

ONE MINORITY PEOPLE

A REPORT

on

THE BANABANS

**Formerly of Banaba (Ocean Island)
Who were relocated to Rabi Island in Fiji**



Commissioned by UNESCO (Apia)

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The Banaban Community on Rabi, Fiji. A summary of its socio-economic situation in 1985. Author Dr Hans Dagmar

Strategy for Rabi Island Development (2001 – 2005)
Rabi Council of Leaders, July 2002



Banaba after phosphate mining

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Two women on Banaba c.1900

Introduction

This report on the Banabans, now living mainly on Rabi Island in Fiji, is a sorry saga of one very displaced minority people numbering now just over 4,000 in population. Fifty seven years ago the last remaining 1003 were all resettled on Rabi Island in northern Fiji. The reason for this was because their homeland of Banaba or Ocean Island (now part of the Republic of Kiribati) was required for cheap fertilizer by the British Phosphate Commission.

Without a doubt, much damage was done. A whole island was left environmentally devastated, a whole people left with an uncertain future. To understand where the Banabans are today, one must study the events of their past, in particular those that

occurred during the 20th century. Their island was devastated beyond recognition. A third of the population got massacred during WW2. The survivors were afterwards relocated 2,400km from home. Their long and drawn out struggle for compensation goes largely unsatisfied, and their woes as forgotten people continue on Rabi Island to this day. They remain amongst the poorest people of the Pacific, their plight largely unknown by the international community.

The first part of the report is dedicated to backgrounding all this. The second part investigates the community today and suggests possible ways forward.

This writing is based on intensive research and fieldwork conducted during August, September and October of 2002. Much of the archival research was conducted in Australia and New Zealand, where most of the official records exist. Fieldwork was virtually all conducted in Fiji, where Banabans across the board were interviewed, both in Suva and on Rabi Island.

The author is indebted to the Rabi Council of Leaders and all other Banabans who gave their unfailing support in the preparation of this report, to Ken Sigrah and Stacey King of Brisbane who gave me unfettered access to their most marvelous archives, and to Mali Voi, UNESCO's Cultural Adviser to the Pacific, for instigating this project in the first place.



Atuara Buokira

The only two words that grace the Banaban national emblem translate to ...

Oh God help us!

1. The Banabans as uprooted people

The mobility of the human race has increased dramatically in modern times. Millions of people now live or seek to live in countries not their own. In many cases, this movement is voluntary, for work, education or following family. In other cases, the migration of people is forced, a manifestation of economic and social issues or environmental degradation that fails to protect the most basic needs of people and their dignity.

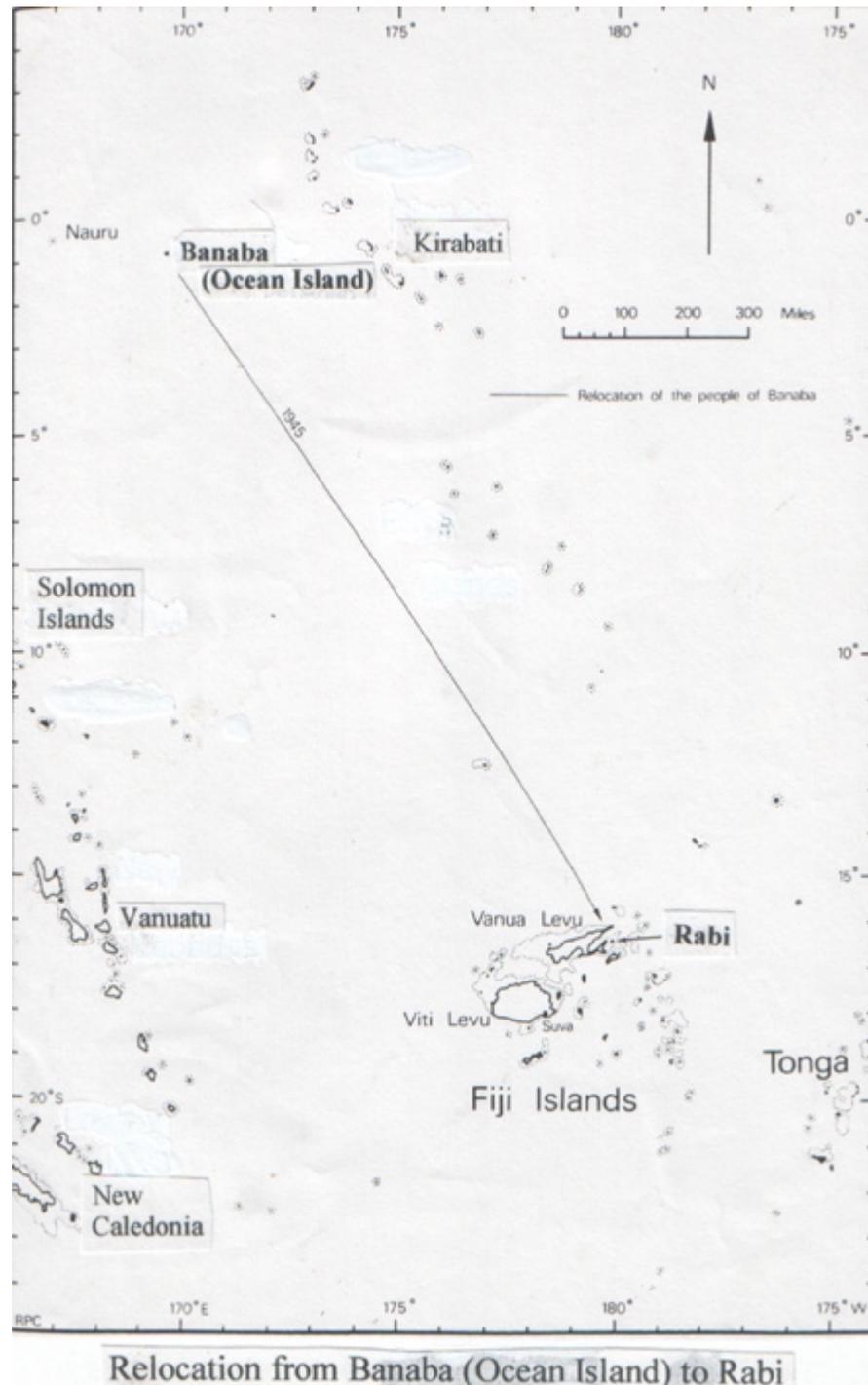
It can be argued that today the international community now largely subscribes to the guiding principals of migration 'management'. The will to help these displaced peoples has

deteriorated rapidly in recent years from acceptance and assistance to control and rejection. Over the last decade in particular, the will of governments to provide encouragement to uprooted peoples has declined sharply. At the same time, public sentiment against refugees and migrants has become more apparent. Outsiders and newcomers are now often the scapegoats for many frustrations and the target for growing hatreds.

Although not apparent to many, resettled communities are nothing new in the Pacific. The vagaries of colonial and current governments has meant these people must always be ready to confront the unpredictable. It happens often enough to be significant that these people encounter problems, events or situations that demand decisive action as a community – essential to asserting their position.

Issues can be as mundane as determining how land clearing was to be organized by the Gilbertese who were resettled on Sidney Island, or dramatic like the bitter debate that erupted amongst the Kapinga people relocated on Ponape as to whether they should divide up their newly allocated village land between the few families or keep it as land for ‘all Kapinga people’, just like back in their homeland.

But with these other cases respectfully aside, in the true context of the Pacific, few sagas are as tragic as the lot accorded the Banabans of Banaba (Ocean Island) through the twentieth century and to this present day.



Between 1901 and 1979, all but 60 hectares of their 595ha home island of Banaba was mined and shipped off by colonial interests.

At first the naturally friendly islanders put their marks to complicated mining legal documents they had no hope of

understanding, but as they saw their island literally disappearing before their eyes, they rallied to object.

Acting to protect colonial farmers in Australia and New Zealand who had an insatiable desire for cheap phosphate to spread on their paddocks, the British Government passed laws that ensured land on Banaba could be taken as required for mining to “protect the farmers of the British Empire”.

Even the land under villages was forcibly taken, women clinging in vain to their coconuts in fiery protest. Villagers were threatened with unspecified ‘punishments’, even told ‘they were signing their own death warrants’ because they were not co-operating. This coercion at highest levels is well documented.

As far as phosphate islands went, Banaba was a rich prize. The island did not have the more shallow guano deposits like Christmas Island and Nauru. Particularly severe uplift around Banaba had given seabirds 20m-high coral pinnacles to perch on. It took these the birds millions of years to fill in around them, but fill them in they did! Banaba had the deepest guano deposits in the world. And wherever it was extracted, there was nothing but complete devastation, huge tracts of island soon lay wrecked, impassable rubble-full canyons surrounding towering 20m-high pinnacles.

Worse would come in 1942, when the Japanese invaded the island, cruelly slaughtering by be-heading, electrification, beating, poisoning, shooting and starving around a third of the population during their three year occupation of the Gilbert Group. This number included the mass execution by departing Japanese troops two days after surrender of 143 Banaban, Gilbert and Ellice lads, the finest and fittest who had been kept behind to fish for the troops.

As the Japanese ruled, the British Phosphate Commission (BPC) doctored up a plan to ensure mining would resume unhindered once the war was over. The instructions from the British government were clear; “This opportunity must not be allowed to pass. Under no circumstances should any Banabans be allowed to return to their island.”

A British phosphate boat wasted little time rounding up the surviving Banabans, all 1003 of them that had been shifted by the Japanese to labour camps in Nauru, Tarawa and most infamous Kosrae, the latter where they were forced to eat mud to survive. The thoroughly demoralized survivors were told by BPC officials that the Japanese had completely wrecked their island (in fact they caused little property damage) before relocating them all to live 2,400km away on Rabi Island (pronounced **Ram-bee**) in remote northern Fiji. This former Lever Brothers’ plantation island, situated 20km north of Taveuni and eight kilometres east of the Tunuloa (or Natewa) Peninsula of Vanua Levu, had been purchased for them using money from their own Banaban Provident Fund.

At first the Banabans thought the relocation was temporary, a two year trial. No developmental infrastructure was put in place for them on this rugged and heavily forested island that had four times the rainfall and was ten times bigger than Banaba.

The Banabans were literally dumped with two months of supplies and tents to live in on Rabi in the middle of the wet hurricane season. Average daytime temperatures in their equatorial homeland hovered around 98 degrees F. On Rabi they were 20 degrees lower. Forty of their elderly would die in the first few months after their arrival.

Fifty-seven years later, the Banabans on Rabi now number just over 3,000. Another 1,150 reside, mainly for employment but also for study, in Suva and to a lesser degree Labasa. A handful

live in Australia, two in New Zealand. All retain strong links back to families on Rabi.

A few hundred Banabans have also relocated back to Banaba in recent years, their presence they say ensuring that no one will ever take their home island away again.

Making matters confusing, Banaba now comes under the governance of Kiribati (formerly Gilbert and Ellis Island Group), while Rabi falls under the Republic of Fiji.

Although they currently have a Banaban rep in both the Kiribati House of Assembly and Fiji Parliament (at the time of writing these are Ioabo Christopher and David Christopher respectively), the minority voice of the Banabans still has to shout long and hard before it's heard.

When hearing their story, it is hard not to be moved by these 'forgotten people of the Pacific'.



The original Buakonikai village, Banaba, taken just before it got mined

For the land that we love

And to what we have lost

Will remain in our hearts forever

Raobeia Ken Sigrah

2. Banaba, the homeland

A 1992 Fiji Government report on Rabi affairs began by describing the Banaban people's "deep and almost fanatical devotion to their home island" of Banaba. This is explained by 'it's isolation and limited resources and water which developed a close knit community'. This is far too simplistic, but whatever the reasons, and wherever they may live today, the Banabans still regard their homeland island of Banaba as their spiritual touchstone, the only reality that stays certain in their lives.

The emphasis of this report is on the Banabans living in Fiji, but it is important first to appreciate the significance of their island homeland. Banaba is now politically one of the 33 main islands

that make up the Republic of Kiribati, but many Banabans will argue that geographically and historically it has never belonged there. A touchy subject in the presence of any I-Kiribati.

Located just below the equator (latitude 0.53 south, longitude 169.35 east), Banaba is a six square kilometre rocky crag that stands out on it's own. It's nearest neighbour is Nauru, 267km to the West, with next Tarawa 386km to the North East.

With a land area of only 595 hectares, the island rises to a high point of 82 metres. It has no fringing lagoon as found around most Pacific islands, rather a surrounding coral ledge averaging 30 metres in width which drops sharply off into the ocean abyss.

The first indigenous people of Banaba it is claimed were te Aka, meaning 'the first hamlet'. These people of Melanesian origin had a reputation for great sorcery, inhabitants of forest and shore who knew little of ocean seafaring and navigation.

Two main invasions of Banaba are indicated through recorded family genealogy. The first came around 16 generations ago (16th century) and brought Indo-Malays from the East Indies, while another around 13 generations ago (17th century) saw a lesser number of I-Kiribati, possibly even just three or four canoes of driftaways. A much larger influx of I-Kiribati would arrive as labourers with the phosphate miners from 1900. These immigrants brought new customs, new aspects of culture and new blood through marriage to the indigenous people.

Banaba became known as Ocean Island after it's 'discovery' by the British trading vessel 'Ocean' in 1804. Early European explorers unanimously describe the island as lying in an unclaimed area of the Pacific known as "no mans land".

Earliest European accounts tell of a happy and contented people who had little contact with the outside world. One 1851 journal

estimates the population of the island at between 2,000 and 3,000, and 'flourishing'.

During the latter part of the 19th century, the Banabans were tragically hit by a succession of particularly severe droughts, the worst called the 'Great Drought' that occurred between 1871 and 1874. Rainfall fell from an average 1750mm (70 inches per year.) to little more than 150mm (7 inches).

Stories of a thirst stricken people are legendary. A whole family would be limited to one coconut shell of water per day, ritually gathered from sacred underground grottos. Things got so bad the islanders would resort to catching flying fish at night merely to suck their exceptionally large and aqueous eyes.

It is not surprising then that Banabans flocked on board the five separate labour recruiting vessels (blackbirders) that called to the island during the 1870s, to be scattered far and wide over the Pacific. It is thought many of these ended up on plantations in Hawaii and Tahiti, never to return.

By 1900, the miserable remaining population on Banaba numbered no more than 450, were reported riddled with disease and reputed to be among the poorest people in the Pacific.

*When I'm asked, "Where is Banaba?" I reply
"Scattered all over Australia!"*

Overseas resident Banaban

3. The Phosphateers

The Banabans blame 'the rock'. A rock doorstep of unknown origin used to prop open a door in the Sydney office of the Pacific Islands Company. A particularly driven young geologist named Arthur Ellis had it analyzed and found it to be over 80 percent pure phosphate of lime, far greater than any coming out of the other two known phosphate islands of Nauru and Christmas at that time.

It took Ellis two months to trace the origin of this rock which had been brought back by a passing steamer from a tiny "unclaimed" island called Banaba, way out on it's own in the central Pacific.

Arriving in May 1900, Ellis quickly established the lush island was almost all pure phosphate. The Pacific Islands Company had literally stumbled upon a fortune. Company representatives had little difficulty in securing acceptance from the wholly innocent Banabans for sole rights to mine their island for 999 years in exchange for just 50 pounds per year. The company claimed the Banaban King had signed the agreement, in fact the Banabans never had a King, let alone any concept of nobility.

Mining started almost immediately. But without real sovereignty, the Company knew it's hold on the island was tenuous, so in the following year it persuaded the British Government to annex the island. A warship duly arrived on 28 November 1901 to sound a 21 gun salute and raise the British flag to a group of thoroughly baffled Banabans. This was done without any consultation or consent of the Banaban population,

the same process being followed in 1916 when Ocean Island was attached to the Gilbert and Ellis Group which would later become Kiribati. The official reason given at the time just one of administrative convenience.

The Banabans relationship with the mining company ran quite smoothly until 1909. By then, the Banabans had seen some 15 percent of their land stripped of phosphate and trees, and they now flatly refused to allow the company to mine any more of their land at the going rate.

The British Government responded by arranging a better deal for the Banabans. On top of the 50 pound annuity payment, all land required for mining on Banaba would now be purchased from individual owners under “Phosphate and Tree Purchase” deeds for sums averaging 20 pounds per acre plus nominal compensation for fruit trees destroyed.

Insatiable demand for phosphate from Australian and New Zealand farmers resulted in a further 145 acres being acquired in 1913. The terms were basically similar to the earlier agreement but land purchase values were increased to between 40 and 60 pounds an acre. An additional royalty of six pence per ton on all phosphate shipped after the 1st of July, 1912 was imposed to start a Banaban Fund to be used “for the benefit of the existing Banaban community in any way that may be recommended by them.”

After 1914, this was changed so that only the interest on the capital sum of the Banaban Fund was available for use. This became known as the Banaban Royalty Trust Fund and was distributed among land holders who leased land to the Company, and for maintenance of Banaban services. These provisions were to set the framework of the future investment and use of Banaban monies right up to the present day.

The Banabans did not realize it at the time, but the British changing the status of their island from a protectorate into a fully fledged colony in 1916 removed much power from them. Holding onto their land would be now all but impossible.

In 1920 the interests of the Pacific Phosphate Company (a subsidiary of the original Pacific Island Company) in both Banaba and Nauru were acquired by the Governments of the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. This consortium was known as the British Phosphate Commission (BPC), who appointed a board of Phosphate Commissioners to run the industry on a commercial basis. Profits were made to the tune of millions of pounds per year.

It was not long before the new Phosphate Commissioners required further land. But the Banabans were now thoroughly disgruntled with their deal, as a third of their island had by now literally disappeared before their eyes. Negotiations broke down and the Whitehall-backed Gilbert and Ellis Islands' Government intervened with the proclamation of a Mining Ordinance permitting compulsory acquisition of land on Banaba. Early in 1931 an area of a further 150 acres of land, including the whole village of Buakonikai, was compulsorily taken and mined by BPC on terms similar to previous agreements. There would be direct compensation to landowners by payments at a rate of 150 pounds per acre, compensation for fruit trees destroyed and rental at the rate of 2/6d per acre per annum to be paid to Colony Revenue.

But the BPC was already well advanced in their plans to rid 'their' Ocean Island of the troublesome natives. A decoded telegram dispatched from the Australian Governor General dated 22 October 1927 to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs clearly outlines Australian Government intentions regarding Banaba.

“As all the phosphate on Ocean Island will eventually be required it appears to Commissioners advisable that steps should be taken to secure another island or islands for the use of the Banabans when Ocean Island is no longer inhabitable and the Commissioners have expressed their willingness to co-operate in this matter.”

In 1931 royalties on phosphate exported were increased to 10½d a ton which was credited to the new Banaban Provident Fund, to be used for the express purchase of a new home for the Banabans, once that could be found.

It became more and more complicated. Another agreement in 1937 provided an annuity to all Banabans. The basic rate was set at 8 pounds each to all adult Banabans and 4 pounds to all Banaban children with additional annuities to holders of land in the 1913 and 1931 areas. This agreement was accepted by the majority of landowners. Approaches from BPC in 1940 for the acquisition of a further 230 acres were agreed in principle, but the whole issue was abruptly disrupted by the entry of Japan into WW2 and the occupation of Ocean Island by Japanese troops from August 1942 until Sept 1945.

We were assembled together and told that the war was over and the Japanese would soon be leaving. We were put in groups, our names taken, then marched to the edge of the cliffs where our hands were tied and we were blindfolded and told to squat. Then we were shot.

Kabunare, a Gilbertese labourer and only survivor of 143 Banaban, Gilbertese and Ellice men executed by the Japanese two days after surrender.

4. Wartime Atrocities

Japan attacked the US Naval Base at Pearl Harbour on Sunday 7 December 1941, with news reaching Banaba the following day by regular broadcast. That afternoon a Japanese flying boat appeared over the island dropping bombs and firing machine guns at the government station in an effort to cut off radio communications. By Dec 10, the BPC manager was instructed to destroy all company equipment.

A free-France destroyer, *Le Triomphant*, arrived at Banaba on 28 Feb 1942 and evacuated 232 BPC staff and 823 Chinese labourers. Left behind were around 700 native Banabans, 713 I-Kiribati and Tuvaluan workers plus their families, and five Europeans. By mid 1942, with war in the Solomon Islands imminent, BPC were calling for the further evacuation of BPC staff on Ocean and Nauru Islands.

The High Commissioner for the Colonial Office in Fiji voiced his strong opinion that it would be wrong to bring out the remaining British officials without taking the native population as well. Anyone left behind on the Island would surely be treated as British sympathizers.

But before anything could be done, the Japanese attacked Banaba and Nauru simultaneously over the weekend of 22/23 August 1942. A garrison of 500 Japanese troops and 50 labourers took possession of Banaba and wasted no time setting up anti-landing craft barriers, fox holes, bunkers, and electric fences around the reef.



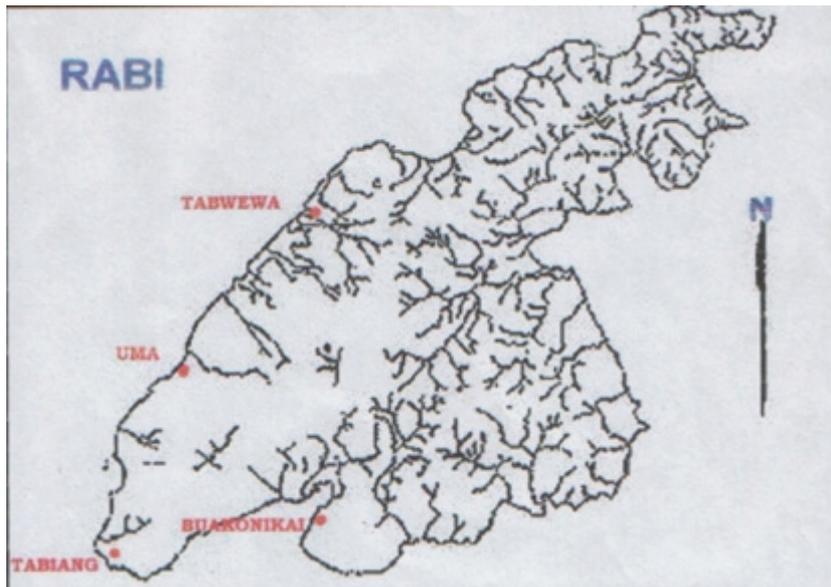
Only known photo of Japanese occupied Banaba, taken by an Allied surveillance mission 1944.

The personal accounts of the atrocities committed on Banaba by Japanese troops against the Banaban and Kiribati people make most disturbing reading. A total of 349 people were killed: shot, tortured, beaten with hardwood sticks, raped, electrocuted, beheaded even in front of their children for as little offence as stealing a green coconut. Lepers and their families were routinely executed.

Serious food shortages developed from July 1943 and the Japanese began shipping off groups of the islanders to labour camps in Tarawa, Nauru, and Kosrae in the Caroline Group. After the departure of the last party in 1944, the only Banabans

and Gilbertese left on the island were 143 of the younger and stronger men, fishermen for the troops.

Two days after surrender, as the Japanese were preparing to depart, these mostly young men were all marched to the edge of a cliff over the reef, hands tied, and shot. One Gilbertese labourer, Kabunare, survived by falling off the cliff and swimming into a cave. His testimony, and that of another, Nabetari, an Ellice islander who earlier escaped on an outrigger and drifted out at sea for seven months, resulted in Commander Suzuki Naoomi later being executed for war crimes.



5. Relocation to Rabi

As pointed out, the need to find an alternative future home for the Banabans had been planned for many years as the phosphate was progressively mined away.

One of the main objectives of setting up the Banaban Provident Fund was to provide for this. Wakaya Island, now a top class resort island, was surveyed in 1940 but rejected because of lack of water in favour of Rabi Island which was purchased in 1942 from the Australian subsidiary of Lever Brothers, called Lever's Pacific Plantations Pty Ltd, who ran it as a copra plantation.

These former owners stayed on as tenants until the bulk of surviving Banabans arrived there in December 1945 to begin what they regarded as a temporary stay while Banaba was made fit for their return.

Rabi is a ruggedly beautiful island with great potential. It has an area of about 70 square kilometers – around 11 times bigger than Banaba. It's rugged interior rises to 472 metres, is well wooded with good commercial timber. It has good anchorages and is in a rich fishing area. At the time of purchase, the copra plantations on the island were at their productive peak of around 600 - 800 ton a year.



The old Lever Brothers building at Nuku is now used by the Rabi Council for administration, wholesale shop and community library

But despite attractions, Rabi was a strange new home to the 1003 Banabans and Gilbertese landed there from the British Phosphate Commission ship 'Triona' on 15 December 1945.

Apart from the coconuts, it was an island of completely unfamiliar trees and plants. It's reef and lagoon fish were different from the deep water species of their waters back home. They had arrived at the start of the hurricane season and the army tents they were expected to live in tore away in the strong winds. More often than not they slept on stretchers sitting awash with water. They were given a two month supply of rations after which they were expected to live off the land and from their arrears of annuities that had mounted up during the Japanese occupation.

The Banabans did not settle in easily. Initially the agreement they understood was that they would go to Rabi for two years, then return to Banaba if they chose.

The new administrative structure of the Banaban community on Rabi was established by the Banaban Settlement Act passed by the Fiji Government at the end of 1945. At first the new set up appeared to be functioning well but growing discontent amongst the Banabans as to their situation grew to such a point that after two years the administrative officer on Rabi asked for police assistance to keep law and order.

The joint Fiji-Western Pacific High Commission team was called in to clarify the rights of the Banaban people to retain their land interests and freedom of movement back to Banaba. It confirmed continued payment of annuities from mining on Banaba, and made them eligible for all normal services to be provided by the Fiji Government on the same terms and conditions as all other Fiji citizens. In reality they would become known as the 'Fijian Banabans' in much the same context as 'Fijian Indians' are regarded.