In Fatiaki, A. et al. *Rotuma: Hanua Pumue (Precious Land)*
Suva: Institute for Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific (1991)

HOUSING AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS ON ROTUMA

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INTRODUCTION

A number of social scientists in recent years have focused on outmigration and remittances as processes which dramatically affect social and economic life in Pacific Island societies (see e.g. Bertram and Watters 1985, 1986; Hooper and Huntsman 1973; Shankman 1976, 1978; O'Meara 1986). Economic problems associated with these processes include decline of agricultural productivity, weakened development potential, maintenance of high living standards by external subsidies and consequent vulnerability to external economic fluctuations. Social changes include the erosion of traditional authority patterns and status structures, incipient class formation based on material wealth, devaluation of collective work, the spread of individualism and fragmentation of community, jealousy, and dissatisfaction.

This paper concerns such changes on the island of Rotuma.[1] Although politically affiliated with the Republic of Fiji, Rotuma is culturally and linguistically distinct, with strong ties to Polynesian islands to the east. The island is relatively isolated, located some 300 miles north of Fiji, and 240 miles from its nearest neighbour, Futuna. Isolation has served to slow the pace of interaction with the Western world, and helped Rotumans to maintain indigenous cultural patterns. Rotumans are capable of producing their own food through gardening the fertile volcanic soils, fishing on and beyond the reefs which surround the island, and raising animals. Imported foods and other materials are available for purchase through stores on the island, but until the late 1960s, the major source of income was copra.[2] The amount of money spent on store purchases was closely tied to copra exports, and therefore limited (see Figure 4 in Howard, Chapter 16, this volume).

However, increased outmigration over the past thirty years has created a situation in which seventy percent of Rotumans now live in urban Fiji. The 1986 Fiji Census reported 6,064 Rotumans in Fiji in contrast to 2,588 on Rotuma itself (Table 1). Perhaps

an additional 1,000-2,000 Rotumans live in New Zealand, Australia, North America and Europe. Many households on Rotuma presently include members who are away and periodically send back money or goods; remittances from relatives abroad have become the largest source of income for the island.[3] This influx of money and material goods is affecting social relationships, lifestyles and values.

TABLE 1

Rotumans on Rotuma and in Fiji, 1956-1986

	1956	1966	1976	1986
Rotuma	2993 (68%)	3235 (56%)	2707 (37%)	2588 (30%)
Fiji	1429 (32%)	2562 (44%)	4584 (63%)	6064 (70%)
Total	4422	5797	7291	8652

Data obtained from Fiji Census Reports, Government Press, Suva, Fiji.

The social implications of these demographic and economic changes can be illustrated by examining one aspect of life on Rotuma: housing. In this paper I review changes in housing styles, materials, construction and maintenance. I then address the factors which have created the opportunities for housing changes, and the implications of these changes for social relationships in general.

CHANGES IN HOUSING ON ROTUMA

Housing Materials and Styles

The accounts of some of the first European visitors (Bennett 1831; Eagleston 1834-5; Cheever 1835; Lesson 1838-9; Lucatt 1851; Haley 1948) give us some idea of housing styles on Rotuma from the early 1800s. Houses were constructed of poles and logs, with thatched sago palm roofs and plaited sago or coconut palm walls. Most dwellings are described as "small," enclosing a space perhaps fifteen to twenty feet wide (Eagleston 1835:409). The chiefs' houses are noted as being larger, for instance forty by sixteen feet (Haley 1948:259) and twenty-five feet high (Lesson

1838-9:433). These early written accounts describe Rotuman houses as rounded at the ends, but I have been told that this was due to Samoan or Tongan influence; the ends of Rotuman houses were originally flat *(tarut fari)* (Mrs. Elisapeti Inia, personal communication). Low doors, which admitted little wind as a protection against hurricanes, required people to enter on hands and knees. Traditionally, the entrance facing the sea or the east was used by higher status visitors, while casual visitors used the inland or western door. The floors were earth, dry grass, pebbles or small pieces of coral, covered with rough mats of plaited coconut leaves *(farao)*, sometimes with a pandanus mat *('epa)* overlay. Cooking was done outside or in a separate outbuilding, also made of poles and thatch.

Rotumans customarily built their houses upon a foundation, or *fuag ri,* of raised earth, surrounded by stone walls (Eagleston 1834:409; Cheever 1835; Lucatt 1851:167). Most reports indicated that foundations were from two to four feet high, but some describe the range from one foot (Allardyce 1885-6:134) to six feet high (Allen 1895). Foundations up to twelve feet high, presumed to have been used for chiefly dwellings, were discovered inland by Gardiner (1898:433).

Some writers suggested these raised house sites were useful in keeping the floors dry during periods of heavy rains (Eagleston 1834:409, 1835; Lucatt 1851:167; Boddam-Whetham 1876:266). For Rotumans, however, *fuag ri* are significant in notions of kinship. One way Rotumans express relatedness is to claim membership in a kin group *(kainaga)* based on common descent from an ancestor who resided on, or held rights to a given house foundation, and the garden lands associated with it (Howard 1970:78). As we shall see, house-building practices in the late twentieth century have serious implications for kinship and land tenure considerations.

Rotuma is periodically subject to hurricanes, which have been known to destroy virtually all the houses on the island; for instance, such was reportedly the case in the late 1700s (Lesson 1839-9:425) and in the 1870s (Boddam-Whetham 1876:262). These disasters necessitated the reconstruction of buildings island-wide. The hurricane of the 1870s described to Boddam-Whetham was followed fairly closely by cession of the island to England in 1881.[4] It was about this time that Europeans introduced lime, made from burnt coral, as a building material. Rotumans seem to have greeted this innovation enthusiastically. At first they

plastered it over their thatched walls, then began to build new stone houses, plastered inside and out with lime (Gardiner 1898:435). In 1884, Resident Commissioner Gordon (Rotuma District Office, Outward Letters) reported that "stone-and-lime houses which are well built and accurate in dimensions, are rapidly taking the place of the present thatch houses." He also mentioned a scarcity of thatch. According to Allen (1895), those building stone houses used "wooden doors, and windows of European manufacture."

In a 1948 report commissioned by the government, Sykes (1948) wrote that "most of the houses are built of stone cemented with a mixture of coral lime and sand and covered with a roof of sago palm leaf thatch." He also noted that there were many European style houses with wooden walls and iron roofs, although these were not well maintained. One would gather from his report that there were few, if any, houses with thatched walls on the island. However, just a few years later, the District Officer, H. S. Evans (1951, #25) provided a numerical assessment of housing types which indicated they had persisted to some extent. He reported that "Rather over one third of the houses are attractive cottages of coral lime concrete, brilliantly white with lime wash; rather less than one third are Rotuman houses with sago leaf walls; twenty-four percent are timber houses and the remaining nine per cent of corrugated iron." Most roofs were still thatched, with no more than 12 percent of the houses having iron roofs.

According to a report prepared by the Rotuma Council in 1966 (Table 2), more than half the houses at the time had stone or cement walls *(ri hafu)*. Thatched houses *(ri ota)* had decreased to less than one-fifth, houses with iron walls *(ri pota)* had increased to 18 percent, and only 13 percent were timber houses *(ri ai)*. The trend toward *ri hafu* continued; fifteen years later, 83 percent of houses had stone or cement walls. Wooden and iron-walled houses constituted 10 percent and 8 percent of island houses, respectively. And there were virtually no Rotuman thatch houses standing. This was probably a result of Hurricane Bebe in 1972 (see below).

In 1989 my husband, Alan Howard, and I conducted a survey of the island. We found that the typical household compound included a cement dwelling with separate cooking and washing outbuildings. Thatched houses were making a slight comeback. In addition to dwelling houses, thatch is still commonly used for constructing cooking shelters *(kohea)*. When roofing iron

TABLE 2

Rotuma House Styles, 1951–1981

	1951[1]	*1966*[2]	*1981*[3]
Walls of:			
Limestone or Cement	(35%)	240 (51%)	269 (83%)
Wood	(32%)	60 (13%)	31 (10%)
Iron	(9%)	84 (18%)	25 (8%)
Thatch	(24%)	89 (19%)	0[4]
TOTAL HOUSES	(100%)	473 (100%)	325 (100%)

1. Reported by H. S. Evans, Resident Commissioner of Rotuma. Percentages only.
2. Records of Rotuma Council, compiled and reported by District Chiefs.
3. Records of Rotuma Council.
4. In 1972 Hurricane Bebe destroyed virtually all thatched houses on the island.

is replaced on dwellings, the old iron may be re-used for *kohea* or other outbuildings. Very few stone-and-lime houses are in use at present as dwellings, although a number of abandoned buildings are still standing; nearly all existing *ri hafu* are cement houses. Although many houses still use curtains to separate sleeping areas from what is essentially one large room, interior walls of wood or cement now commonly separate sitting room from bedrooms.[5] Recently Rotumans have begun to construct houses with kitchen, bathroom and toilet facilities under the same roof with bedrooms and sitting room.[6] Doorways in cement houses do not necessarily face seaward and inland, or east and west; instead they tend to be oriented toward the roadway and the village. Casual visitors use whichever entrance is closest at hand, or which gives entry to the room to which they wish access, such as the kitchen or the sitting room.

Another innovation in the past decade is the advent of two-storey houses on Rotuma. The man who built the first one on the island reported that some Rotumans were critical. Others, however, have begun to follow his example; in 1989 our survey turned up six double-storey houses.

Home Furnishings

Early visitors to Rotuma reported but little in the way of house furnishings: "mats, carved bare wood pillows, a few clubs, spears and drinking vessels of coconut shells" (Eagleston 1834). Lesson (1838-9:434) mentioned low tables for eating. Coconut shells strung on sinnet for carrying water could be hung up in the house (Eagleston 1834) and "in the centre of the house is generally slung a little koop net on which are deposited their provisions etc." (Cheever 1835). A more elaborate description of a storage device is given by W. L. Allardyce, who was acting Resident Commissioner in 1881:

> There is scarcely a house which does not possess, suspended from the ridgepole, a kind of large four-sided swing basket, called *kokona*, which serves as a larder and cupboard, and general receptacle for things which are intended to be out of the way of the children and rats. To guard against the latter a piece of circular wood, a foot or more in diameter, is obtained, and a hole bored in the centre, through which the main string of the kokona passes. Underneath this piece of wood, when a suitable height, a knot is made, not large enough to pass through the hole in the wood, which is thus kept stationary. However, the slightest weight on any part of it, at once gives the wood a sudden tilt downwards, and the rat is dropped on to the floor, clear of the *kokona*, and alongside of the cat. (Allardyce 1885-6:134).

Through the example of visiting Europeans, and opportunities to go abroad as sailors, Rotumans were exposed to alternatives for furnishing houses. For instance, a Mr. Emery, former mate of an English whaleship who left that position for health reasons, settled in Rotuma around 1829 and built a wooden house on the offshore islet of Uea. He had English furniture, cooking utensils, and pictures on the walls. Emery married a Rotuman woman, and lived on Uea with about 60 other Rotumans who treated him as their chief (Cheever 1835). Another sailor from a whaling ship, visiting in the early 1850s, noted that brightly coloured curtains were used to screen the sleeping areas of a large house he and his mates visited. He surmised these had been traded by some whaling captain for hogs and other provisions (Haley 1948:258).

In 1960, Howard conducted an island-wide household survey which included an assessment of dwellings as "European" or "Rotuman" style. Howard's Rotuman research assistants classified the houses based on their own criteria. They

characterized Rotuman style as houses with mats on the floor and very little furniture. European style referred to houses with enough furniture (tables, chairs, sofas, beds, cabinets etc.) to accommodate a European guest comfortably. Thirty-three percent of houses were assessed as European style by these criteria (Howard field notes 1960).

Alan Howard and I conducted a more detailed survey of island households in 1989, including inventories of household furnishings and appliances. These inventories revealed increasing purchases of imported durables over the past 30 years; this is illustrated by a tally of selected consumer items by years obtained (Table 3). Although some furniture was and is built by the residents or occasionally by a carpenter on the island, building materials are usually imported; and virtually all other furniture is purchased and shipped to the island.

TABLE 3

Selected Consumer Goods on Rotuma by Years Obtained

ITEMS	*nd*	*1970 pre*	*'70–'74*	*'75–'79*	*'80–'84*	*'84–'89*	*Total Owned*
Sewing machines	38	68	55	51	79	59	345
Refrigerators	6	8	8	18	43	38	121
Motorbikes	9	2	9	28	53	75	176
Lawnmowers	4	1	6	9	29	43	92
Bicycles	2	1	5	8	26	38	80
Freezers	3	1	0	5	8	20	37
Generators	1	1	2	1	8	26	39
Cars & Trucks	4	0	0	4	5	18	31
Videos	0	0	0	0	4	22	26
Washing machines	0	0	0	0	1	9	10

Data obtained from 1989 survey of 414 houses conducted by Jan Rensel and Alan Howard

House Construction

Customarily, house building is a group process, although it

may be guided by one who is particularly skilled *(majau).* Members of the *kainaga* as well as neighbours and friends assist. With thatched structures, women as well as men contribute labour, helping to collect and prepare the sago or coconut palm fronds. The host household thanks the helpers by providing food. Hocart (1913, #4833) noted that the household prepared a *koua* (feast cooked in the earth oven, including a pig and starchy roots such as taro or yams) for the *majau* both before and after the house was built, and provided meals everday on which he worked. In addition, members of the household remain indebted to those who help them. They should be ready to reciprocate with their labour when needed. A house on a *fuag ri,* or on *kainaga* land, is subject to use rights by members of the *kainaga,* and these claims can be strengthened by contributing labour toward construction.

Reciprocal labour arrangements are still fairly common today, especially in the construction of dwellings, *kohea* or other shelters from thatch or iron. However, with cement and wooden houses, a growing tendency toward paid, professional labour can be observed in house construction over the past several years. Some of this can be explained in terms of a need for skilled labour to install windows, ceramic tile, and other imported features. In particular, houses being constructed by returning retirees or by Rotumans who live abroad but want a holiday home on the island, are being built on a commercial basis. A foreman supervises paid labourers, some of whom are hired precisely for their professional skills. A few of the most recent houses have even been designed by professional architects. Most such houses are not built upon a traditional *fuag ri.*[8] They belong to a particular family and are not subject to the claims of the extended *kainaga* by right of contributed labour.[8]

House Maintenance

With both Rotuman and European style houses, maintenance falls into two categories: cleaning and repairs. Cleaning a Rotuman style house includes sweeping the floor, sunning the mats, and picking up leaves and other rubbish in the compound. Although some nineteenth century European visitors found Rotuman houses "small, dark and dirty" (Forbes 1872:227), others were impressed with how neat and "scrupulously clean" they were (Lesson 1838-9:434; Bennett 1831:201; Haley 1948:258). In

1960 Howard found that house and grounds keeping was a matter of personal habit and varied between households, noting that there was much praise for the meticulous housekeeper, and some criticism for the slovenly one (Howard 1970:32).[10]

When the primary furnishings were mats, one could assume that plaiting them would take up much of women's time. Today more and more Rotuman houses are equipped with Western-style furniture. Although mats remain highly important for ceremonial exchange, and commonly are used as floor coverings or beds, women reportedly spend less time plaiting mats than they used to, and young women often do not learn how to plait mats at all. When asked what women are doing instead, informants said they were spending more time looking after their houses (Field notes 1988). Whether or not this is actually the case, it provides a rationale for spending less time in other activities. The care of houses seems to have assumed greater importance in Rotuman perceptions than in 1960 (Howard, personal communication).

The type of housing repairs needed has changed as materials have changed. Thatched roofs and plaited walls must be periodically replaced. As with the process of building a thatched house, rethatching is an activity which typically involves a group of relatives and neighbours contributing their labour on a reciprocal basis and being thanked with food. Rotumans valued sago palm as more durable than coconut palm for roofing thatch (Bennett 1831:201; Evans 1951, #25); according to the report of a Methodist minister who stayed on the island for several years in the 1880s, a sago palm roof "put on nicely is said to last without rethatching for twelve or sixteen years" (Allen 1895). To protect thatched roofs during strong winds, pairs of coconut palm fronds were (and are) laid over the roof vertically, tied together at the top. Hurricanes, of course, necessitated rebuilding, and as Gordon (cited above) noted in 1884, there was apparently a lack of thatch for the purpose at times.

Rotumans were receptive to a less-labour-intensive and longer-lasting alternative when lime was introduced as a building material. Lime-and-stone houses, however, required periodic white-washing with additional lime (Evans 1951, #25). Likewise, wooden houses need paint and are subject to termites, and iron roofs eventually rust and must be repaired or replaced (Sykes 1948). One advantage of cement houses is that they require little maintenance, especially if left unpainted. Increasingly, however,

householders are choosing to paint their cement structures. Expert plasterers are sometimes hired to prepare the surfaces for painting. While painting is an activity still done on a reciprocal basis, several households in one village paid labourers for house-painting in 1989.[11] With the introduction of indoor plumbing, electrical wiring, bathroom tile and other improvements, Rotumans tend to hire individuals with special skills for installation and repairs. Thus both labour and materials for Western-style houses increasingly require cash.

The essential differences in maintenance between Rotuman and European style houses involve the costs of obtaining and replacing materials. Sago and coconut palm thatch, and even lime and stone, are native materials; labour is the main investment, and is provided by family and neighbours. Materials such as roofing iron, timber, cement, paint, tile, wiring, and plumbing fixtures are all imported goods. These items cost money, and the know-how to install and repair them is primarily available on a cash basis.

Summary of Housing Changes

Traditional Rotuman thatch dwellings have all but disappeared from the island. Most houses are now built of cement and iron. There is an increase of "European style" furnishing; most houses have at least some furniture and appliances. In addition, there is a trend toward ever more elaborate houses, with separate rooms, interior plumbing, and second stories. There is a tendency to pay for labour instead of relying on reciprocal labour for house construction. All of these charges depend upon an influx of imported materials and cash for purchases and upkeep.

FACTORS AFFECTING CHANGES IN HOUSING

Hurricane Bebe, 1972

The near disappearance of thatched houses can be attributed largely to Hurricane Bebe, in 1972, and the subsequent government disaster relief programme. Rotumans were given small loans (averaging about $F300) in the form of materials, typically including six bags of cement for a house foundation,

eight galvanized iron pipes for supports, timber for rafters, roofing iron and nails. The New Zealand Army came to Rotuma to assist with the rebuilding effort, and brought the materials. The rafters were cut and assembled at one village, then loaded onto a truck with the other materials and delivered to sites around the island. A model house was built in one district, with two or three men from each district assisting. These men then worked along with one soldier, assigned as foreman, to direct construction by eight-person teams in their own district. After pouring the foundations, the teams placed iron posts upright in the cement to act as roof supports, then erected the rafters. People were left to choose and build their own walls out of whatever material they could afford and obtain.[12]

The construction teams competed to see how fast they could build the basic structures. The work of the New Zealand Army and their Rotuman assistants has now assumed legendary status on the island: during the period of 21 days, it is said, they built 302 new housing units (Field notes 1988; 1989). As can be seen from the house counts in Table 2, three hundred houses represents a significant proportion of the dwellings on the island.

Besides the obvious physical differences, this massive reconstruction provided opportunities for other kinds of change. Some families chose not to rebuild their houses on family *fuag ri* in order to avoid *kainaga* claims on the new houses. This served to encourage later extensions and improvement, since the investments could be passed on to one's own offspring with assurity, rather than possibly being re-allocated to another branch of the *kainaga*.

Hurricane Bebe and subsequent aid efforts provided significant impetus and opportunity to housing changes on Rotuma. However, the overall trend toward more elaborate, individually-owned housing is sustained by the outmigration of Rotumans to paid positions abroad, and the cash and imported materials these migrants send back to the island.

Outmigration and Remittances

Over the past 35 years, a marked increase in outmigration can be observed among the Rotuman population (see Figure 1 in Howard, Chapter 16, this volume). Young Rotumans often further their education by attending schools in Fiji. Many of these stay on, taking positions in government and business.

Others go abroad for school, work, or to accompany spouses to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States or Europe.

Despite the increased outflow, the population remaining on the island has stayed relatively stable, averaging around 2,880 over this period. At the same time, average household size has decreased, from 7.4 to 5.8 persons (see Table 2 in Howard). Our research indicates a marked increase in households with one to three persons. While Howard found that such small households made up only 11 percent of Rotuman households in 1960, almost 30 percent of households fell into this category in 1989. At the same time, the percentage of households on the island composed of ten or more people dropped from 17 percent in 1960 to only 7 percent in 1989 (see Figure 2 in Howard).

The increase in small households may be attributed in part to return migration by individuals who choose to establish separate households rather than join existing ones. In addition, some formerly larger households now are represented by a single individual, who has been designated caretaker for the family home. He or she maintains the house with the financial support of family members abroad, who return from time to time. The emigrants thus have a place to stay when they visit, and retain a claim to their house site and lands should they decide to resettle on Rotuma. Both of these processes represent avenues for the investment of money in island housing from outside.

Remittances directly affect housing improvements in that relatives send building materials, furniture and appliances, or the cash to purchase such items. In addition, they often provide money to pay for labour on houses. Remittances can also have an indirect impact on housing. The inflow of money allows people to purchase many foods instead of investing time and effort in either producing more food or selling copra for purchasing power. Access to remittances thus serves to free up men's time; some men use this time to work on their houses.[13] Traditionally, Rotuman men spent most of the day in the interior bush lands, either working on their gardens or cutting copra. Travelling by foot or horseback to and from their lands, sometimes a few miles away from the village, also took time. Today, with approximately 30 cars and trucks and more than 150 motorbikes — many provided by relatives off-island — men can reach their plantations much more quickly. The amount of time spent gardening or cutting copra has also fallen off. According to a survey of daily activities which I conducted in

one village in 1989, on the average men reported visiting their gardens for weeding, planting, or harvesting four times a week, for less than three hours a visit. Of 17 households, only six reported making money from cutting copra during the 13 weeks of the survey.

The trend toward decreased production effort can be seen by examining records of garden yields over time. While the number of men in productive age groups (ages 15-50) has remained fairly constant (Table 4), garden yields have declined markedly since the 1960s (Table 5).

TABLE 5

Crop Plant Counts on Rotuma, 1966 and 1981[1]

	1966	*1981*
Papai *(Cyrtosperma)*	204,936	93,250[2]
'Apea *(Alocasia)*	48,133[3]	68,908
Banana *(Musa)*	113,683	44,220
Cassava *(Manihot)*	331,712	98,744
Yam *(Dioscorea)*	101,073	69,136
Taro *(Colocasia)*	326,201	288,904

1. Data obtained from records of Rotuma Council, compiled and reported by District Chiefs.
2. One district did not report any papai in 1981. I don't know if this is a reporting error, or if they simply did not grow any.
3. Three of seven districts did not report any 'apea in 1966.

I attribute the decline in production of food primarily to the fact of increased remittances. The influx of money from non-copra sources can be inferred from Figure 4 in Howard, Chapter 00, which shows the decline in copra income compared to store purchases. More direct evidence of remittances can be found in Post Office records of telegraph money orders (TMOs). In 1976, the District Officer estimated that the average sum sent to Rotuma through TMOs was between $5,000 and $6,000 a month (see Plant, Chapter 13). Postal records for TMOs sent in the years 1982-1988 show an average of over $125,000 per year, or over $10,000 per month. And money orders represent but one avenue for cash

TABLE 4

Rotuman Men on Rotuma and in Fiji, 1956-1986

	1956			*1966*			*1976*			*1986*		
Ages	*R*	*F*	*T*	*R*	*F*	*T*	*R*	*F*	*T*	*R*	*F*	*T*
15-19	159	114	273	163	155	318	164	257	421	151	359	510
20-24	91	99	190	81	178	259	73	264	337	94	313	407
25-29	86	64	150	90	117	207	49	196	245	5	252	337
30-34	76	46	122	83	87	170	60	159	219	67	241	308
35-39	68	43	111	72	79	151	69	128	197	54	182	236
40-44	73	41	114	75	57	132	54	118	172	52	160	212
45-49	44	17	61	55	48	103	67	97	164	63	127	190
Totals:	597	424	1021	619	721	1340	536	1219	1755	566	1634	2200
Percent:	58%	42%		46%	54%		31%	69%		26%	74%	

R = on Rotuma; F = in Fiji; T = Total
Data obtained from Fiji Census Reports, Government Press, Suva, Fiji

flowing into the island; other means include bank checks sent by mail, and cash brought by visitors.[14]

The opportunities created by hurricane relief efforts and the inflow of remittances were not sufficient in themselves to cause the marked increase in Western-style housing on Rotuma. Rotumans have chosen to act on these opportunities in pursuit of what they consider to be a better life. A third factor affecting changes in housing on the island is therefore Rotuman attitudes and values.

Rotuman Attitudes and Values

Rotumans have demonstrated a deep-rooted tendency to value things European more highly than things Rotuman. The Reverend William Allen, a Methodist minister who spent several years on Rotuma during the 1880s, noted at that time:

> Everything English he [the Rotuman] thinks is better than Rotuman. "Their axes are better than our stone axes, their muskets than our spears and clubs, their knives than our cockle-shell, their ships than our canoes; the English have a God, therefore the God of the English must be superior to ours." Thus the Rotuman reasons (Allen 1895).

An example from Rotuman language also suggests this view. In his *Rotuman Grammar and Dictionary* published in 1940, the missionary C. Maxwell Churchward defined the term "*helava*" as meaning "(of things) beautiful to look at" and "(of persons) belonging to some other place or country, strange, foreign, alien" (Churchward 1940:220).

Since the nineteenth century, Rotumans have increasingly adopted European things: imported clothing, tools, foods, as well as housing materials and furnishings. In 1960 Howard (1970:18) found that "Many European products are now considered absolute necessities rather than luxuries." The high value Rotumans place on imported goods is reflected in their incorporation into formal ceremonial presentations. For instance, a tin of meat or fish is presented along with roasted pig and taro to each honoured guest at a feast; a length of cloth (or a monetary donation) is acceptable as a funeral gift in place of a pandanus mat.

The trend toward ever more elaborate European-style housing

dramatically demonstrates this attitude. As Chris Plant writes in Chapter 13 of this volume, the switch to concrete housing after Hurricane Bebe was not only impelled by the desire for stronger materials, but also in pursuit of the status of European goods. By embracing Western-style goods as status markers, Rotumans perhaps inadvertantly have contributed to changes in social relationships.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF HOUSING CHANGE

Wealth, Rank and Social Merit

As Chris Plant noted, a Rotuman's house is the "measuring-stick whereby one gauges people's wealth and status." Prior to Cession in 1881 there was little material difference among Rotuman houses in style and furnishings. Chief's houses were distinguished primarily by their larger size, which reflected the chiefly responsibility for hosting visitors (Paul Vaurasi, personal communication). In the past chiefs could call upon community labour to build their houses, but today they are in the same position as everyone else: materials, and to some extent labour, cost money. Furthermore, there seems to be an erosion of the custom of claiming a particular house which goes with a title when a person is made a chief.

At the same time, Western-style houses may be becoming increasingly important for establishing claims to chiefly titles. In a discussion of qualities to look for in a candidate for chieftainship, one Rotuman suggested that a chief today should be:

1. a handy man who works hard and can do a lot of things well;
2. someone who participates in the community — not a loner;
3. a Christian who is active in church affairs;
4. someone who looks like a chief and *has a good house and therefore can be looked up to;*
5. someone who speaks well;
6. one who is educated and can speak English well;
7. one who loves the people, that is, takes care of them (Field Notes 1988; listed in this order, emphasis added)

The inclusion of housing in such formulations was not noted

during previous anthropological research on the island in 1960 (see Howard 1970). A negative example is the case of one chief who is currently subject to criticism for not having a "proper house" in which to entertain visitors (Field notes 1990).

At present, most houses of district chiefs are neither the largest nor the most elaborate in their districts.[15] Rather, people with higher earned incomes, and especially those with financial support from off-island, command the resources to develop elaborate housing. In effect, the higher standard of living subsidized by remittances may be leading to incipient class formation.

Evaluation of social merit aside from rank considerations has also been affected by increased access to Western-style housing. Customarily, a Rotuman's ability to provide an abundance of food, primarily garden produce, has been of central importance in evaluating social merit. Recently, however, this measure has been eclipsed by one's ability to provide a Western-style house. I was told in 1988 that there is a Rotuman saying: *"Nono ka ri lelei, ma 'inea ne hua' lelei."* ('When the house is good, you know the occupants are good.') Likewise with villages: *"Nono ka hanua lelei, ma inea ne hua lelei"*(Field notes, 1988).

Valuation and Maintenance of Relationships

The trend toward more elaborate, European-style housing has implications for the ways relationships are nurtured, and for which relationships Rotumans consider most important. As in other Pacific Island societies, reciprocal food gifts are a customary expression of close relationships for Rotumans. However, informal food sharing between households on Rotuma may be declining due to such factors as reduced garden production, greater access to refrigeration, and increased reliance on store-bought food.[16]

Relationships are also nurtured by hosting events. Formerly, the interior of a dwelling could accommodate a large group; curtains which separate sleeping areas could be taken down or pulled aside, and the few simple furnishings removed or pushed against the wall to make room for everyone. However, with more furniture, and especially the construction of interior walls between sitting room and bedrooms, there is less social space inside a house.[17] Today, large groups tend to meet in community

halls rather than homes; for special occasions, temporary shelters *(ri hapa)* are constructed. The more Western-style houses are thus more private spaces as well, used less in support of wide networks of relationships.

In contrast, having a European-style house can support relationships with people who live off-island. As Rotumans come to depend more upon cash and imported goods supplied by kinsmen in Fiji and abroad, relationships with these relatives may assume more importance than those with other households on the island. Nurturing such connections includes providing comfortable accommodations when they visit, with comfort increasingly defined in terms of the urban settings from which the visitors come, i.e., a European-style house and furnishings. Providing food is still important, but can be accomplished despite reduced gardening effort when supplemented with store-bought food.

Relationships are also customarily maintained and strengthened by reciprocal contributions of labour. At any point in time one party feels obligated to the other for help received, and ready to respond in kind; thus the relationship is kept in mind, and alive. A commercial transaction such as paying workers cash does not involve such on-going reminders of relationship. To the extent that Rotumans pay others for their labour, relationships are not reinforced as they would be through reciprocal labour exchanges.

A further indication of a shift in the definition of important relationships is the trend toward building houses off *fuag ri*. With the increased capital accumulation represented by a European-style house, Rotumans are concerned to assure that their direct descendants inherit.[18] Paying labourers also serves to avoid *kainaga* claims to house and property.

Conclusion: Implications of "The Good Life" for Cultural Survival

This paper illustrates how a number of factors — environmental, demographic, economic, and social — have combined to affect changes in Rotuman housing over the period of written history. In turn, the trend toward western-style buildings and furnishings is affecting social relationships among Rotumans. The processes of obtaining materials, construction and

maintenance increasingly rely on money rather than reciprocal assistance. People on Rotuma come to depend less on each other for support and more on wage earners in Fiji and abroad. The greater independence of individual families on the island is reflected in how they use their houses, as well as in their hopes for retaining control over their investments by passing the houses on to their own descendants. If this trend continues, the gap between those with access to money to invest and those without it may widen and grow more permanent.

Jean-Marc Philibert (1981), who studied the effects of wage employment on residents of a village in Vanuatu, suggests that emerging images of the good life may threaten cultural survival of Pacific Island societies. The emerging high standard of consumption, modelled after urban wage earners and fueled by increasing affluence, may undermine the subsistence economy, shatter community solidarity and increase social differentiation.

Philibert's observation may apply equally to people experiencing increased affluence through remittances. The material wealth which some Rotumans now enjoy may be contributing to the demise of customary aspects of Rotuman life, including the evaluation of social merit, concepts of property, and the interdependent network of relationships previously sustained by reciprocal exchange. It remains to be seen whether future generations of Rotumans will feel that the value received has been worth the cost.