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THE FIRST ROTUMANS

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Even after nearly thirty years it is not difficult to recreate the mixture of feelings that overcame me when the plane I had taken from Hawaii, itself rather exotic in my eyes, landed at Nandi in Fiji. The Qantas flight arrived at five o'clock in the morning, and while we were disembarking the glow of dawn made its appearance. The air was soft and tropical, but still cool, and the Fijian policemen, whose presence (in the theatrical sense) was most impressive, added drama to the scene. A mixture of strange smells, some sweet, others pungent, filled my nostrils. I was overcome with a sense of being in an exotic place and, my anthropological training notwithstanding, was overcome with a combination of excited anticipation and anxiety. I was twenty-five years old, naive and full of wonder for the mysteries of cultural differences. The airport experience did nothing to dispel the images I had in my mind of the culture I was planning to study, or what "my subjects" would be like. If anything, the island of Rotuma, which was governed from Fiji by the Colonial Administration, would be even more exotic, and more primitive, than Fiji. I had read the meager literature describing Rotuman culture, and something about its history, and it left no doubt that I would find a people steeped in traditions and beliefs I would find initially bizarre and irrational. But I would work hard and eventually unravel their twisted logic so that it would appear sensible. I would be translator for these people, would transform their exotic remoteness to comfortable familiarity. It was a mission of sorts, born of a need to make sense out of a world I was (and still am) struggling to understand. I could not help but run over the rules I had set for myself:

Be observant and careful not to offend.

Do not show disapproval no matter how strange the behavior or how silly the beliefs (which recalls a dictum I read in an early edition of *Notes and Queries in Anthropology*, the fieldwork manual published by the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, that an anthropologist should not show his revulsion no matter how disgusting the customs of the natives really are)!

Concentrate on communicating, by learning the Rotuman language and being careful to talk simply and clearly when using English.

There were other rules—there must have been, for I remember rehearsals as taking quite a bit of time—but I have forgotten what they were. In retrospect it seems they helped me deal with anxiety, but they were soon displaced by the realities of interaction, which rendered any preconceived code of conduct untenable.

It was in this frame of mind that I met, quite fortuitously, my first Rotuman. I had left Nadi and taken a taxi to Korolevu, a resort on the way to Suva where I would later have to confront Colonial Administrators, for whom I had prepared another set of preconceived behaviors. In Suva I would have to be on my "best behavior" and would have to recall all the rules of etiquette and table manners my mother had tried to teach me as a child. With them I would use the elegant parts of my vocabulary (learned mostly in studying for my entrance exam to Stanford) so as not to sound like a dolt. My advisor had suggested that I buy a tuxedo and dinner jacket, which I couldn't afford, just in case I got invited to formal affairs in Suva. Lacking the right attire, I was even more determined to talk properly. With Rotumans I would talk simply and clearly, with Colonial Administrators I would turn into a pedant.

But before facing these ordeals I would spend a day at Korolevu, which lived up to its advertisements as a resort that captured the full flavor of Fiji. The hotel was located on a splendid beach, with palm trees and all the romantic symbols of the South Seas. The hotel rooms were *bures*, thatched huts, and the service personnel were frizzy-headed Fijians who by physique and bearing gave new meaning to my visions of "the noble savage." I was enthralled, to say the least. After dinner—itself an exotic experience for me although the fare was curry rather than dalo (taro) and roast pig—I got into a conversation with one of the hotel clerks. He asked what I was doing in Fiji and when I told him about my plans for doing research on Rotuma he said, "Oh, we have a Rotuman working here as maintenance manager. Would you like to meet him?" My heart skipped a beat. "Sure" I replied, and quickly rehearsed "the rules." So I was taken to meet my first Rotuman.

Alex Rae was an impressive looking man by any cultural standard. He stood about six-foot-four, had a mane of white wavy hair and a beautifully bronzed complexion. Despite his casual European clothes he appeared the epitome of a Polynesian chief. He was in his mid-sixties at the time—a very handsome man indeed. As soon as he spoke I realized my rules were a waste of time, for his speech was as elegant as his appearance. To my untutored ear it sounded like Oxford or Cambridge, but turned out to be simply good Fijian English. Mr Rae was

a charming and gentle man, who made me feel at ease right away. I guess I learned my initial important lesson from him in the first few minutes of our encounter—that Rotumans were gracious, perceptive hosts, and that any attempt on my part to act the the role of anthropologist would be ludicrous.

He held full command of our conversation, asking first one question, then another. He listened patiently to may answers and showed full appreciation for my purposes. We started out slowly, talking about practical matters related to life on Rotuma, and then he gradually shifted toward more theoretical concerns. I don't remember the specifics, for in retrospect it was his sophistication and style of conversing that sticks in my mind. However I do remember my first blunder. We were talking about the issue of Polynesian migrations and he mentioned some of Peter Buck's theories. I seized the moment to make one of those Batesonian statements—a statement framed in such a way as to carry an implicit message about our developing relationship—that one is often tempted to make to people one is patronizing. I said, simply and as a matter of fact, that Peter Buck was a Maori, that his true name was Te Rangi Hiroa. What I was trying to do, of course, was use Peter Buck as a common denominator between us. I am an anthropologist; Peter Buck was Te Rangi Hiroa, a Polynesian; you, Alex Rae are a Polynesian; therefore there is a social equivalence between us. I am not really you social superior by virtue of being white.

Perhaps I am making myself sound more arrogant than I was in fact, for my manner was gentle and appreciative of his obvious intelligence. His response caught me off guard, for he corrected my error. I don't remember his exact words, but the message was that I was not quite right, that Te Rangi Hiroa was only half Polynesian. His mother was a New Zealand Maori but his father was Irish. In truth I did not know this, or if I once did had forgotten it, and felt properly chastised. I don't think Mr. Rae was trying to chastise me, or was making a statement about our relationship. I think he was much more at ease and less self-conscious than I was during the entire encounter. But his remark made me aware of how inappropriate my initial framework had been for our interaction. Lesson two: don't assume I know more than another person, Rotumans included, unless I'm prepared to be embarrassed.

Our conversation extended for hours and I enjoyed it immensely. It was in no sense an ethnographic interview. If I had entertained that thought to begin with it soon dissolved in the sheer pleasure of conversing with a delightful and knowledgeable companion. This simply wasn't the context I had associated with anthropological interviewing. I could not see Alex Rae as a "subject", only as a

remarkable human being. He did talk about his life, especially about the period of his youth when he became a professional boxer. This led him to discuss various professional boxers, past and present, and to my astonishment he knew the succession of world champions in every major weight division from the beginning of records to the present. Since I took pride in my own knowledge of sports trivia—I could recite the New York Yankees lineups back to the 1920s—Rae's knowledge of boxing was the final persuader. Here was a formidable intellect—a man from whom I could, and did, learn much.

I left Korolevu in a rather different frame of mind from the one I had brought to Fiji. The landscape was still exotic enough, but I was no longer burdened by notions of "primitive" natives. In Suva I met Alex Rae's sister, Faga, her son Oscar and daughter, Liebling. All were sophisticated urbanites who further demolished my preconceptions. Liebling had been the first Miss Hibiscus and had traveled extensively abroad; Oscar was a draftsman for a Government agency.

Perhaps it was one the jokes Oscar told me that put the final nail in the coffin of my ill-conceived notions. It went like this:

There were two men who were fond of poetry. One man was an ardent fan of Tennyson, the other was equally committed to the poetry of Shakespeare. They would frequently go on walks together and when they came upon interesting scenes would make up poems in the style of their favorite bards. One day when they were on such an excursion they saw before them a man approaching with a severe hernia. The Shakespearean turned to his companion and asked, "How would Tennyson describe this scene?"

With only a moment's hesitation the second man offered his verse:

"Down yonder hill there comes a wag, legs spread apart,
balls in a bag."

"Not bad," remarked the first man. His friend then challenged him to compose a poem in the Shakespearean manner, and without hesitation he came forth with his composition:

"Lo! What manner of man is this, that comes with his balls in
parenthesis?"

As it turned out, Alex Rae and his sister Faga were by genealogical reckoning among the highest ranking Rotumans alive at the time. They were grandchildren of the great chief Marafu, who was in power when the island was ceded to Great Britain in 1881. It was, I think, fortunate that I met them first, since it might have been easier to maintain my illusions had I gone directly to Rotuma. Not all Rotumans were as sophisticated as Alex or Oscar, but then again, I have met few people since who can match them.