

“Bring the Past to Present”: Recording and Reviving Rotuman Music via a Collaborative Rotuman/Fijian/Australian CD Project

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Abstract

This paper explores a recording project that led to CDs documenting Rotuman musical performances and music practice in Suva, Fiji. The project was a collaboration between the Rotuman diasporic community, the Oceania Centre for the Arts and Culture at the University of the South Pacific and a music-based researcher from Australia. It uses description, analysis and ethnography to explore the role of digital technologies; the role and evolution of music in diasporic communities in Australia and Fiji; the benefits and challenges of collaborative transnational musical research projects; and the role of music researchers as music producers.

“I think it is very important to know about the old songs and the new ones as well. I am a lover of singing and I love to sing church hymns and the traditional songs as well. It is also important because I can always tell my grandchildren about the songs of the past and present and they might know when they grow up whether anything has changed.” (Sarote Fesaitu, eldest female member of the Churchward Chapel’s Rotuman Choir, Suva, Fiji 2004)

In recent years an emerging discourse in music-based studies has coalesced around the interrelationships between digital recording technologies, cross-cultural collaborative research projects and music-researchers operating as music producers, artists or entrepreneurs. Greene and Porcello (2005:2) use the term “wired sound” for this phenomenon and discourse and provide the following summary:

Recording studios have become, among other things, sponge-like centers where the world’s sounds are quickly and continually absorbed, reworked, and reincorporated into new musics. Music can no longer be adequately modeled as something that happens in a local context and employs only the expressive means specific to a locality. Instead, music making increasingly employs technologies produced elsewhere and is informed by a heightened awareness of sounds that are traveling rapidly around the world. Wired sound therefore refers not only to the contemporaneous fact that many of

the world's musical practices are increasingly wired together. Music (including even music that resists globalization) happens along a global circuit of rapid communication and varying influence.

Appadurai (1990) has typified these broad processes as rapid, disjunctive and globalized cultural flows. This article documents and analyses a particularly cogent example of these processes in practice and adds to the phenomenon and discourse of how not only sound but also people are "wired" together through music. It also adds to discussions of the dynamics of cultural identity and ethnicity in Oceania (Linnekin and Poyer 1990).

There has been limited documenting of the sacred and secular music of Rotuma, Fiji's northern most island, both in historical and contemporary contexts.¹ Existing key sources include research on chants by Kaurasi (1991) and on dance by Hereniko (1991).² Howard and Rensel (1997) and Fatiaki (1991) provide overviews of Rotuman culture, its demographics, and its socio-cultural and political organization.

The focus here is on a collaborative recording project between the Methodist Churchward Chapel Rotuman Choir (CCRC) in Suva, Fiji; the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture (OCAC) and the Media Centre at the University of the South Pacific; Rotuman researcher Makereta Mua; and Central Queensland University. The original impetus for the project was the presence of Rotuman-based music in the Torres Strait region of Australia, which I had been recording and researching. Via a series of serendipitous events and encounters, an interest in the music of Torres Strait led to an interest in Rotuman music.

One of my roles in the project was as Co-producer of the recordings with Nigel Pegrum. Pegrum is an experienced musician, sound engineer and producer and has probably recorded and sold more Indigenous music than any other producer in Australia through his work with Aboriginal *didgeridui* David Hudson (Neuenfeldt 2005). I was also Executive Producer in collaboration with representatives of the aforementioned organizations.

The main results of the project are two CDs.³ One, *Rotuman Chants and Hymns* (Figure 1), was released in 2006 under the auspices of the OCAC and features traditional Rotuman sacred songs (*mak ka pelu*) and secular chants (*tautoga*). The OCAC holds copyright in the recordings. The other, *Churchward Chapel Choir* (volume two), was released in 2006 under the auspices of the CCRC, which holds copyright in the recordings. It features the *mak ka pelu* hymns and anthems arranged by choirmaster Samuela Taukave. The reasons why the *mak ka pelu* hymns were used twice will be addressed below. This analysis focuses mainly on the *Rotuman Chants and Hymns* CD.

Theoretically, this paper uses a combination of cultural studies, ethnomusicological and ethnographic perspectives. Taken together they help to unravel the musically linked threads that informed the project and the resulting recordings. Sara Cohen provides a useful overview of how such confluences can be viewed from a cultural studies perspective that profits from an ethnographic element:

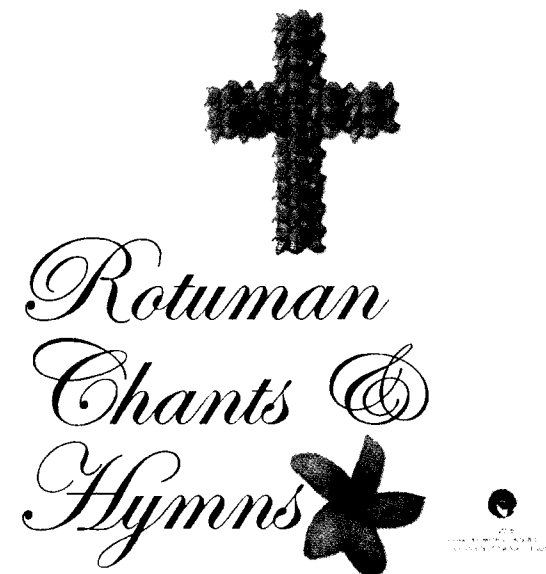


Fig. 1. Rotuman Chants and Hymns CD Front Cover Artwork by Simple Arts (2005). —(Photo by author).

Individuals produce and consume music within specific social contexts (households, neighbourhoods, etc): at specific times or historical moments; within specific networks of social relationships (involving kin, peers, colleagues, etc), relationships that have different dimensions (social, political, economic). People's experiences of music, the uses they have for it, and the meanings they construct around, or through it, are bound up with these specificities, and with the interconnections between them. (Cohen 1993:135)

Music, especially within a diasporic population such as Rotumans in Suva (Irava 1991), perforce plays a role in fashioning "the changing social, territorial, and cultural reproduction of group identity" or "ethnoscape" proposed by Appadurai (1991:191). Music, however, is not just the recordings themselves or the technological and industrial processes that underlie their cultural production; it is also the making of meaning. Insights into how Rotumans make meaning via the music and the project are revealed in the ethnographic data.

I must note at the outset I make no claim to in-depth knowledge of Rotuman music or culture. I am very much a novice. However, through doing music-recording projects such as this an interested academic researcher and a curious music producer out of necessity must learn more about a distinct social group. Such research helps to gain insights into the music and how to analyze and produce it to reflect appropriately the culture, society and ethos from which it arises.

There are several underlying and overlapping topics investigated here that inform the projects as examples of the “wired sound” phenomenon. They include the role of digital technologies to facilitate such projects; the role and evolution of music in diasporic communities (in Torres Strait, Australia and Fiji); the benefits and challenges of collaborative transnational musical research projects; and the role of music researchers as music producers.

1. The Torres Strait Connection

Because the projects arose from an interest in Rotuman music (and dance) in Torres Strait, it is useful to examine those linkages. Between 1863 and 1904 over 60,000 Pacific Islander immigrants from all over Polynesia and Melanesia—predominantly men—came to work as indentured laborers in Australia’s maritime, sugar and pastoral industries (Shnukal 1992). They constituted a sizeable proportion of the maritime workforce in Torres Strait for some time (Mullins 1995) and also provided the great majority of Christian missionaries. Consequently Pacific Islanders influenced music and dance performance as some imported musical genres were adopted or adapted and other local ones banned because of their connection to pre-colonial religion or performance culture (Lawrence 1998). Because the Pacific Islander immigrants had been Christianized, had experience dealing with Europeans and spoke the trade language Pacific Pidgin English, they became “the principal mediators between the new [colonial] order and indigenous Torres Strait Islander custom...and agents of social and cultural transformation” (Shnukal 1992:6). Their actions, attitudes and cultural practices impacted on what is now known as *ailan pasin*; that is, Torres Strait custom (i.e., Island Fashion). They became an elite in the sense that: “They were strong, well paid, and many were mission educated, knowledgeable in sorcery and healing, and had traveled widely” (Shnukal 1992:8). They also intermarried with local women and had large families amidst stresses on Indigenous fertility due to disease and dislocation. Based on detailed genealogical research, Shnukal (1992) notes that many Eastern, Central and Western Islanders today can demonstrate some Pacific descent.

The majority of Pacific Islanders in Australia were deported around 1906 following on from the passage of the Pacific Island Labourers Act of 1901. It was a legislative and administrative outcome of the White Australia Policy, which aimed to ensure the “purity” of the so-called “white race” and protect “white privilege” in employment and education. However in some areas of Queensland some Pacific Islanders were allowed to remain or evaded deportation. In Torres Strait some were allowed to remain if they had married local women or had established families. Communities such as St Paul’s on Mua Island can trace their origins to such policies and populations. Shnukal (1992:14) asserts that the socio-cultural influences of Pacific Islanders on Torres Strait Islanders were profound: “modern Torres Strait Islander creolized culture preserves its continuity in innovative and borrowed forms, almost every aspect of traditional culture and society having been transformed or reinter-

preted as a result of contact with Europeanized Pacific Islanders.” Although the general population does not always recognize the origins of these influences today, some Torres Strait Islanders are aware of them.

Immigrants from Rotuma were only one of many groups of those Europeanized Pacific Islanders in Torres Strait. Although not necessarily related consanguinally they did constitute a discernable sub-group within the wider Pacific Islander population. For whatever reasons, Rotumans have left recognizable cultural traces particularly in the islands of eastern Torres Strait, Erub (Darnley) and Mer (Murray), although the Pacific Islanders’ presence and movements within those islands were fraught with difficulties (Shnukal 1996). The title of a recent edited collection of research about Torres Strait Islanders, *Woven Histories, Dancing Lives* (Davis 2004), highlights that for Islanders identity, culture and history are often interrelated through music and dance. One interesting facet of their contemporary cultural heritage and performance culture is the influence of Rotuman immigrants. In Beckett’s (1981:1) opinion: “Island music and Island dance are not traditional to the Torres Strait. Like Island hymns, they are the product of the second half of the nineteenth century, when Torres Strait was ‘civilized’.... Always receptive to new things, the Islanders readily adopted the music and dance of these outsiders.” This has led to the distinct synthetic form practiced today and as documented in the historical recordings of Lawrie (1970), Beckett (1981) and Laade (1979).

According to the elderly informants Beckett (1981) recorded on Mer (Murray) Island in the late 1950s, there were clear distinctions made about the provenance and era of different popular songs that had originated from various islands such as Rotuma, Tanna, the Solomon Islands, Samoa and New Guinea. Amidst all these diverse genres, Rotuman music and dance were well regarded and came to be known as *Tai-bobo* in both Eastern and Western Torres Strait.⁴ Performance aesthetics remained relatively intact in the eastern islands but were adapted into another transitional musical genre called *Company Rice* in the western islands although the dance movements remained recognizable. Musically, in the eastern islands the chants consisted of two-part, over-lapping singing that could be continued indefinitely, which was an aid to prolonged dancing. In the western islands, the singing was in unison. Islanders came to use waisted drums (*warup/buruburu*) traded in from New Guinea or *gor/kulap* bean-seed shakers as percussive accompaniment although the Rotumans had used rolled up mats. Laade (1979) noted on Mabuiag Island mostly elderly men and women performed Rotuman songs and dances as entertainment at weddings, but he could obtain no texts.

Choreographically, the Rotuman dancers reportedly performed bare-chested in trousers, wore blue paint and used banana leaves as decoration. Their dance movements were set as ensemble not individualistic actions and they faced the audience. Accompanying hand-actions might suggest maritime work such as winding or hauling ropes and sails or using a steering wheel. They also added percussive accents using hand clapping and body slapping. The *tag-tag* genre was danced in place while in the *tugifo* genre the dancers were in constant motion with successive ranks of dancers

moving to the front. Some of these Rotuman-based stylistic characteristics were carried over into different yet related versions of *Ailan Dans* [Island Dance] as it evolved throughout the Torres Strait beginning in the early 1900s (Beckett 1981). Contemporary Torres Strait dance still contains some of the choreography and aesthetics introduced by Rotuman immigrants—even if not recognized as such by many Islanders—albeit changed over five generations and the considerable internal and external migration of Torres Strait Islanders. An interesting side note is that in casual conversation in Torres Strait, some Mer Islanders asserted to me that the Rotumans gifted the dances and music to them specifically and thus other Islanders should not perform them. This is a bit paradoxical as Mer Islanders had been instrumental in the expulsion of Pacific Islanders such as Rotumans from Mer (Shnukal 1996).

To attempt to ascertain if recognizable musical traces existed between Torres Strait Islanders and Rotumans, I played some of the Beckett recordings to Rotumans in Suva prior to the recording sessions. The “old” songs were unfamiliar to younger Rotumans and only a few elderly people could recall them at all, usually with the comment that they had not heard them since their grandparents’ era. This is understandable given the versions performed even in the late 1950s-1960s in Torres Strait had come with Rotuman emigrants in the mid to late 1800s. Consequently, language meaning and pronunciation or original content had been lost or transformed into something that certainly had traces of Rotuman influence but was muted or mutated.⁵

Consequently, it was decided not to try to record any of the chants on the Beckett recordings. In some ways trying to trace musical linkages was complicated by having to deal with two complex diasporas: that of Rotumans to Torres Strait and that of Rotumans to Fiji. Given that such mass movements of populations are commonplace across Oceania, similar challenges face other researchers trying to track the flows of cultural identity, ethnicity and the politics of culture (e.g. Linnekin and Poyer 1990).

2. The Project and Process of Recording

The project arose directly out of a chance meeting with OCAC director Epeli Hau’ofa at a conference at the Australian National University’s Centre for Cross-Cultural Research. During casual conversation he mentioned the OCAC was doing recording projects with emphasis on fusion music (combining different Oceanic musical traditions). Some OCAC projects specifically record innovative fusion music. For example, *Veivosaki* (2004) blends music from Fiji and the Solomon Islands and features the collaboration of Suliasi Tuilawalawa and Calvin Rore. The liner-notes by Hau’ofa (2004) state: “one of Oceania Centre’s main objectives [is to foster] the emergence of truly regional Oceanic art forms that transcend our cultural and national diversity.” They also do projects based on traditional music genres.

Given my personal and professional interest in recording Indigenous music, we continued discussions about a possible project and I briefly visited Fiji on route to North America. At about the same time, Makereta Mua, a Rotuman researcher and

graduate student at USP, contacted me. She was interested in the Rotuman diaspora to the Torres Strait region of Australia in the later part of the 1800s and possible remnant cultural practices. As noted above, Rotuman music and dance is of particular interest in Australia given its impact on the performance culture of Torres Strait Islanders (Shnukal 1992). In particular Mua was intrigued by the Rotuman influenced music (and dance) genres—such as *taibobo*—extant in the Torres Strait region and among the diasporic Torres Strait Islander population on mainland Australia (Beckett 1981). I use the term genre in the sense of “a set of musical events, real or possible, whose course is regulated by a definite arrangement of socially accepted rules” (Fabbri 1982:136). These have changed over the generations; however, for some Torres Strait Islanders Rotuman influences are still recognized as important.⁶

Through the above-mentioned contacts it was eventually decided Pegrum and I would travel to Fiji in late 2004 with recording equipment to record the Churchward Chapel Choir at USP in the first collaboration between the OCAC and the Rotuman community. We had done on-location Indigenous recording projects in the Torres Strait region of Australia (Neuenfeldt 2001) and elsewhere (Crowdy and Neuenfeldt 2003) and we were keen to broaden our recording experience. Choirs require different production techniques because they are usually recorded “live” without multi-tracking. Consequently, the “takes” must be as good as possible because it is impossible to “fix-it-in-the-mix” later. Aside from minor editing and sound shaping (such as reverb and equalization), a choir recorded on minimal microphones is much more of an “organic” musical event than multi-tracking. It captures the immediacy of the musical moment and also any “flaws” in the performance.

The diversity of Christianized music in Polynesia is vast (Garrett 1982; Stillman 1993). Due to Rotuma’s location at the interstices of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia—as well as diverse denominational influences (Wesleyan and Roman Catholic)—different musical genres of sacred songs have circulated there. Consequently, the choice of repertoire for the recordings was left to the discretion of the CCRC. However, it was decided at the outset to record enough material for two CDs with slightly different mandates. The CD for the CCRC would contain traditional hymns (from the *mak ka pelu* genre) and anthems, thereby paying homage to the past while celebrating simultaneously newer musical genres and arrangements. The CD for the OCAC would contain the same traditional *mak ka pelu* hymns as well as traditional secular chants, thereby documenting—and possibly reinvigorating—two genres of Rotuman music. They would be marketed and sold separately.

To record the music to its best advantage we transported to Fiji two eight-track digital recording machines (a Tascam DA-38 and DA-88), a 32-channel mixer and a selection of high quality microphones. Such portable recording equipment—in essence a mobile recording studio—is not the most up-to-date available (e.g. computer-based recording software such as Protools) but it is very robust. It had proved its suitability and reliability during previous on-location recording projects in the tropics; humidity, salt air and inconsistent electrical power supplies can adversely affect digital equipment. Once the tracks were recorded they could be easily transferred to

back-up media, taken to Cairns, transferred to Protools, and then mixed and mastered in a fully equipped recording studio. Because of digital technology, on-location recordings can provide high-quality data that can be manipulated to “industry-standard” during the post-production phase.

The sessions took place at the Media Centre at USP, which has a large television studio space suitable for a thirty-member choir. The Senior Video Producer, Melanie Guiney, and her staff assisted with organizing the venue, which proved perfect for the project. It was the preferred venue rather than the Churchward Chapel because the chapel is located on a busy roadway in Suva (Rewa Street). The recordings would have been difficult to do properly with so much extraneous and invasive noise. Of course the quality of a choir’s singing is the key ingredient in such a project and the Churchward Chapel Rotuman Choir was very well rehearsed and disciplined under the musical direction of choirmaster Samuela Taukave. One or two takes of a song were recorded after the usual preparatory procedure of outlining the process of recording, adjusting microphone placements and relaxing the choir—and producers. In the context of a normal church service songs are not repeated so it is a challenge for a choir to repeat a song. However, because of their discipline and obvious fervor for the content and intent of the songs they were able to repeat songs when required.

There were only a few minor adjustments made for recording the performances. For the *mak ka pelu* hymns the volume of the bell (a metallic idiophone) had to be attenuated. Such a bell is known as a *mak pel* when used to accompany a particular kind of hymn (Howard 1998). In this instance it was a disused fire alarm bell and consequently had an extremely penetrating sound that spilled onto all the microphones. Playing it more softly quickly rectified the sonic imbalance (see interview extracts below for comments on recording the bell). For the anthems several takes were required to get an adequate recording level when solo voices were featured. Focus on an individual voice is arguably somewhat of a departure from the conventions of the choir genre. Analogously, Goldsworthy (1995:31) has noted that “Fijian musical aesthetics...accords priority to group performance (not individual excellence).” However, the adjustments were accomplished quickly once the choir members knew our technical requirements.

For the traditional secular chants, we had to regroup the singers into a circle around a pile of folded mats. Some members struck these with sticks, a hallmark of Rotuman performance practice (Eason 1951:23 cited in Howard 1998). The microphone placements were changed to capture the more centrally focused sound. This was in contrast to the forward-facing choir that had been recorded for the *mak ka pelu* hymns and the anthems, with two microphones in front and two at the sides to capture the ensemble sound. Vishal Kumar from the Media Centre later recorded at the chapel the large log drum (*lali*) played by Vilisoni Fauoro, the CCRC’s chief steward. It is used to call people to worship. The sound of the *lali* was blended with sound effects of waves for a brief prelude to situate sonically the *mak ka pelu* hymns’ island provenance as such drums are used on Rotuma. Because the waves had been record-

ed in Torres Strait, it also provided an aural link to Australia and evoked the Rotuman diaspora to Torres Strait to work in the maritime industries.

The recording sessions were trouble-free; we had not encountered such a high level of professionalism in the community or church choirs we had recorded previously in Australia. It soon became obvious to us that singing was taken seriously by the Rotuman community and choir rather than being a casual, ad hoc activity associated only with episodic acts of worship. It was worship certainly but it was also imbued with a high level of precision and pride. Given the history of competitive choir singing in Fiji such an approach is not unusual, but as novices recording for the first time in Fiji it was a pleasant surprise to us. The recordings were then taken to Pegrum’s recording studio in Cairns, Queensland (Pegasus Studios), mixed, mastered and sent back to Fiji for final CD production. Fiji-based Simple Arts did the artwork for *Rotuman Chants and Hymns* (Figure 2). All post-production activities, CD pressing and distribution were handled by the OCAC and the CCRC for their respective CDs, which were sold to those interested in the music of Rotuma and Oceania.

3. The Recordings

Some of the genres recorded were chosen specifically because they are important components of the Rotuman repertoire albeit arising from older traditions. Such a consideration is part of the OCAC’s mandate to document traditional Oceanic music as well as innovate via cross-cultural collaborations. The new words and translations into English for some of the chants are by the Rotuman cleric, Reverend Iven Fatiaki. Consistent with traditional Rotuman musical practice, some were written specifically for the occasion (the project). They are notable for their eclectic and current topics but are mainly connected to issues arising from the Rotuman diaspora to Fiji and elsewhere such as Australia (Howard and Rensel 2001). The anthems are more commonly performed but new versions are always welcome.

The traditional chants are presented on the CD in an extended single track (8:32) with one following the other quickly. In keeping with contemporary Rotuman performance culture the songs constitute a “complete” performance (Howard 1998): at least one example of the different genres is presented. The first two are *sua*. As a noun, *sua* translates into English as “a song composed for a purpose and with a message. As a verb, it means to sing” (Hereniko 1991:126). The *sua* recorded for the project arguably fit within the “action songs and dance” category proposed by Kaurasi (1991) based on topics and the mixture of local and international tropes noted below. The *tiap hi* song extends greetings to relatives and friends living in Australia. The *tiap forau* song recounts the inter-relationships between the migrants, the pearling industry and how people back home on Rotuma benefited. The final song is a traditional chant about a bird (*swamphen*).

What follows are some examples and summaries of the traditional chants and *mak ka pelu* songs,⁷ which acknowledge and thus link members of the historical and

1. The first two "sua" are reflections of the migration of Rotumans to Australia and the experiences they and their descendants encountered over time. The "tiap hi" offers greeting and good wishes to Rotuman relatives and friends in Australia. The "tiap forau" refers to the migration of Rotumans to the Torres Strait in search of better opportunities in the pearling industry, their experiences and the benefits derived by their relatives back home in Rotuma. The last piece is a traditional song about a Heron.
2. This particular beating of the lali informs Rotumans that the church service is about to begin.
3. Rotuman Hymn Book (RHB 143)
4. RHB 140
5. RHB 306
6. RHB 209
7. RHB 304

Produced by Karl Neuenfeldt and Nigel Pegrum. Recorded by Nigel Pegrum at the University of the South Pacific Media Centre, Suva, November 2004 and mixed at Pegasus Studios, Cairns, Australia. Production assistance and cultural liaising by Makereta Mua. Special thanks to Professor Epeli Hau'ofa and the staff at the Oceania Centre for the Arts & Culture, Melanie Guiney and the staff at the Video Production Unit, Media Centre at the University of the South Pacific, Reverend Iven Fatiaki, choir master Samuela Taukave, chief steward Vilisoni Fauoro and all the choir and church members for their hospitality and great musicianship. CD and cover graphics by Simple Arts.

Fig. 2. Rotuman Chants and Hymns CD Back Cover Artwork by Simple Arts (Photo by author, 2005).

contemporary Rotuman diaspora. Of the two *sua* songs, *Kapa Roa'ia Se Laloga* and *Tātāve Ta Forau*, the latter has an explicit connection to the diasporic Rotumans and is couched in the maritime and mobile metaphor of seagulls.

Tukuğa fāua tātāve ta foraua/ Tu'unoa se ufağa 'ona Hāua/ āsia mafakatoa' noho 'e vasa/ Kapa roa poa ne Rotuam se maōan/ Hi'ia—e/ Hi'ie hie hie. In the dying year seagulls migrated/ Find themselves in a new environment [Australia]/ Visiting friends living abroad/ Reviving identity, not to be forgotten.

The *Tiap Hi* song is even more explicit: naming some of the places Rotumans live in Australia, including Torres Strait. Although there has been no direct migration to the Torres Strait since the late 1800s, the migrants' descendants are still considered part of the diaspora.

Mafakatoa' ne Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, Adelaide/Mafakatoa' ne Brisbane, Darwin, Perth Ma Torres Strait/alalum ne Kesmas te/Ma fāu fo'ou 'I la pupe' Beloved friends in Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, Adelaide/Beloved friends in Brisbane, Darwin, Perth and Torres Strait/The blessing of Christmas and the happiness of the New Year be with us all.

The song *Tiap Forau*, identified here by its first line "*Jenega ava 'eake kot kama-ta'*", alludes to Rotumans leaving home to work in maritime industries. They brought

back with them material goods such as marble tombstones, wood for houses and bicycles. They also brought back with them Bible translations from Tasmania.

Cling to the Bible provides a good example of the *mak ka pelu* hymns. Its provenance is the Rotuman Hymn Book (#143) with music by Saverina Taito and words by C.M. Churchward and M.J. Smith. The first verse and the chorus show the general tenor of the hymns.

Mā ma kikia se puk 'on 'aitu/ Iris ne mā sin kat pō ra la sar/Poto koroa ne'ne'I hani-sis/ 'E'on laloga la tau ma 'itar. Cling to the Bible tho' all else be taken/Lose not its precepts O precious and pure/Souls that are sleeping its tidings awaken/Life from the dead in its promise sure.

Pukut 'aitu na se famori/ 'Is kop la mā sin ma 'is alalum.
Cling to the Bible (x3)/Our lamp and our guide.

As an outsider involved in the project, there are several noticeable elements in the recordings—analyzable as texts and performances—that are unrelated to the processes of their cultural production on the CD. The chants are musically and rhythmically complex. Considering some of the choir members were unfamiliar with the chants, the performances are assured yet exude an ambience of spontaneity. As noted earlier, it can be a challenge for a large group of singers such as a choir to do repeated "takes." In this instance the performances arguably retain the sense of the social occasions that would have informed their original use as vehicles of entertainment and informal education. Thematically, the actions and adventurousness of ancestors are recounted, the difficulties and benefits of migration noted, as well as the urge to keep contact notwithstanding the geographical and generational distances. The *mak ka pelu* hymns likewise reveal a complexity and sense of spontaneity, albeit couched in Christian rhetoric and musical genres. Underlying all the recordings is a sense of a community that may be dispersed yet can make connections via dormant yet recoverable cultural practices (the chants) and an abiding commitment to Christianity (the hymns and anthems).

4. Rotumans' Comments on the Project

The immediately preceding analysis is that of an outsider, a foreigner functioning simultaneously as a music researcher and a music producer—two quite discrete yet sometimes complementary roles (Neuenfeldt 2001). In order to get more of an insider analysis of the project and the recordings it is fruitful to turn to interviews done with some of the principal Rotumans involved. The interviews were conducted at the Churchward Chapel in 2004 a short time after the recording sessions. Rotuman researcher Makereta Mua facilitated the interviews and she and I conducted them. In some ways she acted as a *de facto* culture broker for the project. However, as a junior member of the community—based on age and possibly gender and also as a non-choir member—she was per chance simultaneously both an insider and an outsider. Indeed, the project may also have offered her an opportunity to learn more about the

“homeland” culture via its revival within Suva’s large diasporic Rotuman community. More Rotumans live off-island than on the island itself (Howard and Rensel 1997).

The interviewees were Reverend Iven Fatiaki (at that time the resident minister of the Churchward Chapel), Samuela Taukave (choirmaster) and Sarote Fesaitu (eldest choir member), (Figure 3). In order to retain the flavor of the interviews and give the Rotumans’ perspectives precedence, they are presented here in their original form with limited editing only for clarity or brevity. Initials are used to denote the interviewers’ questions and the interviewees’ responses. They illuminate the project’s major underlying ethos as well as community, religious and personal imperatives.



Fig. 3. Rotumans involved in Interviews. L-R: Reverend Iven Fatiaki (Resident Minister at the time), Samuela Taukave (Choirmaster), Sarote Fesaitu (Eldest Choir Member), Makereta Mua (Researcher)—(Photo by author, 2005).

KN: Reverend Fatiaki, what do you think is the importance of using music in church services and social situations to help maintain Rotuman culture?

IF: Well, I think it has a great significance because the music has the power of getting people together. Music will of course help the people bring the past to present, remembering what had been done. The happenings of the past can be related through music to perhaps revive what had happened and to maintain the culture.

KN: For maintaining the culture, how important is [music] for the Rotumans living in Suva versus the people who still live on Rotuma? How do you use the music to keep connections to the home island or to develop something new in Suva?

IF: That is very important because as time changes people tend to move with development, seeking better education, health and better opportunities. Being away from the center [of the culture] will gradually move them away from the culture. Music and music festivals can, in a way, bring them together and help to maintain their identity even though they are so far away from the island. Music can of course hold them and bring them together as a people.

KN: Sarote, what enjoyment do you get from singing the old songs as well as the new songs?

SF: I think it is very important to know about the old songs and the new ones as well. I am a lover of singing and I love to sing church hymns and the traditional songs as well. It is also important because I can always tell my grandchildren about the songs of the past and present and they might know when they grow up whether anything has changed.

KN: How did you feel then when you heard these songs that we recorded, especially the older songs being sung in new versions or with the big choir?

SF: Yes, I sang some of those anthems and took part in the solos when I was younger. I left the choir for so many years and I came back to the choir because of my love for singing the church hymns, anthems and the culture ones as well. As you can see, I am now 72 years old and I still want to be a part of the choir.

KN: Samuela, as a choir director can you tell me what is the challenge of taking some of the older songs like we did on part of the project and adapting them or arranging them for the people in the choir now?

ST: When I started I followed what the previous choirmasters were doing. I was fortunate enough to attend classes at the University of the South Pacific with Ueta Solomona and started learning more about music. That is how we started to develop and uplift our standard of singing.

KN: Reverend Fatiaki, what message are you trying to get across when you are composing a song both as worship as well as music?

IF: Composing has the same formula as writing a composition. You have to have a context and a text that you want to relate to the people through music. And the context can be very cultural or sacred and that makes a difference. When singing a secular song, you have a cultural context that expresses the current life of the people and perhaps relating to the past lives of people. But with sacred music it has to help the people “float” to a certain level where they will meet their Master, be inspired and come out refreshed after the service.

KN: Do you ever get a feeling when you are in the middle of the service or sermon that the whole congregation has gotten the message or that the music has helped deliver your text?

IF: Yes, but I think that all aspects of worship have the same importance. We cannot say that the message itself has more importance than the singing. The sitting together of people, the gathering, their singing and praying and the message as well accounts for the whole thing. Each part of the service contributes to the totality of the service.

KN: So, how do you feel the first time you hear one of your songs being sung by the whole congregation?

IF: I think it is an amazing thing—you feel like crying because it is you who produced what the people are singing. So, it is quite amazing.

KN: Do you ever get the feeling that you [personally] are not really writing the song? That a “higher force” is writing the song and you are just the medium through which it goes?

IF: Yes, I am just doing the work but the Master helps me do it. It’s not me. That is how I feel.

MM: Reverend Fatiaki, the five traditional chants that you adapted for the CD—what inspired you to write [new words for] those particular chants?

IF: Well, I love the Rotuman culture and because of that you have to be a person with great observation. Because of that I love composing songs that relate the past happenings to the present happenings. I was so happy to write about the lives of those Rotumans who went to the Torres Strait. As a Rotuman, it is my honorable duty to do it.

KN: Sarote, could you tell me what feeling you get when you are singing in the middle of the choir?

SF: I feel very good because I am the oldest member of the group and when we sing those songs that I used to sing during my young days it really makes me feel like crying and I feel very emotional and happy as well.

KN: Samuela, being a choirmaster is as much about work as it is about worship. So how did you feel when we were recording the other evening and we had to re-do a track?

ST: Before the actual recording we had approached the Reverend Fatiaki to pray for us because we didn’t expect it to be that easy or that fast but I thank the choir members for their patience especially for those tracks that we had to re-do again and again.

KN: Yes, it is the easiest project Nigel Pegrum and I have ever done because the choir is so well rehearsed.

MM: Samuela and Sarote, does being a member of the choir improve your Rotuman language skills?

SF: I think so. I’ve noticed a lot of the younger generation speaking a lot of English at home but when we come to church we speak in Rotuman. The hymnbook is written in Rotuman and we have to sing in Rotuman unless the choirmaster has an English piece for us to sing. I think being in the choir helps improve our Rotuman language.

ST: Yes, that really helped because before leading the choir I was not able to speak in Rotuman that well. I was brought up in a Rotuman family and when my parents spoke to me, I answered back in Fijian or in English. When I joined the choir and was chosen to lead I was totally scared, but the elders in church gave me courage and said they would help me with my Rotuman. That is how I was able to cope when leading the choir. Also, traditionally, wherever the choir goes I have to lead them.

For example, if there is a funeral I have to lead them and speak on their behalf. In the beginning I would ask the Elders in the choir to do this for me. But because Rotuman is my mother tongue it was not that difficult to pick up on the language.

MM: As choirmaster, what are some of the cultural challenges you face when dealing with choir members?

ST: It is very challenging because sometimes I speak in Rotuman to them and I notice my Rotuman is inaccurate when they laugh. I overcome these language problems by just speaking in English but then I try and improve my Rotuman the next time we meet. Another major challenge for me is speaking in Rotuman gatherings whenever the choir is invited.

KN: Reverend Fatiaki, what would you consider to be a good outcome for these two projects that we are doing?

IF: Well, I think there are two important areas. Firstly, economically when the discs are reproduced and sold. Secondly, they will help the people to grow culturally. When they have the discs in their different homes they can listen to Rotuman music while attending to their daily chores. Moreover, [they will help] to hold the choir [together] as a people. I talked with the choirmaster about copyright but I think with our identity and culture we have no fears.

MM: Apart from singing in the church, what are the other activities that choir members are required to partake in?

ST: We are sometimes approached to perform for a wedding. We do a *hafa*. The word *hafa* is the Rotuman translation of the [English] word “half,” meaning half the performers are men and the other half is women. The *hafa* is the actual performance by men and women of the Rotuman traditional dance known as the *tautoga*. We are also asked by people to do the entrance and exit songs for weddings in church.

KN: Sarote, how did you feel on Friday night when you heard the old songs being sung?

SF: I know that there are a lot of the members of the congregation who used to be choir members before who would remember those songs. I feel emotional and happy about those songs... especially the anthems because they were sung by us many years ago.

MM: What are some of the challenges faced in attracting the young Rotumans to the choir?

ST: Before joining the choir, there are certain rules that you must know and follow. Many youths join the choir without fully understanding those rules. I usually allow them to settle down in the choir before asking them if they want to be permanent members.

KN: Reverend, what are the qualities that are important for choir members?

IF: There are quite a few good things. Let’s say the first priority is getting people of all ages together under one person’s leadership and to maintain their identity as Rotuman people and as church people. There are ways and means of getting the younger people to participate not only in church activities but in secular activities as well. Like Samuela mentioned, the choir can go out and dance in a dance hall as a

choir representing the people doing a *hafa* or a *tautoga fa* (men's *tautoga*). These are other means of attracting young Rotumans to the church. You will find it difficult to get them straight into the pews but there are other ways of attracting them away from their peer groups to be with the Elders to learn about Rotuman culture.

KN: So, are the social aspects of [performance] and particularly the cultural identity as Rotumans as important as the music?

IF: Yes, it is.

KN: Do they balance each other?

IF: Yes.

MM: Is being a member of the choir demanding on them?

ST: Being a member of the choir is a voluntary thing. But being a choirmaster is demanding. You've got to show by example: you've got to be the first person there and that last person to leave.

KN: How many weeks did you work in preparing that material for recording?

ST: We prepared for about a month.

KN: With the bells, how long have they been used? Do you use them for getting pitch [or mainly for rhythm]?

IF: The bell plays a tremendous part in the choir; it gives them the timing so it helps them to know the rhythm and when to start and when to stop. The bell signifies something very special — [e.g., "you have to follow me; you have to be very honest with me"]... because the bell leads the whole thing — it is very special because there is an invisible Guest present.

KN: Was the bell always used in service?

IF: Pitch comes from the soprano but the bell helps with rhythm and timing. Without the bell we cannot accomplish the [intended totality of the music].

ST: The bell organizes the tones; gives us the rhythm; the bell will notify us if there is a silence or a rest. The pitch is according to the music.

KN: What are a "good bell" and a "bad bell"?

ST: We want a bell with a *heg*, something that rings and sustains the sound. Some bells are from the bicycle. When you press it once it rings continuously and some are like plain irons but the members do the harmony.

KN: When we recorded, the bell player was playing like he would in church but because it is such a pure tone it goes over all the microphones and it was the loudest thing in the recording. How difficult was it for the bell player to play the bell softly during the recording?

ST: When we [play] that in church [the sound is open], in the studio the sound is closed. He found it quite difficult to play in the studio.

KN: Sarote, do you hope your children and grandchildren eventually sing in the choir or at least can appreciate the music that the choir produces?

SF: I have my two daughters, their husbands and my elder grandson all in the choir now and I hope we will continue to do so.

The interviewees' observations reveal some of the project's major underlying ethos as well as some community, religious and personal imperatives. Sacred music is clearly perceived as an important adjunct to worship but also as a musical means to cultural ends, as is secular music such as the chants. Music — whether traditional or contemporary — helps make meaning because of its sociality and its cultural embodiment in performance or worship. For Reverend Iven Fatiaki, composing and writing are ways of linking past with present within a Rotuman framework. For Samuela Taukave, being a choirmaster has brought personal benefits because he has had to learn more of his language and culture. For Sarote Fesaitu, it has helped her reconnect with her culture and pass it on to her descendents. Overall, the interviews highlight the mixture of the communal and personal elements present in music practice and performance as captured by the recordings.

5. Conclusion

The preceding descriptions and analyses are aimed at providing some insights into the Rotuman CD projects as examples of the "wired sound" phenomenon, in particular the *Rotuman Chants and Hymns* CD. They also delve into the role and evolution of music in a diasporic community in Fiji that is linked to Australia via a diaspora over a century ago; the benefits and challenges of collaborative transnational musical research projects; and the role of music researchers as music producers.

The collaborators arguably received different but complementary benefits from the project. What the CD project hopefully accomplished for the Churchward Chapel Rotuman Choir were the documentation and possible reviving and re-invigoration of some musical genres of their traditional and contemporary secular and sacred music. As well the proceeds of sales could be used to support other choir activities. Another benefit identified by Reverend Fatiaki was they might also provide a soundtrack for Rotumans going about their day-to-day lives but accompanied by their own music. For Rotuman researcher and culture broker Makereta Mua hopefully it was a learning experience, an object lesson in undertaking insider/outsider research and all it entails. Having Rotumans trained to do academic research is a potential benefit to the community. However, the role of any such researcher has to be negotiated within the context of their place within the community as defined by their age, gender and perceptions of their degree of cultural competence.

For the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture and the Media Centre at the University of the South Pacific, it demonstrated their commitment to community-based projects. Because it was an exploratory project it shows that collaboration can potentially benefit all the participants especially as all have different mandates, agendas and institutional requirements. The sales of CDs can also be used to support other activities. For Central Queensland University, hopefully it showed that their researchers are capable of working internationally and cross-culturally. For Nigel Pegrum and me, it was definitely a worthwhile and interesting project, culturally and musi-

cally, especially experiencing first-hand the links to Torres Strait Islander music (and dance). Through trial and error and well-intentioned advice, we learnt some of the protocols necessary for collaboration in a Rotuman/Fijian context. But equally importantly we got to hear some unique music and broadened our musical horizons. We would readily undertake another project with any of the collaborators.

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Notes

- 1 Useful information on Rotuma is located at: <<http://www.hawaii.edu/oceanic/rotuma/os/hanua.html>> (accessed 19 January 2006). The site has been used to advertise the launch of the CD <<http://www.hawaii.edu/oceanic/rotuma/os/News.html>> (accessed 19 January 2006). Tracks from the CD are at: <<http://www.hawaii.edu/oceanic/rotuma/music/CCchants-hymns.htm>> (accessed 22 January 2006). Also of interest is Howard's (1999) description of the Rotuman presence on the World Wide Web.
- 2 Howard (1998) provides a succinct overview and <<http://www.hawaii.edu/oceanic/rotuma/music/songsalbums.htm>> (accessed 19 January 2006) provides a listing of recordings.
- 3 Another result of the project was the 2006 inclusion of one of the Rotuman traditional chants in a CD, *Island Way*, by Torres Strait Islander musician and singer Henry (Seaman) Dan (2006). His CD, *Perfect Pearl*, won an Australasian Recording Industry (ARIA) Award for Best World Music Recording in 2004 and *Island Way* was nominated for an ARIA in the same category in 2006. The Rotuman *sua*, *Kapa Roa'ia Se Laloga*, begins and closes the CD with Seaman Dan singing in English about his own ancestral links to Oceania albeit not Rotuma in particular but rather New Caledonia and Niue.
- 4 The two main indigenous languages spoken in the Torres Strait region are Kala Lagaw Ya in the Western islands (related to Aboriginal languages) and Meriam Mir in the Eastern islands (related to Papuan languages). Historically the two language groups had extensive trading routes within the region although they were culturally diverse and geographically dispersed.
- 5 However, in 2006 upon hearing Laade's recordings Makareeta Mua (2006) identified the Non-opua song as a Rijaujau chant from Oinafa Village in Rotuma, which is still sung and danced. The 1979 Torres Strait version was readily recognizable. It is number 26 on Laade's *Traditional Songs of the Western Torres Straits* (1979) and is described as "Dance song from the South Pacific, probably from Rotuma (Mabuiag)."
- 6 For example, in 2006, a group of Torres Strait Islanders, the Deep Sea Dancers, performed in Fiji at the Melanesian Arts and Cultural Festival and made contact with their Rotuman relatives. The *Torres News* commented: "The group performed traditional Kabkar, singing and

Taibobo, a form of Rotuman Island dancing from which members of the group have family connections [Head Dancer] May [Passi] said most of the group are of Rotuman descent. 'We went to showcase our talent and to establish links with our Rotuman relatives. They sought us out before we had the chance to contact them.' May said she discovered she had about 60 relatives and understood that represented about a quarter of her family on Suva. 'They performed the Mamasa welcome ceremony for us with seven district chiefs present.'"

- 7 The songs on the *Rotuman Chants and Hymns* CD are: *Kapa Roa'ia Se Laloga*, *Tātāve Ta Forau*, *Tiap Hi*, *Tiap Forau*, and a chant. The *mak ka pelu* hymns are: *When We All Get to Heaven* [*Rotuman Hymn Book* 304/Alexander's Hymnal 136 Music by Foraete 'Elaise, Words by Makereta Wave and E.E. Hewitt], untitled hymn [*Rotuman Hymn Book* 140/*Methodist Hymn Book* 300 Music by Jone Tevita, Words by Ieli Irava and Edwin Hatch], *I'll Stand by Until the Morning* [*Rotuman Hymn Book* 306/*Sacred Songs and Solos* 1065 Music by Foraete 'Elaise, Words by Reverend E.M. Pene/F.H. Pene], *Psalm/Salam 29:11* [*Rotuman Hymn Book* 209 Music by Jone Solvalu, Words by Reverend J.M. Vamarasi], *Cling to the Bible* [*Rotuman Hymn Book* 143 Music by Saverina Taito, Words by C.M. Churchward/M.J. Smith].

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