Photo 9.1 Resident Commissioner William Russell with Rotuman chiefs, 1927. *Russell 1942, reproduced courtesy of the Polynesian Society.*

Photo 9.2 Fanfare for Fr. Soubeyran at Motusa. *Marist Archives, Rome.*

9 The Evolution of Authority during the Colonial Period

The chiefs are all jealous of each other

They went to Fiji and brought back bags for us to put copra into

This is the chiefs' time to make the people work

The whole of Itumutu has to build the Government House

The chiefs went to Fiji but they don't know what they went for

They wrote a letter and brought a white man to rule

Besides him they brought shovels and American axes to cut all the woods down.[1]

Translation of song composed by
Gagaj Manava of Itu'muta in 1880

Missionary Impact on Chiefly Authority

The overall impact of European intrusion on chiefly powers prior to British administration was complex, with some changes serving to increase chiefly authority while other changes diminished it. The introduction of a commercial economy initially enhanced the power of the chiefs, who, by acting as intermediaries between their people and ships' captains, received a portion of the intake. But commercialism also contributed to individual control of land (see chapter 10), with the subsequent decrease in chiefly authority that inevitably accompanies an increase in economic autonomy by subordinates.

The missionaries generally worked hard to convert the chiefs, for the people in a district were reluctant to convert

until their chief had done so. This put the chiefs in a favorable negotiating position, and they made it clear that their conversion was conditional on being politically supported by the missionaries. In a letter dated 26 October 1864, Rev. William Fletcher reported the following substance of a conversation between himself and a chief:

> He [the chief] said...that he had heard that now the missionary had come, he would try to do away with all the powers and prerogatives of the chiefs. I told him that the lotu inculcated respect and obedience to rulers. He appeared reassured, yet evidently had the idea that the missionary and the lotu might be disturbing forces.[2]

There is even some evidence that Wesleyan and Catholic missionaries used promises of enhanced chiefly support in their competition for converts.[3]

Once the chiefs had accepted Christianity, they acted as the missionaries' deputies in their districts, and in this capacity increased their personal privileges. The missionaries instituted a set of fines—for fornication, nonattendance at church, and other transgressions of the new system of rules[4]—from which the chiefs apparently received a percentage.

However, in working to eliminate the office of *sau,* which they considered heathen, the missionaries liquidated one of the more important functions of the chiefs, that of guiding the religious destiny of the island. Furthermore, a new class of indigenous experts emerged, in the form of catechists and teachers, who, in addition to the missionaries, preempted the chiefs' judiciary role in moral matters. In short, by accepting Christianity, and the religious dominance of missionaries, the chiefs set the stage for narrowing the scope, if not the degree, of their authority.

The Fiji Model of Indirect Rule and Rotuman Chiefs

The British, having successfully instituted a system of indirect rule in Fiji, proposed to do the same in Rotuma, but they failed to take into consideration the differences in chiefly systems. Superficially viewed, the roles of a Fijian *yavusa* chief and a Rotuman district chief were nearly identical. Like his Rotuman equivalent, a *yavusa* chief organized activities in his district, was an arbitrator of disputes, and was ceremonially honored through precedence in kava drinking. He did not exercise primary distributive

rights in the land—this was left to *mataqali* (lineage) chiefs—but he received a portion of the first fruits. Nevertheless there were significant contrasts. For example, *yavusa* chiefs were ritual leaders by virtue of their direct descent from deified founding ancestors. Their political power was therefore strongly backed by supernatural sanctions, while the authority of Rotuman district chiefs was much more secular in conception. Also, Fijian chiefs were chosen on the basis of primogeniture, thereby limiting likely successors to the elder sons of a reigning chief. Such sons were treated with considerable respect from birth, and they were socialized with an eye toward the chiefly role. From childhood onward they were trained to positions of authority, and their peers learned to subordinate themselves to their wishes.

The Rotuman system of succession, in contrast, was much more fluid. Contenders for a title were often numerous, with any ancestral link to a previous chief making a man eligible. Consequently the number of male children who might eventually succeed to a particular title was extensive, and prior to their succeeding to a title, no one was apt to receive the special privileges normally given Fijian chiefs' elder sons.

These differences lent a distinctly different flavor to chieftainship in Fiji and Rotuma. Ideologically, leaders in both societies held similar kinds of authority, but while Fijian chiefs generally exercised a genuine dominance over their subjects in the psychological sense, Rotuman chiefs did not. To put this another way, in Fiji, the powers of the office were conceived as embodied in the individual—they were personalized. In Rotuma, the powers belonged to the title (or office) alone.

Fijian social organization was ideally suited for indirect administration, and the British made the most of it. The chiefs, by virtue of their dominance, provided ready-made channels for administration. The rights and duties allocated to them by the colonial administration were added to their traditional roles, and the people accepted them without significant resistance. British officials were therefore encouraged to duplicate the design in Rotuma.

That there was going to be some difficulty implementing this scheme was quickly recognized by Hugh Romilly, who served as Acting Deputy Commissioner from 17 September 1880 to 15 January 1881. In an address to the Rotuma Council of Chiefs in September 1880, Romilly, looking ahead

to post-cession conditions, expressed his concern for the lack of deference being shown to them:

> The Council of Chiefs will remain the same. I promise to be guided as far as possible by your experience and advice. I have observed however with pain that some of your chiefs are not treated with proper obedience and respect by your young men. In some instances you have found it difficult to get even small things done by them without grumbling on their part. If I am to introduce English law here I can only do it through the chiefs and it is absolutely essential that you should insist on the strictest obedience from the people you have under you. I do not know on whose side the fault is but I am perfectly certain you can command respect and obedience if you choose to do so. Without it you can give no assistance to me in carrying out the law.[5]

Romilly quoted from Governor Gordon's speech on 20 October 1879 (see chapter 8, pages 192–193): "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." Romilly went on to say, "There will be a law made...to punish disobedience but it would be infinitely better if you could govern your peoples without having to bring them to me for punishment."

Romilly mentioned that he had heard that some of the young men had threatened not to provide the copra necessary for supporting the new government if the chiefs were too hard on them; he commented that "you chiefs must not allow them to talk like this. They must obey your command without questioning." He obviously did not understand the difference between Rotuman and Fijian cultures in the matter of chieftainship.

In addition, Romilly reported that at this meeting, "The chiefs decided on adopting English law at once, revoking all their former ones," instead of waiting until cession was official.[6]

Attempts to Promote Hierarchy

In an endeavor to establish some degree of hierarchy among the Rotuman chiefs, which in his view would simplify governance by colonial administrators, Romilly proposed that Marąf and Albert, as the chiefs of the largest districts, should have more authority than the rest. He suggested that

these two be known as the head chiefs of the island and that they should "choose a title for themselves by which they and their successors should be known." He reported a consensus at the meeting that Marąf and Albert would assume the title of "Puertiu" (head chief), and that the other chiefs would be known as "Pueritu" (district chief).[7] Subject to the Governor's approval, Marąf and Albert were to receive £30 a year while the other five chiefs would be paid £10 a year.

That an apparent consensus at a meeting between chiefs and a British administrator could not be taken at face value soon became evident to Romilly, for he reported an incident shortly thereafter in which the people of Oinafa threatened to take up arms against Itu'ti'u. It seems that as a result of the decision to elevate Albert to the status of a "head chief," a conflict occurred with regard to the established order for the ceremonial drinking of kava:

> It turned out that Niomfang [the acting chief of Oinafa], who freely confessed his intention of fighting, had been offended by being offered kava to drink after Albert. His tribe had considered it a great insult. They were also under a misapprehension as to who was to be considered head chief in the island. At a meeting three months ago the chiefs decided that on the arrival of Your Ex— to hoist the British flag that Albert and Marof should call themselves Puertiu and exercise a certain amount of authority over the other chiefs. This the Oinafa people had taken amiss; they said that whoever was head chief of Oinafa was always second and that if there were two head chiefs they would fight among them.
>
> I told Niomfang that when the Governor of Fiji or a deputy of his should come to hoist the flag the matter would be settled, but that meanwhile all the chiefs were equal and therefore that he had no ground for complaint.[8]

That the other chiefs were less than enthusiastic about the proposed arrangement, and that the people were not about to allow the chiefs to bully them, is clear from the song composed by Manava that begins this chapter. According to Romilly it was sung on 29 December 1880 at a Christmas festival at which the whole island was assembled. He reported that after having written the song Manava had misgivings concerning its propriety and advised the people

not to sing it, but they only laughed at him and sang it anyway, giving great offense to Maraf and Albert.[9]

The Movement toward Re-cession

When Charles Mitchell took over as Resident Commissioner following cession in May 1881, he soon found that a significant number of Rotumans were not happy about the state of affairs. In a letter addressed to the Governor dated 12 October 1881, he reported that "certain headmen and landholders of the island" had submitted a petition, signed by 103 individuals, asking for re-cession. The petitioners complained that the chiefs who ceded the island had not consulted the landholders (who constituted almost the entire adult population). The petition was stimulated by two rumors, according to Mitchell: that an increase in taxes was imminent, and that "the natives would be put on reserves and most of the land would be sold to white men."[10]

Mitchell commented on the unusual degree to which landholders on Rotuma exercised independence from the chiefs, which he attributed to the "large number who have visited other countries and been employed as sailors in vessels sailing to civilized countries where they have seen the liberty enjoyed by the inhabitants of Australia, California and England."[11] Although he agreed to send their petition on to his superiors in Fiji, Mitchell gave the signers no reason for optimism, pointing out that they only represented about one-fifth of the landholders on the island.[12]

Mitchell attributed the relatively weak authority of Rotuman chiefs to a progressive deterioration of the institution and, echoing other British observers, seemed somewhat bemused after being told repeatedly by Rotumans that "we do not wish our chiefs to be placed in authority over us," and that "we will obey the regulations made by government but not rules made by chiefs."[13]

Mitchell suspected that the closed nature of meetings of the Council of Chiefs contributed to a lack of trust between landholders and chiefs. His solution was to authorize the landholders in each district to elect a councillor to sit in on council meetings. It was to be their duty to bring before the Resident Commissioner any grievance the landholders might have and to "assist with their advice in all matters that may come before us."[14] Before the month was out, councillors had been elected in all districts save Roman Catholic Fag'uta,

where the landholders reported that they were satisfied with the existing state of affairs.[15]

With the establishment of colonial rule the chiefs found themselves in a dilemma. The Resident Commissioner expected them to act authoritatively, but did nothing to enhance their actual power. The chiefs apparently assumed that the new government would grant them greater decision-making powers, allowing them to pursue self-interest to a greater degree than traditional custom permitted. The people, however, were more wary of the chiefs' dictatorial inclinations than the Resident Commissioner's authority over them. Perhaps they felt they could more easily resist—via protest, negotiation, and passivity—demands made by a non-Rotuman commissioner than they could the demands of a potent, Fiji-style, chief; or perhaps they sensed that authority exercised by European outsiders would be less self-interested and intrusive. In any case, Resident Commissioner Mitchell and his successors were only willing to back the chiefs to the point of enforcing English law and honoring their own conception of Rotuman custom.

Most of the chiefs got the message and stopped, or at least toned down, requests for government backing for their authority, but Albert did not give up so easily. He continued to press for official support, only to be continually rebuked. In January 1882 Mitchell noted:

> Albert asked me about his getting food from the landholders of his district and asked me to make an order regarding it. I said to him "why cannot you get along with your people as Vasea, Marof and others do? If I have to make any order regarding such things I must first assemble the land holders in your presence and hear what you all have to say regarding your customs of the time of Cession, for an order from me cannot be disobeyed and I must be very careful in such matters."
>
> He then said, "See how well the Fijians treat their chiefs in such cases."
>
> To which I replied that the relations between chiefs and people of Fiji and chiefs & people of Rotumah were very different in each case at the time of Cession.[16]

Mitchell's response effectively communicated the contrast between the power of his office with that of the chiefs. Suspecting that the chiefs were coming to regret their decision to cede Rotuma to Great Britain, he expressed the

view that they would indeed vote for re-cession if they were given the opportunity to do so, "provided they thought they could do so without fear of consequences from what they might imagine would ensue from their change of opinion."[17]

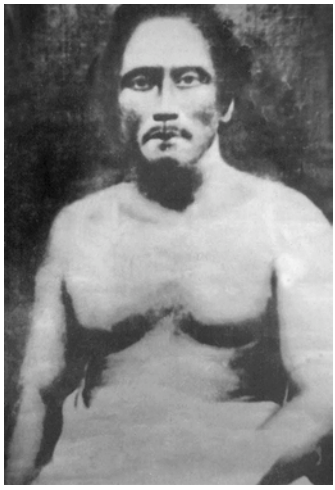

Photo 9.3 Chief Albert of Itu'ti'u. *Courtesy of Henry Enasio.*

In another attempt to elicit Mitchell's support, Albert evidently confessed his miscalculations, because the following month Mitchell reported that

> sometime before Cession [Albert] had given up his right to contributions in kind from his tribe and accepted 5/ [5 shillings] from each of the adult males of the district.
>
> On the cession of the island he remitted this contribution thinking...that the principal chiefs would be placed in the position of Fijian chiefs and receive high salaries. This contribution from his tribe together with 6/ per ton on copra amounted to £60 or £70 annually, while he now receives a salary of £12-0-0.[18]

In May of 1882, Mitchell was replaced as Resident Commissioner by William Gordon, who served until July 1884. In October 1882, Gordon informed the Rotumans who signed the petition for re-cession that their request of the previous year had been refused. By this time the petitioners had evidently changed their minds, so they received the news with equanimity, or even relief. Gordon reported:

> Some time ago, Fagmaniua, the chief of the petitioners ... stated to me that he did not now desire re-cession, that he knew the people were much better off under the

government of England than they had been before, when they had no protection against the oppression of their chiefs.

What they were afraid of, he said, was the imposition of fresh taxes for the purpose of paying large salaries to the chiefs, who had no right to them. They were quite willing to pay taxes to, and for, the government, but they objected strongly to be taxed to pay the chiefs.[19]

The Economics of Chieftainship

That economic concerns underlay the tensions between chiefs and their subjects was further underscored by a request to Gordon, made by Marąf and "some of the other chiefs," that the ancient custom of bringing first fruits to the district chief be replaced by a fixed payment. When Gordon asked how this would be implemented, Marąf proposed increasing taxes. Gordon acknowledged that the chiefs had in fact fared badly as a result of cession, since previously they had been paid royalties by the traders, a practice that was stopped under British administration in favor of paying taxes to the government.[20] But Gordon saw this less as a matter of lost royalties than as an issue that arose because of a decline in the custom of food tribute to the chiefs. The best solution, he suggested, would be if the chiefs would come to a mutual agreement with their people, but he recognized that the chiefs, in their desire to avoid direct confrontations with their people over the issue, were trying to use the government's authority as a vehicle for collecting these dues and paying themselves higher salaries. After giving the matter considerable thought, Gordon recommended to the Colonial Secretary:

First, that the chiefs be allowed to arrange with their people, if they can, for the payment of a fixed amount, whether of food or money, and that in the very doubtful event of some such agreement being come to, it be sanctioned and legalized by the Government—or

Second, that a careful inquiry be made as to the customs which were really in force at the date of Cession and that these be reduced to the form of a Regulation, and made compulsory.[21]

Gordon reminded the Colonial Secretary that the old custom concerning food tribute had been falling into disuse long before cession, and expressed the view that the Rotuman people were using the fact of their paying taxes to the government as a pretext for disregarding the custom.[22]

The Exercise of Colonial Power and the Transformation of Chieftainship

Albert again raised the issue of chiefly prerogatives in 1885, when A. R. Mackay was Resident Commissioner. In the July meeting of the Council of Chiefs, he asked: "What can be done to people who will not do things for the chiefs?" to which Mackay replied:

> I do not quite understand your question Albert. Anything the chiefs tell the people to do, in the name of the government, they will have to do—but matters which concern the chief personally I would like to be settled between him and his people without my interference.[23]

Albert's frustrations were kept in check until 1888 when an incident occurred leading to his suspension. The incident resulted from a request by Mackay that copra be delivered in sacks instead of coconut-leaf baskets. The people were generally annoyed with this demand to alter their habits, and Albert, apparently sensing an opportunity to gather popular support for a confrontation with the Resident Commissioner, incited his people to refuse cooperation. After Mackay publicly censured Albert, the disgruntled chief wrote a letter to the Governor complaining about the severity of Mackay's rule and requesting his removal. The Governor did not take Albert's charges seriously and sent a copy of the letter to Mackay, who read it at a meeting of the council, where he obtained a strong censure of Albert's conduct from the assembled chiefs.[24] This final humiliation made it clear to all that the political power of the chiefs was negligible—a realization that had consequences for the nature of chieftainship in subsequent events.

From this point on most Rotumans recognized that the advantages of being a district chief no longer outweighed the disadvantages. The only economic benefit was the larger land-holdings that accompanied most chiefly titles, but this was offset by greater demands on resources. The honors paid to chiefs at ceremonies provided some incentive for

aspirations to the role, but these were outweighed by contradictory role demands—the need to comply with the commands of the Resident Commissioner while trying to respond to the wants of their constituents—which inevitably led to resentment by the people.

The disregard Rotumans came to have for district chiefs in the years after cession is apparent in the records of the Rotuma Council. For example, at a meeting of the council in February 1896, Chief Maṛaf of Noa'tau complained that, at a recent marriage in his district, two district chiefs who attended (Tuipenau from Itu'muta and Tigarea from Itu'ti'u) were passed over during the kava ceremony in favor of several subchiefs. Maṛaf complained, "If the people go on like this, they will laugh at us bye and bye."[25] Resident Commissioner H. E. Leefe told the chiefs to "inform the people in every district that I am greatly displeased at what has happened, that should it occur again, I shall remove the offenders from their districts and keep them under my own eye until they know how to treat a chief properly."[26]

As a consequence of these conditions, the competition for chiefly roles waned, and the traditional rules governing succession, flexible as they were, gave way to a lax toleration allowing almost any adult male to fill a vacancy. Contributing to this tendency was the active part that most Resident Commissioners played in selecting the "right man for the job." It became commonplace for the people in a district to nominate several candidates and permit the commissioner to make the final selection.[27] Not only did the commissioners participate actively in choosing chiefs, but at times they deposed men who failed to meet their expectations. A sequence of events concerning the district of Noa'tau is illustrative. In a letter dated 17 April 1900, Commissioner Leefe wrote to the Colonial Secretary:

> I have the honour to inform you that I have been obliged to suspend Marafu, the chief of Noatau.
>
> My reason for doing this is, that he has got his district into a state of rebellion, through having attempted to exalt his brother over the heads of the petty chiefs who formerly took precedence over him. I called a meeting of the petty chiefs of Noatau & they prayed me to take charge of the district for a short time, until matters were smoothed over, this I have done, but hope shortly to be able to reinstate Marafu in his former position. He, Marafu, is a rabid Wesleyan &

> about half his district are Catholics, he naturally should act carefully, which he has by no means done. I hope however that shortly by treating the people justly, that I shall be able to reinstate Marafu or else to put someone else in his place.[28]

Leefe's efforts at reconciliation were unsuccessful, however, and during the following month he reported the results of a meeting with the people of Noa'tau:

> The whole district with the exception of Marafu's father-in-law, expressed their distrust of him as their chief, upon this Marafu resigned and I accepted his resignation. The people of Noatau then with one accord asked that Konrote Mua should be appointed as their chief and I acceded to their request.
>
> This man is about thirty-five years of age and is a nephew of the late Horosio Marafu, the best chief that Rotuma has ever possessed. I sincerely trust that this appointment will be the beginning of a time of peace and quietness for the district of Noatau and that Konrote Mua will prove a useful man like his uncle. I gave him the name of Marafu with the usual ceremonies.[29]

The people's strategy in choosing Konrote Mua soon became apparent, for he proved to be anything but a demanding chief. Thus in October 1901, Leefe's replacement, John Hill, reported:

> At a Council meeting on the 2nd instant some of the Chiefs made complaint of the state of affairs at Noatau. That the people go wandering all over the island at night, that Marafu does not keep his people in order, that sales of land have taken place during the absence of the Res. Com. and without the knowledge of the chiefs who were acting in the Res. Com.'s place and that Marafu, contrary to regulation, allowed his people to gamble any night, in fact told them to do so any night until 10 O'clock, although the rule is that only on Tuesday nights is gambling to be allowed. These charges were made in Marafu's presence which he acknowledged as true....I think Marafu is hardly fitted for his position. I do not think him a bad man, but he is weak and tho' a nice fellow in many ways, he is stupid and not fitted to keep control of his people.[30]

This case also illustrates the wider participation of the people of a district in choosing a chief. Whereas formerly choosing a successor was considered strictly a matter for the *mosega* to decide, interference by the commissioners paved the way for democratization. The people, in other words, gained an awareness of the de facto control that the commissioners were allocating to them and took advantage of the opportunity by selecting men who were known for their generosity, humility, and consideration for others. The choice of such men was expedient, for their generosity could be tapped in times of need, their humility opened them to persuasion, and their considerateness insured that no harsh demands would be made. Under previous conditions these classical Rotuman virtues did not carry so much weight in the recruitment of a chief, for when only the *mosega* was responsible for choosing, they tended to give weight to seniority within the family. They also favored a quality of assertiveness that would assure the promotion of the *mosega*'s welfare—at the expense of the rest of the community if necessary. This is not to imply that democratization under the colonial regime was complete, and that kinship affiliation was eliminated as a factor. Men who could trace their relationship to a chiefly ancestor were still favored as candidates, but such criteria as seniority of branch or directness of descent were sufficiently played down to permit a vast expansion of eligibility.

A number of conditions followed from these circumstances. Firstly, some men were selected as chiefs who were not senior in their own family. This led to incidents such as that reported in the district of Juju by Resident Commissioner Hugh Macdonald in 1916:

> A complaint was made to me by Tavo of Juju regarding the behaviour of Iratuofa, brother of Uafta, Chief of Juju, and also about the Chief himself. The complaint was afterwards backed up...by all the head men in the district....The complaint was that Iratuofa was acting as if he was chief of the district and that Uafta allowed him to act in this way. As they said, "We don't know who is the chief and we have now two chiefs in our district...."
>
> Meetings such as district meetings are held so Tavo says in Iratuofa's house.
>
> The other men confirmed Tavo's statements and Tiporotu said that he had remonstrated with Uafta

> about Iratuofa's behaviour and that Uafta had replied that Iratuofa was his brother and was older than he was.[31]

It is not difficult to understand how events like these contributed to a further decline in the prestige of district chiefs.

Democratization and Chiefly Control

Increased democratization also led to a weakening of the social controls in district affairs. The situation in Noa'tau described earlier was one example. Another is provided by a sequence of events that occurred in 1931. In this instance the Resident Commissioner, William Carew, had difficulty getting people to obey a resolution requiring adult males to spend four days a week clearing their plantations. The resolution was clearly Carew's idea—he was doing his best to improve sanitary conditions on the island—but the chiefs had approved the measure in council and it was up to them to administer it. As might have been predicted, the people resented this gross imposition on their time, and in two districts the men collectively voiced their intention not to comply. This greatly annoyed Carew and he mixed persuasion with threats to gain their acquiescence. Eventually he got his way, but not before the chief of Itu'muta, one of the two insubordinate districts, had resigned as a result of the refusal of his people to obey him. In the aftermath, Carew asked the people of Itu'muta to nominate other candidates to replace the deposed officeholder. He rejected the first two nominees because they were leaders of the resistance. Two more men were nominated, one of them a Methodist minister, the other a subchief. The minister declined the nomination on the grounds that it would interfere with his mission obligations, and the subchief was selected by default. This man remained chief until 1960 when he was deposed on the recommendation of the District Officer,[32] on grounds of senility and incapacity to fulfill the obligations of the role. As one might suspect, the man never commanded a great deal of respect from members of his district.[33]

For Carew the incident highlighted the ineffectiveness of the chiefs, and in an effort to remedy the situation he proposed to the Governor that chiefly obligations be reinforced by law:

> I would suggest for His Excellency's consideration the passing of a Rotuman Regulation penalizing the chiefs for omissions in duty, and their people for disregard to their orders on district matters.
>
> It is also suggested that each future chief should be installed with a considerable show of Government ceremony and he be supplied with a Badge of Office whereby all then should know and respect him.[34]

However, A. L. Armstrong, then the Secretary for Native Affairs, did not support Carew's suggestions and they were never enacted.

The problem for the British administrators, it seems, was that they saw Rotuman political institutions as neither fish nor fowl. *Gagaj ‘es itu‘u* did not have the kind of authority they associated with chiefdoms such as Fiji, but the system also lacked elements crucial to their understanding of democracy. They were determined to resolve the issue one way or the other. Whereas some, like Carew, opted to reinforce the status of chiefs (without, of course, giving up any real power themselves), others, like A. E. Cornish, instituted moves toward democratic representation on the council. In 1939, with the approval of the Governor of Fiji, Cornish introduced a reform whereby a chief would be elected for a period of three years in the first instance, after which members of the *mosega* who had elected him would vote for a new chief, or reelect the old one if they considered him satisfactory, provided he had also proved satisfactory to the government. The first chief appointed under this rule failed to be reelected by his people and subsequently complained to the government on the grounds that the new procedures violated Rotuman custom. By this time Cornish had died, and following an investigation the traditional custom was reinstated.[35]

The Sykes Report

In 1948 J. W. Sykes was sent to Rotuma for the purpose of investigating the administration of the island, among other matters. His devastating report on the functioning of the Council of Chiefs characterizes the authority structure under colonial administration:

> The District Officer presides at the meetings of the Council which are held monthly. The purpose of this

Council is "to consider and advise the District Officer on any matter communicated or submitted to the Council" and it is the main organ of government on the island. I have attended three meetings of this Council during my stay on the island and read through the minutes of the meetings for the past few years and also several comments on it by previous Resident Commissioners and District Officers. I have also heard many opinions of it by natives who are not members of it, and from what I have seen, heard, and read, I think that the District Officer could very safely dispense with its consideration and advice. At the three meetings which I attended it was with the greatest difficulty that the chiefs could be prevailed upon to speak at all and I do not think any of the district representatives ever did speak. According to the regulations, these district representatives should be nominated by the District Officer but, in fact, they are appointed by the respective chiefs. I understand that they are supposed to represent the minority religion of their district. That is, in a predominantly Wesleyan district, the chief of which would presumably be a Wesleyan, a Catholic would be appointed as District representative on the Council and vice versa in a predominantly Catholic district. In fact, however, the district representatives do not represent anybody, not even themselves, for they do not speak in Council being apparently content to act as dummies to chiefs who are themselves anything but eloquent. The minutes of the Council meetings give the completely misleading impression that various matters are fully discussed by a representative gathering of the people of Rotuma whereas in fact practically all the talking is done by the District Officer, the silence of the chiefs and representatives being taken as consent. Lest it should be thought that this rather harsh condemnation is based solely on my very short experience of Rotuma I should like to quote the opinions of two previous Resident Commissioners and District Officers with far longer experience of the island. In his annual report for the year 1930 the Resident Commissioner (Dr. W. K. Carew) wrote—"They (i.e. the chiefs) prove themselves time after time but poor channels for administration, and indeed they are almost equally as weak in any advisory capacity"—In 1935 the Acting Resident

> Commissioner (Mr. A. E. Cornish) stated in his annual report—"At these meetings the chiefs are always acquiescent and it is difficult to obtain an opinion or an open discussion on any subject"—Again in his report for 1938 the same officer said—"The point I wish to make is that owing to the custom of selecting chiefs from only a few families the most efficient men are not always available. If it were possible to just select the most able man in the district, I have no doubt that the Rotuma Council would be a more efficient body but I am afraid that this would also be interfering too much with custom and probably too revolutionary at present. Hence, Rotuma for a long while yet, will have a Council of Chiefs chosen for their rank but not always their ability." And yet again in 1939 Mr. Cornish reported—"It is very difficult to get the chiefs to give definite opinions at these meetings, in fact, to use an Americanism they are almost perfect 'yes men,' frequently endeavouring to give the opinion that they think the Chairman wants and not what they think themselves." Finally, let me quote from a letter written to me in English by a Rotuman during my visit:—"The present council of seven chiefs and the Commissioners as head or Chairman has been running the island native affairs ever since 13th of May 1881. They have shown very little progress as far as helping their own people. They seem afraid of expressing their own opinions or even exchange views amongst themselves. This kind of fruitless meetings must not continue any longer as it is only wasting good times." I have only quoted extracts referring to the chiefs in council: there are many more seething remarks about their activity, or lack of it, in the administration of their districts, but I think I have quoted enough to show that the poor impression which the Rotuma Council made on me is not due to any recent decline in it or to its members nervousness in my presence. The defect is fundamental.[36]

Sykes proposed that the Council of Chiefs be abolished and replaced by an elected council.[37] His recommendations probably would have been instituted had not H. S. Evans been appointed District Officer the following year. In contrast to Sykes's accusations that the chiefs were ineffective to the extreme, Evans maintained, "The chiefs

effect exactly what they are there to do, which is to advise the centre on what their people wish and to persuade their people to what is agreed to be good for them."[38] In emphatic terms, he warned against the sweeping changes proposed by Sykes.[39]

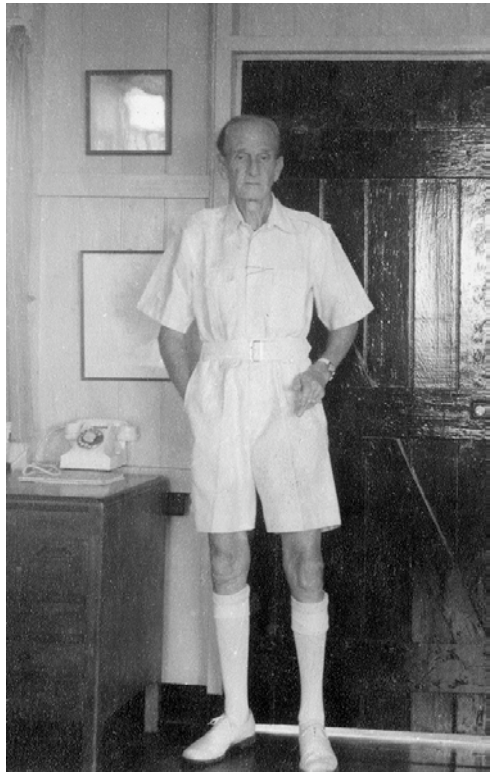

Photo 9.4 Dr. H. S. Evans, 1961. *Alan Howard.*

The conflicting attitudes of Sykes and Evans stemmed from their different views on Rotuma's best interests. Sykes's proposed innovations were designed to speed up "progress," while Evans was apprehensive about rapid change and perhaps a bit idealistic in his evaluation of the traditional culture. For Sykes the chiefs constituted a hindrance, for Evans a safeguard.

As it turned out, Evans's plea won the day, but in 1958 the Rotuma Council was reconstituted to include one representative from each district, elected by secret ballot, in addition to the chiefs. This replaced the practice of each district sending a representative chosen by the chief. The composition of the first group of elected representatives

included two schoolteachers, an independent businessman, a Methodist catechist, a lesser government employee, a returned serviceman who was a carpenter by profession, and a man who spent nine years in Fiji and whose brother held an M.A. degree from a New Zealand university. The name of the council was changed from the Rotuma Council of Chiefs to the Council of Rotuma. Its role, to advise the District Officer and communicate his rulings to the people in the districts, remained the same. This situation prevailed until Fiji obtained independence in 1970.

Rotuman District Officers

A significant development in the latter stages of the colonial era, which lasted up until 1970 when Fiji was granted independence from Great Britain, was the appointment of Rotumans as District Officers. According to Eason,[40] in 1944 a Fiji Affairs Ordinance gave some powers of self-government to the Fijians, which led Rotumans to request similar consideration. Following negotiations, the colonial government agreed to provide a Rotuman to serve as District Officer. First to be appointed was Josefa Rigamoto, in 1945. Rigamoto, the eldest surviving son of Tokaniua Emose, paramount chief of Oinafa, had served with distinction as a sergeant, and leader of the Rotuman contingent (see photo 9.6) in the Fiji Military Forces in Solomon Islands during World War II, and was decorated with the Military Medal. He had previously been employed as a civil servant in the Lands Department as a draftsman and became a trusted associate of Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna. Later in his career, Queen Elizabeth awarded him an MBE and CBE. Rigamoto served as District Officer from 1945 to mid-1949,[41] with short interruptions. Following an interim period of three years, most subsequent District Officers have been Rotuman (see appendix C).

It is difficult to assess the effect appointing Rotuman District Officers had on the administration of the island. In some respects it complicated matters, since Rotumans had to navigate between the ideal of neutrality and the demands of kin for special consideration. However, fluency in the language gave them a distinct advantage insofar as they did not have to communicate through (not always disinterested) interpreters. Much depended on the personal styles of the appointees. Some, like Fred Ieli and Fred Gibson, were strong leaders who in many ways emulated the autocratic styles of

their European predecessors. Others, like A. M. Konrote, were more inclined toward consultation and at least quasi-democratic processes of decision making.

In any case, it seems clear that the appointment of Rotumans paved the way for a major transformation in the roles of District Officer and district chiefs following Fiji's independence in 1970 (see chapter 12).

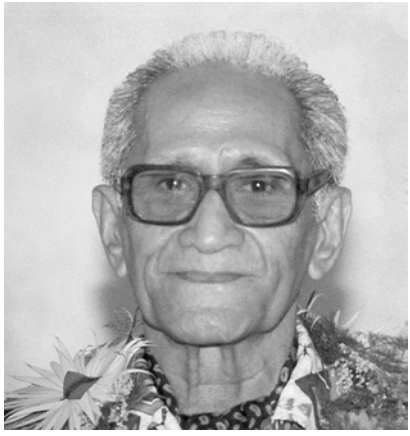

Photo 9.5 Josefa Rigamoto, the first Rotuman District Officer. *Family photo album.*

Summary

The role of the chiefs as administrative agents was affected by the changes in chiefly status that took place during the colonial era. As we have documented, the men who ceded the island had anticipated the support of the commissioners, against their constituents if necessary. In effect, they had gambled away the popular basis for their support in an effort to gain a share of the power inherent in the commissioner's office. But at most the commissioners were willing to legitimize the de facto power of the chiefs at the time of cession. Furthermore, by exercising their own considerable powers, the commissioners cast into sharp relief the weakness of the chiefs. This came as a rude shock. As subsequent events eroded their authority even further, the chiefs eventually discovered themselves to be little more than vehicles for political maneuvering by the commissioners on one side and the people in their districts on the other, so they adjusted their behavior accordingly. To the commissioners they granted all the respect due an acknowledged superior.

By Rotuman standards this meant exercising considerable restraint during interaction with the Resident Commissioners, to the point of accepting almost anything the latter desired. Council sessions became decidedly one-way affairs, with the commissioners stating their views, the chiefs asking a few clarifying questions, and then acquiescing. The chiefs would then return to their home districts where they would explain the decisions of the council, which were generally put into the form: "The commissioner wants us to..." If the people responded negatively, the chief would return to a subsequent session of council with the objections of his district members. These he would present to council in the form, "The people of my district say that..." In this way the chiefs protected themselves from conflict by reducing their decision-making responsibilities to correspond with their reduced privileges. They gained a reputation among colonial officials as "yes men" who would agree to anything proposed by Resident Commissioners and District Officers, while rarely following through and sometimes even actively resisting policies they had seemed to approve in council. In other words, they, like the subjects they had hoped to dominate, became masters of passive resistance.

Carew summed up Rotuman attitudes toward personal autonomy in his Annual Report for 1930:

> The outstanding feature in Rotuman life is the complete nonacceptance, by the young Rotumans, of the principle that to his elders some deference and obedience is due, and to his community and country certain duties are also due....
>
> Another outstanding feature in Rotuman life is the complete absence amongst the people of any sense of respect for their Chiefs. They listen to their Chief if his words suit them, but if otherwise, they turn deaf ears to him.
>
> This attitude permeates through every stratum of Rotuman life. If the Petty Chiefs do not agree with their Chiefs, they abstain from carrying his will to the people, and again if the people do not care for what their Petty Chiefs say they are similarly heedless to their orders.[42]

Although he may have overstated the case somewhat, Carew put his finger on autonomy as a key aspect of Rotuman culture, one that has done much to shape the history of the Rotuman people.

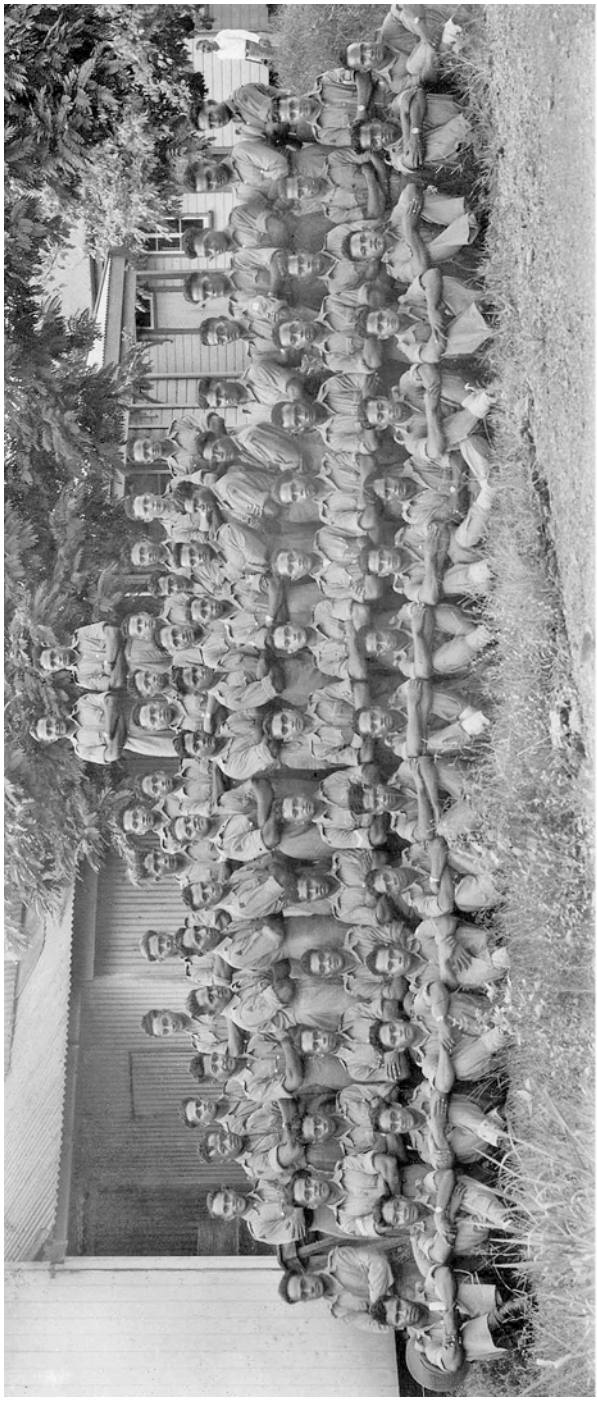

Photo 9.6 Rotuman ex-servicemen who took part in the Solomon campaign in Bougainville 1942–1945. *Rigamoto family album.*

Notes to Chapter 9

We have previously published a number of items discussing the nature of chieftainship in Rotuma, and the current chapter represents a synthesis of several of them. Shortly after completing fieldwork in 1961 Howard published "Conservatism and Non-Traditional Leadership in Rotuma," in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (Howard 1963b), which dealt with the strains on chieftainship that resulted from the emergence of a new, educated elite. He followed this with "The Rotuman District Chief: A Study in Changing Patterns of Authority," published in the *Journal of Pacific History* (Howard 1966a), which describes the historical processes by which Rotuman chieftainship was changed by missionaries and colonial administrators. In her doctoral dissertation, "For Love or Money? Interhousehold Exchange and the Economy of Rotuma," Rensel explored cultural expectations concerning the relationship between chiefs and their subjects (Rensel 1994).

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[1] Dispatch from H. Romilly to Western Pacific High Commissioner, 3 January 1881. Outward Letters, Rotuma District Office, Suva, Fiji, Central Archives of Fiji and Western Pacific High Commission.

[2] Methodist Church of Australasia, *Wesleyan Missionary Notices,* no. 31, April 1865.

[3] Methodist Church of Australasia, *Wesleyan Missionary Notices,* no. 31, April 1865.

[4] Writing about Roman Catholic priests in Rotuma, Boddam-Whetham stated: "Absence from Church is fined; smoking on Sunday, or even walking out, is against the law. Women are fined for not wearing bonnets when attending mass, kava drinking ensures a heavy penalty, and fishing on holy days is strictly forbidden" (1865, 265).

[5] Dispatch from H. Romilly to Western Pacific High Commissioner, 28 September 1880. Outward Letters.

[6] Dispatch from H. Romilly to Western Pacific High Commissioner, 28 September 1880. Outward Letters.

[7] Dispatch from H. Romilly to Western Pacific High Commissioner, 28 September 1880. Outward Letters.

[8] Dispatch from H. Romilly to Western Pacific High Commissioner, 13 January 1881. Outward Letters.

[9] Dispatch from H. Romilly to Western Pacific High Commissioner, 3 January 1881. Outward Letters.

[10] Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 12 October 1881. Outward Letters.

[11] Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 12 October 1881. Outward Letters.

[12] Mitchell reported that none of the Wesleyan teachers, Roman Catholics, or people from the district of Noa'tau had signed the petition. He speculated that no Catholics had signed because they were gratified by the protection of their rights by the colonial government. However, in a later communication he wrote that as far as he could judge there were many others besides those who actually signed the petition who wanted re-cession, and that he felt almost certain that if they were forced to pay the entire cost of government a majority would have been in favor of re-cession. He thought that many did not sign the petition because they suspected that Mitchell would use the information to identify, and presumably punish, those expressing dissatisfaction with the colonial regime (Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 26 January 1882. Outward Letters).

[13] Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 12 October 1881. Outward Letters.

[14] Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 12 October 1881. Outward Letters.

[15] Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 30 October 1881. Outward Letters.

[16] Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 10 January 1882. Outward Letters.

[17] Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 28 January 1882. Outward Letters.

[18] Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 16 February 1882. Outward Letters.

[19] Dispatch from W. Gordon to Governor of Fiji, 20 October 1882. Outward Letters.

[20] According to Gordon, prior to cession the traders paid six shillings per ton on all copra exported to the chief of the district in which the copra had been purchased (Dispatch from W. Gordon to the Colonial Secretary, 17 November 1884. Outward Letters).

[21] Dispatch from W. Gordon to Colonial Secretary, 17 November 1882. Outward Letters.

[22] Dispatch from W. Gordon to Colonial Secretary, 17 November 1882. Outward Letters.

[23] Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 9 July 1885.

[24] Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 10 August 1888, 11 October 1888, 14 January 1889.

[25] Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 6 February 1896.

[26] Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 6 February 1896. The order of kava serving to district chiefs, which had been subject to constant change in precolonial times, depending on the results of recent wars, the changing fortunes of different chiefs, etc., was fixed by Resident

Commissioner Macdonald in 1917. The issue was brought before him by the brother of a *mafua* (an elder responsible for directing the kava ceremony) who was disconcerted over the ambiguity at a recent ceremony concerning who should be given precedence, the chief of Malhaha or the chief of Juju. Macdonald decided that the order should be dictated "by custom," which he interpreted as favoring Malhaha over Juju (Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 7 June 1917).

[27] For examples, see Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 1 September 1910, and a dispatch from A. E. Cornish to the Colonial Secretary, 30 January 1939, Outward Letters.

[28] Dispatch from H. E. Leefe to Colonial Secretary, 17 April 1900, Outward Letters.

[29] Dispatch from H. E. Leefe to Colonial Secretary, 25 May 1900, Outward Letters.

[30] Dispatch from J. Hill to Colonial Secretary, 7 October 1900, Outward Letters.

[31] Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 6 January 1916.

[32] Following a reorganization of administration in the Colony of Fiji in the 1930s, the appointed official in charge of Rotuma was known as District Officer.

[33] Dispatch from W. Carew to Colonial Secretary, 5 February 1931, Outward Letters.

[34] Dispatch from W. Carew to Colonial Secretary, 5 February 1931, Outward Letters.

[35] Sykes 1948.

[36] Sykes 1948, 3–4.

[37] Sykes 1948.

[38] Evans 1951.

[39] Dispatch from H. S. Evans to Colonial Secretary, 22 September 1950. Outward Letters.

[40] Eason 1951, 109–110.

[41] Rigamoto was reappointed District Officer in 1964 and served until 1966.

[42] Annual Report for 1930, 26 February 1931. Rotuma District Office, Suva, Fiji, Central Archives of Fiji and Western Pacific High Commission.