The informality of this Fijian party on the island of Vanua Levu is emphasized by the introduced containers. Photograph courtesy Dr. Alan Howard

Cover: Change is stimulated by culture contact.

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Aerial view of the western end of Rotuma.

Culture Change In Rotuma

By ALAN HOWARD

A complete study of culture change of a Pacific island requires attention to three time periods, or phases, in the island's history. The first phase is the period from the time of initial settlement until the time of discovery by European explorers. Since there are no written records to document what occurred during this phase we refer to it as *prehistoric*, and study it by means of archaeology, by comparisons of language and culture with related islands, and by piecing together the fragments of history passed down in oral traditions. The second phase could be called the period of *primary* acculturation. It extends from the time of "discovery" through the period of initial transformation, during which the original culture was modified by contact with alien European cultures. Our investigation during this period focuses upon the impact of missionaries, traders, beachcombers, colonial administrators, and other agents of Western society. The third phase has no clear-cut beginning, but it is marked by an intensification of relationship between the island and a particular port town. It could be called a period of *secondary acculturation*. Our concern for change in this period focuses upon the flow of population, goods, money, information, and ideas between the island and urban areas.

The island of Rotuma, where I did research during 1960-61, provides an example of these three phases. Rotuma lies about three hundred miles to the north of the Fiji group, on the western fringe of Polynesia. At present approximately three thousand Rotumans live on the island, and perhaps two thousand others now reside in Fiji, with which Rotuma has been politically united since it was ceded to Great Britain in 1881.

Rotuma's geographical location places it very near the conventional intersection of Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia, and there is evidence to indicate that it was influenced in the prehistoric phase by all three of these areas. Physically, for example, the Rotumans show a wide range of variation for a small population, although first impressions are likely to lead the casual visitor to classify them as Polynesian. The Rotuman language has been classified as both Melanesian and Polynesian by different linguists, but it seems clear that whatever its original affinity, it has borrowed heavily from Polynesian vocabularies. The legendary material describes the founding of the island by a Samoan chief named Raho, and a later Tongan invasion under Ma'afu from Niuafo'ou.

The best conclusion we can draw is that Rotuma was occupied prior to Polynesia proper, but that its original population was heavily influenced by later cultural invasions from Western Polynesia, as well as from Fiji, the Ellice and Gilbert Islands, and probably others as well. This variety of influences has lent to Rotuma a unique flavor that makes it difficult to categorize, and we must await the results of archaeological research before we can adequately piece together the puzzle of the island's prehistoric relationships.

Rotuma was "discovered" in 1791 by Captain Edwards in H.M.S. *Pandora* while he was searching for the mutineers of the *Bounty*. The Rotumans approached the ship with great caution and were prepared for war, but through constant coaxing the crew managed to lure the reluctant islanders on board and traded with them for needed supplies. Before the 18th century had ended the island was visited by a second European ship, the *Duff*. The first half of the 19th century was a time of increasing contact with European culture, and the original reluctance to engage in trading gave way to an eagerness for the acquisition of European goods. Whalers found the lush island an excellent station for replenishing their stores and it became one of their favorite stopping places. In addition to the whalers came the labor recruiters, who found the Rotumans more than willing to leave their homeland, and scores of young men were transported to plantations in all parts of the Pacific. Others eagerly signed on board visiting ships as crew members and sailed to every part of the globe. In addition to these influences, contact with

The Rotuman village of Maftoa, the transitional thatched dwellings near the shore combined with houses built with introduced cut lumber.

European culture, or at least a highly specialized segment of it, was rendered continuous by the large number of deserters who found their way to Rotuma's hospitable shores.

Soon after the middle of the 19th century, missionaries from the Wesleyan and Roman Catholic Churches had established themselves. Unfortunately the French priests and English ministers were somewhat less than tolerant toward one another's labors, and a religious factionalism resulted. Each mission marked off its own territorial domain and jealously guarded its converts from the "evil" influences of the other side. Disputes arose between adherents of the opposing faiths, often over the question of the right to build churches on communally held land. Antagonisms between the Wesleyans and Catholics continued to mount until 1878, when they culminated in a war between the two sects, in which the Catholics were defeated by the numerically superior Wesleyans.

The unrest which followed led the paramount chiefs of Rotuma's seven districts to petition to England for annexation, and in 1881 the island was officially ceded to Great Britain. The Crown decided that Rotuma should be administered as a part of the Colony of Fiji—the nearest Crown Colony—rather than as a separate unit. A Resident Commissioner was appointed to govern it along with an advisory body consisting of the seven paramount chiefs. Fortunately for the Rotumans, government under English law had the desired effect of reducing religious conflict, and eventually harmony was restored between the two factions. British policy in Rotuma was also directed toward bringing the benefits of civilization, and by the end of the 19th century Rotuma was thoroughly enmeshed in the modern world.

Thus the 19th century for Rotuma was a time of rapid sociocultural change, though not without a considerable degree of social upheaval. By the beginning of the 20th century, however, this transformation was virtually complete, and the Rotumans had made their adjustment to the alien culture. By that time they had been "Christian" for nearly half a century, had engaged in commercial trading for a comparable period of time, and had submitted to English law for nearly twenty years. They wore European clothes, used European tools, and supplemented their native diet with tinned meats, tea, biscuits, and innumerable other items. They also paid taxes to the government, applied for marriages and divorces through government offices, sought medical aid from the Resident Commissioner, and sent their children to the mission schools.

That does not mean that the Rotumans simply adopted Western culture uncritically and made no effort to retain their own customs. Rotuma is, in fact, a conservative society even today, and much of the aboriginal culture pattern is still intact. It would be more correct to characterize the 19th century as a period of selective cultural borrowing,

Rotuman mother and child. Pacifiers have been employed only recently.

The occasion of a Rotuman baby's first birthday. The cake was baked in a kerosene oven.

The proud possessor of a new bicycle and neat haircut. A Rotuman father and son.

in which the Rotumans adopted into their society a considerable number of foreign elements, and managed to attain a new and apparently successful integration.

During the 20th century Rotuma has continued to change, but it has changed more as part of the modern world than as a distinct entity. Although the community has retained its unique cultural identity to a considerable degree, socially and economically it has become thoroughly integrated with the rest of the Colony of Fiji. Today Rotuma is in the position of a hinterland community to Fiji's "urban" centers (the use of urban being derived from the census report of 1956 for the Colony of Fiji), and particularly the city of Suva, which is the center of government, commerce, and communication. Information, goods, money, and people continually flow into Suva from all over Fiji and it, in turn, serves as a center for the dispersal of the commodities that are necessary to maintain modern life. Besides this primary relationship with Fiji's capital city, Rotuma also mantains links with other urban centers within the Colony, particularly those that have substantial Rotuman enclaves within them. Urban areas, as centers for the dispersal of the commodities of modern life, are also centers of culture change, and although change is most rapid in the cities and towns themselves, hinterland islands like Rotuma are also affected. The stream of new people, new goods, and new ideas which flows into the island requires a constant readjustment of the social system.

Most easily absorbed are those things, such as material items, that raise the standard of living. A high standard of living or material well-being is the one matter that all Rotumans, conservative

A 10th grade class at the Rotuma School follows the curriculum used in New Zealand and Australia.

Preparation for a wedding feast, the traditional earth oven heated with wood from packing crates sent to the island.

The Rotuman Catholic Church was built under the direction of French priests, and completed at the beginning of this century. The photo (left) was taken during a funeral ceremony, some of the pallbearers still dressed in the traditional lavalava.

and radical alike, are likely to agree about. To obtain desired goods they are vigorously involved in the copra trade and have formed cooperative societies. They send their children to schools in Fiji where they become teachers, medical officers, and government officials. Thus Rotuma, though geographically remote, is today very much a part of a larger social system—the Colony of Fiji, and with the latter, a part of the modern world. As a hinterland community it supplies the Colony's urban centers with talent and ships its specialized product, copra, to Fiji's markets. In return it receives trained personnel to fill necessary roles, goods for better living, and specialized aid in the form of policies and advice from learned men.

Thus far the flow of people, goods, and information has been slow enough, and limited enough, to permit the community to exercise a firm conservatism, and thereby maintain a high level of internal cohesion. But the question that suggests itself is, what will happen to the community when this flow is intensified? That it will intensify is a certainty, and only a question of time. As better and faster modes of transportation are made available the island's protective isolation will disappear, and new techniques of mass communication – television via satellites, for example – are bound to have an effect.

The impending intensification of interaction will undoubtedly yield many advantages. Better education will be made available, and a higher standard of living. But community cohesion will surely be threatened. The danger area is that of social control, which is likely to be impaired by a rapid influx and departure of people. Thus even Rotuma, remote at it now is, may, in the not too distant future, have to deal with the same kinds of problems that plague only the Colony's cities and towns today.

A wedding couple. The groom is a schoolteacher, educated in New Zealand. Their marriage was arranged in the traditional manner, between families. The couple barely knew each other before the wedding.