

The Valuation of Photographs: Rotuman Responses

Jan Rensel and Alan Howard

Concern for the return of physical and intellectual materials taken or transcribed by anthropologists (among others) from their communities of origin has gained considerable momentum in recent years (see Jaarsma 2002 for an overview). Among the materials at issue are photographs, which in some respects represent a special case with unique considerations. Whereas physical artifacts such as carvings or paraphernalia often lose cultural meaning when removed from their context, and written records are generally acknowledged as involving attributions of meaning by the writers, photographs provide replications of moments frozen in time that give them a “truth value” absent from other forms. This is not to say that photographs are not often interpreted in varying ways, and with the advent of computer technology for altering photographs people may be becoming more cautious, but it still seems to be the case that people tend to treat photographs as “authentic records,” whereas attitudes toward written records are far more subject to dispute.

To be sure, photographic collections inevitably reflect the agendas of the photographers, as has been well documented (see Edwards 1997 and Quanchi 1997 for overviews). Among the collections from the island of Rotuma to which we refer in this paper, agendas are rather obvious for many of the photographers. For example, [A. M. Hocart](#), who spent six weeks on Rotuma in 1913, took multiple profile photographs of people’s heads to go along with physical measurements—reflecting a concern, prevalent at the time, for racial classification. [A collection taken by French Marist priests](#) on the island during the early twentieth century focuses on the two church buildings and their surroundings, activities taking place in proximity to the churches, and group photos of Catholic adherents. And [photographs taken by H. S. Evans](#) in 1940 reflect his interest in the diffusion of cultural traits. Most of his photographs depict artifacts, details of house construction, and other aspects of material culture.

Archivists, historians, and anthropologists attribute special value to photographs taken prior to the kinds of introduced changes that radically altered traditional cultural patterns. For archivists, historical photographs are preserved for their potential worth to both current and future scholars and for the communities depicted—a major reason why archives these days are

busy digitizing photographs and making them accessible online. For historians, they are valued for the information they contain concerning events, personages, and historical processes; they represent valuable supplements to written records. For anthropologists, historical photographs, and photos in general, not only provide snapshots of the cultures they study but also become a commodity of exchange with the people they study. Anthropologists commonly make gifts of photos they have taken to the people who were photographic subjects, and at times they have given those people copies (or originals) of historical photos as well. In return, the subjects of their studies have on occasion provided photos in their possession that are of interest to anthropologists. In addition to their exchange value, photos provide anthropologists with an opportunity to stimulate conversation concerning what is represented in them, often leading to valuable cultural information and new insights (Collier et al. 1986).

Our interest, however, is less in the motivations of photographers, archivists, historians, and anthropologists than in the value of photos to cultural groups who have been photographic subjects, and particularly to the Rotuman people with whom we have worked over the past half-century. In addition to providing people with photos we have taken, we have made a concerted effort to make available to Rotumans photos that have been preserved in archives, museums, libraries, and personal collections by posting them on the Rotuma Website (www.rotuma.net), which Alan created in 1996 and continues to maintain. The fact that photographs can be replicated digitally without significant loss of quality makes them ideal “artifacts” for virtual repatriation (Hennessy 2009).

Photographing Rotumans: A Personal History

When Alan first went to Rotuma in December 1959 to do dissertation research, photography was not high on his list of priorities. He had arrived in Fiji in August without a camera but eventually bought a used 35mm camera in Suva and purchased a supply of black & white film as well as some rolls of color slide film. He had in mind doing research on ceremonies, and taking snapshots of key elements seemed like a good idea. He knew there were going to be difficulties getting the film processed; the only regular transportation to and from the island was a government boat that went once every three months, so storing the film (and camera) in the high humidity tropics would be a problem.

Alan began taking photos in other parts of Fiji while waiting for the boat to Rotuma. Most of the 67 photos he took there were of Rotumans he met in various contexts, and he took 26 more on the five-day journey on the *Yanawai*, a copra boat that stopped in Levuka, Taveuni, and Savu Savu before arriving at Rotuma. During the course of his year on the island he took 354 black & white photos and 310 color slides. Mostly he took the camera to events such as weddings, funerals, dance performances, but he did not routinely carry it around. A few times he spent part of the day “doing photography,” taking photos of scenery, groups of people doing routine chores in the villages, children at play, and whatever caught his fancy, in hopes of capturing the flavor of life on the island on film. Rotumans were very receptive to being photographed, often posing when they became aware of the camera and usually thanking him for taking their photo. Unfortunately he was unable to share the photos with people on the island at the time because he sent the exposed film to be developed and stored in California with his family there. Alan spent the following year (1961) doing research among Rotumans in Fiji, during which time he took only 14 more black and white photos, in Levuka.



Men weighing copra on beach prior to drying it (Rotuma, 1960). Photo by Alan Howard.



Women preparing pandanus leaves prior to weaving mats (Rotuma, 1960).
Photo by Alan Howard.

Returns to Rotuma 1987–2004

Alan did not return to Rotuma for 27 years and during that period essentially lost contact with the people he had gotten to know there. In the interval he had donated a selection of his black & white photos to the Bishop Museum archives; they were processed by George Bacon from negatives into 8 x 10 inch prints, and Alan was given a duplicate set. In 1987, along with Jan, Alan revisited Rotuma on his sabbatical and used the photos as a means of reconnecting with people he had known and of showing some of the younger folks images of their parents, grandparents, and other family members. As we encountered individuals with connections to people in the photos, we gave the prints away as gifts (*te fakhanisi*). When we left after two weeks, we had distributed all of the 8x10s to expressively grateful people.



People in Itu'muta District looking at photos from 1960 (Rotuma, 1987). Photo by Alan Howard.



Woman with photo of self from 27 years earlier (Rotuma, 1987). Photo by Alan Howard.

During our 1987 visit we took color photos only, mostly as a record of our experiences there, but in our three visits to Rotuma in 1988, 1989, and 1990, during which time Jan was doing dissertation research, we had a more ethnographic focus in mind. For that period we took two cameras along, one for slides, the other for color prints. We accumulated a total of 314 slides that we categorized as follows: houses (47), boat days (14), visit of the *Fairstar* tourist ship in 1989 (31), environmental problems (20), work (17), weddings (19), social life (20), food production (20), ceremonies (*kato'aga*) (28), other events (14), activities of women & children (14), friends (19), children in school (31), and Jan & Alan (20). The slides were supplemented by color prints (uncategorized) of people, events, and scenery.

The photos and slides were taken to provide visual reminders of our experiences on the island, as supplements to our field notes, and as potential illustrations for publications and lectures. At times Rotumans specifically requested or instructed us to take particular photos, especially at ceremonial events. Interestingly, they never asked for copies of the photos; they just wanted to be sure we were photographing the important things from their point of view.

On our 1990 trip, in addition to a still camera, we brought along a videocamera. Besides videotaping special events like weddings and birthdays, Alan spent several days shooting scenes from everyday life, including people caring for their children, preparing food, making mats, planting taro, feeding pigs and chickens, etc. All together we brought back 13 hours worth of video.

We revisited Rotuma multiple times in the 1990s and early 2000s, mostly for short visits and always with a camera along. We continued to take photos of people we spent time with as well as everyday activities and special events. In 1996 we brought along an inexpensive film camera that took panoramic images, which was great for photos of scenery and large gatherings of people. Among the special events we photographed were the 150th anniversaries of Wesleyan and Catholic missions, in 1989 and 1996, respectively.



Panoramic photo of food presentation at 150th anniversary of Catholic mission, showing cake in the shape of the Sumi Mission Church (Rotuma, 1996). Photo by Alan Howard.

Two subsequent events significantly affected the way we incorporated photographs into our engagement with the Rotuman community. In late 1996 Alan created a website for the now widely dispersed Rotuman community, and early in the 21st century we decided to write a history of the Rotuman people.

Photos on the Rotuma Website

The Rotuma Website provided an opportunity to post photographs that we had taken as well as snapshots sent to us by a few friends who had been to Rotuma. It started off as a modest project with only a handful of photographs, categorized simply as scenery, social events, and interesting things. Mindful of bandwidth limitations at the time the website was created, we restricted the size of each photo to less than 40K. At this size and in such low resolution (72 dpi), these photos were not suitable for printing, so for all practical purposes they were limited to viewing on computer screens.

In 1998, following visits to Rotuma and Rotuman communities in [Fiji](#), [Auckland](#), [Sydney](#), [Melbourne](#), [Wellington](#), [San Francisco](#), [Florida](#), and [England](#), we posted photo montages of people in each of those locations. The montages were larger images but still were less than 100K in size. By this time we had switched to a digital camera so were able to take an almost unlimited number of photos without having to worry about processing.



Photo montage of Rotumans in Auckland (1998). Photos by Alan Howard.

Also in 1998, Rocky Peters, a Rotuman living in Canada, visited Rotuma and sent us via e-mail attachments a set of 13 photos, mostly scenery, that he had taken on a visit to Rotuma. They were also added to the website as low-resolution, small-size images. A listing of these early [photographic collections](#), along with later contributions, is posted on the Rotuma Website.

Photographic contributions to the website followed in subsequent years by Peace Corps volunteers and shorter-term visitors to Rotuma. [Richard Mehus](#) had served as a Peace Corps volunteer from January 1972 to December 1974. He was inspired by the Rotuma Website to contact us and send a CD with a digitized set of photos he had taken during his stay on the island. Most of the photos were taken at Rotuma High School, where he taught, but he was also present when Hurricane Bebe struck Rotuma in October 1972 and he took a number of photos of the devastation. Some of his photos were in black and white, while others were in color. Seth Pershan served as a Peace Corps volunteer from September 1989 until December 1991. He contributed a set of 19 miscellaneous photos for uploading.



Devastation from Hurricane Bebe (Rotuma, 1972). Photo by Richard Mehus.

Shorter-term visitors who contributed photos for the website included [Nancy Smith](#), an American woman whose son married a Rotuman on the island in December 2000—most of her photos were from the wedding and associated activities; Natasha David, who also visited Rotuma in December 2000; [Anneke Martine](#), a Dutch woman who visited Rotuma in September 2004; and [Mojito Mua](#), a Rotuman who took photos on the island in August and December 2010.

[John Bennett](#), an American married to a Rotuman woman, has lived on Rotuma off and on for many years. He acquired a digital camera during the last decade and has been sending photos from Rotuma on an intermittent basis. A set of his well-composed images taken during 2008–2009 has been uploaded to the website.

In addition, we now regularly receive and post digital photos taken at various events such as weddings, graduations, and so on, from Rotumans scattered around the globe. These are placed in the context of accompanying news items, as are photos downloaded from news sources such as the Fiji Times Online. Whenever the information is available we acknowledge the source of photos. In some cases, individuals post relevant photos on other sites that host them; in such instances we are apt to create links to them in appropriate contexts.

As broadband width has increased significantly and become more universally available, we have posted larger photos, often in high resolution. A major boon has been our adoption of TalaPhoto, an application that creates digital albums for websites. This has permitted us to post photos in high resolution that are easily downloaded and printable.

To make at least a portion of Alan's 1959–61 photos available online, he uploaded a [photographic essay](#) in seventeen segments, accompanying the photos with an account of his experiences. We were gratified to receive messages from Rotumans who found in this collection the only photos of their parents or grandparents they had ever seen.

Collecting Historical Photos

In 1961, [Dr. H. S. Evans](#) provided Alan with a set of 50 black and white photos he had taken on Rotuma in 1940. He later served as district officer there in 1943 and 1950. Evans was interested in cultural diffusion and saw Rotuman culture as derivative from Samoa. Thus he took multiple photos of artifacts that he related in his notes to Samoan equivalents. He also took a number of photos of events such as weddings and sporting competitions (wrestling, spear throwing). He made a habit of creating panoramas by joining two or more photos to display a scene, giving a good sense of events from a distance.



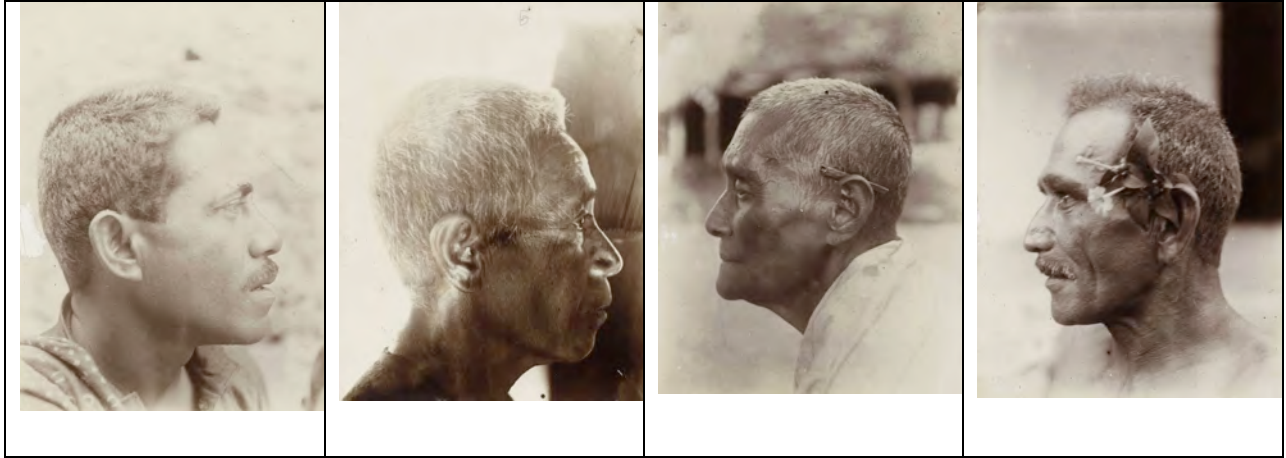
Composite photo of a wedding by H. S. Evans, joining three sections (Rotuma, 1940).



Photos of material culture used by H. S. Evans to make comparisons with Samoa (1940).

But it was not until we decided to write a history of the Rotuman people that we embarked on a concerted effort to collect historical photos. As a first step, we posted a request on the Rotuma Website asking for old photos, which we promised to preserve and/or restore before returning to the sender with a digital copy. This netted not a single response, so we primarily had to rely on museums and archives; however, we also brought along a portable scanner on one of our field trips, which yielded modest results as we were able to copy and return people's photos immediately.

We obtained a few photos of artifacts from the Auckland War Memorial Museum and a somewhat more extensive collection from the [Fiji Museum](#), but our real bonanzas were from the Alexander Turnbull Library (National Library of New Zealand) in Wellington and the Archivio Padri Maristi (Archives of the Marist Fathers) in Rome. It was at the Turnbull Library that we found a collection of [26 photos taken by Hocart](#) on Rotuma in 1913. Aside from a few pictures of scenery, most of Hocart's photos are of people posing (a result, no doubt, of camera limitations). He was a phenomenal field worker and during his short time on the island produced over 800 pages of notes on all aspects of Rotuman society and culture, including genealogies and physical measurements of human bodies. To accompany the latter, he took several photos of people's heads, presumably to show their shapes. The photos were toned gelatin silver prints; most exist in sepia tones, possibly as a result of deteriorating pigments. The Turnbull charged us NZ\$13.05 per photo, which they provided on a CD.



Photos by A. M. Hocart showing head shapes of Rotuman men (1913). Turnbull Library.

Our excursion to the [Marist Archives in Rome](#) was something of a shot in the dark. We were accompanied by Fr. Tom Splain, who was teaching anthropology at the Gregorian University in Rome at the time. Fluent in Italian, Tom acted as our translator with the archivist, whose initial response to our request for photos from Rotuma was that there weren't any. However, in response to our obvious dejection, the archivist brought out the albums of photos from Fiji for us to look at. We quickly discovered a number of photos from Rotuma interspersed with those from Fiji. In all, we found 91 photos taken in Rotuma, mostly during the 1920s and 1930s.



Father Griffon and Rotuman parishioner with truck (ca. 1930). Marist Archives, Rome.

We sat for hours in the sweltering archives, writing out explanations of all of these photos. The archivist, who was very pleased to have them identified, offered to scan them, put them on a CD, and mail them to us with no charge. They include a range of subjects, including Fr. Gustave Griffon with one of the first motor vehicles (if not *the* first one) on the island; group photos of priests, nuns, and parishioners; church buildings; and ceremonial activities.

In addition to the museums and archives, we attempted to obtain photos from the National Archives of Fiji, the *Fiji Times*, and the Fiji Ministry of Information in Suva, with only limited success. We were disheartened when we were told that because of space and personnel limitations, photos from many notable historical events had been discarded. However, we did find and were allowed to scan (with our portable scanner) photos from the [opening of the council house](#) in Rotuma in 1971 and the [centennial celebration of Rotuma's cession to Great Britain in 1981](#).



Centennial celebration of Rotuma's cession (1981). Fiji Ministry of Information, Suva.

Making Historical Photos Available

Alan created a section of the Rotuma Website for all the [historical photos](#) in our possession, along with other, more recent, collections. This was a way of making these scattered resources available to the Rotuman people, in most cases at a high-enough resolution to be printed.

Photos also played a key role in our decision to self-publish [Island Legacy: A History of the Rotuman People](#) in 2007. At first we had submitted the manuscript to a university press but were told the volume would be limited to 30 photos—and also that the text of the manuscript would have to be cut by a third. Both conditions were unacceptable to us, especially since we conceived of the book as addressed to a Rotuman rather than an academic audience. The book we eventually published contains 102 photos. We made sure to acknowledge the photos by photographer, if known, and according to the specifications of the institutions from which they were acquired. Most institutions responded generously to our requests for permission to publish, but we had an issue with the British Museum. Several years earlier, we had purchased photos of a set of Rotuman war clubs and other artifacts held at the museum, so the photos were already in our possession. But when we requested permission to publish eight of them (five on half a page), we were informed that we would have to pay a license fee of £30 per image, which would have cost us £240, or over US\$400 at the time. This was something of a shock, so we attempted to negotiate for a reduced fee. We explained that the book was not for profit; any royalties from sales of the printed version were to support a scholarship for Rotuman students, and a digital version of the book is freely available via the Rotuma website. We also argued that including the photos was a way of making available to the Rotuman people images of historical Rotuman artifacts that they were unlikely to see otherwise. Ultimately, after several e-mail exchanges, the museum lowered their fee to £30 for publishing all eight of the images, which we regarded as a reasonable compromise. (We appreciate the great service such institutions provide for scholars and the general public alike and understand the need to charge fees for services. In this instance we were gratified that the museum's staff were flexible enough to recognize the validity of our argument and to accede to our request.)

None of our costs in collecting photos of and by Rotumans have been covered by grants; all costs have been paid by us out-of-pocket. However, we feel we owe it to Rotumans to make historical photos accessible to them because, in our experience, visual history is at least as

important to them as verbal accounts, if not more so. Our sense of obligation in this regard is fueled by gratitude for the generosity and support the Rotuman people have shown us over many years of field work.

The Value of Photos

From the feedback we have received from Rotumans, we can suggest a hierarchy of interest in photographic content. Near the top of the hierarchy are photographs of people known to the viewer, with pictures of close relatives (parents, grandparents, siblings) and oneself especially appreciated. Photos of deceased relatives are also prized, especially if no others are available. Even if people in photographs are not readily recognized, Rotumans often make a game of trying to figure out who they are, where they are from, and to whom they are related. Also of high interest, although somewhat less so, are photos of places on Rotuma. Pictures taken in home villages, on nearby beaches, and of familiar landmarks are valued to the extent that they trigger personal reminiscences. At the very top of the hierarchy, however, are photos of close relatives in or near their homes, gardens, or other locations associated with them. In addition to these most valued photos, a number of scenes—the beach at Oinafa, the view across Maka Bay from the government station, some offshore islets—have become iconic of the beauty of Rotuma as a whole and a source of pride in identity. Such photos are often enlarged and adorn the walls of many expatriate Rotuman households.

Another category of photos are those recording events, some of which are considered to be of particular historical value—for example, the [opening of the council house in 1971](#), the devastation caused by [Hurricane Bebe in 1972](#), the [100th anniversary celebration of cession](#) to Great Britain in 1981, and the 150th anniversary celebrations of the first arrival of Methodist and Catholic missionaries in 1989 and 1996, respectively. Such photos seem to be less highly valued by most Rotumans unless they include images of kinsmen or close friends, or in some instances, buildings or places of special interest (e.g., one's home that had been damaged in Hurricane Bebe). An exception to this are occasional booklets printed by Rotumans to commemorate historical events such as the anniversaries of missionary arrivals.



View across Maka Bay at sunset (Rotuma, 2010). Photo by Eseroma Vula.

The Impact of Changing Technology

Technological changes have had a dramatic impact on photography in Rotuma, as elsewhere. The early photos, taken during the first half of the twentieth century, were incapable of recording movement without blurring, so most of them either involved scenery, artifacts, or people posing. Photography was restricted to those with access to film, cameras and related equipment, and development facilities, as well as the money to cover the relatively high associated costs. For Rotumans living on the island, these obstacles precluded participation. Thus the only photos available from this period were taken by visiting Europeans and the resident Marist priests.

Even though photography during the second half of the century became increasingly accessible, until fairly recently cameras were a rare possession among people on Rotuma. For one thing, film had to be imported from Fiji and sent back for developing, and it tended to spoil

quickly in the tropical heat and humidity. However, photographs became increasingly available as Rotumans migrated abroad and sent pictures home, or as they returned home for visits and took snapshots there. As a result, family photographs began to adorn the walls of many homes on the island, and some families kept albums of family photos. As the island became less isolated, an increase in visitors resulted in a great deal more picture taking and hence availability of photographs. In addition, professional personnel assigned to positions on the island—teachers, agricultural officers, policemen, etc.—often brought cameras with them.

Since the advent of digital photography, the availability of photographic images on the island has increased dramatically, although limited access to the Internet has limited the flow. In a recent visit to Rotuma, in August 2012, we were honored guests at a founders' day celebration at Rotuma High School. It was a fundraising event with a charity queen competition, a cadets' drill team demonstration, and rugby and netball games. To say that there was frenzy of photo taking, mostly with mobile phones, would be no exaggeration. Rotumans abroad are also very much involved in taking photographs of people within the now global Rotuman community and sharing them on Facebook and other social media. Interest in video recordings, particularly of dance performances, is particularly strong, both on the island and among expatriate Rotumans (often shared on YouTube). Despite these technological changes, as far as we can tell, the hierarchy of values that we have outlined above has not significantly changed.

* * *

THIS IS A LIGHTLY EDITED VERSION *of a paper that was presented in the symposium titled "Photographing Pacific Islanders" at the annual meeting of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania held in San Antonio, Texas, February 5–9, 2013. We are grateful to Kathryn Creely and Eric Silverman for organizing this symposium and the informal and working sessions in prior years that led up to it. We thank Kathy and Eric and all the participants in these sessions for the inspiration of their work and their suggestions for improving this paper. All photos reproduced on the Rotuma website with permission.*

References

Collier, John Jr., John Collier, Malcolm Collier, and Edward T. Hall

1986 *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Edwards, Elizabeth, editor

1997 *Anthropology and Colonial Endeavour*. Special issue, *History of Photography* 21 (1).

Hennessy, Kate

2009 Virtual Repatriation and Digital Cultural Heritage: The Ethics of Managing Online Collections. *Anthropology News* (April): 5–6.

Jaarsma, Sjoerd R., editor

2002 *Handle with Care: Ownership and Control of Ethnographic Materials*. ASAO Monograph 20. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Quanchi, Max

1997 Introduction. In *Imaging, Representation, and Photography of the Pacific*. Special Issue, *Pacific Studies* 20 (4): 1–12.