



Photo 8.1 Burial grounds of the *sau* at Sisilo, Noa'tau, 1988. *Alan Howard*.



Photo 8.2 Fr. Soubeyrand and Resident Commissioner (in pith helmets) with Rotuman men. *Marist Archives, Rome*.

8 Cession and the Early Colonial Period

We, the chiefs of Rotuma, with the knowledge and assent of our respective tribes, and in accordance with their desire, do, on our own behalf and that of our respective tribes, hereby cede and surrender absolutely, unreservedly and unconditionally to Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, Empress of India, the possession of and full sovereignty over all ports, harbours, roadsteads, streams and waters, and all foreshores and all islets and reefs adjacent thereto: praying that Her Majesty will be pleased to extend to us such laws as now govern her Native subjects in the Colony of Fiji, or such other laws as in Her Majesty's wisdom she may see fit to make and appoint for our Government and for the maintenance of peace and good order.

Rotuma Deed of Cession, 1881

Initiating the Process

A little over a year after the 1878 war, on 19 June 1879, Maraf, the paramount chief of Noa'tau, wrote to Sir George William Des Voeux, who was Acting High Commissioner in the temporary absence of Sir Arthur Gordon.

I write this letter to you the Governor and the high chief of Fiji.

To His Excellency the Governor who rules justly and under whose administration peace and prosperity is enjoyed.

I beg of Your Excellency to be of good mind towards me and hear my petition.

The chiefs of the various districts of Rotuma voted me by a show of hands to be their ruler and have all

signed the paper in confirmation thereof...They are unanimous that I should be their leader and have agreed to abide by my decisions in all matters.

They then after a while withdrew the power thus placed in me and wished to go to war, as they objected to be under one Chiefdom or Govt. but instead that each chief should rule his own district.

You may have heard of our previous war which took place not long since and they are again dissatisfied.

They attribute their dissatisfaction to my receiving certain money from a Mr. Weber a German residing in Sāmoa. I do not believe this to be the cause—the real one being that they object to my having the ruling power over them. This disaffection will continue and will probably cause another war.

I do not wish for war or that any chief or person should suffer, but I approve of Christianity and our living together in unity and this is the reason of my petition to Your Excellency that you may consider the present state of Rotuma and that you may send someone (Mata [representative]) or write advising me to come and see you, or else suggesting to me what I should do in the matter.

I know nothing—You know everything
 I am in darkness—You are enlightened
 I am weak—You are strong
 I am foolish—You are wise¹

I am anxious and desirous and it has also long been apparent to me that we (Rotuma & Fiji) should be under one Govt.

Be of good mind towards me and communicate your decision in this matter that I may let those who are assisting me in my duties to know of Your Excellency's wishes in regard to Rotuma.²

Marāf may have had several motives for writing such a letter. He may indeed have been apprehensive about another war, especially if he was insisting on the right to dominate the other chiefs. Marāf apparently saw himself as the leader of the victorious side in the previous war and therefore entitled to rule over the entire island. However, this conflicted with the principle of district autonomy. His reference to receiving money from Weber, the head of J. C. Godeffroy and Son in Sāmoa, suggests that he might have been using his position to further his own welfare and to control trade, which surely would have antagonized the other

chiefs. European traders on the island were also concerned that a renewal of hostilities would prove disruptive to their interests. According to an account by George Westbrook, two German traders on the island—Captain Stammerjohn, trading for a German firm in Fiji, and either a Mr. Carl Pullack or Captain Axeman, trading for the German Trade and Plantation Company of Sāmoa (DHPG)³—made representations to the Fiji government about the previous war, requesting that the government take steps to insure stability. Westbrook remarked that these and some other traders persuaded the Rotumans to request annexation to Fiji.⁴

Another possible factor was a fear of punitive foreign intervention. Eason reported that, as a result of the Catholics' defeat in the 1878 war, "there was talk among them, though whether serious or not is not known, of asking for French intervention."⁵ Apparently the French priests made threats to that effect, and they were taken seriously in light of previous visits by French warships. Eason also suggested that the chiefs were apprehensive about possible German intervention, having heard a rumor that Mr. Weber was planning to come from Sāmoa to Rotuma in a German man-of-war to establish trading stations.⁶ One suspects that the chiefs were influenced by traders on the island who objected to the prospect of additional competition.

Acting High Commissioner Des Vouex forwarded Maraf's petition to England and dispatched Lt. Graham Bower, commanding officer aboard HMS *Conflict*, to Rotuma with his reply—that the decision did not rest with him, but with Queen Victoria and Her Majesty's advisers, and that he did not presume to judge the outcome. He made it clear, however, that he had recommended granting the request.⁷

Bower's Report

Lieutenant Bower wrote back to Des Vouex that, on his arrival on Rotuma:

I sent a message to warn Marafu that I had a letter for him from you, and requesting his attendance to receive it: he arrived about two hours afterwards at the beach and sent to tell me he was there. I sent back to say I was waiting for him: he then came on board and was received by a guard and every mark of respect. I requested him to send messages to the Chiefs to say I would see them at a meeting at Oinafa on the Saturday.

When he told me that if he sent, some of the Chiefs would not come, I desired him to send in my name, to say the Chiefs were to meet me at 12 o'clock on the beach at Oinafa, and to add that I would know those who were absent. Marafu then attempted to explain to me his views of the state of the island but I informed him that I would hear what he had to say in the presence of other chiefs.⁸

Bowers attended a "Wesleyan tax collecting service," talked with some of the traders, interviewed the French priests in Fag'uta, and "took every opportunity of conversing with the people and trying to ascertain their feelings."⁹

On Saturday, 12 July 1879, Bower met with the chiefs, and utilizing the services of "an excellent interpreter, a half-caste," in the presence of two European traders, read Des Voeux's letter to them.¹⁰ Bower then addressed the chiefs in the condescending manner that characterized colonialism at the time:

It is a great honour and privilege to be counted among the children of the Great Queen and to be counted the brothers of Englishmen....No man will be allowed to take the law into his own hands, but if he is wronged he must go to the magistrate. All quarrelsome fighters will be punished. To support the expense of the Government you will have to pay a tax. If you are willing to agree to all this and still wish to be children of the Great Queen, you must sign a paper to say so.¹¹

Bower met with the chiefs again on Monday, 14 July 1879, and after they confirmed their desire to petition for cession he had them sign a document, the English translation of which reads:

We the Chiefs of the Island of Rotuma have heard and understood the letter of the Governor of Fiji. We have also heard the words of the officer of the Great Queen of England, and we ask the Great Queen to rule our island, and to receive us as subjects. We ask for a Magistrate, and we promise to obey him and to keep the peace with one another.¹²

The document was signed by the following district chiefs: Marafu (Noa'tau), Albert (Itu'ti'u), Vasea (Malhaha), Niumfaga (Oinafa), Manava (Itu'muta), Osias (Juju), and Aisea (Pepjei).¹³ It was also witnessed and signed by the translator, Thomas W. Baker. In his report, Bower noted,

"The above was read and translated to the Chiefs, and signed of their own free will and by their request without pressure or request made by anyone whatever."¹⁴

The next day Albert and Manava requested a memorandum of agreement concerning the way the island would be governed while they awaited an answer to their petition, whereupon Bower drew up the following document and called another meeting of the chiefs:

The chiefs recognize Marafu as the head chief of the island, but he has no authority to make agreements in their name without their consent. Each chief rules in his own district, and all agree to keep peace with each other, until the answer of the Queen of England arrives. Marafu may call meetings of the chiefs, but they are not obliged to attend. Those who wish may go, but no law can be passed unless all chiefs are present. This agreement holds good for one year.¹⁵

The chiefs signed the memorandum and Bower submitted a report to the Governor of Fiji, in which he also placed the blame for the 1878 war on the Methodist missionary Moore and suggested that Maraf was a tool of the missionary. Bower advocated the appointment of a resident Deputy Commissioner and proposed announcing that all disturbers of the public peace would be deported. He concluded with the warning that unless Rotuma were annexed, "I dread to think what the ultimate consequences may be."¹⁶

Concerning the economic viability of Rotuma as a self-sustaining colony, Bower wrote that, in his opinion, it was unlikely that revenue collection would be able to meet administrative costs for the first few years in the event of annexation, but that "he was assured by local European traders, of whom there were eight in 1879 (two Germans, the rest English), that the island could support the salary of a magistrate, and indeed the chiefs had unanimously stated they were willing to pay taxes for that purpose."¹⁷

Bower further recommended prohibiting arms and ammunition and the importation of liquor, and proposed that the island be administered through the chiefly system, with occasional presents made to the chiefs as recognition for good behavior.¹⁸

In the Interim

In a letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, John Gorrie, acting in the position of High Commissioner of the Western Pacific in the absence of Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, expressed the view that

if any islands on our borders, such as Rotumah, where the native chiefs live only to quarrel among themselves, believe they would be better under the strong government of the Colony, I would, within reasonable bounds, admit them to the blessings of good order and firm rule, because the additional weight of our liabilities is small, the benefit to the people themselves very great, and the gain in commerce decidedly worth having.¹⁹

He also suggested that the government of France should be consulted prior to any decision because of the presence of French Catholics on the island.

On 7 September 1879 Des Voeux sent a dispatch to the Secretary of State for the Colonies enclosing a copy of Marāf's letter, but not Bower's report or the chiefs' petition, because, as Des Voeux explained, the latter items should be sent with Sir Arthur H. Gordon's observations (and Gordon was expected back shortly). Des Voeux ended his letter with the comment:

I trust you will approve of the action taken, which while committing the Government to nothing, has at least had the effect of delaying for a year an internecine war.²⁰

That Marāf, at least, was anxious about the outcome of the petition is revealed in a letter to Gordon dated 2 October 1879. The letter was written by a resident European, Andrew Wilson, with Marāf's signature attached:

I am requested by two of our chiefs here, one Maroff [Marāf] & Horasio [a subchief adviser to Marāf], to convey to you their respects, and to state that they have been thinking very seriously lately of writing you about annexing this Island to the Fiji government under Great Britain.

I think in this letter they wish me to state that they are still of the same opinion and have the same wishes

as they expressed in their letter to you some months ago.

If it would not be presuming too much I think they would be glad to hear from you in connection with this matter.

The Chief in conclusion wishes me to state that he will write you again by the first opportunity at state [*sic*] his wishes more fully which he hopes you will kindly consider.²¹

On 12 October 1879 Gordon forwarded the chiefs' petition to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. In his accompanying letter he stated: "I have not the smallest hesitation in strongly urging that the wishes of the petitioners should be complied with."²²

Gordon made reference to the fact that

the inclusion of this island within the limit of Fiji, was contemplated in 1874, and that but for the misreading of a telegraphic despatch addressed to Sir Hercules Robinson on the subject, the boundaries of the new Colony would probably have been so defined as to include Rotuma within them.²³

He expressed the view that this should be regarded not as an annexation, "but rather as a mere rectification of the maritime boundary of the colony."²⁴

Gordon went on to present a strong case for annexing Rotuma. Contrary to Bower's opinion,²⁵ he asserted that no additional expenses would be incurred by the imperial government or the Colony of Fiji, but that annexing Rotuma would lead to an immediate increase in the colonial revenue and ultimately to an increase "of very considerable importance."²⁶ He also warned

of the grave responsibilities which will be incurred by refusing to listen to the petition now made...if the unanimous request of the chiefs and people be disregarded, we undoubtedly become responsible for the results of our refusal to listen to their prayer. That those results will be distressing and will end in the extermination at no distinct day, of an interesting people, I cannot doubt. It is now in our power to save them—not only at no cost to ourselves, but to our own advantage—not only without any disregard of their wishes, but in accordance with their own earnest solicitation.²⁷

Gordon ended his report by informing the Secretary of State for the Colonies that pending a reply to the petition, "or the issuing of Letters Patent rectifying the boundary of the Colony," he was sending his private secretary (and nephew), Arthur J. L. Gordon, to Rotuma as Acting Deputy Commissioner, to advise the chiefs during the interim and to "practically assume the direction of the government."²⁸

Anxious over the delay in receiving a reply to their petition, a delegation of three chiefs, Maraf, Albert, and Manava, sailed to Suva on the schooner *Levuka* to press their case. Gordon officially received them on 20 October 1879, surrounded by his personal staff, the Chief Justice, the Attorney-General, the heads of departments, the high chiefs of Fiji, "a few citizens," and representatives of the press. An article published in the *Fiji Times* on 25 October 1879 gives an account of the proceedings:

Sir Arthur Gordon, in his official robes and decorations, took his seat at a little after noon, and the three Rotumah Chiefs were then introduced by Mr. Wilkinson, His Excellency's Native Commissioner, who acted as interpreter.

The chiefs said, in effect, that they had deemed it advisable to come to Fiji to see her Majesty's representative, and plead their desire for annexation in person. The offer to cede their island to Great Britain had been made in writing, but they were so anxious about it that they had come in person to urge on and hasten a decision. They were also anxious that His Excellency should send some person down to Rotumah at once to watch over their interests and to otherwise instruct them in forming some interim laws by which to govern themselves. They also desired to express their gratification at what they had seen and observed in Fiji since their arrival; for while they had been prepared to see improvements, what they had seen by far surpassed their most sanguine expectations. This was all they had to talk about.

His Excellency then replied:—Chiefs of Rotumah, it gives me pleasure to bid you welcome to Fiji. Your petition to the Queen has already been forwarded to Her Majesty, and I have recommended that its prayer should be complied with. Whether it is so or not, it will be for the Queen in her wisdom to determine. Meanwhile, and until Her Majesty's pleasure be known, I am willing, so far as I can do so, to accede to your

wishes, and will send an officer of my Government, a relative of my own, to live among you and advise you. You will, I am sure, take heed to his words and follow his counsel, but till such time as her Majesty has declared her will, the government of the island will remain wholly with yourselves. Even should your offer be accepted, it will in a great measure do so. It is through the chiefs of the land, some of whom you see round me to-day, that the Queen mainly governs her Fijian subjects in this colony. It is to the chiefs of the land that we look for and from whom we receive efficient assistance in the difficult task of government. It will be the same in Rotumah, should the Queen consent to take you under the shelter of her throne. It is through you that we shall govern the people of the land: to you that we shall look for aid in guiding and controlling them. Whatever may be the result of your present action there can be no doubt of this, that Her Majesty will be deeply touched by the confidence you have shown in her good will towards you. I again bid you sincerely welcome, and trust that your short stay among us may prove in every respect agreeable to you.

The Rotumah Chiefs then begged His Excellency's acceptance of a few mats of their own country's manufacture. They knew His Excellency had no need of such articles and they were almost ashamed to present them, but they desired they might be accepted as a good-will offering—as something from Rotumah. They had come to no hasty decision in offering their country to Great Britain—their fathers had desired it before them, and it had been long talked of by the Rotumah people, and now they were anxious to complete what their fathers had commenced.

His Excellency said he accepted the present in the spirit in which it was offered, and hoped their visit to Fiji would continue to be enjoyed by them, and that they would have a pleasant voyage to their homes.

His Excellency then withdrew, and shortly afterwards entertained all present at a luncheon.²⁹

In his dispatch reporting the event to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Gordon noted that he had other meetings with the Rotuman chiefs "of a more confidential character." He reported that the three chiefs said they had come with the approval of the other signatories of the

petition (that is, the four remaining district chiefs). Further, he wrote:

They enquired, somewhat anxiously, whether any further steps taken on their part would facilitate the accomplishment of their wishes. They were also deputed, they said, to confer with me generally as to their future obligations and duties in the event of their offer being accepted by Her Majesty.

They informed me that the step they had taken in requesting Her Majesty to assume sovereignty over them was no hasty or inconsiderate one; that they had been thinking about it for the last five years:—very seriously ever since the cession of Fiji—and, to some degree, even before that event; whilst their last "war" had quite determined all parties among them that their only chance of escape from future calamities was to be found in absorption into the Colony of Fiji.³⁰

Gordon informed the visiting chiefs that he could not immediately appoint a magistrate until cession had been confirmed, but that he was sending a Deputy Commissioner who would advise them to the best of his ability, although that officer would only have jurisdiction over British subjects. This, he wrote, "caused them no little concern, as the desire to see some control put upon the proceedings of the crews of foreign vessels and other visitors is no doubt one of their reasons for wishing to be included within the boundaries of this colony."³¹

Having satisfied himself that the chiefs wished to entirely surrender themselves to the Queen, Gordon, acting in his role as Western Pacific High Commissioner, drew up a form, adapted from the Deed of Cession of Fiji, for their signature. At the chiefs' urging, he added a sentence that Rotumans would be ruled by the same or similar laws to those that applied to Fijians. The three chiefs,³² with the document in hand, left Fiji on the *Levuka*, accompanied by Arthur J. L. Gordon, on 30 October 1879 and arrived at Rotuma on 11 November, following a side trip to Futuna.

Before landing, Acting Deputy Commissioner Gordon arranged for Maraf, Albert, and Manava to call a meeting of all the chiefs on Friday, 14 November, at Noa'tau. At that meeting the remaining chiefs signed the Deed of Cession, which was presented in three languages: Rotuman, Fijian, and English.³³

Gordon then addressed the assembled chiefs and asked if they accepted the conditions of cession:

CHIEFS,—

I am glad to see you all here to-day.

Those of you who have lately visited Fiji know that it was the desire of Sir Arthur Gordon that you should all meet me here on my arrival amongst you. And the reason of this was twofold:

1st. That I should be able to satisfy myself, and report to him as to whether it was truly the wish of all you chiefs to Sign your names to the petition already forwarded to the Queen of England; and, whether you fully understood the words and meaning of that petition; and, secondly, that, if I found that the true wish and desire of you all was expressed in that petition, that I should then ask you to make those wishes more clear.

In that petition you have asked the Queen to "take" you; but this is not sufficient: what she would wish to know is whether you would "give" yourselves to her, and it will then be for Her Majesty in her wisdom to decide whether she will grant your prayer.

It is one thing for the Queen to *take* you,—it is another for you to *give* yourselves to the Queen.

If any one among you does not understand what I have said, let him now speak and I will explain. (Here the chiefs signified that they fully understood what had been said.)

I will now read to you again your first petition that has already been sent to the Queen. (Here the petition was read, and at the conclusion each Chief was asked separately—"*Is this your desire? and have you signed this of your own free will?*")

Answered in every case in the affirmative.)

I will now read to you a paper already signed by three of your number in Fiji.

(Here the Offer of Cession was read in Rotumali [*sic*], and each chief was asked separately:—"*Is this clear to you? Do you desire to sign this paper? Is it the wish of your people that you should do so?*")

Answered in each case in the affirmative.

Signatures to the Offer of Cession were then made and witnessed.)

It is well. I am now satisfied that it is the true desire of the Chiefs and people of Rotumah to give themselves and their island to the Queen of Great Britain, and I shall lose no time to make known to Sir Arthur Gordon the proceedings of this day; and he will at once convey the same to Her Majesty the Queen.

I will now read to you the words of Sir Arthur Gordon to the chiefs who visited Fiji. (Here the speech made to the Rotumali Chiefs at Nasova, on the 21st October last, was translated.)

My presence among you is a guarantee that Sir Arthur Gordon is, according to his word, willing, so far as he can do so, to accede to your wishes, for he has sent me, as he says, to live among you and advise you.

As you have heard, I have no authority to govern you, but I am ready and willing to listen to and advise you to the best of my ability, should you seek such advice from me; and that I may best learn your wants, I would propose that I should make a tour of the island, and visit each of you separately at his own home; and that after that you should again all meet me, either here or elsewhere, and together discuss any matters that you may either separately or collectively desire to bring to my notice for the individual or the common good.

In the mean time, if there be any question you would wish to ask me immediately, I am ready to hear it.

(No question was put, but the chiefs expressed their thanks for the proposition of visiting them separately.)

The meeting then closed after the plan for payments to be made to cover expenditure pending the receipt of reply to the petition had been discussed and agreed to.

14th November, 1879³⁴

Shortly after his arrival, Acting Deputy Commissioner Gordon was confronted with expressions of discontent, not with the cession proceedings, but with Osias, the chief Maraf had appointed to rule over Fag'uta. Osias was a Wesleyan, ruling over a Catholic district, and resentment had mounted over the harshness of his governance. A deputation from Fag'uta requested that Osias be deposed in favor of Morisio, a Catholic man of high rank. According to Gordon, "The deputation ended by saying that thenceforward the people of Fag'uta were determined not to obey Osias: that 'They would sooner die first'."³⁵

Lacking the authority to do anything about it, Gordon replied that he would enquire into the matter. His first step was to question each of the chiefs separately to ascertain their opinions on the subject. He found that Albert, Manava, and Vasea were prepared to leave the decision up to Gordon, but that Tavo, Aisea, and Maraf argued that things should be left as they were. Soon afterward the chiefs met in council and decided unanimously that Osias should be retained in his post. The chiefs, all Wesleyans, let Gordon know that under British rule they would put no obstacle in the way of the government appointing chiefs of their own choosing, but that they were wary of the influence exerted by the French priests, so "they dare not place in the hands of the Catholics such an advantage as the re-appointment of a Catholic Chief in Fag'uta would necessarily give."³⁶

In his report to the High Commissioner, Gordon made his own view of the matter clear: he saw the chiefs' decision as the result of the Wesleyan teachers' influence and said he was of the opinion that "it would be well for now, if only a matter of policy, to give to Fag'uta the chief of their choice."³⁷ He said he felt sure that should Osias remain in his post, and should the decision for annexation be unfavorable, that a war would surely ensue.

High Commissioner Gordon visited the island from 12–16 December 1879 and met with the chiefs in the home of his nephew, Acting Deputy Commissioner Gordon, and attended smaller local meetings at two locations. He wrote:

At all these meetings the most eager desire was expressed for a favourable answer to the petition addressed to Her Majesty by the chiefs and the people, and I have no doubt of the sincerity and unanimity of their desire to be incorporated in the Colony of Fiji. Their motives are indeed very obvious and natural, and I believe them to be quite right in supposing the step to be the only one which will assure them domestic peace, and freedom from vexatious interference on the part of strangers.³⁸

High Commissioner Gordon's visit was highlighted by his installation as *sau*, a ceremony that effectively acknowledged his supreme authority over the island.

Gordon took the opportunity to address the assembled chiefs. He told them that, should their petition for cession be approved, his representative on the island (that is, the Resident Commissioner) would be a real and effective *sau* for

the whole island. He also assured them of his neutrality regarding religious disputes, and in order to settle the dispute over chieftainship in Fag'uta he said he saw no reason why the people of the district should not choose their own chief. He proposed to leave the appointment of chief to a free election and took the initiative by going to Fag'uta and presiding over the election. The predictable outcome was that Morisio, who was regarded as the rightful successor of the previous chief, Riamkau, was elected to replace Osias. On his installation, Morisio took the title Tiporotu.³⁹

High Commissioner Gordon instructed Acting Deputy Commissioner Gordon to supply the Rotumans "with a few simple laws," and on 2 January 1880 the latter met with the chiefs

and with their consent and aid framed laws relative to murder, assault, theft, quarrelling, slander, and the buying and selling of liquor; and for the enforcement of these laws. I, with the consent of the chiefs, have appointed three Gagaja ni Pure (Native Magistrates), two of them of the Wesleyan denomination, and the third a Roman Catholic. I have also given instructions for the erection of two prisons or lock-ups, one in the district of Ituteu, and the other at Noatau.⁴⁰

A significant effect of these actions, in Gordon's view, was that "whereas formerly each district had its own laws, now there is a general code for the whole island."⁴¹

It is clear from the tenor of these events that the Acting Deputy Commissioner, with the encouragement of the High Commissioner, was taking an increasingly active role in the governance of the island despite the initial pronouncement that he would only have authority over British subjects. The Gordons no doubt believed that their interventions would insure peace and be in the best interests of the Rotuman people. It is also likely that they were optimistic about the petition for cession being approved in London. There is no evidence to suggest that the chiefs objected, and they may have even encouraged Gordon to take an active role in governance prior to cession.

Government versus Missions

It was perhaps inevitable that the installation of a colonial regime, even in its formative stages, would result in tensions between government-appointed authorities and the mission-

aries. From the time of near-universal conversion to Christianity (and the demise of the position of the *sau*), the missionaries established a variety of rules that they expected their converts to adhere to, rules they backed up with fines, exclusion from rights of membership in the church, or both.

The missionaries' authority to do this was undermined when High Commissioner Gordon, in his December 1879 speech to the chiefs, "spoke of the relaxation, so far as the Government was concerned, of the proscription of all old customs and amusements, so far as they were themselves innocent and lawful, such as dancing in the daytime, games at ball or *tiqa* [competitively throwing reeds for distance], the wearing of flowers, etc. In these matters every one was free to follow his own conscience, and so on."⁴²

The stage was set for an initial confrontation when Acting Deputy Commissioner Gordon inquired into the problem of absentee young men. He had been instructed by High Commissioner Gordon to look into the possibility of placing some restriction on labor recruiting by foreign vessels, and found that in the four districts from which he received returns (Itu'ti'u, Itu'muta, Fag'uta, and Malhaha), 177 young men were absent, one third of whom were married. When he asked the chiefs at a council meeting the reason why emigration was so popular among the young men, he reported they all agreed that the main reason was "the hard rules of the missionaries."⁴³

In a subsequent communication to the High Commissioner, Acting Deputy Commissioner Gordon reported:

With regard to the relaxation of the somewhat stringent and oppressive missionary regulations, forbidding certain amusements, singing, wearing of flowers, &c., I was much gratified to find a readiness to do so on the part of the Roman Catholic missionaries.

The Wesleyan teachers, on the other hand, are not inclined to go so far in this matter, confining their permission to join singing and dancing parties to those of the natives who, as far as I understand, are non-communicants.

Your Excellency is well aware of how much real importance liberty in matters of amusement and harmless customs is to the Native, and the unfortunate result of a contrary practice in the case of Rotumah. I have therefore encouraged, as far as possible, all innocent amusements, and have had the pleasure of

witnessing how eagerly the people respond to such encouragement. One very decided benefit is gained by these gatherings of the people for amusement that I had by no means anticipated; that is, they go far to obliterate the unfortunate hatred and jealousy existing between Roman Catholics and Wesleyans, and I have been assured that since my arrival, many people, even in some cases relatives, belonging to different sects, have met at these gatherings in a friendly manner, and have spoken to each other for the first time in ten years!⁴⁴

In effect, the establishment of an incipient colonial regime set up a struggle for authority among three competing factions: the Rotuman chiefs, the missionaries, and colonial administrators. It was a competition that the colonial administrators were destined to win, but not without significant resistance.

Establishing a Colonial Administration

A family crisis in England led to Acting Deputy Commissioner Gordon's leaving Rotuma in favor of F. P. Murray. In a parting tribute to his nephew, High Commissioner Gordon wrote to the Secretary of State for the Colonies:

It is with the greatest regret that I am compelled to deprive myself of Mr. Gordon's services at this time. Since November last he has performed the duties of Deputy-Commissioner and Resident Magistrate at Rotumah, with a skill and success which demand my warmest acknowledgments. His tact and good management have drawn the disunited factions of that island together in Harmony. With no physical force to back him—with no money from hence to aid him—he has, by moral force alone, and simply as an adviser, while declining to assume any position of authority, obtained the absolute obedience of the whole people, and has induced them to pay the whole of the expenses (including his own salary) involved in the administration of its affairs.⁴⁵

William Eason reported that the chiefs had agreed to make tax payments in copra to defray the costs of administration. The tax was fixed at first at fifty-six tons a year and assessed locally. At the rate of £11 10s per ton, tax income

for 1880 amounted to £644. Taxes were paid in copra until 1921, when the levy was shifted to a money payment.⁴⁶

The younger Gordon left Rotuma on 21 June 1880. Shortly after arriving on the island, his replacement, F. P. Murray, invited the chiefs of each district, the native magistrates, and some of the native teachers to join him in a three-day visit to the districts of Itu'ti'u and Itu'muta and adjacent islets. His object was

to encourage friendly relations amongst the various districts, and to give the chiefs and people of the eastern districts an opportunity of seeing a part of their country which, owing to mutual jealousies, they have never before been able to visit. All whom I invited were very glad to join me, and I thus had the satisfaction of bringing about what is said never to have taken place hitherto—a meeting of representatives from all the districts without exception, in a friendly manner and for the purpose of amusement. I was assured by the chiefs that, although this was the first, it should not be the last occasion of the sort.⁴⁷

On 17 September 1880, High Commissioner Gordon was finally able to provide a response to the chiefs' petition, informing them through Deputy Commissioner Murray of "the Queen's gracious acceptance of their cession of the island to Her Majesty."⁴⁸ Gordon's letter, addressed to the chiefs, read:

The Queen has listened graciously to your petition, and accepts you as her subjects. I rejoice that your wish is thus accomplished. I trust that peace and prosperity may ever endure among you in consequence.

I send down Mr. Romilly, who is already known to you, to make the necessary preparations for my formally taking possession of the island in Her Majesty's name, and hoisting the British flag there. This I mean to do in the first week of November.

In the meantime, pay attention to all that Mr. Romilly orders or advises you to do.

I send my love to you.

I am your true friend,

Arthur Gordon⁴⁹

Murray responded that when the chiefs were told the news, they asked him to convey to Gordon an "expression of the feelings of deep gratitude and satisfaction."⁵⁰ On the same day (17 September), Murray turned over all records

connected with the deputy commissionership of Rotuma to Hugh Romilly, who had visited Rotuma for more than two months in 1879–1880, when A. J. L. Gordon was Acting Deputy Commissioner.⁵¹ According to High Commissioner Gordon, "Mr. Romilly (who is the son of Colonel F. Romilly, Deputy Chairman of the Board of Customs)...thoroughly understands his modes of proceeding and relations with the chiefs and people, by whom Mr. Romilly is much liked."⁵²

On 5 November 1880, High Commissioner Gordon issued a proclamation that the island of Rotuma was now a part of the Colony of Fiji.⁵³ In a subsequent proclamation, he extended to Rotuma the operation of certain laws governing the Colony of Fiji. The proclamation provided that:

1. Existing laws and customs are to be observed and followed with necessary modifications, and the powers of Magistrate are to be extended to foreigners and natives.

2. The Laws of Fiji are to be followed as far as is practicable, with modifications necessitated by local circumstances (together with such Native Regulations as may be expressly extended to Rotuma).

3. Ordinances and Native Regulations as under are to have force at once:—

Quarantine Ordinance; Customs Ordinance and Tariff; Licensing Ordinance; Board of Health Ordinance; Native Regulation No. 2 of 1877 Respecting Courts; Native Regulation No. 12 of 1877 regarding Marriage and Divorce; Native Regulation No. 13 of 1877, regarding Births and Deaths.

4. A Council of Chiefs is to be set up, consisting of the Resident Commissioner as Chairman and the Head Chief and one Councillor of each District, but the Resident Commissioner is not bound to act on their advice.

5. The Native Magistrates already appointed by the Chiefs under the High Commission are to retain their offices and functions subject to the approval of the Resident Commissioner.

6. The sale and purchase of land except between natives of Rotuma is forbidden and invalid.

7. The sale of spirits is prohibited.

8. The recruiting of labourers to serve out of the Colony is prohibited.

9. The procedure to be followed by the Magistrate and the Native Magistrates is to be as follows:—

Cases concerning Europeans are to be conducted by the Stipendiary Magistrate according to the procedure of the Stipendiary Magistrates Ordinance; and in native cases by the *Gagaj ni pure* [district chief] following the procedure for Provincial Courts in Native Regulation No. 2 of 1877 concerning Courts.

Any breach of the provisions of this Proclamation renders the offender liable to a fine of £50.⁵⁴

With these proclamations Rotuma ceased to be governed under the Western Pacific High Commission and became part of the Colony of Fiji.

In January 1880 Des Voeux succeeded Gordon as Western Pacific High Commissioner and Governor of Fiji. It is ironic that he was the one to formally annex the island, for he had disagreed with Gordon about the desirability of approving the chiefs' petition. He argued, in contrast to Gordon, that an island so isolated, inhabited by a people so distinct from Fijians in race, language, and social organization, could not be considered a natural part of the Fiji group. He also foresaw Rotuma becoming an economic drain on Fiji, at least for some years to come, and rued the necessity of sending competent officers there, reducing the already insufficient supply of such officers in Fiji. Although he fully agreed that annexation would benefit Rotuma by terminating religious warfare, and that it was desirable to keep the island out of the hands of a foreign power, Des Voeux was "unable to see why Fiji should be made to bear the cost in the first instance and to take the risk of what after all was little else than a philanthropic experiment."⁵⁵

Given his concern for financing the administration of the island, Des Voeux made an early decision that was to have serious long-term consequences for Rotuma: he decided to close Rotuma as a port of entry into Fiji. It would be impossible for Rotuma to be a port of entry, he argued, without stationing a medical man there to stem the introduction of infectious diseases into Fiji, but no provision had been made for a doctor's salary, and the medical personnel in Fiji were already inadequate. From the time cession took place till the present, all vessels going to Rotuma have had to come through Fiji first.⁵⁶

For Rotuma's first Resident Commissioner, Des Voeux selected Charles Mitchell, who held the post of Commissioner for Lands and Immigration in Fiji. Des Voeux had clashed

with Mitchell in a previous posting in Guiana, and held him in low esteem. He commented in his memoirs:

Though he had traits of character deserving of respect, I had not found him a satisfactory officer in Fiji, yet I hesitated, because of our former relations, to give it expression, and I now took the first opportunity of transferring him to another sphere of duty, where his defects would be of less importance and his good qualities have more chance of display.⁵⁷

Des Voeux induced Mitchell to accept the post by telling him he would "be very much his own master," and that if he discharged his duties satisfactorily it would improve his chances of promotion to a colony nearer home.

On 9 May 1881 Des Voeux and Mitchell embarked from Levuka on HMS *Miranda*, captained by Edward Dawson, bound for Rotuma. They arrived on 12 May at Motusa and on the following day performed the ceremonies that officially marked the cession of Rotuma to Great Britain. Des Voeux described the event as follows:

we proceeded to an open space near the chief's house to take part in the ceremony which was the object of my visit. The path to the ground had been covered by the natives with mats; and on arrival there we found a guard of honour, furnished by marines, drawn up by a flagstaff which had been erected in the centre. I thereupon read aloud the Royal Proclamation annexing the island to the British Dominions, upon which the Union Jack was hoisted on the staff, the marines presented arms, and a royal salute of twenty-one guns was fired from the *Miranda*. After this I delivered a practical address to the assembled chiefs on the duties which accompany the privileges of British subjects, and at its close introduced Mr. Mitchell to them and administered the oath of office to him as Government Agent and Resident Commissioner.⁵⁸

That evening the Rotumans entertained their guests with dance performances, including a war-club dance that momentarily alarmed some of the Governor's party with a mock aggressiveness that Des Voeux deduced was a test of his bravery not to flinch. There followed a kava ceremony and feast, after which Des Voeux retreated to the *Miranda*, which set sail before nightfall.

If anything, Des Voeux found Rotuma to be even more of a burden, both administratively and financially, than he originally anticipated. He complained in his memoirs that for such a small island, with a population of under 2,500, it presented disproportionate difficulties and took up too much of his time. The problems were compounded, in his view, by differences in custom, which made Fijian native regulations and some of the ordinances unsuitable; by the difficulties and costs of communication; and by a fall in the price of copra, which led to a one-third reduction in revenues generated by the Rotumans. As one cost-cutting measure, Des Voeux excluded Rotuma from the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court and gave the Resident Commissioner judicial as well as executive authority, with the exception of capital offenses, which were reserved for consideration by the Governor of Fiji.⁵⁹

Reflections

Why, one might ask, if Rotumans were so bent on maintaining control over their own destinies, on preserving their autonomy, were they so eager to cede the island to Great Britain? Surely they were aware of the implications of having a colonial regime establish authority over them—a good many of them were familiar with the situation in Fiji. The implications should also have been evident to them in the imperial rhetoric of the British officials from the very beginning of their negotiations with the Rotuman chiefs.

Were the chiefs so fearful of internal warfare, so afraid of intervention by France, or possibly Germany, that they were willing to yield their powers of governance to the British? Were they bullied in some way by English traders on the island to accept British dominance? Did English missionaries encourage the move in the hope of minimizing the influence of the French priests?

While such considerations might have played a role in stimulating discussions of the move, we are convinced that there were other, more compelling motives, particularly on the part of the chiefs. It appears to us that the chiefs saw cession as a means of increasing their own powers vis-à-vis the people in their districts, and the leading chiefs, particularly Maraf and Albert, may well have thought cession would enhance their own status as the dominant chiefs. Their problem, as will become clear in the next chapter, was

that they were unhappy about the unwillingness of their people to obey them (i.e., the people were protecting their own autonomy by resisting unwanted intrusion by the chiefs into their affairs). Evidence presented in the next chapter suggests that the chiefs thought that by ceding Rotuma to Great Britain they would enhance, not diminish, their authority. As it turned out, they were dead wrong.



Photo 8.3 Man and child, ca. 1905. *Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.*



Photo 8.4 Woman and girl, 1913. *A. M. Hocart. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.*

Notes to Chapter 8

To compose this chapter we have relied heavily on a set of documents concerning Rotuma's cession compiled by the Fiji Archives for the High Court's consideration of Rotuma's status vis-à-vis Fiji following the 1987 coup in Fiji. We are grateful to the Archives for providing us with a copy.

¹ This is an example of the kind of tactical humility that is called for by Rotuman custom in circumstances where a supplicant is requesting a significant favor from someone, especially someone of higher rank.

² Colonial Secretary's Office Records 1443/1879.

³ Deutsche Handels und Plantagen Gesellschaft für Sud-See Inseln zu Hamburg.

⁴ Westbrook 1879, 6–7; see also Westbrook 1935, 148. Westbrook also mentions a "Rotuman half-caste" lady by the name of Susannah who lived in Levuka and represented Rotuman interests there. She was apparently known among Europeans in Fiji as the "Rotumah Consul." According to Westbrook, Susannah "certainly rendered valuable assistance in getting her countrymen to agree to annexation by Fiji," but he does not elaborate (1879, 7).

⁵ Eason 1951, 60.

⁶ Eason 1951, 62.

⁷ Letter to Secretary of State for the Colonies dated 30 October 1879. Dispatch 97, Colonial Secretary's Office Records.

⁸ Letter dated 12 July 1879, quoted by Eason 1951, 60.

⁹ Eason 1951, 60.

¹⁰ Eason 1951, 61.

¹¹ Quoted in Eason 1951, 61.

¹² Eason 1951, 61.

¹³ On the document Albert is listed as "Chief of Motusa," the main village in Itu'ti'u, and Osias is listed as "Chief of Faguta." Niumfaga, who signed for Oinafa district, was not the district chief at the time; he held the position of guardian to Tavo, the actual chief, who was considered too young at the time to take on such a responsibility. See note 33.

¹⁴ Eason 1951, 61.

¹⁵ Eason 1951, 62.

¹⁶ Eason 1951, 63–64.

¹⁷ Eason 1951, 64.

¹⁸ Eason 1951, 64.

¹⁹ Letter dated 18 August 1879. Dispatch No. 50. Colonial Secretary's Office Records.

²⁰ Dispatch No. 97, 1879. Colonial Secretary's Office Records.

²¹ Colonial Secretary's Office Records 1973/1879.

²² Dispatch No. 115, 1879. Colonial Secretary's Office Records.

²³ Dispatch No. 115, 1879. Colonial Secretary's Office Records.

²⁴ This is an interesting revelation insofar as we know of no documentation indicating that the chiefs of Rotuma, or any other Rotumans for that matter, had been consulted in 1874.

²⁵ In a subsequent dispatch (No. 117, 1879), Gordon submitted Bower's report and flatly stated that Bower had erred in his estimates because his visit was limited to a district that had suffered substantially more than the others from the recent war, and because he was unfamiliar with the system of taxation in the Colony. Along with Bower's report Gordon submitted a report by John Thurston that supported Gordon's own assessment.

²⁶ Concerning the financial implications of cession, Gordon wrote:

I have ascertained, on indubitable authority, that an immediate revenue of £1500 may be looked for, while the expenses could not, at the most liberal estimate, exceed £900.

The increase in the colonial expenditure of Fiji would be one additional Magistrate and Customs Officer at £450, a police officer, at say, £150, a clerk at £150, and the maintenance of a few constables, and of a boat and boat's crew. If, on the contrary, the petition be refused, it will undoubtedly be requisite to appoint a Deputy Commissioner for the Island, which will involve a charge on the Imperial Government.

²⁷ Dispatch No. 115, 1879. Colonial Secretary's Office Records.

²⁸ Dispatch No. 115, 1879. Colonial Secretary's Office Records. In a later note High Commissioner Gordon noted that A. J. L. Gordon had acted as his private secretary since the beginning of 1866 (Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 36).

²⁹ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 2.

³⁰ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 1.

³¹ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 1.

³² In his assessment of the three chiefs, Gordon wrote: "The chief, Maraf, who appears to enjoy a slight—though but a slight—pre-eminence amongst them, is an intelligent man, though inferior in ability and vigour to his colleague, Albert, who appears to possess considerable energy and shrewdness. The third chief [Manava] took but a subordinate part in conversation" (Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 1).

³³ Gordon noted that in the case of the district of Oinafa, the name is different from the signature affixed to the petition forwarded by

Bower. On that occasion, Gordon explains, "Niumfang, a man of no rank, but holding the position of guardian to the young chief, represented Oinafa; but at the meeting held to-day, the Chief, Tavo, appeared on his own behalf" (Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 7).

³⁴ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 7, Enclosure 2.

³⁵ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 8.

³⁶ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 8.

³⁷ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 8.

³⁸ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 11.

³⁹ Gordon 1897–1912, Vol. 4, 141.

⁴⁰ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 16.

⁴¹ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 16.

⁴² Gordon 1897–1911, Vol. 4, 141.

⁴³ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 9.

⁴⁴ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 16.

⁴⁵ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 36.

⁴⁶ Eason 1951, 70.

⁴⁷ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 37.

⁴⁸ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 46.

⁴⁹ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 46.

⁵⁰ Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 48.

⁵¹ Murray had taken the position on a temporary basis, with the understanding that he would not stay on Rotuma beyond the month of September (Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 52).

⁵² Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 52.

⁵³ *Fiji Royal Gazette*, No. 20, Vol. 6, 5 November.

⁵⁴ *Fiji Royal Gazette*, No. 22, Vol. 6, 27 November.

⁵⁵ Des Voeux 1903, 26–27.

⁵⁶ Soon after taking up his position in May 1881, the man Des Voeux appointed as Resident Commissioner to Rotuma, Charles Mitchell, made a spirited request to the Governor to allow the island to retain port of entry privileges. "The closing of Rotumah as a port of entry will slightly increase the revenue and trade of Fiji, but it will at the same time most seriously injure the inhabitants of this island by destroying to a great extent the competition between traders which is the only possible means of keeping the trade of this place in a healthy condition" (Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 7 October 1881. Outward Letters, Rotuma District Office, Central Archives of Fiji and Western Pacific High Commission, Suva, Fiji.)

⁵⁷ Des Voeux 1903, 27–28.

⁵⁸ Des Voeux 1903, 29.

⁵⁹ Des Voeux 1903, 33–35.