Youthful Visions: Place and Identity in Teenage Rotuman Poetry

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This paper explores poems written by three youths with genealogical connections to the island of Rotuma, a Polynesian island that is politically part of the Republic of Fiji. All three poems glorify the beauty of the island, although from different perspectives. We suggest possible influences that could form such perspectives.

Like the inhabitants of many other Pacific Islands, Rotumans have emigrated from their small, home island in large numbers. From a population of perhaps 4,000 at the time of first contact with Europeans in 1791, the number of Rotumans on the island has dwindled to below 2,000, while more than 8,000 resided in Fiji proper, according to the 2007 census. We estimate that an additional 2,000–3,000 Rotumans now reside elsewhere, mainly in Australia, New Zealand, England, Canada, and the United States. It is relevant to our analysis to point out that Rotuman migrants have been extraordinarily successful in their adaptations overseas, resulting in a large number of professionals, middle- and upper-management business personnel, government employees, and so on. The poems we present in this paper all were written by teenagers who in one form or another have been affected by the migrant experience.

Poetic expression on Rotuma has traditional roots in songs that accompany dance performances (tautoga). Typically, the lyrics involve expressions of gratitude to those who organized and contributed food to the event, and acknowledgement of the chiefs from the host district. They also generally include verses praising the beauty and unique features of host community. Composers of songs (purotu) are widely recognized and honored for their
contributions. Other traditional forms involving poetry include chants (e.g., war chants, dirges, and recitations accompanying the ceremonial presentation of kava) and chiefly oratory, although these tend to be more formulaic and less subject to creative input. Rotumans have also composed numerous hymns for church services, since the Catholic and Methodist missionaries arrived in the mid-nineteenth century.

On the island, songs (*maka*) are also composed for special occasions, sung by small groups of musicians playing guitars, keyboards, and other imported instruments, and in recent years professional musicians have recorded CDs in the Rotuman language for commercial distribution. While the melodies played by these bands are often borrowed from the Pan-Polynesian repertoire, the lyrics are generally original, and like the lyrics accompanying *tautoga* dances, they frequently include praise for the beauty of specific places or for the island as a whole.

**Poem #1: One Happy Day, by Matthew Bray**

Matthew Bray is the son of a Rotuman woman and an Australian man who live in Canberra, Australia. Matthew wrote the poem in 2005 when he was fifteen years old; he submitted it to a literary competition we sponsored and was awarded first prize in the English-language “open” category (there were separate prizes for Rotuman-language poems, and for primary and secondary schools on Rotuma). At the time Matthew had never been to Rotuma, but as we shall see, he has a vivid sense of what the island is like.

**One Happy Day**

I hear there is not a more beautiful place,  
Nor company more satisfying,  
Than Rotuma, that wonderful, heavenly space,  
On whose strength my heart is relying.
The home to which I’ve never been,
The place I’ve not yet wandered,
The beauty like I’ve never seen,
“How is she?” I have pondered.

I consider myself, yes, a child of her soil,
And yet her own song I’ve not heard,
But her poetry flows as my family’s dance,
I write it down now, word for word.

Rotuma, an island so bless’d by the Lord,
The waves roll and glisten with beauty,
The hearts of the people, their existence unflawed,
O God, they will never refute thee.

The harmonious songs gently flow on the breeze
The humid yet quiet siesta,
Then up starts the dancing, the fara is here!
Av’ maneа, the time for fiesta!

In the family everyone’s got their own work,
Responsibility no matter what their age is.
The kainaga system means that no one will shirk,
It has worked for us throughout the ages.

The wind comes ashore from its home on the seas,
As it catches the smell of the koua out back,
And the sound that it makes as it whistles the trees,
The atua are looking for a humanly snack!

The other small islands outside of the reef,
Hofliua, Solkope, Afgaha,
And Hatana, who knows what is hiding beneath
Your deadly and silent pear ha’a.

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1 Av’ maneа (literally, “play time”) takes place during the hottest season (December-January). The word fara in this context refers to groups traveling from village to village at night to make music and then be thanked by the residents, who give them food, etc.

2 Kainaga here means those who are related to one another.

3 The Rotuman earth oven is called a koua; one word for spirits is atua.

4 The soil (pera, or when modified by an adjective, pear) of Hatana is considered sacred (ha’a).
I’ve tried hard to learn your language
Worked so hard as to master your songs,
But I know what the truth is, I’m waiting,
For to see you is what my heart longs.

And I know it too, one day I’ll go there,
I’ll go there to find where I belong,
I’ll go fishing, and swimming, and dancing,
And I’ll join in the many old songs.

But until then I’ll pray for you, Rotuma,
Pray that no man will lead you astray,
One day we’ll be together, hanue ta,
That will truly be one joyous day.5

The vision and sentiments expressed by Matthew are remarkable for their vividness and intensity. He references sights he has never seen, sounds he has never heard, and aromas he has never smelled, all in idyllic terms. He has obviously spent some time contemplating being on Rotuma, anticipating a visit that will fulfill his sense of identity as a child of a land he knows only in his mind’s eye. We can only speculate about what has fueled his imagination. It could have been a combination of things: listening to stories his mother told about growing up on the island, reading books and articles about Rotuma, seeing photographs and video clips, hearing Rotuman music, enjoying the camaraderie and light-hearted humor expressed at family gatherings (several of his mother’s brothers live nearby).

We had occasion to visit the Bray family while in Canberra in February of this year. Matthew had journeyed to Rotuma for the first time during the previous Christmas holidays, and it was evident that the visit did nothing to diminish his enchantment with the island. Perhaps even more interesting, his younger brother, Michael, who had previously shown little interest in Rotuma, returned from the visit with a similar sensibility and a commitment to learning the

5 The general word for land or place is hanua; the (specific) place is hanue ta.
language, to the extent that Matt told us Michael’s bedtime reading is the Rotuman dictionary. Both brothers expressed a desire to return as often as possible.

Poem #2: Good Old Days.... by Harieta Vilsoni

Harieta Vilsoni is a seventeen-year old who was born and raised on Rotuma until the age of ten when her family moved to Fiji. In early 2007 she moved to Al Ain, United Arab Emirates, where her mother is employed as a nurse and her father teaches English. In her first e-mail messages to us from UAE (she is our sigoa (“namesake”; godchild), she was homesick and waxed nostalgic about Fiji and Rotuma. She submitted the following poem to the youth section of the Rotuma Website in April 2007.

Good Old Days....

I’m here in Al Ain
UAE

Still with me
sweet memories of good old days
amongst the old hifau trees
running and dashing
like a fall won’t bother

Just a touch of who will be the he
was all that mattered....

The good old days
where our mapigas would
chase us to ao moaf

to clear all the ulu leaves
in case visitors strike our way

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6 Hifau (or hefau) is a kind of tree (Calophyllum inophyllum) with thick, spreading branches.

7 He in this context refers to a calling (he‘e) game.
Or the Saturdays
during low tide when mummy
would take us up to the reef
for a swim and to catch fish

The *ia‘ mia‘ta*
or the *poraha*
was the family’s favourite
but mine was the *polo*

So tasty the meat is
just after catching it

We head home
to *fun pan* with
*tapiko ma ‘a‘ana*
Yum yum!*

How I still wish
the world can experience
the days I’ve traveled
walking with my cousins
from village to village
enjoying each breeze
the day brings

The times when daddy and I
ride on our bikes
playing *he* all the way
just to fetch his newspaper
to get a glimpse of the
new investigations

Or the times when I’d follow
my brother around
with his fellow friends
spearing fish with their ‘*ai kota*

---

8 In strict Rotuman, no “s” would be added to the word *mapiga* (grandparent) to form the plural. To *ao moaf* is to look for and sweep up rubbish, often fallen leaves such as *ulu* (breadfruit).

9 *Ia‘ mia‘ta* (lit., “the red fish”), *poraha* (a fish with yellow and blue strips), and *polo* (a young blackfish).

10 To *fun pan* is to fry. *Tapiko ma ‘a‘ana* means cassava (tapioca) and taro.
Or the many times
I’d tag along with my older sis
playing volley and netball
learning new techniques
and enjoying each game
which led me to playing
in district tournaments
by the age of ten

I still miss those days
when dad and mummy
would take us the kids
se fan hanueta la kakou sas
teaching us the different fish names
which fish is safe to eat
and which that can kill within a sec
The hai ta was among the many
sea creatures along with the he’e, ‘i’or ta
And pa’ta
that am told not to play around with

I still remember the funny days
when during one of the family picnics
I followed my sister
to the wharf
where they’d jump off and swim during high tide
and I refused to go back to the shore
when suddenly she lifted me up
and threw me into the deep

Oh man that was when I really learnt
my strokes

Or the times
when I used to chase both my brother and sister
just for them to take me to fara
was a bit lalai at the time though
but would give anything

\[11\] spear-gun

\[12\] to the beach to swim in the sea

\[13\] stingray, octopus, the shark, the eel
just to get back to that
good old life I had\footnote{short for ‘aklalai, cautious}

So many good times I’ve spent on the island
ten whole years
I did spend my childhood
in a place that is always
PARADISE to me
ROTUMA I call HOME

Traveling abroad is always a clear view
but the best view
is standing at the ka’ta
a rocky bridge
where Lulu Beach facing
Split Island
Oh! What a beauty\footnote{Ka’ta, a rocky arch, is a well-known land formation on the southwest shore of Rotuma.}

Or the view of
Islepi
in Motusa
With every reason to fall in love with the beauty
of the beach

Or the view at
Oinafa
the white clear sandy beach
with a glimpse of Haua Island

Such amazing sites
I would love to see one more time

I miss the Christmas holidays
when the clock strikes 6
we all disappear with our ha’fali
ready for fara
how much fun we’d have
roaming from place to place
cheering each family with a fara song\footnote{Ha’fali are wraparound skirts.}
Or the times we’d run just to escape
the buckets of water
coming towards our way
good times . . . good times

I really miss the sea
when every afternoon
we’d gather at the ‘aita
at Pep Haua
for a swim
joking with each other
telling sorts of funny stories”

What a life I will always treasure

In this poem we also have a vivid representation of the island, but with the additional reference to activities and experiences. Like Matthew, Harieta praises the beauty of the island, although scenes are more specific, identified by name. Her more-frequent use of Rotuman terms reveals her greater bilingual ability. The notion of Rotuma as a paradise, and as home, is explicitly emphasized by the use of capital letters. References to “fun” and “play” are suggestive of a carefree existence, an implicit contrast with her life in Al Ain where she has been confronted with adapting to a totally new and challenging environment. Happily, she has adapted extraordinarily well, making many friends and taking on a leadership role in her high school. She is also a talented multi-sport athlete, much admired by her schoolmates.

Poem #3: Going Home, by Rose Mary Josefa

The final poem of this set was submitted by Rose Mary Josefa during the 2004 literary competition. The judges awarded it first prize in the English-language section of the Rotuma

17 In this context ‘ai means tree, and ‘ai ta is “the tree.”
High School category. We don’t know much about her background, but it seems clear from her poem that she had only recently come to Rotuma at the time the poem was written.

**Going Home**
My eyes feel that they are glued
To this pristine scene in front of me
The swaying movement of the ship
Lulls me gently into unreality
Forgotten is the wretched retching
The empty feeling, and the reeling
The last minute grabbing at the railing.
Here at last, the longed for arrival.

A shimmering expanse of various blues
And aquamarine of different hues
My feet itch to skim over the sea
And touch that smile so warm and bright
Of a sandy beach so glittering white
Fringed by palms that beckon and wave.
Raising arms I reach out for their shade
To dive into air, then sea, in my haste.

Opening eyes into waters so very clear
In the greatest surprise I lose all fear.
Looking around in my new surroundings
Comes the knowledge that I cannot drown
The need for air forces me to surface.
Feeling exhilarated, I wipe water off my face
Giving myself courage to brave the swim
To the land I’ve seen only in a dream.

Greetings Rotuma, to you I have come
Across the oceans I have heard your call
And I can no longer wait, cannot ignore,
But I am like some flotsam washed ashore.
I have tasted your waters, kissed your shores
Give me time to know your lore, learn your mores
Give me a chance to show you my love
Then embrace me like a prodigal son.

The emphasis in this poem is less on a physical description of the island than on a personal engagement with its generic qualities—the surrounding sea, the air, the beach. Yet the poem
evokes the same sense of an encounter with paradise that is evident in the previous poems. Reference to “the land I’ve seen only in a dream,” suggests that she, like Matthew, envisioned the island prior to seeing it, and that she, too, held a profoundly romantic image of Rotuma before arriving there. Her allusion to emerging from the water to the shore is suggestive of birth, or re-birth as the case may be. It is as though she is anticipating being re-formed socially, transfiguring her social identify from that of an expatriate to that of a true Rotuman (a process that presumably was already taking place, as she was attending school there at the time she composed this piece).

**Conclusion**

What is it that feeds this imagery of paradise for teenagers like Matthew, Harieta, and Rose Mary? To begin with, as we already pointed out, Rotuma is blessed with lush vegetation, which provides a range of verdant hues that contrast with the white sand beaches, the deep blue sea, and a clear blue sky decorated with fluffy white clouds (when it isn’t pouring rain). In other words, most observers experience it as quite beautiful. In effect, it easily lends itself to paradisial notions.

Secondly, Rotuman culture, even in its overseas manifestations, retains a well-established tradition of poetic expression embedded in song lyrics, with recognition of the talents of composers (*purotu*). This, in itself, is a stimulus to those with the talent to compose poetry that expresses an appreciation of people and places.

Thirdly, childhood on Rotuma is remembered by most adults who grew up there as an idyllic time. Indeed, our observations over a nearly fifty-year period suggest that children are indulged to a considerable extent, and that relations with parents and peers are often very
positive. It is not surprising, therefore, that migrants who grew up on the island transmit idyllic imagery to their children.

Finally, we propose that the idyllic vision evident in the poems of Matthew, Harieta, and Rose Mary serves to anchor a favorable cultural identity as Rotumans. The notion of a beautiful island paradise is iconic for much more than the scenery, activities, and experiences referred to in the poems. It also, we suggest, serves as a symbolic representation of the reputation Rotumans have earned abroad as hard-working, diligent, law-abiding, and in general extraordinarily successful people. If we are correct, the imagery in the poems is indicative of a great deal of pride in being Rotuman, and that Rotuma itself has become, in its idealized representational form, the very heart of a positive sense of identity for these youths, as well as for emigrant Rotumans around the globe.

This positive identity is strongly echoed in a song that has come to be adopted by Rotuman expatriates as a sort of “national anthem.” More so than for long-time island residents, who tend to focus on more specific local ties in their songs, this anthem refers to the island as a whole.

'Atumotu helava la kele

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1.'Atumotu helava la kele pani sio 'e tafa ne hule</th>
<th>Chorus:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pua, ragakari, hata mara ma tiere</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rotuma 'otou hosa ne 'ai pumuet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chorus:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helava ne, 'os hanue</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rogo lelei ne 'oris garue</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kalua 'e, hanisi ne</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gagaja la 'utuen se rere</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Asa ne 'otou hosa ne 'ai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pumuet, ne gou he'a la kele</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. An island so beautiful to see in the light of the moon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweet fragrance of frangipani, gardenia and more</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotuma my most precious flower</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chorus:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>So beautiful my home</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flourishing and prosperous</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>embraced with love</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>God be praised</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweet blooms so varied and plentiful</td>
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<tr>
<td>I so treasure and long to see</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotu-ma 'otou 'atumotu</td>
<td>Rotuma my home</td>
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<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helava la kele</td>
<td>So beautiful to see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La rogoena 'e 'oris garue</td>
<td>May it continue to prosper and grow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Pani 'e kia'a ne asoha
Fisi ma'a lelei ka helava
Rava ne mairo, kori sea ma 'ai poa
Hili kalu 'e laloga ne Rotuma

| 2. Lit by the red glow of sunset |
| Radiant and beautiful           |
| Trails of perfumed flowers      |
| Permeates throughout Rotuma     |

3. Tukuena 'e peau ne lala
Tae la maoena se laloga
'Otou hosa ne 'ai pumuet ka a'helava
Isalei Rotuma la gou se mao'akia

| 3. As the waves drew me away   |
| It soon fades from the horizon |
| My precious and beautiful flower |
| My beloved Rotuma I will never forget |

Thus, it seems, the poems by Matthew, Harieta and Rose Marie reflect a general mindset of expatriate Rotumans for whom the physical island represents a glorified symbol, and a powerful reinforcement of their cultural identity.