it is on balance, a positive, adaptive emotion that may help diasporic Rotumans to cope with challenging circumstances. See Sedikides et al. 2008. See also Miller and Slater 2000 for a discussion of the ways in which diasporic groups harness new communication media to create and spread ideal-typical constructs of culture, homeland, family, and identity.

17. For a discussion of identity issues among Tongans and Samoans on the Internet, see Franklin 2004, chap. 6. See also Lee 2007.

18. *Dateline* was a Fiji government-sponsored program shown on Fiji Television Channel One on Sundays. The program that Fiu referred to featured Fiji's cultural presentations by the various ethnic communities in Noumea during the Arts Festival. The Rotuman item, as stated by Monifa, was not a *tautoga* (traditional group dance) but a *mak Rarotonga* (Rarotongan-style dance introduced to Rotuma in the 1950s) performed by Rotuman representatives.

19. The response of Rotumans to a video in May 2011, *Salat se Rotuma* (Voyage to Rotuma), aired by Tagata Pasifika in New Zealand, has been in marked contrast. Virtually all the Rotumans who have viewed it and commented on the Rotuma Group's Facebook page have praised it as both a moving and an accurate portrayal of Rotuman culture.

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