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ON ROTUMA, "IT'S UP TO YOU"

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Rotuma is a small, tropical island in the South Pacific. By historical accident it is part of the Republic of Fiji, but Rotumans are a culturally-distinct people. In 1960, Alan Howard conducted fieldwork on Rotuma for his dissertation in anthropology. Recently, he and his wife, Jan Rensel, returned to the island to begin a new phase of long-term research on social and economic change. This article is based on some of their experiences on Rotuma in 1988.

Four days before we were to leave for Rotuma a shocking headline appeared in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin. The banner read, "'King' of Fiji Isle Vows to Secede" and beneath it, "A Fijian gunboat ferries troops to Rotuma to thwart a self-styled king's threat of secession." We found the story to be incredible. A gunboat? soldiers? to Rotuma!! You have to know Rotuma to realize how preposterous that sounded. When our friends called, asking if we were cancelling our trip to the globe's newest hot spot, we could only laugh.

More apropos is the account of Rotuma in *The Pacific Island Handbook* of 1959, the one that led Alan to decide to go there in the first place. That article begins: "Rotuma is one of the most beautiful, attractive and romantic of the Pacific islands." And indeed it is. Not only does it match in physical beauty everyone's conception of what a Polynesian island ought to look like, with dense green, luxuriant foliage and pristine white sand beaches, but the beautiful brown-skinned people display the traits of gentility and generosity that inspired 19th century artists and scholars to romanticize Polynesians out of all proportion.

Although inter-district rivalry in the late 1800s led the Rotuman chiefs to cede the island to England, Rotuma's history in this century

has been exceptionally non-violent. Physical aggression (*pel* in the Rotuman language) is rare on the island. During the year he spent on Rotuma in 1960, Alan had become familiar with a people whose main concerns were maintaining social harmony and avoiding confrontations. The Rotuman word that best describes the way Rotumans act toward one another is *hanisi*. It is one of those words that can't really be translated. It implies love and compassion, but refers more to a way of acting than a way of feeling. Giving food and comfort to someone who is sick and hungry is perhaps the epitome of *hanisi*. Alan was also impressed with the degree to which Rotumans accepted personal differences and respected one another's autonomy.

Paradise? Not quite. But not too bad an approximation. So what in the world had happened to precipitate the sending of a gunboat to such a peaceful island?

It seems that a part-Rotuman man by the name of Henry Gibson, a resident of New Zealand, had declared himself to be *Sau* 'King' of Rotuma. There had been no *sau* in Rotuma since 1873, when the institution was condemned by Christian missionaries for its pagan rituals. Henry Gibson had a vision in which some of the ancient *sau* appeared to him, and urged that he revive traditional customs on the island. He took the mandate seriously, and returned to establish a Cultural Centre of sorts in his home district. A karate master, he reinvented the sacred kava ceremony, endowing it with features that seem to incorporate notions of Oriental philosophy. When Fiji declared itself a republic, following the second military coup in September 1987, Henry Gibson did not stand idly by. He declared Rotuma independent, too – from Fiji – and sought recognition from foreign governments.

This might have been laughed off if Henry Gibson were not blessed with charisma. He apparently has a cult following even among white New Zealanders. In Rotuma, many of his kinsmen are ardent admirers, and support his claims. Following Gibson's lead, a group of his supporters

challenged the right of the new republic to maintain sovereignty over their island. They threatened to take down the Fiji flag and replace it with the Union Jack. Rotuma had been ceded to Great Britain, they argued, not to Fiji. In May 1988 the leaders of this rebellion were arrested for sedition, and were being held at the tiny Rotuma jail. We arrived a week later.

The gunboat was anchored near our village, but it was regarded more as a curiosity than a menace. Several of the soldiers were Rotuman, and they used the occasion to visit their families. The Fijian soldiers mostly languished near the beach, or visited the few Fijian households on the island. Things were as calm as ever.

On the day the boat left for Fiji, friends and relations gathered at the wharf to see off soldiers and prisoners alike. If there was tension in the air it was not political in nature, only the visible expressions of *hanisi* between parting kinsmen and friends.

Following a hearing in Suva, the capital of Fiji, a trial date was set for later in the year. The dissidents were released on bail and returned to Rotuma, where they resumed their roles in community life. Although they defiantly held to the righteousness of their position, they were not ostracized. Whatever individuals thought about the political statements being made, their outward behavior was still molded by an over-riding concern for social harmony, and a tradition of accepting differences.

Staying in tune

Maintaining social harmony on such a small island is not easy, but Rotumans have evolved a set of customs that seem to work quite well.

Their child-rearing practices are geared toward developing individuals who are acutely sensitive to social environments. On the one hand this sensitivity is expressed in a careful reading of other people's feelings and a constant adjustment of behavior to promote

interpersonal harmony; on the other hand there is the potential for touchiness and susceptibility to hurt feelings.

In order to minimize the likelihood of offense, behavior that might affront or challenge others, or that might be construed as bragging or showing off, is discouraged. For instance, at every feast the host ceremonially apologizes for the quality and quantity of food (which is invariably good and plentiful!). Humility is built into the very fabric of Rotuman life and acts to keep confrontations to a minimum.

When someone does offend or wrong another, Rotumans are quick to ask forgiveness (*faksoro*). Unlike modern American society, with its focus on blame and litigation, Rotuman custom involves apologizing without concern for assigning fault; the focus is on restoring and maintaining good relationships. Once someone does *faksoro*, the apology is almost always accepted and the incident is forgotten. Life goes on from that point.

Following extreme offenses, where lives may have been lost or put in jeopardy, custom requires a formal ritual of apology. A man of stature, a chief or distinguished elder, must go on behalf of the offender to the person or family who have been wronged. He brings gifts that include a fine white mat, kava roots, and a roasted pig. He wears a garland of Tahitian chestnut leaves around his neck, and assumes a posture of extreme humility. Symbolically, he is offering his life in a plea for forgiveness. The person to whom the apology is made signifies acceptance – which cannot reasonably be refused – by removing the garland. Instead of the knot, which symbolizes grievances, being tightened so as to strangle the one seeking forgiveness, it is untied. The potential entanglements the incident might have caused are averted.

A harmony of differences

Rotumans de-emphasize hierarchy in political relationships. Each of its seven districts, each village, indeed each household is treated as an autonomous entity. At the individual level this respect for autonomy even includes young children. Youngsters are not expected to accept the directions of their elders without question. For instance, in the household where we stayed, when parents asked a child to do something the request was often ignored, without further comment. It was assumed that the child was otherwise engaged and ought not be disturbed. As often as not someone else would fill in.

Not that the parents don't get frustrated on occasion! Tarterani, one of our closest Rotuman friends, told us how he had asked his oldest son to help him pour cement one afternoon. The son agreed, but while Tarterani was getting things ready, his son's friends came by and asked him to go play rugby. When it came time to pour the cement the son was nowhere to be found, and Tarterani had to do everything himself. That evening, at dinner, Tarterani chided his son. "If you had come around late this afternoon," he said, "I'd have hit you with the shovel!" Then he dropped the issue. We asked Tarterani why he didn't punish his son for so flagrantly abandoning his responsibility. He thought for a moment, then replied, "I want my children to have a choice."

Nevertheless children learn to act in ways that promote social harmony. They soon discover the powerful rewards for behaving properly. These are the rewards of inclusion and social approval, not material rewards. In fact, aside from food, there are few material rewards to give. But once children learn the stakes, the choice is truly theirs. And so it is with adults. When we asked people what they thought someone else would do, the usual answer was, "It's up to them." When we asked advice about how we should act in certain circumstances – should we bring a gift or not; how much should we pay for the motorbike we wanted to rent – we were invariably told, "It's

up to you." This emphasis on personal autonomy extends to the political arena, where divergent views, such as those held by the dissidents, are entertained. Most Rotumans have adopted a "wait and see" stance, patiently allowing events to unfold before making a final judgment.

Balancing act

Rotuman concerns for social harmony and personal autonomy call for sensitivity, a willingness to forgive, acceptance of difference, and patience. Force, in this context, makes no sense. Solutions are not imposed from above, but negotiated, until consensus emerges. Rotumans like to be able to discuss issues privately, before a meeting, rather than in it, so that confrontations can be avoided.

One of the best examples of the Rotuman style for resolving differences and arriving at consensus is in the realm of music. When practicing traditional songs (*mak*), someone usually introduces the melody by singing a little bit alone. Others join in, tentatively at first. If it doesn't sound right to the rest, the effort is allowed to fade away. Then someone else offers a different melody. Again others in the group will try it out, and so on until the "right" tune brings forth full participation. The same procedure applies when practicing church hymns.

The church in our village has no organ. Instead, one of the choir members strikes a little bell to keep the rhythm. The "bell" is a casing from a spent bullet. *Pel*, as irony would have it, not only means "to fight"; it also is the word for bell. *Mak pel* are not fighting songs, but songs of peace, in harmony. Rotumans not only have a talent for maintaining social harmony. They also have a gift for producing metaphors.

We found, it seems, on this remote island in the Pacific Ocean, a society that has created a superb balance between the potentially

suffocating demands of a tightly-knit community and the anomie of extreme individualism.