

**Ambitions, Values, and Emotions
as Expressed in Rotuman Student Essays, 1960**

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While doing my doctoral research on Rotuma in 1960, I engaged in a variety of systematic data-collection projects. Besides copying all the information available in the registers of births, deaths, marriages, and divorces back to the beginning of the twentieth century, I conducted an island-wide household census, interviews with mothers regarding childrearing, and interviews with teachers about their teaching strategies. I also invited Upu and Malhaha high school students in Forms III and IV (grades 9 and 10) to compose essays. I provided teachers with a list of topics of interest to me that I thought might provide some insight into Rotuman thinking, and I asked the teachers to choose whichever ones they thought best. I do not know what actual instructions the teachers gave the students, nor do I know whether they provided any additional guidance that may have influenced the outcomes.

The teachers ended up assigning five topics out of longer list, including:

- What kind of life do you want to have when you are an adult?
- Where in the world would you most like to live, and why?
- What do you think Rotuma will be like twenty years from now?
- What dream do you have most often and what you think it means
- Describe how you felt when someone who was close to you (a friend or relative) died

The students' essays were written in English in longhand on notebook paper. At the time, English was taught in the schools beginning at grade 3, but it was not spoken in the great majority of households or during community meetings or events. Although in the more advanced grades (Forms III and IV) much of the content was taught in English, there were few opportunities for students to get feedback on their writing skills. As a result, the essays turned in by the students for this particular assignment contained a number of misspellings or grammatical irregularities. For the sake of clarity, Jan and I have edited them lightly.

Ambitions: Future Occupations

Thirty-eight students (ages 14–16) wrote an essay about the kind of life they would like to have as an adult. Their occupational choices, arranged by students' gender, were as follows:

Females: nurse 9, doctor 3, teacher 2, cook 1, dental nurse 1, cook 1, actress 1 = 17

Males: doctor 6, sailor 3, teacher 2, architect 1, carpenter 1 = 13

Gender unknown: teacher 5, doctor 1, health inspector 1, veterinarian 1 = 8

The striking thing about this distribution is the aspiration of the great majority of these student to become professionals, particularly health professionals 21 (55%) or teachers 9 (24%). The Form III teacher who assigned this topic, Aisea Aitu, included the following note with the batch of essays he gave me:

Dear Alan,

Please find your first batch of compositions. These are written by the children without any assistance from me whatsoever. Strangely enough, however, you will find a large percentage of the candidates aiming at medicine as a future course. I simply cannot account for this overwhelming percentage. Perhaps with your research work into Rotuma's background, you may be able to attribute some motive for this desire to be medical men and women in future.

Yours sincerely,

Aisea Aitu

My research suggests four main factors that could explain this distribution:

- 1) Rotuman child rearing, which in general was quite indulgent and supportive of a child's personal autonomy, tended to instill a sense of quiet self-confidence and a "can do" mentality so that most youths, as well as adults, felt capable of achieving any goals they set their mind to.
- 2) The two types of professionals who had a physical presence on the island, and could serve as models to be emulated, were health personnel (most doctors and nurses) and teachers. The

students had the kinds of personal engagements with such individuals that made it possible to imagine themselves fulfilling their roles.

- 3) Rotuman culture at the time placed a great emphasis on contributing to the welfare of others in their families, local communities, and the island as a whole. In fact the great majority of students, when explaining why they made their choices, emphasized various forms of service, such as curing sick people and saving lives, helping people to keep clean, teaching mothers what they need to know so they can keep their babies healthy, and helping to raise the standard of living on the island. All but eight of the students either directly or indirectly indicated that they intended to return to Rotuma to help elevate the conditions of living on the island. Correspondingly, only a few mentioned monetary or status rewards as their primary motivation.
- 4) The focus on the medical arts may have been influenced by recent school lessons having to do with Western innovations in medical practice. Several of the students who chose health professions mentioned such advances in medicine. For example, a female student in Form III declared her intention to become a nurse, inspired by what she had learned about:

the kinds of medicines and drugs invented by famous men such as chloroform by a man called Dr. James Simpson and penicillin by Dr. Fleming. Also William Harvey in 1657 proved that the blood circulates. The man that discovered germs was Louis Pasteur through a microscope. All these drugs, medicines and other things I would like to use as much as I could. If I want to be a good student I would like to study very hard to know these ways. I must help the doctor to operate on sick people and extract bad teeth.

As a matter of fact, this generation of Rotuman students, as well as subsequent generations, have been remarkably successful in their educational accomplishments, with many if not most completing their secondary—and a significant number, tertiary—educations. Correspondingly, the proportion of Rotumans who have moved into the professions, including medicine, teaching, the law, and middle and upper management positions has been impressive, both in Fiji and abroad.

A subsidiary theme in several of the essays was a desire to travel to Fiji and further abroad, either in the process of getting an education or for its own sake. For example, one young man wrote:

I always wanted to become a sailor. Following are some of the reasons for my fantasy. I can sail round the world to satisfy my curiosity. Another simple reason is that I can mix with other people. From that mixing my knowledge is liable to be wider.

And a young woman wrote that she would like to become an actress, in part because “I will travel overseas and see faraway countries.”

The Most Desirable Place to Live

Responses to the essay question “Where in the world would you most like to live, and why?” brought out the desire to experience life abroad at the expense of commitment to staying in or returning to Rotuma. Of the sixteen students who wrote on this topic, only two chose Rotuma as their place of choice (one male, one female); both of these emphasized the desire to contribute to their people’s well-being. Three others (all males) chose places in Fiji (two chose Suva, one Nadi). Interestingly, the two who chose Suva specified that they would prefer to live a few miles away from the main town so they could retain some of the advantages of living in Rotuma, such as being able to plant a garden. As one young man put it:

I would like to live in Suva. My home should be in a place four miles away from the main town. It is healthier out there than in the town. You can still go to town but in a different life altogether. You cannot plant in town but you can plant out at my home. It is very unhealthy in the town. You cannot sleep well at night. There are many robbers in town. There are also many vehicles that run day and night.

The other two emphasized the sights to see (for example, airplanes, buses, and other large vehicles, and big buildings) and the different kinds of people (Fijians, Indians, Chinese, Europeans, and Samoans, as well as Rotumans).

Two others (one female, one sex unknown) chose America, although their essays included a broader range of destinations. Both specified wanting to see US President Eisenhower and a range of different kinds of sites (which, like the president, were likely to have been topics covered in their school's history and geography lessons). Thus, the girl wrote:

The reason for my living in U.S.A. is that I would know something about their president Eisenhower... I also want to see the sky-scraper in New York which is known as the tallest building in the world, and it is also the headquarters of the United Nations Organization. I also want to see coal fields in Pennsylvania. I want to go and live in the place where all the films are made, which is known as Holy wood... I like to live most in New York because it is the largest city... I can see the largest and longest rivers which are known all over the world, such as the Mississippi and the Amazon, and also Hudson Bay, all the lakes...

The other person who chose America wrote:

I should like to live most in U.S.A. to see the president called Eisenhower. Secondly, I should like to see the two houses of Senate and Commons at Ottawa. In Ottawa I could see Canada's Parliament. Its Prime Minister is Mr. John Diefenbaker. Leaving Ottawa I should like to visit New York, by a train. It is the famous city for its buildings. I should like to visit Mexico and Galveston because of its oil. Leaving those places I should like to visit the Panama Canal where the ships pass from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean. It is the biggest canal second to the Suez.

The remaining eight students all chose England. Again, the emphasis was on the head of state (in this case Queen Elizabeth II) and famous sites. Exemplary was the essay of a young woman:

I should like to live in England because I want to see the Queen. Secondly, I should like to see the Buckingham Palace where she lives. In England, I would like to see the Big Ben which is known all over the world as the largest clock. If I should live in England I should like to visit Manchester where all the cotton goods

are manufactured. I should like to visit St Helen where glass is manufactured. I should like to visit Leeds where woolen goods and blankets are manufactured. I should like to visit Sheffield because it is famous for knives, cutleries and armours. I should also like to visit Nottingham where lace and leather industries are. I should like to visit Glasgow which is the second city of Great Britain. I should like to visited Coventry where motor-cars are made and which is famous all over the world. I should like to visit Oxford, the educational centre which is famous all over the world. I should like to visit Swansea and Cardiff in Wales where coal is produced and iron is imported from Spain. I should like to see Liverpool which is the second seaport in England. I should also like to see the famous river in England which is called Thames that has a dock for ships to anchor. I should like to visit the coal fields of Scotland called Fifeshire, Lanarkshire, and Ayrshire where iron is imported from Sweden. I should like to visit Aberdeen and Dogger Bank which is the fishing ground in England. The reason is that I should like to see the famous towns and cities in England. Another reason is that our island Rotuma is ruled by the Queen in England. The last one is that I want to know the climate.

What these essays suggest is that the history and geography lessons taught at these grade levels fired the imaginations of a good proportion of the students. It's interesting that none of the students chose either Australia or New Zealand, the two countries outside of Fiji with the largest concentrations of Rotuman emigrants today. I would attribute this to the likelihood that neither of these countries were core parts of the curriculum in the Rotuman schools at the time, while the United Kingdom and the United States were central.

Rotuma Twenty Years On

Five students (three males, two sex unknown) wrote an essay about what they thought Rotuma would be like in twenty years. All predicted that life on the island would be much improved over that time span. Here are some quotes that suggest ways in which they thought things would be better:

We might have better schools and more beautiful buildings. I think more busses will come. In 20 years time I think Rotuma people will be more than six thousand... I think there will be a hotel at Motusa.

The schools would be rebuilt, roads, stores, and there would be a hotel at Motusa and an aerodrome. Coconuts would be replanted and the bush would be cleared away. The Rotumans would have a wireless telephone round the island.

By 1980 I think Rotuma will have received self-government and there will be many children in schools, many busses and trucks and the road will be concrete and traveling will be very easily. I think Motusa will be one town during 1980 and there will be some cafes there. In order to have self-government we must have an aerodrome.

Some of the Rotumans will have motor-cars and bicycles. I think there will be a big harbour at Oinafa and the boats must pay a sum of money when they anchor. The R.C.A. company will be one of the biggest towns in Rotuma during 1980. The houses of Rotuma will all be concrete...

I think Rotuma will be on a very high standard. Motusa will be something like Lautoka at this time. Road will be enlarged, school standard will be very high. Motorcars running every now and then. There will be a very big harbour at Motusa. The R.C.A. will be a very big society. Poor Rotumans are not going to travel by foot but by their own motorcars. The people are not going to live in houses made of palm leaves but in concrete houses.

Our hospital will be well built. We will have plenty doctors and nurses. Travelling will be very easy. That is we will have a concrete road round the island... I think there will be a big wharf at Motusa for big liners to call... the two companies will pack up their things and return to Fiji. There will be an airdrome where aeroplanes land. Rotuma will have received their self-government.

Some of these predictions were not too far off, while others have proved to be rather fanciful. On the plus side, by 1980 Rotuma school facilities were improved, a wharf had been built in Oinafa that accommodated large vessels, and most people lived in concrete, wooden, or limestone houses (with the great majority of thatched homes having been destroyed by Hurricane Bebe in 1972). The two firms on the island, Morris Hedstrom and Burns Philp, had indeed both packed up and left, and the Rotuma Cooperative Society was thriving (although it subsequently failed). And in 1981 an airstrip was constructed that allowed small planes to fly to Rotuma on a more or less regular basis.

Among the student predictions for 1980 that did not materialize were increases in the island's population and urbanization, and there were no hotels or tourist accommodations. Rotuma remains part of Fiji and is not self-governing, and the roads have deteriorated rather than improved (and in 2019, during our last visit, they seemed to be in the worst shape ever). While there were a few more motor vehicles in 1980, they did not result in any significant change in the ease of transportation around the island.

What stands out from these essays, however, is an optimistic view of the future that suggests a motivation to institute change that could improve the lives of people on the island.

Dreams

Thirty-five students wrote about a dream they'd had and what they thought it meant. Dream interpretation is, of course, problematic even within one's culture, given the flexibility of words and images to take on a variety of meanings depending on a given individual's personal experience. I therefore did not attempt to guess at the symbolic significance of particular concepts of images in the dreams the students reported having. Rather, I tabulated certain themes, taken at face value. For instance, 20 of the dreams (57%) could be classified as nightmares. They included 8 dreams of fearful conditions one encountered, 4 of being chased by a person or creature intending to do them harm, 4 of themselves or a member of their family being afflicted by a disease or death, 3 of being trapped in a cave or on an island, and 1 experiencing a general calamity on Rotuma.

Three examples:

I was grabbed by a magician and was taken to the mountains. We saw many people on our way and I cried to them for help, but they gave no reply. On the mountain I was encircled by troops of little men. They wore green jackets, red caps and white owl's feathers on their heads. I was led to a very huge building in which sat their old king. The king ordered a few men to take me on board a ship and to kill me on their way. We embarked on the ship and sailed until the land was out of sight. The sailors then decided to kill me. I begged them to let me say my prayers first, something I was taught to do. I went up the top of the mast to have a last look around. I fell down on my bended knees to be killed by the crew. The captain brought a knife and came closer to me. Just as he raised his knife, I woke up and screamed. I realized that it was only a dream.

Strolling along the street one day, I met a queer, ugly looking fellow who I really recognized as a magician. Passing him and not so far I could hear him shouting and calling after me. My heart seemed to beat faster when I saw his ugly crooked teeth. Reaching me he bowed low and kissed my toes. Most suddenly I felt as if there was something happening to me. He then laughed and laughed at me until I became smaller and smaller. He then tied a rope to my neck and led me. Passing a window of a shop I could see myself in a mirror. I couldn't believe my eyes for this sight of it makes me feel awful. I was changed into a cat. Leaving the street we came to a very lonely place where I thought I was at Suva. He then led me and brought me to a very dark cave. Inside it I could see many creatures and reptiles crawling and fighting. He opened the door and threw me right into the middle of these beasts where I was killed and eaten by them. I woke up and burst into a loud scream. I then knew that this dream would bring me misfortune and bad luck.

Coming home late on Christmas night, I found out that it was my grandmother's house. I opened the door quietly because I did not want to disturb her. I knew though, that if she was awake, she would hear me no matter how quietly I came in. The light was on in her house, at the far end. While I was hanging my coat, I heard her steps coming slowly. I turned and saw her. She looked at me intently for

a moment holding on to the door. She told me that she was dying and I had better call a doctor. I picked her up and took her to her bed, then I called a doctor. I sat beside her and held her dry, papery old hand. She was quiet, her eyes were closed and sometime during the few minutes I sat waiting she died. I uttered a cry and was awakened.

Five of the students had dreams that could be classified as resulting in personal failure. For example, one young man reported the following dream:

In my last dream I found myself being employed by Morris Hedstrom's firm as a submechanic in their garage. I was ordered by the chief mechanic to overhaul motor-cycles and automobiles. After repairing those motors I used to drive them and examine whether the engine was working smoothly. During the drive on a motor-cycle I collided with a truck, because of my carelessness. My driving licence was suspended. I woke up after the dream and I told myself that my wish, that was to drive a motor-cycle, would never come true.

In contrast, six students reported having dreams that could be considered achieving satisfaction or wish fulfillment. An example:

I dreamt that I was to take a trip on a small boat. I went to a local market and bought things for my journey. When I was in the midst of a crowd, I heard the boat's siren, and I ran very fast in order to catch the boat. When I reached them I was welcomed by a young gentleman who kindly took me inside and showed me my room. The sea was very calm and everything was pleasant. As the glorious rays of the sun appeared from the sky, we sighted the harbour. The boat anchored and I went down the gangway. I was surprised when a person called my name. I turned round to see my friends rushing forward to greet me. I was so happy that I laughed and shouted.

I was able to identify 15 of the student essayists as female and 10 as male; the remaining 10 could not be assigned a gender. There was no pronounced difference in the distribution of nightmarish and satisfying dreams among the three categories, with females having 12 (80%) bad dreams (frightening or of personal failure) and only 2 (13%) of personal satisfaction or wish fulfillment, while males reported 8 (80%) bad dreams and 1 each of satisfaction or wish fulfillment (20%). Among those without a gender designation the distribution was similar, with 7 (70%) bad dreams and 3 (30%) positive ones.

The majority of the students (20, 57%) interpreted their dreams as signifying what would happen to them sometime in the future, with 10 foreseeing a negative outcome and 10 a positive one. Examples of negative outcomes included friends or family members dying, not realizing ambitions such as travel to Fiji or the United States, and not getting to ride a motorcycle, losing possessions to thieves, generally having bad luck, or going to hell. Examples of positive outcomes included being able to overcome difficulties through effort, being able to travel and seeing wonderful things, passing exams, becoming popular and having lots of friends, and generally being happy in the future.

Reactions to Death

Fourteen students wrote about their responses to the death of a friend or close relative. Six of the essays (43%) concerned the death of a friend, five (36%) the death of one's father, and one each (7%) the death of "a relative," a father, a mother or friend, and a father's cousin and friend. It is not clear from the essays which are descriptions of actual deaths and which are imagined; they nevertheless provide an indication of how the students verbalized about death, at least in English. Not surprisingly, all of the students used the term "sad" when describing their emotions, and six used the term "sorrow" in addition. Five mentioned crying. Three of them wrote that they felt like they were dying or wished they had died instead of their loved one.

With regard to why they grieved (or would grieve) as they did, there were understandable differences depending on whether they were writing about a parent (father) or a friend. Fathers were noted for "agreeing with all my wishes," doing everything I want," and the like. Friends were touted for being easy to get along with, and as desirable playmates and workmates. In

describing changes in their behavior following the death of a loved one, several mentioned a loss of appetite or a feeling of malaise.

Here are four examples:

When I'm alone to think of that day when my father died I feel so sad that I seem to lose my mind. Losing a dear father to me is just like a person living without a head. Because of my rudeness, which I did to my father when he was alive, I feel as though, if he would be alive again, I would do him good and not evil all the days of my life. I feel so sad that sometimes I pray God to let me die and spare my father's life, but because God creates things and he is responsible for a man's life, now I have no more dear father.

When my father dies I will feel very sad, lonely and unhappy, because I will have no more father to do the things that I want to do. I will cry and think about him on that day. I will always be wanting him to come back into life again. I do not feel ... like eating or playing. I feel sad so I think about him to be alive but let me die. When I want to do something I always think about him because everything that I want he always does it.

When my friend died I felt sadness and sorrow. I really know he breaks with me and I will never see him again. As we were favourite friends, we worked together helping each other and when he died I know that nobody is going to help me. I collected all the sport materials which my friend made and put it in a holy place. I did not join my neighbours to play or singing. I sat down, crying about his death. I also did not have sufficient meals as I did when he was living. I did not keep busy because of my sadness. On every night I saw him in my dream when I sleep.

When I see my friend died I am very sad. He is my loving friend. My friend is a harmless little boy. When he dies I am very angry because his father did not send him to the doctor. I am working very hard on that day to feed those who came to

see his death. I am always happy to see my friend because he was a clever boy. He always helps me when I am in need. I am also happy to help my friend.

Reflections on the Essays

What can we conclude from these essays? Perhaps most obvious is that Rotuman teenagers at this time were experiencing the range of emotions characteristic of adolescents the world over: ambitions to create a satisfying life for themselves, however they conceive of it, through education and travel; anxiety about their ability to perform on exams and to overcome hurdles in their paths to achievements and/or the realization of their ambitions; concerns about their relationships with peers and senior relatives. Considering that they were born and raised on an isolated island like Rotuma, with minimal exposure to books, movies, television, etc., the essays express a remarkable degree of sophisticated thinking about who they are and who they want to be as adults. All in all, the essays can be seen as precursors to the considerable success that students of that generation enjoyed educationally and occupationally as adults. I cannot help but be very proud of them!