

## 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 (eg, 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' manea*, the time for fiesta!<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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!<sup>3</sup>

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*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Av' manea* (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.

<sup>2</sup> *Kainaga* here means those who are related to one another.

<sup>3</sup> The Rotuman earth oven is called a *koua*; one word for spirits is *atua*.

<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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

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<sup>5</sup> 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<sup>6</sup>

Just a touch of who will be the *he*  
was all that mattered...<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Hifau* (or *hefau*) is a kind of tree (*Calophyllum inophyllum*) with thick, spreading branches.

<sup>7</sup> *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!<sup>10</sup>  
 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*

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<sup>8</sup> 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).

<sup>9</sup> *Ia' mia'ta* (lit., "the red fish"), *poraha* (a fish with yellow and blue strips), and *polo* (a young blackfish).

<sup>10</sup> To *fun pan* is to fry. *Tapiko ma 'a'ana* means cassava (tapioca) and taro.

*'e fan hanueta'*

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*<sup>2</sup>  
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<sup>3</sup>

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

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<sup>11</sup> spear-gun

<sup>12</sup> to the beach to swim in the sea

<sup>13</sup> stingray, octopus, the shark, the eel

just to get back to that  
good old life I had<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> short for *'aklalai*, cautious

<sup>15</sup> *Ka' ta*, a rocky arch, is a well-known land formation on the southwest shore of Rotuma.

<sup>16</sup> *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 Haa  
 for a swim  
 joking with each other  
 telling sorts of funny stories<sup>17</sup>

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

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<sup>17</sup> 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 identity 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 paradisaical 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.” Moreso 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

<p>1.'Atumotu helava la kele pani sio 'e tafa ne hule Pua, ragakari, hata mara ma tiere Rotuma 'otou hosa ne 'ai pumuet</p> <p>Chorus:</p> <p>Helava ne, 'os hanue Rogo lelei ne 'oris garue Kalua 'e, hanisi ne Gagaja la 'utuen se rere</p> <p>Asa ne 'otou hosa ne 'ai Pumuet, ne gou he'a la kele</p>	<p>1. An island so beautiful to see in the light of the moon Sweet fragrance of frangipani, gardenia and more Rotuma my most precious flower</p> <p>Chorus:</p> <p>So beautiful my home Flourishing and prosperous embraced with love God be praised</p> <p>Sweet blooms so varied and plentiful I so treasure and long to see</p>
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<p>Rotu-ma 'otou 'atumotu Helava la kele La rogoena 'e 'oris garue</p> <p>2. Pani 'e kia'a ne asoha Fisi ma'a lelei ka helava Rava ne mairo, kori sea ma 'aipoa Hili kalu 'e laloga ne Rotuma</p> <p>3. Tukuena 'e peau ne lala Tae la maoena se laloga 'Otu hosa ne 'ai pumuet ka a'helava Isalei Rotuma la gou se mao'akia</p>	<p>Rotuma my home So beautiful to see May it continue to prosper and grow</p> <p>2. Lit by the red glow of sunset Radiant and beautiful Trails of perfumed flowers Permeates throughout Rotuma</p> <p>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</p>
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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.