

# The "Bula Bulletin" Bi-monthly

May – June 2011

**"Circumcise... your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger..."**

Deuteronomy  
10:16-19 (NRSV)

## The resettlement of the Banabans in Rabi, Fiji

Many of you will already be thinking that my working life, based as it is in tropical Fiji, must be idyllic, and when my research takes me on site visits across tranquil seas to distant archipelagos, I think I may have lost all possible chance of convincing you otherwise.

Much of my work with the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) is focused on climate change and the resettlement of at-risk peoples in Oceania. The region has over 200 coral atolls, all of which, scientists predict, are under threat from rising sea levels. Over the coming years, inhabitants of these low-lying islands face relocation away from their atoll homes.

PCC wishes to offer advice and accompaniment to its member churches as they support affected communities. Of all advocates involved in the resettlement task, the Church in the Pacific is physically as well as spiritually the closest to the community, and as such, it is ideally positioned to help allay fears and relieve anxieties among those affected.

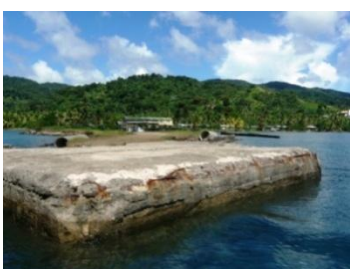
To be in active solidarity with the peoples of Oceania, PCC needs to be aware of various accompaniment approaches, and to be able to offer suitable guidance where appropriate. Past resettlement schemes therefore offer a rich source of information on the relocation process, and also, on occasion, provide hope to island communities who face uncertain futures. The historic resettlement of the Banaban community to northern Fiji, though not a climate-related case, is an excellent 'local' study that highlights both the problems and potential of community relocation.

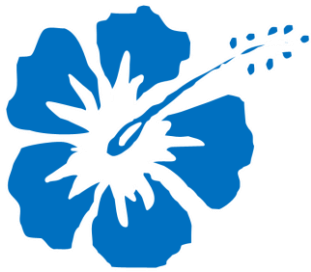
## Banaba Island: its people and its phosphate deposits

On 15<sup>th</sup> December 1945, a boat carrying 1003 people arrived in Rabi Island (pronounced Rambee), in northern Fiji. Most of those who disembarked were Banabans, all had connections with Banaba Island and all had suffered greatly both before and during World War Two.

**Prior to World War Two:** In 1900, Arthur Ellis, a young British geologist, came across a rock propping open an office door at the Pacific Islands Phosphate Company in Sydney. He was curious about the properties and origin of the rock, and soon traced the sample back to Banaba, a tiny, isolated island in the central Pacific. He found that Banaba was almost entirely pure phosphate, then 'unclaimed' and worth a fortune\*.

\* Phosphate was highly prized as an agricultural fertiliser at the turn of the C20th, with insatiable demand for high-grade supplies coming from the farming sectors of Australia and New Zealand.





The phosphate company quickly acquired sole mining rights to the phosphate deposits in Banaba (for the next 999 years!) in exchange for £50 a year, and in 1901, to ensure continued exclusive access, the British government annexed the Island.

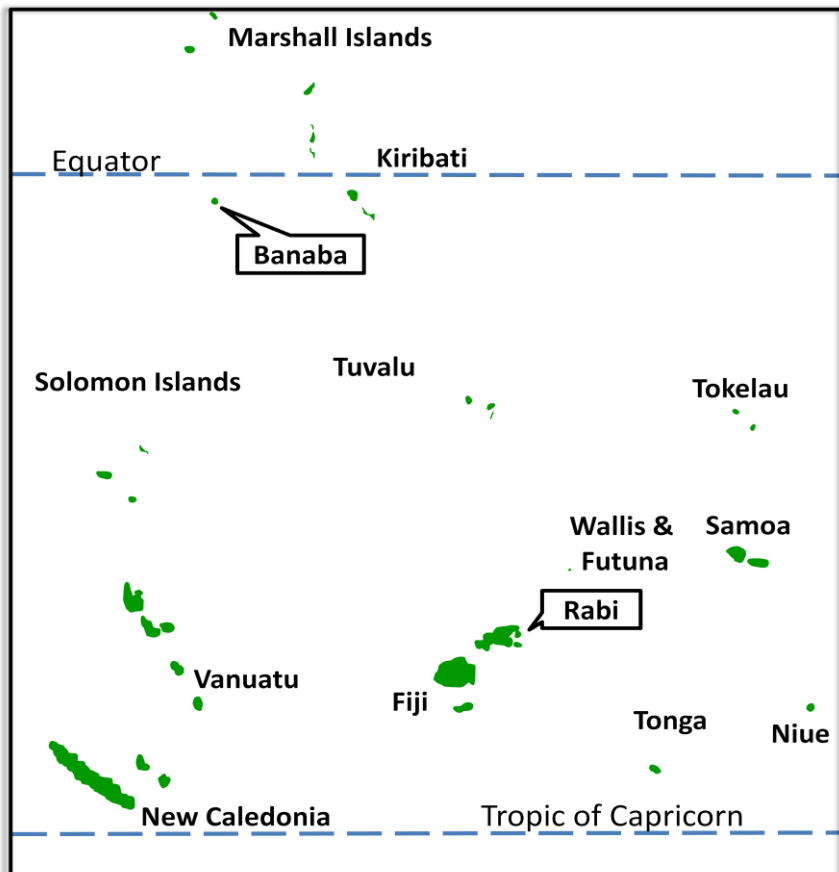
Initially the Banabans welcomed their visitors, though soon it became apparent to them that the mining activity on their island was slowly destroying their home. The Islanders protested. In response the mining company increased its extraction payments. Over the subsequent years, the Island continued to disappear, the Islanders continued to protest and the extraction payments continued to increase (though the Banabans were never offered a fair market rate for the mining activity on their land).

**World War Two:** In 1942, the British authorities, realising that sooner rather than later Banaba Island would be unable to sustain its population, sought an alternative home for the Banaban community. At that time, the Lever Brothers were selling Rabi Island in northern Fiji for £25,000. Before representatives from Banaba could inspect the suitability of Rabi the Japanese invaded Banaba, and shortly after, the Island's population was dispersed to internment camps in Tarawa, Nauru and Kosrae. Unperturbed and not wishing to lose out on the buying opportunity, the British authorities went ahead with the purchase of Rabi, using monies from the Banabans' own phosphate royalties.

**The relocation process:** At the end of World War Two the British authorities gathered the surviving Banabans at Tarawa in Kiribati. The Islanders were told, untruthfully, that their Island had been rendered uninhabitable by the occupying Japanese forces, and that they could not return home. Instead the entire community was to relocate to Rabi Island, some 2,400km away; in the meantime, the British Phosphate Company wasted no time in recommencing mining activities.

The weakened Banabans arrived in Rabi in mid-December 1945. Temporary tents were awaiting them, along with enough tinned food to last them their first three months. It must have been a truly traumatic experience.

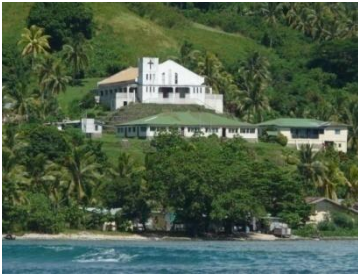
Markin Corrie, a Banaban elder, now living in Suva, was a young 15-year old at the time, and recalls how during their first night in Rabi, resident cows came down to graze in the area where the tents had been erected. In the darkness, the cattle duly trampled the tarpaulin structures, razing several of them to the ground. The Banabans had not seen a cow before and were terrified.



Rabi, a lush, hilly island, is ten times the size of Banaba Island.



**“The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in troubled times”**  
Psalm 9: 9 (NRSV)

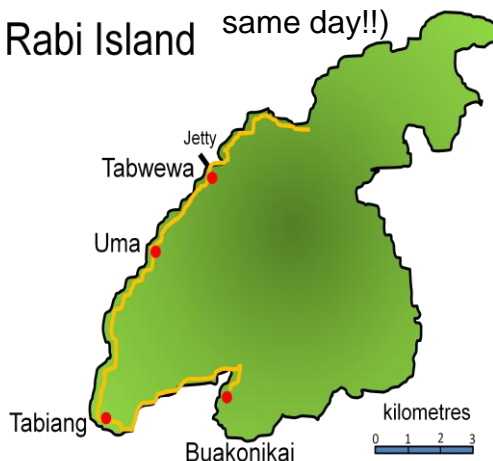


**Resettlement lessons learnt:** Records in the National Archive of Fiji show that the authorities had gone to some considerable efforts to prepare for the Banabans' arrival in Rabi. Nevertheless, aside from the bovine oversight, several aspects of the Banaban resettlement meant that the Banabans were ill-at-ease in their new home. They had arrived at the beginning of the cyclone season, and were unprepared for the vicious weather brought by these tropical disturbances (Banaba Island, sitting close to the equator, does not experience cyclones). They were also skilled at deep-sea fishing (Banaba has no fringing reef), but knew little of the fishing opportunities that the shallow reef around Rabi presented, and they had no experience of growing agricultural crops (Banaba was a rocky, barren outcrop with very scarce water supplies).

Understandably, the Banabans took some time to adjust to their new environment. They were reliant on local advice and know-how from neighbouring communities\*, and owing to their treatment, they felt bitter towards the British authorities. In 1965 the resentment came to a head when the community instigated legal procedures in the British Courts for compensation, and the case became the longest in British history at the time. Some 16 years later, the Banabans finally accepted an Australian \$10 million package. Despite the size of the award, which was inadequate compared with the amount given to the residents of Nauru, another phosphate-mined Pacific island, the Banabans have only been allowed access to the interest from this compensation payment.

**Rabi and the Banabans today:** Today, the vast majority of Banabans still reside in this very remote part of Fiji. To make the journey by sea from Suva to Rabi requires a 12-hr overnight boat ride from Suva to the nearest town of Savusavu on Vanua Levu, Fiji's second largest island. Once at Savusavu it's another 5-hour bus ride on unfinished roads to Karoko, the closest crossing point for Rabi. Finally, a 45-minute boat crossing lands you at the jetty in Tabwewa, the main village and administrative centre for Rabi. (Incidentally the 180° International Dateline runs straight through Tabwewa, but Rabi and the 300+ other Fijian Islands are on the same time, 12 hrs ahead of GMT & all, thankfully, are on the same day!!)

Rabi Island



Worldwide, it is estimated that there are some 7-8,000 Banabans alive today. A sizeable community of Banabans can be found in Suva, and a few now also live in Australia, New Zealand and the US.

Suva's population is sufficient to sustain a weekly meeting of the Banaban elders, who meet at Banaba House in the city centre. Rabi Council is also housed in Banaba House, and they must first be consulted when arranging a visit Rabi Island.

**The visit of PCC to the community:** Just before Easter, two colleagues and I from PCC headed for Rabi. Our aim was to consult with the Banaban community on issues of identity, Banaban culture and their sense of place and belonging, some 66 years after their elders had landed in Rabi. We were interested in understanding how the current Banabans viewed themselves and their relationship with Fiji their adoptive home.

\* The original inhabitants of Rabi had been moved to neighbouring Taveuni Island when the Lever Brothers bought Rabi for copra plantation use. Their descendents still live in Taveuni today.





Despite its location in northern Fiji, the Island of Rabi still has an autonomous feel to it. The two-storey Rabi Council of Leaders' building greets you from the jetty, and the elected Council's 9-strong membership oversees the running of the Island, manages its services and generally keeps tabs on the comings and goings of Rabi's few visitors.

Our task, during our 5-day stay, was to meet with as many of the Island's residents as we could. To this end, we were indebted to *Talatala Qase Kabong*, Divisional Superintendent of the Methodist Church of Rabi who smoothed our visit and enabled us to meet with a wide cross-section of the community.

The Banabans in Rabi are Fijian citizens and unsurprisingly, most we met were born in Rabi, and knew of Banaba Island only from the stories of previous generations.

### Prayers & reflections:

- Pray for those who have to leave all that is familiar, to start a new life in a new home and in a new land.
- Pray for those in authority and for host communities who receive displaced people.
- Reflect on what it must be like to be told you cannot return to your home.
- Reflect on what it must be like to feel you are not in control of your life.
- Imagine you have to survive unaided on a tropical island. What issues do you think you would encounter?
- Give thanks for opportunities presented by new starts.
- Live, in all circumstances and at all times, with hope for the future.

**Identity and culture:** In a by-gone era, the Banabans had a unique culture, supported in part by their geographical remoteness. They used to have their own language, their own dance and their own traditions, but with the arrival of missionaries from neighbouring Kiribati, bringing with them a Bible written in Kiribati, the Banabans became eager to learn this 'new language' of salvation. Today, like the rest of Fiji, the Banabans are schooled in English, and the elders collectively can recall just 20-30 words of the original Banaban language. Present generations in Rabi speak Kiribati at home, and learn Fijian and Hindi as 'other' languages in school.

Banaban dancing almost had a similar fate, as any kind of dancing was discouraged by the Church. After internment, and with the upheaval of arriving in Rabi, the Banabans' unique stick dance was all but lost to the world. Its movements were only saved during the 1970s when dance instruction sheets were found gathering dust in a school cupboard. Today, the dance is reserved for special occasions, and is performed on Banaba Day, the 15<sup>th</sup> December each year. This newly-created commemorative day helps preserve 'Banaban' culture and identity among Islanders.

When asked about their national identity, the Banabans admit their response depends on who is asking the question. When they are talking with another Fijian, they say that they are from Rabi (as Rabi is part of Fiji); when a person from Kiribati asks the question, the Banabans passionately reply that they are from Banaba (although today Banaba Island comes under the jurisdiction of Kiribati, no Banaban will say that they are from Kiribati). Yet mention rugby, and all Banabans say that they support Fiji!

**Hope for the future:** The Banabans' acceptance of Rabi as their home gives hope for those in the Pacific who face uncertainty from climate-induced resettlement. Future generations, free of the trauma of relocation, may one day live their lives with dignity and freedom in alternative locations to their parents' and grandparents' homes of today; yet, like the Banabans, it may be possible for the descendents of future displaced people to retain a sense of identity and belonging to their distant lands and to a distant time.

***'For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.'***

*Romans, 8: 24-25 (NRSV)*

God bless  
Julia