

Konousi (Koni) Aisake was born in the isolated village of Fapufa in 1960, the 13th of 16 children born to Aisake Kaurasi and Raumue Penerope. Of the 16, ten boys and four girls survived to adulthood.

Konousi left Rotuma for Fiji at age 14 and attended D.A.V. Boy's College in Suva. He worked for the Blue Lagoon Cruise company for ten years until 1987 and was one course short of attaining an interisland master's certificate when the coup overthrowing the Fiji Government occurred, leading him to emigrate to Canada.

He met his future wife, Sandra, in 1985. They met again in Suva after the first coup, and "we watched the burning that occurred in Suva town and the second coup. From that moment we said that we'll start a new life in Canada." They were married on 14 November 1987.

Konousi worked in a stained glass factory for ten years where he learned the art of making stained glass. In 1996 he set out on his own as a self-taught woodcarver and maker of art objects from stained glass.

He is interviewed by Alan Howard.

(AH) *You were born and raised on Rotuma and lived in the rather remote village of Fapufa. Can you tell me what it was like as a child growing up there?*

(KA) As a child growing up in remote village, I had a great life. I enjoyed fishing, farming, and trapping. I most enjoyed going out on my own to see new places that I hadn't been to before. Somehow my parents knew that I was different from my brothers and sisters, and I was.

(AH) *Were you artistic as a child? If so, how did you express*

it? If not, when did you realize that you had artistic talent?

(KA) As a child I had no idea that I had artistic talent. It was just our way of life, being around Dad. In 1990 I start creating art and found it fulfilling to come up with something that I created. And it took me back to my childhood days.

(AH) As you look back, was there anything in your childhood that influenced you to become the artist you are today? Was there anyone in your family, or any teachers, who particularly influenced your artistic development? If so, please tell me about it.

(KA) I looked up to my dad and know how blessed I am for the knowledge that he gave me. When you have little money creativity is the key, like learning how to build a traditional house, or mixing coral to build a stronger house.

(AH) You left Rotuma at the age of 14 to go to school in Suva. Can you tell me about your experience at D.A.V Boy's College there (how long were you there?) Did your experience there have any influence on your artistic development?

(KA) As a 14-year old Rotuman, attending school in D.A.V. Boys College was a tough challenge. I knew no one, and had little experience speaking English, and didn't know any Fijian or Hindi. Every word had to be translated into Rotuman, then back to English. I spent three years in that college. What I learned was how to get along and survive.

(AH) After leaving school, you spent 10 years working with the Blue Lagoon Cruise Company out of Lautoka. Did you have any opportunities during this period to express yourself artistically? If so, how?

(KA) During my ten years with the Blue Lagoon Cruise, working

with ropes was the only creative thing I got to do—making fenders, rope nets, and many different kinds of knots.

(AH) *What would you say are the dominant artistic traditions on Rotuma? In other words, how have Rotumans traditionally expressed themselves artistically?*

(KA) Today in Rotuma the dominant artistic traditions are dance and mat weaving.

(AH) *In what ways do you see yourself as expressing your artistic talents consistent with these traditions? In what ways do you see your work as different from them?*

(KA) The difference is in the way I express my work; it is to show my people that we can bring back this type of skill [woodcarving], which has been lost for some time, so we can get in touch with our roots. The gift is always there, and the time has come to do something about it.

(AH) *What were the biggest adjustments you had to make after you married Sandra and migrated to Canada?*

(KA) The biggest adjustment was trying my best to understand how things work in Canada in every way.

(AH) *How did you happen to get a job in a stained glass factory in Canada? Why were you attracted to that job? Can you describe for me what kind of work you did in the stained glass factory, and what influence it had on your artistic development?*

(KA) I found an ad in the local paper looking for someone who was willing to learn about decorative glass known as stained glass. All I knew then was I needed to restart my life. I first started working in the putty room; after glass doors and windows are built, putty is packed in to hold the glass pieces in place.

As the company grew I was chosen to start up the double glazing section. Double glazing involves using two pieces of clear glass to protect the stained glass unit. In 1989 the company grew again and bought a master glass machine which had numeric controls for making incisions. The software used a CAD program that was copied to a floppy disk for the machine to use. The program was made for particular designs on particular sizes and thicknesses of glass. To do this correctly you had calculate the co-ordinates for the placement of the design on the glass. You also had to calculate the depth for the grooves of the diamond wheel(s) and the polishing wheel(s). These calculations had to be precise so glass wouldn't break, and so flaws and unjoined lines wouldn't happen because they are very visible on glass. I personally designed a test program that ran the master glass machine. This test allowed me to tell the machine how I wanted the etching to be done, and what groove size I wanted on that particular thickness of glass. I was also responsible for sand blasting. This included training, solving problems, and supervision. If the design is blasted incorrectly on the pieces of glass it won't work out. I taught workers how to cut glass. From this work I gained an understanding of glass and admiration for it. The color of stained glass and its beauty influenced me a lot in my artistic development.

(AH) After you left the stained glass factory in 1996 you started woodcarving in addition to making items out of stained glass. You have described yourself as a "self-taught" woodcarver. What inspired you to take up woodcarving?

(KA) I was deeply drawn to and inspired by how the American Indians have struggled to hold on to their culture, especially knowing that the art of woodcarving has been almost forgotten by my people. I knew I had to do something about it before it's too

late.

(AH) *Can you tell me something about the way you learned the art of woodcarving?*

(KA) I learned wood carving by using a few good ideas from books, which I made work. I knew that I'm good with my hands, so I just worked at it. And listening to Rotuman music helped along in the process.

(AH) *What equipment and materials do you use?*

(KA) The only special tools I use are a box-cutter knife, very few carving chisels, a drill and a sander. Ninety-nine percent of my work is done manually. I believe that this way I can use my good energy to give my work life. Yellow cedar is the wood that I use mostly for carvings. It's not as cheap as other wood, but it is the best for carvings.

(AH) *Can you tell me something about the technique you use?*

(KA) My technique is to draw a picture on a piece of cardboard, then transfer it a piece of wood. Then I cut out the shape before carving.

(AH) *How long did it take before you felt like you had mastered the art?*

(KA) It took me five years. When I compare my earlier carvings to today's, I can tell that I've improved. Designs that took me hours no longer take that much time. I feel that I still have a lot to learn before I'll be a master in woodcarving.

(AH) *In what ways does your style of carving reflect your life experiences as a Rotuman?*

(KA) I started carving as a gift to my Dad. The goal was to

spread his name and to create a smile and joy in anyone with an interest in art. My style of carving reflects my family history and Rotuma. For example, my preferred design is tropical fish. There are some bad fishing practices going on in Rotuma today. I am trying to bring fish art work into Rotuman households in Rotuma, and hope that this will lead to people fishing in a different way and with a better understanding.

The designs I use are my own and the carvings tell a lot about my family, and about Rotuma.

[Konousi uses a variety of symbols, many drawn from Rotuman culture, in his work. He provided the following set of signs that appear on his artwork and their meaning:



**This is how I see life;
it starts small and continues**



**These lines come from
a human hand**



**Main sail of a sailboat;
shows that I used to have a life
out at sea**



The sea



**Hani
si = Hanisiof
of**



or



**Means how many kids in my
Dad's family or my own**



Birds



**Circle of life: living creatures
need one another to create a life**



**Sometimes I use these lines to
tell how many hours or days I
spent on a piece**



Sunrise (mostly seen as an eye)



**Reflections of light on a nice calm
day at sea, or at night**



Waves breaking

"Hanisiof" is the Rotuman equivalent of "aloha." It signifies love, compassion, and feelings for someone.]

(AH) *What objects that you create give you the most satisfaction? What are your inspirations for making these objects?*

(KA) Working with coconut shells brings me the most satisfaction. It's an interesting material that I can bend and fold in any shape I want. But you must have respect for it because it can break. It teaches me about life—that there's a limit to every life form and one must know when and how to stop going further. It's also easy for my people to relate to, and is something that is Rotuman. That brings me a lot of pride.

(AH) *How often have you returned to Rotuma since you migrated to Canada? Do your visits to Rotuma affect your art in any way? Do you have any plans for passing on your artistic ideas and knowledge to other Rotumans? If so, in what ways?*

(KA) So far my family has been to Rotuma four times in seventeen years. My plan is to visit Rotuma every five years with my wife and children, but because of the cost of flying, and arranging time off from school and work, it is getting harder. If we could, we would visit Rotuma every year. Being home inspires me and grounds me. Every time I visit Rotuma it makes me proud to see my art work been worn everywhere I look. That gives me determination to do more. I do hope that some day I'll have more time to express my art and points of view there. My plan is to open a studio in Rotuma someday.

(AH) *When you are selling to Canadians or other non-Pacific buyers, do you have a sense of whether they buy your work for its artistic properties (they like how it looks) or because of*

*what it represents? If the latter, do you like to talk to buyers about Rotuma and what figurative symbols, such as fish, mean to Rotuman people? In other words do you specifically represent your work to customers as **Rotuman** art?*

(KA) People buy my work because they like how different my work is compared to others. Usually a buyer wants to know who I am and where Rotuma island is on the world map. I tell them to search the Internet for Rotuma island. I specifically tell them my work is Rotuman art.

(AH) Do you have any idea of how many sales of your work have resulted from the display on the Rotuma Website?

(KA) Yes. The Rotuma website plays a major role in my sales, especially among Rotumans. All I know is that three thousand plus carved coconut shell hair holders have been sold in Rotuma.