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Rotumans in Australia and New Zealand: The problem of community formation

ABSTRACT

As members of the Fiji polity, people from the isolated island of Rotuma have been able to move freely about the archipelago, leading to stepwise-migration internationally, with Australia and New Zealand as primary destinations. Rotuman men engaged in the pearl-diving industry in the Torres Strait in the late nineteenth-century, who married local women, were among the first documented migrants to Australia. Following World War II, a steady stream of Rotumans, many of them married to white spouses, emigrated and formed communities in urban settings like Sydney, Brisbane, Auckland, and elsewhere, where they have been remarkably successful. Their very success in the work force, along with high rates of intermarriage and dispersed households, makes getting together a challenging prospect, requiring a strong motivation, effective leadership, and a commitment to preserving their Rotuman cultural heritage.

KEYWORDS: Rotuma; diaspora; cultural preservation; cultural identity, Australia, New Zealand

The island of Rotuma is located on the western fringe of Polynesia, about 465 kilometres north of the main islands of Fiji. Politically, Rotuma was governed as part of the Colony of Fiji since its cession to Great Britain in 1881 and has been part of Fiji since the country's independence in

1970. Although its linguistic affiliations remain somewhat of an enigma (see Grace 1959; Schmidt 1999), the culture of the island reveals a closer affinity with Samoa, Tonga, Futuna, and Uvea than with Fiji or the Melanesian islands to the west. 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. 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).

Labour recruiters came to Rotuma from all over the Pacific, and Rotumans were employed in such places as the Sandwich Islands (now Hawai'i) and Samoa, but after cession in 1881, the island was closed as a port of entry and labour recruiters ceased to call there. All traffic between Rotuma and the outside world was diverted through the Colony of Fiji. Although most of the men who left the island—either as sailors or to take employment abroad (for example, in the pearl diving industry in the Torres Strait)—returned home after some time away, a significant number did not. They left ships in Australia, New Zealand, England, and elsewhere and took employment, married local women, and settled into their new lives. 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 homebound relatives were concerned. For whatever reasons—limited literacy curtailing letter writing; transportation into the Pacific being too complicated, sporadic, and unpredictable; Rotumans being extraordinarily adaptive to and successful in new environments; or a combination of factors—communication was extremely limited at best.

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 centres 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 birth rate remained high, which strained the island's carrying capacity. Thus, whereas the 1956 Fiji census found 68 percent of Rotumans in the country living on their home island, by 2007 the figure had dropped to 19 percent. The overall number of Rotumans in Fiji as a whole (including Rotuma) increased during this time span from 4,422 to 10,137.

Fiji has been a way station for many Rotumans who have emigrated elsewhere, including Australia and New Zealand, where substantial identifiable communities have developed. Rotuman communities of lesser size and varying cohesion have also 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, and a few families with Rotuman members settled in other places, including Sweden, Norway, and the United Arab Emirates, for example. While no figures are available for Rotumans outside of Fiji, we estimate their numbers to be around 2,000–3,000.

On the whole, Rotumans have been remarkably successful in adapting to their host countries' social, cultural, and economic contexts. But today they face a different challenge: that of maintaining their communal identity as Rotumans. In this article, we review how and when Rotumans migrated to Australia and New Zealand, how they have integrated into the fabric of

those countries' socioeconomic environments, and how they work at maintaining their language, culture, and identity in contexts where 'Rotuman' is not a well-known category. Our central concern is with the obstacles standing in the way of community formation in these countries and in assessing the degree to which these obstacles have been overcome.

Our analysis is based on multiple visits to Rotumans in Australia and New Zealand, as well as elsewhere around the globe, dating back to 1994 as part of an ongoing research project on the Rotuman diaspora. This represents an extension of our long-term research on Rotuma and Rotumans in Fiji beginning in 1959, when Alan started fieldwork for his dissertation. In previous publications we have discussed in detail issues of adaptation and identity in foreign contexts (Howard and Rensel 2001, 2004), while paying special attention to the conditions and processes that shape cultural identity. We have also focused on which aspects of Rotuman culture have been privileged in its reconstitution abroad, and which activities have been singled out for preservation as symbolic of group identity. Our other publications dealing with various aspects of the Rotuman diaspora are Howard 1961; Howard and Howard 1977; Rensel 1993; Howard and Rensel 1994, 2007, 2012. All of these publications are available on the Rotuma Website, created and maintained by Alan since 1996 (www.rotuma.net).

ROTUMANS IN AUSTRALIA

The first focused migration of Rotumans abroad was to the Torres Strait Islands, where they participated in the pearl-diving industry in the late nineteenth-century. Estimates of the number of Rotuman men involved range from 100 to 200 at given times (Gordon 1884; Allen 1895), although an investigation of ships' logs by Makereta Mua suggests that the overall flow was

much higher (Mua 2007: 35). While most of the men engaged in the pearling industry eventually returned to Rotuma, a number of them remained and married local Torres Strait Islanders. An unknown number of others settled on the Australian mainland.

By 1940, Part-Rotuman Torres Strait (PRTS) Islanders formed a new elite in the Torres Strait and worked as priests, schoolteachers, storekeepers, and policemen (Shnukal 1992: 24). For all practical purposes they were cut off from contact with Rotuma, and, according to Mua (who did research in the Torres Strait in 2004), most PRTS Islanders she interviewed saw themselves first and foremost as Torres Strait Islanders because of their links to land in the Torres Strait (Mua 2007: 40). Nevertheless, awareness of their Rotuman forebears was very much in evidence. In speeches made at Mua's welcoming ceremony, and in the interviews, frequent references were made to the many contributions Rotumans had made to the Torres Straits in areas of music and dance, gardening, cooking methods, feasting, and funerary rites. The PRTS Islanders also praised their Rotuman forebears for being industrious, hard working, and generous. But although they expressed pride in their Rotuman ancestry, for pragmatic reasons their sense of Rotuman identity remained submerged in favour of their status as Torres Strait Islanders (Mua 2007: 76).

Surnames were not used on Rotuma until the late twentieth-century, but they were required in Australia, including the Torres Strait. Most Rotumans used their father's primary name (the one he was known by for this purpose), but a number of Rotumans in Torres Strait who married local women took the surname 'Rotumah' (an earlier spelling of the island's name). The name served not only as an indicator of a man's place of origin but also as a badge of cultural identity (Mua 2007: 45). Today there are a significant number of individuals scattered around Australia with the Rotumah surname; a search of Facebook on 6 September 2013 listed

75 persons with that surname, and a group called 'Rotumah family history' had 82 members. This is but one indication of the role that social media has played in reinvigorating a concern on the part of PRTS Islanders for their Rotuman roots, with a sharing of photos of Rotuman and part-Rotuman ancestors, information about and photos from Rotuma, and postings expressing a keen interest and pride in their common heritage. In addition to using electronic media to explore and reflect on the group's cultural roots, a number of PRTS Islanders have travelled to Fiji and Rotuma and have been hosted by the descendants of their common ancestors. As yet there have been no concerted efforts on the part of PRTS Islanders, or on the part of the more recently established Rotuman communities in Australia, to integrate the groups' activities, although a sense of common bonds seems to be growing.

A later immigration stream began in the 1950s and accelerated throughout the remainder of the twentieth-century. It followed two trajectories, distinguished by gender. The majority of Rotuman women who migrated to Australia married Australian men. Many met their husbands in Fiji before emigrating; others went to Australia for schooling or work and met their husbands there. In her study of Rotuman migrants in the Sydney area, Seferosa Michael estimated that '70–80% of all migration to Australia has been the result of marriage to non-Rotuman spouses, most of whom were Australian citizens' (Michael 1991: 8-9). Australian men working in Fiji mostly occupied managerial positions with firms and banks or served in professional capacities. They were generally of middle-class background, and, on returning to Australia, they brought their wives into middle-class Australian society, to which the women successfully adapted. These women and their children adjusted to mainstream Aussie culture and did not consider themselves members of a disadvantaged ethnic group. The circumstances of migration to Australia have been somewhat different for Rotuman men. Many of the first migrants came as

sailors and jumped ship. Some were caught and sent home in disgrace, but others married Australian women and settled down. Most eventually legalised their status, although some did not do so for many years, placing them in a tenuous social position in the meantime. Compared to Rotuman women in Australia, Rotuman men spanned a broader range in the occupational structure, from unskilled workers to positions of management. On the whole, however, our research suggests that they aspired to middle-class living standards, which most achieved. As Agnes Hannan (who did research on Rotumans in Australia in the early 2000s), noted:

The Rotuman community in Australia has contributed strongly to Australian society. Amongst their numbers are ministers of religion, accountants, lawyers, teachers, administrators, nurses, travel agents and other occupations from blue-collar to millionaire property owners. Rotumans are known for their ambition and their desire to do well at whatever they turn their hand to. (Hannan 2008: 178)

By far the largest Rotuman concentration in Australia at the end of the twentieth-century—consisting of well over one hundred families in which at least one person was of Rotuman extraction—was in Sydney, where migrants organized around churches. Rotuman Wesleyans initially joined a Polynesian congregation established by Rev. Jione Langi, who was assigned by the Fiji Methodist Church to serve migrants from Fiji in Sydney before he was posted to New Zealand in 1985. When the various Polynesian communities grew large enough, they split off, each establishing its own church and supporting its own minister. Soon after inception, the Rotuman congregation divided over the issue of language. Whereas a core group of cultural conservatives insisted that services be conducted in the Rotuman language

exclusively, others requested English be used as well. The latter group started their own congregation, without benefit of an ordained minister. Catholic migrants in the Sydney area organized into a social group that met periodically; not until October 1999 was the first Catholic mass conducted entirely in the Rotuman language. Other communities emerged in Brisbane, Melbourne, Adelaide, and Perth as Rotumans moved to these cities. At the time of her research, Hannan estimated there were approximately 500 Rotumans in Australia (Hannan 2008: 175). The population of Rotumans in Brisbane and its surroundings has especially grown rapidly in recent years. In each of these locations, efforts have been made to organize activities and get-togethers on a more-or-less regular basis, despite the fact that people are dispersed over the urban sprawls that characterize these cities.

Rotumans, along with other non-white immigrants, experienced a shift in policies and attitudes in Australia over the years. During the post–World War II years, Australian immigration policy was exclusionist; the so-called White Australia policy prevailed. The category ‘Rotuman’ was essentially unknown; to respond ‘Rotuman’ when asked one’s ethnicity by white Australians required further explanation and was generally avoided. One could say ‘Fijian’, ‘Pacific Islander’, or ‘Polynesian’, or, if light-skinned enough (and especially if one had a European-sounding last name), one could pass as an ‘Aussie’. For the most part, however, it was best to avoid ethnic categorisation whenever possible. With the demise of the White Australia policy and its replacement by a commitment to making Australia a ‘multicultural’ society, the position of Rotuman migrants changed. It became somewhat chic to be ‘ethnic’.

Multiculturalism encouraged an emphasis on distinctiveness as opposed to identification with the unmarked, connotatively bland concept of ‘Aussie’. Rotumans have therefore been encouraged to reevaluate their ethnic identity, to organize into groups based on their Rotuman

heritage, and to give public cultural performances of various kinds. They are still confronted with the fact that, for most white Australians, Rotuma is unknown; thus, in most encounters they still identify themselves as from Fiji or Polynesia. But overall the social climate has become more favourable for maintaining an overt Rotuman self-identification.

Nevertheless, maintaining and perpetuating their Rotuman cultural heritage in the environment that is modern urban Australia is of great concern to most first-generation migrants. Of particular concern is the preservation of the Rotuman language and the cultural values underpinning interpersonal relations that are at the heart of notions of Rotuman-ness. As Hannan put it:

The idea of Rotuman-ness and the Rotuman ability to maintain their cultural identity concerns the Australian Rotuman elders. Their unease lies mainly with the acculturation of the younger members of the Rotuman community. They believe that peer pressure at school, intermarriage into Australia's increasingly multicultural society and the death of the Rotuman-born older generation may reduce the ability of the second and later generation Australian-born Rotumans to maintain the customs of a culture grown in a different land. Already language loss is apparent in Australian-born Rotumans and efforts are being made by older Rotumans to address it by making lessons in the Rotuman language available. These have not always been successful or long lasting as parents are increasingly busy at work. As well, members of the community do not always live close to one another and this occasions time-consuming travel to language lessons. (Hannan 2008: 197–198)

ROTUMANS IN NEW ZEALAND

In 1994, with the assistance of Rev. Jione Langi (who had become pastor-at-large for the Fiji Wesleyans in New Zealand after being transferred from Australia), we were able to identify 125 families in New Zealand that included at least one person of Rotuman extraction. Langi also helped provide information regarding year of immigration to the country, occupation, and spouse's ethnicity if married. Our information on year of immigration indicates that Rotuman migration to New Zealand began in the 1950s and reached a peak during the 1970s and 1980s, when New Zealand immigration policy was more lax than it is now. For those on whom we have such data (N=70), 20.0 percent arrived before 1970, 35.7 percent came in the 1970s, 38.6 percent came in the 1980s, and only 5.7 percent immigrated during the first four years of the 1990s. The majority of immigrant Rotumans (55.2%) settled in the Auckland area, with smaller but nevertheless vital communities in and around Napier and Wellington.

Of the 74 Rotuman women for whom we have marital information, 40 were married to or had been married to European New Zealanders (Pakeha), 15 to Rotuman or part-Rotuman men, 16 to other Polynesians (including Fijians or part-Fijians), 2 to Indians, and 1 to a Chinese man. Of the 36 Rotuman men in our survey, 14 were married to Pakeha women, 10 to Rotumans, and 12 to other Islanders. A higher proportion of women thus married Pakeha spouses (**55%** compared to **39%** of men). Rotumans who were married to Rotumans or part-Rotumans accounted for only 23 percent of the New Zealand couples we identified, which suggests, along with our data concerning Rotumans in Australia, that for Rotumans intermarriage and migration are strongly correlated.

Rotumans in New Zealand have, like their counterparts in Australia, largely been integrated into the urban middle class. This is reflected in our data on occupation, which show a

preponderance of both men and women, and their spouses, in managerial/supervisory, professional, or white-collar occupations (75.0% of Rotuman women, 70.6% of their spouses; 55.9% of Rotuman men, 85.7% of their spouses).

The 2013 New Zealand census provides a revealing update of the data we collected.

Major findings regarding Rotumans in New Zealand are as follows:

- **The population of Rotumans in New Zealand increased from slightly over 500 in 2001 to slightly over 600 in 2006 and to 783 in 2013.**
- **The median age of Rotumans in 2013 was 25.6; 44.7 percent were male and 55.3 percent female.**
- **Of those under the age of 15, 56.3 percent were New Zealand born, while this was the case for only 21.9 percent of those between the ages of 15–64 and for none of those over the age of 65.**
- **In 2013, 93.1 percent of Rotumans lived on the North Island, with the majority (59.0%) in the Auckland Region, followed by the Waikato Region (10.7%) and the Wellington Region (9.6%).**
- **In 2013, 37.9 percent said Rotuman was their only identity, 35.2 percent said they belonged to two ethnic groups, and 27.2 percent said they belonged to three or more ethnic groups. Of those aged 65 and over, 81.0 percent said Rotuman was their only ethnicity, while this was the case for only 15.3 percent under the age of 15.**
- **Of those with mixed ethnicity, 49.4 percent combined only with other Pacific peoples (excluding New Zealand Maoris), 25.3 percent combined with Europeans (Pakehas), 5.0 percent with NZ Maoris, and 7.3 percent with Asians. An additional 13.4 percent combined with Pacific peoples and two or more other ethnicities.**

- **While nearly everyone claimed proficiency—ability to hold a conversation about everyday things—in the English language (96.1%), proficiency in Rotuman was reported by 30.1 percent of those identifying themselves as Rotuman. Among those born in New Zealand, only 4.7 percent claimed proficiency in Rotuman, compared to 55.9 percent of those born abroad (mainly in Rotuma and Fiji).**
- **For Rotumans over the age of 15, 84.9 percent had a formal qualification (level 1–4 certificate or above) compared with 70.1 percent for other Pacific Islanders and 79.1 percent for the New Zealand population as a whole. A bachelor’s degree or higher was held by 15.7 percent of Rotumans, compared to 8.0 percent for other Pacific Islanders and 20.0 percent for the total population of New Zealand.**
- **The most common occupations for Rotumans were professional (21.8%), clerical and administrative (16.8%), and managerial (14.9%). Men were most likely to be employed as technicians and trades workers (20.4%), while women were most likely to be employed as professionals (24.5%).**
- **The median income was \$34,700 for men and \$23,000 for women, with the majority (63.7%) coming from wages, salary, commissions, bonuses, etc. The unemployment rate was 7.4 percent, lower than that for other Pacific Islanders (10.0%), but higher than the New Zealand average (4.8%).**

Circumstances for Rotumans in New Zealand have been affected by the social visibility of the indigenous Maori population. Although the initial division between Pakeha and Maori remained the anchor of New Zealand ethnic distinctions, substantial immigration of other Polynesians (particularly Cook Islanders, Samoans, Tongans, and the people of Niue) following World War II has made the situation more complex. As in Australia, ‘Rotuman’ was a largely

unknown category in New Zealand, and migrants generally identified themselves as being from Fiji or Polynesia, but the connotations associated with being Polynesian in New Zealand are complicated by ambivalent feelings frequently expressed by Pakeha. The association of Maori and Samoans in many people's minds with various kinds of social problems has offset proclaimed liberal commitments to a society in which race is of no consequence. Rotumans found that the Polynesian component of their identity could be problematic at times and contextually variable. More recently, the Rotuman presence in New Zealand has been given a higher profile as a result of some *Tagata Pasifika* coverage on national television, including segments on Rotuman language and dance and a video of Rotuman staff member Ngaire Fuata's first visit to her parental homeland.

A recent vignette on *Tagata Pasifika* sums up the current state of affairs for many Rotumans in New Zealand in relation to their cultural identity. Two young Rotumans attending a cultural celebration were asked by the interviewer, 'Have you been to Rotuma yet?'. 'No', the children responded. 'Do you know where Rotuma is?'. 'No', they said again. 'Do you know how to spell Rotuma?'. 'No', they giggled. 'What have you learned so far with today's celebration?'. 'I've learned about the dancing and about family and friends hanging out together', the young girl answered. 'Are you proud to be Rotuman?'. 'Yes', the children nodded, and then repeated firmly, 'Yes'.

GETTING TOGETHER

In both Australia and New Zealand, households are geographically dispersed, within cities as well as around the country, and most adults spend their weekdays employed as wage earners, attending school, or running their households. Such conditions leave little time for socialising,

other than with workmates, schoolmates, and neighbours, few of whom are likely to be Rotuman. This means that for Rotumans to organize themselves into communities, and for them to plan events that are distinctively Rotuman, they are generally restricted to weekends.

Only in the larger communities like Sydney, Brisbane, and Auckland is the population concentrated enough to sustain church congregations served by a Rotuman minister who conducts services in the vernacular language. Rotuman congregations, where they exist, allow people to socialise with one another, reinforcing ties and heightening cultural awareness. In such cases, Sunday is a day when one's Rotuman identity can be foregrounded, but the majority of Rotumans in Australia and New Zealand attend churches where services are conducted by ministers or priests unfamiliar with their language or culture. For these individuals, the only time that can be allocated for Rotuman events is Saturday. In addition, Saturday is the only day available for events that are inclusive of nearly all religious denominations.

Under such circumstances, organising activities or events is no simple task. People often have conflicting commitments, even if they desire to spend time with their fellow Rotumans. Their children may be engaged in sports or other activities during the weekends that pull them away, and non-Rotuman spouses may have obligations to *their* families and friends. Individuals' level of commitment to the local Rotuman community varies greatly, so that while some are eager participants, others have to be coaxed to become or remain involved or even to attend an occasional event. Keeping a Rotuman community viable thus requires the leadership of committed individuals who are prepared to take the time and spend the energy to organize activities, to keep people informed, and to take responsibility for raising and allocating funds to meet expenses incurred by the group. Since chiefly titles on Rotuma are specific to localities there and do not retain their authority away from the island, leadership is a delicate matter, and

concern over the management of money in particular has plagued overseas Rotuman communities wherever they have emerged.

The experience of Rotumans in New Zealand provides an example. In the 1970s, a first attempt was made to organize the growing Rotuman enclave in Auckland, but the effort was ill fated and short lived; a second attempt in the 1980s also met with failure. Factional strife reportedly broke out, leading to disenchantment and bad feelings. Then, following the appointment of Rev. Jione Langi to Wellington in 1985, a gradual process of reincorporation took place. Reverend Langi made an all-out effort to identify Rotuman families in New Zealand and to help them create an overarching community. In 1992, he was appointed pastor-at-large to the Fiji Methodist community in New Zealand and relocated to Auckland. He established the Rotuman New Zealand Fellowship as a formal organisation with a written constitution, dues, and biannual meetings. The Fellowship has hosted Rotuman groups traveling to New Zealand, organized a Christmas sojourn to Fiji and Rotuma, and held fund-raising drives for various purposes. It is nonsectarian in character and divided into three chapters based on regions within New Zealand (Auckland, Wellington, Waikato/Bay of Plenty).

Despite the charismatic leadership of Reverend Langi, periodic disputes threatened the integrity of the Fellowship. Following a trouble-plagued group trip to Rotuma in 1993, during which limited transportation to the island required some families to remain in Fiji proper, several members protested and dropped out of the Fellowship, threatening group cohesion. Only after Langi was reassigned to Fiji did most of the protestors return to the Fellowship, which presently appears to be strong and active under the leadership of a layman, and the annual meetings, hosted by each regional group in turn, are eagerly anticipated and well attended.

Intermarriage can also be an impediment to the formation of viable communities. First, it creates conditions in which the Rotuman language is subordinated to English or another common language. Language use is a central feature of cultural identity; not speaking Rotuman on a daily basis means missing the opportunity of bringing into regular focus concepts and ideas that are constant reminders of one's Rotuman heritage. Second, intermarriage results in half of one's kin network being non-Rotuman, and thus one's association with Rotumans is likely to be considerably diluted. The more culturally different in-laws are, the more one has to adjust one's own behavioral style to get along, perhaps muting that which is most Rotuman in one's character. Third, spouses raised in the Western cosmopolitan mode often find the extended family orientation that prevails in Polynesian societies burdensome and intrusive. They may resent frequent demands on their own nuclear family for contributions to various events and causes and may not welcome visits from their spouses' kin. They may also discourage their spouses' participation in any Rotuman cultural events. This is not always the case, of course. We know of several European spouses who have learned the Rotuman language, who are themselves eager participants in activities within the Rotuman community, and who make periodic 'pilgrimages' to Rotuma. But these seem to be the exception rather than the rule. For the most part, the high degree of intermarriage appears to diminish migrants' links to their network of Rotuman kinsmen and peers and to weaken their sense of Rotuman identity. In addition, their part-Rotuman children generally do not speak the language and can easily dissociate themselves from their Rotuman ancestry.

The importance of language cannot be overemphasized. A major goal of our recent research has been to determine which aspects of Rotuman culture were being singled out for preservation as symbolic of group identity. When we have asked the question directly, the first

thing mentioned by most migrants, particularly those of the older generation who grew up on the island, is preservation of the Rotuman language. It is key for many reasons. Not only does language encode aspects that are unique to the culture, but it also provides the nuances of communication that are at the heart of intimacy for those who grew up on Rotuma. But teaching the language to the children of migrants is a difficult task, in part because the language is phonetically and grammatically complex due to metathesis, which creates unusual vowel diphthongs that have grammatical significance. Still, efforts are made to preserve the language by using it as much as possible in informal settings, by teaching children Rotuman songs, and by holding classes for anyone interested. In Australia there is a weekly radio program broadcast mostly in the Rotuman language, and Rotuman is a frequent medium of communication in social media on the Internet. Those who are motivated to learn the language can take advantage of an interactive Rotuman-English dictionary on the Rotuma Website (www.rotuma.net), a website created by Alan Howard in 1996, and the Rotuman Language and Culture Website (www.neiu.edu/~rotuman/) created by Marit Vamarasi, a linguist married to a Rotuman man.

It is important to note that ties to Rotuma and to Rotumans in Fiji remain strong for a great many migrants and their foreign-born children. Visits in both directions are common, while donations of goods and services, as well as remittances, maintain a steady flow to the home island. For the Australian- and New Zealand-born offspring of migrants, visits to Rotuma can take on the aura of a pilgrimage, ‘a return to the beginning, to the bosom of the family, the hearth and a reification of identity’ (Hannan 2008: 250). And in recent years, social media like Facebook have become vehicles facilitating and reinforcing ties via the sharing of information (often in the Rotuman language) and photos. Over **eighty** Rotuman groups are listed on Facebook, with the largest, ‘Rotumans on Facebook’, having over **5,000** members. (However,

because Rotuma itself still does not have ready access to the Internet, those on the island have not been active participants.). A general theme portraying Rotuma as a kind of paradise pervades the postings, adding to the attractiveness of Rotuman identity. In addition to individuals' postings, groups use Facebook to discuss and announce plans for meetings and uniquely Rotuman celebrations.

CONCLUSION

Our thesis in this article is that for Rotumans in Australia and New Zealand the maintenance of a viable Rotuman identity, and preservation of the Rotuman cultural heritage, does not occur naturally; it requires conscious motivation, organisational skills, and a lot of work. Several factors pose a challenge: the fact that a high proportion of Rotumans are married to non-Rotumans who do not share their cultural knowledge and may not be prepared to accept Rotuman cultural values; the geographical dispersal of households within cities and around countries; the relative success of Rotumans economically and socially, which allows them to blend in easily in their host societies; the lack of institutionalized hierarchy within diasporic Rotuman communities; and the comparative complexity of the Rotuman language, which, along with an absence of adequate teaching materials, makes it difficult to learn as a second language.

Indeed, it is a tribute to Rotumans in Australia and New Zealand that they have put in the effort to create vibrant communities in all locations where there are enough eligible households. It is testimony to an unwavering motivation to promote a heritage in which they take great pride as well as a willingness to make whatever sacrifices it takes. In addition to the sheer pleasure that derives from getting together with their cultural mates, they share a pride in the overwhelming

success of Rotumans worldwide and in the (somewhat romanticized) image of the home island, all of which helps to foreground a cultural identity that could easily have been lost in the process of assimilating to their hosts' sociocultural environments.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jan Rensel is managing editor for the Center for Pacific Islands Studies, at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. She has been conducting research among Rotumans on Rotuma and in the Rotuman diaspora since 1987. In addition to numerous articles about Rotumans, her publications include *Home in the Islands: Housing and Social Change in the Pacific* (co-edited with Margaret Rodman, 1997), and *Island Legacy: A History of the Rotuman People* (co-authored with Alan Howard, 2007).

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