

Diasporic Connections amongst Torres Strait Islanders and Rotumans

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Abstract

In the 1870s many Rotuman workers travelled to the Torres Strait Islands to join the pearling industry. In 2004 I travelled to the Torres Strait Islands to interview the children and grandchildren of Rotuman workers to find out whether they, the descendants, had any sense of Rotuman identity and whether that shaped their social lives in any way. Whilst in the Torres Strait several Part-Rotuman-Torres Strait Islanders [PRTS Islanders] requested for my assistance in tracing their relatives in Rotuma. This paper focuses on the diasporic connections amongst PRTS Islanders and their Rotuman relatives using two case studies. One case study involved a PRTS family who asked for my assistance to help trace its families in Rotuma. The second involved a Rotuman family which asked for my assistance to help trace its Torres Strait Island relatives.

Introduction

Many workers in the Torres Strait Island pearling industry originated from Rotuma, a small fertile volcanic island situated four hundred and sixty-five kilometres to the north of the Fiji group. Rotuma is approximately 43 square kilometres in area with fringing reefs and islets rich in fish and other edible sea creatures and plants. The island is not on the main sea routes and as a result, sea services are relatively poor. Rotuma was ceded to Great Britain in 1881 whereupon it was made part of the Colony of Fiji. It remained a part of Fiji politically following Fiji's independence in 1970. Because of the irregular sea services returning to Rotuma once a person left, was significantly difficult.

The Rotuman diaspora was born out of the mostly voluntary movement of Rotuman workers out of Rotuma. Many left Rotuma from the 1790s on whaling ships; in the 1830s more Rotumans left on sandalwood

voyages and several years later, about seven hundred men, nearly a third of the population left Rotuma to work in the Torres Strait pearling industry (Gardiner, 1898; Plate, 2005:93). The Torres Strait Islands are situated between the tip of Australia's Cape York and the Western Province of Papua New Guinea. In the 1870s the islands were overtaken by the pearling industry, bringing people from all over the Pacific. The recruitment of Pacific Islander seamen ceased with The Federation of Australia and the introduction of the White Australia policy at the turn of the 19th century. While some Rotuman men who had married local Torres Strait women were permitted to stay, all had died by the mid-1900s (Mua and Beckett, 2014:1).

In May 2004, I travelled to the Torres Strait Islands to interview several Part-Rotuman-Torres Strait Islanders [PRTS Islanders] to find out whether they, the descendants, have any sense of Rotuman identity and whether that has shaped their social lives in any way.

This paper discusses how the first Rotuman workers were perceived in terms of their Rotumanness and how their descendants, (the PRTS Islanders) conceptualise their Rotuman ancestry and the effect on their social lives. The paper will then report on two genealogical case studies that highlight the importance and implications of this connectedness to Rotuma.

Torres Strait Islands

The Torres Strait Islands were named after Luis Vaez de Torres, the Spanish navigator who made the first attested European passage through Torres Strait in 1606 (Shnukal 1992:15). According to Shnukal, 'Torres Strait Islanders were originally a Melanesian people, who are believed to have migrated from coastal Papua New Guinea hundreds of years ago, although the Islanders of the southern-most islands are related also to the Aboriginal people of Cape York' (1992: 14). Beckett estimates that the 'total population at contact was probably between four and five thousand dispersed over some twenty islands' (1987: 26). Shnukal reported that Rotumans lived and worked in the Torres Strait from about 1860 onwards. Many Rotumans were missionary-educated and hardworking, which helped elevate their status in Torres Strait Islander Society (Shnukal, 1992; Allen, 1895; Forbes, 1875: 226). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, based on the 2001 Census data, the resident Torres Strait Islander population is now 48,791, of which 86% live outside the Torres Strait area (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). May Passi, a PRTS Islander informed me that there are about 5000 PRTS Islanders

living in mainland Australia and Torres Strait, although this can not be confirmed due to lack of statistical records (Passi, 2004, pers.comm.).

Early Rotuman settlement in the Torres Strait

The influx of labourers from other parts of the world since the 1800s created a racially diversified community and Thursday Island became popularly known as the 'Sink of the Pacific' (Beckett 1987:57). The hierarchy consisted of north Europeans at the apex, black-skinned peoples at the bottom, and the other workers distributed according to their position along the colour spectrum. This was because Europeans, most of whom were Anglo-Australians, occupied the highest levels of industry, commerce, government, religion and military. Non-Europeans were subordinate and bound in service to them by one means or another.

Rev. William Allen, a missionary in Rotuma from 1881 to 1886, found Rotumans to be generally hardworking in nature with good seafaring skills, which made them popular among sea captains (Allen, 1895; Forbes, 1875:226). According to Allen, nearly 200 young Rotumans were said to be hired as divers in connection with the Torres Strait pearl industry (Allen, 1895). Resident Commissioner William Gordon reported that there were over one hundred Rotuman men at Torres Strait, the majority of which were employed in the management of boats and about forty or fifty hired as divers earning up to £40 per month (Gordon, 1884, cited in Howard and Rensel, 2007: 378). Plate (2005: 93) states that Rotuman pearl divers and boatmen in the Torres Strait earned up to £200 a year (Plate, 2005: 93).

Intermarriage

It was the Federation of Australia that precipitated the White Australia policy, though Queensland then began to prevent further intermarriage. By 1900 the Queensland Government tried to reduce the indigenous population's contact with outsiders. It expelled foreign residents, some of whom had lived with local women for years. Because of its general disapproval of 'half-caste' populations, the Government made sexual relations between Islanders and others an offence and allowed inter-marriage only with the Protector's express permission. The Protector was a government official who had many other responsibilities including the administration of Torres Strait Islander employment, wages, and savings bank accounts. A number of Pacific Islanders, already married to Torres Strait women, including Rotumans were

resettled, some at St Paul's Anglican Mission on Mua Island.

Volume 6 of the *Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait*, led by Alfred Cort Haddon in 1898, includes an extensive set of genealogies by W.H.R. Rivers and a discussion of the regulation of marriage in the Murray Islands. Rivers noted that marriages to South Sea Islanders, especially Rotuman men, were very popular among the parents of daughters because of presents (gifts) received from their sons-in-law. At the time, there were a large number of Rotuman men living on the Murray Islands (Haddon, 1908:121). In his genealogies Rivers mentioned a number of Rotuman men, including Barney Rotumah who married a local woman called 'Biged', and Dick Rotumah who married Mogi (Haddon, 1908:11-2). When the South Sea men and their wives were expelled from Murray Islands, they transferred to Darnley/Erub which was short of people following an epidemic.

Claims to Rotuman ancestry did have its advantages. PRTS Islander families who lived at St Paul's Mission on Moa Island came under the care of the Anglican Church which was established officially in 1908. PRTS Islanders, along with other Pacific Islanders at St Paul's Community were not subject to the same legal restrictions as other Torres Strait Islanders. This enabled them to escape strict government controls such as the prohibition on alcohol and the pass system of travel (Shnukal, n.d.: 4). PRTS Islanders not living on Moa Island were classified as Torres Strait Islanders under the Act.

By 1940 Pacific Islanders formed a new elite in the Torres Strait and worked as priests, schoolteachers, storekeepers and policemen (Shnukal, 1992:24). Mullins (1994) argued that the new elite, composed of descendants of Pacific and Torres Strait Islanders, continue to wield the bulk of economic and political power in the Torres Strait.

Welcome Ceremony

The Welcome Ceremony PRTS Islanders hosted in my honour at the Port Kennedy Hall on Thursday Island in May 2004 was an opportunity for the hosts to express their feelings about their Rotuman heritage. It also enabled me to share my interest in the historical and kinship links between Rotuma and the Torres Strait. In my welcome speech, I explained my visit to the Torres Strait had more depth than a normal academic exercise in that my family had been part of the early migration to the Torres Strait. Connections were established during the Welcome Ceremony, and greater interest and enthusiasm was created among the PRTS Islanders in learning more about Rotuman cultural practices and

tracing their genealogies with the hope of discovering living relatives in Rotuma.

John Abednego was a PRTS Islander present at the Welcome Ceremony. John's grandfather, Billy Aptinko of Noa'tau, Rotuma, married Rachel, the daughter of Harry Weano from New Caledonia and Bibi from Mabuiag Island. Aptinko and Rachel had eight children, one of whom was Kamuel, John's father (Abednego, 2004, pers.comm.). At the time of my visit in May 2004, John Abednego was the Chief Executive Officer of Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal Corporation for Legal Services.

Abednego pointed out that the PRTS Islanders were fully assimilated into Torres Strait Islander society and were first and foremost 'Torres Strait Islanders' and that my presence had, for the first time, provided an opportunity for them to gather together as Part-Rotuman descendants. Although some PRTS Islanders were not certain about their Rotuman genealogical links, they had testimonies, through old photos and stories that were passed down from their *ate* (grandfathers) to their children about how their grandfathers came from Rotuma to settle in the Torres Strait.

Abednego's speech highlighted several characteristics that are associated with the original migrants and their descendants—as hardworking, humble, generous and committed to improving their lives and those of their people:

Our *ate* have made huge efforts and sacrifices to travel all the way from Rotuma to settle here in the Torres Strait Islands. Today, we, the Part-Rotuman-Torres Strait descendants have all helped to contribute towards Torres Strait society in all areas, making the efforts and sacrifices of our forefathers worthwhile. We have done well for ourselves in all areas of life in the Torres Strait and we don't skite [show-off] ... we don't skite about it. Torres Strait is moving ahead. In the political arena we are looking for greater autonomy, better wages, better conditions, better control of our livelihood and our affairs. A *gud pasin* in the local vernacular describes a person who is kindhearted and generous as our Rotuman forefathers were. All the Rotuman descendants here in the Torres Strait—we have made it worthwhile for them to come over and we carry on their worth in all the respective fields—politics, economics, social, cultural and other areas of life. We, the Rotuman descendants are proactively involved in the different areas. So we have contributed towards the

development of Torres Strait today in our own little way and we don't skite about it (Abednego, June 2004, pers.comm.).

John Abednego's speech reiterates the fact that hard work, generosity and humility are important cultural indicators of Rotuman identity, and these values helped establish and elevate the status of Rotumans in Torres Strait Islander Society both past and present. Pacific Islanders, including Rotumans, quickly gained wealth and status as a result. This is affirmed by Mullins (1994:116) who wrote about the important changes occurring as a result of the contact between Pacific Islanders and Torres Strait Islanders in the pearling industry with many Pacific Islanders much sought after by pearling masters and earning higher wages than Torres Strait Islanders. Many of these affluent men settled into Torres Strait community, because of their wealth and status, 'exerted influence within the communities disproportionate to their numbers' (Mullins, 1994: 116).

Stuart Hall (1990: 225) pointed out that cultural identities are not fixed but are constructed and reconstructed through memory and narrative, and that cultural identities are related to the way in which people are positioned by and position themselves within the narratives of the past. Hall's ideas are instantiated by Abednego's claims that the PRTS Islanders were fully assimilated into Torres Strait Islander society and were first and foremost 'Torres Strait Islanders' as this had to do with Native Title claims where Torres Strait Islanders wanted the Australian Government to recognize their rights and interests to their land which stem from traditional Torres Strait Islander laws and customs and their desire for more control over their livelihoods and state of affairs. This indicated a reversal of the situation in earlier years, when Rotumans regarded themselves as superior to Torres Strait Islanders.

Diasporic Connections

Diasporic connections through oral narratives and stories, grew out of ceremonies, meetings, visitations and attempts by PRTS Islanders and Rotumans to trace their history and family links. In societies where oral traditions predominate, genealogies help to trace the social relations between kin members based on descent and marriage and connect people to their ancestors and to the places associated with them. Cultural memories are likewise important insofar as they link kin members to one another and to the land.

The symbolic significance of land lies in the connectedness of kin

who share common ancestors, which determines their social relations with one another, their status in society and their land rights. This connectedness provides people with an understanding of their place in society, their social worth and more specifically, it defines who they are, where they came from and how their past and present affirm their cultural identity.

'Dick Rotumah' is an important aspect of cultural identity that symbolizes important kinship ties with ancestors. Since the 1860s Pacific Islanders, including men from Rotuma, had their islands of origin reflected in their adopted surnames. Many Rotumans adopted the surname 'Rotumah'. One such person was Dick Rotumah, also known as Cedarec or Dick Cedric or Dick Tui Rotumah (Shnukal, 1992: 19-20). During my fieldwork in the Torres Strait Islands some of Dick Rotumah's descendants enquired about their Rotuman heritage and enlisted my help in their search for Dick Rotumah's relatives in Fiji.



Dick Rotumah: His portrait was taken from a sketch by Tom Roberts, courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales in Shnukal (1992).

Edna Brown, a great grand-daughter of Dick Rotumah, contacted Anna Shnukal who gave her the following details.

Dick Rotumah was born in 1868 in Rotuma and died on 19 January 1911 at Omai anchorage on board the lugger *Edith* of paralysis from diving. The spot where he died is now known as Cedric Passage (Shnukal, 2004, pers.comm.). Dick Rotumah's parents are listed as 'MA' and 'unknown'. Rotumah's middle name - Setaric or Cedric - is similar to the Rotuman name Setaliki or Setariki, and Tui or Tue is a common Rotuman name. To date, I have not been able to trace Dick Rotumah's

relatives in Fiji due largely to the lack of clarity in the name of one parent (MA) and the absence of a name for the other (unknown).

Names such as 'Dick Rotumah' are cultural badges, social codes or mores of identity that represent or identify the wearers' place of origin, thus reinforcing the importance of names as a symbolic representation of cultural identity. In a book *Navigating Boundaries: The Asian Diaspora in Torres Strait*, the authors mention that for the coming together of five major Asian communities in the Torres Strait, the sea served as a maritime highway that connected people for reasons such as trade, navigation and kinship (Shnukal et al., 2004: 2). To commemorate Dick Rotumah's importance as a maritime worker with special skills in pearl diving, the sea passage where he died was named 'Cedric Passage' after him. This is an example where the sea forms an important historical link over time between Rotuman migrants and Torres Strait Islanders. In short, the sea passage embraces narratives of Rotuman cultural identity and its links to the Torres Strait pearling industry.

Case Studies

Several genealogies generated a great deal of interest and provided a wide range of stories about Rotuman migrants and their descendants. These life stories and past oral narratives become an integral part of memory, and the search for genealogies that involved a connectedness that links memory to kin. This was particularly important to the living relatives, the living to the dead, the living to the land and interconnectedness with and to other places. Knowledge of this past (and its quintessential linkages) becomes a part of the present, and considered essential when claiming titles and land rights. Sis, a Torres Strait Islander, stated that 'Genealogy is important because you must hand the land to the right person. The genealogy must be there because there is no written tradition' (Sharp 1993: 16).

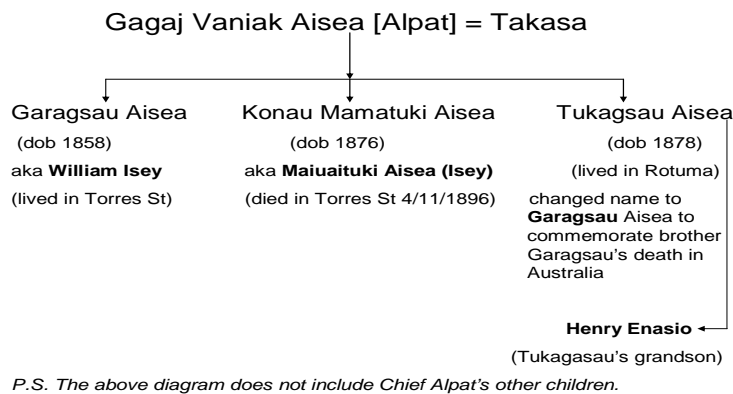
The descendants of a particular family that I traced covered an area from Rotuma, Wallis and Futuna, Torres Strait Islands, Papua New Guinea and Croker Island (Queensland). Uncovering this involved interviews, e-mails and telecommunication with a wide range of people as well as archival research. The following two case studies were developed out of two early Rotuman migrants, namely the Isey Brothers and Morseu. In all cases, descendants of the original migrants who had supported me with my fieldwork requested assistance with tracing their Rotuman relatives.

The case of the Isey Brothers illustrates the difficulties associated

with poor communication over long distances. The tragic death of George Morseu highlights questionable practices and misfortunes associated with pearl-shelling. More important is the success story of Morseu's descendants through Noritta and Danny, who were raised 'well' under adverse conditions to enable them to succeed in their respective careers.

Garagsau and Konau (the Isey Brothers)

Henry Enasio, a full-blooded Rotuman living in Sydney contacted me in April 2005 to seek my assistance in tracing his grand-uncles, Garagsau and Konau. Enasio's great-grandfather was Gagaj¹ Vaniak Aisea, a high chief of Itu'tiu, Rotuma, who was one of the *gagaja* who ceded Rotuma to Great Britain in 1881. After the Cession of Rotuma on 13 May 1881, Governor De Voeux bestowed on him the name 'Albert' for the prominent role he played in the Cession of Rotuma. Since the session, he was called Gagaj Vaniak Alpat² (Enasio, 2004, pers.comm.). Given below is a kinship diagram of Chief Alpat's family:



(Source: Henry Enasio 2004, pers.comm.).

According to Enasio, Gagaj Vaniak Alpat's son's, Garagsau and Konau were described as tall, fair and well-built men, who, as chiefs,

¹ *Gagaj* is the Rotuman term for *chief*.

² As the Rotuman alphabet did not have the letter "B" and the name "Albert" had to be spelt according to the way it was pronounced in Rotuman, it became "Alpat".

were given the responsibility of leading a group of Rotumans to the Torres Strait Islands to join the pearling industry in the late 1800s. Gagaj Alpat and his wife Takasa received news that Garagsau and Konau were diving for pearl shells during bad weather when their compressed air hose burst. They drowned as a result (Enasio, 2004, pers.comm.). Gagaj Alpat and Takasa were grief-stricken when they heard the tragic news. Gagaj Alpat changed his surviving son's name to Garagsau to commemorate the death of his son. Takasa cut off two of her fingers on her left hand as her *putu*³ to mark the death of her two sons. Enasio's grandfather later became Gagaj Garagsau Alpat of Itu'tiu. He was the youngest of Gagaj Alpat's children and was born in 1878 (Enasio, 2004, pers.comm.).

Anna Shnukal provided Enasio with additional information which suggests a fate other than drowning. Garagsau and Konau were known in the Torres Strait as the two Isey brothers, and, according to Shnukal:

1. William ISEY born c.1858 at Rotuma, son of Albert, native *gagaj*, and Takiso, married Mary Clarke a widow born c.1850 in Durham. They married on 17 September 1888 at Cooktown, North Queensland. At that time, William Isey was a pearl sheller living on Thursday Island. His wife also lived on Thursday Island; her father was Christopher Wetherly (Wetherby), mining inspector, and her mother was Ellen De Bord;

2. Maiuaituki Aisea, son of Albiti, *gagaj* of La Harve, Rotuma, a diver b. 1876 at Rotuma arrived in Queensland c.1891 and died 4 November 1896 of phthisis (the old word for consumption and now more commonly known as tuberculosis) at Thursday Island. His sister-in-law reported his death. Her name was Mary Aisea of Thursday Island (Shnukal 2004, pers.comm.).

Enasio was excited about the information provided by Anna Shnukal and confirmed that the name of the place where Gagaj Alpat and family lived was not 'La Harve' (as mentioned above) but 'Lihava', the chiefly site beside the Methodist Church at Motusa, Itu'tiu. The foundation at Lihava was hand built by the people of Itu'tiu District out of volcanic rocks and mud to a height of about ten feet. The government, in turn, built a monument in front of Lihava, which still stands today, to commemorate the cession of Rotuma and as a sign of respect for Chief Vaniak Alpat (Enasio 2005, pers.comm.). The above evidence produced by Anna Shnukal provides a different story about the fate of Garagsau

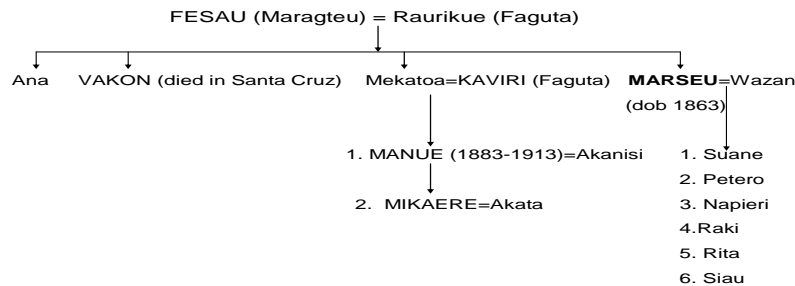
³ *Putu* is showing grief by inflicting physical injury on oneself (Churchward, 1940: 292).

and Konau. Enasio’s family in Rotuma were told that Garagsau and Konau had accidentally drowned while diving for pearls in the Torres Strait and both men lost their lives. Death by drowning in a diving accident that was conveyed to Rotuma was misinformation that caused unnecessary agony and suffering to their parents. Both men later married and one of the brothers died on 4 November 1896 from tuberculosis at Thursday Island.

Howard and Rensel (2004) wrote about how early out-migrants from Rotuma in the nineteenth century were generally assimilated into the recipient societies and factors such as Rotuma’s isolation—the infrequent shipping system and migrants not being good letter writers—made regular communication impossible. Gagaj Alpat and Takasa most certainly faced this situation and had to rely on oral accounts of their sons which in this case were false and unreliable.

Morseu

Danny Morseu, a descendant of George Morseu, enquired about his great-grandfather, Morseu from Rotuma. Anna Shnukal’s records showed that Morseu was born in 1863 in Rotuma and died on 4 September 1912. He was also known as Sweeney Morseu, Rocky Rotumah or George Rotumah. He married Wazan from the Murray Islands. His parents were Pesau and Rauregoa (Shnukal 2004, pers.comm.). With the help of Hocart (1913) and Hariti Kelemeti, we were able to trace Pesau and Rauregoa to a family tree with Fesau of Maragteu and Raurikue of Faguta:



Source: Noritta Morseu 2004, pers.comm.)

According to Anna Shnukal, George Morseu was one of the best deep-sea divers who lived at Zomered, Murray Islands. He died of ‘supposed suicide’ by drowning at sea near Calico Reef, Darnley Island. The reports say that he tied weights to his feet before jumping overboard (Shnukal 2004, pers.comm.). However, Harry Captain of Darnley Island had another theory:

There was one diver called George Morsio of the Morsio family. He was a deep water diver on a boat called *Eagle*. He found a big pearl. He came from a Pacific Island called Rotuma, he was the only one amongst the Japanese. So they stayed on the lugger. One night they slept until the next morning. They woke up, looked around, couldn’t find him, he was gone. He went and drowned himself because he was worrying about something. So they found him under the water that morning. So that pearl became the property of the head diver on that boat. But I suggest that the Japanese killed him and hanged him under the water, just to make it look like an accident, but the treatment was like I said it before (Harry Captain, pers. comm., in Shnukal 2004).

In 2010 Noritta Morseu, great-granddaughter of Morseu, was the first Torres Strait Islander to obtain a PhD from the University of Queensland. Noritta said that Morseu’s wife, Wazan, died two years after him in 1914 from what some said was an attack of fits. They had ten children, who were separated after Wazan died. They grew up in different families, some with Rotuman ancestry. Suane was 12 years old when his father, Morseu, died and he was raised in Darnley Island by a Rotuman called Tom Oui and his wife, Tulu (Noritta, 2004, pers.comm.).

Noritta described how she was raised by her grandfather, Suane, along with Danny, Dick and Angie. They lived at Tamwoy on Thursday Island and had no running water, no fridge and electricity, and had to walk for miles to cut firewood and fetch water. Danny mentioned that he never knew his real father, who was a white man; his mother was a Morseu. He, too, grew up with grandfather Suane, who taught him the basics of survival in life. Both Noritta and Danny grew up in a rusted corrugated iron house; water was scarce for washing clothes, dishes and showering. Yet, their grandfather still hand-watered all his plants regularly. He planted bananas, taro, cassava, sweet potato, corn, pawpaw, peanuts and medicinal plants such as *ubar (noni, from the Rubiaceae family)* so that food was plentiful throughout the year. Danny remembered how they were taught to prepare gardens and how to cook

pigs in a *kup maurior* (earth oven). A pious Christian, he always said prayers at night and read the Bible with a magnifying glass. He encouraged them to be helpful and would often say ‘when you do something for somebody you do it from the heart’ (Noritta 2004, pers.comm.). Noritta said he reminded them about the need to do well in school. She would always remember her grandfather’s words, ‘if you want to beat the white man at his own game, you’ve got to be just as educated as him’ (Noritta and Danny Morseu 2004, pers.comm.).

Danny claimed that his grandparents, particularly his grandfather, Suane, kept him focused on what they needed to do in order to survive and this kept him disciplined and focused right throughout his life and especially in his sporting career (Danny Morseu 2004, pers.comm.). Danny Morseu was Project Manager for the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy based on Thursday Island and was widely recognized for his sporting achievement in basketball. Danny was a dual Olympian and the first Torres Strait Islander Olympian (1980 and 1984). He also won the award for Special Contribution to Indigenous Sports (1999), and was the first indigenous player to be inducted into the Hall of Fame and was a member of the All Time Players List (Danny Morseu, 2004, pers.comm.):

Being a good sportsperson and good at my schoolwork made me feel very lucky. However, I also feel that I had a very special gift and it’s all about how to take advantage of that. I think that gift comes from my forefathers—our Rotuman men with fire in their bellies who jumped into a boat and pushed off the Island and said “we’ve got to go and find out what life is all about out there”. I went through the same journey but experiencing it in Australia and in the process I guess I wasn’t scared of anything. My granddad, Suane Morseu, taught me that fear is something that you work through and there are so many challenges and opportunities for you to discover yourself as a person and as a leader and a role model for people. After granddad died I promised myself that I would visit Rotuma one day... just to be able to put my foot on the soil of Rotuma and say to myself, well Danny, this is where it all started... this is the place where your great-granddad Morseu came from (Morseu 2004, pers.comm.).

An excerpt from an email from Danny Morseu on his visit to Rotuma in 2009 describes his feelings: ‘Rotuma, what can I say—it

culture, people, natural beauty, surroundings and sandy beaches, its uniqueness, no rivers, no snakes or frogs—unusual but absolutely beautiful, I can say it’s paradise... it’s been so long since my great grandfather left Rotuma and migrated to the Torres Strait Islands and I must say that I am blessed to meet my family’ (Morseu 2009, pers.comm.).

Concluding Remarks: Memories and Identities

The concept of ‘collective memory’ was first introduced in 1925 by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. According to Halbwachs (1980), cultural memory implies that people possess history as they remember it. Human memory can only function collectively within members of a group who have come through similar experiences and contexts. Collective memory is therefore selective, based on the groups’ background and experiences. It is also a living memory because cultural memory retains from the past only those things that still live or are capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive. This helps to retain and solidify cultural identity for those living in the present (Halbwachs, 1980:50-80). Selective memory of communities includes not just positive memories but the remembering of a painful past as seen in George Morseu’s tragic death and more importantly, people’s responses to that pain. There are often silences and intervals in stories about painful events of the past and the aftermath of the pain is usually borne by surviving family members both consciously and unconsciously. In the Morseu case study, very little is known about how Wazan felt or what she went through with her ten children.

Allan Kaniu, another of Morseu’s descendants, visited Fiji in November 2005. Allan mentioned that his father was Opeta and his father’s father was Morseu’s son, Napaeri. Instead of using the Morseu surname he opted for his mother’s surname, Kaniu. His mother was a landowner in the Murray Islands and taking on his mother’s family name aided them in their fight over land ownership claims at Murray Islands. Allan’s adopted surname shows how identity can be a site of multiple subjective positions which can be contrary and conflicting (Moore, 1994: 55). Kinship and land are the basis of Torres Strait Islander identity. Adopting his mother’s surname was for Allan, a subjective experience of identity, and a way of exhibiting multiple subject positions in the battle for land rights in Murray Islands. In this context Allan’s Rotumanness is largely submerged and regarded as ‘other’ while his Murray Islander identity (via adopting his mother’s surname) becomes dominant.

Although Allan exhibits a yearning and curiosity to learn more about his Rotuman ancestry, he realizes that this linkage to his Rotuman ancestry is something that must be kept private for it is not useful, given the current political climate in Torres Strait Islander society where emphasis is on Murray Islander heritage. Allan's example illustrates that identity is always linked to notions of power and is never static but always changing. It also highlights the contemporary power relations that exist between PRTS Islanders and Murray Islanders where land ownership claims are tied in with claims to indigenous Murray Islander identity. Rotuman identity becomes submerged as a result. This is a common reflection of PRTS Islanders in the Murray Islands context—when placed in an uncomfortable situation regarding their Rotuman origin, Murray Islander identity is opted for as many of their needs are addressed under that status.

Oral narratives and tracing of family links reveal the complexities associated with pearl diving. The case of the Isey brothers illustrates the difficulties associated with poor communication over long distances. Parents of the Isey brothers in Rotuma were grief-stricken when they heard the tragic news that their sons drowned while pearl diving in the Torres Strait and their mother, Takasa, cut off two of her fingers to mark the death of her sons. However, I discovered through my research that the Isey brothers did not drown while pearl diving. Both brothers married and settled down in Australia. Pearl diver, George Morseu's tragic death reveals the painful events that occurred in the past and the family members' responses to that pain. I assert that it is impossible to unify or reconcile PRTS Islanders' Rotuman identity with their Torres Strait Island identity as identity is always something that is fragmented, something that is contested, re-negotiated and re-created; identity is something that undergoes constant transformation. John Abednego argued that PRTS Islanders are fully assimilated into Torres Strait Islander Society and though they like the idea of being Rotuman they prefer to keep their Rotumanness private and submerged as their Torres Strait Islander identity is more dominant and important because of their fight to have the Australian government recognize their rights for more autonomy and control over their livelihoods and state of affairs in the Torres Strait Islands. Allan Kaniu took on his mother's family name to help them fight over land ownership claims in the Murray Islands. PRTS Islanders are a little insecure about their origins, and although they like making contact with kin in Rotuma they stress that they are first and foremost Torres Strait Islanders. This is due to Native Title claims, which became an issue in the last decade or so. This is a reversal of the situation

of earlier years, when Rotumans and other Pacific Islander parentage regarded themselves as superior to Torres Strait Islanders, preferring to marry amongst themselves, and being disproportionately represented among the ranks of skippers and local government councillors.

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3. Danny Morseu, Thursday Island, June 2004
4. Henry Enasio, April 2005 (email correspondence).
5. John Abednego, Thursday Island, June 2004.
6. May Passi, Thursday Island, June 2004.
7. Noritta Morseu, Brisbane, June 2004

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