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A deep sense of belonging

by Amelia Vunileba



Makereta Mua with a copy of the CD

CULTURE and traditions are fading fast. If indigenous people are not careful, their heritage could be lost to the sands of time.

And if that happens, identities will also be lost because that is what sets us apart from other races.

Rotumans are a unique lot. Even though they are Fijians by stature, they have their own traditions which make them unique.

The Rotuman community last month launched a CD of songs of their ancestors. The CD contains traditional Rotuman chants and hymns depicting the experiences of those who went to the Torres Strait in search of opportunities in the pearling industry.

The CD, titled *Rotuman Hymns and Chants*, was launched on January 26 by Churchward Chapel chief steward, Vilisoni Fauoro at the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture at the University of the South Pacific.

Production assistant and cultural liaison officer, Makereta Mua, said songs had been sung by the Churchwood choir.

"The migration of Rotumans to Torres Strait happened in the 1860s to the 1900s and the chants and hymns talk about that period," she said.

"Initially there were discussions between Doctor Karl Neuenfeldt, Associate Professor at the School of Contemporary Communication at Central Queensland University and Professor Epli Hau'ofam, head of the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture at USP, about the possibility of undertaking recording projects with an emphasis on combining different Pacific musical traditions.

"I was also in touch with Dr Neuenfeldt regarding my research on the Rotuman diaspora to the Torres Strait, particularly the influence of Rotuman music and dance on the culture of the Eastern Islands on Torres Strait."

Makereta said she was asked to find a group of Rotumans who could sing the traditional Rotuman chants similar to the Rotuman chants that maritime workers took with them to Australia in the late 1800s.

She said in 2004, Dr Neuenfeldt, Nigel Pegrum, the Churchwood chapel choir and the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture recorded the CD.

She said the CD was to include five traditional Rotuman chants called the **tautoga** and five church hymns or **mak ka pelu**.

"The CD was recorded at the USP's media centre and mixed in the Pegasus Studio at Cairns, Aus-tralia," said Makereta.

"Four of the five traditional chants or **tautoga** were composed by the former resident minister of Churchward, Reverend Iven Fatiaki," she said.

"The first two **sua** and **tiap hi** are reflections of the migration of the Rotumans to Australia and the experiences they and their descendants encountered over time.

"The **tiap forau** refers to the migration to Torres Strait.

"These people had gone in search of better opportunities in the pearling industry which benefited relatives back home," she said.

Makereta said the remaining five hymns or **mak ka pelu** were sung, along with the use of a bell or triangle, and the style of singing was similar to the Lauan polotu and Tongan hiva usu.

She said the only other instruments used were wooden sticks on folded mats for the **tautoga** and an unused fire bell for the **mak ka pelu**.

"Churchward choirmaster Samuela Taukave said the bell organised the tones and helped with the rhythm and timing of the hymns."

Makereta said this was not the first CD on **tautoga** or **mak ka pelu** but it was the first of its kind because it talked about what the Roumans went through when they migrated to the Torres Strait.

"It is also new, given the fact the **tautoga** chants acknowledge Rotumans in Australia and gives special recognition to the presence of part-Rotumans in the Torres Strait.

"The migration of Rotumans to Fiji and other parts of the world has occurred since the 1880s and the trend is still continuing.

"More Rotumans are living in parts of Fiji and abroad than on the island and this interaction with other ethnic groups through migration has created a distinctive sense of Rotuman identity."

Makereta said the CD helped link Rotumans all over the world through music and Mr Fatiaki summed it up when he said: "Music will help people bring the past to the present, remembering what was done.

"The happenings of the past can be related through music to perhaps revive what happened and maintain the culture."

"The lyrics emphasise the importance of the Rotuman value of hard work and sharing.

"It gives Rotumans a greater appreciation of what their ancestors went through."

She said while some young Rotumans were interested in traditional music, most were not too keen on it because of perhaps the influence of Western music and ever-changing urban lifestyle.

Makereta said the impact of globalisation would be hard to change and this had resulted in most people being drawn away from traditional practices and culture.

She said the major challenge for most traditional societies was to prevent the loss of individual cultures. One way to achieve this was through the promotion of such hymns and chants.

"Rotumans need to stop awhile and critically look within their society and ask themselves who is a Rotuman, or what are Rotuman traits and practices."

Makereta was passionate about the CD and said if there wasn't any effort to promote tradition and culture, they would be lost.

She said, "if no deliberate attempt is made to create the appropriate awareness and promote active programmes among our people, it is quite possible that in the not-too-distant future we could be just another scatter of people without roots on which to claim an identity."

"One way of creating awareness is for parents, grandparents, elders and leaders in the community to make a concerted effort to inculcate these important values to the younger generation," she said.

She said it would be good to teach indigenous language, music and dance in primary and secondary schools. It could be included in the school curriculum.

She said the CD was one way of capturing traditional music and dance for future reference.

Makereta said there were close to 100 people at the launch, including the Minister for Information, Marieta Rigamoto.

The CD costs \$20 and can be bought at the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture at USP.
