

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF ROTUMAN DIASPORIC IDENTITY

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Introduction

The result of civilization, at the Sandwich Islands and elsewhere, is found productive to the civilizers, destructive to the civilized. It is said to be compensation—a very philosophical word; but it appears to be very much on the principle of the old game, ‘You lose, I win’: good philosophy for the winner (Herman Melville, 1987: 420).

We must annex those people. We can afflict them with our wise and beneficent government. We can introduce the novelty of thieves, all the way up from street-car pickpockets to municipal robbers and Government defaulters, and show them how amusing it is to arrest them and try them and then turn them loose—some for cash and some for ‘political influence’. We can make them ashamed of their simple and primitive justice...We can make that little bunch of sleepy islands the hottest corner on earth, and array it in the moral splendor of our high and holy civilization. Annexation is what the poor islanders need. ‘Shall we to men benighted, the lamp of life deny?’ (Mark Twain, 1873).

Melville and Twain both recognized that the history of contact between the South Pacific and the West, while benefiting the West, has had a deleterious effect on the Pacific. While the interest of these authors appears to be primarily in the economic impact that colonialism had on the area, it is undoubtedly the case that the impact negatively affected all areas of culture.

The South Pacific islands have long held a powerful attraction for Europeans and North Americans alike, due to their exoticism or otherness. The gently waving palm trees, white sandy beaches, lush vegetation, and friendly brown-skinned people depicted on travel posters and in Hollywood movies such as *South Pacific*, *Hawaii*, and *Mutiny on the Bounty* have created an other-worldly conceptualization in Western minds. In this post-colonial age, the palms, sand, and people (mostly) remain, yet many of these islands struggle to maintain their traditional cultures and languages in a rapidly modernizing world. Rotuma is one such island. Seventeen miles in circumference, it lies at latitude 12 degrees S and longitude 177 degrees E, 280 miles northwest of Viti Levu, Fiji. In this paper I intend to demonstrate that Rotuman identity is in jeopardy, owing largely to its small island status.

Because of its isolation, Rotuma was a frequent port of call during the whaling era, approximately between 1791 and 1881, with ships' crews stopping there to do repairs and gather provisions. At one point after 1875, according to reports written by ship captains, there may have been as many as 100 white deserters living on the island, at a time when the indigenous population was no more than 2,500. Early on during this same period, the Rotuman people showed extreme curiosity about the world beyond their island's boundaries. To satisfy their curiosity, many young Rotuman men allowed themselves to be recruited to work on whaling ships, and later on Pacific plantations. As a result of this geographical mobility, the Rotuman language has contributed to the development of Pacific Pidgin English (Keesing, 1988: 69), whose daughter languages are now found in various creolized forms in places such as Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and the Torres Straits. In spite of its prolonged

exposure to English during this period, the Rotuman language remained basically intact back on the home island. Thus, Rotuman islander identity was maintained.

The Decline of the Rotuman Language

The Rotuman language is a member of the Eastern Oceanic Subgroup of Austronesian. An isolate within that group, its nearest relatives are Fijian and the Polynesian languages, such as Tongan and Samoan.

One of the primary functions of language is to indicate our identity, to tell others who we are. David Crystal asks the question (2005: 303): "Why should language be such a significant index of ethnic or nationalistic movements?" His answers are that 1) language is such an integral and obvious part of a community's life; 2) language provides a link to the past; and 3) language unites groups of speakers and separates them from other groups which speak differently.

At present, the Rotuman identity is rapidly eroding, as people now opt to leave the island in larger and larger numbers. According to the best estimates (Gordon, 2005), the total Rotuman population numbers around 9,000. Approximately 2,500 of those live on the island, while the rest live in places such as Fiji, Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, California and British Columbia. They have left primarily for education (the island offers schooling only through grade 10) and employment (businesses on Rotuma have all failed and copra sales—once the main income source—depend on regular shipping to Fiji, which is erratic at best). Most emigrants are young adults, who take with them their youthful energy and skills. Few return, other than to briefly visit relatives. The children of these emigrants are growing up speaking English in addition to, or sometimes in place of, Rotuman. Those who remain on Rotuma are primarily the very young and the very old. The greatest source of income on the island is remittances sent from overseas. However, as there are few goods on Rotuma that require cash purchase, other than cases of imported corned beef and gravestones, much of this money is ultimately used to send more people overseas.

Rotuman Islander Identity in Diaspora

So what does it mean to be a Rotuman islander in these diasporic communities? Judging from reports posted on the Rotuma website (www.rotuma.net), there are several types of traditional activities that are maintained in these overseas enclaves. These occasions are important in terms of Rotuman identity maintenance. The primary one is the annual observance of 'Rotuma Day', which occurs on or around May 13, to commemorate the day in 1881 when Rotuma ceded itself to Great Britain in order to be protected from France. Rotumans congregate for 2–3 days, some traveling a considerable distance to participate in the celebration. They dance (*maka*), especially the *tautoga*, and eat traditional food cooked in an underground oven (*koua*), such as *fekei* pudding (made of taro or bananas), pig (*puaka*), taro ('*a'ana*), and tinned corned beef (*poat kau*). Fine hand-woven mats (*apei*) are present in abundance. The cultural traditions carried out at this annual event, which vary little between different Rotuman communities worldwide, are reported via the Internet to the Rotuman diasporic community. Although this event is essential to maintaining a Rotuman identity outside of Rotuma, there are also signs to suggest that much that is uniquely Rotuman is being lost. For example, there are almost no reports of Rotumans living outside of Rotuma performing the *mamasa* (drying ceremony) for guests who come from overseas, or weaving new mats. Their weddings do not include a female clown, as island weddings do (Hereniko, 1995).

The Rotuman language is also essential to Rotuman identity in diaspora. In a study done by anthropologists Dr Alan Howard and Dr Jan Rensel (2001), the Rotuman language has been

identified by Rotumans as the single most critical component of Rotuman identity. Yet for Rotumans observing Rotuma Day outside of Rotuma, the language used will most likely be English (often mixed with Rotuman in private conversations). When reports of the celebration are sent to the website, they are primarily written in English (although the website also publishes material in the Rotuman language), with the occasional inclusion of a Rotuman word or expression. Clark (2005: 29) reports that, according to a survey she conducted of users of the Rotuma website, people actually want more articles in Rotuman. It is this discrepancy between what is stated as a value (that is, the centrality of the Rotuman language to Rotuman identity) and actual behavior (a shift to English) which signals that Rotuman identity is in crisis. Rotuma is not alone in this among Pacific islands. Lotherington (1999) points out the inherent contradiction in the 1970 call of Ratu Sir Kamese Mara, then Prime Minister of Fiji, for the newly independent Pacific island nation to follow ‘the Pacific Way’, which would place ‘tradition’ over ‘development’. The call was issued, not in Mara’s native Fijian, but in English. What we appear to have here is a case of what Golovko (2005: 33), following Ingold (2000) calls “language as declared”, rather than “language as spoken”—that is, language is a symbol of identity more than it is a means of daily communication for the majority of Rotumans.

A language, by definition, is distinct from all other languages. Rotuman has some morpho-syntactic properties that are not found anywhere else. Although it shows lexical similarities to its closest relatives, partly due to shared inheritance and partly due to borrowing, its morphology displays unique properties. In particular, all lexical words have two forms (called ‘complete’ and ‘incomplete’ or ‘long’ and ‘short’), one form derived from the other by one of three processes: metathesis (*hosa* > *hoas* ‘flower’), vowel deletion (*atmotu* > *atmot* ‘island’), and umlauting (*mose* > *mös* ‘to sleep’). I would maintain that the processes of metathesis, vowel deletion, and umlauting, which together conspire to make most surface words consonant-final (a trait uncommon in Oceania), were unlikely the result of a gradual change. Rather, it seems more probable that this was a conscious and deliberate attempt on the part of Rotumans during a period of isolation centuries ago, following the period of contact with Tonga and Samoa, to separate themselves from others, either for the purpose of creating a secret language or as a means of establishing a linguistic distance from Tongan and Samoan, from which it had borrowed a large number of words. This would have been a means of setting them apart, of affirming their special uniqueness among the island groups in the South Pacific. So while the Rotuman people, by their actions since the beginning of Western contact, have proclaimed their desire to connect to the larger world, they have, at the same time, built a fence with their language. Language is more than a symbol; it is an “act of identity” (LePage and Tabouret-Keller, 1985).

There are probably, in all small islands, particularly postcolonial island societies, conflicting desires for pre-modernity (that is, to be separate, independent, and to maintain traditional values and ways of living) and modernity (that is, to be connected, to possess Western goods, and to be part of the global village). To simultaneously meet both sets of needs/desires may be impossible; there will generally be some sort of negotiation of values or else the islanders may choose either pre-modern or modern ideologies and practices. It appears that many island cultures are choosing connectedness over separateness, (the English) language as an instrument of inter-group communication over the indigenous language as an instrument of social identity, and language as declared over language as spoken.

The issue of tourism demonstrates these conflicts in Rotuma. “Tourism is often considered the economic savior of small island nations” (Sperlich, 2005: 59). Nevertheless, while tourism brings in much-needed income, it simultaneously exposes islanders to the lure of material goods and non-traditional values. The Rotuman Council of Chiefs for many years refused to allow tourists to visit the island. Any visitors who arrived by plane or boat without connections to local residents were put up in local homes. In 1986 the Council relented slightly, and signed

an agreement with the *Daystar*. This cruise ship would pay F \$20,000 for the right to dock in the port town of Oinafa and to allow its tourists to spend several hours on the island, lying on its beaches, swimming in the pristine waters, and purchasing leis, woven fans, and mats. But before long the agreement was cancelled, as the seven districts on the island could not agree as to how the income should be divided up. As a result, today there are still no restaurants, hotels or guesthouses on Rotuma. Travel to and from the island is getting more difficult and more expensive. The Rotuma website has reported that the airstrip needs repairing, but the Fijian government shows little interest in spending funds on a non-revenue-producing area; aviation fuel is often in short supply, which prevents the smaller planes (that could possibly use the unrepainted airstrip) from flying there; and the ships take two days to travel between Viti Levu and Rotuma, which only the locals and backpacking Western youth are willing to tolerate.

Conclusions

As noted above, the island of Rotuma and its residents are becoming more isolated because of poor transportation, loss of industry, and the out-migration of its best and brightest. Meanwhile, the rest of the Rotuman people, those in diaspora, are becoming more connected to the global community by leaving the island permanently. Language use has also experienced a split, with the Rotuman language still in use on the island of Rotuma, while overseas most Rotumans are switching to English, the language of most global communications.

Could the use of the Rotuman language be restored among members of the Rotuman diaspora? Just as the coral reef surrounding Rotuma is being restored by some students from the University of the South Pacific in Fiji and their *Läje* (reef) Initiative¹, the Rotuman language could be revitalized through concerted efforts of the Rotuman people themselves. Since September 2006, I have been working on the creation of a Rotuman language learning website (www.neiu.edu/~rotuman.htm). A website has the advantage over other media (such as textbooks or CD-ROMs) for learning a language in diaspora, in that a website is equally available to all parts of the world (provided the requisite technology is available), the Internet is not likely to be replaced anytime soon, and nearly all people who live in Western countries have access to computers and the Internet. My goal for this project is to encourage the maintenance of Rotumaness in diaspora through the learning of the Rotuman language. Rotumans living in diasporic communities will use this resource to varying degrees, but I predict that all who use it will feel more Rotuman as a result.

In conclusion, I would like to quote from a message posted on a forum on www.rotuma.net on preserving the Rotuman language:

As I visited Ilisapeti Inia's home in Savlei I peeped in to see what was in her office and found that there was a room full of books, jokingly I said that this is a library, she laughed and said yes but the real library is here pointing outside to the ocean, to the village, to the people and the Island. We are our own library, its in us to teach our Rotumaness to our children (Victor Narsimulu, posted May 4, 2006).

Endnote

¹ The coral reef habitat has been damaged by dumping of household rubbish, rust from metals disposed into the sea, and a fast-growing coral known as *kama*. It is no surprise that a natural resource such as the reef is compromised at the same time that the culture and language are endangered. All are essential parts of island ecology. In fact, in its 2002 Annual Report (www.rotuma.net/os/lajereports/2002annualreport.htm), the *Läje* Initiative connects these conservation concerns with the loss of culture and traditions (including language) on the island.

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