

## BEING ROTUMAN ON THE INTERNET

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*Cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being." It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.*

—Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora"

THIS PAPER IS THE LATEST IN A LONG-TERM EXPLORATION of Rotuman cultural identity in which I have been engaged (see Howard and Howard 1977; Howard and Rensel 2001, 2004). Those papers dealt with the origins of Rotuman cultural identity in Fiji and expressions of cultural identity in several diasporic communities, ranging from enclaves in Fiji's urban areas to Rotuman communities in Australia, New Zealand, and Hawai'i.

Inspired by theorists such as Stuart Hall (1990) and Anthony Giddens (1991), who regard identity as fluid, multiple, and context driven, the argument I make in this paper is that the contexts in which people communicate with one another provide both opportunities and constraints on the degree to which cultural identity is expressed and the forms that it takes. In the papers cited above, my coauthors and I showed how expressions of cultural identity were affected by historical, geographical, and communication variables that characterized those physically grounded communities. In this paper I examine Rotuman expressions of cultural identity in cyberspace, including the Rotuma

Website, which I created in 1996, and subsequently on Facebook. My focus is on the specific ways in which persons of Rotuman ancestry (whether through both parents or only one) choose to communicate their Rotuman roots to other Rotumans, to knowledgeable friends, to country-mates, and/or to the world at large in electronic media.

### Ethnicity and Cultural Identity on the Internet

Studies of diasporic ethnic group participation on the Internet have gained momentum over the past few years. Anthologies such as *Native on the Net: Indigenous and Diasporic Peoples in the Virtual Age* (Landzelius 2006) and *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics and Community* (Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010) offer important insights into the use of various electronic media by specific migrant groups. Examples based specifically on Facebook data include studies of Basques (Oiarzabal 2012); Kurds (Eliassi 2015; Jacob 2013; Jaf 2011); Uyghur Chinese (Nur-Muhammad et al. 2013); and Chinese professionals (Mao and Qian 2015). (For a general review of social media and migration research, see McGregor and Siegel 2013.)

The development of the Internet and, subsequently, social media beginning in the mid-1990s was a godsend to diasporic Rotumans around the world, leading to the formation of a now-global community in which friends and relatives can keep in constant contact, while enabling expressions of Rotuman identity in a variety of ways, which is the main focus of this paper.

The emergence of email provided the initial vehicle for emigrants with computer access to stay in touch, although at the beginning finding one another on the Internet was not so easy. Not long after getting wired for email ourselves, my wife Jan Rensel and I began to share news with Rotumans, and spouses of Rotumans, who were online. In 1995, we started ROTUMANET, a list of interested parties with whom we shared news from any Rotuman community that provided it. People sent us news via email, fax, or regular mail, and we relayed it to everyone on the list, which came to number more than sixty email addresses.

In November 1996, I took the next step—to construct a website that would provide a place in cyberspace where emigrant Rotumans could not only keep up on the news from Rotuman communities around the globe but could also find and communicate with one another. To facilitate this, I introduced a news page, bulletin board, and registry in which individuals could fill out a registration form indicating who they are and how they can be contacted. This allowed individuals to locate relatives, friends, and associates by using the search function.

The Rotuma Website ([www.rotuma.net](http://www.rotuma.net)) has grown over the years and now includes over 15,000 files covering a wide array of topics. In addition to a news page and bulletin board, there are pages covering various aspects of Rotuman

history, archaeology, language, population, culture, economy, religion, land tenure, political organization, and food preparation; the accomplishments of Rotuman artists and athletes; and the biographies of notable personalities. Also included is an archive of publications and theses concerning Rotuma dating back to the early nineteenth century, a section featuring historical and contemporary photographs, and separate sections concerning Rotuma High School and the activities of a group of Rotuman scientists (LājeRotuma Initiative) who are engaged in research and environmental education on the island. Of particular interest for the focus in this paper is the Rotuman Forum (a section of the website where people can express their views regarding topics of concern to the Rotuman people<sup>1</sup>) and sections on Rotuman humor and poetry.

Before discussing the specific ways in which Rotuman cultural identity has been affected by the venues made available by the Internet, including the Rotuma Website, and subsequently social media (especially Facebook), it is important to provide some details of the ways in which Rotumans express their Rotumanness.

In contrast to concepts of cultural identity that rely on notions of common origin or shared characteristics with others, I choose to look at identity construction from a discursive perspective (Hall 1996), specifically from the standpoint of expressions, in multiple formats, that signal affiliation with a particular group. Hall's insistence that "because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies" (1996, 4) provides additional rationale for my contextual approach to identity construction.

Among the multiple ways an individual can signal identification with a particular ethnic group, none is more central than the use of language (Cunliffe, Morris, and Prys 2013; DeAndrea, Shaw, and Levine 2010). However, visual media can also be a prominent means of communicating information regarding identity (Emmison, Smith, and Mayall 2000), as can references to specific cultural icons and practices.

The variety of ways in which Rotumans express their cultural identity include (1) the use of the Rotuman language, ranging from single words to complex sentences; (2) joking in a characteristically Rotuman way; (3) referring to particular places in Rotuma; (4) expressing appetites for typical Rotuman foods; (5) referring to and participating in Rotuman-centered events, such as Rotuman-style dancing and Rotuma Day celebrations; (6) singing songs in the Rotuman language or calling attention to them; (7) acknowledging connections to Rotuman kin and well-known Rotuman celebrities; (8) expressing admiration or nostalgia for Rotuma's beauty and/or culture; and (9) direct expressions of pride in being Rotuman.

### *Use of the Rotuman Language*

Use of the Rotuman language is the foremost way that an individual can signify Rotuman cultural identity.<sup>2</sup> Yet, for the children of migrants (especially those who are the offspring of mixed marriages), learning to speak, read, and write Rotuman can be a daunting task, especially if the language is not spoken at home. In large measure, this is because of the complexity of the language's phonetic and grammatical structures. Rotuman uses metathesis, the inversion of word-final vowels with immediately preceding consonants, which produces a vowel system with umlauts and other diacritics, shortened vowels, and diphthongs. The result is that a base system of five vowels is increased to ten. In addition, the different forms of words that result from metathesis have grammatical significance, further complicating the language (see Churchward 1940; Wikipedia 2016). A further impediment to learning the language outside the home environment is a lack of available resources, including opportunities to hear the language spoken in some localities, and the absence of a consistent orthography, with one based on French, one based on English, and a third that uses linguistic diacritics. As a result, informally written Rotuman is generally subject to the whims of sounding out words and phrases as one hears them.

In an online survey of people identifying themselves as Rotuman conducted in 2012 by Matt Bray (the son of a Rotuman woman married to a white Australian), participants were asked to assess their Rotuman language ability. Of individuals born in Rotuma, nearly all (97.3 percent,  $n = 37$ ) rated themselves as highly competent in the language, as one would expect; those born in Fiji were intermediate with 51.6 percent ( $n = 93$ ) rating themselves as highly competent, whereas those born elsewhere rated themselves at the lowest level of competence (60.7 percent,  $n = 28$ ).<sup>3</sup>

These data are relevant insofar as the overwhelming majority of respondents (97 percent,  $n = 161$ ), regardless of their Rotuman language ability, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "Speaking the Rotuman language is an important part of being Rotuman." Thus, the use of the Rotuman language on the Internet, even in the form of isolated words, carries exceptional weight for the assertion of Rotuman identity (see Howard, Bray, and Rensel 2013).

### *Joking in a Characteristically Rotuman Way*

Rotumans love to joke. Any informal Rotuman gathering is regularly punctuated by gales of laughter as participants tease one another about little mistakes they have made, quirky personal characteristics, and just about anything out of the ordinary. Past incidents of a humorous nature may be repeated over and over again, eliciting laughter each time. To take offense at even what might be

considered an insult in other contexts is regarded as inappropriate and a threat to otherwise congenial relationships. The quintessential form of teasing among Rotumans is the custom of *te samuga*, in which people become known by reference to a humorous incident or characteristic associated with an ancestor. For example, the descendants of a man who, upon seeing a mirror for the first time, tried to shake hands with his image are known by the phrase "shake hands with the mirror." Others are known as "red pants," "white horse," "skinny legs," "buttons," and "biscuits" (English translations), among others. Thus, the ability to take a joke, as well as to dish it out, is at the heart of expressions of intimacy when Rotumans interact.

#### *References to Places in Rotuma*

Like most Pacific Islanders, Rotumans are connected with specific places on their home island, an association that includes rights and obligations and is laden with strong emotions. There is a hierarchy of inclusion, with people from the same district (there are seven) sharing a sense of kinship, people from the same village having a closer sense of relationship, and those whose ancestors occupied the same named house foundation (*fuag ri*) regarding one another as true kin. Places have connotations ranging from stereotypes of character—for example, people from Malhaha have the reputation of being "bush lawyers," supposedly for their propensity to argue and to make snap judgments; those from the district of Oinafa at the eastern end of the island are said to take themselves very seriously because it is a chiefly district and they are obsessed with protocol; and people from the westernmost district of Itu'muta are characterized as relatively relaxed and fun-loving—to personal associations with ancestors, rights to land, and a sense of shared history (see the Figure).

Thus, representations of places are loaded with meaning, and making appropriate references to them, whether in texts or images, suggests an intimate knowledge of the culture. In addition to locally based variations in meaning, certain scenes have an iconic value suggestive of the beauty of the island as a whole or representative of activities that hold a nostalgic value for migrants abroad. Reference to such scenes, generally in photographs or videos, can be used to signify a commitment to one's Rotuman identity in an inclusive manner.

#### *Expressing Appetites for Typical Rotuman Foods*

In an article published in the *Fiji Times* titled "Straight from the Cooking Bure,"<sup>4</sup> Geraldine Panapasa, a young Rotuman woman living in Suva, began with the following paragraph:

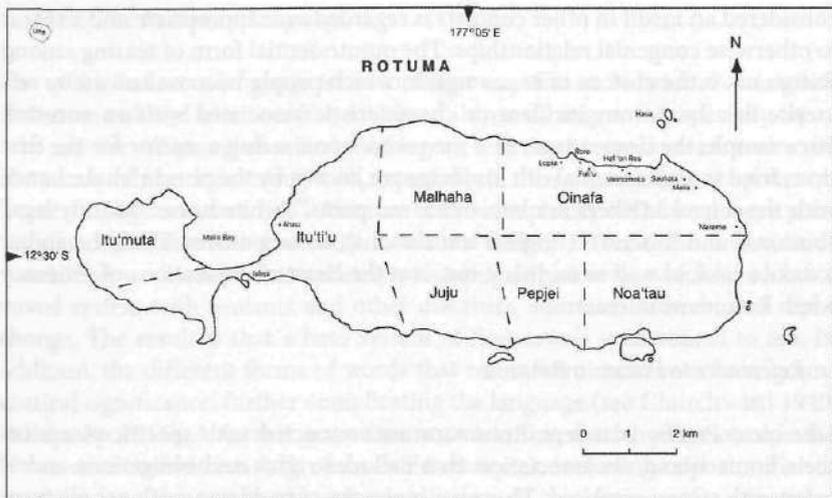


FIGURE. Map of Rotuma.

When it comes to mouth-watering traditional dishes, the best place to go is back to the island. Trust me, there's nothing more scrumptious and delicious than tasting an original recipe from the land of your forefathers. Last month [on Rotuma Day, May 13th], Rotuma was filled with all sorts of yummy foods made from recipes passed down over generations. (Panapasa 2012)<sup>5</sup>

Panapasa went on to describe particular beverages and dishes in near ecstatic terms, including the juice of green coconuts, *tahroro* (fermented coconut flesh used as a sauce with fish or chicken), *fekei* (a sweet pudding made from starch, usually from cassava, sugar and coconut milk), and *telulu* (a method of cooking fish over a hearth fire). In addition to these iconic items, she praised the preparation of pork (cooked in an earth oven), lobsters, seaweed, pan-fried fish, and even the chop suey and stir-fry. Panapasa concluded her article with the assertion that such foods have become “part and parcel of our unique Pacific identity and culture.”

Food items such as those mentioned by Panapasa are especially significant for diasporic Rotumans who grew up on the island, although *fekei* in particular has come to be a favorite of Rotumans everywhere and symbolic of food that is quintessentially Rotuman.

*Referring to and Participating in Rotuman-Centered Events*

There are several Rotuman-centered activities that transcend geographical boundaries. These include group dances (*tautoga*) and traveling dance parties (*fara*), rituals associated with life events such as marriages and deaths, gatherings of Rotuman associations abroad, Rotuma Day celebrations, and participation in Rotuman church congregations (mainly Methodist and Catholic).

Of all the activities fostered by migrant organizations, none is more important to Rotuman cultural identity than dance. Rotuman *tautoga* (dance performances) as well as the practice sessions (*taumaka*) provide opportunities for Rotumans to interact with each other in characteristically Rotuman ways, with much joking and banter; the lyrics of songs accompanying dances characteristically objectify and idealize Rotuma and its culture; and dance engages people in performing publicly as representatives of Rotuman culture and thus encourages identification of performers as Rotumans.

The term *fara* in ordinary conversation translates as "to beg, request, ask for" (Inia et al. 1998, 195). In reference to dance, "going *fara*" alludes to the practice, especially during the Christmas holidays, of groups going from house to house to perform dances in the Rarotongan style.<sup>6</sup> The residents of each recipient household are expected to express their appreciation for being entertained by providing food and drink and by dousing the dancers with sweet-smelling powder and/or perfume (for a full account, see Scheifes 2005). Participating in other Rotuman-centered events, and, perhaps as important, talking and reporting about them, are also a means of asserting one's cultural identity as a Rotuman.

*Singing Songs in the Rotuman Language or Calling Attention to Them*

A substantial repertoire of songs with Rotuman lyrics is widely known to people who spend time at Rotuman gatherings. Characteristically, some of the participants bring a guitar or ukulele, and those who know the lyrics join in the songfest that inevitably occurs. In addition, there are several groups of recording artists who have published albums of Rotuman songs, and their CDs are widely distributed among Rotumans around the world. Knowing these songs, and expressing appreciation of them, is another way of proclaiming one's Rotuman identity.

*Acknowledging Connections to Rotuman Kinsmen and Well-Known Celebrities*

As in most other Pacific Island societies, relationships are all-important to Rotumans, and as part-Rotumans comprise a substantial proportion of those

living abroad, emphasizing one's links to Rotuman relatives is an important way of asserting one's Rotumanness. So, too, is overtly expressing pride in the accomplishments of Rotuman celebrities, whether they are in the arts, sports, politics, or the professions.

*Expressing Admiration or Nostalgia for Rotuma's Beauty and/or Culture*

It would not be an exaggeration to say that a definite mystique has developed concerning the natural beauty of Rotuma and the cultural values associated with the way of life there, such as working hard and being generous. For those who have grown up on the island and have moved away, expressions of nostalgia are prevalent; for persons born abroad who have Rotuman ancestors, visits to the island often trigger rapturous reports of their experiences. In many respects, imagery of the island, with all its physical and social characteristics, is at the heart of Rotuman identity. Referencing these qualities, therefore, whether in poetry, prose, photographs, videos, or by other means, is a strong statement about one's commitment to Rotumanness.

*Direct Expressions of Pride in Being Rotuman*

Expressing pride in one's Rotuman ancestry is the most direct way of affirming one's identity. For example, in a Facebook group by the name of "Rotuman Pride" with a membership of 1,446, one person posted the following poem:

Roses are red,  
 Rotuman's are brown,  
 DASH WAT I AM,  
 So put it down.  
 My Rotuman pride, I will not hide.  
 My Rotuman race, I will not disgrace.  
 My Rotuman people will always stand by,  
 Through thick & thin,  
 Til' the day we die.  
 Rotuman pride is my mind.  
 Rotuman blood is my kind.  
 My Rotuman blood Flows hot & true.  
 So step aside and let me through,  
 Cause its all about Us Rotumans  
 Life sucks and then u die,  
 But if you're Rotuman you die with pride.

### Expressions of Identity on the Rotuma Website

The Rotuma Website provides a venue in which people can present themselves as individuals who cherish their Rotuman identity. They have done so primarily by submitting items to the Rotuman Forum, jokes to the humor page, recipes for Rotuman dishes, poems to the literary section, and by reporting on Rotuman-centered events on the Bulletin Board.

The Rotuman Forum<sup>7</sup> currently includes discussions of fifty-six separate topics, including political issues, practical concerns associated with development, land issues, and aspects of Rotuman identity. Nostalgia figures quite prominently in a 2004 posting of an expatriate living in Australia at the time, under the title "Thoughts about Rotuma":

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

From a distance I see the holistic beauty of Rotuma:

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

From a distance I feel the soothing effect of Rotuma:

- that calls me all the days of my life
- from Lagi te Maurea [north-east wind] with its cool and enchanting effect
- to the tranquility that captivates my senses
- with the security that I can sleep at night with my doors and windows open
- with no worries of being robbed or mugged,

From a distance I smell the fragrance of Rotuma:

- the Tieri and Ragkari [sweet-smelling flowers] that graces the maidens heads
- to the Sea and Kori [sweet-smelling fruits] that also anoints their heads
- the fragrances that permeate, I have longed for in my head

From a distance I hear the call of Rotuma:

- carried to me by the wind of my imagination
- with laughter of women and joy of children
- free of worries
- that begs me home

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

It is there that I promise that I will one day return to retire and live for the rest of my life. To rekindle the kinship and repay Rotuma for what I owe it, and to be buried with the rest of my loved ones.<sup>8</sup>

This is one of many ways Rotumans abroad have paid homage to the island and their Rotuman heritage on the website.

The section on Rotuman humor<sup>9</sup> is filled with jokes chiding their compatriots who are less proficient in English than they are. For example:

A Rotuman man went to a store to buy bullets for his gun. Since his English was not good, he thought very hard as to how he will relate to the salesman what he wanted to buy. He knew that the Rotuman word for bullet is *aita* (or *aiat*). However there is another Rotuman word which is very similar in spelling and pronunciation; *a'ita* (or *a'ite*) which is the Rotuman word for Saturday. So he said to the salesman "I want to buy a box of Saturday."

The section of the website on Rotuman recipes<sup>10</sup> provides opportunities both to share information regarding the preparation of traditional Rotuman dishes and to display one's cultural knowledge and hence Rotuman identity.

And in the literary section of the website,<sup>11</sup> almost all the poems in both Rotuman and English extol the virtues of the island's beauty and culture, as seen in this poem entitled "My Home Island":

How brightly glistering in the morning sun  
 Those white beaches with its glimmering sand  
 As the dawn softly smiles  
 And the cold breeze sighs  
 On this beautiful isle  
 With the sound of the waves  
 Breaking on the rocks

As it thunders in my heart  
While I am far away  
Threatening to fade  
As the years pass away  
With coconut trees far and wide  
And grooves of evergreen  
Lining on the side  
Of winding roads all around  
Restore to me those memories  
Of childhood years growing up on this isle  
Though distant  
I still remember you  
Under God's blue sky  
Oh give me back my home island  
Where its beauty never fades.<sup>12</sup>

The website also provides a venue for announcing and calling attention to events of special interest to Rotuman communities like Rotuma Day celebrations or fund-raisers for Rotuman causes such as the island's hospital, schools, or scholarships. Indeed, virtually all contributions to the website by Rotumans or part-Rotumans constitute direct or indirect ways of expressing one's Rotumanness.

However, the role of the Rotuma Website in fostering Rotuman identity abroad goes well beyond the opportunity for individuals to express themselves as Rotumans in cyberspace. In an online survey of Rotumans who visited the website, Caroline Clark (whose master's thesis, completed in 2005, is titled "The Rotuma Website: Transnational Relations and the Articulation of Cultural Identity") reported:

The response to the website, as articulated through the survey, is positive. Community members that access the website use it as a tool for learning about Rotuman culture and connecting to cultural identity. For some migrant Rotumans, the website is the only form of Pacific Island culture that they know. While the website itself is not a form of culture, it serves a dialogic purpose. There is a circular relationship between the website and the community in that each contributes to the other. As a result, the Rotuma Website reflects and recreates Rotuman culture and is thus both conservative and transformative. (Clark 2005, 36)

As one respondent to Clark's survey put it:

The website helps us stay connected with our communities everywhere, and by that we are continually sharing and revisiting the unique experiences that each of us can identify with as being inherently Rotuman. We are able to maintain links with each other through this website, and so are able to feel that we are part of each other's experiences and celebrate and acknowledge that. (Clark 2005, 28)

Clark reported that 90 percent of her 151 respondents "believe that the website works to preserve Rotuman culture," and that 100 percent "believe that the website creates and maintains a sense of community among the global Rotuman diaspora" (Clark 2005, 27).

Yet the venue provided by the Rotuma Website is limited in terms of allowing people as individuals to express aspects of and pride in their cultural identity. In fact, although the website has been a popular site for news and bulletin board messages—getting an average of 300+ visitors a day at its peak—relatively few individuals have been regular contributors. But these limitations were rapidly overcome with the advent of social media.

### Cultural Identity in the Digital Diaspora

While still in its infancy, the literature concerning the role that social media play in perpetuating ethnic or cultural identity has been expanding rapidly. Research about Facebook usage is a growing specialization in social science, fueled by the worldwide involvement of a broad band of demographic groups around the globe.<sup>13</sup> Relatively easy access to this wealth of data has already stimulated studies of the online behavior of a wide variety of socially defined categories of Facebook users, including gender (García-Gómez 2013); homosexuals (Atay 2015); teenagers (Boyd 2014); race (Grasmuck, Martin, and Zhao 2009); nationalities (Miller and Slater 2000); and ethnic groups (Boupha et al. 2013). It is a subset of the literature regarding ethnic groups—focused on identity construction and maintenance among diasporic populations—that is most relevant to my concerns in this paper, given that the vast majority of Rotumans on Facebook live away from the home island.<sup>14</sup> The arena of Internet communication engaged in by immigrant groups has been labeled the "digital diaspora" (Brinkerhoff 2009; Laguerre 2010), recognizing that people now are able to actively maintain relationships across geographical boundaries on a daily basis, whereas in the past this was not possible.

A common theme in such studies is that, in diaspora, cultural identities are not static but are evolving and becoming more complicated. In the words of Stuart Hall:

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a “production”, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (Hall 1990, 222; see also Hereniko 1997<sup>15</sup>)

One way of conceptualizing identity formation in diaspora is to refer to “hybrid” or “hybridized” identities (Smith and Leavy 2008; Marotta 2011) as a means of explaining and interpreting the experiences of individuals who live within two or more cultural milieu. I am somewhat less than satisfied with such a concept, perhaps because of its metaphorical roots in biology and its earlier application to racial interbreeding. I much prefer the concept “multicultural” when applied to the cultural identity of Rotumans in diaspora. The notion of multiculturalism and its application to identity has been well defined by Peter Adler:

the multicultural individual is propelled from identity to identity through a process of both cultural learning and cultural un-learning. The multicultural person . . . is always recreating his or her identity. He or she moves through one experience of self to another, incorporating here, discarding there, responding dynamically and situationally. The multicultural person is always in flux, the configuration of loyalties and identifications changing, the overall image of self perpetually being reformulated through experience and contact with the world (1998, 234).

While I’m not proposing that all Rotumans and part-Rotumans in diaspora fulfill all aspects of this definition, I would maintain that a great many do and that a fundamental (though not necessarily conscious) appreciation of the nature of cultural differences, along with a willingness to adapt to them when contexts permit, is widespread. Thus, almost all the Rotumans that I know in Fiji are multilingual, fluent in Rotuman, Fijian, and English, while many speak some Hindi as well, and they can comfortably interact with members of each ethnic group. This is not to say that they consciously identify themselves with these groups, but rather that the cultural knowledge they control becomes part of their sense of self. In the perspective of Joseph Straubhaar, their cultural selves are “layered,” and those layers are constantly changing over time as individuals are exposed to new cultural experiences through personal interactions or by exposure to various kinds of media (Straubhaar 2008).

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The methods used in Facebook studies vary considerably.<sup>16</sup> Some researchers have relied primarily on qualitative data, while others have attempted to code postings on Facebook. Qualitative studies usually rely on content analysis of postings or intensive interviews with selected Facebook users. The size of the samples can be quite small, as few as eight (Jacob 2013) or twelve (Jaf 2011; Mao and Qian 2015). In other instances, researchers have done content analysis of Facebook groups based on particular ethnic group interests (Nur-Muhammad et al. 2013).

Content analysis and interview material are of limited value for comparative studies; instead, such studies call for coding schemes that allow for quantitative analysis. An example is the study of African American, Latina/o, Indian, Vietnamese, and white students by Sherri Grasmuck, Jason Martin, and Shanyang Zhao (2009). Their research methodology included focus groups, interviews, and analysis of Facebook profiles based on a coding scheme “covering virtually all the major items that can be found in a Facebook account” (Grasmuck, Martin, and Zhao 2009, 167).

Because I consider my study of Rotuman Facebook users a comparative study, albeit within a single ethnic group, I have opted to create a coding scheme for Facebook postings that covers a wide range of characteristics, including responses to postings in the form of comments and “likes.” My approach is comparative in the sense that I am examining different patterns of expressing Rotuman identity within different kinds of Facebook groups as well as in the postings of individual Rotumans. In addition to analyzing Facebook postings per se, I use data collected from an online survey I conducted in June 2016 that specifically focused on Facebook usage; the survey generated 186 responses from Rotuman Facebook users.

### Rotuman Facebook Groups

Soon after Facebook became available to the general public in 2006, Rotumans began signing on and, in the process, they formed groups devoted to various

purposes. In this section, I focus on the use Rotumans make of Facebook by identifying specifically Rotuman Facebook groups and examining postings, including comments attached to postings, for their patterns of discourse and the ways in which Rotuman cultural identity is expressed within them.

The underlying premise of this analysis is that Facebook groups develop cultural (in this case, subcultural) patterns that may differ from one another in significant ways. The rationales for a group, the number of members who belong to a group and who participate by posting items and/or commenting on them, the use of imagery, the language used (Rotuman and/or English, including text speak—shortened bits of English), degrees of interaction between members, and the use of humor, among other variables, all contribute to the distinctive patterning of a group's subculture.

A search of Facebook groups containing "Rotuma" or "Rotuman" in their names in August 2016 turned up over one hundred groups, with memberships varying from one to over 5,000.<sup>17</sup> Having identified these groups, the next step was to create a typology that would reflect their purposes and the ways in which the groups were used by participants. I arrived at a typology of six types, presented below, listing groups with fifty or more members as of May 24, 2016. Groups can be either public or closed. Public groups are open to anyone who accesses their webpage; postings are visible to anyone, and anyone can upload postings or comment on postings. Closed groups are limited to "members" such that postings only appear to members and only members can upload postings or comment on postings. One can request membership in a closed group but must be admitted by a current member.

1. Groups based on specific communities:

- Rotumans in the UK, Ireland, and Europe (Closed—298 members)
- Auckland Rotuman Fellowship Group (Official Page) (Public—233 members)
- Rotuman Youth of New Zealand (RYNZ) (Closed—110 members)
- RAV: Rotuman Association of Victoria (Closed—86 members)
- Wellington Rotuman Group Public (Public—65 members)
- Navua Rotuman Farmers club (Public—56 members)

2. Groups based on locations in Rotuma:

- Motusa, Rotuma (Closed—503 members)
- Oinafa Rotuma (Closed—304 members)
- Lopta Rotuma (Closed—423 members)
- Paptea Village, Rotuma (Closed—208 members)
- Sauriri'is—Mara'e Lopta, Rotuma (Closed—117 members)
- Juju District Community (Public—69 members)

3. Church-centered Rotuman groups:
  - Vailala Rotuman Catholics, Brisbane, Australia (Closed—240 members)
  - Rotuman Church Hymns (Public—169 members)
  - Suva Rotuman SDA Youths (Closed—90 members)
  
4. School-based groups:
  - Rotuma High School Alumni (Public—740 members)
  - Rotuma High School scholars on Facebook (Closed—398 members)
  - Rotuma High School Friends (Closed—301 members)
  - USP Rotuman Students Association (Closed—175 members)
  - Ex-Rotuma High School (Closed—62 members)
  - Rotuma High School (yr 2001–06) (Closed—58 members)
  - FNU, Rotuman Tribe (Samabula Campus)<sup>18</sup> (Closed—58 members)
  
5. Sports-based groups:
  - Rotuman Sports Council (FRSC) (Closed—507 members)
  - Rotuma Hapmak Sports Club (Closed—285 members)
  
6. General Rotuman-centered groups:
  - Rotumans on Facebook (Public—7,221 members)
  - >[ROTUMAN PRIDE!!]<— (Closed—1,446 members)
  - MUST BE ROTUMAN (Public—1,314 members)
  - Rotuma (Closed—782 members)
  - ROTUMA (Public—767 members)
  - Im Proud To Be Rotuman (Public—637 members)
  - Rotumans Overseas (Closed—584 members)
  - Rotuma Island Brothers (Public—387 members)
  - Rotuman Community Worldwide (Public—266 members)
  - Fapui, Rotuma (Closed—82 members)
  - Rotuma Islanders (Closed—72 members)
  - Rotuma United (Public—70 members)
  - The Rotuman Squad (Public—62 members)

The growth in membership of groups has been rapid. In the groups I have been monitoring (see upcoming text), the average increase from August 6, 2014 to May 24, 2016 has been 35.3 percent.

To compare and contrast the subcultures of these various groups, I developed a coding scheme for postings and comments to posts that included the following variables:

*Audience*

Individual Personal Posting (no specific audience)

Activity (what individual is doing, has done, intends to do)

Disposition: mood, attitude, identity

Postings addressed to members of the group

Announcements regarding events, congratulations, requests, general information

Expressions of gratitude, appreciation, condolences, apology

Greetings related to holidays or extending welcoming

Humor, Rotuman-centered or general

*Images*

Self: self alone, self with family, self with friend or friends

Others: family, friends, groups

Events: Rotuman gatherings, performances, sports

Places: Rotuma, elsewhere

Food: Rotuman food, general food items

Photos with audio: hymns, Rotuman songs, other

Videos and slideshows: dance performances, band performances, slideshow with Rotuman music, other

*Topics*

General: religious, political, cultural, music, advertisements

Health: physical health, mental health, food, and diet

Life Events: births, birthdays, graduations, marriages, deaths, and funerals

Rotuma: comments about Rotuma, expressions of Rotuman identity

*Interactional*

Requesting information about events, whereabouts of someone, services, other

Providing information about events, whereabouts of someone, services, other

Conversations: dialogue between two or more individuals in the comments

Humor: general (often signaled by LOL, hahaha, teehee, etc.), or Rotuman-centered

*Language (coded separately for postings and comments to posts)*

English

Rotuman

Mainly English with some Rotuman words or phrases

Mainly Rotuman with some English

*Number of Responses to Posts*

Likes

Comments

Seen by (a statistic that appears only on a select few sites)

**Selected Group Profiles**

I began monitoring postings on Rotuman Facebook group sites in August 2014 and have periodically coded information on selected groups through July 2016. I am a member of all the groups profiled below, including closed groups to which I have been admitted. My procedure was to start with the latest posting on each site and to code fifty postings working backward. What I call the “monitoring period” refers to the interval between the earliest and latest postings in each set.<sup>19</sup> Thus, depending on the amount of activity on a site, monitoring periods vary from a few weeks or months to two or more years. I have selected one group from each of the six types listed above for profiling.

*Group Based on Specific Community*

The Auckland Rotuman Fellowship Group is a public group, which had 199 members at the time it was coded. It was created in February 2013 by the elected leader of the Rotuman community in Auckland, which, according to the 2013 New Zealand census, is home to 462 (59.0 percent) of the total number of individuals who identified themselves (or member of their family) as ethnically Rotuman. The Auckland group is one of three chapters of the New Zealand Rotuman Fellowship (NZRF), the other two being Wellington and Mairani (Waikato/Bay of Plenty). The posted rationale for the Auckland group reads as follows:

Noa'ia e Mauri!! [formal Rotuman greeting]

Welcome to the Official Facebook page for the Auckland Rotuman Fellowship.

This page is an opportunity for the Executive to update all members and interested parties on upcoming events and for you to send in your feedback on events we host.

Feel free to join and to send in any feedback and suggestions on events that we have hosted and that we can host for the Rotuman community here in Auckland.

Hope to see you all at our next event!!

Faiaksia [thanks].

*Auckland Rotuman Fellowship Executive*

The monitoring period for this group was from February 18 to November 1, 2014, during which seven individuals posted messages, with three members accounting for 80.4 percent of the items. The overwhelming number of postings (forty-three, 86.0 percent) concerned events of interest to the group, in most instances (thirty-nine, 78.0 percent) providing information about or relevant to an event. The majority of these postings concerned dance practices (*taumaka*) preparatory to performances by the group at Rotuman gatherings and information about the annual NZRF gathering, which was hosted by the Auckland group in October 2014 (the final posting during my monitoring period, on November 1, 2014, consisted of a twenty-six-minute video of the occasion). One member, who formed a Rotuman Zumba group, posted fifteen announcements regarding meetings of the group. Only five photos of people were posted, all of groups, although thirteen images containing decorative designs and two photos of food appeared.

While sixteen of the postings inspired ten or more “likes,” the average was eight. A posting of a photo of the Zumba group drew the greatest response (thirty-six likes and two comments). Comments were quite rare, averaging fewer than one per posting (0.8), and there was a total absence of conversations. Humor was expressed in only three instances. However, indications are that a substantial passive audience visited the site, as evidenced by an average of 96.6 viewers of postings (indicated by a “seen by” statistic attached to each posting).

The language used in most of the postings and comments was overwhelmingly English; only two postings were entirely in Rotuman; three postings and two comments were primarily in English with some Rotuman; and two postings and one comment were primarily in Rotuman intermixed with English.

The site was clearly intended as a means for the leaders of the Rotuman community in Auckland to communicate with members regarding organizational matters. Therefore, it does not encourage postings of attitudes or opinions by the general membership, and, although it serves a Rotuman clientele, it does not facilitate expressions of Rotuman identity as such. The relative lack of Rotuman language in the postings and comments can be seen as recognition that many members of the Rotuman community in New Zealand lack fluency in the language.

*Group Based on Location in Rotuma*

The island of Rotuma is divided in seven districts, each headed by a *gagaj 'es itu'u* (district chief). The district of Oinafa is on the northeastern part of the island (see Figure) and is the basis of the Oinafa Facebook group.

Oinafa is a closed group, which had 184 members at the time it was coded. The group was created in August 2011 with the following rationale:

Secret Group

Membership is strictly available to those who are from Oinafa and have once been or lived in Oinafa.<sup>20</sup>

During the monitoring period, from January 16, 2012 to April 10, 2014, seventeen different individuals posted items. However, twenty-one of the postings (42 percent) were by a single individual who had spent the Christmas holidays on Rotuma in December 2011. Most of his posts were photos taken during his visit and included iconic scenes of the island, groups of individuals engaged in various traditional activities, well-known individuals, children frolicking in the sea, and men with the fish they had caught. All together, just four individuals accounted for 62 percent of the postings.

Responses to the photos, and to the postings in general, elicited an average of 5.4 “likes” and 4.2 comments, but a relatively high number “seen by” (120.0), suggesting a substantial passively engaged audience. The posting that received the greatest response was a poem in the Rotuman language (eighteen likes, nine comments). Noteworthy was the comparatively frequent use of the Rotuman language in both posts (40 percent) and comments (48 percent), with sixteen posts and five sets of comments entirely in Rotuman. This is more than any of the other groups surveyed and suggests a sense of connectedness (through kinship, shared icons, and a common attachment to the locality) that makes expatriates more comfortable using their native tongue. This same sense of connectedness led to a relatively frequent number of conversations (37 percent of postings with comments) and the second highest percentage of humorous expressions (38 percent) among the groups surveyed.

In addition to photos of scenes and iconic activities taken on Rotuma and the use of the Rotuman language to express Rotuman identity, several postings were in praise of Rotuma, and particularly Oinafa, including some in the form of poetry. For example, the member who had spent his Christmas holidays on Rotuma posted the following:

POEM FOR MY DISTRICT “OINAFU”

Born & bred in Sauhata, in the beautiful district of Oinafa,  
 Crystal clear sea waters surrounding the unspoilt islands of Haua,  
 Snow white sandy beach of Islepi, the only place where people like to  
 come for picnics,  
 Unwind, distress under the trees, falling asleep from the scents of hoas  
 pene'isi [sweet-smelling flowers],

Growing up surrounded by our Mapigas [grandparents/elders],  
 mua'ak te rak'ak te [taking the lead in teaching] backed up by their  
 wisdoms,

As the sun sets for another day, they tell us tales of giants till we snore  
 away,

The friendly smiles of the people, living their life in simple,

Haharagi tauna' la re 'ia 'iom kau ta [youths getting together to drink  
 kava],

faeag mane'ak [joking],

kaha'ak te ma ahae'akia te ne au ta [laughing and thinking all the time]

The best picnic spots in the island, Haf'on Ros, Roro & Fu li'u are one  
 of their kind,

Yarning under the niu hu & hi fau [coconut and *Callophyllum*] trees,  
 pas lon ma a'fain ke kihikihi [playing cards and giggling],

From Marama to Mal'ia [Melia], Far ta [going dancing] to Vaimomoko  
 & Lopta,

fup famori figalelei ma se mao'akia [the younger generation should  
 not forget],

la hanis ma haisoag se 'os 'Itu'ta [to love and help our district],

No matter where i go, what the world has in store for me,

Where the river of life may flow, i will remain loyal to OINAVA

'Ereko 'ae 'otou FATUMANAVA [Because you are my HEART].

### *Church-Centered Group*

Vailala Rotuman Catholics, Brisbane is a closed group that was created in October 2011 with 122 members at the time of coding. Its stated rationale is to “post questions, photos, events and comments in relations to the Catholic Mission in Rotuma.”

During the monitoring period, from August 15, 2011 to October 16, 2014, items were posted by ten individuals, with the creator of the group accounting for the great majority of the postings (74 percent). As might be expected, religious themes were common in the postings (e.g., announcements of Mass, inspirational quotations, happy feast day messages) often accompanied by images (e.g., Pope Francis, historic photos from the Catholic mission on Rotuma, photos from the funeral of Fiji's archbishop). Responses to the postings were an average of four “likes” and an average of one comment, while “seen by” an average of 77.1 members. And although postings were almost all exclusively in English, with only two of them containing some Rotuman, 30 percent of the sets of comments contained Rotuman phrasings. However, there was only one conversation and one expression of humor, suggestive of an essentially passive audience.

Although a Rotuman group, this site is primarily dominated by religious themes appropriate to its congregation. Therefore, it did not provide a venue that encouraged expressions of Rotumanness so much as expressions of religious devotion.

#### *School-Based Group*

Rotuma High School Alumni is a public group that had 576 members at the time of coding. It was created in July 2008 with the following rationale:

For all ex-Rotuma High School Students. Tell others when you were a student, your experiences, your teachers, your subjects, sports, culture, the fun, dancing and many more

This was amplified in a subsequent post by the group's creator:

Many of us who attended RHS still hold fond memories of times spent at the school. Share with us your experiences, great moments, your most unforgettable event or experience at RHS. Identify the year you were at RHS. Happy sharing. Upload fotos *Alalum* [Good luck]!

It is one of the more participatory groups, with posts by twenty-nine different individuals during the monitoring period from April 16, 2012 to December 17, 2013. Photos were infrequent, with one group picture of Rotuma High School students and eight images related to high school athletics. Seventeen of the postings (34 percent) included expressions of gratitude or appreciation for what they had taken away from the high school experience on the island, including praise for teachers and staff. A few posts concerned recent news items that related to the school, such as a shortage of fuel on the island, which resulted in children having to walk to school because the buses were unable to take them. The postings elicited an average of 7.5 "likes" and 4.8 comments. The posting drawing the greatest response (thirty-four likes, twenty-six comments) was the group photo of eight male Rotuma High School students from an unspecified earlier time.

The data on language suggest a relatively high comfort zone for using the Rotuman language, with 26 percent of the posts and 48 percent of the sets of comments including Rotuman phrasing. Thirty percent of the postings and comments were entirely in Rotuman. Other indicators of interactional comfort were the frequency of conversations (20 percent) and indications of humor (46 percent).

*Sports-Based Group*

Rotuman Sports Council (FRSC) is a closed group with 507 members at the time of coding. It was created in September 2015 with the following rationale:

Noa'ia [Greetings]

This page has been created by the Council to provide updates, raise and answer queries, Improve Communication to Clubs and vice versa but most importantly: ultimately improving our Rotuman standards and uplift of Council oversight

During the monitoring period, from October 20, 2015 to March 12, 2016, thirteen members posted items, with one individual, the founder of the group, accounting for 64 percent of the postings. Three types of items dominated the postings: photos of sports groups participating in the annual Rotuman games (twelve), information about the various Rotuman sports groups (thirteen), and expressions of gratitude (seven), greetings (five), or condolences (three) addressed to particular parties.

The average number of responses to the postings was 19.2 likes and 2.3 comments per item, with the greatest response (forty-seven likes, two comments) in reaction to a photo of one of the competing athletic groups. At least some Rotuman language was included in eleven of the postings and six of the sets of comments. Joking was involved in ten instances, and four conversations occurred in comments.

*General Rotuman-Centered Group*

Rotumans on Facebook has become the premier site for Rotumans, with 7,280 members as of August 15, 2016. Considering that the total number of individuals identifying themselves as Rotumans or part-Rotumans in the world is probably in the range of 12,000 to 15,000 at the most, this site apparently includes a large proportion of the total population.<sup>21</sup> The group, which is public, was created in May 2011 with a simple rationale:

*Rotuam ta tae 'e ut tutu ne rante' ma 'is la 'io ne famor his tae 'e facebook.*

Rotumans are spread around the world and let's see how many Rotumans are on Facebook.

During the monitoring period, from May 28 to August 5, 2016, thirty-four individuals posted items, with four being the most from any one person, suggesting a broader level of participation than other groups as far as posting is concerned.

The majority of posts (thirty-five, 70 percent) included images covering a wide spread of subjects ranging from family members to Rotuman celebrities in sports and politics<sup>22</sup> to slideshows of scenes from Rotuma accompanied by soundtracks of Rotuman songs. Videos were included in eight postings.

Responses to postings were far more numerous than in other groups, but hardly in proportion to the number of members, with an average of 45.7 “likes” and five comments per posting. The highest number of responses (145 likes, eleven comments) was in response to an instrumental version of a popular Rotuman song.

Use of the Rotuman language showed up in twenty (40 percent) of the posts and twenty-four (48 percent) of the sets of comments, the second highest number of instances after the Oinafa group. Conversations occurred within the comments 16 percent of the time and humor in 18 percent of instances.

### Individual Rotuman Facebook Pages

In addition to group participation, thousands of Rotumans have created their own Facebook pages, which constitute a somewhat different context from group pages, especially insofar as the anticipated audiences for postings differ. In group settings, the anticipated audiences are other members of the group, whereas postings on personal pages are aimed at one’s “friends,” only a portion of whom may be Rotuman.

To obtain a sample of postings from individual Facebook pages comparable to that from groups, I selected a sample of fifty of my Rotuman “friends” (the first fifty who appeared on my list of over 400 Rotuman friends) and coded the latest posting for each.<sup>23</sup> I also relied on two additional sources of data to assess the ways individual Facebook pages implicate expressions of Rotuman cultural identity. One source is the information provided by individuals about themselves in the “About” sections of Facebook pages. The other is from the June 2016 online survey I conducted among Rotumans regarding Facebook usage, which yielded 186 responses.

Regarding the two samples (my “friends” and the respondents to the online survey), it should be noted that neither can be regarded as representative of the entire population of Rotumans on Facebook. Because I am much better known by older Rotumans than by teenagers and young adults, those who have befriended me and those who responded to my survey tend toward the older portion of the age spectrum. Thus, 59 percent of my “friends” were over the age of thirty-five, as were 64 percent of those responding to the survey. As for gender, half of my “friends” were male, half were female, although among survey respondents only 39 percent were male and 61 percent were female. The discrepancy in the survey sample suggests that women tend to be more active on Facebook, a conclusion supported by the number of hours reportedly spent per week on Facebook by men and women: 31 percent of the men reported spending one hour or less per

week compared with 18 percent of the women, while 41 percent of the women reported spending ten or more hours compared with 24 percent of the men.

Although at the time of this writing Facebook does not include a space for ethnicity in its “about” section, there are several ways in which people can signal their cultural identity, including the languages section of basic information, places lived, schools attended, “details,” and life events.<sup>24</sup> However, less than half (42 percent) of my “friends” sample took advantage of the opportunity. Fourteen of them (28 percent) indicated knowledge of the Rotuman language, five (10 percent) reported having attended Rotuma High School, and three (6 percent) referred to the district they associate with on Rotuma. One person self-described as “a pure-blooded Rotuman,” but there were no other direct references to ethnicity. Among other markers of identity, current residence was provided by forty (80 percent) of my friends, school affiliation by thirty-seven (74 percent), occupation by twenty-nine (58 percent), marital status by twenty-five (50 percent), religion by sixteen (32 percent), and political views by eight (16 percent). This suggests to me that, on the whole, Facebook does not provide a particularly fertile context for Rotumans to express their cultural identity. I attribute this in large measure to the fact that among their many friends (median = 593) are many non-Rotumans, which differentiates the context from the Rotuman Facebook groups. Asked in our online survey, “What proportion of your friends on Facebook are Rotuman?” 35 percent responded “Most of my friends”; 33 percent checked “About half of my friends”; while 32 percent answered “Fewer than half of my friends.”

This impression—that the Facebook context for individual postings does not provide a particularly fertile context for Rotumans to express their cultural identity—is supported by an analysis of postings on my friends’ Facebook pages. The monitoring period for coding was from March 16 to August 21, 2016. What stands out is the prominence of photographs, videos, or other images in the postings. Only three of the postings were not accompanied by some such form of visual imagery. The majority were photographs of oneself with or without family or friends (twenty, 40 percent), followed by photos of family members or others (twelve, 24 percent), videos or links to videos, mostly from YouTube (eight, 16 percent), and images as background for sayings (for example: “Kindness makes you the most beautiful person in the world no matter what you look like” seven, 14 percent). Noticeably absent were photos of places in Rotuma.<sup>25</sup>

Responses to the postings were quite varied, ranging from none or just a few to over 200. The average number of “likes” was 37.3 and the average number of comments 3.5. The greatest number of responses (238 likes, twenty-two comments) was to a photograph of a beautiful young Rotuman woman who had recently won a surfing competition in Fiji. Joking was embedded in twelve (24 percent) of the postings and five (10 percent) included conversations.

None of the postings were in the Rotuman language and only four (8 percent) of the comment sets were primarily in Rotuman, while seven (14 percent) were primarily in English with some Rotuman included. Interestingly, there was as much Fijian as Rotuman in the comments, a reflection of the multilingual abilities of virtually all Rotumans in Fiji. To put this into perspective, in response to a question in the online survey asking individuals to rate their knowledge of the Rotuman language, 57 percent answered that they were fluent, 23 percent that they could converse moderately well, and the remaining 20 percent professed lesser ability. In response to a question concerning what language they use when posting something on Facebook, only 18 percent responded "Usually in Rotuman," or "Usually in Rotuman with some English"; 36 percent responded "Usually in English with some Rotuman"; and 47 percent answered "Usually in English." Their responses to what language they use to make comments varied only slightly, with 22 percent favoring Rotuman. What this suggests is that the predominant use of English is more a matter of choice rather than a deficiency in Rotuman language ability.

There were several references, with pride, to the recent gold medal performance of the Fiji rugby sevens team at the Rio Olympics but no mention of Rotuman celebrities or cultural icons. The overall impression I get from these individual postings, and from my general participation with Rotuman friends over several years, is a desire by most to convey a multicultural identity rather than a narrowly Rotuman one.

### Summary of Expressions of Rotumanness on Facebook

The Table provides a tabulation, by Facebook groups and individual Rotumans, of the nine ways, previously detailed, in which Rotuman identity is commonly expressed. It reveals both how the varying purposes of the groups encourage or discourage expressions of Rotumanness and the forms of expression they favor. For example, the groups that showed the highest overall number of such expressions—Oinafa (105), Rotumans on Facebook (eighty-nine), and Rotuma High School Alumni (seventy-one)—have no pragmatic purpose other than providing a venue for Rotumans, with or without shared backgrounds, to interact. Those groups with pragmatic agendas—Auckland Rotuman Fellowship Group (twenty-seven), Vailala Rotuman Catholics, Brisbane (thirty), and Rotuman Sports Council (thirty-five)—showed the least. A large part of discrepancy between these groups can be accounted for by the greater use of the Rotuman language by the nonpragmatic groups, by expressions of intimacy through joking by the Oinafa and alumni groups, and by references to places in Rotuma by the Oinafa group (mostly involving photos taken in the district of Oinafa). References to Rotuman celebrities or kin played a significant role for the Rotumans on Facebook group (fourteen) and individual Rotumans (nineteen). In general, the

TABLE. Expressions of Rotumanness by Facebook Group.

Names of Facebook Groups	Instances of Rotuman Language <sup>2</sup>	Instances of Joking <sup>2</sup>	References to Places in Rotuma <sup>3</sup>	References to Rotuman Foods <sup>3</sup>	References to Rotuman Events <sup>3</sup>	References to Rotuman Music <sup>3</sup>	References to Rotuman Kin/Celebrities <sup>3</sup>	References to Rotuma's Beauty/Culture <sup>3</sup>	Expressions of Pride in Being Rotuman	Total Expressions of Rotuman Identity
Auckland Rotuman Fellowship group	10	3	0	1	13	0	0	0	0	27
Oinafa	51	19	19	0	1	1	7	6	1	105
Vailala Rotuman Catholics, Brisbane	17	1	6	1	1	1	3	0	0	30
Rotuma High School Alumni	41	23	4	0	0	0	3	0	0	71
Rotuman sports council	18	10	1	0	7	0	0	0	0	36
Rotumans on Facebook	44	9	8	5	3	6	14	3	0	92
Individual (non-group) Rotumans	11	12	0	0	0	0	19	0	0	42
Totals	192	77	38	7	25	8	46	9	1	403

<sup>1</sup> Inclusive of both postings and comments (each set of comments counted as one unit).

<sup>2</sup> Including generic expressions like LOL, hahaha, heehee, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Including photos or videos.

<sup>4</sup> Including soundtracks.

dominant means of expressing Rotumanness was through use of the Rotuman language (193), followed by joking (seventy-seven), references to Rotuman celebrities or kin (forty-eight), and references to places in Rotuma (forty).

### Concluding Observations

As a self-conscious product, Rotuman identity has evolved from its origins in the migration from Rotuma to Fiji during the mid-twentieth century, to its expressions in diasporic communities abroad, and more recently to digital environments such as the Rotuma Website and Facebook. The overall evolution has responded to a variety of facilitators and constraints, which has resulted in a multiplication of ways of expressing Rotumanness as the contexts within which Rotumans interact with one another and the world at large have continued to proliferate.

Among the most profound changes for Rotumans in diaspora is the addition of digital media as a primary means of communication, particularly among individuals who lack opportunities for face-to-face interaction. There is an important distinction to be made between physical, face-to-face contexts for expressing cultural identity and online contexts. In physical contexts, participating in dances, singing songs, preparing and sharing Rotuman foods, communication based on body language, touching, and so on, are prominent means of expressing Rotuman identity, but these activities are not available in online communications. In contrast, online communication facilitates the use of photos, videos, and soundtracks for referencing distinctly Rotuman activities and icons. It also facilitates the planning and organizing of face-to-face gatherings. Cultural bonding can take place in either context, although one could argue that digital communication lacks the depth of face-to-face encounters and does not produce the same degree of bonding.

It must be pointed out that the samples of Facebook codings in this study cannot be considered as representative in the broadest sense. Not only is the sampling of individuals skewed by my relationship with different age cohorts, but changes in content and form also take place over time as particular events are foregrounded. For example, in conjunction with Rotuma Day celebrations in various segments of the global Rotuman community, a flurry of postings planning the events, commentaries about them, and photos and videos of the events come to dominate for a time each year. Likewise, certain sporting events, like the annual Rotuma Games or political events affecting the Rotuman community, come to the fore periodically. And a visit to Rotuma by an avid photographer can result in a surge of postings in one or more venues. It is also the case that Facebook has changed and continues to evolve by adding new features and encouraging the provision of more and more personal information. But although my sample codings represent limited slices of time and may

not reflect the overall scope of postings over the long run, they nevertheless illustrate my main point—that expressions of cultural identity are sensitive to context, including online contexts like Facebook, and that they can be expected to continue to evolve as those contexts change.

Undoubtedly, the opportunity to participate on social media, and particularly Facebook, has had an uplifting effect on Rotuman identity generally. By providing venues in which participants can lend expression to their Rotumaness, where they can share words and images that reinforce their sense of belonging to a distinctive culture, they facilitate a sense of pride in being Rotuman. Thus, in my 2016 online survey, in response to the question “Has your participation in Facebook affected your identity as a Rotuman?” nearly two-thirds of respondents replied that it had strengthened their sense of identity, with 40 percent checking “It has made my sense of identity as a Rotuman much stronger,” 26 percent checking “It has increased my sense of identity as a Rotuman somewhat,” and 34 percent checking that “It hasn’t made any significant difference.” Facebook has also played a major role in creating a global Rotuman community in which new expressions of that identity are emerging.

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#### NOTES

1. I have generally edited items submitted by Rotuman colleagues for grammar, spelling, and clarity with the aim of making their contributions as much to the point as possible. In most cases, I return the edited versions for approval before posting them on the website. Therefore, the postings are more like letters to the editor of a newspaper than raw message board items.

2. There are a small number of non-Rotumans who are relatively fluent in the language and many more, especially those married to Rotumans, who know a smattering of words.

3. Low competence includes the following responses: (1) I’ve never spoken, sung, read, or been taught any Rotuman; (2) I can sing lyrics to Rotuman songs without knowing the meaning of anything; (3) I know the meaning and pronunciation of very few words; and (4) I know some basic phrases (e.g., greetings, counting). Medium competence includes (1) I can carry out a very basic conversation; (2) I can understand most Rotuman spoken to/around me but can’t respond; and (3) I can understand most Rotuman spoken to/around me and can respond

although not fluently. High competence includes (1) I can speak enough to get by living in Rotuma but struggle to write with correct spelling and diacritics; and (2) I can speak, read, and write fluently like Rotumans on the island, with a local-sounding accent.

4. In her article, Panapasa used the Fijian word *bure* (house) rather than the Rotuman term for cooking house, *kohea*.

5. Rotuma Day is celebrated on the anniversary of the island's cession to Great Britain on May 13, 1881. Although on Rotuma it is celebrated on the 13th, abroad it is usually held on a weekend in May convenient for those in the community involved.

6. Rarotonga-style dancing was introduced to Rotuma in 1940 by a group of Rarotongans who visited the island for two months. According to Vilsoni Hereniko, the Rotuman version is like Rarotongan dancing in many ways, yet different: "The swaying of the hips and the shaking of the knees is much lower. Hand and leg movements are less varied and simpler. Also, the men tend to keep the upper part of the body more erect, not displaying the flexibility that one often sees in Rarotongan dancing" (1991, 137).

7. <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum1.html>.

8. <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum27.html>.

9. <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Humour.htm>.

10. <http://www.rotuma.net/os/recipes.htm>.

11. <http://www.rotuma.net/os/literarycompetition/literarycomp.htm>.

12. [http://www.rotuma.net/os/literature/Rupeni\\_Fatiaki-1.htm](http://www.rotuma.net/os/literature/Rupeni_Fatiaki-1.htm).

13. In their comprehensive review of Facebook research in the social sciences, published in 2012, Wilson, Gosling, and Graham identified 412 relevant articles, which they sorted into five categories corresponding to five broad questions: (1) Who is using Facebook and what are users doing while on Facebook? (2) Why do people use Facebook? (3) How are people presenting themselves on Facebook? (4) How is Facebook affecting relationships among groups and individuals? (5) Why are people disclosing personal information on Facebook despite potential risks? They classified fifty articles (12 percent) as dealing with "identity presentation."

14. Internet access on Rotuma is expensive and quite limited.

15. Hereniko, a Rotuman who is a professor at the University of Hawai'i, offers a different perspective from the one presented in this paper. He divides Rotuman history into three phases: *ao maksul ta* (time of darkness), *ao taf ta* (time of light), and *ao fo'ou ta* (new time), corresponding to the Euro-American categories of precolonial, colonial and postcolonial (1997, 429). He summarizes the identity implications in his concluding paragraph:

The *ao maksul ta* (time of darkness) was a period of contested identities, marked by exploration and trade. Then came the *ao taf ta* (time of light), when missionisation transformed cultural identities by converting Islanders to a new religious

order while suppressing certain cultural practices. However, as Islanders embraced Christianity, they infused it with their own symbols and ways of worshipping. Since World War II, in their quest for personal, national and regional identities, Islanders have sought ways to reconcile indigenous culture, Christianity, and Euro-American values of materialism and progress. A wide range of fusions ensued, creating different identities from which to choose and multiple ways of symbolising them. In the contemporary phase, the *ao fo'ou ta*, Pacific cultural identities are indeed negotiable. (Hereniko 1997, 437)

Hereniko observes that a similar historical pattern exists in other Pacific Island societies and notes some of the ways in which artistic productions have been affected by this progression. I do not see our different perspectives as incompatible. Rather, I see his approach as dealing with a broader level of historical inclusion.

16. For general discussions of research methodology in the study of diasporic populations on the Internet, see Reips and Buffardi 2012 and relevant articles in Vargas-Silva 2012. Also of interest is Trevor Castor's article "Mapping the Diaspora with Facebook" (2014).

17. I also included some groups named after districts or villages in Rotuma.

18. FNU stands for Fiji National University.

19. Postings are not necessarily in chronological order on Facebook. Making a comment on an older posting moves the posting up to the date of the comment.

20. Jan Rensel and I spent several field sessions living in the district, so we qualified for membership.

21. Of course, not all members of the group have Rotuman ancestry. Included are non-Rotuman spouses, persons who have visited or worked on the island for shorter or longer periods of time, close friends of Rotumans, and at least two anthropologists.

22. The current president of Fiji, Jioji Konrote, is a Rotuman. Photos of him appear frequently in local media.

23. Because friends can post on one another's "walls," the postings were not necessarily by the person owning the Facebook page. In such cases, I selected the latest posting by someone I knew to be Rotuman.

24. It should be noted that Facebook periodically adds new features to its pages that alter the context in significant ways.

25. This was also the case with the heading photos atop the Facebook pages, many of which were of beautiful scenery, but none of scenes were from Rotuma.

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