



Photo 12.1 First plane to arrive at Rotuma, 1981. *Fiji Ministry of Information.*



Photo 12.2 Satellite dish at government station, 1996. *Alan Howard.*

12 Postcolonial Rotuma

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*. It's the special uniqueness that I hope we would all want to keep.

Yvonne Aitu, *Rotuma Web site*, 1999¹

When Great Britain granted independence to the Colony of Fiji on 10 October 1970, it also yielded responsibility for the governance of Rotuma, which was recognized as part of the colony. In this chapter we reflect on the changes that have occurred on the island since Rotuma became part of the newly formed state of Fiji.

Physical Changes

During the 1970s and 1980s material conditions on Rotuma were transformed in several ways. A wharf was completed at Oinafa in 1975, making it possible for ships to load and unload directly instead of having to transport people and cargo between ship and shore by launch. More significantly, an airstrip was opened in 1981, in time for the centennial celebration of Rotuma's cession to Great Britain.

One might expect these new facilities to have greatly diminished Rotuma's isolation, but relief was partial at best. Airfares were too expensive for most Rotumans, and because of low passenger loads Fiji Air decreased its original bi-weekly flights to once a week.² And although the wharf made unloading and loading easier, shipping schedules remained unreliable, so that even at the end of the twentieth century, isolation was still one of Rotuma's major problems.

Also of consequence were changes in housing. In 1972, Hurricane Bebe destroyed almost all of the thatch-roofed, native-style houses. They were mostly replaced by concrete houses with corrugated iron roofs. The New Zealand Army came on a relief mission following the devastation and supervised the building of some 300 houses in about three weeks' time. A 1966 survey of house types by the Rotuma Council categorized 240 (50.7%) as *rī haʻfu* (concrete or stone), 60 (12.7%) as *rī 'ai* (wood), 84 (17.8%) as *rī pota* (iron), and 89 (18.8%) as *rī fakrotuam* (Rotuman style). In a subsequent count, during 1981, 82.8 percent of the houses were categorized as *rī haʻfu* and the count for *rī fakrotuam* was zero (table 12.1).³

Table 12.1
Rotuman House Styles, 1951–1989

Walls of:	1951[a]		1966[b]		1981[b]		1989[c]	
Limestone or cement	–	35%	240	51%	269	83%	361	82%
Wood	–	32%	60	13%	31	10%	24	5%
Iron	–	9%	84	18%	25	8%	46	10%
Thatch	–	24%	89	19%	0	0%	8	2%
Total Houses	–		473		325		429	

[a] Reported by H. S. Evans, Resident Commissioner of Rotuma. Percentages only.

[b] Records of Rotuma Council, compiled and reported by district chiefs.

[c] Survey of 414 households (85% of all households on Rotuma) conducted by Jan Rensel and Alan Howard.

An increase in hurricane-proof housing is only part of the story, however. During these two decades Rotumans put more and more of their resources into modernizing and improving their homes. A number of two-story homes were built, and such features as verandahs, louvered windows,



Photos 12.3–4 Aftermath of Hurricane Bebe. *Richard Mehus, 1972.*

and rubber-tiled floors were added. Whereas formerly furnishings had been very simple, European-style furniture became commonplace. Almost every home had tables and chairs; most had sofas and standing beds. People also made their domestic lives more comfortable by importing a variety of household appliances, including radios and sewing machines, gas stoves, refrigerators, and deep-freeze units.

Furthermore, the underground freshwater lens was tapped in 1976 making piped water available around the island, so people no longer had to depend on rainwater storage tanks. Most homes subsequently added indoor kitchens, with sinks and running water. Also, thanks to additional assistance from New Zealand, water-seal toilets, either inside or just outside the main building, were installed. These replaced pit latrines in the near bush and outhouses on piers over the tidal flats. (One of the purposes for installing water-seal toilets was to eliminate some of the main breeding environments for flies and mosquitoes, but in fact little improvement occurred. The flies and mosquitoes were as much a nuisance at the end of the century as they had been in colonial times.)

Electrification also transformed life on Rotuma. During the late colonial period, the only generators were located at the government station in Ahau and the Catholic Church stations at Sumi and Upu. By the end of the twentieth century several villages had generators that provided electricity for at least a few hours per day, and quite a few individual households had their own generators. This made it possible for many people to use electric appliances and to keep their homes lit until late in the evenings.

Power lawn mowers were introduced in quantity during the 1980s and 1990s. In the past, most homes were surrounded by packed sand, kept tidy by frequent sweeping. The availability of mowers encouraged people to plant lawns, giving a somewhat different appearance to villages. The sound of power mowers became a familiar experience in the previously quiet ambience of village life.

In addition to an increase in noise pollution, the importation of increasing quantities of tin and plastic containers precipitated a waste disposal problem. Although such items were supposed to be deposited in pits, they often found their way to beaches, where they were both hazardous and unsightly.

The number of motor vehicles on the island increased greatly during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Whereas at the end of the colonial era only a few private and government vehicles were present, by 1989 our islandwide survey turned up 21 privately owned cars or trucks and 150 motorbikes in working condition, or nearly one for every three households (there were perhaps a hundred more vehicles not in working condition). This was in addition to numerous vehicles operated by government and cooperative agencies. Thus mobility on the island had greatly increased. In colonial times a trip to the other side of the island had been a major excursion, but by the late 1980s it became routine.

The dramatic increase in fuel-consuming appliances and motor vehicles, when coupled with an erratic shipping schedule, led to recurrent fuel shortages. Chronic complaints resulted in the construction in 1997 of a fuel depot by Mobil Oil at Hansolo, in the district of Itu'ti'u. The tanks at the depot were filled periodically by oil tankers pumping fuel through a pipeline built over the reef connecting to the tanks. Mobil Oil also opened a petrol station at Upu in Itu'ti'u that became the main outlet for fuel on the island. However, because they found this arrangement unprofitable, Mobil Oil subsequently ceased their operations, requiring people on the island to revert to reliance on fuel sent by ship.



Photo 12.5 Mobil Oil depot at Hansolo, 2001. *F. Deschamps.*

Despite the massive increase in number of vehicles, the main road around the island was little improved by century's end. It remained quite rough in places, which was hard on automobiles and pickup trucks, and required caution by motorbike riders. However, the network of feeder roads built to replace footpaths into the bush made it considerably easier for people to access their gardens, and to bring out food crops and copra. The sight of men carrying baskets on a shoulder pole or on horseback, so common during the colonial era, was a distinct rarity in the latter part of the century.

During the late colonial period communication with the outside world had been limited to a radio-telephone at the government station and shortwave radios. Mail came and went with ships, which often meant waiting several weeks or even months. After air service was established in the 1980s, mail was carried on the weekly plane (if it wasn't off-loaded in favor of more lucrative cargo). The plane also brought copies of Fiji newspapers for regular subscribers.

The old radio-telephone, noted for its erratic reception and transmission, was replaced in 1990 by a new, more powerful and reliable radiophone. Telephone lines were laid around the island during the 1990s, and a switchboard was installed at Ahau with trained operators in attendance. As a result, it was no longer necessary to dispatch someone by bicycle or motor vehicle to convey a message to someone elsewhere on the island.

The telephone system also 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.

Live television was not yet accessible on Rotuma at century's end, but VCRs made their appearance in the 1990s. Videos completely replaced the outdated films formerly shown to large audiences in makeshift theaters. Rotumans are therefore much better informed nowadays about modern trends, at least as they are portrayed in the movies.

Political Change

Following Fiji's independence, it did not take long for a crisis to develop over the prerogatives of chiefs versus those of the District Officer. Under the colonial administration the District Officer had been *gagaj pure*, "the boss." His authority came from the Governor, whom he represented, and ultimately from the British Crown. With independence, the basis of his authority became ambiguous. The District Officer at the time of independence was Fred Gibson, an educated Rotuman who had his own ideas about how Rotuma should be governed. Gibson was a commissioned naval officer and an active member of the Rotuman Association in Fiji. Dissatisfaction with Gibson was forcefully expressed by the Rotuman chiefs in 1968, two years after his appointment and two years prior to Fiji's independence. In a letter to the colonial administration, the seven district chiefs complained about Gibson's alleged high-handedness. The letter begins:

We, your humble Chiefs of Rotuma, wish to lodge a very strong complaint against the treatment meted out to us by your representative the District Officer, Mr. F. Gibson during the two years he has been with us.

Because of the great loyalty and respect we have for Her Majesty and her Government, we did our best to overlook his harsh and disrespectful attitude to us and our people, but we now have reached a stage when we cannot tolerate it any longer. Never have the dignity and honour of Rotuman Chiefs and the people they represent fallen so low [as] at the present moment through his administration. As we are the great defenders of our custom and our way of life, we felt it our duty to appeal for help, and get him removed.⁴

The letter goes on to document instances of Gibson humiliating individual chiefs in public venues and in council and of his interference in the process of selecting new chiefs. The chiefs also complained about Gibson's treatment of Fijians on the island, and particularly the Fijian medical officer whom he allegedly reprimanded and told that the people of Rotuma did not like him. The chiefs wrote that they wished to dissociate themselves from the District Officer's attitude to Fijians on the island, "which if allowed to continue might be wrongly interpreted as it is our policy to gradually push Fijians out of Rotuma. The Fijians might take

up the same attitude to the Rotumans in Fiji and what a mess!"⁵

The response of L. P. Lloyd, the chief secretary, was dismissive of these complaints. His letter in reply to the chiefs concluded with the comment that he was asking the Commissioner, Eastern Division, to look into the matter, but he also stated, "In the meantime it is the desire of Government that the Chiefs do not allow trivial matters of personal animosities to hinder the peace and progress of Rotuma."⁶

The chiefs continued to complain, but it was not until after Fiji's independence that they received a sympathetic hearing. The newly elected Prime Minister, Ratu Kamisese Mara, went to Rotuma and personally ordered the District Officer's removal, replacing him with Konrote Marorue, an experienced government clerk.

Mara's action signaled the beginning of an entirely different relationship between District Officers and the Council of Rotuma. Whereas previously the council had been merely an advisory body, it was now empowered as a genuine legislative organization. The District Officer was relegated to the role of adviser and administrative assistant to the council. This meant that council members—chiefs and district representatives alike—found themselves in a position of legislative authority for the first time since cession. The council, charged with overseeing local affairs, received a government subvention that increased substantially in the years following Fiji's independence. As a result, the position of district chief became increasingly attractive, and competition for relevant titles intensified.⁷ On occasion, in three districts—Itu'muta, Oinafa, and Itu'ti'u—different individuals have simultaneously claimed chieftainship, resulting in bitter disputes and divided loyalties. In each case outside intervention was required to resolve the dispute; in the case of Oinafa it was decided by Fiji's Chief Justice.

Offsetting this increase in political power, chiefly authority was undermined to a certain degree by the success of Rotumans who migrated to other locations in Fiji. Well-educated migrants attained positions of responsibility in the professions, business, and national government. Their kin on Rotuma came to rely more on them for assistance and support, and less on the chiefs, since the chiefs controlled comparatively fewer resources vis-à-vis the national government.

Migration also affected symbols of status. In times past, a chief's home was the main indicator of his rank. It was the biggest and best in his district, and was built and maintained by communal labor. The chief's house served as a receiving center for visiting dignitaries and was an important symbol of the district's prosperity and organizational ability. In the postcolonial period, however, modern-style houses requiring significant capital investment were built by persons without titles. Motorbikes and automobiles were also accessible to anyone with the money to pay for them. Chiefs could only participate in this competition for prestige items if they, too, had ready access to cash. Much of the money for these commodities came from abroad, in the form of remittances from migrant kin. In addition, Rotumans who, like teachers and government employees, held full-time jobs on the island, often invested in prestigious housing and transportation. Since the chiefs received only modest stipends for their council duties, they were sometimes tempted to use public funds in ways that aroused criticism, such as dubious expensive excursions to Fiji. At various times serious charges were made against individual chiefs and the Rotuma Council concerning alleged mismanagement of public funds, placing them in a position of having to continually defend their actions.

Many successful migrants took an active interest in developments on Rotuma, and offered to help the Rotuma Council with their projects. The reactions of the council members were ambivalent. In some instances they welcomed the assistance of their better-educated kin; in other instances they expressed resentment over what they considered unwarranted intrusion into their affairs. For the most part they welcomed initiatives by Fiji-based Rotumans, but demanded control of implementation.

Complicating relations between chiefs and successful Rotumans in Fiji was the fact that few of the latter took titles. From the chiefs' perspective, this suggested their own superior status, and generated an expectation of deference, if not obeisance. From the standpoint of Rotumans enmeshed in modern commercial establishments, professions, and government bureaucracies, Rotuman titles and chiefly positions were largely irrelevant away from the island.

Status distinctions within the Rotuma Council became more fluid following Fiji's independence. Recall that in the precolonial period, district ranking depended on the outcome

of interdistrict wars. As a result of cession, however, and the termination of warfare, the ceremonial rank order of districts was frozen as of 1879 in the following sequence: Noa'tau, Oinafa, Itu'ti'u, Malhaha, Juju, Pepjei, Itu'muta. There is no evidence that this order was ever disputed during the colonial period, and it is likely the Resident Commissioners and District Officers would not have permitted a change to occur. They were interested in political stability and maintaining their own view of tradition; their writings suggest they considered the ceremonial rank order of districts to be a central feature of Rotuman tradition.

When the Rotuma Council was finally empowered as a policy and decision-making body, it therefore seemed natural for Maraf, the chief of Noa'tau, to be chairman, and indeed, he was elected to the post by the council members. But in 1981 the council chose as chairman the district representative (*mata*) from Juju, Toa'niu. This stirred considerable controversy. Maraf complained bitterly and gained a good deal of support. A number of ministers in the Methodist Church preached against the change, citing it as an example of "the tail wagging the head"—of the system being turned upside down. Both sides gathered signatures and sent petitions to Fiji, but the government let the change stand, refusing to interfere. Since then the chairmanship has changed hands several times, to chiefs or *mata* from different districts, and the issue has faded away.

While the institution of chieftainship remained firmly embedded in Rotuman culture, the practical aspects of chiefly roles became increasingly complicated and problematic. Whereas during the colonial era chiefs were intermediaries between a Resident Commissioner or District Officer and the people in their districts, the new arrangement presented them with the much more complex task of maneuvering between the central government in Suva and the people of Rotuma as a collectivity. Whether they liked it or not, they were held responsible for fulfilling the material as well as the political aspirations of the Rotuman people—a task that demanded a completely different set of skills.

In general, Rotuma in the postcolonial era became a much more political community than it had been under British dominion. During colonial times people rarely discussed political issues and were reluctant to express personal viewpoints in public. Dissatisfaction with government policies and directives were given expression by grumbling and passive resistance. With the change in regime, people

were more prepared to speak out openly, to debate issues, and to criticize those in authority directly. If Rotuma was factionalized during colonial times, the cleavage was mainly along religious lines; in the postcolonial period the divisions became political. One of the most prominent political issues to arise was the advisability of promoting tourism.

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. Ultimately the *Fairstar* visited Rotuma in June 1986. The visit proved relatively uneventful, and it was followed by two visits in 1987, one by the *Society Explorer*, the other a return visit by the *Fairstar*, which visited once more in 1989. Opposition softened, although the debate over the pros and cons of tourism continued.

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. The question of a more intensive commitment to tourism—the building of hotels for example—was put off for future consideration.

On reflection, the removal of the British-based colonial administration provided Rotumans with a renewed opportunity to express their desires for autonomy and self-governance. They immediately tested the waters and got a



Photo 12.6 Passengers from the *Fairstar* watch as Rotuman men ceremonially prepare for a feast, 1989. *Jan Rensel.*



Photo 12.7 Selling handicraft to a *Fairstar* passenger, 1989. *Jan Rensel.*

favorable hearing from Ratu Mara, whose sympathy for chiefly authority should not be surprising. As a result, chiefs abandoned the strategy of passive resistance they had honed to a fine art during the colonial period, and they began to speak their minds. Their subjects were no less encouraged to speak up, resulting in a genuine transformation from a politically passive to a politically vibrant society. With colonial constraints lifted, the Rotuman passion for autonomy was able to gain full expression.

Economic Change

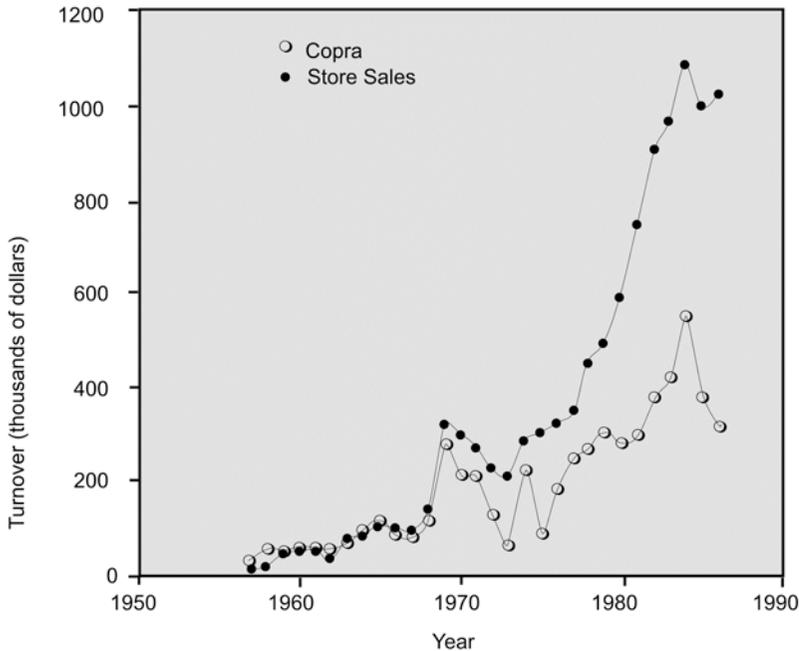
Throughout most of the colonial era, business on the island had been dominated by foreign companies, particularly Morris Hedstrom and Burns Philp, but by the time the colonial era ended the Rotuma Cooperative Association (RCA) had put the firms out of business and thoroughly dominated commerce on the island, as detailed in chapter 10.

Income to Rotuma in colonial times was almost entirely dependent on copra exports, supplemented by a small number of wage-earning positions. For example, in 1960, only 16 Rotumans worked for the commercial firms; 23 held wage positions with the Rotuma Cooperative Association; and 28 were employed by the government, half of them as schoolteachers. Although employment opportunities grew after Fiji's independence from Great Britain—in 1992, there were 37 schoolteachers and 69 other government employees, RCA employed 79 workers, and another 30 worked for the Raho Cooperative—wages and copra exports still accounted for only a small portion of total income.

In 1970, the year of Fiji's independence and two years after the firms closed their shops, RCA reported a store turnover of F\$319,044. By 1986 RCA's volume of sales had increased 237 percent and surpassed F\$1,000,000 annually. Income from copra, however, which remained the island's chief export, only increased by 49 percent. Whereas in 1970 store turnover exceeded copra income by only 40 percent, by 1986 the discrepancy was 217 percent. It is apparent, therefore, that most of the money spent in the shops at that time was coming from somewhere other than copra sales (see graph 12.1).

A portion of additional revenue came from entrepreneurial activities by people on the island, including yam, vanilla, bêche-de-mer, and lobster exports, but these were small-

scale family operations. Increased wage earnings, and the availability of bank loans from the Rotuma branch of the National Bank of Fiji, also contributed to increased purchasing power. Cash remittances also grew considerably and were a major income source. In 1976 the average monthly total sent to Rotuma by telegraphic money order (TMO) was between F\$5,000 and F\$6,000.⁸ The amounts sent by TMO for the years 1982–1988 averaged over F\$10,000 per month.⁹ Money orders were but one means by which remittances reached Rotuma; cash and checks were also sent by mail or brought by visitors.



Graph 12.1 Rotuma Cooperative Association turnover, 1957–1986.

Source: Rotuma Cooperative Association.

Our 1989 survey showed that just under half (49 percent) of Rotuman households reported receiving remittances; the number of individuals listed as contributing financial resources to a given household ranged from none to seven. Reported amounts ranged from F\$10 to F\$4,000 at a time, with a median amount of F\$100. Cash was sent primarily for general support, that is, to be spent on food and other household needs. Other remittances came as gifts for special occasions—Mother's and Father's Days, birthdays, Christmas, funerals—or periodic needs such as school fees. Larger amounts were often sent in response to requests for church

fund-raisers, for house construction, or community improvement projects.

Rotuma Post Office records show annual income from remittances in the form of TMOs increased dramatically during the 1990s, from F\$256,365 in 1994 to F\$815,374 in 1997.¹⁰

Rotuma's economy was also dramatically affected by the opening of a branch of the National Bank of Fiji (NBF) on the island in 1988. The opening was initiated by Visanti Makrava, a Rotuman who was appointed General Manager of the National Bank of Fiji after the 1987 coup. NBF began making modest loans to individuals and businesses at rather high interest rates (from 11 to 16 percent depending on security). By mid-1989, the bank had provided personal loans totaling F\$424,330 to 128 individuals, and F\$246,371 to 14 businesses.

THE RAHO COOPERATIVE

The Rotuma Cooperative Society continued to dominate commerce on Rotuma through the 1980s despite a challenge from an upstart cooperative named for the legendary founder of Rotuma, Raho. The new co-op had its origins in discontent with RCA's management, which grew more pronounced over time.

It was primarily the trust most people had in Wilson Inia that allowed people of both faiths, and all districts, to keep co-operation alive in the early years. Inia's extended absence from the island during his early adulthood had kept him free of parochial politics, and although he was a leader in the Methodist Church, he preached tolerance and understanding. But even he could not be a strong leader and remain free of conflict. The inevitable clashes occurred over mismanagement of funds on the part of some members. Despite the training in bookkeeping, shopkeepers or local co-op officers often could not account for money. Inia suggested a rule—that any shortfalls at the time of audit would have to be made up personally by the shopkeeper or officer involved. People who persisted in draining money were dismissed from their positions, and if their culpability were flagrant they could be expelled from the association. Although most people accepted these rules, those who were expelled became antagonistic. Their expulsion was all the more bitter after the firms went out of business, because RCA's monopoly left expelled members with no place to sell their copra or buy

imported goods. Disputes also developed over repayment of expelled members' shares in the association.¹¹

The most serious instance of money mismanagement occurred during 1977 in the village of Oinafa, where the local RCA shopkeeper failed to report a serious shortfall in his accounts, and the internal auditor allegedly doctored the books to disguise the deficit, which amounted to several thousand dollars. Although they and their relatives in Fiji eventually restored the shortfall, both were dismissed from their positions with RCA. The auditor then went to RCA's central committee and formally apologized. His apology (*faksoro*) was in high ceremonial fashion, involving a sacrificial pig, kava, and fine white mats. He went *hen rau'ifi*, with leaves around his neck, symbolically offering his life to atone for the offense. This is a rare event in Rotuma and is usually reserved for instances in which a life has been taken. It is virtually inconceivable for the offended party to refuse acceptance of an apology so presented.

But Inia did indeed refuse the apology. He argued that *hen rau'ifi* was a custom relevant to interpersonal offenses, as when one party injured another, but that it did not apply to business matters where money was involved. He said that embezzlement could not be undone that way. Many people were shocked by Inia's decision, but he held fast to his position. Members of the auditor's family were especially upset. His father sent a letter to RCA demanding that the Oinafa Co-op copra shed and shop, which were on family land, be removed. RCA members disassembled the wooden shed and moved it. The store was made of concrete, however, and could not be moved. Some of the men wanted to destroy it, but Inia told them to leave the building as a "gift."

Soon afterward, another family member, Atfoa Varea, who held a high position with the government in Fiji, arranged for loans to begin a rival cooperative called Raho. One of Atfoa's brothers, who held the subchiefly title Toa'niu in the district of Juju, was put in charge of operations on the island.

Raho operations initially foundered. Inadequate bookkeeping and general mismanagement of funds kept it from developing a stable capital base, so it posed no serious immediate threat to RCA's dominance. Two other breakaway groups emerged in opposition to RCA, both short-lived. From 1963–1967 the Rotuman Planters' Association handled a small portion of the island's copra, and the Rotuman Development Corporation did likewise from 1975–1979. Neither group developed the infrastructure to compete

successfully, but both, along with Raho, were indications that satisfaction with RCA's operations was far from universal.

In 1990 Atfoa Varea moved to reorganize Raho. He solicited assistance from Visanti Makrava, whose position as general manager of National Bank of Fiji provided access to extensive financial resources and an influential personal network spanning Rotuma and Fiji.

Makrava agreed to take on the supervision of Raho and immediately set out to pay off the organization's considerable debts and to challenge RCA's dominance of trade. He did so by providing bank loans to local businesses already in competition with RCA, in addition to loans he made available for Raho's operations.

With the aid of the bank loans and several grants, Raho expanded its operations and developed its infrastructure. New copra dryers were constructed, fuel dispensing facilities were installed, a walk-in freezer was imported for frozen foodstuffs, and trucks were purchased to transport goods and copra. The new management made a conscious practice of responding to customer demand for imported products and offered a better price for copra than RCA. By 1992 Raho reportedly was handling more copra than RCA and had dramatically increased its share of store sales.

To undermine RCA's domination of the copra trade, Raho instituted a scheme in which people contracted to lease copra rights in land under their control in exchange for materials or goods sold by or through Raho. The lessors were not required to pay interest on the line of credit they received. Raho then contracted with NBF for an interest-free loan to buy the materials or goods ordered by the lessors. Employees of Raho cut the copra and were paid for their labor from the proceeds; the remainder, less a percentage to Raho, was placed in a savings account from which loan payments were made.

The scheme was cause for consternation among many Rotumans who argued that although the lands being leased were mostly *kāinaga* (extended family) lands, only the family of the *pure* (steward) was receiving benefits. In response, Makrava maintained that the scheme allowed for people who did not control land to get lump sums of money. He said that in most cases, the *kāinaga* did discuss the option of leasing land with the *pure* and that there were only a few complaints.

In addition, Raho bought husked coconuts for the same price they were getting paid for them, making no profit, a business practice RCA could not match.

By 1993 RCA was losing money and in dire straits. Even long-time members succumbed to the lure of doing business with Raho, and soon thereafter RCA experienced a complete collapse, leaving Raho with a near monopoly of the island's commerce.



Photo 12.8 The Raho Cooperative complex in Oinafa, 1994. *Alan Howard.*

All was not well with Raho, however. By the end of February 1995 Raho was in debt to the tune of F\$1,443,667 from the Rotuma branch of NBF, with an additional debt of about F\$432,298 to the Samabula branch. In addition to Raho's indebtedness, an associated company, Tieri Distributors, which was set up in Suva to act as a buying agency for Raho, had a debt amounting to F\$1,048,088. Tieri also supplied goods to people on the island and received payments through Raho. Unfortunately, payments were lax and Tieri was dissolved while still heavily indebted.¹²

Raho, in conjunction with NBF, fostered a business culture of excessive consumption and an attitude of "get what you can get while you can get it." Those who took out business loans and the employees of Raho sensed that the bubble would burst because so much depended on Makrava's beneficence. As a result they kept asking for more rather than repaying debts, and Raho employees "borrowed" freely from the shops. The atmosphere of this period was in stark

contrast to that of the early days of RCA, when a spirit of self-sacrifice and economic restraint prevailed.

Excessive loans to Rotumans were only a small part of NBF's plight (only 1.26 percent of the total loans given by NBF, according to Makrava),¹³ and following an audit in 1995 the bank was declared insolvent and a reorganization was mandated. By the end of the year Makrava was out as general manager and had retired to Rotuma. The collapse of NBF signaled the end of Raho as a viable business entity and its assets were dissipated. This left only a few small entrepreneurs in control of Rotuma's commerce until the Post Office opened a shop at Ahau and became the island's main retailer. Thus, at the end of the twentieth century the business infrastructure on the island was more fragmented and disorderly than at any time since cession, when the firms had controlled commerce.

Health and Demographic Changes

As detailed in chapter 11, from the time of initial European intrusion throughout most of the colonial period the main threat to the health of the Rotuman people had been contagious diseases: influenza, whooping cough, measles, tuberculosis, yaws, etc. Only with the advent of the wonder drugs in the 1950s were these diseases brought under control.

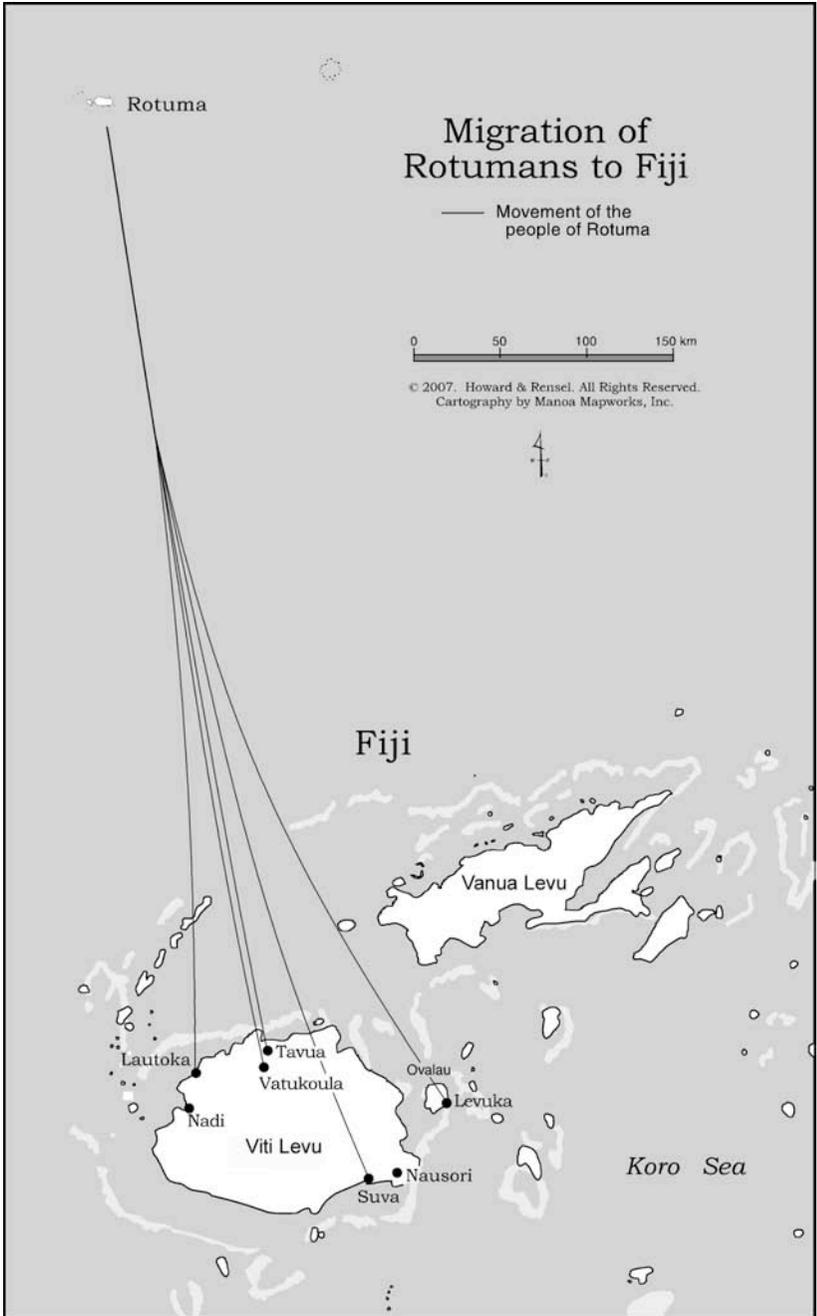
During the last decades of the century, however, the diseases of affluence and a modern lifestyle became more prevalent and now confront the people of Rotuma with daunting new health challenges. A July 1996 survey of 915 adults on Rotuma by Dr. Temo Kiloni revealed that 51.1 percent of the men and 78.7 percent of the women were overweight or obese, with the highest rates in the 40–59 age group. The incidence of diabetes rose with age, from 0.7 percent in the 20–29 age group to 29.7 percent in the 60–69 group, which clearly suggests that it was primarily of the adult-onset variety and a function of lifestyle risk factors. Hypertension rates likewise rose among older people, from 2.0 percent in the younger group, to 32.8 percent in the 60–69 group. Interestingly, the rates of all three conditions *decreased* among Rotumans 70 and over, which may reflect the maintenance of a more traditional, pre-affluence lifestyle, or possibly, that members of their cohort who had these conditions had already died off. Ominously, in his survey, Dr.

Temo discovered 89 previously undiagnosed cases of hypertension and diabetes, suggesting a vital need to monitor apparently healthy individuals more closely.¹⁴

As elsewhere, changes in diet and exercise patterns were largely responsible for these threats to health.¹⁵ The Rotuman diet has shifted from one consisting primarily of subsistence crops (taro, yams, cassava, etc.) and fresh fish, to a diet consisting of a much higher proportion of store-bought, processed foods, high in fat and salt. Whereas people in the past were likely to die of contagious diseases, gastro-intestinal disorders, or pneumonia, by the end of the twentieth century they were dying from heart disease, stroke, and complications stemming from diabetes. These diseases of modernity reflect changes in lifestyles made possible by increased affluence (leading to increased reliance on store-bought foods), and less-demanding physical labor. Whereas men in the past got plenty of exercise walking back and forth to their gardens, putting in long hours there, fishing on the reef, and preparing earth ovens on a regular basis, they were now able to go to their plantations by motor vehicle, spend less time gardening because they could buy food, let their wives do the cooking, spend long hours sitting at kava-drinking sessions, and generally do less arduous work. The combination of a fat- and salt-laden diet, along with less-than-adequate exercise, ushered in a health transition that will require people to adopt new patterns of eating and exercising if morbidity and mortality are going to be controlled.

Migration

By the end of the colonial period it was clear that the flow of people from Rotuma to Fiji was accelerating and would have a major impact on the future of the island. In the 1960s there were well over 3,000 Rotumans on the island and nearly that many in Fiji. On Rotuma one could sense the pressure on land, manifested in a preoccupation with land issues and an increasing frequency of disputes. One could also sense, particularly among youths, the pull of Fiji's urban centers as sources of employment, education, and a more modern lifestyle.



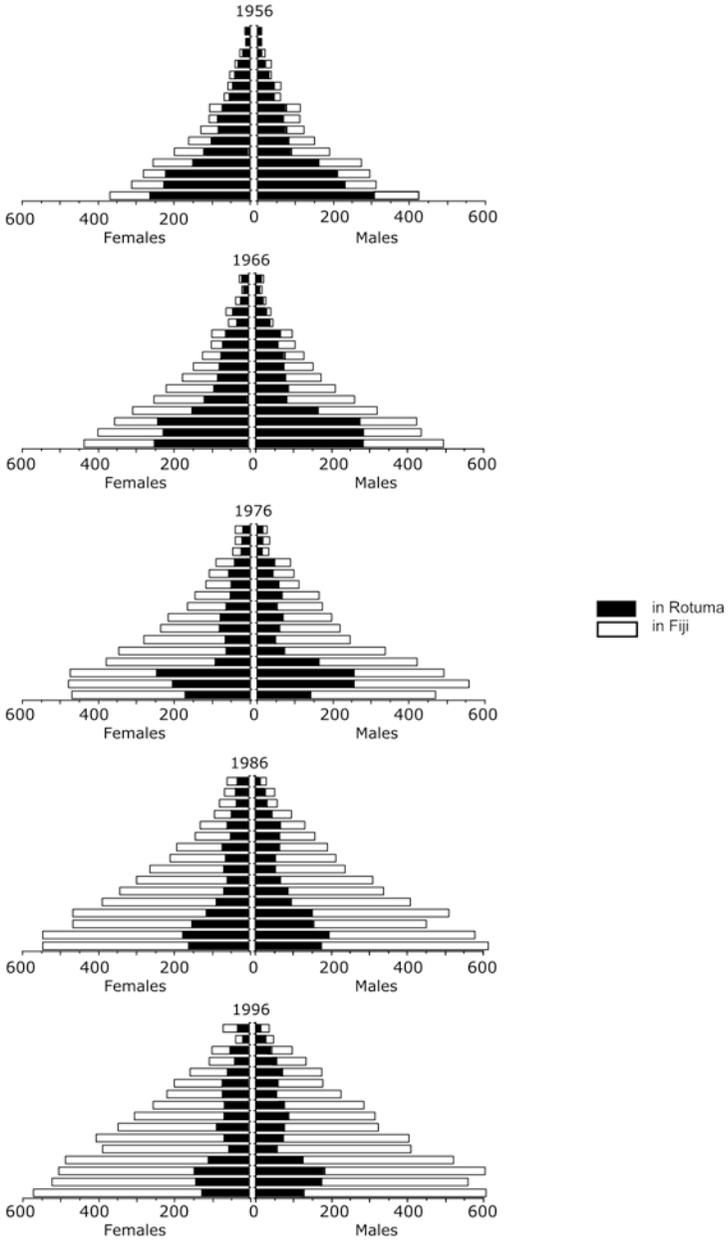
Census data collected since that time vividly shows that although the overall Rotuman population continued to grow, out-migration from Rotuma to Fiji reduced the population of Rotuma (see table 12.2). Using the 1966 census as a baseline, when the number of Rotumans on the island was reported as 3,235, the population decreased to 2,707 in 1976 and 2,588 in 1986, at which point it stabilized (the 1996 census yielded a count of 2,580). During the same thirty-year period, the number of Rotumans in Fiji (not including Rotuma) nearly tripled, from 2,562 to 7,147.¹⁶

Table 12.2

Distribution of Rotumans in Rotuma and Fiji, 1881–1996

Year of Census	Rotuma		Fiji		Total
	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent of Total	Number
1881	2452		no data		2452
1891	2219		no data		2219
1901	2230		no data		2230
1911	2176		no data		2176
1921	2112	94%	123	6%	2235
1936	2543	90%	273	10%	2816
1946	2744	83%	569	17%	3313
1956	2993	68%	1429	32%	4422
1966	3235	56%	2562	44%	5797
1976	2707	37%	4584	63%	7291
1986	2554	30%	6098	70%	8652
1996	2580	27%	7147	73%	9727

Out-migration significantly affected Rotuma's age structure. In 1956 the age structure resembled that of any rapidly increasing population, with a broad base of youngsters, tapering to a peak of elderly individuals. While the overall Rotuman population continued to have this pyramidal shape, as the twentieth century came to a close the population on Rotuma showed a pronounced reduction in the middle age ranges, resembling the shape of an hourglass, with smaller proportions of young children than previously, an indentation in the middle age groups, and relatively high proportions in the older age categories (see graph 12.2). This suggests that out-migration increasingly involved young couples who either migrated with their children, or left Rotuma single, married in Fiji, and had their children there.

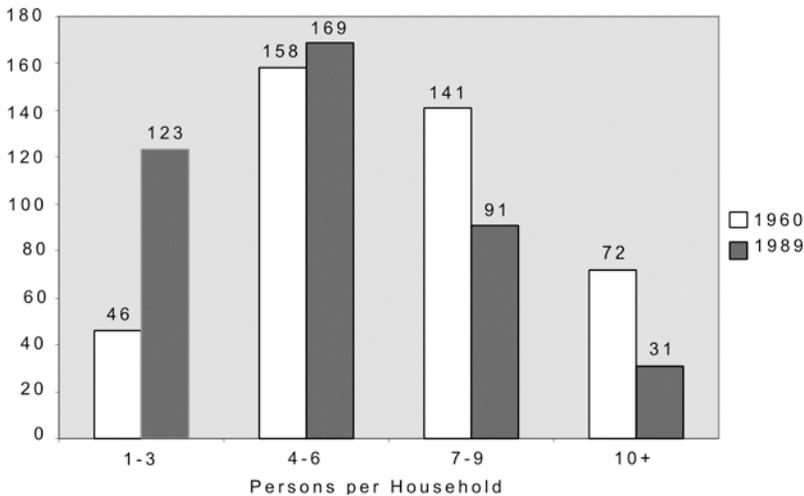


Graph 12.2 Rotuman age and sex cohorts in Fiji Censuses, 1956–1996. Each bar represents a five-year cohort, with 0–5 year olds at the base of the pyramid and persons of 75 or older at the top.

In addition, the population pyramids reflect a trend of earlier migrants returning to Rotuma following retirement.

Household size and structure changed as well during this period. According to census reports the number of persons per household on Rotuma decreased from 7.3 to 5.3 persons between 1956 and 1996. In part this reflects the loss of individuals from existing households through out-migration, but that is not the whole story. There was a substantial increase in the total number of households as well, from 428 in 1956 to 493 in 1996. The drop in average household size can be accounted for mainly by a substantial increase in the number of small households, those with three or fewer persons, and to a lesser extent by a decrease in the number of large households, those with seven or more persons.

Our own censuses, taken in 1960 and 1989, showed an increase in the proportion of households composed of 1–3 persons from 11.0 percent in 1960 to 29.7 percent in 1989; (graph 12.3).¹⁷



Graph 12.3 Household size, 1960 and 1989

To some extent the increase in small households was a result of returning migrants who opted to establish their own households rather than join existing ones. It also reflects investments by Rotumans abroad in maintaining active links to the island. By building or refurbishing a home and having it occupied by a close kinsman, out-migrants insured that they, or their immediate family, would have a place to return to in Rotuma. A number of houses on Rotuma were in fact occupied on a caretaking basis for relatives who sent

remittances to have new homes built or old ones improved. In other words, the occupants of many small households were in the position of protecting the resettlement rights of their close kin abroad.

Social Change

The most pronounced social change following the departure of colonial administrators was a healing of the rift between the Catholics and Methodists. A new generation of ministers and priests took positive steps to encourage cooperation and participation in each other's events. Catholic priests and nuns began attending Methodist Conference fund-raisers, even donating money. It was a landmark event when Pepjei, a predominantly Catholic district, hosted the Methodist Conference in 1989. Likewise, Methodists took to donating labor, money, and goods to events sponsored by the Catholic Church.



Photo 12.9 Interior of home in Malhaha, 2001. *F. Deschamps.*

Another religious change was the establishment of new denominations on the island, including Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Assembly of God, and Mormons.

Given the importance of church activities in the social life of Rotuma, these changes suggest that communities were becoming more fragmented, and that religion was becoming more a matter of individual choice than of community commitment.

More generally, the rules governing social relations between various categories of people relaxed. In earlier times relations between young unmarrieds, for example, were more constrained. Boys and girls who were romantically interested in one other were extremely careful to hide their feelings, lest they be teased unmercifully. Although courtship behavior was by no means flaunted in public, by the end of the twentieth century flirtations were more open and obvious. Also less constrained were relations between adolescent brothers and sisters. In the past brothers and sisters of courting age avoided each other, especially in contexts where one or the other might be with an actual or potential sweetheart. In general the respect behavior between brothers and sisters infused their relationships with an air of formality, perhaps even tension. While respect was still evident in the 1990s, formality and tension were considerably reduced.

Parallel changes took place between chiefs and their subjects. Much of the formality and ceremonial respect behavior that marked interactions between chiefs and commoners in the past was relaxed. Low bowing in the presence of chiefs, and lowered voices when addressing them, were much less in evidence. Respect protocol, such as getting off one's bicycle when passing a gathering of people or a chief's house, became a rarity (perhaps because it is more cumbersome to get off and walk a motorcycle than a bicycle). Except during ceremonial presentations, chiefs came to be treated more like ordinary individuals than persons requiring ritual respect.

The most obvious change in social life between the late colonial period and the new millennium was the degree to which men met in groups to drink kava. In days past kava was drunk on Rotuma almost exclusively at ceremonies. However, the Fijian custom of drinking kava socially caught on among men who spent time in Fiji, and most villages spawned kava-drinking groups who met frequently—often for several hours a day—spending time engrossed in casual conversation. In the past men used to complain that women spent too much time sitting around gossiping; during this later period it seemed to be the men around the kava bowl

who were the greatest offenders. Many critics, including a number of outspoken preachers, claimed that excessive kava drinking was at least partially responsible for a decline in agricultural productivity.

The change that possibly had the most significant effect on social life was the attainment of higher levels of education. At the end of the colonial era, only a small number of adults on Rotuma attended school beyond standard (class) 8. In the 1990s, most younger adults had completed Forms 5 or 6. Overall, the educational achievements of younger adults lent a greater air of worldly sophistication to Rotuman social life. Young adults on Rotuma read more, were better informed, and were less prone to accept authority in an unquestioning fashion than in the past.

Cultural Change

Corresponding with the more cosmopolitan sophistication of young Rotuman adults was a change in worldview. In colonial times people were greatly in touch with their past; they had a stronger sense of cultural tradition. This was often expressed in concerns about the ancestors, who had a strong "presence" in Rotuma at the time. In postcolonial Rotuma people became much more interested in the present and future. The kinds of experiences that would have raised hair on the back of one's neck before, like walking past a graveyard at night, no longer aroused apprehension. For better or worse, such changes in perspective are a reflection of the degree to which Rotuma has been drawn into the modern world.

Changes in language and language usage also occurred. As a reflection of education many more Rotumans became fluent in English, and as a result of greater exposure to Fijian, fluency in that language became widespread. It became commonplace for speakers to switch from English to Fijian to Rotuman several times within the course of a speech without losing the attention of a Rotuman audience. Correspondingly, many English and Fijian words became part of everyday conversation; in some instances they replaced Rotuman words that were commonly used before.

By the end of the millennium people had more choices and a wider set of experiences to draw on. Life on the island became more complex, and more integrated into the world

beyond. All of this is not to say, however, that Rotuman culture lost its distinctive character. Life on the island was still governed by the same general rules of social interaction, of caring and sharing, as in the past.



Photo 12.10 Men constructing a thatched-roof house with timber walls, 1989. *Alan Howard.*



Photo 12.11 Men painting a modern, two-story home, 1989. *Jan Rensel.*

Notes to Chapter 12

Information in this chapter has been drawn from several previously published articles, including "Reflections on Change in Rotuma, 1959–1989," which was included in the volume *Rotuma, Hanua Pumue: Precious Land* (Howard 1991), and "Rotuma in the 1990s: From Hinterland to Neighbourhood," which was published in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (Howard and Rensel 1994b). Of special relevance for the section on political change were "The Resurgence of Rivalry: Politics in Post-Colonial Rotuma," in the journal *Dialectical Anthropology* (Howard 1989) and "Ritual Status and Power Politics in Modern Rotuma," which appeared in *Chiefs in Modern Oceania*, edited by Geoffrey White and Lamont Lindstrom (Howard and Rensel 1997).

Observations about social, cultural, and linguistic change rely to a great extent on the contrast between Howard's experiences in 1960 and his and Rensel's experiences during visits to Rotuma in the late 1980s and 1990s. These observations are subjective in nature and could readily be given a variety of alternative interpretations.

¹ <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum16.html>

² Subsequently Fiji Air abandoned the route because it was financially unproductive. Sunflower Air took over the route for several years in the 1990s, but was forced to give it up because it was unable to comply with safety requirements, after which Fiji Air resumed service on a weekly basis.

³ See Rensel 1997 for a discussion of housing changes on Rotuma from precolonial to contemporary times.

⁴ Letter to Chief Secretary L. P. Lloyd, 12 December 1968. Fiji National Archives.

⁵ Letter to Chief Secretary L. P. Lloyd, 12 December 1968. Fiji National Archives.

⁶ Letter to the chiefs of Rotuma dated 4 February 1969. Fiji National Archives (C9/30).

⁷ Howard 1989.

⁸ Plant 1991, 210.

⁹ Rotuma Post Office records.

¹⁰ Vilsoni n.d.

¹¹ See *Fiji Times* account of a complaint registered by Pat Managreve in the *Fiji Times*, Wednesday, 3 April 1974.

¹² *The Review*, Nov. 1995, p. 57.

¹³ *The Review*, Jan. 1996, p. 18.

¹⁴ Kiloni 1996.

¹⁵ See, for example, Baker, Hanna, and Baker 1986.

¹⁶ Census Reports, Fiji Government.

¹⁷ The official 1996 census showed similar results to our 1989 survey, with households of 1-3 persons accounting for 29.4 percent of the total. The 1956 census did not include a breakdown by household size.