

kava. And not just with plants. A modest chicken farm could for example supply eggs. The islanders have free range chickens, but most eggs are lost to outlying or mongooses. A small piggery could supply pork, a few breeding cows some beef and very basic dairy products.

To their credit, farmers from each village have already banded together in small 'clubs' or group co-operatives. In Tabwewa Village for instance, there is the northern, central and southern groups, each with two dozen of more members.

Taking into account past endeavours, it would be wise if the committees of all these groups, and Banabans are well oiled on this level, should perhaps be engaged on an advisory or liaison basis to any development program. A 'manager' from each village could be consulted for advice to avoid being involved with an endless array of committees who want to run projects because of their incumbent positions. The Banaban's attitude of no man above another does delay decision making and can be highly counterproductive. The challenge may be to keep all business dealings separate from 'custom' while at the same time acknowledging and respecting the importance of cultural life and the effect it will have on the business.

That said, the farmers still need new tools, new seeds, new stock and in many cases some basic roading to be able to access their subsistence plots. What incentive is there to diversify into heavier crops when everything has to come out on your back down steep and slippery jungle trails?.

It would be fair to say that fishing is the preferred means of livelihood for many Banabans. There is widespread feeling that there is a potential for modest fishing ventures if each village could be equipped with proper boat of around F\$7,000 to F\$10,000 value to extend their ranges in this remote area. A central ice making facility, where catches could be stored and

sent away to market in Suva, would be essential to this operation. A disused ice making facility does already exist on the island, but as usual it's installation came with no spares or technical assistance and remains broken down.

A central co-op could be formed to run all this business, and co-ordinate specialist value-added fisheries such as *beche de mer* and shark cartilage, even some of the crabs this island crawls with. The council does have in its strategic plan a 'fish shop' at Uma which would handle the catch and crate it away to Savusavu for sale. Fishing licenses for this remote area would have to be obtained from the Fiji government.

The worry with encouraging conventional fishing around Rabi is declining catch levels around the island are indicating serious fish stock depletion in action. Creek systems are also under extreme pressure from overfishing. Possible strategies to address depletion issues are wisely identified by Council and include the introduction of fish farming ponds for subsistence and bait, developing a prawn and shrimp farm as a substitute for fish, and regulation of fish harvest sizes. The investigation of designating one or more marine reserves around the island could also be beneficial, with spin-offs for possible tourism.

The few Banaban individuals who did try commercial fishing in past years appear to have failed, it is said because not that they lacked the skills, indeed every Banaban seems to be a skilled fisherman, but because of their inability to separate cultural and traditional village values from what is strictly business.

On Rabi, key areas that need to be considered before any business startup are as basic as ...

1. Who is going to actually do the physical work?

2. The influence family and church will have over the worker.
3. How will the business be affected by the Banaban custom of sharing everything they own and all the money they earn? This is part of the Banaban psyche and will be difficult to change. Banabans find it exceedingly hard, shameful even, to say “No!” to their fellow man.

Theft is rare in Banaban culture. An unforgivable crime, its infrequency is due, say anthropologists, to the old Banaban tradition of *bubugeeing*. To *bubugee* is to ask for something which could not be refused – provided of course that the family from whom the loan was asked had more than enough for themselves. For example, let us suppose a family lost all their canoes in a storm; they could build new ones, but this would take too much time. They would instead approach a more well-to-do family and ask for the temporary gift. This was custom, and would never be refused. Land alone could never be *bubugeed*. Land meant everything, money and possessions little. Money always came and went, but land remained. It remains the one inalienable possession in a changing world. Ill-luck would surely follow the family who borrowed too much. Years could lapse before a loan was repaid. No records were kept, no kind of interest ever charged, why should the return be greater than the loan. Time meant nothing, time was just a European failing.

It is essential then that any outside training providers be well versed in Banaban culture, and attempt at least to learn their Gilbertese language. In the past it is a fact that the Banabans have always rebelled or expelled British advisers or BPC-appointed advocates because they were seen as not considering their unique culture.

Applying western business principles comes down to setting guidelines, hiring and firing, making hard decisions. There are a few Banabans who argue that the RCL long ago should

have imported a skillful business administrator versed in running things the te I–Matang way, out of custom. But overall, the Banabans see western business practices as compassionless, not to be inflicted for sake of profit. Hellfire sermons are still delivered on Rabi about the importance of giving.

One other very important reason many new businesses fail to clear the ground on Rabi include little chance of financial backing, not the least reason being because Banabans cannot use their group titled-land as collateral. Means of finance and capital have to be investigated if business is to be encouraged, whether from international grants or development funding, Fiji Trade and Development Bank, RCL, co-operative fund raising or private sector joint ventures.

Making it even harder, these people have no banking facilities, no real scheduled freight or shipping facilities and generally a lack of communication. There is no regular mail service, at best it operates once a week. An air mail letter from Australia can take three weeks to arrive, months for parcels. Fiji Telecom has only managed to put in three phone lines for a 3,000-plus population to date and the Island's only fax machine is at the Council office. Ordering anything from parts to basic supplies is always a problematic and frustrating affair. Transport on the island is a couple of cars, two trucks and one clapped-out bus.

Still, it is conceivable that the first Internet connections on Rabi may be available mid-late 2003, and with the teaching of computer skills, these could provide enormous backup to business startups. The use of Internet in Fiji and throughout the Pacific is developing at a fast pace, and could at least be made available for public use on Rabi in the Community Library and High School library.

Several years ago, Rabi High School was given two computers by Rotary in Australia. A generous gift for sure, but the computers soon 'broke down' with no one knowing how to 'fix' them. They remain idle, and a good lesson that high-tech assistance to this remote island needs adequate followup, not just for a few months, but often years.

Lack of support remains the biggest killer of business ventures. More than a few ambitious and hopeful Rabi youths have returned fresh-faced and exuberant from attending enterprise-type workshops in the 'outside world' of Suva, Australia and New Zealand. But back home away from their supportive trainers, and with few at home to understand their needs, these youths cannot be blamed for giving up in the face of adversity. Training a group of Banabans on the island in a broad-based Skills of Enterprise group would inherently provide them with some ongoing strength of support, similar to a town's Chamber of Commerce.

There is also considerable potential on Rabi for basic village manufacturing ventures. One example of low tech natural products that could be developed on Rabi include an animal-fat free soap made from discarded kava dregs, a highly effective anti-fungal, that has been already developed with excellent results. This soap can be made with basic ingredients in large pots and cast in something as simple as old PVC plumbing pipes.

International health warnings about kava last year were a serious body blow to the export kava industry across the Pacific. Still, this plant's beneficial powers stay undeniable as a powerful muscle relaxant, appetite suppressant, anti-fungal and diuretic. Potential for new processed kava products acceptable to western-style markets are already being explored. These also include relaxing bath 'fizz bombs', body scrubs and kava flavoured coconut milk drinks.

Banabans were once highly skilled in traditional herbal medicines and remedies, and there is desire amongst some to explore the making of their own exclusive range of natural health and beauty products. The promotion of these natural products could raise health awareness at the same time. Possible natural products include soothing creams, salt-based body scrubs and washes, with noni and other preferred basic ingredients all growing in abundance on Rabi.

The advantage of this industry is that its products can be produced (to a certain level at least) with minimal equipment, large gas fired pots with the possible addition of a shrink wrapping machine. The RCL have various under-utilized buildings in all four villages that may under the right circumstances be made available.



‘Milk-O’. This earliest Banaba postcard c.1915 shows sampling of fresh coconut toddy, a Banaban tradition

Making coconut toddies has always been part of Banabans tradition. An early photo taken on Banaba shows a man up his coconut tree engaged in the highly specialized extraction techniques which involve binding up the emerging coconut spathe and, over a period of several days and several climbs, bleeding and collecting its rising sap or *te karewe*. The first fresh juice, *te moan tari*, is highly nutritious and given to infants and mothers. Another version, *te katete*, is slightly boiled and favoured by older people and women. A thicker syrup version, *te kamaimai*, is made by boiling the juice for up to 5 – 6 hours, and is used traditionally just like sugar or made thicker like honey, eaten as spread with breadfruit or bread. This latter product is well favoured in many Pacific islands and has been a commercial product in Kiribati and Christmas Island for many years. The other major product from the juice is a potent alcoholic toddy, made by simple self-fermentation over a period of several days.

A small cutting toddy processing factory on Rabi could be investigated, exporting a full range of toddy products to Fiji and beyond. One advantage the Banabans do have is that Rabi is one of only two places in Fiji where the infamous coconut toddy can be legally harvested, a concession that takes into account the long Banaban tradition with toddy.

Since Banabans put huge value on education for their children, any assistance that can be given to the four schools on Rabi (one Secondary and three Primary, plus preschools) would be highly regarded and produce excellent long term results.

Even the briefest visit to any school on Rabi leaves the impression of serious under-resourcing, with needs as basic as they get. The children of Tabiang Primary School for instance put up with a squalid pit toilet with barely a door. Their desks have had their legs sawn off because the school cannot afford

any chairs, so they take their lessons on the floor. Teachers conveyed requests for sets of basic resources like readerbook sets.

The island's only secondary institution Rabi High School, with a role of 267, is off a short side road at Tabiang. When I visited, the island's only bus had broken down, and until the parts arrived, principal Rubena Karakaua let all her students know she expected them to start walking at 6.30 if it meant getting to school on time. "I will make them a cup of tea when they arrive, but they must learn to depend on their own resources. Encouraging independence is critical here."

Her school is well run, but basic. They desperately need a photocopier, wall posters, basic craft and music equipment. Parents recently built a new science lab, a first for the school, which now lies empty awaiting the government's share of the deal, F\$18,000 worth of science equipment.

Compared to high schools elsewhere in Fiji, the resources given Rabi are sadly lacking, particularly technical, vocational and agricultural science, all subjects critical to advancing society here.

In the Pacific, it is a fact simply not enough people are offered the chance to participate in meaningful employment. On Rabi, less than ten percent of the islanders could hope for formal employment, and a big growth rate means there are more and more students leaving school with academic qualifications that have little hope of employment. One quarter of all Banabans are currently enrolled in school. Most will leave between 4th and 6th form, and there is no 7th form available on Rabi.

Basic cultural skills are taught at High School level including canoe-building, weaving, toddy harvesting and traditional house building and basic wood-work. The introduction of a

well equipped technical skills department would enhance life skills for generations to come on Rabi. These could include small motor and outboard maintenance courses, metalwork and basic industrial design. Many a retired but still enthusiastic tradesman from New Zealand Australia may well be encouraged to impart their expertise in these areas.

These courses would also serve to channel off the less academically-inclined students into creative activity they naturally prefer. Just like sporting incentives should be equally encouraged.

Education systems of the Pacific need a reforming change of emphasis. Learning institutions continue to churn out an increasing number of school leavers that have little chance of meaningful employment. New ways have to be explored to empower young people to participate fully in the life of their communities. Academic subjects will always be important for participation in a modern world, but equally important for Pacific peoples are those skills which enable them to explore their innate creativity and aid their economic development, skills the Banabans have at times in their history come very close to loosing.

One positive aspect of assisting the High School is that it transcends village rivalries as students draw equally from all four villages. With the right encouragement, Rabi's human resources are poised to act. For example, the High School's craft teacher, Tatauea Kaiea, attended the Body Shop workshop in Melbourne in 1995, her experience would be well worth tapping into if commercialization of crafts is to be investigated.

Traditional crafts the Banabans are expert at – fans, fish-hooks, bags, mats, shell vases and hats – are also kept alive through the Women's Interest Groups. These latter groups, all

village based, have suffered a perceived lack of support of late. Assistance for them to advance through dedicated professional artist workshops to introduce new skills including better co-operative marketing could be explored.

Another Body Shop participant was Biara Touakin. He is now the local ‘electrician’ in a broad sense, looking after the power generator at Uma Village. His skills could be encouraged further with outside training in eco-efficient electric generation, either hydro, wind or solar. Rabi definitely needs to survey alternative energy generation as a way of reducing the Island’s dependence on imported diesel. This island has ample flowing water with sun and wind aplenty. Most houses are now wired up, but await full-time generation. Applications for surveys of the Waidogoloa Creek and Rakentai River for possible mini-hydro-electric systems have already been lodged with Fiji’s Energy Department.

Another project Biara is keen on is restarting a community newspaper, but without at least a basic computer to work with on the island, this task is near impossible. The Banaban Heritage Society newsletter called Banaba/Ocean Island News came close to meeting this need before fading out in 1997. Any publications like this are all well received by Banabans.

Improving electrification, putting in telecom systems, sawmilling and sustainable forestry are just a few areas where private New Zealand and Australian companies with expertise in these key areas could be enlisted to help out, paid for at least in part by those donor governments. These forms of assistance are nothing new here. A NZODA scheme begun in 1999 saw the houses of Uma all wired up with labour provided by the community. The generator runs from around 6pm to 10pm each evening and households are charged on a user-pays basis. Other smaller private backyard operations also supply.

Educational institutions in donor countries could also assist the long term training of young Banabans with higher technical skills to ensure these new schemes stay up and running.

The potential for a quality eco-tourism venture also exists on Rabi if properly developed, although it may be argued this is the realm of joint venture or private investment.

Rabi Island currently attracts only the odd tourist who typically has heard about the friendly Banabans and unique aspects of their culture, such as dancing. But the place rates barely a one line in all the Fiji travel guides, only one mentioning that permission must be obtained from the Rabi Council of Leaders before turning up.

With the right promotion, tourism could be encouraged. Much how the colonial and gold-gilded temple town of Luang Prabang in central Lao (formerly Laos) was honoured with a UNESCO World Heritage site classification, the first time an entire town had been classified thus, Rabi could perhaps be nominated in some way as an island of cultural significance – the last refuge of the unique Banabans. Rabi is not the easiest place to get to, typically by chartered boat from Karoko on the remote eastern side of Vanua Levu, but it does boast some excellent untouched beaches and potential sites for an ‘eco-lodge’, the primo one being at deserted Motawa (Albert Cove) in the north of the island. The existence of a minor hot spring here is an added bonus.

An American hotel consortium years ago proposed a hotel at Motawa. It seems their proposal was rejected by the then-RCL on several grounds. There was suspicion that a long term lease would have given the company near freehold rights over the area. The company’s offer to put in a road from the end of Tabwewa village (Nuku’s main settlement) to service a lodge

at Motawa was perceived as largely negative – the suspicion that an influx of uncontrolled visitors would bring immoral influences of drinking and other ‘loose’ behaviour. Nearby land owners suspected that they were not involved in the negotiation process and turned against the proposal, effectively killing it.

Today the mood towards allowing a controlled tourism venture is very positive. Providing the lessons of that failed past proposal are learnt from, the establishment of an eco-lodge could have some good spin offs for Rabi. Tourists could participate in fishing, birdwatching and forest walks using local guides. Dancing groups could perform and the Women’s Interest Group would have a local outlet for their crafts. Food to order could be supplied by local growers.

There is much talk of culture of late amongst the Banaban youth, and the time is ripe to build on this rise of sentiment. A recent canoe making workshop for instance resulted in the enthusiastic revival of traditional Banaban boat making. One per week of the thoroughly useful fishing craft got made for months afterwards, supplying more fish to more families.

In the Marshall Islands, many isolated communities are turning back to canoe making because the introduced dinghies powered by outboard motors have gone into a phase of problems. There is a lack of spare parts and technicians to fix motors on outer islands, compounded by rising costs of oil, fuel and service charges including wages of operators.

Those trained in Western concepts of development (based on individual profiteering) need to rethink their development paradigms to come more in line with co-operative and sharing of profits. To bring this about on a village level is not easy, often with Pacific societies there are three levels of ‘population pockets’ in so far as levels of integration with

modern development go. They are: 1. A traditional group binded by strong kinship and cultural obligations; 2. Those partially integrated into modern development but from time to time return to their traditional group while still working with the modern group; and 3. Those fully integrated into modern development, often referred to as the 'urban elite'. Many of these latter only return to their traditional groups for important community and cultural obligations like funerals, but otherwise keep only loose attachments to traditional groups. Typically Group 3, out of their traditional setting for some time, exploit both Groups 1 and 2 for their own gain. They also indirectly impose their presence with 'new things' brought in from outside. To their credit, the various groups of Banabans, on and off Rabi, do appear to act with some cohesion.

Not everything that is worth supporting can be quantified, cultural pursuits are beyond money value. Rabi is richly endowed in song and dance for instance, well beyond it's size and small population. To watch a Banaban dance performance is a most stunning experience, their bold actions and clarity of voice in both men and women highly striking.

Two existing traditional dance groups, the Banaban Dancing Group and the Rabi Dancing Group, thirty-odd members each, are capable of carrying their own in any international dance competition or festival.

Better days have seen them perform in Japan, at the opening of the Sydney Opera House and once at the Pacific Arts Festival (in Rotorua, NZ) where they were a smash hit. Most dramatic is their *karanga* or stick dance. But complete lack of funds and sponsorship keeps them firmly on the island these days. It seems such a waste of talent. If only a group of Banaban dancers could attend the Pacific Arts Festival in Palau in 2004, how wonderful that would be for all Banabans!

Banabans as a people stay fully proud of their dancers, as shown by RCL's plan for a 70m X 25m cultural centre (estimated cost \$52,000) plans for which have already been drawn up by Rural Housing. Funding is being sought from various agencies, including Multi Ethnic affairs, but this is not a project that looks like it will be taking off in the near future. Another plus for having this large building is that it can also serve as meeting place and for hurricane evacuations.

Encouragement of more contemporary expressions of music could also be fostered, from 'entertainment' singing to more 'urban' music for the youth. Setting up a small low cost recording studio at the High School could return endless esteem for the several thousand dollars it would cost.

A supposedly twice-monthly 'Banaban Program' broadcasts cultural items to both people on Rabi and Banaba via Public Service Broadcasts (a subsidiary of the Fiji Broadcast Commission). The charged cost is around F\$295 to produce each thirty minute show, which is why many of them don't get to happen. It is lovely to see these people sitting around their radio, engrossed in this their own special program. They miss it dearly when it does not come on.

Radios are something Banabans do have, most households have at least some type of receiver. A dedicated Banaban community radio station on the island, broadcasting just a few hours a day, could be a wonderful outlet for creative expression, local news and notices, even playing of popular Pacific music.

Wherever you look, there are so many worthwhile projects to undertake on Rabi. In the course of framing development for displaced peoples, we should keep an 'open book' and see 'what' and 'how' it should be written. Not everything can be

done at once, but at least a few could be started. To show someone in the world really cares. “A moment to choose, risking to be with Uprooted People” as the World Council of Churches called their refugee resource manual.

Not everyone will be satisfied with whatever gets done, however well intended. But the Banaban people respect those who get up and speak from their hearts with strong conviction. This is why the Interim Administrators appointed by the Fijian Government in 1992 were very successful. The Banabans resented the fact they were not able to run their island themselves, but they came to respect the Administrators, especially Major Malo and Ratu Epeli. Oft-quoted is that the Interim Administration were very respectful to elders and Banaban culture during their tight two year control.

Above all the Banabans want to be kept informed, know how decisions are being made for the welfare of the entire community and it's future survival as a whole. This consultation and informing will also serve to share the responsibility out, especially amongst the older people whose support is critical.

One very simple final sentence summed up the recommendations made for the Banabans by the Committee of Inquiry into the Rabi Council Affairs back in 1992: “They have to face realities.”

This may still be the case, but there could be no more deserving people in all of the Pacific. Encouraging their voices to speak can only serve to enrich the repertory of world culture, adding to the quality of life for us all.



From Koroko on Vanua Levu, an open boat will take you the 8km across to Rabi

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