

# 3

## The Rotuman experience with reverse migration

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### Abstract

This paper examines responses to a questionnaire concerning migration experiences and attitudes administered to 90 individuals on the island of Rotuma in 2012 by high school students under our supervision. The results are divided into four sections: (1) perceptions of Rotuma; (2) the migration experience abroad; (3) getting resettled following return; and (4) readaptation to life on the island. The predominant reported reason for returning to Rotuma was to look after parents, grandparents or other close kin, followed by other family considerations. Responses concerning resettlement reflected highly positive images of the island and its culture, and satisfaction with the return experience. We conclude that networks of kinship ties that transcend the island's boundaries facilitate both movement away and return. This has resulted in a situation in which the frequently used definition of migration and reverse migration—that migrants go with the intent to remain—is problematic for many, if not most, of the Rotumans who travel or return from abroad. Most appear to keep their options open, with ties to kin providing opportunities for visiting and resettlement in multiple venues.

## Introduction

This paper is the product of over 50 years of research concerning the flow of population from and to the island of Rotuma, which has been politically part of the Republic of Fiji since cession to Great Britain in 1881. In 1960, during Alan's first period of ethnographic fieldwork on Rotuma, he conducted a census of the island that included residential histories of all adults, and in 1989 Jan organised a similar census during her dissertation research.<sup>1</sup> The latest of our 12 visits to the island since 1987, in 2012, provided us with an opportunity to supervise students at Rotuma High School interviewing return migrants using a questionnaire of our design. Along with historical documentation, these data provide a long-term perspective on the patterns of mobility that have characterised the Rotuman population over the years.

The overall picture that emerges from our research both on the island and among Rotumans abroad is of a people who manifest exceptionally high rates of out-migration; at present approximately 85 per cent of Rotumans and part-Rotumans live abroad, mostly in Fiji, but also scattered around Pacific Rim countries and in Europe. They have been extraordinarily successful educationally and occupationally, with little evidence of the social problems that have afflicted many other Pacific populations. This has led to a very positive cultural identity that is reinforced by an idealised image of Rotuma as a kind of paradise, which encourages both short- and long-term visits to the home island. Both our ethnographic observations and our latest survey data make it clear that return visits to the island, whether for a few weeks or long-term, rarely disappoint, in contrast to other studies we know of among Pacific populations.

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1 In 1960, two Rotuman assistants (Amai Sakimi and Rejeli Mejeli) interviewed adults from each household on the island, under Alan's supervision. In 1989, after a full-day training workshop, 14 teachers from Rotuma's primary and secondary schools interviewed households in assigned areas. Unfortunately, the individuals enlisted to survey the district of Pepjei and part of the district of Noa'tau were unable to complete their assignments. However, by December 1989, the remaining teachers had completed surveys of 85 per cent (415) of Rotuma's households.

## Theoretical perspectives on reverse migration

As George Gmelch noted in his review of return migration literature in 1980, most of the literature up to that time dealt with persons who originally migrated to urban-industrialised countries or regions, notably in northern Europe and north-eastern North America. The typologies that resulted from those studies were heavily weighted toward economic considerations. The neoclassical economics approach, for example, viewed return migration as the result of miscalculating the costs of migration while not reaping the benefits of higher earnings; in other words, returning to one's homeland was seen primarily as a failed migration experience in economic terms. The counterpoint to this approach was the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) perspective, which viewed return migration as the successful culmination of calculated economic goals (Cassarino 2004: 255).

In reaction to these economic models, the structural approach to return migration contends that returning to one's homeland is a social as well as a personal issue, although financial and economic factors have been heavily, though not exclusively, privileged in studies relying on this perspective (Cerese 1974). The structuralist approach has also been criticised for its assumption that little information or material exchange takes place between migrants and their home communities (Murphy 2002), an assertion particularly inappropriate for most Pacific Islands populations and certainly for the Rotuman case. More appropriate for Pacific populations are the transnational and social network approaches to return migration, both of which assume that migrants maintain strong linkages with their homelands while abroad. While most studies from these perspectives also tend to emphasise the mobilisation of resources, social network theory makes room for social capital as a valued resource. Even though some studies of return migration have allowed for a range of considerations affecting the phenomenon, our reading of the literature suggests a strong rationalistic bias—of calculating actors primarily interested in economic advantage—that is not as appropriate for the Pacific region as it may be elsewhere. Helen Lee and her associates deserve much credit for providing a Pacific perspective to the issues involved (Lee and Francis 2009). This paper attempts to build on their insights with the goal of formulating some propositions that may help to account for the nature of reverse population flows from diasporic destinations to Pacific Island homelands.

## A historical overview of the Rotuman diaspora

Like many other Pacific Islanders, Rotumans began emigrating from their home island as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Voyaging was an integral part of their cultural tradition prior to European intrusion, but European vessels provided a wider range of opportunities to visit, and settle, in distant lands. Commenting in 1867 on the extent of emigration, Reverend William Fletcher, the first European Methodist missionary to be stationed on Rotuma, wrote that upwards of 700 young men were known to have left the island in recent memory (Fletcher 1870).

Labour recruiters came to Rotuma from all over the Pacific, and Rotumans were employed in such places as the Sandwich Islands (now Hawai'i) and Samoa, but in 1881, when Rotuma was ceded to Great Britain, the island was closed as a port of entry and labour recruiters ceased to call there. All traffic between Rotuma and the outside world was diverted through the Colony of Fiji, from which Rotuma was governed. However, during this early period the basic pattern was for emigrants to return to Rotuma after a few years, and therefore the flow of population back to the island nearly balanced the outward flow.

While most of the men who left the island—either as sailors or as workers abroad (for example, pearl diving in the Torres Strait)—returned home after some time away, a significant number did not. They left the ships in Australia, New Zealand, England or elsewhere and took employment, married local women and settled into a new life. Rotuma's isolation made it difficult for emigrants to keep in contact with their home island, and most of them disappeared as far as their homebound relatives were concerned. For whatever reasons—limited literacy curtailing letter writing; transportation into the Pacific being too complicated, sporadic and unpredictable; Rotumans being extraordinarily adaptive to and successful in new environments; or a combination of such factors—communication was extremely limited at best.

As members of the Fiji polity since cession, Rotumans have been able to move freely about the archipelago and have taken advantage of the possibilities this has offered. The flow of this migration path accelerated markedly during the last half of the 20th century as young Rotumans moved to Fiji's urban centres to pursue education and employment

opportunities. Also stimulating out-migration was a rapid increase in the population of Rotumans resulting from a dramatic decrease in the death rate following the Second World War while the birth rate remained high, which strained the island's carrying capacity. Thus, whereas the 1956 Fiji census found 68 per cent of Rotumans in the country living on their home island, by 2007 the figure had dropped to 19 per cent. The overall number of Rotumans in Fiji as a whole (including Rotuma) increased during this time span from 4,422 to 10,137.

Furthermore, Fiji has been a way station for many Rotumans who have emigrated elsewhere, including Australia and New Zealand, where substantial identifiable communities have developed, often around Rotuman-oriented churches. Rotuman communities of lesser size and varying cohesion have developed elsewhere, including Hawai'i, the San Francisco Bay Area, Vancouver in British Columbia and Fort McMurray in Alberta, Canada. In addition, a substantial number of Rotumans emigrated to England, where they are widely scattered, making organisation impractical. A few families with Rotuman members settled in other places, including Sweden and Norway, for example. While no figures are available for Rotumans outside of Fiji, we estimate their numbers to be around 2,000–3,000.

Improved transportation and telephone services following the Second World War helped to relieve Rotuma's isolation, resulting in a substantial increase in the volume of visits to and from the home island and telephone contact with kin in far-flung lands. However, such contact remained episodic until the last decades of the 20th century, when an airstrip was built on the island and a modern telephone system installed. And although it continues to be erratic, shipping services to the island from Fiji have improved from colonial times when government vessels made only four visits a year.

As the Rotuman population grew in Fiji and transportation between Rotuma and Fiji significantly improved, the flow of population between Rotuma and Fiji took on the quality of a two-way traffic, with people moving back and forth with regularity. The flow to Fiji from Rotuma was characterised by short-term visits for special events such as weddings, funerals and births; for specialised medical treatment; for workshops or training programs; to participate in sporting events; to visit relatives; or just for fun. Such sojourns have become increasingly routine, as shown in Figure 1.

MOBILITIES OF RETURN

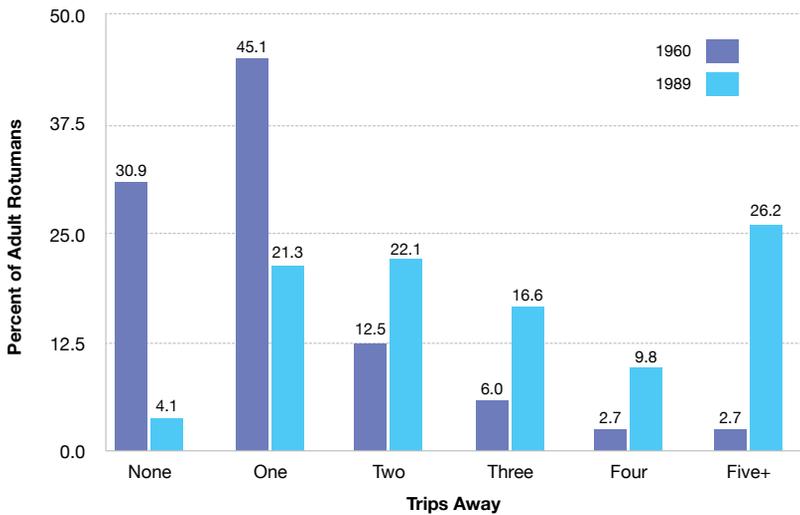


Figure 1: Per cent of Rotumans by trips away, 1960 and 1989

Source: 1960 survey conducted by A. Howard; 1989 survey conducted by A. Howard and J. Rensel.

According to Alan’s initial survey in 1960, 76 per cent of the adults surveyed had been off-island only once or not at all, but in 1989 this was true of only 25.4 per cent. And while only 11.4 per cent of the 1960 group reported three or more trips abroad, 52.6 per cent of the 1989 sample had made at least three trips. Fifty-seven individuals in the 1989 group reported making 10 or more trips, and a few reported as many as 40. Indeed, we were aware of a number of people who travel back and forth several times a year.

In the years that we have made return visits to Rotuma, beginning in 1987 (12 times in all), we have seen manifestations of this circulating population in the form of newly constructed houses, while others have been abandoned; men returning to the island to take chiefly titles, then leaving again after a period of time; and skilled workers returning for the duration of development projects. Teachers and health personnel come and go, as do other government workers whose assignments may shift between Rotuma and other parts of Fiji. In many cases it would be difficult to define people who were born on Rotuma and left for extended periods

of time, then came back, as ‘return migrants’,<sup>2</sup> because the contingencies that govern their movements are often unpredictable—a condition that is prevalent in many Pacific societies characterised by circular migration, or as we would prefer to phrase it, by the fluid movement of population streams among multiple locations.

Some Rotumans of our acquaintance maintain what amounts to dual residence in both Fiji and Rotuma. They travel back and forth quite frequently, often with their families, sometimes alone. They are well-off financially and enjoy prestigious positions in Fiji, but they travel back to the island in order to spend time with relatives, participate in policy decisions, or simply to enjoy activities such as fishing and gardening that have special appeal for them. In most instances they own homes in Fiji and stay in houses jointly owned by relatives on Rotuma.

Attachment to the physical beauty and culture of the island, with its ethos of sharing and caring, are lures for people who spent their childhood on the island and maintain idealistic, nostalgic memories of their time there. Indeed, in contrast to some other Pacific societies, for example, Samoa (Gerber 1975) and Tonga (Morton 1996), childhood in Rotuma is a particularly benign period (see Howard 1970). This helps account for the strong impulse of diasporic Rotumans to return for holidays, particularly during the Christmas period, which extends for six weeks or so and is a time for picnics, beach parties, feasting, dancing and general socialising. Emigrants from a particular village or district may organise reunions during this period, sometimes in conjunction with donations of valued items such as generators, transport vehicles, or building materials for common purposes.

## Households and social networks

Among the more significant changes associated with the expansion of the Rotuman population abroad have been modifications to household composition and the nature of social networks. These changes need to be understood in light of the number of Rotumans who now reside abroad

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2 Gmelch (1980: 136) defined return migration as ‘the movement of emigrants back to their homeland to resettle’. This makes the definition dependent on motivation, which is difficult, if not impossible to determine with authority. In our experience, Pacific Islanders are especially responsive to changes within generally extensive social networks that may affect their proclivities toward migratory moves, so that ‘settlement’ may in most cases be highly provisional.

and a significant drop in population on the island of Rotuma. Whereas the 1966 census showed a total of 3,235 persons on Rotuma, by the 2007 census the figure had dropped to 2,002 and has since dropped below 2,000.<sup>3</sup> Correspondingly, average household size declined from a high of 7.4 in 1956 to 5.8 in 1986. The change is reflected in our own survey data. In 1960 Alan recorded 417 households on Rotuma with a total of 2,892 persons, or 6.9 persons per household, whereas the survey Jan organised in 1989 revealed an average of 5.3 persons per household. This drop in average household size can be accounted for mainly by a dramatic increase in small households, those with three or fewer persons, and to a lesser extent by a decrease in large households, those with seven or more persons. In part, this reflects the loss of individuals from existing households through out-migration.

But that is not the whole story. There has been a substantial increase in the total number of households as well, from 417 in 1960 to 493 in 1996. To some extent, the increase in small households represents return migration by individuals who have opted to establish their own households rather than join existing ones. It also reflects investments in maintaining an active link to the island by Rotumans abroad. By building a home and having it occupied by close kin, out-migrants ensure that they and/or their immediate family will have a place to return to in Rotuma. Where whole families have migrated, it may be especially important to leave at least one person behind to ensure continuance of rights in *kainaga* (kin group) land. A number of houses on Rotuma are in fact occupied on a caretaking basis for relatives who have sent remittances to have houses built and improved. In other words, the occupants of many small households are in the position of protecting the resettlement rights of their close kin abroad.

A comparison of findings from the 1989 survey with that from 1960 gives additional insights into changes in household structure. The major change was a substantial increase in households composed of single persons or married couples (27 in 1989 compared to only six in 1960). This difference, and a smaller proportion of 'expanded' households, accounts for most of the variation between the two surveys. Considering the fact that single individuals are not viable production units for subsistence

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3 Since 1986, Fiji censuses have not distinguished Rotumans by ethnicity, placing them in the category of 'other', so the 1996 and 2007 figures for the island of Rotuma include Fijian and Indo-Fijians who are employed there, as well as non-Rotumans married to Rotumans.

purposes, the data on household structure would appear to support the interpretation offered above—that an increased number of households are occupied by caretakers for kin abroad.<sup>4</sup>

The 1989 survey included three questions concerning household membership: (1) Who are members of this household and are currently here? (2) Who are members of this household and are currently away? and (3) Is there anyone staying here now who is not a member of this household? The first question generated a list of 2,199 individuals, the second question 1,265, and the third question 20 individuals. Of the household members away, 208 were staying in other households on the island, but 1,057 (or nearly one-third of those people considered to be household members) were away from the island.<sup>5</sup> Nearly 70 per cent of the households surveyed listed at least one absentee household member; most of those were close relatives, such as children (59 per cent) or siblings (19 per cent) of the household head and his/her spouse. Many of these individuals provided periodic or regular support for their households through remittances and gifts of household goods, building materials and other costly items. We asked when absent household members departed and we were able to obtain approximate dates for 874 of the 1,057 leavers. Of these, 36 (4.1 per cent) had been away for 30 or more years, 130 (14.9 per cent) for 20–30 years, 217 for 10–20 years (24.8 per cent), 351 for 1–10 years (40.2 per cent), and 140 (16 per cent) for less than one year. Given the accelerating rate of out-migration during this period, it appears that the length of time people had been away did not have a significant effect on their membership in a household.

The overall impact of this extension of household members beyond the island's perimeter has been to shift the centre of gravity of social networks toward family members abroad and away from local sources such as neighbours, village-mates and more distant kin on the island. In the past, people on the island were much more dependent on one another for

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4 The question can be raised as to whether smaller household size is at least in part the product of a growing preference for nuclear family households resulting from experience abroad. We don't think that's the case. Rather, we think it is mostly the result of increased reliance on support from abroad, mostly in the form of remittances, which reduces reliance on household labour resources, making it more a matter of practicalities than ideology.

5 The vast majority of these were listed as living in Fiji (861), with Australia (52), New Zealand (22), other Pacific Islands (18), the United States (13), Europe (10) and Canada (7) accounting for most of the rest. Ten individuals were listed as sailing, and nine others as serving in the army in the Middle East at the time.

labour in such projects as building houses,<sup>6</sup> for sharing limited resources and for other kinds of economic support when needed. Now, for many households, the main source of economic security comes in the form of remittances and material goods gifted by kin abroad.

According to the 1989 study, just under half (49 per cent) of Rotuman households reported receiving remittances; the number of individuals listed as contributing financial resources to a given household ranged from none to seven. Reported amounts ranged from F\$10 to F\$4,000 at a time, with a median amount of F\$100. Cash was sent primarily for general support, that is, to be spent on food and other household needs. Other remittances came as monetary gifts for special occasions—Mother’s Day or Father’s Day, birthdays, Christmas, funerals—or periodic needs such as school fees. Larger amounts were sent (often in response to a request) for church fund-raisers or for house construction or improvement projects. Dependence on remittances and tangible resources has no doubt increased in subsequent years.

This increased reliance on family members abroad has resulted in a diminishing of the formerly strong ethos of sharing and caring that pervaded the island in the past and a greater emphasis on payment for labour and the commercialisation of exchange of food and other products (see Rensel 1994). We do not mean to imply that sharing and caring is disappearing from the local scene—people still are likely to be comparatively generous and helpful when their compatriots are in need, or when they wish to affirm relationships with other island residents—but less resource dependence on one another has freed those relationships of the necessity that interdependence promotes.

Rotumans abroad are expected to ‘keep their relationships warm’ (*mahmahan*) with those on the island if they want to assure their rights to land on Rotuma, which is a major concern for many, if not most, Rotumans away. Land rights on Rotuma are distributed bilineally, with multiple parties having rights in ancestral lands. Stewardship of land in which multiple parties have rights is left in the hands of someone on the island who is designated as *pure* (overseer); it is he, or she, who decides who can rightfully have access to the land under his or her control.

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6 See Rensel (1997) for an analysis of the social implications of the change from thatched houses, which were built with freely available materials by exchange labour, to houses that are made mostly of imported materials and paid labour.

Out-migrants who have maintained an active relationship with relatives who oversee family lands are much more likely to gain access to land for building a house and/or for planting crops. Out-migrants who fail to maintain active relationships (through visits, remittances, gifts etc.) are more likely to find their claims disputed.

On the other side of the equation, material goods flowing from Rotumans on the island to those in Fiji have also increased in volume over the intervening years. In large measure this is the result of the increased size of the Rotuman community in Fiji, which continues to value products from the island. These items include Rotuman handicrafts, especially fine white mats (vital for presentation on ceremonial occasions such as weddings and funerals); livestock such as pigs and goats; island produce such as taro, yams, coconuts and oranges; and prepared Rotuman delicacies, frequently sent by plane with a passenger. Any of these items may be sent to relatives for special occasions, to accompany a visiting family member or just as *te fakhanisi* (a gift), helping to express and maintain ties. Improvements in transportation between Rotuma and Fiji have facilitated the flow in both directions.

Although the circulation of resources throughout family networks is undoubtedly of major importance, it would be a mistake to overemphasise the role that it plays in reverse migration. Family networks are valued by Rotumans for much more than the material advantages they offer. We would argue that they are also valued in and of themselves as a source of identity and a sense of self-worth. One reason access to land is so important to Rotumans, as it is to most other Pacific Islanders, is because association with particular parcels of land is central to identity, and land rights are deeply embedded in the social networks of descendants from ancestors who held rights in those parcels. Likewise, ancestral figures play a major role in people's sense of self-worth, and being embedded in the family network of common descendants solidifies one's association with desirable ascendants. Indeed, we know of many instances in which individuals have sacrificed materially in order to maintain, strengthen or expand social ties, particularly within extended families, as our data on return migration will illustrate.

## A survey of return migrants

In August 2012, we were honoured guests at a Founder's Day celebration at Rotuma High School.<sup>7</sup> We were hosted by the principal, Perry Gabriel, and his wife, Siteri, with whom we stayed for two weeks. Principal Gabriel asked us to hold workshops for both teachers and students regarding how to conduct research, and we were more than glad to oblige. The main reason for the request was that doing a research project is now a graduation requirement, but neither the faculty nor the students have had much experience in this regard.

After we discussed potential research topics with Principal Perry and informed him of our special interest in return migrants, he suggested that we work with the advanced students in Forms 3, 4, 5 and 6 on the topic.<sup>8</sup> We had already constructed a questionnaire for interviewing returnees, and we adapted it for survey purposes. We held a pre-interview workshop with the students, going over the questionnaire in detail to explain its purpose and to answer any questions they might have. They were instructed to select an interviewee who had been away from the island for several years before returning. Several teachers volunteered to be interviewed if a student could not find someone suitable. The students ended up turning in a total of 90 usable protocols.

We must emphasise that this was an availability sample only, for which we do not claim statistical validity. The fact of the matter is that a significant portion of the adults on the island can be considered returnees. Almost all of the teachers, only a few of whom were interviewed, had been away for a number of years for tertiary education. Likewise, virtually all other government employees—medical personnel, agricultural officers, technicians, etc.—had spent years abroad. Most of these personnel had been posted to Rotuma, some by choice, some not. In addition, as our earlier survey data indicate, a good many other adults had spent

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7 For information about the 2012 event (in honour of Wilson Inia, the school's founder), see the Rotuma High School section of the Rotuma website: [www.rotuma.net/rhs/](http://www.rotuma.net/rhs/).

8 Each form at the high school was divided into an advanced group and a normal group. We had the normal group do a separate project on household economies. There were 105 students in the advanced group, of whom 94 turned in a protocol. One of these contained too little information to be useful, and in three instances two students interviewed the same returnee, leaving 90 usable protocols.

significant time abroad. However, we do think the results of the survey by the high school students provide a valuable insight into many, if not most, returnees' experiences.

Of the 90 usable protocols, 60 were from male interviewees, 30 from females. Ages ranged from 27 to 83, with the majority (55.6 per cent) in the 30–49 bracket, 28.9 per cent in the 50–69 bracket, and 20 per cent in the 60 or over bracket. Only three interviewees were under the age of 30. Responses came from all seven districts on the island, with Itu'ti'u, the largest district, contributing 36.7 per cent; Malhaha and Juju 12.2 per cent each; Noa'tau 11.1 per cent; Oinafa 10 per cent; and the two smallest districts, Pepjei and Itu'muta, contributing 6.7 per cent and 5.6 per cent respectively (see Tables 1 and 2 and Figure 2).

Table 1: Age and gender of interviewees

	10–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–58	60+	Total
Males	1	3	11	20	15	10	60
Females	0	0	11	8	3	8	30
Total	1	3	22	28	18	18	90

Table 2: Location of interviewees by district

Itu'ti'u	Malhaha	Juju	Noa'tau	Oinafa	Pepjei	Itu'muta
33	11	11	10	9	6	5

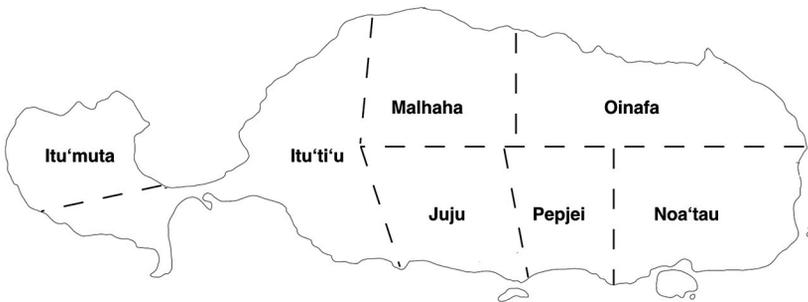


Figure 2: Districts of Rotuma

Source: Drawing by A. Howard.

## Results

The results of the survey reported below are divided into four sections: (1) perceptions of Rotuma; (2) the migration experience abroad; (3) getting resettled following return; and (4) readaptation to life on the island.

### Perceptions of Rotuma

Perceptions of Rotuma are important for several reasons—as a symbolic focus for cultural identity among diasporic Rotumans, as a stimulus for visits to the island and as an inducement to returning to the island to live after spending years abroad. Generally speaking, the image of Rotuma bandied about by diasporic Rotumans is idealised to a considerable degree. Rapturous postings on social media are common, with the term ‘paradise’ used frequently. A posting on the Rotuma Website Forum by Henry Enasio in 2004, then living in Australia, poetically illustrates this mindset:

Thoughts about Rotuma

Rotuma Hanua Aier ‘Ontou [Rotuma, my true land]

As I reflect and reminisce about those vivid moments growing up in Rotuma, it reminds me of the good old days, of the kinship and life of peace and tranquility I have sorely missed.

From a distance I see the holistic beauty of Rotuma:

an island in the sun, given to me by my father’s hands  
with its emerald green and lush rain forest, cupped in leafy hands  
its white sandy beaches, soft as maidens hands  
with its sky blue crystal waters, bound by reefy hands  
abundant in fish, like an exotic dancer’s twinkling hands  
that calls to me by the most seductive sunset I have ever seen  
from Ahau through Maka Bay to Uea.

From a distance I feel the soothing effect of Rotuma:

that calls me all the days of my life  
from Lagi te Maurea with its cool and enchanting effect  
to the tranquility that captivates my senses  
with the security that I can sleep at night with my doors and windows open  
with no worries of being robbed or mugged,

From a distance I smell the fragrance of Rotuma:

the Tieri and Ragkari that graces the maidens heads  
to the Sea and Kori that also anoints their heads  
the fragrances that permeate, I have longed for in my head

From a distance I hear the call of Rotuma:

carried to me by the wind of my imagination  
with laughter of women and joy of children  
free of worries  
that begs me home

With these in mind, I know for certain the meaning of Rotuma Hanua Aier 'Ontou. For wherever I go, I will always long for and miss Rotuma all the days of my life.

It is there that I promise that I will one day return to retire and live for the rest of my life. To rekindle the kinship and repay Rotuma for what I owe it, and to be buried with the rest of my loved ones.<sup>9</sup>

Many of these themes are reflected in the childhood memories of the returnees in the survey, who were asked, 'What do you remember most about Rotuma in the time before you left?'

Twenty-one respondents (23.3 per cent) mentioned the physical environment, either as a distinctive memory or in comparison with the state of the environment today. Examples of the former were beautiful sandy beaches, sea breezes, moonlight and lush greenery. Examples of the latter were that the island was unspoiled or there was less rubbish; there were not many cars and bikes; the roads were white and sandy and shady with a lot of huge trees, but now there are few; fishing was easy because fish were large and plentiful, but now it's harder to fish because there are fewer; there were mostly thatched houses, but now there are more cement and concrete structures.

Twenty respondents (22.2 per cent) made general reference to aspects of the lifestyle they remembered, often in very positive terms, such as how peaceful and carefree life was then; how life was simple but good; that people felt safe and secure; that Rotuma seemed like a paradise. Some more specific responses in this category referred to activities such as drinking orange wine, going fishing with village women, and weaving mats in the community hall with village women; the fact that men then did not drink so much 'grog' (kava); or how life on the island contrasted with that abroad, where road accidents or robberies were frequent and people have to work for money to support themselves.

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9 Ahau, Maka Bay and Uea are Rotuman place-names; *lagi te maurea* refers to a cool breeze; *tieri*, *ragkari*, *sea* and *kori* are names of flowers. This topic of the Rotuma Forum is posted at [www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum27.html](http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum27.html).

Sixteen respondents (17.8 per cent) referred to peoples' attitudes, always in positive terms, and often with the implication that nowadays they are no longer as idyllic. Examples: people were very friendly and hardworking; people were kind and cared for one another, sharing food with neighbours; kinship was very important; help was given freely; people were peace-loving and there was a strong feeling of togetherness.

Fifteen people (16.7 per cent) referred to categories of people or other social units from the earlier time, including grandparents and other elderly people, who were valued for their wisdom (and who have since died), parents, other relatives, friends and schoolmates, and lots of children in the villages.

Twelve interviewees (13.3 per cent) focused on how the island was less modernised before, with no electricity in the villages, less government support and development, fewer vehicles and the boat only came every three or four months.

Nine respondents (10 per cent) made reference to traditional customs; for example, customary values were more observed and respected, children still had respect for customs and traditions and were well behaved, people were obedient to chiefs and traditional ceremonies were valued highly.

Eight individuals (8.9 per cent) mentioned economic concerns, noting that prices for food and other goods were quite cheap compared to now; most people earned a living from copra and did not have to buy food; and the Rotuma Cooperative Association was the main business on Rotuma.

Seven respondents (7.8 per cent) mentioned food as a significant component in their memories, recalling that eating was simple and very cheap. People relied less on the shops for processed food and instead consumed 'natural' (homegrown) Rotuman food, which was available in abundance, including lots of *dalo* (Fijian for taro = Rotuman '*a'ana*) and fresh fish.

Overall, the majority of these responses reflect a very positive remembrance of the island and its culture during the period before people emigrated, with a degree of nostalgia and a lamenting of how things have changed. This suggests that such memories played a role in motivating emigrants to return later in life.

Answers to a question concerning the biggest changes they'd noticed upon their return to the island were nearly evenly divided by those focusing on physical (including environmental) changes (47 responses, 52.2 per cent) and those focusing on cultural and lifestyle changes (44 responses, 48.9 per cent). The main physical changes referred to included various aspects of development (electrification, water supply, mobile phones and more vehicles—20 responses, 22.2 per cent). Housing changes (from traditional thatch to cement structures) were mentioned by 13 persons (14.4 per cent), while five respondents (5.6 per cent) mentioned pollution or erosion.

Answers concerning cultural and lifestyle changes were more varied. Dietary changes were mentioned by eight respondents (8.9 per cent); seven (7.8 per cent) referred to an improvement in the standard of living; six (6.7 per cent) cited a loss of culture and/or a lack of respect for chiefs and elders; six (6.7 per cent) spoke to an increase in individualism; five (5.6 per cent) observed a more materialistic outlook and concern for money; four (4.4 per cent) mentioned changes in dress codes; and two (2.2 per cent) referred to an increase in kava consumption. Twelve persons acknowledged changes in lifestyle without noting specifics. An additional five (5.6 per cent) individuals reported seeing no significant changes since their return, even though two of them had been away for 10 or more years. (As someone who spent a year on the island in 1960 and did not return till 1987, and last visited in 2012, Alan has seen all of the changes referred to above, but continuities are equally apparent. Thus the emphasis given by each respondent can be seen as a personally selective perception.)

These responses reflect an ambivalence concerning the changes taking place, with some returnees emphasising the positive aspects of developments since their childhood, while others portrayed the changes in more negative terms. As we shall see from their responses to other questions, discussed below, perceived changes have had little effect on the satisfaction that returnees express concerning their current life circumstances.

### The migration experience

Rotuma is an isolated island that, until 2008, was closed as a port of entry, requiring all traffic to and from the island to go through Fiji. With no significant industries other than copra production, employment has been extremely limited. In the 1989 survey, 148 persons on the island reported being gainfully employed. Of those, 68 worked for either the Rotuma Cooperative Association or the Raho Cooperative, mostly in low-paying

jobs. Within a few years both cooperatives failed and the jobs were eliminated. That left the schools (34 positions), the government station (22 positions) and the hospital (13 positions) as the main employers on the island. Almost all of these positions were filled by personnel from abroad, leaving few employment opportunities for people who had not been abroad. Over the years, copra production has accounted for the lion's share of income for local labour, and, as many Islanders have related to us, cutting copra is hard work that is poorly compensated.

Likewise, educational opportunities on the island have been limited. The high school was not established until 1958, with Form 4 as the highest grade. It wasn't until many years later that Forms 5 and 6 were added, and Form 7 was just initiated in 2013. That means that students used to have to go abroad to complete their secondary education and become eligible for higher education. Since Rotumans generally place a high value on education, the motivation to send children to Fiji and beyond for further education has been very strong.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the overwhelming reasons given for leaving Rotuma were education (53 responses, 58.9 per cent) and employment opportunities (24 responses, 26.7 per cent), with nine individuals (10 per cent) mentioning both. In a few cases it was the respondent's parent who moved to Fiji to take a job. Among the other responses were that the family migrated to Fiji, a divorce or family problems, a birth or death, for medical attention or for a better life.

The great majority of respondents (79, 87.8 per cent) had lived in Fiji when abroad, and only six of them (6.7 per cent) mentioned other countries of residence (mainly Australia and New Zealand). Of those who reported living in Fiji, 53 of them (58.9 per cent) lived in Suva; most of the rest stayed in other urban centres like Lautoka, Nadi or Levuka. While it is true that the great majority of off-island Rotumans are in Fiji, it is also true that substantial numbers of emigrants now live in Australia, New Zealand, England, Canada and the United States. But among returnees, those coming back from Fiji are clearly overrepresented. We suggest that two variables may account for this: (1) it is easier for people in Fiji to travel back and forth to Rotuma, and therefore to maintain close ties with family members and close relatives there, and (2) the great majority of Rotumans in other countries have achieved a standard of living and lifestyle that they are reluctant to give up. No matter how much money

people have, limitations in the availability of goods, services, recreational facilities, etc. on Rotuma may be a serious deterrent to returning for those who have adapted well to living in first-world countries.

The importance of kinship networks for the migration experience shows up in response to a question regarding with whom one lived while abroad. The most frequent answer to this question was aunts and/or uncles (35, 38.9 per cent), with brothers and/or sisters (20, 22.2 per cent) next. Fifteen (16.7 per cent) had moved abroad with their parents, and in four cases (4.4 per cent) the returnees had established households abroad with spouse and children. Six interviewees (6.7 per cent) simply stated that they stayed with 'relatives'. Grandmother, cousins and daughter were named once each as hosts. Only two respondents said they went directly to boarding schools.

Sixty-three of the 90 respondents (70 per cent) reported schooling abroad, almost all of it in Fiji. Of those, 37 (41.1 per cent) reported attending secondary schools, and 24 (26.7 per cent) had received some form of tertiary education beyond high school. Two persons attended a maritime academy. This suggests that the motivation to leave Rotuma for additional education was fulfilled in the great majority of cases.

Rotumans, in general, are overrepresented in the higher occupational categories in Fiji, and this showed up in the returnees' responses to a question regarding employment abroad. Seventeen (18.9 per cent) had been skilled workers (carpenters, plumbers, electricians, welders, mechanics, foremen, gold miners, etc.); 10 (11.1 per cent) had been teachers (five were currently teaching in Rotuma, and the other five were retired); 10 (11.1 per cent) had been white-collar workers (receptionists, cashiers, office clerks, bank officers, etc.). Of the remainder, most had been in positions of responsibility as secretaries, police officers, in the Fiji military, etc. Only seven of the interviewees (7.8 per cent) reported working at positions requiring lower skill levels (labourers, waitresses, drivers, etc.), and five others (5.6 per cent) had been sailors.

Responses to a question regarding how long interviewees had been away before returning to Rotuma ranged from six months to 56 years, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Years abroad before returning to Rotuma

Less than 10	10–19	20–29	30–39	40+
26 (28.9%)	29 (32.2%)	17 (18.9%)	9 (10%)	7 (7.8%)

\* Two questionnaires did not include an answer to this question.

### Resettlement following return

The predominant reported reason for returning to Rotuma was to look after parents, grandparents or other close kin (32 instances, 35.6 per cent), followed by other family considerations (for example, to look after land, build a family home, help run a family business—19 instances, 21.1 per cent); lifestyle considerations (for example, peace and tranquillity, cheaper to live, a good place for retirement, to be with own people—18 instances, 20 per cent); employment transfer (five instances, 5.6 per cent); to be of service (five instances, 5.6 per cent); and to learn the language and/or culture (three instances, 3.3 per cent). Only four persons (4.4 per cent) reported returning to Rotuma because of push factors abroad (for example, lack of employment, visa expired). Five responses (5.6 per cent) were idiosyncratic or unintelligible. These results demonstrate quite clearly the overwhelming significance of kinship ties and obligations in motivating return mobility.

By subtracting reported age when returning from reported current age we were able to calculate how long interviewees had been away, resulting in Table 4.

Table 4: How long since returning (in years)

Years ago	No. of respondents
0–4	33 (36.7%)
5–9	15 (16.7%)
10–14	14 (15.6%)
15–19	6 (6.7%)
20–24	6 (6.7%)
25–29	6 (6.7%)
30+	10 (11.1%)

Thus slightly more than half of the respondents (53.4 per cent) reported returning to the island within the past decade.

When asked, 'How did you decide where to settle [following your return to Rotuma]?' the great majority of those providing answers (51 of 66 respondents, 77.3 per cent) replied that they went to a home occupied by close kin or to a home or plot of land to which their family had rights. The remaining 15 respondents (22.7 per cent) occupied government, school or mission quarters; asked relatives where they should stay; or stated that they chose a place that was attractive because of its location. Twenty-four of the interviewees did not answer the question.

Altogether, 13 individuals (14.4 per cent) reported problems with kin or neighbours following their return to Rotuma. Seven of them (7.8 per cent) reported having problems with relatives following their return. In three instances (3.3 per cent) land rights were at issue; in four instances (4.4 per cent) some form of family problems were involved: 'they would like to be my boss', 'staying with my uncle (not real father); they treat me different from their children', 'financial difficulties', or simply 'family problems'. Six interviewees (6.7 per cent) reported having problems with their neighbours: gossiping, jealousy and in one instance, a land dispute.

Our sense is that land disputes are more frequent than reflected in the questionnaire data. In addition to the likelihood that people on Rotuma are reluctant to talk about disputes, we know of several instances of people who intended to return to the island but were put off by disputes over land claims, as well as people who had returned and as a result of such disputes decided to leave again. Mute testimony to such circumstances can be seen in the considerable number of partially built and abandoned homes.

### Readaptation to life on the island

Economic life on Rotuma for most families involves both access to plantation land and money. In the past, the main source of money was from copra, but that has been superseded in recent years by remittances, or in some instances by pensions or the sale of agricultural produce. In order to determine the sources that returnees relied on for their livelihood, we included questions about food production and sources of income.

The majority of the interviewees (66, or 73.3 per cent) reported maintaining a garden or plantation on which they grew food crops for their household. Almost all of them (59, or 65.6 per cent) planted the basic root crops of taro, yams, sweet potatoes and/or cassava. Other crops included tree crops such as bananas, papaya, breadfruit, oranges (28 respondents, or 31.1 per cent); pineapples and/or watermelons

(nine respondents, or 10 per cent); and sugarcane (nine respondents, or 10 per cent). Ten persons (11.1 per cent) planted kava, and eight of these (8.9 per cent) reported selling it for income. It is interesting to note how many returnees who planted non-starchy vegetables such as cabbage, eggplant, beans and cucumbers (43, or 47.8 per cent). This is a marked change from past patterns when almost none of these foods were regularly cultivated. It suggests that having lived overseas and been exposed to more varied, 'healthy' diets, many returnees are in the process of altering traditional dietary patterns.

With regard to income, 25 individuals (27.8 per cent) reported getting a 'regular income from abroad such as a pension'. If so, they were asked if it was enough to care for all their needs; all but four persons responded that it was. Other sources of income were salaries from government jobs, including teaching (14, 15.6 per cent); remittances from relatives abroad (11, 12.2 per cent); cutting and selling copra (11, 12.2 per cent); selling produce and/or fish on the island (eight, 8.9 per cent); and other sources such as savings accounts, running a shop, building houses (five, 5.6 per cent). Twenty-four interviewees (26.7 per cent) reported no regular source of income at all. We assume that most of these individuals were in a dependent relationship with others who provided them with money when needed.

One important measure of the reintegration of returnees into the social life of the island is the degree to which they participate in community activities. The data we collected lend strong support for the success of returnees in this regard. Seventy-five of the 90 respondents (83.3 per cent) reported participating in community activities at various levels: village (27, or 30 per cent); district (19, or 21.1 per cent); church (34, or 37.8 per cent); school (seven, or 7.8 per cent); and voluntary associations such as women's clubs (seven, or 7.8 per cent). Participation in fundraising activities was mentioned by 14 respondents (15.6 per cent). Twelve of the interviewees (13.3 per cent) were in positions of responsibility or leadership such as district representative to the Rotuma Island Council or village headman. When asked, 'Are you able to use skills that you learned abroad here in Rotuma?' 67 persons interviewed (74.4 per cent) answered yes. The ways they described using what they had learned varied considerably but were heavily weighted toward teaching relevant skills, advising and counselling.

Of prime importance in assessing the successfulness of returnees' reintegration are their attitudes toward life on the island. We began by asking about the biggest changes they noticed since they left, and followed this up by asking them to assess the best and worst thing about living in Rotuma, whether they felt a need to leave Rotuma from time to time, whether they had any regrets about returning, and how they compared themselves with their compatriots who had not lived abroad. Finally, we asked them to assess their overall satisfaction with their experience since returning to Rotuma.

Concerning the biggest changes they'd noticed upon their return to the island, answers were nearly evenly divided by those focusing on physical (including environmental) changes (47, 52.2 per cent) and those focusing on cultural and lifestyle changes (44, 48.9 per cent). The main physical changes referred to included various aspects of development, such as electrification, water supply, mobile phones and more vehicles (20 responses, 22.2 per cent). Housing changes (from traditional thatch to cement structures) were mentioned by 13 persons (14.4 per cent), while five respondents (5.6 per cent) mentioned pollution or erosion.

Answers concerning cultural and lifestyle changes were more varied. Dietary changes were mentioned by eight respondents (8.9 per cent); seven (7.8 per cent) referred to an improvement in standard of living; six (6.7 per cent) cited a loss of culture and/or a lack of respect for chiefs and elders; six (6.7 per cent) spoke to an increase in individualism; five (5.6 per cent) observed a more materialistic outlook and concern for money; four (4.4 per cent) mentioned changes in dress codes; and two (2.2 per cent) referred to an increase in kava consumption. Twelve persons (13.3 per cent) acknowledged changes in lifestyle without noting specifics. An additional five individuals (5.6 per cent) reported seeing no significant changes since their return, even though two of them (2.2 per cent) had been away for 10 or more years.

These responses suggest that many returnees were not uncritical about the changes they observed, in part, perhaps, because they were comparing them to a somewhat idealised conception of earlier times. Criticisms were more vividly described when the interviewees were asked what they considered the worst thing about living in Rotuma.

At the time of the survey, a supply ship from Fiji had not come to Rotuma for about six weeks, resulting in a severe shortage of fuel, groceries and other valued commodities. The shortage led to a rationing of tap water (three hours a day), electricity (early morning and evenings), and transportation. This has been a recurring problem on Rotuma for many years, so it is no wonder that irregular transportation and resultant shortages headed the list of complaints, with 42 interviewees (46.7 per cent) mentioning it. This was followed by complaints about economic conditions (not enough jobs, expensiveness of imported goods, hard work to survive—13 responses, 14.4 per cent); environmental problems (flies and mosquitoes, hot weather, pollution—13 responses, 14.4 per cent); social problems (gossip, conflict over land, disrespect for authority—12 responses, 13.3 per cent); and the lackadaisical attitude of people on the island (six responses, 6.7 per cent).

However, when asked about the best things about living on Rotuma, the idyllic image re-emerged. We divided responses into five categories: (1) an emphasis on peacefulness, safety, the simple stress-free life (45 responses, 50 per cent); (2) the economic advantages of living in Rotuma, including free rent, abundant food resources, low cost of living (45 responses, 50 per cent); (3) a clean, unpolluted, and beautiful environment (19 responses, 21.1 per cent); (4) social benefits such as being with kin, harmonious relations, friendly people (15 responses, 16.7 per cent); and (5) the freedom to be your own boss, to move about freely, to work or not (12 responses, 13.3 per cent). Most people gave more than one response, hence the high overall count.

The discrepancy between the somewhat critical views expressed above and the rather idyllic views expressed in response to the latter question is to a large extent inherent in the nature of the questions asked, but it also is the product of the comparisons being made. In the first instance, criticisms are being reflected against a vision of a glorified past; in the second instance, praise emerges when returnees compare the advantages of contemporary life on Rotuma with their view of life abroad.

When asked if they felt a need to leave Rotuma from time to time, 48 of the respondents (53.3 per cent) said no. Of those who said yes, 25 (27.8 per cent) mentioned visiting family (mostly children and grandchildren); nine (10 per cent) wanted to pursue opportunities for employment or education; and six (6.7 per cent) offered idiosyncratic responses or no specifics.

Only three interviewees (3.3 per cent) expressed any regrets about returning to Rotuma. One said he missed ‘the fast track life’; another rued the setback to his studies; and the third person complained that people on the island ‘talk too much’. Eighty-five (94.4 per cent) said they had no regrets and two (2.2 per cent) gave no response.

In order to gain a sense of how returnees saw themselves in comparison with age-mates who had remained in Rotuma, we asked them, ‘In what ways do you think your life as a returnee is different from other people your age who have lived most of their adult lives on Rotuma?’ Answers were varied but fell into six basic categories: (1) an emphasis on the returnee’s enhanced skills and experience (32 responses, 35.6 per cent); (2) an emphasis on the returnee’s superior financial circumstances (eight responses, 8.9 per cent); (3) an emphasis on the returnee’s superior health and/or younger appearance (five responses, 5.6 per cent); (4) general comments about differences in outlook, attitude, behaviour (24 responses, 26.7 per cent); (5) an emphasis on the superior skills of non-returnees for adapting to the local environment (nine responses, 10 per cent); and (6) no or negligible difference (seven responses, 7.8 per cent).

Finally, we asked interviewees to rate their experience since returning to Rotuma on a four-point scale: very satisfying, somewhat satisfying, not very satisfying, and not satisfying at all. The results are as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Degree of satisfaction with return experience

very satisfying	somewhat satisfying	not very satisfying	not at all satisfying
61 (67.8%)	19 (21.1%)	7 (7.8%)	2 (2.2%)

The fact that nearly 90 per cent of the respondents rated their experience positively is testimony to the relative ease of reintegration of returnees to Rotuma. Neither gender nor length of time since return affected satisfaction significantly, and surprisingly, neither involvement in disputes nor problems with relatives or neighbours led to harsher assessments. In fact, of the 13 individuals who acknowledged such involvement, eight answered very satisfying, three somewhat satisfying, one not very satisfying, and one not at all satisfying, suggesting that there were sufficient advantages to offset such distressing encounters for most individuals.

## Reflections on the data

The data we have presented are suggestive of several factors that encourage emigrants to return and to successfully reintegrate into Rotuman society. To begin with, it is apparent that networks of kinship ties that transcend the island's boundaries facilitate both movement away and return. This has resulted in a situation in which the frequently used definition of migration and reverse migration—that migrants go with the intent to remain—is problematic for many, if not most, of the Rotumans who travel or return from abroad. Most appear to keep their options open, with ties to kin providing opportunities for visiting and resettlement in multiple venues.

The circumstances of Rotuman mobility differ from most of the cases discussed in the migration literature insofar as the primary destination for emigration is Fiji, which, though socially and culturally distinct, is nevertheless within country. Only a small proportion of those who emigrate to Fiji go on to migrate transnationally. Also, the population of Rotuma has declined over the past quarter century. Thus, while slightly fewer than 2,000 Rotumans are now on their home island, over 8,000 reside in Fiji, and an estimated 2,000–3,000 are out of the country. It is not surprising, therefore, that only six of the 90 respondents in the student survey had lived outside of Fiji (New Zealand and Australia). This suggests that people are far more likely to return from Fiji than from transnational locations. We think there may be two main reasons to account for this discrepancy. First, transportation and communication are easier and less expensive between Rotuma and Fiji than between Rotuma and foreign countries. This facilitates more frequent contact via visits back and forth as well as communication via telephone calls, making it easier to keep relationships 'warm', and thus being able to count on the support of relatives when returning. Second, Rotumans who have emigrated from Fiji have, on the whole, been extraordinarily successful. The vast majority, many of whom have married someone who is native to their new home, enjoy a high standard of living by any measure. And although a good many of them cherish their Rotuman identity and are motivated to visit Rotuma on occasion, they would be giving up too much to move back to Rotuma. The same is less true of Rotumans in Fiji, where the discrepancies in lifestyle and living standards are less dramatic.

Another factor leading to reverse migration is the overwhelmingly positive image of Rotuma in the eyes of Rotumans everywhere. Not only is the beauty and bounty of the island idealised, but the great success of Rotumans overseas has lent strength to Rotuman identity, the core of which focuses on imagery of the island itself. Childhood memories elicited by the questionnaire were overwhelmingly positive, and the comments on the best things about living in Rotuma greatly outnumbered those about the worst things.

We attribute the overall success of returnees' reintegration in large measure to something we have observed consistently over the years: Rotumans—even those who were born and raised elsewhere—have demonstrated a remarkable social sensitivity and ability to adjust their behaviour to conform with cultural expectations. It is also our impression, both from our ethnographic experiences and the survey data, that communities on the island are receptive to returnees and appreciate their contributions.<sup>10</sup> The only exceptions we are aware of involve a small number of returnees who may be seen as displaying an air of superiority or arrogance.

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<sup>10</sup> Although the survey results may well have been biased by the fact that the interviewees were high school students, leading interviewees to be reluctant to mention difficulties they experienced after returning to Rotuma, which they might have elaborated on to an adult during an in-depth interview, they are entirely consistent with our observations and interview materials compiled over a combined 83 years of research among Rotumans. We therefore are inclined to accept them at face value.

Adi Tuicakau Lilicama, Aqela Lilicama, Berutida Lorosio, Faith Marieta Lorosio, Pherlaine Luenna, Ashley Managreve, Opteia Manava, Silomeci Marama, Theresa Mateo, Esther Mausio, Samuela Marshon Mekatoa, Hanisemao Morsio, Danielle Mose, Leysina Muaror, Caritas Nafaere, Thomas Nafaere, Monalisa Nakaora, Waqa Naitini, Firomena Nawai, Maria Olson, Natalie Onisimo, Daphne Ostonu, Olovia Paka, Peter Paka, Vincent Panata, Samantha Petero, Kevin Pau‘u, Emmanuel Pene, Lois Penjueli, Philorina Raturaobe, Antonio Ravai, Flavia Ravai, Rigamoto Isimeli Ravai, Emolina Rigamoto, Mika‘yla Savea, Rahine Semesi, Dennis Serenino, Stephen Solvalu, Joshua Sopapelu, Kristel Suliana, Shane Tanumafili, Faretenoa Taukave, Makereta Tausea, Louisa Tifere, Naomi Veisoi Tikomailepanoni, Bernadene Tomoniko, Crezelda Tonumafili, Sam Jioje Tuvalu, Chris Ufamarata, Tipo Vaurasi, Kimberly Vernass, Aaron Viliame, Poirā Viliame, Ana Vitau, Jacqueln Vitori, Domonique Vollmer, Nathan Vollmer, and Cameron Whippy.

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