

Unit 22: Nauru: Faces of Change, Past Leaders and Modern Nauru

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Facts

Population:	13,770 (July 2008 Estimate.)
Highest point:	Topside (61 m)
Language:	Nauruan (official) and English
Religion:	Protestant (66%), Catholic (33%) and others
Independence:	31 January 1968

Glossary

Assimilation	The process when members of a particular culture are forced into the lifestyle of another, more dominant, culture.
Land tenure	The period or terms of owning land
Matrilineal	When a system of land ownership, tribal rights and obligations are handed down from the mother.
Yako	Nauruan word for deep sea or ocean
Resettlement	Shifting a particular cultural group from their place of origin to another area, usually by the Government.
Status	Relative position in a group or a whole society

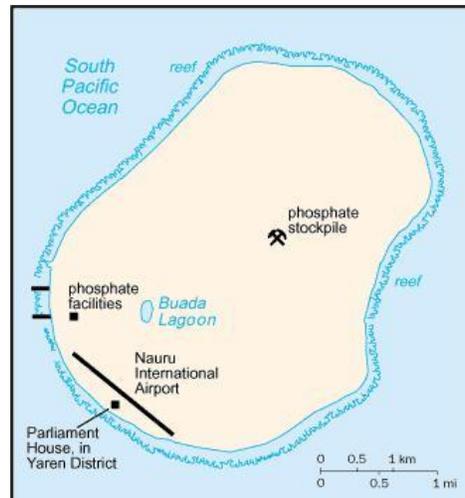


Figure 22. 1. Map of Nauru

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- have a good understanding of Nauruan culture;
- appreciate the wisdom and strength of President DeRoburt and how he helped to build modern Nauru
- gain an understanding of Nauru's current social and economic problems and hope for the future

What were key events in the gaining of independence in Nauru?

The discovery of phosphate in Nauru in 1900, plunged Nauru into colonialism, and a vastly different way of life began for the islanders. Those changes were not to the advantage of the people of Nauru. It took the strength and wisdom of President Hammer DeRoburt to address the problems created by colonialism.

What are the main features of traditional Nauruan culture?

Traditional Nauruan Culture

The Nauruan culture has developed in isolation from other cultures over a long period of time. It is not known when Nauru was first settled but it is known that when the first Nauruan families arrived they settled in the villages along the narrow coastal strip of land around the island. These villages consisted of closely related family members, organised under a head chief (usually an elder of the family). There was also an island chief. These chiefs could be either men or women.

The Nauruan culture is **matrilineal**. That is, land ownership and tribal rights are handed down from mother to daughter. However, both women and men are able to own land.

Coconuts were the most important resource in traditional Nauruan society. Wealth was measured, not by the size of the land, but by the amount of coconut produced in a plot of land. It was common for Nauruan families to leave their homes for a few days and settle on coconut lands to work on them and keep them clean.

Land and sea ownership is a very important aspect of Nauruan culture. For the Nauruan people, land represents wealth, and is a mark of **status**. The Nauruans are deeply attached to their land. In traditional society, Nauruans knew who owned which land. They had no need for fences or lines to determine the boundaries of their lands.

The sea is another important source of food and represents survival for the Nauruans. Just as with **land tenure**, Nauruans knew which part of the reef or **yako** belonged to which family. In traditional Nauruan society there was an unwritten law that trespassers would be punished. The type of punishment was determined by the chiefs.

Questions and Activities

1. Explain how the traditional villages were organised.
2. Why are the land and the sea so important to Nauruans?
3. What was the most important resource in traditional Nauruan society?
4. Looking at Pictures 1 and 2 answer the following questions:
 - (a) What are those people doing?
 - (b) Why would these people be working together?
 - (c) What do these pictures reveal about Nauru's traditional life?
5. A society in which land ownership and tribal rights are handed down from mother to daughter is a _____ society.

What was the impact of colonialism on Nauru?

One of the main problems caused by the German takeover of the island, and the later phosphate mining by Australia, Britain and New Zealand, was that the islanders were excluded from the financial benefits of phosphate mining. Initially, the rights of phosphate mining belonged to a German company called *Pacific Phosphate Company (PPC)*. Between 1900 and 1920, these rights shifted to the *British Phosphate Commission (BPC)*. This company was administered by Australia on behalf of its other partner governments, Great Britain and New Zealand.

When the colonial powers decided who was to own the phosphate company, they did not consider the Nauruans. There were very few Nauruans involved in the mining activities. *BPC* preferred to import foreign labourers rather than use Nauruan labour. Nauruans were banned from the facilities owned by *BPC* such as the Gold Club, the Staff Club, and the residential area for the *BPC* employees. Nauruan landowners received only half a penny per ton of phosphate as royalties.

During the colonial period, Nauruans had no say in decisions on phosphate mining or land issues. A central concern to Nauruans was the loss of valuable coconut trees. These were rapidly being replaced by office buildings and recreational areas for *BPC* employees.

Since the beginning of phosphate mining, Nauruans had been helplessly looking at the destruction of their ancestral lands. Whilst the *BPC* partners were profiting, the Nauruans were watching their sacred lands disappear. When the *BPC* wanted to set up a Boat Harbour and cantilevers for the exporting of phosphate, they faced problems with the Nauruans who were willing to stand up for their rights, protest and make petitions.

'The construction was delayed but a solution to the problem was necessary and the Australian resident commissioner declared that the ownership of the sea did not exist any longer ... Even today some old Nauruans remain perplexed about this decision which deprived them of their most important rights. 'He said you cannot even own the sea, that's rubbish, aaah!' Some said, 'our law has been broken, we cannot any more own the sea and you cannot give a channel to your family'.

From Skinner, S, P. 1981. The Nauruans, San Francisco: Some Press, p. 47

Questions and Activities

5. Divide the class into groups of four or five students.
 - Read the extract above
 - Discuss how local landowners would have felt seeing damage done to their land through phosphate mining.
 - In your group, imagine you are representatives of a Nauruan tribal family.
 - Write down your ideas,
 - then as a group write a petition to convince the government to stop what they are doing to your family land.

What led Nauruans to a desire for independence?

Apart from the issues of economic exclusion, Nauruans also had to address the issue of **'resettlement'**. Resettlement involves moving whole local communities from one area to another to clear space for economic activities. The *BPC* offered resettlement of Nauruans to Curtis Island, off the coast of Queensland (see *extract below*).

'In August and September 1963, the Director of Nauruan Resettlement visited Nauru to discuss with the Nauruan Local Government Council proposals for resettlement of the Nauruan people. The Australian Government's proposals were explained in detail to the Council. The main proposal was that Curtis Island be acquired and vested in the Nauruan people. A Nauruan Council would be established with wide powers of local government within the State of Queensland. Public screenings of a film of Curtis Island were held, and at this time the Government's proposals were again explained and many questions answered. In addition, public meetings were held with the Nauruan people.'

Administration of the Territory of Nauru, 1963-1964, Report to the General Assembly of the United Nations 1964, p 11. (See Question 6)

These issues only served to strengthen the Nauruan leaders' resolve to break the yoke of colonialism. Although there was no actual referendum passed on this matter, President DeRoburt must have been aware that Nauruans did not want to lose their beloved ancestral land. DeRoburt feared that his small community would be **assimilated** into Australian society. Acceptance of Curtis Island, DeRoburt said, could result in Nauruan people 'being soaked up by Australia like ink on a blotting paper' (Biography sheet of President DeRoburt, supplied by Nauru House, Melbourne Office).

So, the only way for the people of Nauru to keep their land and their sovereignty was through independence and control of the phosphate industry, which by right belonged to them.

Questions and Activities

6. Read *Figure 22.3* and answer: Were the proposals by the Australian Government fair?

7. Write a paragraph (100-200 words) commenting on:

(a) the impact of phosphate mining in Nauru.

(b) the problems or benefits of **resettlement** for both Australians and Nauruans.

8. List the events that led Nauruans to want independence.

9. Why was it important for Nauruans to gain control of the phosphate industry?

Why is President DeRoburt known as the 'Father of the Nation'?

President DeRoburt was an important leader in Nauru's struggle for independence. Most Nauruans fondly remember him as the man who gave them their independence. DeRoburt is therefore recognised as the 'Father of the Nation'.

Hammer DeRoburt was born in Nauru on 25 September 1922, and died on 15 July 1992. He grew up under the leadership of Chief Detudamo during the Second World War. DeRoburt was influenced by Chief Detudamo's visions for a future when Nauruans would govern themselves.

DeRoburt was elected President of Nauru on 31 January 1968, when Nauru gained its independence. He knew that, although phosphate was necessary for Nauru to be self-sufficient, it was a limited resource.

As soon as Nauru gained independence, DeRoburt committed himself to developing Nauru. His main goal were raising the living and educational standards of its people in the present and into the future.

One of DeRoburt's first initiatives was to reorganise the *Nauru Local Government Council (NLGC)* to best serve the interests of the Nauruan people. Under his administration, the *NLGC* expanded its networks from social services to being a commercial business operating the *Nauru Corporation* supermarket and managing firms such as *Air Nauru* , the *Shipping Agency*, *Nauru Fishing Corporation*, the *Meneng Hotel*, and *Nauru Insurance Corporation*.

President DeRoburt planned to increase social benefits to the Nauruans. Using the profits from phosphate mining, and trust funds, he provided education and health services to the people free of charge. Those who required specialised health treatments were flown to Australia at the Government's expense. The number of educational scholarships was raised to 20 students per year. Being a teacher himself, DeRoburt believed firmly in a solid educational foundation for his young nation.

Questions and Activities

10. What were the benefits to the Nauruan people introduced by DeRoburt?

11. Why did the President consider all these changes necessary?

12. What was the *NLGC*?

13. After independence, what were the responsibilities of the *NLGC*?

14. What are the messages conveyed in the song written by President DeRoburt's wife
and in the poem by an anonymous Nauruan?

WHEN WILL IT ALL END?

Kolle DeRoburt

When will it all end?

Your never ending journey

I am lost and in despair

Call of country is stronger

When will my yearning end?

My life is troubled

My wish is to be-

Where I can be close to you-

When will it all end?-

The needs of my home, Nauru-

You are small and beautiful-

I love you more than riches itself-

Maybe it will all end-

When all dreams are fulfilled-

THE PIONEER

(Anonymous)

The pioneer is gone

the path is clear

No twig, no snare

Can entwine

The flame is gone

The embers remain

Forever burning

In our hearts and minds

The last of the chiefs is gone

The nation mourn

In peace and comfort

The spirit soars

The work is done

His work is done

To you, my homeland, I give-
My blessings, they are yours forever-

Government policies in contemporary Nauru

The Nauruan Government has had to face a lot of problems concerning the island and its people. One of the most pressing problems is that, the current source of funding for Nauru, which comes from phosphate mining, is running out.

Under DeRoburt's Government, and later the Government of President Marcus Stephen, a lot of groundwork was laid down for the future of the people of Nauru. The main focus of Government policies was been on issues such as water and energy resource, alternative forms of industries and exports, land and sea tenure, health, education and the environment.

Water and energy resources are an extremely important issue on a coral atoll with a growing population and limited freshwater supply. In the past, Nauru has relied on imported water from Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Now, the Government has established a Desalination Plant, which converts seawater into fresh water.

Another issue in contemporary Palau is health problems introduced by Western style 'junk-foods' and imported tinned foods. However, Nauruans are becoming more aware of health related issues. They realise that a change in lifestyle and diet can reduce these problems significantly. The Health Department is working with the *World Health Organisation (WHO)*, and health awareness is being made public through workshops, classes and informal discussions.

When the missionaries first established formal education in Nauru, it was geared towards preparing the students for Nauruan life. However, after phosphate mining began, these aims were forgotten. After independence, there was a revival of the traditions of Nauruan culture. For example, a museum was opened and an archive of Nauruan history has been created.

President DeRoburt's plan of using technological knowledge of countries such as China and Taiwan became a reality, with the establishment, in 1992, of the Agricultural Technical Mission. The aim of this project was to find out which plants can survive Nauru's harsh climate. It also focused on improving various livestock farming methods such as pig and poultry farming.

President DeRoburt was a strong advocate for the protection of the natural environment. He was outspoken in the conservation of the sea for the future generations of Nauruans, and exposed the dumping of nuclear waste in the Pacific Ocean.

The Government has now established the *Nauru Fisheries and Marine Resource Authority (NFMRA)*, a department whose main function is to protect the sea and its marine life. The NFMRA has been empowered through the *Fisheries Act 1997* to patrol the open sea for illegal fishing. It also monitors and controls local fishing on the reef and out in the open sea.

Another function of the *NFMRA* is to provide technical assistance to local communities. It has organised workshops to educate local fishermen about protecting and conserving the reef and marine life.

It could be said that despite a great deal of outside influence, Nauru is making progress and that the economy, culture, politics, daily life and social relationships are becoming “Nauruan” again.

Questions and Activities

15. List the main issues facing Nauru today.

16. Why are water and energy resources such an important issue?

17. What are the main causes of health problems in Nauru? How can these problems be Addressed?

18. How is technological knowledge from countries such China and Taiwan used in Nauru?

19. What is the function of the *Agricultural Technical Mission*?

20. What does *NFRMA* stand for? What are the functions of this department?

21. Why do you think the Nauruans should be concerned about protecting both the land and sea environments?

References

Administration of the Territory of Nauru, 1963-1964, *Report to the General Assembly of the United Nations 1964*.

Skinner, S.P. 1981. *The Nauruans*, San Francisco