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La restitution du patrimoine
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Web Sites as Vehicles for Repatriation

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Let me begin by providing some background to my involvement with the island of Rotuma, which has been the focus of a Web site I created in 1996. I first went to Rotuma for doctoral research in cultural anthropology in December 1959, and spent a year on the island. I spent an additional year doing research among Rotumans in Fiji, with which Rotuma has been politically affiliated since 1881, when the chiefs ceded the island to Great Britain. I must admit that I was enchanted with the island, the culture, and its people; it was an extremely positive experience. Because of the island's remoteness and transportation problems (boats came only once every three months or so), I did not return until 1987, when I had a sabbatical leave. In 1981 an airstrip was completed, making the island more accessible, although flight schedules were, like boat schedules, rather erratic and unpredictable.

Somewhat to my surprise, and despite many rather significant changes over the previous 27 years, I found the island as enchanting as ever, and was determined to return on a regular basis. My wife, Jan Rensel, had recently received an M.A. in anthropology at the University of Hawai'i and decided to do her doctoral research there, so we had a good excuse to go back. We have consequently returned on multiple occasions ranging from six months to a week or so. In addition, we have spent a good deal of time visiting migrant Rotuman communities in Fiji, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, Canada, and the United States. As with many other Pacific populations, Rotumans have spread around the world during the past half-century. In 1956 the majority of Rotumans in Fiji (2,993 or 68 %) were living on the island,

while slightly less than a third (1,429 or 32 %) were elsewhere in Fiji. By 1996 only 27 % of Rotumans in Fiji were residing on Rotuma and the percentage continues to drop. Perhaps as significant, there has been a steady flow of Rotumans abroad, so that now we estimate from two to three thousand Rotumans or part-Rotumans (there has been a high incidence of intermarriage) live away from Fiji.

My re-engagement with Rotumans stimulated a desire to find a way to contribute to the perpetuation of Rotuman culture (which I greatly admire) and a sense of community in their diaspora. It was with this in mind that I began a Rotuma-oriented list serve in 1994, with the objective of sharing news and announcements with Rotumans who had access to e-mail at the time. This project was quite limiting, and was not a suitable vehicle for achieving a related goal, that of making accessible historical materials that were buried in professional publications, obscure books, and scattered archives. As I became familiar with the Internet, I decided a Web site would be a far more suitable vehicle for perpetuating a sense of community. In November 1996, I launched the Rotuma Web site.

Web site as archive

The Web site was begun modestly, and included general information about Rotuma (history, language, population, culture, geography) along with a selection of photographs, mostly from our recent visits. I added sections as they occurred to me or were suggested by visitors (maps, a news page, an interactive Rotuman-English wordlist, a register that allowed people to locate one another, sections for Rotuman humour and food recipes, etc.).

My retirement from teaching in 1999 afforded me more time to devote to the Web site, which has continued to expand and now hosts over 7,000 files amounting to over a gigabyte of disk space. I have digitized historical materials to upload to the Web site, beginning with the most important early documents (pre-twentieth century), and have continued to add other relevant sources as they become available to me. These include Gordon Macgregor's 1932 field notes, which had been deposited at Bishop Museum in Honolulu.

With the museum's permission, I posted Macgregor's notes, which were well organized by topic, but had never been incorporated into a publication. The notes were particularly appropriate for repatriation because rather than "inscriptions", they were essentially "transcriptions", that is, accounts given by Rotumans about their customs and beliefs, with a minimum of interpretation or attention to what James Clifford labelled "passing events". According to Clifford (1983: 135-142), transcribing is a process of recording already formulated, fixed discourse or lore. A ritual, for example, when its normal course is recounted by a knowledgeable authority, is a transcription; an ethnographer's musings about an event that she has witnessed is not.

Macgregor's field notes in fact are polyphonic insofar as he identified a number of different consultants, each of whom is a source of specified items of information. This presented me with another dilemma. Should I identify Macgregor's informants on the Web site, or should I follow the anthropological custom of keeping such people anonymous? The issue was complicated somewhat by the fact that Macgregor not only identified consultants by name, but also had in his files an assessment of each one, including, in some instances, his opinion of their veracity. In addition, I was able to identify most of his consultants in my demographic files, making it possible to place them genealogically as well as spatially (i.e., which district they were from). My decision to include the names of Macgregor's informants, along with his assessments and my registry information, was based on three considerations. One was that they were all now deceased and therefore beyond embarrassment. It is possible, of course, that some of their descendants might be teased for what they are reported to have said, but teasing is endemic to Rotuman society and, in my opinion, essentially harmless. Besides, the material is generally not of an embarrassing nature. A second consideration was that the information on informants allows knowledgeable Rotumans to place them not only in time and space, but genealogically as well, and since such contextualization of information is central to Rotuman epistemology it seemed appropriate to include it. Finally, there is the issue of credit. In fact the information contained in the notes "belonged to" Macgregor's informants and I believe they should be given proper recognition. On the Web site, a viewer may click on an informant's name (attached to each entry) and find a brief biographical note composed of Macgregor's comments and my registry data.

What results is a rather postmodern (decentred, heteroglossic) perspective on Rotuman “traditional” culture. It is rather ironic that notes that were originally oriented toward producing a standard, homogenized monograph in the 1930s Bishop Museum series should turn out this way. On virtually every topic multiple voices are in evidence, providing divergent, sometimes contradictory information.

To make some of the notes intelligible I had to do some editing, or add marginal notes. I tried to keep editing to a minimum, a goal made easier by the fact that Macgregor had typed most of the notes from his original handwritten versions (which were also included in the Bishop Museum Archives). Still, some of the notes were cryptic and required interpretation or, more frequently, grammatical correction. This means that my interpretations of the notes are part of the final mix.

Another project was to digitize all of my and Jan's articles about Rotuma and to make them available on the Web site. To date we have uploaded 37 items, with publication dates ranging from 1961 to 2006. Recent publications by other authors on relevant topics have also been uploaded (with the authors' permission), or in some cases links have been made to other Web sites where relevant publications may be viewed or downloaded.

In addition to written materials, we have over the years collected, from archives and individuals, historical photographs dating back to the latter part of the nineteenth century, which I have now uploaded. Photographs are a particular cynosure among Rotumans; trying to identify individuals, and especially ancestors, is of particular interest. I also added a photographic essay using a selection of pictures from my 1959-1961 field work.

Interaction and allowance for participation

Soon after creating the Web site I added a message board that allowed visitors to post messages and engage in conversations with one another. At the beginning I was charmed by the distinctively Rotuman banter and communication styles, but in time the board came to be dominated by a few anonymous individuals who engaged in nasty personal debates filled with profanity and inappropriate language. At the urging of several of my Rotuman friends, I removed the message board in favour of a bulletin board that required people to identify themselves and to send

their messages to me for posting. Regrettably there was a loss of spontaneity, but a welcome increase in civility. It also helped to foster a better sense of community insofar as contributors were identifiable as real people who had to take responsibility for their postings instead of anonymous individuals who may or may not have been Rotuman. I mention this point because it highlights the degree to which I have come to exercise personal control over the Web site.

Still, I wanted to provide Rotumans with opportunities to express their views on topics of interest to them, so I introduced the Rotuman Forum, a section of the Web site in which people could propose and address particular issues and comment on one another's postings. To date, 43 topics have been brought up, ranging from issues of Rotuman identity, whether or not Rotuma should be independent of Fiji, to the question of whether there should be a morgue on the island. The discussions convey quite well, in my view, the range of opinions that prevail within the now global Rotuman community.

Jan and I have also taken steps to encourage Rotumans to make literary contributions to the Web site. One project was to post the writings of Elizabeth Inia, a sage Rotuman elder, whom we worked with on three separate projects: a book of Rotuman sayings, a book detailing Rotuman ceremonies, and a Rotuman-English wordlist. The sayings (473 of them) have been posted at the rate of one per week ; the ceremonies book is on the Web site in its entirety ; and the wordlist is on the Web site in an interactive form, allowing visitors to translate Rotuman words to English and vice versa.

Another project we started was a literary competition with cash prizes that we established for the best three submissions in each of seven categories: Rotuman and English poems for high school students, for primary school students, and for adults, and an open competition for short stories. We held the competition for two successive years (2004-2005) but terminated it for lack of sufficient participation and logistical problems. The winning submissions have been posted on the Web site in a literature section. Although the competition is no longer being held, several Rotuman poets continue to submit items for posting.

I also established a section of the Web site for the exclusive use of Rotuma youths. In this section youths are encouraged to send in accounts of their experiences (visits to Rotuma or foreign lands, special projects, etc.), poems, short stories, or other creative products suitable for a Web site.

Role of web site manager

It may be clear by this point that I take quite an active role in managing the Rotuma Web site. For example, I routinely search the Internet for items likely to be of interest to Rotumans (Google keyword alerts have been a great help in this regard). I screen items for their appropriateness, and edit submissions for grammar, spelling, and clarity, so that most of the material on the Web site from Rotumans (and others) has been modified by me. I make sure, however, to have submitters check my edits for their approval. If they object to any of my changes, or request changes of their own, I accommodate them.

Why do I feel I have a right to take such an active role, not being Rotuman myself? For one thing, a distinction must be made between Rotuman ethnicity and the Rotuman community (which is now global in scope). While I can never be ethnically Rotuman, I (along with many other non-Rotumans, e.g., non-Rotuman spouses of Rotumans) am an accepted member of the global Rotuman community. As such, I feel a sense of responsibility to the community, which includes taking an active role in promoting its welfare.

I also view the Web site as one of Rotuma's more visible representations in the world and I want it to be a positive one, one that will not cause Rotumans embarrassment or distress. From the feedback I have gotten to date, I am greatly encouraged in that regard. An M.A. thesis by Caroline Clark at the University of British Columbia, entitled "The Rotuma Website: Transnational Relations and the Articulation of Cultural Identity" (Clark 2005), was particularly heartening. Clark received 151 responses to an extensive online survey regarding the Rotuma Web site. She reported that "90 % of survey participants indicated that the website works to preserve Rotuman culture and 100 % responded that the website works to create and maintain a sense of community among the global Rotuman community". Several respondents suggested additions they would like to see to the Web site, many of which I have subsequently implemented, but more can and should be

done. The main concern expressed by survey respondents was that of succession – who will take over the site when I am no longer able to manage it? Given the politics of controlling information in Rotuman communities, this issue is a fascinating one. It is going to require some careful research to decide who can best continue the legacy.

References

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MOTS-CLÉS

Rotuma – Îles Fidji – site internet – retour des données – ethnographie – histoire mélanésienne – partenariat – témoignage – photographie – archive