

ALAN HOWARD and JAN RENSEL

## Rotuman identity in the Electronic Age

For some groups cultural identity comes easy; at least it's relatively unproblematic. As Fredrik Barth (1969) pointed out many years ago, where boundaries between groups are fixed and rigid, theories of group distinctiveness thrive. Boundaries can be set according to a wide range of physical, social, or cultural characteristics ranging from skin colour, religious affiliation or beliefs, occupations, to what people eat, and so on. Social hierarchy also can play a determining role, especially when a dominating group's social theory divides people into categories on the basis of geographical origins, bloodlines, or some other defining characteristic, restricting their identity options. In the United States, for example, the historical category of 'negro' allowed little room for choice; any US citizen with an African ancestor was assigned to the category regardless of personal preference.

Although in Polynesia social boundaries have traditionally been porous, cultural politics has transformed categories like 'New Zealand Maori' and 'Hawaiian' into strong identities, despite more personal choice and somewhat flexible boundaries. In these cases, where indigenous people were subjugated by European or American colonists, a long period of historically muted identity gave way in the last decades of the twentieth century to a Polynesian cultural renaissance that has been accompanied by a hardening of social categories and a dramatic strengthening of Maori and Hawaiian identities. Samoans also have a relatively strong sense of cultural identity, but for a different reason. In their case, identity is reinforced by a commitment to *fa'asamoa*, the Samoan way of life. It is by way of cultural contrast – *fa'asamoa* versus western cosmopolitan culture – that Samoan identity has crystallized. The same holds true for many other Pacific peoples who have attached great value to indigenous custom, or 'kastom' as it is called in Melanesian pidgin. They generally emphasize relationships, attachment to place, and local community values in contrast to the values of a commercial market-based economic system.<sup>1</sup>

Less attention has been paid in the Pacific to instances of weak cultural

<sup>1</sup> For discussions of the politics of cultural identity in the Pacific see Keesing and Tonkinson 1982, Linnekin 1992, Lindstrom and White 1993 and Turner 1997.

identity. To clarify the distinction we are making: we use the concept of strong cultural identity in reference to instances where cultural affiliation is salient in individuals' self-concepts (see Hereniko 1994), whereas weak cultural identity refers to instances where such self-ascriptions are of minimal significance. Where people's interactions with one another are primarily patterned on the basis of cultural affiliation, strong cultural identity prevails; where cultural heritage is of little importance in patterning relationships, weak cultural identity is indicated.

In this chapter we explore an example of relatively weak cultural identity, the Rotuman case, and discuss the factors that facilitate its strength or render it weak.

### *The problem of Rotuman identity*

Rotuman cultural identity must be understood in a historical context that begins with the island's relative isolation. Although prior to European intrusion Rotumans were certainly aware of inhabitants of other islands (Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Futuna, Uvea, and others), contact was sufficiently infrequent to preclude a clear sense of their own distinctiveness. Rather, the focus of identity concerns was with family lineages and locality (district, village) within Rotuma. It was not until Rotumans began to emigrate in substantial numbers to Fiji, to which Rotuma was administratively assigned by the British colonial regime following cession in 1881, that a distinctive sense of Rotuman identity emerged. Beginning as a trickle in the early part of the twentieth century, Rotuman migration to Fiji accelerated following World War II. Whereas in 1946 only 17% of Rotumans lived in Fiji, by 1966 the figure had climbed to 44%, and by 1986 to 70%. The latest census figures, for 1996, show 2,580 Rotumans on the island and 7,147 (73%) in Fiji. This only tells part of the story, however, since a significant number of Rotumans (we estimate from 1,000-2,000) have left Fiji for Australia, New Zealand, other Pacific Islands, North America, and Europe.

As they increasingly came into regularized contact with others (Fijians, Fiji Indians, Europeans, and so on) Rotumans developed for the first time a pervasive cultural consciousness – a recognition that their distinctive heritage was a significant factor in ordering social relations in the world outside Rotuma (Howard and Howard 1977). However, for a number of reasons, Rotuman identity has remained relatively weak when compared with other groups.

In Fiji, Rotumans were recognized as a distinct group because they were substantially different from Fijians physically and culturally, and their language was unique. However, they were somewhat marginal under British colonial rule, while the categories of Fijian, Indian, and European formed

the main template for strong identities. Rotumans, being a relatively small population, were often bureaucratically classified in the catch-all category of 'other'. As the numbers of children with European progenitors increased in the mid-twentieth century, the stigmatized category of 'half-caste' was replaced by the quite positive category of 'part-European' – and since many Rotumans had a European forebear as a result of liaisons between renegade sailors or traders and Rotuman women on the island, they fit comfortably into that niche. Even Rotumans without European ancestry could often pass because they were generally lighter-skinned than either Fijians or Indians. Thus in their self-identification Rotumans had a degree of choice denied to members of most other groups in Fiji. This tended to soften the boundaries between the Rotumans and other groups.

Rotumans in Fiji organized into communities when their populations in an area reached a critical mass. But in both Suva and Lautoka/Nadi, where their numbers were greatest, they organized according to district of origin on Rotuma, suggesting that locality on the island remained uppermost in their minds as a basis for group identification. On a more abstract level, however, as Rotumans were exposed to higher forms of western education, they learned to think about their heritage in abstract terms, including the concept of culture. 'Rotuman culture' became an object of thought, analysis, discussion, and debate. This was a new phenomenon that required the ability both to distance oneself from one's cultural experience and to make meaningful comparisons with other cultures. The cultural consciousness that emerged became a significant component of Rotuman cultural identity as people came to think of themselves as members of a category (or community) based on their shared cultural heritage.

The confounding of racial categories in colonial Fiji gave Rotumans, if not a relatively privileged place in the hierarchy of non-European ethnic groups, at least some latitude for proving their worth, which they did through education and hard work, acquiring a reputation for responsibility and reliability. By 1960 Rotumans were well over-represented in professional, management, and supervisory positions (Howard 1966, 1970), and they have continued to excel. On the one hand, this has tended to strengthen Rotuman identity because of its positive overtones; on the other hand, success has weakened group identity by providing opportunities for individuals to dissociate themselves from Rotuman communities. It also facilitates significant relationships with classmates, workmates, professional associates, and so on, on the basis of common interests and histories quite apart from ethnic origins. Indeed, our argument is that the extraordinary success of Rotumans in adapting to modern cosmopolitan culture and the world capitalist economic system lies at the heart of their relatively weak sense of cultural identity.

If this is true of Rotumans in Fiji, it is even more the case with Rotumans

who have emigrated to Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere, where additional factors further weaken Rotuman identity. Wherever they have emigrated, Rotumans have moved directly into, or have quickly attained, middle- or upper-middle-class status, continuing the pattern of educational, occupational, and social success achieved in Fiji. They have also intermarried to a great extent. In her study of Rotuman migrants in the Sydney area, for example, Seforosa Michael (1991:8-9) estimated that '70-80% of all migration to Australia has been the result of marriage to non-Rotuman spouses, most of whom were Australian citizens' Australian men working in Fiji mostly occupied managerial positions with firms and banks, or served in professional capacities. They were generally of middle-class background and on returning to Australia brought their wives into middle-class Australian society, to which the women successfully adapted.

The situation in New Zealand is comparable. From an informal survey we conducted during a field trip to New Zealand in 1994, we calculated that approximately 87% of marriages involving Rotumans were to non-Rotumans; 57% were to Pakeha New Zealanders. The pattern of intermarriage holds for Rotumans in Hawai'i, Canada, the US mainland, and Europe. Intermarriage acts to weaken cultural identity in several ways. Firstly, it creates conditions where the Rotuman language is subordinated to English or another common language. Language use is a central feature of cultural identity; not speaking Rotuman on a daily basis means missing the opportunity of bringing into daily focus concepts and ideas that are constant reminders of one's Rotuman heritage. Secondly, intermarriage results in half of one's kin network being non-Rotuman, so that one's association with Rotumans is likely to be considerably diluted. The more culturally different in-laws are, the more one has to adjust one's own behavioural style to get along, muting that which is most Rotuman in one's character. Thirdly, spouses raised in the western cosmopolitan mode often find the extended-family orientation that prevails in Polynesian societies burdensome and intrusive. They may resent frequent demands on their own nuclear family for contributions to various events and causes, and discourage visits from their spouses' kin. They may also discourage their spouses' participation in any Rotuman cultural events. There are exceptions, of course. We know of several instances of European spouses who have learned the Rotuman language, who are themselves eager participants in activities within the Rotuman community, and who make periodic pilgrimages to Rotuma. But these seem to be the exception rather than the rule. For the most part, the high degree of intermarriage appears to diminish migrants' links to their network of Rotuman kin and peers, and to weaken their sense of Rotuman identity. In addition, their part-Rotuman children generally do not speak the language and can easily dissociate themselves from their Rotuman ancestry.

Another factor that weakens cultural identity abroad is the fact that outside of Fiji the ethnic category 'Rotuman' is unknown. Most people in other countries have never heard of Rotuma. When asked where they are from, migrants often answer 'from Fiji', or simply identify themselves as 'Polynesian', rather than go through the lengthy process of explaining where Rotuma is, how Rotumans differ from Fijians, and so on. The overall tendency, in fact, has been to avoid questions of ethnicity entirely and simply blend into the general population wherever possible. That was especially true in earlier periods, before it became chic and politically advantageous to belong to an ethnic group other than white Australian, Pakeha, and so on.

One characteristic that has facilitated Rotumans passing easily into middle-class society is a highly developed social sensitivity that is ingrained in Rotuman culture. In foreign environments, this translates into an ability to adapt quickly to a wide variety of social conditions. Rotuman socialization seems to result in what Vilsoni Hereniko calls 'a quiet confidence' (personal communication) that fosters a 'can do' attitude. Repeatedly, in widely varying contexts, Rotuman migrants have told us how they observed complex activities and role performances by seasoned veterans and said to themselves, 'I can do that!' They go on to tell how they in fact learned to perform and achieved success.

One of the consequences of educational and occupational success abroad is that Rotuman migrants have never formed ghettoized enclaves. Being readily employable, they have multiple options, not only in places to work but also in places to live. This dispersion means that they interact far more with others than with Rotumans, both as workmates and as neighbours.

It is therefore relatively easy for Rotuman migrants to dissociate themselves from their cultural heritage and to assume an identity that is more convenient, for part if not most of the time. Given these centrifugal tendencies, what are the contingencies that facilitate the formation of Rotuman communities abroad, and that lead to the celebration of Rotuman identity along with attempts to preserve a valued cultural heritage? This question has motivated our recent research and has stimulated us to take an active role in the process.

### *Doing Rotuman culture abroad*

On the island of Rotuma, people 'do' Rotuman culture as a matter of course. They do it unselfconsciously, in an all-encompassing manner. People interact with one another according to generally accepted rules of conduct that are characteristically Rotuman; dress in suitable clothes according to context; sit on mats in gender-specific ways; plant crops, fish, and even buy food in

shops in identifiably Rotuman ways. The way people eat, drink, sing, dance, plan events – the very rhythm of daily life – is clearly patterned by Rotuman cultural principles, regardless of how one chooses to define ‘culture’. Even individuals who return to the island after having been abroad for many years, but were socialized on the island as children, readopt the patterns they learned when young. Those who do not are targets of criticism, especially if they have the hubris to disregard the rules of decorum, or worse, to try to change them by fiat. In such a context, where the few non-Rotumans who live on the island have been largely assimilated, issues of cultural identity are virtually non-existent, or at least are heavily muted. People don’t *choose* to act as Rotumans, or to honor their Rotuman heritage, so much to ‘go with the flow’ of social life on the island.

In Fiji the situation is more complex. In some places – parts of Suva, Vatukoula, Lautoka, and Nadi, for example – the density of Rotuman communities is sufficient to sustain a daily routine that is comparable in many ways to that on Rotuma. People may be able to get along speaking Rotuman most of the time, interacting mainly with Rotuman kin, eating Rotuman dishes, and so on. But even so, people come into frequent contact with Fijians, Fiji-Indians, and others, requiring them to monitor their behaviour in ways that they did not have to on Rotuma. Furthermore, when holding characteristic Rotuman events, like weddings and funerals, dances and fundraisers, certain accommodations must be made (for instance, substitute materials, untitled men taking the roles of chiefs) that require making choices. The process of deciding what substitutions would or would not be acceptable brings cultural consciousness to the fore and heightens a sense of Rotuman identity.

Migrants living apart from other Rotumans have more choices, and have to make a more self-conscious effort to maintain their affiliation with one or more of the Rotuman communities in Fiji. Attending functions may require extensive travel, forgoing other commitments, and other sacrifices. In general, however, Fiji offers the vast majority of Rotumans an opportunity to interact with one another relatively frequently, and to sustain a lifestyle that is not significantly different in many respects from the way of life on Rotuma. The fact that Fijian culture is in many ways compatible with Rotuman culture makes the transition easier and the choices less drastic. Cultural identity under these conditions, while heightened in many respects, does not become salient, and for most people is subordinated to locational, occupational, and other identities.

For Rotumans living in countries dominated by western cosmopolitan elites the circumstances are quite different. Daily life in cities like Sydney, Auckland, and Vancouver requires patterns of behaviour dramatically different from those on Rotuma. Most individuals spend their weekdays working

as wage earners, attending school, or running their households. Since families tend to be geographically dispersed, there is little time for socializing, other than with workmates, schoolmates, and neighbours, few of whom are likely to be Rotuman. This means that if Rotumans decide to organize themselves into communities abroad, if they are to plan events that are distinctively Rotuman, they are generally restricted to weekends. A few of the larger enclaves, in Sydney and Auckland, for example, are able to sustain church congregations with Rotuman ministers who conduct services in the vernacular language. This allows people to socialize with one another as well, reinforcing ties and heightening cultural awareness (it also provides a venue for conflict, however, and for personal antagonisms to flourish). In these instances, Sunday is a day when one's Rotuman identity can be foregrounded, but the vast majority of Rotumans overseas attend churches where services are conducted by ministers or priests unfamiliar with the language or culture. For these individuals, the only time that can be allocated for Rotuman events is Saturday. Likewise, Saturday is the only day available for events that are inclusive of nearly all religious denominations.<sup>2</sup>

Given these circumstances, organizing activities or events is no simple task. People often have conflicting commitments, even if they desire to spend time with their fellow Rotumans. Their children may be engaged in sports or other activities during the weekends that pull them away; non-Rotuman spouses may have obligations to their families and friends. Individuals' commitment to the local Rotuman community varies greatly, so that while some are eager participants, others have to be coaxed to become or remain involved, or even to attend an occasional event. Keeping a Rotuman community viable overseas thus requires the leadership of some committed individuals who are prepared to take the time and spend the energy to organize activities, to keep people informed by making phone calls or sending newsletters, and to take responsibility for raising and allocating funds to meet expenses incurred by the group. Where there is no established hierarchy, however, leadership is a delicate matter, and concerns over the management of money have plagued overseas Rotuman communities wherever they have emerged.

The experience of Rotumans in New Zealand provides an example. In the 1970s, a first attempt was made to organize the growing Rotuman enclave in Auckland, but the effort was ill-fated and short-lived; a second attempt in the 1980s also met with failure. Factional strife reportedly broke out, leading to disenchantment and bad feelings. Then, following the appointment of

<sup>2</sup> On the island of Rotuma most people are Methodist, with Roman Catholics a close second; Jehovah's Witness, Assembly of God, and Seventh-Day Adventist religions have also won converts. Abroad there are Latter-Day Saints (Mormons). Only Seventh-Day Adventists tend to have conflicts with Saturday Rotuman events.

the Rev. Jione Langi, a Rotuman Methodist minister, to Wellington in 1985, a gradual process of reincorporation took place. Langi made an all-out effort to identify Rotuman families in New Zealand and to help them create an overarching community. In 1992 he was appointed 'pastor at large' to the Fiji Methodist community in New Zealand and relocated to Auckland. He established the *Rotuman New Zealand Fellowship* as a formal organization with a written constitution, dues, and biannual meetings. The Fellowship has hosted Rotuman groups travelling to New Zealand, organized a Christmas sojourn to Fiji and Rotuma, and held fund-raising drives for various purposes. It is non-sectarian in character and divided into three chapters based on regions within New Zealand (Auckland, Wellington, Waikato/Bay of Plenty).<sup>3</sup>

Despite Langi's charismatic leadership, periodic disputes have threatened the integrity of the Fellowship. Following a trouble-plagued group trip to Rotuma in 1993, during which limited transportation to the island required some families to remain in Fiji proper, several members protested and dropped out of the Fellowship, threatening group cohesion. Only after Langi was reassigned to Fiji did most of the protestors return to the Fellowship, which presently appears to be strong and active under the leadership of a layman, with well-attended biannual meetings.

Our own experience in Hawai'i is also illustrative. Two main sources account for the majority of Rotumans who have settled in Hawai'i. One derives from the stream of students who have attended Brigham Young University at La'ie since the mid-1960s; the other from the cable ship *Enterprise* that docked in Hawai'i for a lengthy period during the 1970s. Most of the former were female; all of the latter were male. Several female students stayed on after completing their education, often taking part- or full-time employment at the Polynesian Cultural Center. Those who stayed generally married men associated with the Mormon complex either as fellow students or work-mates. A number of men from the cable ship married local women, mostly of Hawaiian ancestry, and obtained their green cards. Subsequently some of these families emigrated to the US mainland, leaving a limited number of Rotuman individuals behind. Whereas the women tended to congregate in or near La'ie, and thus knew one another, the men scattered around O'ahu and were mostly absorbed into their wives' communities.

Rotumans were thus all but invisible in 1994 when we returned from a field trip to Fiji, Australia, and New Zealand, where several Rotumans, on learning that we were from Hawai'i, had given us the addresses of their relatives on O'ahu. When we returned to Honolulu we invited them all to

<sup>3</sup> Initially there was a fourth chapter on the South Island, centred in Christchurch, but following some moves and defections the size of the community fell below critical mass and it has been inactive for the past few years.

a party, making it clear it was a Rotuman event (we invited them to bring Rotuman delicacies and offered to show home videos of the island and play Rotuman music cassettes). Several of our guests had been unaware of one another's presence in Hawai'i, and met for the first time on that occasion.

The party was a great success and we collectively decided to meet again a few weeks later at Munue Tavo's house, which had a large yard that facilitated Polynesian-style interactions. His wife, Phyllis, was Hawaiian and quickly became a facilitator for the incipient community. Several other gatherings were arranged in quick succession, and soon we decided to form an association with regular membership, dues, and scheduled activities. Munue was elected president and served in that capacity for two years until he and Phyllis moved to Alaska. The 'Tefui Club' – The Rotuma Association of Hawai'i – gained impetus when club member Vilsoni Hereniko launched his book, entitled *Woven gods* (1995), about clowning on Rotuma. On that occasion, the Tefui Club performed traditional ceremonies and a group dance in front of a large audience of non-Rotumans. The event required many weeks of dance practice; the pooling of resources; and much labour to prepare an earth oven for roasting a pig and taro, and to make *fekei* (Rotuman pudding), *tefui* (Rotuman-style garlands), and *titi* (ti leaf and flower skirts). Since then, the club has performed a number of times in public and has become known within the Polynesian community in Hawai'i.

The solidarity of the group was considerably enhanced when Elisapeti Inia, a retired schoolteacher and respected Rotuman elder, visited for a time in 1996. Drawing on her fund of genealogical knowledge, Mrs Inia was able to show people precisely how they were related to one another, so an association that was initiated on the basis of shared ethnicity evolved into a kin-based community with much stronger ties. The solidarity of the group was further enhanced by a series of camp-outs over holiday weekends, sometimes involving 13 or 14 tents and perhaps 50 or 60 individuals sharing a common kitchen shelter. Camping activities include singing and dancing, playing cards, teaching crafts, fishing, hunting for crabs on the beach, roasting marshmallows, volleyball, horseshoes, and an enormous amount of teasing, laughing, and horsing around.

Initially the children of mixed marriages were only marginally involved, but they became progressively interested in their 'Rotuman side'. They now regularly participate in dances and do school projects on Rotuma.<sup>4</sup> The total number of ethnic Rotumans comprising the core of this community is about 17 or 18, but with their spouses and children, students at BYUH who irregu-

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the project by high-school student Hillary Morris concerning the making of *fekei ulu* (breadfruit pudding); now posted on the Rotuma website <http://www.hawaii.edu/oceanic/rotuma/os/fekeiulu.htm>.

larly participate, and occasional visitors, the group swells to a maximum of about 60 individuals.

The climax of solidarity was in September 1999 when the group hosted and performed dances at a party honouring Alan's retirement from the University of Hawai'i. Members of the University community and Rotuman visitors from Australia, New Zealand, Alaska, Fiji, and Rotuma attended the event. Since that time, however, squabbles over the use of club funds and the issue of paying dues resulted in a factionalization of the group, so that only a handful have attended recent meetings.

Our research into a number of overseas clubs suggests that disagreements over the management of group finances are an important, but not the only trigger for overt expressions of discontent. When we discussed aspects of group identity with migrant Rotumans they usually began with a positive imagery of themselves as hard-working, honest, and reliable, but people often added that within their own groups people can be backbiting, touchy, and difficult to lead. As a result, the strength of Rotuman identity tends to fluctuate where migrant communities exist, coming to the fore during successfully planned events, receding into the background when group solidarity is lessened by internal squabbles.

### *Cultural practices and identity*

A major goal of our recent research has been to determine which aspects of Rotuman culture were being singled out for preservation as symbolic of group identity. When we've asked the question directly, the first thing mentioned by most migrants, particularly those of the older generation who grew up on the island, is preservation of the Rotuman language. Language is a key for many reasons. Not only does it encode aspects that are unique to the culture; it also provides the nuances of communication that are at the heart of intimacy and social life on Rotuma.

Independent of language, the ability to discuss genealogical connections, as well as politics, events, and personalities on Rotuma, identifies individuals as active members in the Rotuman community. Control of information about Rotuma, or about Rotumans in Fiji or elsewhere, is a valuable asset. Videotapes have become an important cultural commodity, allowing migrants to vicariously experience key events, or to remember and relive them. Migrants, their spouses and children are increasingly acquiring books, musical CDs, and other publications about Rotuma. By seeking out and incorporating such information, they engage in the process of objectifying Rotuman culture and history as well as enhance opportunities for participating in discourse about it.

Of all the activities fostered by migrant organizations, however, none is more important to cultural identity than Rotuman dance. Dance performances contribute to formation of Rotuman cultural identity in three fundamental ways:

1. They provide opportunities for Rotumans to interact with each other, especially during practices, in characteristically Rotuman ways (with much joking and banter) and thus create a venue for consolidating relationships.
2. The lyrics of dances characteristically objectify and idealize Rotuma and its culture. They place heavy emphasis on such notions as the beauty of the island, the bounty of food, gardening and fishing, and Rotuman values of hard work and generosity.
3. Dance engages people in performing publicly as representatives of Rotuman culture and thus encourages identification of performers as Rotumans.

Cultural artefacts also play a role in promoting identity, depending on availability. Rotuman fine mats are available in Fiji, for example, although they are mostly made on the home island and are very costly. Still, they are presented at most ceremonies, along with *tefui* garlands, and are highly prized as cultural emblems. In Australia, New Zealand, and Hawai'i, however, there are not enough mats to consistently maintain such prestations, so they have largely been withdrawn from circulation, or may be used for display only, rather than exchange. Other, more accessible items have come to signify Rotuman (or more generally, Polynesian) identity abroad. Dressing for special events in island-style clothes, eating island foods, and decorating homes with shell leis, woven fans, and photographs or paintings of scenes from Rotuma, are all ways of making public or quasi-public statements about cultural identity.

### *Communication and cultural identity*

Early out-migrants from Rotuma – those who left in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries and did not return – were generally assimilated into the communities in which they settled. The pattern was to break ties to the culture and, since they were not great letter-writers, to terminate contact with friends and relatives. We have been told by the descendants of some of these people that they were told almost nothing about the island by their Rotuman forefathers, who appeared to have had no interest in maintaining a Rotuman cultural identity. In part, this was a consequence of Rotuma's isolation. Ships went to the island only a few times a year, requiring major commitments of time for visits, and the only means of communi-

cating with people there, aside from letters, was by an erratic and expensive radio-telephone.

The situation changed in 1981 with the construction of an airstrip on Rotuma and the inauguration of weekly flights from Fiji. Along with a more frequent shipping schedule, visits to Rotuma have become much more feasible for people abroad, with a consequent explosion of traffic between migrant enclaves abroad and Rotuma. In recent years, a number of (extended) family reunions have been staged on the island, in addition to group visits organized by Rotumans living overseas. Migrant communities in Australia and New Zealand have also hosted visits by groups from Rotuma. The installation of a satellite dish and telephone service in the late 1990s, which makes possible direct-dial telephone calls, has further enhanced the degree of regular contact between migrants and their relatives on Rotuma. Making a telephone call, expensive though it may be, seems to be much more congenial to Rotuman styles of communication than the more formal process of writing letters.

These developments have acted to bolster the cultural consciousness of Rotumans abroad by reinforcing ties between migrants and their kin on the home island. However, during the course of our research we became aware of the fact that Rotumans overseas had generally lost contact with relatives who had emigrated elsewhere. The emergence of e-mail in the 1990s provided a vehicle for emigrants with computer access to stay in touch, although finding one another on the Internet was not so easy at the beginning. Not long after getting wired for e-mail ourselves, we began to share news concerning Rotuma with a few colleagues who had also done research on the island. The network expanded through first-hand contact with Rotumans, or spouses of Rotumans, who were online. Eventually, in 1995, we started ROTUMANET, a list of interested parties with whom we shared news from any Rotuman community. People sent us news via e-mail, fax, or regular mail, and we relayed it to everyone on the list, which came to number more than sixty e-mail addresses.

In November 1996 we took the next step to construct a website that would provide a place in cyberspace where emigrant Rotumans could not only keep up on the news from Rotuman communities around the globe, but also find and communicate with one another. Our primary goal was to do what we could to preserve a cultural heritage we greatly admire by facilitating cultural bonding (see Howard and Rensel 2001) and bolstering Rotuman identity.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The following section summarizes information contained in an article by Alan Howard (1999) published in *The Contemporary Pacific*. In that article Alan uses the first person pronoun (I) to describe the development of the website, whereas here we use the plural pronoun (we). This reflects the fact that although Alan is the webmaster and has designed, constructed, and maintained the website, he does so in constant consultation with Jan. Given the context, the dual pronoun seems more appropriate here.

The Rotuma Website initially included a news page and an interactive message board that allowed people to post messages and respond to other people's postings. It also included sections on Rotuma's history, language, population, and culture, based on texts adapted from our own writings. The culture section provided an overview for visitors looking for a general summary, and more detailed sections covering such topics as economy, land tenure, political organization, arts and crafts, music and dance, religion and mythology. We also posted a series of photographs from our files showing scenes and activities, and maps showing Rotuma's location vis-à-vis Fiji and the division of the island into districts and villages. A section was added describing recent publications, with separate pages for each of several new books about Rotuma and how to purchase them.

Feedback concerning the website was extremely gratifying. Rotumans in several different locations reported visiting the website frequently, printing out the news, and circulating it to other Rotumans in their area. A number of individuals became regular correspondents, periodically sending us news from their communities for posting. To keep information from being lost, we established a News Archive containing previous postings on a month-by-month basis.

The Message Board was well used for a number of different purposes, including locating friends and relatives, announcing upcoming events, expressing views on various issues, and engaging in humorous banter in a style reminiscent of family gatherings on Rotuma. Individuals and groups made their presence known from such faraway places as Hong Kong, Laos, Sweden, and Nanaimo (Canada), as well as from places with well-established Rotuman enclaves. It was heart-warming to see friends and relatives who had been out of touch discover one another and exchange messages. In a few poignant instances individuals requested, and got help locating long-lost relatives. In other cases web contact led to actual reunions or attendance at cultural events. Messages were mostly in English, although many contained a mix of Rotuman and English, and some were exclusively in Rotuman. However, the Message Board also proved a disappointment. While the majority of the interactions were benign and bore the unmistakable stamp of Rotuman cultural patterns, especially in the role that humour plays, the venue came to be dominated by a small group of anonymous users who posted offensive messages marked by foul language, nasty personal attacks, and disrespect for Rotuman customs. When repeated pleas for civility failed to have an effect, and in response to complaints from a number of regular visitors, we reluctantly decided to remove the Message Board and replace it with a managed Bulletin Board that requires users to send messages directly to us for posting.

Positive responses from Rotumans who accessed the website encour-

aged us to expand its scope and to add new features. For example, we had long wanted to make obscure published materials about Rotuma available to Rotumans, and had even pursued (unsuccessfully) the possibility of establishing an archive on the island. The website offered an alternative; we scanned a number of key nineteenth-century publications and posted them in an archival section. Together they incorporate several hundred pages of published documents. Since virtually all these materials are buried in publications generally inaccessible to the Rotuman community, posting them constitutes a form of documentary repatriation that permits Rotumans to more easily research their history. In addition, we obtained permission from Bishop Museum to post Gordon Macgregor's field notes from his 1932 field trip to Rotuma.

We also scanned all of our papers and book chapters that we have published on Rotuma (35 so far, with more in press), and posted them in full on the website. This gives Rotumans (and academic colleagues) easy access to our writings, most of which are not readily accessible apart from university libraries.

Given the importance attributed to language by migrants, we felt it would be a service to provide an English-Rotuman dictionary online. The only published dictionary of the Rotuman language, by C. Maxwell Churchward (Sydney: Methodist Church of Australasia, 1940), was out of print for many years. Furthermore, entries are in Rotuman with English definitions only, so people wanting to find the Rotuman equivalent for an English word receive little help. For our own purposes, we typed Churchward's entries into a database several years ago, making it possible to create an English to Rotuman word finder list.<sup>6</sup> The website offered an opportunity to make this information available in an interactive format. Viewers can type an English word into a form on the screen and bring up all the Rotuman words that contain it as part of the translation. Or they can do the reverse – put in a Rotuman word and bring up English glosses.

To make the website an interesting place to revisit, we added a 'proverb of the week' page, which draws from a recently published book by Elizabeth Inia (1998), and at the suggestion of Rotumans who frequented the website we added pages of Rotuman Humour and Rotuman Recipes. We also established 'The Rotuman Forum', a set of web pages where personal viewpoints on Rotuman history, culture, language, and politics can be posted. The purpose of the forum is to give Rotumans and other interested parties an opportunity to share their views regarding matters of concern to the Rotuman

<sup>6</sup> Eventually we turned our database over to Hans Schmidt, and he, in conjunction with two Rotumans (Elizabeth Inia and Sofie Arntsen), reworked the corpus for publication (Inia et al. 1998).

community. Topics have ranged from tourism and environmental concerns, to political issues involving Rotuma's relationship to Fiji. One of the forum topics concerns the issue of Rotuman identity, which demonstrates that at least some overseas migrants regard it as worthy of discussion.

In order to facilitate people finding one another, we created the Rotuman Register, an interactive database that allows users to fill out a form identifying themselves by name, their home district and village on Rotuma, their gender and age, and their parents' names, in addition to current location, mailing and e-mail addresses. This allows people to search for others using several different criteria. To date well over 500 people have registered.

A further opportunity to facilitate communication presented itself in 1999 when the University of Hawai'i, where the website's server is based, established a venue for virtual communities that include chat rooms and bulletin boards. In response, we created the 'Rotuman Virtual Community', containing chat rooms in both English and Rotuman, and multiple bulletin boards serving a variety of purposes. To avoid the problems associated with the defunct Message Board, we required individuals desiring to participate to use their proper names and to follow prescribed rules of etiquette. However, the programme at UH was terminated and experiments with other chat-room possibilities proved futile and have been abandoned.

The website continues to grow, adding new features from time to time. Recent additions include a section on Rotuman music, with MP3 and Quicktime sound clips, and a section on contemporary Rotuman artists, illustrating ways in which individual artists have creatively used aspects of the culture in their productions. Besides providing them with greater exposure (both within the Rotuman community and the outside world), it is, along with periodic reports on the Newspaper of accomplishments by specific individuals, a means of enhancing pride of heritage.

We also uploaded a detailed description of Rotuman marriage ceremonies produced by Elizabeth Inia, but this was replaced by the complete text of her recently published book on Rotuman ceremonies (Inia 2001; we asked for and received permission from her and the publisher to do so). A Rotuman lawyer who practises in both Fiji and Australia offered to provide free legal advice concerning matters pertinent to Rotumans and Rotumans in Fiji and suggested that his offer be posted on the website, which we have done. In this instance, interested parties communicate directly with him rather than go through us.

The website has also become a venue for fund-raising ventures to benefit Rotuma. One of the most exciting is a programme initiated by Rotumans in Fiji called LājeRotuma (Rotuman reef) that aims at cleaning up the environment by holding workshops, organizing clean-up projects, and training personnel on the island to deal with environmental problems. The project is

partially funded by the World Wildlife Fund, but organizers have reported that the website announcements have also attracted donations.<sup>7</sup> The Rotuma Hospital Board has also used the website successfully to solicit funds for specific projects. The newest fund-raising project is to raise money to buy computers for the high school on the island.

### *Conclusion*

In order to remain salient to individuals, cultural identity must be continually reinforced. In some contexts, reinforcement comes from 'others', who regularly remind people of their cultural distinctiveness by interacting with them in stereotyped ways. One could hardly forget one was Zulu in South Africa during apartheid. Cultural identity may also be reinforced within ethnic groups, especially where people are repeatedly reminded of the importance of maintaining key customs, which may range from circumcision to rituals related to family honor. Where neither of these circumstances prevail, where it is a matter of individual preference, sources of intermittent reinforcement are crucial to sustaining a viable cultural identity. We contend that the Internet can provide significant opportunities for such intermittent reinforcement.

Of all the factors that facilitate a strong sense of cultural identity, none is more important than the presence of a community associated in people's minds with a particular heritage. With the great diasporic movements of the late twentieth century, Pacific peoples have scattered around the globe, rendering the nature of communities somewhat problematic. The questions raised for Rotumans and other Pacific Islanders are: Will such dispersion lead to the demise of their unique cultures? Will it result in complete fragmentation, with enclaves in different countries evolving into thoroughly transformed communities, tied to 'home' islands only by vague historical connections? Or will new global communities emerge, well grounded in the cultures, histories, and languages of the Pacific Islands?

Sustaining a global community based on a particular cultural heritage requires a core group of participants who engage in a frequent exchange of news and information, and who nurture a sense of collective history built from continual exposure to common lore and shared interests. To some degree, exchanges of letters, remittances, telephone calls, and occasional visits back and forth have continued to nourish a sense of common community among Pacific peoples from distinctive cultures. But it is not enough.

<sup>7</sup> A description of this project is posted at <http://www.hawaii.edu/oceanic/rotuma/os/lajerotuma.htm>.

Cheaper, more frequent communication is required, and it is becoming increasingly available via the Internet. The Internet not only provides an opportunity for people to exchange e-mail on a daily basis at very low cost, it offers the possibility of creating spaces on the World Wide Web that can be visited daily – spaces where people can obtain news, exchange gossip and information, express opinions, look up historical and cultural information, and stay in touch with one another.

If we define community as a body of persons having a common history or common social, economic, and political interests (*Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary* 1993:233), then it is fair to say that an international Rotuman community indeed exists. It is a community whose focal point is the island itself, in which membership depends, to some extent at least, on an interest in Rotuman history, language, and culture. More importantly, it is a community defined by a common interest in one another's lives by virtue of kinship, marriage, friendship, or shared experience. Most people with attachments to the island want to stay in touch with friends and relatives; they want to share news and stay informed of what's going on in Rotuma and in overseas enclaves where they have kin, schoolmates, and friends. Abroad, however, they must also contend with the demands of cultural contexts that require setting aside, or at least muting, their Rotuman identity.

The centrifugal forces that act to weaken Rotuman cultural identity abroad will probably increase in intensity with each passing generation. The Rotuma Website represents a concerted effort to counteract those forces, and to promote Rotumans' engagement with their cultural heritage. We are committed to this effort because we believe that something vitally important would be lost if that heritage were forgotten. We see a link between the success Rotumans have enjoyed overseas and their childhood socialization into Rotuman culture, and believe that by nurturing the development of a global Rotuman community, and a pride of heritage, their children and grandchildren will be as well served in the future. After all is said and done, isn't that what cultural identity is all about?

#### References

- Barth, Fredrik (ed.)  
1969 *Ethnic groups and boundaries; The social organization of culture difference.* Boston: Little and Brown. [Scandinavian University Books.]
- Hereniko, Vilsoni  
1994 'Representations of cultural identities', in: K.R. Howe, Robert C. Kiste, and Brij V. Lal (eds), *Tides of history; The Pacific Islands in the twentieth century*, pp. 406-34. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

- 1995 *Woven gods; Female clowns and power in Rotuma*. Honolulu/Suva: University of Hawai'i Press and Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific. [Pacific Islands Monograph Series 12.]
- Howard, Alan  
1966 'Plasticity, achievement and adaptation in developing economies', *Human Organization* 25:265-72.
- 1970 *Learning to be Rotuman*. New York: Columbia Teachers College Press.
- 1999 'Pacific-based virtual communities; Rotuma on the World Wide Web', *Contemporary Pacific* 11:160-75.
- Howard, Alan and Irwin Howard  
1977 'Rotumans in Fiji: The genesis of an ethnic group', in: Michael D. Lieber (ed.), *Exiles and migrants in Oceania*, pp. 161-94. Honolulu: University Press of Hawai'i. [ASAO Monograph 5.]
- Howard, Alan and Jan Rensel  
2001 'Where has Rotuman culture gone? And what is it doing there?', *Pacific Studies* 24-1/2:63-88.
- Inia, Elizabeth K.  
1998 *Faeng 'es Fuaga (Rotuman proverbs)*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.
- 2001 *Kato'aga; Rotuman ceremonies*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.
- Inia, Elizabeth K., Sofie Arntsen, Hans Schmidt, Jan Rensel and Alan Howard  
1998 *A new Rotuman dictionary; An English-Rotuman wordlist and C. Maxwell Churchward's Rotuman-English dictionary of 1940*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.
- Keesing, Roger M. and Robert Tonkinson (eds)  
1982 *Reinventing traditional culture; The politics of kastom in Island Melanesia*. Sydney: Anthropological Societies of Australia. [Mankind 13-4, special issue.]
- Lindstrom, Lamont and Geoffrey White  
1993 'Introduction: Custom today', *Anthropological Forum* 6:467-73.
- Linnekin, Jocelyn  
1992 'On the theory and politics of cultural construction in the Pacific', *Oceania* 62:249-63. [Special issue edited by Margaret Jolly and Nicholas Thomas, 'The politics of tradition in the Pacific'.]
- Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*  
1993 *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. Tenth edition. Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster. [First published 1916.]
- Michael, Seferosa  
1991 *Rotuman migration and settlement in Sydney*. Sydney: Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs.
- Turner, James W.  
1997 'Continuity and constraint; Reconstructing the concept of tradition from a Pacific perspective', *Contemporary Pacific* 9:345-81.