The Successes of Rotuman Women in the Modern World

Alan Howard [University of Hawai‘i]

Makereta Mua [Fiji National University]

Abstract

Inspired by Ester Boserup’s 1970 thesis regarding the role of indigenous economies in promoting the success of women in the modern economies, this article explores aspects of Rotuman culture that have led to the considerable success of Rotuman women in a wide variety of contemporary occupations. Our analysis is based on multiple sources implicating the socialization of women that promote a self-confidence conducive to accomplishments. This article also includes reflections on the sources of their success by seventeen interviewees.

The Successes of Rotuman Women in the Modern World

It has long been recognized that throughout the twentieth century the academic disciplines of history and the social sciences exhibited an androcentric (male) bias. A notable exception was Ester Boserup's 1970 publication of *Women's Role in Economic Development.* As summarized by Paola Giuliano (2015:34**),** Boserup

> argued that the origin of differences in the role of women in societies lay in the different types of agriculture traditionally practised across societies. In particular, she highlights important differences between shifting agriculture and plough agriculture. Shifting agriculture, which uses hand-held tools like the hoe and the digging stick, is labor-intensive with women actively participating in farmwork. In contrast, plough agriculture is more capital-intensive, using the plough to prepare the soil. Unlike the hoe or digging stick, the plough requires significant upper-body strength, grip strength, and burst of power, which are needed to either pull the plough or control the animal that pulls it. Also, farming with the plough is less compatible with simultaneous childcare, which is almost always the responsibility of women. As a result, men tended to specialize in agricultural work outside the home.

Thus, according to Boserup, societies with plough agriculture tend to reinforce the belief that women's place is within the home, while shifting agriculture is more permissive of women's work outside the home. Inspired by Boserup's work, a number of researchers explored the

relationship between agricultural practices and women's status in developing economies (e.g., Goldschmidt and Kunkel 1971, Reid 1988, Winzeler 1974), and found the evidence in support of Boserup's thesis to be limited. Likewise, when assessing Boserup's approach to traditional Pacific Island economies—or to put her underlying proposition more generally, the degree to which there are no physical requirements that preclude women's participation in the main economic activity of a traditional society improves the chances that women will be successful in modernizing economies—we conclude it is only part of the picture. Nevertheless, Boserup's observation that attitudes regarding the role of women in modern societies are rooted in traditional cultures was provocative as an incentive for us to examine Rotuman cultural practices and beliefs with that in mind. Our assumption is that there are a multitude of cultural practices and beliefs that have a bearing on women's status and their ability to succeed in contemporary economies.

Beginning in the latter part of the twentieth century, Rotuman women have increasingly taken advantage of educational and occupational opportunities to achieve success in the professions, in business and bureaucratic management, and in the arts. In this article we explore the cultural variables that have contributed to this success, including historical, cultural, and psychological factors, from legendary times to now. We rely on data from a multitude of sources, ranging from the roles of women in Rotuman myths, to traditional discourse and cultural practices involving women, the roles of socialization and formal education, and accounts of life experiences in both written records and personal interviews. While we are aware of the successes of Rotuman women in Australia, New Zealand, and many other countries, our main geographical focus is in Fiji, where the great majority of Rotumans now reside. We therefore begin by presenting information regarding Fiji's history regarding the roles played by women.

Traditional Fijian society was organizationally patrilineal, with all that implies regarding the status of women. Inheritance of property was through the male line, as was status in the hierarchy. The main objects in the prestige economy were whales' teeth (*tabua*), which were obtained and circulated by men. Women were relegated to performing household chores, including cooking meals and cleaning the house. As community and village members they were treated as subservient to men and were essentially excluded from public decision-making, and since warfare was endemic, the well-being of men was of paramount importance and encouraged them to emphasize their masculinity, including aggressive behavior. The British colonial government did little if anything to alter the gender bias insofar as it, too, had a strong male bias. In addition, according to a country gender assessment in 2015, gender inequality "is perpetuated by discriminatory practices, legislative and policy biases, and unequal access to resources and services" (*Fiji* 2016:xii). One of the more ugly manifestations of this male bias is violence against women, which was pervasive in the past and continues to be a serious national issue (Forster 2011).

Fiji has committed to a number of specific international and national goals related to gender equality, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which was adopted by the United Nations in 1979 and ratified by Fiji in 1995, and has made some progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals related to gender equality (signed by Fiji in 2000). But gender bias in Fiji remains an issue, as indicated by the relatively low participation of women in the more prestigious sectors of the economy (*Fiji* 2016:xiv). Although part of the explanation for this underrepresentation is the remnants of a male bias that pervades contemporary Fijian society, we believe it is also a consequence of a high proportion of girls failing to develop the skills and attitudes that are conducive to success

within the subcultural settings in which they are socialized. **The main exception to this general finding concerns Fijian women from the chiefly class, who are generally treated with considerable respect and given the kind of special privileges that help to develop self-confidence and the attitudes and skills required for success in high-level positions in contemporary settings such as politics and education.** In contrast, it is our contention that Rotuman girls more generally are socialized in ways that enable them to develop the necessary skills and attitudes that facilitate their ability to succeed in all sectors of the modern milieu.

Rotuman Culture and Female Achievement

In a previous article concerning the accomplishments of Rotumans in the modern economy, Howard (1966) identified a number of historical and cultural conditions that are conducive to the development of achievement motivation among Rotuman youths without regard to gender. These include an absence of colonial oppression; a relatively secular, egalitarian social organization; and a child-rearing regimen characterized by open expressions of affection throughout childhood, infrequent and mild punishment for misdeeds (generally carried out by mothers rather than fathers), encouragement of independence, and recognition of and rewards for achievements. Howard argued that this type of socialization, during which children are allowed to confront and resolve problems on their own, supports the development of a sense of mastery and self-confidence leading to anticipation of success when confronting new and challenging situations.

But quite obviously, not all children who are exposed to such favorable conditions go on to successful careers. In fact, the proportion who do is still quite modest. Women in particular

face circumstances that constitute barriers to success in societies that are still somewhat androcentric in character. It was with this in mind that we decided to focus our attention on women who had successfully overcome whatever challenges they encountered. On the one hand we are concerned with aspects of Rotuman culture that are specific to females, while on the other hand we are concerned with the factors to which successful women attribute their successes.

The Role of Women in Rotuman Mythology

For the content of Rotuman myths, we rely on the volume *Tales of a Lonely Island*, by Mesulama Titifanua, translated by C. Maxwell Churchward (1995). This collection has the advantages of having been acquired in the Rotuman language and providing English translations. Women figure prominently in the myths in various roles, as creators and protectors of the island ("The Founding of Rotuma"); as the instigator of a coup resulting in a major change in the Rotuman political landscape ("The First Kings in Rotuma"); as cannibalistic tricksters and healers ("Nujmaga and Nujka'u"); and perhaps most importantly, as a woman who subdues a threatening monster ("Kirkirsasa"). In two stories in which women find themselves needing to escape male oppression they do so successfully, in one case by sprouting wings and flying away ("Lalatäväke and Lilitäväke"), in the other by turning themselves into stars ("The Two Sisters Who Became Constellations").

In his cogent interpretation of Rotuman myths (1995), Vilsoni Hereniko pointed to women's roles as representatives of the land and—in opposition to chiefs who are prone to abuse their power—as domesticators who constrain chiefly oppression. Vis-à-vis males in general, Hereniko drew attention to the theme of males and females as equal partners in reproduction and

regeneration, as symbolized by their complementary but different roles (Hereniko 1995:56–63). But, in addition, the women in these myths are also powerful and creative individuals. They either are fearless in their dealings with men or find ways to evade male oppression, and are, in general, autonomous, self-possessed beings who have mastered the skills and strategies necessary for success in achieving their goals and controlling their own destinies.

We are not proposing that exposure to these myths as young girls—story telling being a major form of entertainment in pre-television and pre-Internet years—was a major contributor to Rotuman women's successes as adults, and we are well-aware of the fact that similar myths involving superheroines are widespread, [1] in many cases in quite clearly androcentric societies. However, in Rotuma we believe it is an integral part of a configuration of cultural characteristics that factor into the successes of Rotuman women.

Growing up Female in Rotuma

During Howard's initial fieldwork in Rotuma during 1959–1960, his Rotuman assistant Rejieli Mejieli collected thirty life histories from women between 24 and 66 years old. Each woman was asked to recall her childhood experiences, and it is these recollections that we have used to characterize the experiences of girls growing up on Rotuma before it had changed a great deal from its traditional forms.[2] What these life histories reveal is a remarkable consistency with regard to the women's reports of being treated kindly by their parents and parent surrogates. In all but three instances the interviewees explicitly recalled such benevolent treatment. In one case, the child grew up in the household of an uncle and aunt who had children of their own and recalled having a bad time with her uncle; in a second case, the woman recalled that her father

had been strict and sometimes punitive, although she professed to love her mother; and in the third instance, her mother died when she was three years old and she was raised by her aunt and uncle, to whom she had to show respect. Another woman didn't report being badly treated but commented about her mother's objections to her choice of profession.

More typical was the report of a 30-year-old woman:

> When I was young my parents treated me very well. They always tried to give me everything I wanted. I remember one time at Christmas when I went with my father to buy a Christmas present for me. I saw a nice toy in the store. It was a pretty doll with a pretty dress, and I wanted my father to buy it, but at that time the price of copra was very bad, and it was a very hard time for everyone who had to earn money from cutting copra, like my father… My father wanted to buy me an umbrella, but I liked the doll better. The two were the same price, and finally my father bought both of them because he did not want to make me worry about the toy, and the umbrella was a useful thing. He knew I liked the toy better, and thats why he bought both of them for me. I'll never forget that day.

In five of the accounts, women reported being raised by parental surrogates who treated them well, for example:

> I was the eldest of four daughters in our family. We had no brothers. I had a different father than my other sisters and I was raised by my mother. She had no husband to help her and she had to take care of me by herself… I can remember

> the day when my mother got married and she told me that I was going to have a father and that he would be able to get for me the things I wanted. My stepfather was a kind man. He loved my mother and me and whatever I asked him for he always gave it to me. He worked very hard and my mother was able to stay with me in the house instead of having to go out and do the work of a man. I was a pet to my stepfather and I became more cheeky than anyone would have suspected before my mother had gotten married… My mother had a baby girl but my stepfather still treated me the same way.

There is a secondary theme in the accounts that has to do with parents instructing children to love their siblings and to be kind to others so that they will be treated kindly in return. A few of the women reported having been their parents' pets and becoming "cheeky" and disliked before reforming.

In our opinion, this indulgent type of child-rearing may well have resulted in a high proportion of Rotuman girls developing a positive sense of self-esteem that would contribute to successful careers. It may also be significant that learning tasks in the home environment involved little or no verbal instruction. The primary mode was observational—watching how things were done by their elders and imitating them. There is some evidence that observational learners develop confidence in their ability to perform the tasks they observe, which promotes a can-do attitude toward performance (Kardas and O'Brien 2018).

Schooling

The Government of Fiji took over responsibility for educating native peoples in the late 1920s. Until that time, the only schools in Rotuma were run by the Methodist and Catholic missions with the primary purpose of promoting literacy so that students could read the Bible. In 1936, school attendance was made compulsory for children between the ages of six and fourteen, and since then all Rotumans have received a minimum of eight years education. Up until the early 1950s, when classes 7 and 8 were begun, only classes 1 through 6 were offered. It was only in 1958 that a high school was opened with forms 3 and 4, which were oriented toward students' passing the Fiji Junior Examination—a prerequisite for continuing their education in the more advanced schools in Fiji. Forms 5 and 6 were added later on; after completing Form 5 a student could take the Fiji Senior Examination, and if successful would obtain a School Leaving Certificate that qualified them for positions in government and private enterprise, or they could go on to one of the professional schools in Fiji, which offered training in such areas as teaching, agricultural science, and medicine. All of these institutions were oriented toward creating a cadre of quasi-professionals for government service. Form 7, which completed the secondary school curriculum in Rotuma, wasn't added until 2013. Thus, until 2013 students who wanted to complete their high school educations, and go on tertiary institutions, had to leave Rotuma for Fiji or beyond.

Going to school represented a rather sharp discontinuity for most Rotuman children. After having experienced a period of nearly unqualified indulgence, they entered a situation in which they had to compete for approval with dozens of others. They were generally quite sensitive to cues indicating approval or disapproval but had not yet learned the skills required to

earn a teacher's approval. Their strong need for acceptance facilitated learning when they were reinforced, but they were prone to give up and withdraw following repeated failures. Although this tendency to withdraw in the face of frustration was a hindrance to scholastic achievement, teaching levels were generally adjusted so that a good proportion of the better students were able to achieve mastery over the large majority of tasks they are required to perform, reinforcing their sense of mastery, and they were encouraged to maintain high aspirations.

That so many students went on to success is a tribute to the Rotuman teachers, most of whom were aware of the stakes of formal education for their people and were extremely dedicated. Although their main purpose was to transmit the kind of information required to pass standard examinations that will permit their students to get a higher education and eventually good positions, they were also aware of the strategies that were effective in getting them to perform, including group activities that encouraged students to cooperate in learning together, rather than to compete for rewards.

For Rotuman girls in the first half of the twentieth century, leaving school usually meant returning to their home compound and taking on homemaking chores. From the parental point of view, the goal of an adolescent girl's domestic education was to groom her to become a desirable spouse. This involved, in addition to mastering the chores of a housewife, learning a mode of decorum that involved modesty and consideration for others. The importance of learning to be a desirable wife could not be overestimated, for it was the only honored role open to a woman if she remained on the island. Gaining a good reputation as a competent and hard-working housekeeper was key to making a desirable marriage.

Those girls who successfully remained in school and passed from grade to grade were generally excused from domestic chores at home. They seemed to gain in self-confidence and

ambition, as illustrated by essays written in 1960 by girls in Forms 3 and 4 in response to the question, "What kind of life do you want to have when you are an adult?" Of the 17 girls who submitted essays, 3 expressed a desire to become a doctor, 10 a nurse, and 2 a teacher. Significantly, all of these girls gave as their reasons as helping the Rotuman people to improve their well-being. Of the remaining two girls, one wanted to become a cook and the other an actress. In most instances, the parents of all such girls were as supportive as they could be to send them to Fiji for further education.

Women in the Economy

The division of labor among adults in Rotuma's domestic economy was quite well marked but not rigid. Men did the heavy physical work, including planting and caring for family gardens, carrying firewood and heavy loads of food, caring for animals kept in the deep bush, and fishing on the reef and, occasionally, in the deep sea. Men also did the arduous work of preparing food in earthen ovens *(koua)* on the home compound and at communal celebrations. They also were responsible for producing copra, the sole commercial product at the time, which involved climbing trees and processing coconuts. Women were more closely tied to the homestead, taking care of children, keeping the family compound in order, cooking ordinary meals, weaving mats, and fishing on the reef. In addition, they might help care for some of the domestic animals, such as chickens and pigs, kept in the near bush. However, women could also be seen helping their husbands to cut copra, and working on cooperative gardens in the bush. Men and women worked together on various special projects, such as communal fish drives on the reef.

But it was in the prestige economy that women's work was of paramount importance, specifically by weaving fine white pandanus mats *(apei)*. *Apei* are the most important items at Rotuman ceremonies. When a chief goes to a function, he must be accompanied by an *apei* (which is carried by his wife or other female representative). Insofar as men's contributions to ceremonies and ceremonial exchanges were in the form of consumables (foodstuffs and kava), *apei* were the only form of sustainable wealth in traditional Rotuman society. Functionally, *apei* had a similar function to whales' teeth *(tabua)* in Fijian society, although in Fiji *tabua* existed strictly in the domain of males, whereas in Rotuma they were created by females.

When women were weaving an *apei* for a chief they were given extreme license to waylay men, including chiefs, and require them to do their bidding, such as making them dance or ridiculing them in various ways (Hocart 1913, note 4596). The license they were granted was similar to that given to female clowns *(hȁn mane'ȁk su)* at weddings (see Hereniko 1995).

Traditionally, white mats were consecrated by the sacrifice of a pig. This infused them with life and therefore rendered them sacred. Thus an *apei* can be considered, as Vilsoni Hereniko has put it, "a woven god" (Hereniko 1995). To this day, the gift of an *apei* therefore lends enormous weight to any form of request or apology. It is very difficult indeed to turn down an appeal backed up with a fine white mat. *Apei* are also used as seats *(päega)* and covers in ritual contexts. The bride and groom at a wedding, honored guests at a welcoming ceremony *(mamasa),* or any others on whom special status is being conferred sit on an *apei* during the performance of ceremonies. Symbolically, this elevates them to a status equivalent to that of chiefs. *Apei* are also used to cover gifts of food on special occasions and as canopies to sanctify special people or items such as a wedding cake.

Whether it was a matter of weaving mats, gardening, or participating in group activities, hard work was a prominent value in traditional Rotuman society. It was one reason Rotuman men earned a reputation for being such desirable crewmen aboard European vessels. A saying that is frequently quoted by Rotumans is "*Hiạ' rā heta ma hiạ' la fa'"* (Keep pressing the branch until it breaks.) This is interpreted as an admonition to do a job until it is properly finished (Inia 1998:31). The saying implies that one should keep focused on the task at hand and not get distracted. In her book regarding Rotuman proverbs, Inia includes 65 sayings that have to do with work, including the biblically derived *"Kop la pumahan"* (You have to sweat) and *"Tạriạ ma mah 'on'ono"* (One receives one's just deserts) (Inia 1998:60, 130). Both of these sayings convey the message that only hard workers deserve success,[3] along with 17 others praising hard work in a variety of forms. Other sayings are criticisms for laziness, giving up easily, wasting time, or shirking work responsibilities (Howard and Rensel 1998:221–222). But it is important to place this emphasis on hard work in cultural context. In contrast to societies that emphasize individual achievement, where hard work is a path to a person's competitive success, in traditional Rotuman society work was mostly cooperative in nature, for the good of a group or the broader community. Thus young women on ceremonial occasions formed working groups to take on the various chores that needed to be done for the success of the event. They could be quite competitive in how they approached such tasks, but the competition was between groups, which tended to strengthen the ties among members of each group. This kind of experience is an important precedent to success in modern contexts insofar as it provides training for cooperative, unselfish, working habits so beneficial to group morale.

Women's Relationships with Men

In a 2021 report regarding violence against women, published by the World Health Organization (WHO), it was estimated that globally about 30 percent of women have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual violence during their lifetime, with about 27 percent involving violence by their intimate partner (WHO 2021). Among the risk factors listed are a history of exposure to child maltreatment, witnessing family violence, marital discord and dissatisfaction, and ideologies of male sexual entitlement. The WHO report concluded: "Gender inequality and norms on the acceptability of violence against women are a root cause of violence against women." When psychological aggression, such as insults and humiliation, is included, the rates are considerably higher, with nearly half of all women in the United States (48.4%) reporting being subjected to some form of expressive aggression (DomesticShelters 2014).

Fortunately, the great majority of Rotuman women have been spared both physical and psychological aggression. From childhood on, females are generally treated with kindness and respect, with displays of violence within and beyond the family very rare. Even during the nineteenth-century "wars" between districts (which were more skirmishes than bloody battles), women were spared, as reported by J. Stanley Gardiner: "Warfare in Rotuma was the exact opposite to what it was in Fiji. The women were never molested" (1998:471). Correspondingly, A. M. Hocart recorded in his field notes, "If a man uses violence with women, the *gagaj* (chief) will be angry" (1913, note 4597).

The preferred residence rule following marriage was traditionally uxorilocal, that is, to the wife's side, where she was eligible to inherit land in her own right, although practical considerations often meant several residence changes over the course of a marriage. The degree

of control that wives could exercise is the subject of several well-known sayings. For example, the notion that women are " unbreakable ropes" *(lū vạsu)* acknowledges the pull that wives exercise over their husband's will, even if he is a chief (Inia 1998:23). Another saying is based on a comment by the legendary warrior Muato'a, that the only place he felt fear was at the sleeping end of his house, where he had to face his wife. Although he had successfully fought in wars, he said he could not win when opposed by his wife (Inia 1998:92). A good example of the general recognition of women's rights vis-à-vis their husbands was the custom of asking a wife's permission before asking her husband to do something that would affect her, such as taking a chiefly title. Other sayings are in praise of a cooperative relationship between husband and wife, including *'Iet tauen se 'on hara* (The axe head fits the handle) (Inia 1998:173) and *Moa ta pulou ka 'uaf ta pulou* (The rooster is fat and the hen is fat) (Inia 1998:88), which are in praise of the advantages of a cooperative relationship.[4]

All of our data suggest that marriages in Rotuma were comparatively stable. For example, the divorce to marriage ratio for Rotuma between 1904 to 1959 was 12.9, a remarkably low rate by contemporary global standards.[5] Another measure is the outcomes of first marriages prior to 1960. Of 646 recorded marriages, 72% couples were still together, 15.9% were terminated by the death of a spouse, 6% ended in separation and 6% in divorce.

All things considered, it is not difficult to understand how traditional Rotuman culture contributed to the development in women with personal characteristics such as high self-esteem, confidence in their abilities to master difficult tasks, a willingness to work hard to achieve their goals, a degree of humility that facilitates working well with others, and an overall can-do attitude—all qualities conducive to success in the modern economy.

We acknowledge that currently the vast majority of Rotumans now live off island, mostly in urban areas with much greater cultural complexity and far more stresses than was characteristic of traditional Rotuman society. Nevertheless, our observations lead us to believe that a substantial portion of Rotuman families abroad are conscious of their Rotuman identity and do their utmost to adhere to traditional values and to transmit them to their children. In doing so, they socialize their daughters in much the same way as their forebears did and instill in them the same traits that are so central to success.

From the Perspective of Successful Rotuman Women

In order to gain insight into the kind of life experiences that contributed to the success of Rotuman women, we distributed a questionnaire to seventeen volunteers, whose jobs ranged from high school principals, university lecturers, office administrators, lawyers, accountants, entrepreneurs, doctors, project managers, and politicians. In addition to information regarding each person's education, work, and family circumstances, the questionnaire included items regarding youthful ambitions, role models and mentors while growing up, the personal attributes they perceived as contributing to their success and how they were acquired, the ways in which being a woman has affected their career, and whether they considered being a Rotuman had anything to do with their success.

Several clear themes emerged from their responses. Most prominent of all was the emphasis on hard work, which most of the women related to their Rotuman upbringing. For example, two respondents directly attributed their work ethic to the Rotuman saying mentioned earlier: *Hiạ' rā heta ma hiạ' la fa'* (Keep pressing the branch until it breaks.) One of them, a

politician, said it was her parents who reminded her about this saying and encouraged her to make sure that whatever job she ventured into, she should do a good job and complete it successfully. She added that this helped her to believe in herself and enabled her to portray self-confidence and courage.

Others related their commitment to working hard to their Rotuman identity and to the reputation of Rotumans, which they felt obliged to uphold. Some examples:

A project analyst wrote:

> I know Rotumans are hardworking people and a lot of organizations who employ them can attest to their reliability and commitment to any task. So yes, being Rotuman and having these traits has helped me become successful. I believe Rotumans are just built like that, we are resilient and adaptable. Being a hardworking race, we are recognized in the workplace and in society as good people to be around. We are dependable and have the ability to move things forward.

A university lecturer wrote:

> I learnt as a Rotuman that laziness is not accepted.

A barrister wrote:

Our fore-fathers and relatives who have shone in Government or in the private or public sector were trail-blazers and hard-working, honest, intelligent and diligent. That notion has somewhat rubbed off on their descendants and I would like to think that being a Rotuman has been advantageous for me and it is also by association to the many successful Rotumans one is related to or is indirectly related to.

An elected member of Fiji's Parliament wrote:

Rotumans are known as hard working, very faithful in their performance, so I didn't want to spoil this reputation.

A teacher of English in a foreign country wrote:

Rotumans are generally known to be hard workers, honest and loyal people, a happy lot.

A regional consultant wrote:

We are a minority race and it has made me push myself to do the best I can so I can be a role model for my children, my community and my family. It also means

> in whatever profession I choose, there won't be many from Rotuma, especially outside of Fiji, so I need to be a good representative of where I am from.

Only two women wrote that being a Rotuman had nothing to do with their successes, while another felt it had not been an asset in her professional career; that she got along better by passing for a Fijian.

More specific to our concerns in this article are notions regarding Rotuman women in particular.

A university subject coordinator wrote:

> I think being a Rotuman woman is something inbuilt in me. I like to take control of the situation and the household; I am used to being in charge and I feel very strongly about justice, good governance, fairness and equality, workers' rights… these things come naturally to me. I have reputation for being fearless.

A service manager wrote:

> We are known for being strong women so maybe that is a factor. We don't give up, we do our best in all that we do.

A prominent lawyer wrote:

My mother funnily enough brought me up to be a strong woman. But you couldn't tell when you see her because she is very quiet and respectful. She taught me that you need to value yourself; you need to be comfortable in your own skin. My mother didn't have many friends; she hardly ever went out but she was happy in her marriage. I learnt how to be like that. You don't need other people to define who you are. Because of my mother's upbringing I have learnt that even at work you don't have to impress people; there is no need to cocktail and impress people; there is no need to market yourself; if you do your work and know your stuff then that should speak for itself.

Another lawyer wrote:

Women [in Rotuma] are brought up strong; a Rotuman woman is a leader of her home; my mother acknowledged my father's leadership but I was brought up that you had a say. I wasn't brought up to be quiet. I had views and opinions. As I grew up I realized that in the different organizations I worked, people found Rotuman women are leaders. My mother was strong in her own quiet way; because she was the eldest of nine children she picked up leadership skills. My mother's grandmother also displayed strong leadership traits.

Other respondents referred to learning about the importance of working hard within their families.

A visa consultant in New Zealand wrote:

> As a Pacific Islander and Rotuman, mothers are the strong voice in the family, they are the center of our homes, so my role model is my mum. She role-modelled her belief in success through her daily life and her constant advice about working hard, and that success can only be obtained through hard work. Seeing her sacrifice to ensure that I was able to attend, and complete my education inspired me to work hard and be successful in life whether it is personal, career or education. Success is measured differently for each person but for me success is being able to look back on my life and feel that the changes that have taken place has given me a sense of pride, fulfilment, happiness, and most of all strength

The head of a university college reported that her mother was her role model:

> My mother is a very hardworking woman; she cut copra, plaited mats; did fishing; kept the house and cooked. I remember at the age of 5 when one day I asked my mother to cook pancakes. She said “if you want to eat pancakes you will have to work hard so you can buy ingredients to make pancakes. Education is the key to success. If you do not work hard and be educated then when you grow up, you

will do exactly what I am doing: cooking, cleaning, fishing, cutting copra and making mats."

This is what motivated me to work hard. I don't like the hot sun and I don't want a life where I would have to cut copra, fish, weave mats and so forth'.

A physician wrote:

My first and biggest role model is my mother. She made things happen, she never sat around and wasted time on "what ifs"! My mother had to overcome many struggles in her lifetime. Her life stories of poverty, back breaking work, hunger, being shamed has always made me burn with courage and determination to achieve all that she had dreamed for herself. Her advice was "Everything is achievable; it just depends on how much you want it!"

My second role model is my dad. Out of the ashes of poverty he was able to make great achievements for himself as a mechanical engineer. He went from being a street kid to graduating with a trade certificate in his field of work. My dad has always encouraged me never to be stagnant in learning, strive for the highest and never look back until you achieve your goals.

~~A high level bureaucrat wrote:~~

~~My role model is my mum. She role-modelled her belief in success through her daily life and her constant advice about working hard, and that success can only~~

~~be obtained through hard work. Seeing her sacrifice to ensure that I was able to attend, and complete my education inspired me to work hard and be successful in life whether it is personal, career or education.~~

It is noteworthy that the motivation to work hard was much less framed in terms of personal ambition than in terms of providing for family, which relates back to the traditional Rotuman emphasis on working hard within a group context. As one woman put it, "My years of experience has taught me that women in leadership roles are not there for power or prestige, but for their families' future." A university administrator aptly summed up the prevailing attitude among our respondents:

> Success is not all the qualifications you have but it's the quality of life spent with loved ones by sharing, caring, loving, and being kind to one another. These are qualities of life that bring happiness and joy to a family. If I didn't have those qualities in my life then I would not call myself successful. Success for me includes graduating from university, but the most important thing in life is to be able to provide for your family, to love and support them, spend time with them, create family activities so that we can all participate, and to provide your children with better education. Hard work, sleepless nights, hiding tears, prayers and perseverance have paid off and I can say that I succeeded in life from what I hoped and dreamt of when I was young because now I am able to give back to my adopted parents who brought me up and to my children and husband, including my extended family members that come my way.

All of these women were high achievers in school, which was a precursor to their occupational successes. In addition to reports of parental emphasis on the importance of education, several of them reported being inspired by one or more of their teachers. For example:

> An accomplished entrepreneur wrote that her foundation social science lecturer was her inspiration and mentor:
>
> She only had positive things to say when times got tough and helped me find my way at the start of University. Later on, my history politics lecturer made me aware of the power of advocacy and the need to speak out against nuclear testing, violence against women and children, homophobia, etc.
>
> I'm also grateful to my mother who taught us the importance of education and the greatest gift we could have was to be educated, especially as a girl. I'm thankful this was imparted on me and I pass on the same advice to my children, especially my girls, so they can be independent. These women were very encouraging and made me feel like I could conquer the world.
>
> A financial manager wrote:
>
> My role models were my teachers that really believed in me and the fact that I could succeed in life : Thank you to my teachers [she went on to name several of them].

Interestingly, only a few of our respondents mentioned impediments they confronted for being women. The great majority averred that gender had no significant impact on their career goals, although a few said they felt obliged to work harder in order to prove themselves.

In response to a question concerning how satisfied they were with their current life circumstances, all of the women interviewed responded positively, not only regarding their jobs, but their family life as well. In other words, they saw themselves as successes, as having achieved their goals, reflecting a high level of self-esteem.

Finally, we asked the women to what they attributed their successes. The majority mentioned supportive parents and/or other family members. In addition, a few referred to their religious beliefs, while several of them attributed their success to personal qualities.

A university professor wrote:

> I am blessed to have a level of intelligence that made me able to pursue my studies and my career. I find that I am thorough in most things that I do. I do not like slumberness [*sic*] and am very aware when I am not performing up to par. This is very rewarding as most of the time I am able to meet due dates. Likewise, I am able to produce quality work.

A university administrator wrote:

I am where I am today because I paid for my own education; I am self-motivated; I have my own goals and I achieve them; I have a very independent streak in me.

A prominent lawyer wrote:

Love of work, discipline, the ability to apply knowledge to the real world. Having a wider worldview perspective on issues. That only happens when one is brave enough to venture out (read, read, read) on what others have to say. I love experimenting with ideas, examples, applying an idea to my reality. I am analytical and never take things for granted, even from so–called experts.

A university department head wrote:

I am a firm believer that if I want to succeed in life, I must learn to take risks, accept challenges and take advantage of any opportunities that come my way. And this has empowered me to survive well in what I do no matter what the situation. A good positive attitude is a powerful tool when I want to focus or achieve my goals, as are some strong personal characteristics such as commitment, a willingness to make sacrifices, dedication, and hard work which helps me to achieve my goals and be successful.

Conclusion

Inspired by Ester Boserup's notion that indigenous women's success in the modern workplace is related to their traditional culture's characteristics, we have endeavored to make the case in this article that the remarkable successes of Rotuman women in the professions, management and other high-level positions in contemporary Fiji and beyond can be related to dominant cultural patterns in traditional Rotuman society, including a pattern of parental indulgence that promotes high self-esteem and self-confidence, a cultural emphasis on working hard within group settings, prominent roles for women in the economy, a high value on education for girls as well as for boys, and a general respect for women's autonomy. We interpret the responses of successful Rotuman women to our interviews and questionnaires as confirming our assumptions.

It is our hope that this article will contribute to a normalization of the fact that given supportive socialization and provided with appropriate opportunities, women, including women from remote Pacific islands, are able to successfully perform at the highest levels within modern societal contexts.

References

Allen, William. 1895. Rotuma. Report of Australasian Association for Advancement of Science, 556–579.

Becker, Howard S., and Blanche Geer.1960. Latent Culture: A Note on the Theory of Latent Social Roles. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 5:304–313.

Boserup, Ester. 1970. *Women's Role in Economic Development.* New York: St. Martin's Press.

DomesticShelters website. 2014. Domestic Violence Statistics: The Hard Truth about Domestic Violence. 1 May. https://www.domesticshelters.org/articles/statistics/domestic-violence-statistics [accessed 8 May 2023]

Eason, William J. E.

1951. *A Short History of Rotuma.* Suva, Fiji: Government Printing Department.

Fiji: Country Gender Assessment 2016. Manila: Asian Development Bank. https://sdd.spc.int/digital_library/fiji-country-gender-assessment-2015 [accessed 8 May 2023]

Forster, Christine. 2011. Ending Domestic Violence in Pacific Island Countries: The Critical Role of Law. *Asian-Pacific Law & Policy Journal* 12:123–144.

Gardiner, J. Stanley. 1898. Natives of Rotuma. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 27:396–435, 457–524.

Giuliano, Paola. 2014. The Role of Women in Society: From Preindustrial to Modern Times. CESifo Economic Studies 61 (1):33–52.

Goldschmidt, Walter, and Evalyn J. Kunkel. 1971. The Structure of the Peasant Family. *American Anthropologist* 73:1058–1076.

Hereniko, Vilsoni. 1995. *Woven Gods: Female Clowns and Power in Rotuma*. Pacific Islands Monograph Series 12. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press.

Hocart, A. M. 1913. Field notes. Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

Howard, Alan. 1966. Plasticity, Achievement and Adaptation in Developing Economies. *Human Organization* 25:265–272.

Howard, Alan, and Jan Rensel. 1998. Rotuman Culture as Reflected in Its Sayings. In *Fäeng ‘es Fūaga: Rotuman Proverbs,* compiled and translated by Elizabeth Kafonika Makarita Inia, 212–250. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.

Howard, Alan, and Jan Rensel. 2020. Rotuman Life Experiences 1890–1960, Volume 1. Available from the University of Hawai‘i–Mānoa Library’s ScholarSpace: https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/items/2ee03438-5f8f-47f3-973c-24ce0a5b8237

Inia, Elizabeth Kafonika Makarita, compiler and translator. 1998. *Fäeng ‘es Fūaga: Rotuman Proverbs*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.

Kardas, Michael and Ed O’Brien. 2018. Research: Watching an Expert Do Something Makes You Think You Can Do It Too. *Harvard Business Review*, May 21, 2018. https://hbr.org/2018/05/research-watching-an-expert-do-something-makes-you-think-you-can-do-it-too

Milton, Kay. 1979. Male Bias in Anthropology. *Man* 14:40–54.

O’Brien, Denise, and Sharon W. Tiffany (eds). 1984. *Rethinking Women’s Roles: Perspectives from the Pacific.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Reid, Anthony. 1988. Female Roles in Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia. *Modern Asian Studies* 22:629–645.

Russell, W. E. 1942. Rotuma: Its History, Traditions and Customs. *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 51:229–255.

Simmonds, Naomi 2011. Mana Wahine: Decolonising Politics. *Women’s Studies Journal* 25:11-25.

Titifanua, Mesulama, and C. Maxwell Churchward. 1995. *Tales of a Lonely Island.* Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.

WHO (World Health Organization). 2021. Violence against Women. 9 March. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women [accessed 8 May 2023]

Winzeler, Robert. 1974. Sex Role Equality, Wet Rice Cultivation, and the State in Southeast Asia. *American Anthropologist* 76:563–567.

Notes

[1] See, for instance, Wikipedia topic "Women in Mythology" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Women_in_mythology)

[2] The entire collection of life stories was compiled and edited by Alan Howard and Jan Rensel and published online in two volumes (Howard and Rensel 2020).

[3] As a teacher on Rotuma in 1960, Inia had displayed on her blackboard the saying, "Only the hard workers deserve success."

[4] This is not to say that wife abuse was entirely absent in the traditional society, but it was extremely rare. Between 1904 and 1959, 200 divorce cases were heard by the magistrate in Rotuma. In 13 cases (6%), women sued for divorce on the grounds of cruelty, the most common grounds being adultery (68.5%) and desertion (25.5%).

[5] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divorce_demography