

Rotumans in Europe: Festival Spaces

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Following a conflict in which English-backed Methodists prevailed over French-backed Catholics, the island of Rotuma was officially ceded to the United Kingdom by the chiefs of the island’s seven districts on 13 May 1881. Because the island is so small and isolated and lacked sufficient resources to be of interest to the colonizers, the British Crown decided to administer Rotuma as part of the colony of Fiji. Following Fiji’s independence in 1970, Rotumans opted to become part of the nation of Fiji.

During the colonial period, the cession of Rotuma was celebrated annually at the island’s government station on the 13th of May with athletic events, an agricultural competition, and a women’s handicraft display, along with feasting and group dancing (tautoga). The audience for the event, which was known as “Cession Day,” included chiefs, religious leaders, invited dignitaries, elders, and other non-participants. The space in which the events took place was a large area fronted by an open, covered pavilion from which the audience of luminaries could observe the performances sheltered from the sun, or rain, and where they were served meals. Dancers performed on the ground in an open, grassy space. Commoners sat on woven pandanus mats spread on the ground adjacent to the pavilion. This arrangement has continued into modern times with few modifications.

Celebrations in Diaspora

As Rotuman migration to Viti Levu increased following World War II, resulting in substantial enclaves in Suva, Lautoka/Nadi, and at the gold mine in Vatukoula, Cession Day celebrations were held in those locations as well, albeit in modified forms. Initially, organizing athletic events was not feasible because of space limitations and too few athletes; the vast majority of Rotumans in those urban areas were not full-time farmers, so agricultural competitions were not possible; and too few women were engaged in making handicrafts to hold viable exhibits. Thus the festivities focused on feasting (including Rotuman specialty dishes) and group dancing. In these locales, Cession Day celebrations were generally held either indoors at halls obtained for the occasion (some of which had stages for performances) or outdoors in public spaces, a pattern that has been perpetuated not only in Fiji but, as the Rotuman diaspora has unfolded, in urban centers in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States—wherever there are enough Rotumans to form a community of sorts. As time went on and the size of diasporic communities increased (including farming capacities in some of the Fiji locales), agricultural shows again became part of some celebrations. However, since the end of the colonial period, the occasion has been referred to as “Rotuma Day,” which officially is still 13 May, although for practicality

celebrations are generally held on a weekend before or after that date so that people do not have to take off time from work.

For example, a posting on the “Rotumans on Facebook” group page (which now has a membership of over 6,000), dated 13 May 2011, reported that Rotuma Day celebrations in Suva were held at Suva Gymnasium. In the same year, postings referred to Rotuma Day celebrations at Concord High School in Sydney and in Kings Park in Perth, Australia.

Over the past twenty-five years, we have attended Rotuma Day celebrations in Honolulu as well as in West Coast communities of North America (the San Francisco Bay area, British Columbia in Canada, and Tacoma, Washington). The spaces in which the events have been held varied, depending for the most part on the number of people attending, whether a non-participating audience was included, and the availability of suitable facilities such as space for group dance performance, an outdoor venue for an earth oven, a kitchen, etc. Venues have ranged from beach parks in Hawai‘i, to recreation centers in the San Francisco Bay area, to a rugby club in Vancouver BC.

As indicated above, Rotumans have really taken to the Internet as a place to communicate with one another and to plan events, including Rotuma Day. A search of Facebook groups using the name “Rotuma” yielded 46 groups; the word “Rotumans” yielded an additional 51 groups. Membership in the various groups ranged from 1 to over 6,000 (as of 14 April 2015). One subset of these groups serves specific localities, such as Auckland and Wellington in New Zealand. In February 2010, a group was created by a few Rotumans living in England. They named the group “Rotumans in UK, Ireland and Europe” with this rationale: “A group for Rotumans living in or visiting the UK, Ireland and Europe, past and present, and anyone with family or other connections to the island of Rotuma.” The great majority of Rotumans in Europe live in England, with just a scattered few on the continent. In contrast to other “localized” Rotuman groups, Rotumans in Europe are so widely scattered that individuals or families are ordinarily only able to get together in small groups to celebrate special events such as birthdays or graduations, or to visit occasionally with nearby friends or relatives. This group’s website serves as a space for all Rotumans in Europe to communicate with one another and to plan events that could be more inclusive. As of 22 April 2015 the group, which is closed (requiring permission to belong), had 259 members, including many of whom did not live in Europe but who were either related to or close friends of the group’s creators.

Rotuma Day Celebrations in Europe

The obvious occasion for holding an inclusive gathering is Rotuma Day, an event of common interest to all Rotumans, and the Facebook group has provided a vehicle for

planning such an event. On 14 March 2013, the Rotuman wife of a Rotuman man serving in the British Army posted an item on Facebook Events inviting members of the group to a “Rotuma Camp Weekend” from Friday to Monday, 24-27 May, at Beeches Farm Campsite in Gwent, Wales. The property, which is situated on the top of Tidenham Chase overlooking the winding valley of the River Wye, is primarily a farm, but it includes a campsite that was opened in the 1950s. The campsite is divided into seven areas, each suited for different sizes and types of groups. The Rotuma group booked Oaks Corner, described on the website as “next to the pot belly pigs pen with a towering old oak and a little view across a horses paddock—a quiet corner.”

The organization of this event, which was attended by about forty individuals, and the space within which it was held, clearly deviated from Rotuma Day celebrations in locations with face-to-face Rotuman communities, where people get together on a regular basis for church services, for life events, and for visits with friends and relatives. On this occasion, there were no spaces formally designated for performance or ceremonies. Indeed, for Rotumans in Europe, the very reason for celebrating Rotuma Day was simply to get together. There was no audience to the event, and the ceremonial components so conspicuous in Rotuma, Suva, and some other venues in urban Australia and New Zealand were absent. And although the participants made an effort at group dancing, it lacked the polish that can result from long hours of practice where people can get together on a regular basis. The fact that this was a four-day event is itself testimony to the motivation for this gathering to be an opportunity for friends and relatives who are otherwise separated geographically to spend time together in a setting that facilitates bonding. Postings by participants following the event indicate its success in this regard. For example:

Thank you all for a fantastic weekend of fun and cultural revisit. We did thoroughly enjoy it and now look forward to the next meet. Thanks again!!

and

What a fun weekend it was, thanks to all who made it possible. Nice to know theres still some crazy rotumans out there.

A trio of different organizers selected the same venue for the celebration of Rotuma Day in 2014. As it turned out, the weather was not cooperative; it rained much of the weekend, and the field turned to mud. However, the conditions did little to dampen the spirits of the participants, as is evident in the following posting on Facebook:

Feeling mud, mud, mud!!!!!! We'll be cleaning up the mud for weeks! 😊

What an awesome weekend! Thank you to all for their love, laughter and incredible hospitality! An outstanding team effort and so proud to be part of such a remarkable and strong community! We all felt so welcomed and grateful, our family has multiplied ten-fold with incredible people and lots of love! Our children had such a wonderful time in the mud with the other kids, making the most of the weather! We were saddened to say goodbye and Eli was missing everyone as he tried to fall asleep last night! We arrived home safely and hope you all did too, must have been a world record effort to push so many cars out of a muddy field hehe 😊

There can be no better testimony than this to the way in which the space selected for a Rotuman gathering contributed to the kind of bonding that was desired by the European group. The contrasting spaces as well as the different activities that took place in them point clearly to the different objectives for Rotuma Day celebrations in diasporic locations compared to those on the home island.

Discussion

The enactment of Rotuma Day festivities in diasporic communities, where concern for the perpetuation of Rotuman culture is paramount, is a prime example of what we have referred to as “cultural bonding”:

We conceive of cultural bonding as a communicative process whereby individuals reinforce notions of sameness (we-ness) by choosing to stress certain cultural attributes from a broader array. Such shared attributes might include talking the same language (sharing an accent, using the same metaphors, and so on), mimicking one another’s body language, agreeing with one another’s opinions (or negotiating the bases for disagreement on a common foundation of agreement), or mutually choosing to participate in specific ceremonies or dance forms (Howard and Rensel 2001:83).

What distinguishes the process of cultural bonding in diasporic communities is that people can choose either to associate with or dissociate from others on the basis of a vast array of cultural models available in the workplace, public arenas, and mass media. Whereas cultural bonding in so-called traditional communities was largely unconscious, in heterogeneous settings it is more a matter of conscious choice. Formation of an ethnic community in such an environment involves the conscious selection of cultural attributes perceived as unique to the ethnic group, elements

that distinguish it from other ethnic groups (Howard and Howard 1977). Rotuma Day celebrations abroad involve people consciously choosing to associate with others *as Rotumans* and consciously selecting objectified cultural aspects they identify as Rotuman—aspects that reinforce their social bonds. As Arjun Appadurai put it: “Culture becomes less what Bourdieu would have called a habitus (a tacit realm of reproducible practices and dispositions) and more an arena of conscious choice, justification and representation” (1990:18). The choice of spaces in which to hold such festivities is instrumental to the process.

Conceptually, therefore, we think of Rotumans as “doing culture,” rather than “having culture.” Such a conception places the emphasis on a notion of culture as a repertoire of activities rather than as a particular array of cognitive or symbolic representations. People form communities by doing culture, that is, by agreeing, overtly or tacitly, to emphasize a selected segment of their total personal repertoires of models for acting and communicating (Howard and Rensel 2001:84).

In addition to the face-to-face performance of their culture, Rotumans enact it online in the digital spaces they’ve created specifically for themselves as members of the global Rotuman community. Diasporic Rotumans rely heavily on digital media (Facebook in particular) to supplement the limited time they may have in each other’s presence. Many of their postings are recognizably Rotuman, whether they use Rotuman language, discuss Rotuman issues, or include photos of places on Rotuma or videos of Rotumans doing things recognizably Rotuman (for example, the preparation or eating of Rotuman foods; performing Rotuman dances). They also, like most Facebook users, share personal information concerning their friends and families, their accomplishments and participation in events—which, because of their geographical dispersion, they could not otherwise share in face-to-face interaction. This means that when they are able to get together in person, they can spend less time catching up and more time enacting Rotuman culture in ways that can only happen in the same physical space.

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Howard, Alan, and Irwin Howard (1997). Rotumans in Fiji: The Genesis of an Ethnic Group. In *Exiles and Migrants in Oceania*, edited by Michael Lieber. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

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