

Arts through the lens of a Rotuman

By Fesaitu Solomone

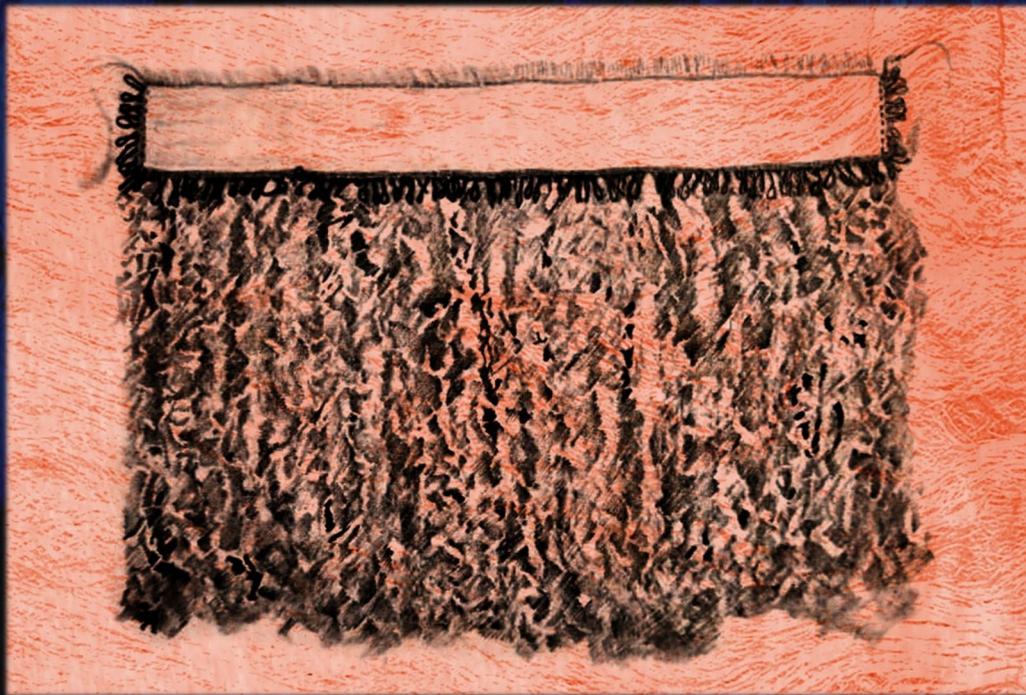


Illustration by Cecelia Faumuina

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Front image caption & credit



Name: Tofua

Description: This tofua or waist garment is from the island of Rotuma. It is made from vovoi or pandanus - with a finely woven waisband, decorated with green and blue coloured wool and the body comprised of ruffled strips of vovoi.

Credit: Collection of Auckland Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira, 1949.11

Link: https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/collections-research/collections/record/am_humanhistory-object-71415?p=2&c=ecrm%3AE22_Man-Made_Object&k=Rotuma&ordinal=16



ARTS THROUGH THE LENS OF A ROTUMAN

“We view ARTS as a “GIFT – Tēfakhanisi’ and ‘TALENT – Talene” from God (‘Āitu) handed down to our ancestors from one generation to another. It is unique knowledge to us and only chosen few possess it. All art forms encapsulate the nature of us as Rotumans that are harnessed and treasured amongst our people”.

OVERVIEW

The question of WHAT IS ART through the lens of a Rotuman has never been thought through from this perspective as to how Rotumans perceive such terminology until now. Rather as the art was embodied into the fabric of our Rotuman people and culture practicing and living it, at times we have never stopped to think what it really means to us. This question itself poses a five-fold dimension as Rotumans around: **How do we define art?; What is the value we place on our art?; What is the purpose that arts serve in our Rotuman community?; What types of art forms still exists?; and How can we sustainably retain this for future generations?**

In speaking to two experts in their areas of speciality as Rotuman master weavers, we all agreed that there is **no** definition specifically for ‘ARTS’. It is only what we all know as family tradition based on our cultural practices passed on through love and passion for the work we do. To achieve a collective view meant that, as key knowledge holders in our respective fields of interests, we must take these questions to the heart of our people based on the island and across the globe. Our three collective voices does not represent the majority of Rotuman

experts, however we do recognise that as Rotuman experts in our specialised areas navigating this space, we are challenged by these fundamental questions.

As Rotumans live and breathe various types of art forms defined by the western world in our respective spaces we have never felt the need to find a deeper meaning and connection to our roots. It was always the norm to practice it, adopting from one generation to another through our love and identity as Rotumans and working from inside out but never beyond the eyes of viewing from outside in as to why and how did we get to where we are now. Rotumans handiwork and works of art flows through their veins, are embedded in their minds and heart, yet never recognising the value of what they bring into the space with their gifts and talents.

My own personal journey, experience and observation growing up on the island of Rotuma will contribute to this arts conversation journey in two forms – as a Rotuman language teacher and a traditional healer. Born and bred on the island in the late 1970s until early 1990s for 15 years prior to moving to Fiji, my story is a living art journey for over 40 years, until settling down in Aotearoa and calling it home. Although physically separated from my island, I am driven to explore and nurture those roots that still binds me to Rotuma. Furthermore, this question around ‘what is art’ from a Rotuman lens never dawned on me until now. It has taken me over forty years as well to re-think, re-evaluate and re-asses this simple word “ARTS” from a western perspective. However, its deeper meaning and core of this space challenges our perception as Rotumans to understand why we do what we believe, love and are passionate about, yet never thought through it carefully. Similarly, a few artists and Rotumans globally in discussions realised that in their own spaces, whilst they do what they love, they have never taken the time to action their thought process in the scheme of *“What does art mean from the lens of a Rotuman.”*

The quote at the beginning that *“We view ARTS as a “GIFT – Tēfakhanisi’ and ‘TALENT – Talene” from God (‘Aitu) handed down to our ancestors from one generation to another. It is unique knowledge to us and only chosen few possess it. All art forms encapsulate the nature of us as Rotumans that are harnessed and treasured amongst our people.”* further reflects those feelings as we put them collectively into writing. It is a living legacy which we will explore on this journey as Rotumans. Although some of our arts hang on the walls and are kept in Museum spaces as an ongoing legacy in some parts of the world, I believe that we as people continuously live and breathe those legacies in our arts spaces in various art forms. However, it is important that we journey back in time to identify who we are as Rotumans.

ROTUMANS AS PEOPLE

Rotuma is a volcanic island of approximately 43 square kilometres, located at 12 degrees south latitude and 177 degrees east longitude, approximately 465 kilometres north of Fiji. Although the island has been politically part of Fiji since 1881, Rotuman culture more closely

resembles that of the Polynesian islands to the east, most noticeably Tonga, Samoa, Futuna and Uvea. Because of their Polynesian appearance and distinctive language, Rotumans now constitute a recognizable minority group within the Republic of Fiji.

Early explorers noticeably documented the rich and fertile soil of Rotuma and abundance of food and fruits, which still today stands true. Previous governance on the island pre-colonisation was ruled by Kings, whereas post-colonisation and missionary settlements on the island influenced our current governance in the hands of Chiefs as Heads of our various seven Districts in Rotuma. Their governance is then subjected to a District Officer selected by the Fiji Government to head the affairs of the island.

Rotumans have their own language and culture with their unique forms of arts and cultural protocols. Although some may be similar to other Pacific cultures, there are some that are uniquely Rotuman. The migration drift from Rotuma dispersing to Fiji then to the rest of the world including Aotearoa leaves the island with a population of less than 2000 people. Furthermore, Rotuma is not exposed to tourism which has kept its natural resources intact and serene.

VARIOUS ART FORMS

Art Form	Images	Short description
Clowning		This is a tradition of women chosen as a performer in our traditional weddings. Rotuma just like any other Pacific island where humour plays a vital part in their everyday life. She acts the clown but has the power and authority during the ceremony including over chiefs.
Singing & Dancing		Traditional dancing and singing in our Tautoga and hafa (men and women performing our traditional dance) is a long standing tradition of performance arts. Composition and choreography are common aspects in our Rotuman community. Rotuman Purotu and Manatu (composers) are well respected in Rotuma. There are a variety of traditional dances that still needs to be revived.

Tefui		This is our new traditional Rotuman garland practiced by both men and women. It is combining our flowers and fragrance of the island.
Tattooing		Tattooing was eventually stopped by missionaries. Common in Rotuman tattooing are images of animals and special designs such as those for women. This art form has been recently revived but needs more work.
Weaving		Weaving is a long-standing tradition in our arts and cultural space. Fine mats and various items are always on display. An art form that will be investigated more in-depth in the next phase due to its meaning and value in our Rotuman community.
Kava Ceremony	<p>A unique feature of females (3) only presenting in our Rotuman kava ceremony. Previously the kava is chewed by virgins signified with purity or symbolised with soroi (coral paste applied to the head) with a lock of hair on the side called 'sope' in our Rotuman culture. There are no men involved at all in our kava presentation ceremonies.</p> <p>https://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2020/05/11/rotumas-kava-ceremony/</p>	
Oratory & Chanting	Oratory skills are highly valued in Rotuman art form through Chiefly speeches.	
Traditional Healers	Rotuma has different forms of healing that is still being practiced today. Many have sought the help of medical specialists only to revert to the help of traditional healers. Majau is the term given to our healers.	

CONCLUSION

Many of the art forms shown above, and many more, will be key discussion points in future as we understand how Rotuman people, artists and practitioners utilise this space to share their knowledge and how elders and various art forms are still practiced in Rotuma. However, this poses the challenge as to how the sustainability of our unique and renowned Rotuman works of art for the future is feasible. The understanding of Rotuman art forms and the lens it wishes to see itself in future, will be an interesting piece of work to incorporate various artists and their views on arts as a Rotuman, their ongoing work, and how these talents will translate and be fostered for future generations.

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Rotuman Website - <http://www.rotuma.net/os/ceremonies/numbers.htm>

Auckland Museum <https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/discover/collections-online/search?k=rotuma>