The Recent Rotuman Experience with Christianity

Alan Howard and Jan Rensel

Introduction

In December 1989 the Rotuman Methodists commemorated the 150th anniversary of the arrival of John Williams, who is credited with bringing Wesleyanism to the island. Seven years later, in August 1996, the Catholic community commemorated the 150th anniversary of the first Holy Mass conducted on Rotuma. Both events were ecumenical in character and both celebrated the island's history and unique culture. They were ecumenical in the sense that the Catholic community participated fully in the celebration by the Methodists and vice versa. The entire island participated in both events, with the predominantly Catholic districts contributing food, labor and valuables to the Methodist celebration and the predominantly Methodist districts doing likewise during the Catholic celebration. Each side performed *taumaka* 'traditional group dances' honoring the other's event.

Activities associated with an earlier period in Rotuman culture were integral parts of both events. At the Methodist celebration the game of *tika* 'throwing darts for distance' was played after a lapse of many years. In preparation for the Catholic celebration the men from Faguta (the two predominantly Catholic districts of Juju and Pepjei) prepared a *koua puha*, which had not been done since 1979. Preparing a *koua puha*, a pudding made from the root of the tuberous root of the dracaena plant, requires a great deal of cooperative labor and is highly ritualized. It is also infused with a rich legendary lore. The men from the predominantly Methodist district of Oinafa performed a *ki* ceremony dressed in putative traditional garb (including leaf skirts and painted faces). The *ki* is a ceremonial chant performed when welcoming a dignitary of exceptional standing. In this case they carried a decorated platform out to a vessel bringing Ratu Mara, President of Fiji, and bore him and Lady Mara to shore on their shoulders.

Evident in both these events was the fusion of both Methodism and Catholicism with notions of 'traditional' Rotuman culture. Both events were celebrations involving the broader Rotuman community, including those who live abroad but returned to participate in the events. They were inclusive as well as ecumenical.

Relations between the Methodists and Catholics were not always so congenial. Until the 1970s, when an Irish priest and the presiding Methodist ministers made a conscious effort toward reconciliation, relations between the two groups were strained at best. Antagonisms harkened back to the initial period of proselytization when French Catholic missionaries competed with English Wesleyans for Rotuman souls. The signal events were two wars (one in 1871, the other in 1879) fought between the two factions, and although the division overlaid prior political antagonisms, in people's memories it was a war between Methodists and Catholics. The wars produced martyrs for both sides, loyalty to whom on behalf of their descendants precluded cooperation between antagonists.

Revisit in 1998

On our flight to Rotuma on July 4, 1998, we sat next to the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) minister, Albert Mani, and had a good talk about the church's experience on Rotuma. According to Reverend Mani, twenty-nine families belong to the SDA church, including seventy people who are baptized. Most are young, in the 25-35 age range. The Adventist presence on Rotuma dates back to the 1970s when Dr. Fatiaki Taukave and his wife, who had converted in Fiji, returned to the island for a period. A church was later built in the district of Itu'ti'u and now supports a full-time minister.

Also on the plane were an Australian couple who were Assembly of God (AOG) missionaries on their way to Rotuma to minister to the incipient congregation that had developed there in the past few years. When we stopped at the new Assembly of God church compound in the district of Itu'ti'u, we

were told that about fifteen families have been attending services there, and that those who have joined are mostly younger adults in their 20s and 30s.

The other religious presence on the island, aside from the majority Methodist and Catholic congregations, is the Jehovah's Witnesses, with some six or seven families. They have been there for some years but we are not familiar with their histories.

Since we did not specifically conduct research on this topic we cannot make definitive statements concerning the exclusivity of the newer religious denominations. From previous field work we are aware of the reluctance of the Jehovah's Witnesses to participate in the celebrations of other church groups, although we are aware that SDA minister participated in both of the commemorative events described above. The AOG group's presence is too new to provide a basis for judgment. If studies in other Pacific societies can be taken as a template, however, we might anticipate that these newer denominations will be more exclusive, less ecumenical, less concerned with honoring Rotuman cultural traditions, and more future oriented than the two mainstream churches.

Exclusivity is associated with notions of theological certitude: if people are made to suppose that the beliefs of other groups are false, there is little ground for cooperation. While the SDA Church, after a period of resistance, has shown an increased willingness to cooperate with other churches, in recent years becoming a member of National Councils of Churches and involved in ecumenical activities (Ernst 1994:49), "the AOG, like other Pentecostals, have been generally hostile to the ecumenical movement, 'which they perceive as embracing the apostate, and stigmatize as merely human efforts to organize institutional unity'" (Hocken, cited in Ernst 1994:23). The theological platform of the Jehovah's Witnesses likewise allows no space for cooperating with other religious groups.

The newer denominations are manifestly less committed to honoring traditional values than the established churches. Conversion often requires separation from kin groups and local communities in favor of commitment to

the church community. This tends to undermine kinship structures based on an ethic of generosity and reciprocal giving, and diminishes the solidarity of local communities. In contrast to the communal spirit that characterizes traditional Pacific cultures, the new religions emphasize an individualistic approach to salvation,** which fosters an ethic based on the notion that "God helps those who help themselves." The net consequence, as Manfred Ernst concludes in his thorough study of new Christian religious in the region, is that "the New Religious Groups spread the ideal of a way of life which is modelled according to western cultural patterns which contribute heavily to a shift in values and in general to a forced liquidation of traditional Pacific culture" (Ernst 1994:278).

This tendency to disregard, if not to denigrate, traditional values is reinforced by a theology that stresses the need for adherents to prepare themselves spiritually for the 'Day of Judgment'. It puts a premium on saving souls and looking to one's own self rather than on looking to and valuing the cultural past. Ernst makes the observation that a characteristic of these groups is a view "that the existing world is evil and wicked and is in stark contrast to the world to come and that the assumed glorious return of Christ will bring an end to misery, diseases, injustices and death. The community of believers itself offers refuge in the struggle against all evil in the world" (1994:245). History and tradition are of little concern given this perspective.

The Social Context of Conversion

The recruiting success of new religions on Rotuma must be reflected against the recent history of social change on the island. It also must be viewed in the broader context of changes in Polynesia, and more broadly against Pacific societies as they are increasingly drawn into the world-wide capitalist system. We address these broader issues after examining the specifics of change on Rotuma.

The Colonial Setting

Until 1970, when Fiji was granted independence from Great Britain, Rotuma was governed by a District Officer (D.O.) whose authority derived from the Governor of Fiji. During the late colonial era the D.O. was advised by the Council of Rotuma, composed of the chiefs of Rotuma's seven districts, an elected representative from each district, and invited professionals such as the Assistant Medical Officer and Headmaster of the high school, but he was clearly the Gagaj Pure 'Governing Authority'. The Council held no significant legislative or policy making powers. The D.O. acted as magistrate in all but the most serious criminal cases. He was the chief arbiter of civil disputes, and was responsible for interpreting and implementing colonial policy. He was also the "Inspector General," who made sure health and cleanup regulations were followed. Political power, in other words, was very much concentrated in the office of the District Officer, his authority magnified by Rotuma's isolation (boats came about 4 to 6 times a year and there was no airstrip).

During Alan's first period of field work, in 1959-60, he was impressed with the high degree of solidarity within villages. People seemed to enjoy working together on community projects and almost everyone was willing to participate. Families shared food freely with one another, and anyone in need could expect help from kinsmen and neighbors. There was some inter-district rivalry, mostly expressed in sports and dance competitions, but it was relatively low key and essentially good-natured. The one rather serious rift was between Methodists and Catholics. Some of the elders still harbored resentments based on the "religious wars" of 1871 and 1878. The two groups rarely co-operated with one another and generally refused to attend each other's functions. Kinsmen who married across religious lines were often ostracized.

From a cultural standpoint Rotumans at that time seemed more interested in their past than they do today. Many of the elders were quite knowledgeable about Rotuman customs and took pains to make sure that ceremonies were properly conducted. Fred Ieli, the Rotuman D.O. at the time, was harshly critical of lapses in ceremonial protocol, and people did their best

to avoid his admonishments. Alan also had the feeling that the spirits of the ancestors — the 'atua — were more on people's minds then. Although most denied doing anything special to propitiate these spirits, people were careful to avoid offending them and acted as if their presence were immediate. Christianity was seen as a way of keeping evil or malicious spirits at bay (Howard 1996).

The population of Rotuma during that time was approximately 3,000, with an additional 1,500 or so Rotumans in Fiji. The population pyramid on Rotuma reflected the recent drop in mortality rates, particularly among children. It was broad at the base and tapered gradually to a peak of elders. Households were correspondingly large. A survey conducted in 1960 revealed an average of 6.9 persons per household, with the large majority being either nuclear (parents and children) or nuclear with one or more resident kinsmen. The effects of outmigration were only just beginning to be felt at the domestic level. It was unthinkable then that members of the same household could belong to different churches. In those instances where a Catholic married a Methodist one or the other would convert, and their children were given no choice.

The Post-colonial Era

The most significant physical change on Rotuma in the post-colonial period (in addition to changes in housing necessitated by Hurricane Bebe in 1972) was the building of an airstrip, significantly lessening the island's isolation. The addition of air travel (though prohibitively expensive for many) and an increase in boat traffic (though still erratic) has resulted in an intensified flow of population to and from the island.

In contrast to some other Pacific island populations, Rotumans are entitled to unrestricted movement between their home island and main overseas destination, Fiji. There are no international boundaries to cross, no immigration rules hindering travel. Population movement has only been

constrained by available modes of transportation and the costs of using them. As transportation has been made more readily accessible, and money become more plentiful, the flow has intensified. Our data show that whereas in 1960 Rotuma was a remote hinterland in relation to Fiji's urban centers (i.e. it was a relatively remote, clearly distinguishable community, with special bonds to Suva), by the late 1980s it had become more like a neighborhood — one of many neighborhoods in Fiji among which Rotumans freely circulate. In addition, increasing numbers of Rotumans have left Fiji and established residence abroad. Substantial enclaves of Rotumans now exist in Australia and New Zealand. Today the population of Rotuma is approximately 2,600, while perhaps 7-8,000 Rotumans reside in Fiji and another 1-2,000 live abroad. These shifts in population implicate a number of changes on Rotuma, including alterations in standard of living and access to resources as well as affecting social relationships, values, political power, and cultural identity.

Access to resources has been significantly increased through remittances from relatives in Fiji and abroad, as well as resulting from an increase in government jobs of the island. Rotumans are putting more and more of their resources into modernizing and improving their homes. A number of two-story homes have been built, and such features as verandahs, louvered windows, and rubber-tiled floors are now common. European-style furniture is also very much in evidence. Whereas two-thirds of the homes were without furniture in 1960, almost every home now has tables and chairs; most have sofas and standing beds. Sewing machines, refrigerators, gas stoves and other household appliances have also become commonplace (see Rensel 1991:190-191 for details). These data, combined with evidence of a significant decrease in local food production, suggest that Rotuma is well on its way from a subsistence to a consumer economy.

The lessening of Rotuma's isolation over the years is also manifest in a substantial increase in the flow of information between the island and the outside world. In 1960, between ship arrivals, communication with the outside world was limited to an unreliable radio-telephone at the government station

and short-wave radios. Today a satellite dish offers direct connections to anywhere in the world, and many households have their own phones. And whereas only a few households on Rotuma owned radios in 1960, nearly all now have them. People regularly listen to news broadcasts in English and Fijian, as well as popular music. VCRs made their appearance a few years ago and a fresh supply of video cassettes are imported on a regular basis. This has completely replaced the ancient films formerly shown to large audiences once a week in a Quonset hut theater.

Perhaps most important of all has been the intensification of personal contacts between Rotumans who have extensive overseas experience and those who do not. Many young Rotumans have been raised and educated in urban settings, have traveled widely, and hold cosmopolitan views. When they return to Rotuma, either to take government positions for a few years or for short visits, they inform, criticize and otherwise share their opinions. While not always listened to with deference, their views circulate and gradually become part of mainstream Rotuman culture.

Social Differentiation

During the colonial period, social differentiation on Rotuma was based primarily on Polynesian notions of aristocracy. There was no chiefly caste since bilineal kinship reckoning insured that most men were eligible for one title or another. Titles were ranked (although not fixedly) in order of prestige and political power. The paramount chiefs of Rotuma's seven districts were at the top of the hierarchy, and within each district sub-chiefs held various rights and responsibilities. Titles often, but not always, included rights to blocks of land and hence to resources on the land, but since resources were largely limited to consumables, surpluses were generally redistributed and thus transformed into prestige. The exception was copra, which was sold for export and produced cash income. However, in the copra trade chiefs enjoyed only a marginal advantage over their subjects, if any, and were under pressure to redistribute what wealth they might have accumulated in the form of lavish gifts on

ceremonial occasions. Housing was perhaps the one area where chiefly advantage was materially manifest, and this was mainly limited to the paramount chiefs. Since it was expected that each paramount chief would entertain important visitors to his district, their homes were generally more lavish than those of their people, but only by a small degree. In fact, in 1960 an outsider would have had difficulty in distinguishing chiefs outside of ceremonial contexts. Social differentiation on Rotuma, although very much on people's minds (in the sense that they were constantly concerned with issues of rank and prestige), was muted by limited availability of wealth-producing resources.

Rotuman migrants have enjoyed extraordinary success, and in Fiji are well-represented in the upper ranks of most occupations. Many are now comparatively wealthy and/or wield a significant degree of political power at a national level. Few of them hold traditional titles, nor do they aspire to them. While they respect chiefs as symbolic figureheads who embody Rotuman tradition, titles are perceived as largely irrelevant to their main endeavors, particularly in Fiji. The chiefs themselves are, with one exception, without advanced education and devoid of significant income or wealth. Culturally, therefore, wealth has been dissociated from chieftainship, and the off-island urban elite now enjoy a recognizably privileged position relative to their kinsmen on Rotuma.

The advantages enjoyed by chiefs on Rotuma have been threatened by the increased number of wage-earners on the island and the rising tide of remittances that have flowed to Rotuma. Some households on the island are the recipients of sufficient funds to build elaborate houses, to furnish them well if not lavishly, to buy cars or trucks, and generally to sustain an elevated lifestyle. Funds available from remittances, loans and grants are invested by some in business ventures that further increase their access to material resources. Other households receive nothing and remain close to subsistence standards. Whether or not a person is a chief is of little consequence in this developing economic differentiation.

Economic differentiation has been accompanied by perceptible shifts in values that underlie notions of social merit and prestige. Whereas in 1960 the main measure of a man was his productivity as a farmer and fisherman, and the measure of a woman her productivity as a mat-maker, today esteem (and often envy) is more often based on education, occupation, and wealth in western terms. In particular competition has developed with regard to housing, which has come to symbolize a family's fortunes in a way comparable to the productivity of one's gardens in the past. What is perhaps most significant about this value change is that whereas produce from the land and sea are generally shared rather widely in the form of ceremonial redistribution and interhousehold exchange, houses are almost entirely for the benefit of the immediate family. The basis for prestige is therefore shifting from communal to household welfare and, with regard to education and occupation, to individual accomplishments.

This is not to say that the old values are dead. Productivity and communal sharing are still highly valued, and fine white mats are still vital for any ceremonial event. However there are clear indications that, despite increased access to plantations via improved bush roads and motorized transport, agricultural productivity has significantly declined over the past thirty years. Fishing productivity also appears to have declined, although no precise figures are available to verify this, aside from the extensive turnover of tinned fish in the shops. The manufacture of fine white mats has also noticeably declined; few young women learn the skill, and what new mats are produced are woven by a shrinking cadre of older women. As a consequence of increased demand (due to an expanded population, including Rotumans in Fiji), fewer weavers and general inflation, fine mats that would have cost around F$10 in 1960 are now valued at over F$100. Other prestige items, like pigs, cows, and tinned corned beef (all of which are used in ceremonial prestations), have likewise inflated in value. This means that access to money is increasingly important if one is to meet ceremonial obligations.

Thus, an incipient class structure is developing within the Rotuman community. In Fiji, at the top level a Rotuman elite enjoy a comfortable lifestyle, even by cosmopolitan standards. Beneath them is a broadening middle class of white-collar and skilled manual workers who own their own homes, have cars and are economically relatively secure. At the lower end of the spectrum are unskilled workers and the unemployed, although most of these are attached to households with wage earners. Long-term unemployment often results in a return to Rotuma, to subsistence activities.

On Rotuma social differentiation based on wealth has not progressed as far, but differences in lifestyle are beginning to emerge. Households with ready access to cash have more elaborate houses, furniture, appliances; they own vehicles; they purchase and consume a much higher proportion of imported, high prestige, foods; they may even own a video and TV monitor. Little time may be spent on subsistence activities: gardening; tending to chickens, pigs, cows and goats; cutting copra; fishing on the reef. Cash-poor households must engage in all of these activities, which are increasingly seen as hard work for relatively low payoff when compared with wage employment. Titles are no longer the main avenue for social enhancement, and the prestige enjoyed by chiefs and titled men is significantly diminished to the extent that they must rely on subsistence activities to maintain their households.

Social cohesion

Older Rotumans frequently mourn the loss of community spirit that they recall from the colonial period. Indeed, in 1960 the range and frequency of community activities were much greater than in recent years. Community members cooperated regularly in village cleanups, road maintenance, building and repairing communal buildings, and various other multi-household endeavors. What goes unsaid is that the District Officer used to demand that most of these chores be done by donated labor, and there were sanctions for shirking. Today, many of the same jobs are the responsibility of paid government workers. Nevertheless, there were other indicators of community

spirit present in 1960 that are less in evidence today, corroborating the old-timers' laments. Foremost among these was the sheer amount of time people spent together in public spaces as opposed to the confines of their homes. Whereas in the past people generally used their homes only for sleeping, cooking (in adjacent cookhouses) and eating, today they engage in a much wider range of home-based activities. More subjectively, commitments to one's village mates appear to have been on firmer footing then than now.

To the extent that there has been a demise in community spirit, several factors associated with migration have contributed. One is that the movement of people into and out of villages has increased dramatically, leading to a lower density of shared histories (histories both in the sense of common participation in past activities and in the sense of knowledge about the details of one another's lives). Limitations on motorized transport in the past meant that people were largely confined to their home communities, and that trips to other parts of the island were major expeditions. Today almost every household has access to a motorbike, car or truck, in addition to the school buses and transportation for hire. People now travel around the island routinely, and spend long periods away. In addition, increased opportunities for travel abroad, often for extended stays, contribute to a lower intensity of common experience (which in Rotuma as in most other small communities is anchored in shared participation in memorable events).

Values have differentiated along lines associated with "progress and modernization" versus cultural conservatism, a line of cleavage that infuses many political issues. A recent controversy concerning tourism is a case in point. On one side were "modernists" promoting the case for bringing tourists to Rotuma. They emphasized the economic benefits that would accrue from having visitors to the island. On the other side were the conservatives, led by the Methodist clergy, who warned of the threat tourism would pose to traditional Rotuman values. They expressed deep concern about the deleterious effects greed for money would have on social solidarity. Ironically, although public opinion shifted toward acceptance after the first few tourist

vessels visited Rotuma, political dissension within the community over who should organize and control such visits has led to paralysis and a cessation of organized tourism.

The greater availability of money, through increased wages and remittances, means that Rotumans today are less materially dependent on their immediate kin and neighbors. Whereas in the past interdependence was fostered by the need to help one another building thatched houses, for example, today's homes require purchased materials (cement and wood) and skilled labor that must usually be compensated in cash (see Rensel 1991). Having money at one's disposal is thus becoming more relevant for material well-being than a commitment to mutual support within the community. As a result, people are now investing more in relationships outside their villages, and particularly in relationships with relatives abroad who might send remittances, building supplies, and other valuables. A concomitant shift is toward an emphasis on lineal and nuclear relations at the expense of maintaining a more extended network of kin, since children and siblings are more inclined to send money and share material resources. Reciprocal exchange patterns have therefore been shifting their locus from geographically confined to geographically dispersed networks, and to a longer time frame for reciprocation.

The Business of Politics

When Fiji gained independence in 1970, and the colonial regime ended, the relative positions of the Rotuma Council and District Officer were reversed. The Council was given primary policy making powers and the D.O. was made its advisor. As a result, post-colonial Rotuma is a far more political community than it was in 1960. During the colonial period people rarely discussed political issues, and were reluctant to express viewpoints concerning the directions future change should take. Dissatisfaction with the D.O.'s policies were usually expressed by grumbling and passive resistance. Now many people have a

definite point of view and are prepared to speak out openly, to debate issues, and to criticize those in authority directly.

Rotumans today are also far more committed to progress and development than they were in the past; they evaluate leaders more by what they accomplish (or do not accomplish) than by what they say or how they act. People want well-constructed modern houses, refrigerators, modern appliances, motor vehicles, and stereos. But while economic development has progressed slowly on the island, Rotumans elsewhere have continued to make their mark, not only in Fiji but abroad as well. Many Rotumans have risen to positions of responsibility and leadership in government, the military, and private industry. They have not only demonstrated an ability to lead, but have accumulated political power far beyond that in the hands of the chiefs. They also enjoy a standard of living to which people on the home island only aspire.

These circumstances have created a dilemma for chiefs on Rotuma. They are expected to formulate policy for development, to take fiscal responsibility for managing the budget, and to administer programs. But they are neither well educated nor trained for these tasks of modern government, and from the people's standpoint, continually botch the job.

As a result, the chiefs' moral authority has been undermined in the eyes of many as a result of their handling of money. They are often criticized for using the limited monies available to the Council for doubtful purposes such as trips to Fiji. Some chiefs have been accused of skimming funds from development projects in their districts, from ships' landing fees, and from cooperative and church accounts. People are therefore often reluctant to support local projects, and may refuse to give either money or labor to communal efforts managed by a chief.

This mistrust of leaders extends to the leadership of the Methodist Church as well and has undermined the moral authority of the Church as an institution. The Rotuman Methodist Church is part of the Fiji Division on behalf of which it holds an annual Conference fundraiser. In typical years sums of F$25-35,000 are raised in a frenzy of competitive donations, each

district trying to outdo the others. But Church members on Rotuma have frequently expressed resentment over the allocation of donations to the Fiji Division, complaining that Rotuma receives only a small portion in return, and there have been calls for separation (see Fiji Times, October 12, 1995).

Within Rotuma, which is divided into two sections, the Oinafa and Motusa circuits, conflict over control of resources has escalated in recent years. Each circuit is presided over by a minister while the whole is under the direction of a superintendent minister. Grumbling over the allocation of resources between the circuits is common and accusations of malfeasance on behalf of the ministers and church stewards have become commonplace. In 1997 discontent erupted into calls for a split between the circuits. The district of Itu'muta hosted the annual conference and a dispute developed over the portion of money allocated to the district to defray expenses. As a result, church members from the Motusa circuit (to which Itu'muta belongs) voted to separate from Oinafa as a distinct division. There was even some talk of Itu'muta, a small district of some 30 households, forming its own circuit. The following year the Oinafa and Motusa circuits each held their own annual conferences, but the request for separation was denied by the Fiji Conference held at the end of 1998. What all this signifies is a fragmentation of community cohesion based on conflicts over resource allocation.

Another conflict erupted in 1998 that further undermined the moral authority of the Methodist Church on the island. The Superintendent Minister, who was faulted by some as causing the split between the circuits because of his handling of Church resources, fell out of favor with Gagaj Maraf, Rotuma's former senator to the Fiji Legislature and highest ranking chief on Rotuma. Maraf wrote a letter to the President of the Methodist Church in Fiji complaining about the superintendent and the fact that he allowed AOG adherents to hold bible study in the Methodist church buildings in his district. The President responded by saying he had "firmly decided" to reassign the superintendent elsewhere and to appoint a new one.

The subchief who was head steward for the Oinafa circuit responded by sending several faxes to the President, complaining about the reassignment and warning him not to listen to Maraf and "his croonies" (sic) and threatening trouble if he acted only on the basis of Maraf's skewed perspective. He also stated that they "would not welcome" a replacement minister. There's much more to the issue than this, involving personality clashes, behind-the-scenes manipulations, and a Byzantine history of competition for power and influence. The result, however, is pronounced loss of moral authority on the part of the Methodist Church.

Nor have the Catholics been immune from internal conflict, although the situation differs in significant ways. For one, all the Methodist ministers and superintendents have been Rotumans since the end of the Second World War while all but one priest (who served briefly in the 1960s before leaving the priesthood) have been non-Rotumans. The priests have been less involved in local politics as a result. But loyalty to the Catholic Church was strained to the breaking point in 1996, when the Archbishop in Fiji decided to switch terminology to correspond with Methodist usage. At issue was the term for 'God'. Of the two terms for spirits in the Rotuman language, the first Methodist missionaries select *'aitu* for God, relegating the alternative, *'atua,* to ghosts and 'devils'. The French priests, coming from Futuna, adopted *'atua* for God since it was the term used by the Futunans. The case for using *'aitu* is rather compelling, however, since the Rotuman high gods were called by that term, and while the vast majority of Catholics went along with the switch, a minority formed a splinter group who refused to attend mass at the church and met on their own.

The splinter group held their own commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Catholic Church on Rotuma a few days before the mainstream celebration in August 1996. Their focal ceremony consisted of a visitation to the grave of the Catholic 'martyrs' from the 1878 war and speeches emphasized that they had died defending the Catholic *'Atua.* Here, too, a historical understanding is necessary to put the picture in perspective, for the

splinter group was composed mainly of dissidents who had also been supporters of Lagfatmaro, a part-Rotuman karate master who claimed to be king of Rotuma and urged Rotuma's secession from Fiji following the coups of 1989 (see Howard 1992). From a religious perspective Lagfatmaro was of interest insofar as he openly called on the spirits of dead ancestors for power and support

Our main point in presenting this historical perspective on changes from the colonial to post-colonial eras is to underscore the sociocultural fragmentation that has taken place in response to increased mobility, the dominance of the world capitalist system, competition for externally produced resources, and the dissolution of community cohesion. As Durkheim would have readily predicted, the result has been an increase of individualism, a measure of anomie, and a lessened disposition to adhere to the symbols of a community-based church.

Elsewhere in Polynesia

The recent growth of new religious groups (NRG) at the expense of historic mainline churches (HMC) elsewhere in Polynesia is strikingly documented by Ernst (1994). In Tonga, for example, NRG affiliation jumped from 9.7 percent of the population in 1966 to 29.5 percent in 1992; in Samoa it increased from 8.9 percent to 18.6 percent between 1961 and 1991; in French Polynesia NRG affiliation rose from 8.6 percent to 17.2 percent from 1962 to 1992; and in Fiji it grew from 2.9 percent to 11.6 percent between 1966 to 1992.

Tonga

In Tonga the major gains have been made by the Assemblies of God, with an annual average growth rate of 20 percent since 1976, and the Seventh Day Adventists, which increased at an annual rate of 16 percent between 1966 and 1992. The Mormons are a third group showing major gains over the same period (9.8 percent) (Ernst 1994:146-147). These groups have grown mainly at

the expense of the three main churches that derive from Methodism: the Free Wesleyan Church, the Free Church, and the Church of Tonga. While these three churches represented about 73.3 percent of the population in 1966, they dropped to 53 percent in 1992 (Ernst 1994:148).

The Mormons have been particularly successful in Tonga and 1992 constituted 15.2 percent of the population, making it the second largest denomination in the kingdom.

Tonga has a history of religious fragmentation. In 1885 King Tupou proclaimed the Free Church of Tonga (FWC), which broke from the Wesleyan Mission. Following internal disputes within the FWC a splinter group established the Free Constitutional Church. In addition to internal splits, missionization by minor Christian denominations has led to a multiplicity of groups. The 1966 census of Tonga showed nineteen different denominations (Fiefa 1968:70, cited in Korn 1978:397), although only seven had a membership of more than one percent of the population.

According to Korn, switching denominations is not uncommon in Tonga, with denominational changes occurring through schooling, marriage, or "personal retooling." Regarding the latter Korn writes: "irrespective of the sincerity of the religious conviction involved, conversion to a different denomination entails some examination of one's present circumstances and a comparison of these circumstances with the prospects that are possible within the new denomination . . . switching is abrupt and the person must immediately take up activity within the new denomination . . . (Matters of belief or doctrine were never put forward by way of explanation as they might be put in our own culture)" (1978:414-415).

This emphasis on the pragmatics of religious affiliation, as opposed to a manifest concern for belief and conviction, resonates with data from other Polynesian societies, including Rotuma. I have always been amazed at the ease with which good practicing Catholic Rotumans could convert to Methodism and vice versa following an interfaith marriage. This, of course, is consistent with

notions of personhood based on social relationships rather than an internally consistent sense of self (Kirkpatrick and White 1985).

Korn also attributes the multiplicity of denominations to the high degree of choice permitted individuals in Tonga:

> . . . place of residence, household membership, kin-group membership, involvement in voluntary associations, and participation in status-striving activities. In each of these areas, and also in congregational and denominational matters, a person has considerable flexibility in determining with whom he will be associated and the extent of his involvement. Moreover, this is a dynamic process; as a person's needs and resources change, he shifts his alignments to accord with new stratagems. The process is clear in the organization of denominational affiliation; it is this shifting of alignments that I have called personal retooling. Retooling by switching denomination at once provides the convert with a new set of associates and makes it possible for him to restructure his commitments or even, in the case of some denominations, to take on wholly different commitments (1978:418).

She argues that the ready acceptance of new denominations is not simply a matter of the material goods or spiritual values that missionaries bring, but that Tongans are attracted to new denominations because they make new stratagems possible. Tongans change affiliations when they can use the opportunities it affords them (Korn 1978:419).

Gordon underscores Korn's point in her analysis of the Mormon Tongan family by pointing out that the Mormon Church provides the best opportunities for Tongans to live, work and study abroad, which helps to account for its recruiting successes. The Church creates overseas networks for Tongans by providing visas, employment, and scholarships for students to study at Brigham Young Universities in Hawai'i and Utah, and following their two-year

missionary experience they are virtually guaranteed employment. The Mormon Church is one of Tonga's largest employers apart from Government (Gordon 1990:204).

According to Ernest Olsen, Pentacostalism initially appealed to those at the lower end of the economic, social, and religious hierarchies, but now includes within its ranks a wider range of individuals. It has been particularly appealing to youths who are attracted to the incorporation of band-generated music into worship services. The band is a key attraction for youthful members, according to Olsen, since many of them aspire to musical competence (Olsen 1999).

Part of the broader context that makes switching denominations a desirable option for many church members is dissention within existing groups. As in Rotuma, conflict within the Methodist churches have contributed to their decline. For example, in the early 1990s the Free Wesleyan Church ordained women as ministers against a good deal of opposition. Ernst concludes that the FWC appears torn "between traditions, ecumenism and some attempts for spiritual renewal. There is no doubt that these unsolved internal problems have contributed to the constant decline of the church in recent years" (1994:150).

According to Korn, congregational memberships in Tonga cut across village boundaries, kin groups, and, not uncommonly, household memberships. On the village level, denominations do not compete. She describes the relationship of congregations to each other as one of "tolerant avoidance," an accommodation to the fact that local memberships crosscut other ties (Korn 1978).

(Western) Samoa

The startling feature of data from Samoa is the increase in the number of individuals who claim no religious affiliation (an average of 37 percent per year between 1961 and 1991). In comparison the gains of new religious groups are quite modest (4.2 percent for Mormons, 7.2 percent for SDAs, 17.8 percent for

all other new religious combined) (Ernst 1994:165). Ernst attributes this development, in part, to the perceived burden the main Samoan church, the Congregational Christian Church of (Western) Samoa (CCCS), places on their congregations to support ministers and make contributions (1994:169; see also Tiffany 1978:304). As a proportion of the population, the CCCS has declined from 53.5 percent in 1961 to 42.6 percent in 1991. The Catholic Church, in contrast, has held its own statistically, which Ernst partially attributes to the fact that most of its funding comes from abroad, with no more than 25 percent raised locally.

Whereas the decision to change one's church membership in Tonga is largely an individual affair,

> in Samoa denominational changes reflect shifts in political alignments of chiefs and their followers. Changes in denominational affiliation are frequently precipitated by chiefly antagonisms and descent group rivalries that follow traditional points of cleavage characteristic of inter-village and intravillage relationships. A change in church membership in Samoa is an important and highly effective medium for expressing discontent and tends to exacerbate already existing tensions between opponents. Denominational competition which reflects underlying conflicts may be intense (Tiffany 1978: 304).

This may help to explain the substantial increase in unaffiliated individuals in (Western) Samoa. As recent news reports describing individuals being beaten for conducting services of a new religious group suggest, religious factionalism is seen as a threat to village solidarity and regarded as a powerful political statement. The safer strategy for alienated individuals, and for those who find the material demands of the church too burdensome, is to cease to be an active member of the congregation.

Samoa and Tonga thus provide contrasting models with regard to tolerance for denominational change. In Tonga, where lineage and kin ties are

given priority over locality as an organizational principle, religious heterogeneity is readily tolerated, leading to a proliferation of competing groups. In Samoa, priority is given to locality, and the pressure to maintain village solidarity inhibits proliferation. If this is in fact the case one would expect to find the most successful proselytization in Samoa to occur in urban areas or in villages that are already politically fragmented.

Samoans in New Zealand

Cluny and La'avasa Macpherson have documented a process among Samoans in New Zealand that involves significant numbers of individuals leaving the established churches during their youth, then rejoining as they reach middle age (1999). Some New Zealand-born children of Samoan parents, lacking confidence in the language and put off by the principle of leadership by elders that denied them a voice in the church's decision-making process, were attracted to alternative forms of worship. "Despite moves to increase the level of youth participation . . . young people continued to leave throughout the 1970s and 80s to practice what they saw to be a Christianity unconstrained by tradition and gerontocratic organisation" (Macpherson and Macpherson 1999). Others left because they became disillusioned with religion, because they changed affiliations following marriage, or because they had other leisure time interests. The Macphersons suggest that "a gap between what parents considered attributes of 'a Samoan' and those possessed by the children" left the latter with significant identity problems. "One way of resolving these, at least partially, was to remove themselves from at least some of the situations in which these issues surfaced. This may lie behind the movement to the evangelical churches in which ethnicity was de-emphasised in favour of a universalistic 'children of God' theology. In these contexts, children's spiritual and religious needs and preferences could be met without the added complication of ethnic identity" (Macpherson and Macpherson 1999:9).

More recently, Macpherson notes, a number of those who left have begun to return to the Pacific Island Congregational Church, and some have taken on leadership roles. In part this may be the result that the political semantics of Pacific Island identity has become much more positive, whereas it was once stigmatised in New Zealand. One way of reclaiming a lost Pacific Islander identity is to affiliate with a Pacific Island Church.

Fiji

In Fiji the Assemblies of God have enjoyed the greatest gains (an annual average of 41.8 percent between 1966 and 1992), largely at the expense of the Methodist Church. An array of other non-traditional Christian groups has also made dramatic inroads, collectively averaging gains of 26.8 percent annually. If the trend continues the AOG will replace the Catholic Church in second place by the year 2000 (Ernst 1994:204). In part the drop in Methodist affiliation can be attributed to a series of scandals involving church leadership. The Methodist Church in Fiji can also be seen as politically and culturally oriented at the expense of Christianity, rendering it susceptible to theological challenges from other groups.

French Polynesia

The two historically mainline religious bodies in French Polynesia are the Evangelical Church (an offshoot of the London Missionary Society--in 1963 the Protestant Church in Tahiti and adjacent islands became fully autonomous and was named the Evangelical Church of French Polynesia) and the Roman Catholic Church. These two churches represented 78.7 percent of the population in 1992. Five other groups (Mormons, SDA, AOG, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baha'is) together accounted for 12.8 percent (Ernst 1994:134). By far the fastest growing group is the Jehovah's Witnesses (62.4 percent annual gain between 1962 and 1992). They are followed by the Seventh Day Adventists and Mormons

(15.6 percent and 13.8 percent annual increase respectively over the same period) (Ernst 1994:133). While the Catholic Church has been holding its own relative to overall population, the Evangelical Church has not, so it appears that most recruits to the new religious groups are drawn from the latter.

Ernst documents recent turmoil within the Evangelical Church that includes a split between traditionalists, who want to keep to the guidelines established by their Christian forebears and the first missionaries, and reformers, who no longer want to deny values embedded in pre-Christian traditions. Widespread dissatisfaction over the handling of money has compounded the Church's problems, with some CPF90 million unaccounted for, and unhappiness over the Church's stance on political issues-- pro-independence and anti-French in response of nuclear testing--has raised some members' hackles. Disagreements among the Church's leaders led to the defection of about ten trained pastors to breakaway groups or the secular world in the early 1980s (Ernst 1994:136).

The Macro-Context of Conversion

In the conclusion of his study, Ernst points to the globalization of market capitalism and its consequences for Pacific societies as a key variable to explain the success of recent proselytization by the New Religious Groups. The dislocation of populations to poverty-ridden urban areas, environmental degradation, the rise of moneyed elites who control industry and commerce, and a trend toward unbridled consumerism have converged to generate a large group of discontents who are willing to discard tradition in favor of imagined future rewards. As Ernst puts it:

> The effects of an all-encompassing transformation of Pacific Island societies experienced over the last decades are of grave consequence for the psyche of individuals. The resulting search for a new sense of life, for orientation and a new social community, very often ends in one of the New

> Religious Groups, especially eschatologically oriented groups such as the Pentalcostals, Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. . . . The basic belief in a better life hereafter helps to bear the hardships of this life. Converts readily adopt the simple answers these groups offer to very complex questions concerning the roots of their hardships.
>
> Characteristic of the eschatological-dispensational groups is a foundation for their beliefs in a totalitarian dualism. This view maintains that the existing world is evil and wicked and is in stark contrast to the world to come and that the assumed glorious return of Christ will bring an end to misery, diseases, injustices and death. The community of believers itself offers refuge in the struugle against all the evil in the world. (Ernst 1994:245)

How motivating the theology of these New Religious Groups is remains problematic. Probably of greater import are social and economic factors, particularly the opportunity to enter a new community that offers strong support for new initiates and sometimes holds the promise of travel, education, and other material benefits.

The social effects of conversion may differ in urban and rural areas. In urban areas conversion often means joining a community to forgo isolation; in rural areas it often involves distancing oneself from existing communities in favor of a newly formed one. Whatever integrative effects conversion has in urban areas is therefore offset by the factionalizing effects it has in the hinterland.

Ernst makes the point that in the free market milieu that has come to dominate world capitalism in the late 20th century, religion has become a commodity that is being aggressively marketed with all the techniques developed by advertising agencies, particularly in the United States. He also alludes to the fact that most of the New Religious Groups have their origins in the U.S. where they form "The New Christian Right," an arch-conservative political group. We are

thus confronted with a situation in which individuals who are being increasingly dislocated from their traditional roots, and drawn into an individualistically oriented consumer economy, are being sold a religious bill of goods via a hard sell. The package incorporates all the conservative values associated with middle-class American culture: wealth, progress, health, order, education, and diligence. Furthermore, it stresses a self-centered orientation to religion as opposed to sociocentric models. To the extent this is indeed the case, the current wave of conversions both signals the decline of traditional Pacific cultural models for experience and gives further impetus to the dominance of market capitalism over people's immediate lives.

In conclusion, current macrotrends appear to be generating centrifugal forces that are dislocating individuals from stable, village-based, face-to-face communities in which religion was (and still is in many instances) an expression of interpersonal solidarity based on generations of shared heritage and common interests. This Durkheimian solidarity is being undermined by the increasing intrusion of free-market consumerism, with its accompanying egocentric individualism and resultant anomie. The New Christian religions, with their emphasis on personal salvation, their promise of a better material quality of life, and their offers of instant community, become a compelling commodity under such conditions.

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