

# ISLAND LEGACY

## A HISTORY OF THE ROTUMAN PEOPLE

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and  
Jan Rensel

Cover photo: Tokoara and Marsuan with their child at Noatau, on the island of Rotuma, Fiji. *A. M. Hocart, 1913.*  
*Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.*

Cover design by Francois Deschamps

Dedication illustration: *Sépulture des Rois à Rotuma (Burial Place of the Kings of Rotuma).* from Duperrey 1826.

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*For the ancestors*

*May their legacy live till the end of time*







## Contents

Illustrations	vii
Foreword	xi
Preface	xv
Acknowledgments	xxii
1. Ecology and Early History	1
2. A Land of Plenty	31
3. The Social Order	59
4. Creativity in Arts and Crafts	85
5. Expanding Horizons	117
6. The Missionary Experience	135
7. Religious Strife	155
8. Cession and the Early Colonial Period	185
9. The Evolution of Authority during the Colonial Period	213
10. Economic Transitions	239
11. Population and Health	267
12. Postcolonial Rotuma	305
13. Rotuma and Fiji	337
14. Rotuman Identity in a Global Community	375
Appendix A: Research into the History of the Rotuman Language	393
Appendix B: Rotuman Phonetics	399
Appendix C: Administrative Officers	401
Appendix D: Gagaj 'es Itu'u, 1881–2000	403
Bibliography	405
Name Index	419
Subject Index	425



## Illustrations

### *Maps*

Rotuma in the Pacific	xxxiv
Rotuma	62
Migration of Rotumans to Fiji	325
Subgroups of Central Pacific languages	397

### *Graphs*

10.1	Estimated copra exports in tons, 1881–1979	251
11.1	Infant mortality rates, 1903–1959	288
12.1	Rotuma Cooperative turnover, 1957–1986	318
12.2	Age and sex cohorts in Fiji Censuses, 1956–1996	327
12.3	Household size, 1960 and 1989	328

### *Tables*

2.1	Rotuman food categories	39
3.1	Average reign of <i>sau</i>	72
11.1	Crude death rates, 1881–1959	283
11.2	Recorded epidemics	289
12.1	Rotuman house styles, 1951–1989	306
12.2	Rotumans in Rotuma and Fiji, 1881–1996	326

### *Figures*

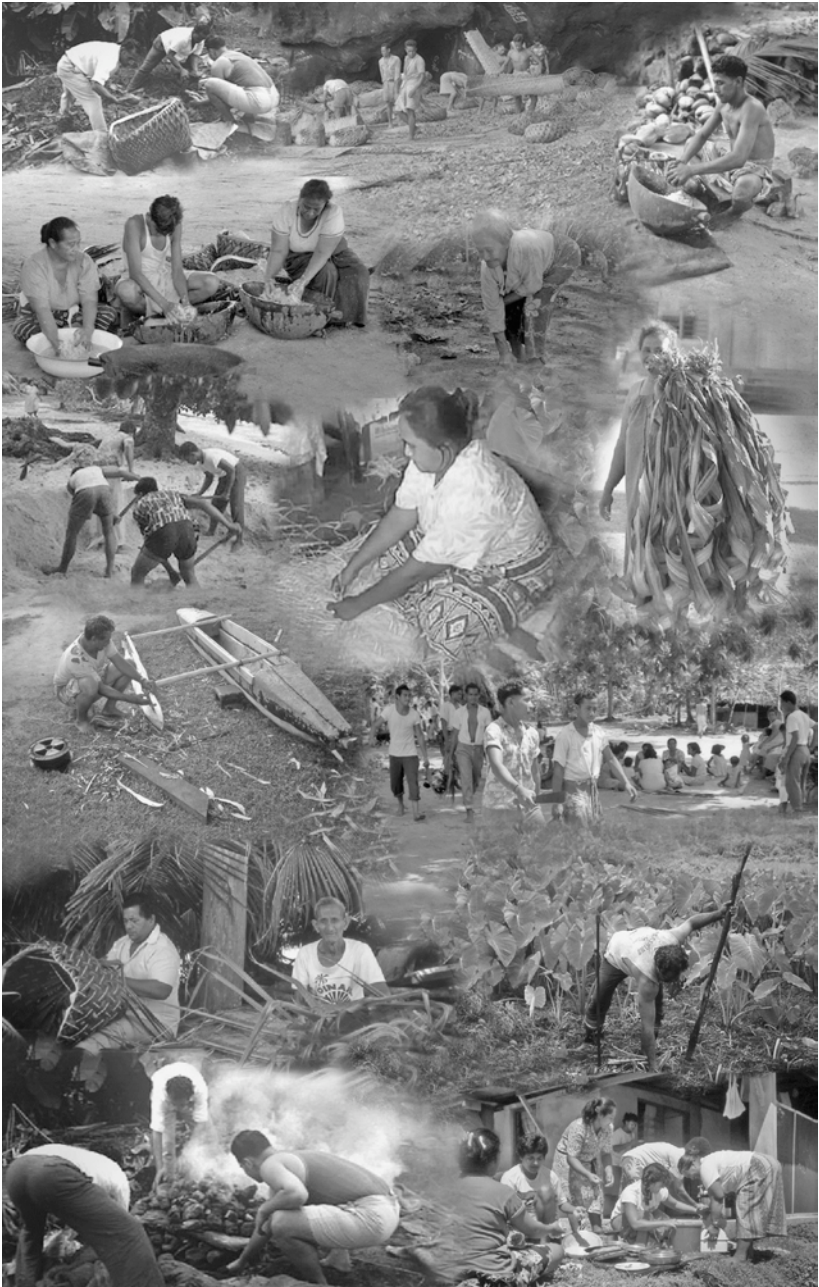
3.1	Village in Rotuma	58
3.2	Transmission of power	58
3.3	Sketch of a Rotuman chief	75
4.1	Inhabitants of Rotuma	84
4.2	Tattoo patterns	95
5.1	Natives of Rotuma (signaling to a ship)	116
7.1	Men carrying body wrapped in mat	161
Ap.1	Language family tree showing position	396

### *Photos*

0.1	Album documenting history of a family	xiv
0.2	The Reverend C. M. Churchward	xvii
0.3	Man sitting atop an ancestral tomb	xxxiii
1.1	Rotuma from space by NASA satellite	2
1.2	Sacred stones on the islet of Hatana	3
1.3	View of island across Maka Bay	4
1.4	Typical bush vegetation	7
2.1	Prize yams at agricultural competition	30
2.2	Calling out food contributions at a feast	30

2.3	Men preparing an earth oven	44
2.4	Traditional Rotuman house	47
2.5	Young men's sleeping house	48
2.6	Cemetery in Maftoa	55
2.7	Young boys atop ancestral tomb	55
3.1	A Rotuman chief	79
4.1	Woven mat	84
4.2	Woven girdle	86
4.3	Bride and groom being wrapped in fine mats	88
4.4	Coconut graters and bowl	91
4.5	Headrest	91
4.6	Chiefly eating table	91
4.7	Fishhook	91
4.8	Fish lure of bone mounted with European hoods	91
4.9	Outrigger canoe	91
4.10	Action dance	100
4.11	Men in headdresses prepared for dance	103
4.12	Group dance performed at a wedding	106
4.13	Serving kava to chiefs in early times	109
4.14	Serving kava to chiefs in modern times	109
4.15	House building with double-sided top plate	112
4.16	Detail of timbers and roof of traditional house	112
5.1	Examples of imported clothing styles	126
5.2	Charles Howard	128
5.3	Alexander and Annie Gibson	128
5.4	Comic dance at a wedding	131
6.1	The Reverend William Fletcher and family	134
6.2	First Methodist mission house in Rotuma	134
6.3	Monument commemorating first Catholic mass	139
6.4	Zerubbabel with four Fijian teachers	142
6.5	Rev. William Fletcher and Mary Fletcher	144
6.6	Frs. Gustave Griffon and Lucien Soubeyrand	149
6.7	Fr. Griffon and Rotuman men	151
6.8	Sr. M. Pierre and young girls	151
7.1	Men dressed in war garb	154
7.2-10	Rotuman war clubs	166
7.11	Tomb of the Catholic martyrs	177
7.12	Cannon used as grave marker	179
8.1	Burial grounds of the <i>sau</i> at Sisilo	184
8.2	Fr. Soubeyrand and Resident Commissioner	184
8.3	Man and child	207
8.4	Woman and girl	207
9.1	Resident Commissioner Russell with chiefs	212
9.2	Fanfare for Fr. Soubeyran	212
9.3	Chief Albert of Itu'ti'u	220

9.4	Dr. H. S. Evans	230
9.5	Josefa Rigamoto	232
9.6	Rotuman ex-servicemen from WW II	234
10.1	Unloading supplies from punt	238
10.2	Unloading cargo at Oinafa wharf	238
10.3	The Catholic church at Sumi	243
10.4	Devastation to coconut trees by Hurricane Bebe	250
10.5	Amāi Sakimi cutting copra	252
10.6	Wilson Inia	259
10.7	Rotuma Cooperative Association headquarters	262
10.8	Itu'muta Cooperative store	262
11.1	Hospital at government station in Ahau	266
11.2	Inside the children's ward at hospital	266
11.3	Mourning a dead child	278
11.4	Burial of a body wrapped in a fine mat	284
11.5	Child welfare nurse	291
11.6	Fr. Griffon driving early vehicle	293
11.7	Prizewinning baby	296
11.8–9	Scenes from a wedding	300
12.1	First plane to arrive at Rotuma	304
12.2	Satellite dish at government station	304
12.3–4	Aftermath of Hurricane Bebe	307
12.5	Mobil Oil depot at Hansolo	309
12.6	<i>Fairstar</i> passengers watching Rotuman men	316
12.7	Selling handicraft to a <i>Fairstar</i> passenger	316
12.8	The Raho Cooperative complex in Oinafa	322
12.9	Interior of a home in Malhaha	329
12.10	Men constructing a traditional thatched house	333
12.11	Men painting a two-story modern home	333
13.1	Chief Maraf Nataniela greets Ratu Mara	336
13.2	Ratu Mara and Adi Lala Mara carried ashore	336
13.3	Rotuma Council meeting	361
13.4	Unveiling monument to Rotuman chiefs	370
13.5	List of Rotuman chiefs on monument	370
14.1	Rotuman teachers at language workshop	374
14.2	Rotumans in Melbourne holding a fund-raiser	374
14.3	Rehearsing for a dance performance in Auckland	387
14.4	Rotumans in British Columbia dancing	387



## Foreword

*‘Otom pumahana jī*

Our sweat runs down

A Rotuman saying reminding people of all the  
hard work that has been done on their behalf

*Island Legacy: A History of the Rotuman People* is a well-researched and superbly documented story of Rotuma's cultural heritage, including how it was, and, in many cases, how it still is. The book confirms and indeed appreciably reinforces Rotuman identity and sustains the continuing relevance of our island heritage in both general and local terms.

Readers will gain a greater appreciation of an island people who, despite their special ability to adapt to modern-day contexts in Fiji, Australia, New Zealand, and beyond, retain their own language and traditions and can still be identified as distinctively Rotuman.

This book contains valuable information about the traditional culture of Rotuma, which some may consider irrelevant to an indigenous person whose outlook has been affected by education, exposure to western culture, and a lack of interaction with *kāinaga* (kin) for several years. But for those of us who aspire to retain, and indeed enhance, our Rotuman identity, the information contained herein about our history, culture, and traditional beliefs and values is a treasure.

Attitudes have changed with the modern-day upsurge of Rotuman identity and increased political awareness among Rotumans remaining on the island as well as those in Fiji and the wider global diaspora. Rotumans are more concerned than ever about their unique traditional heritage, not only with preserving it generally, but also with sustaining particular facets of it. I therefore greatly appreciate that this book is written for Rotumans as well as for scholars and a broader general audience. It is essential reading for those Rotumans who still retain an appreciable degree of their own

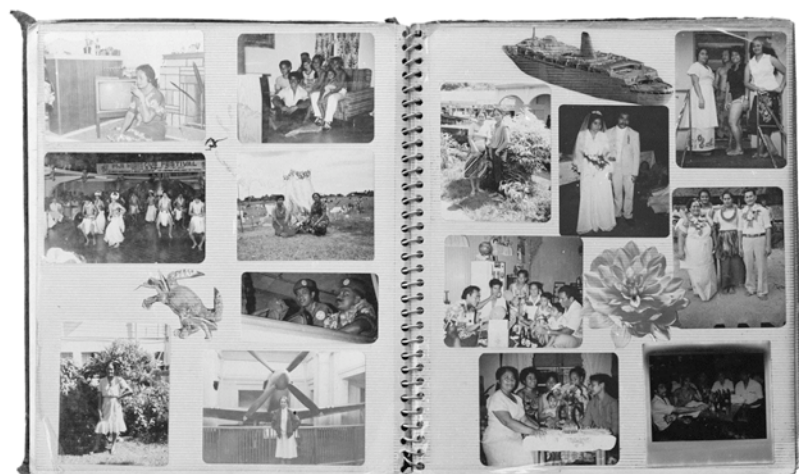
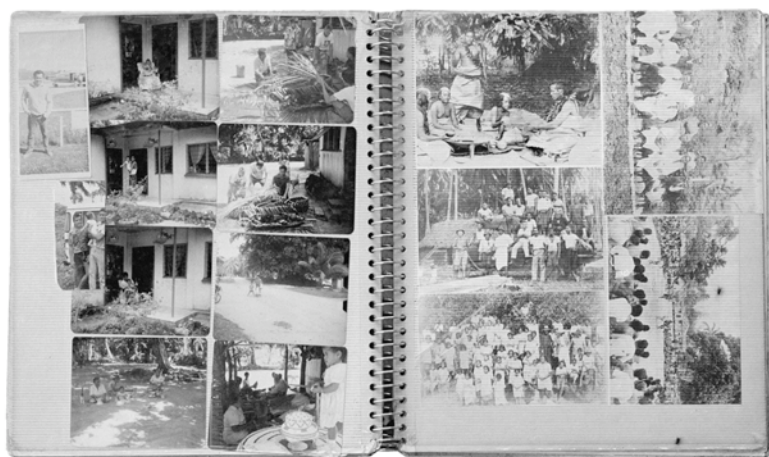
traditional culture, to assist them in looking at their culture in perspective and in relation to others. It is also important for those who have begun to lose their traditional culture to a certain degree; it may enhance their interest as well as stimulate their craving for the mana of their Polynesian island background, and will serve as a basis on which their Rotuman identity may be cherished and preserved for future generations.

For non-Rotumans, *Island Legacy* provides an authentic and authoritative account of Rotuman society and culture as it was when Europeans first arrived and how it has changed since then. The care with which the authors have presented an account of considerable complexity is a demonstration of the genuinely affectionate concern that they have developed for the Rotuman people during a long and mutually beneficial association.

J. K. Konrote  
Major General (Retired)



## Island Legacy



**Photo 0.1** Album documenting history of a family in Rotuma, 2001.  
*F. Deschamps.*

## Preface

History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illumines reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life and brings us tidings of antiquity.

Cicero (106–43 BC), *Pro Publio Sestio*

Writing history is an exercise in selection. More than that, it is a matter of selection piled on selection, as the published and archival accounts one has to work with have already been sifted through chance encounters, individual biases, and the whims of publishers and archivists, among others. Because Rotumans had no written language prior to European intrusion, their versions of history were orally transmitted and appear to have focused more on family lore than on their collective experience as a people. Political history—stories of invaders from abroad, tales of conflicts between rival chiefs and the like—is embedded in mythical structures that embody far more than mere chronologies of memorable events. These accounts incorporate moralities and visions of an orderly world, concerns that often appear to supersede a desire to narrate history in the usual western, academic sense. Furthermore, European visitors were the first to write down these oral traditions, and who knows what influenced the accounts they recorded and sometimes published? What questions did they ask, and in what language? Who were the Rotumans who provided the narratives, and what were their particular biases and agendas? How did they understand the questions asked of them by their European interviewers, and how much did they simplify their accounts in order to be understood by outsiders? Were the accounts written down on the spot, or were they recorded from memory well after the interview? In most instances these are unanswerable questions; we must

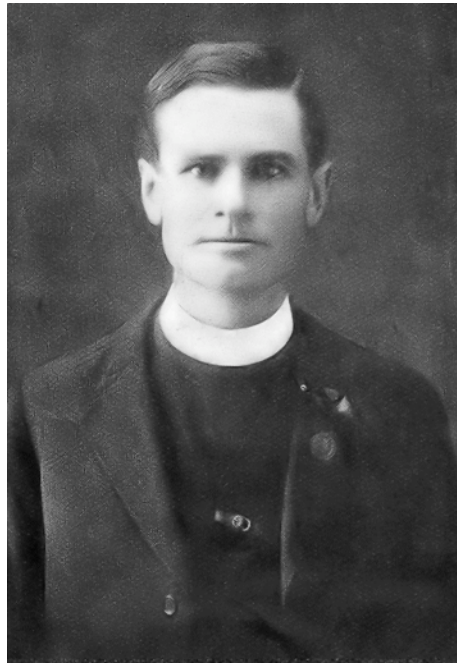
decide the best we can, given our own biases, which accounts to honor and which to treat with skepticism. Historical legends are still passed down orally from one generation to the next, but now there are further complications. For example, how much are the legends that are currently retold influenced by people's exposure to education, to travel, to motion pictures, video, and other media? Where they deviate from accounts recorded a century ago or more, which versions should be given precedence? Aware of these factors, we have chosen to present Rotuman oral accounts not as factual history but rather as conceptions of an eventful past, conceptions that have changed over time and continue to change.

We have elected to give priority to the oral histories recorded by Father Joseph Trouillet in the latter part of the nineteenth century and those recorded by Mesulama Titifanua in the 1930s.

Fr. Trouillet served as Catholic missionary on Rotuma from 1868 to 1906. Shortly after arriving, he recorded oral traditions concerning political history, particularly the succession of paramount chiefs (*fakpure* or *vakāi*), priest-kings (*sau*), and ritual leaders (*mua*). He obtained accounts of the roles played by each of these figures, thereby shedding considerable light on the nature of Rotuma's mid-nineteenth century political structure. His account, in French, was never published, and his handwritten journals were transported to the Vatican archives just prior to Howard's arrival on Rotuma in 1959. Fortunately, typed copies were made by Gordon Macgregor, an anthropologist who visited the island in 1932, and by H. S. Evans, an Englishman who served as District Officer on Rotuma from 1949 to 1952. In places it is apparent that the typist had difficulty transcribing Fr. Trouillet's handwriting, and in addition to discrepancies between the two versions there are inconsistencies in the spelling of Rotuman words and names. Also, we do not know whether Trouillet's account, titled "Histoire de Rotuma," represents the views of several Rotumans or just one consultant, although we can be quite sure it incorporates the perspectives of residents from Fag'uta, the Catholic stronghold on the southern side of the island. Nevertheless, Trouillet's narrative is remarkable for its chronological ordering of fabled events and sets a framework for the study of Rotuman legendary history. His account is available at libraries containing Pacific Manuscripts Bureau documents (reel 159) under the title "Historical Accounts of Rotuma."

When presenting segments of this text we use Evans's English translation.

Mesulama Titifanua transcribed legends dictated by "older natives"; he recorded them in the Rotuman language and they were translated into English by the Reverend C. Maxwell Churchward, a Methodist missionary and linguist. The published volume, *Tales of a Lonely Island*,<sup>1</sup> has the advantage of incorporating both Rotuman text and English translation. Because of the Methodist affiliation, it no doubt contains biases characteristic of the northeastern districts (who were entrenched rivals of Fag'uta for political supremacy), but at least we have some knowledge of the recording context.



**Photo 0.2** The Reverend C. M. Churchward.  
*Uniting Church in Australia, National Assembly  
Historical Reference Committee.*

Another source of information on Rotuma's remote past is archaeology. Selection in the case of archaeology is mostly a matter of what physical items from the past survive and are found, primarily by digging them up. Unfortunately, little subsurface archaeology has been done on the island to date, so there is not much hard evidence at our disposal. Nevertheless, we draw on the work of Thegn Ladefoged, an

archaeologist who extensively surveyed surface remains.<sup>2</sup> Ladefoged's investigation led him to some important conclusions about the development of political institutions on Rotuma, which we consider in some detail.

Part of the task we have set ourselves requires an attempt to reconstruct Rotuman society during the early years of European intrusion. Here we have had to rely to a great extent on the accounts of visitors, most of whom stayed for only a short time. They were the ones who were most curious and who wrote the longest accounts. Sources are much less extensive for Rotuma than for more frequently visited archipelagoes like Hawai'i, Tahiti, Sāmoa, Tonga, and Fiji. This is a mixed blessing for a historian: on the one hand it reduces the amount of detail one can draw on, but on the other hand it makes selection an easier task. Just about every account about Rotuma containing more than a few paragraphs is worth considering, although the credibility of the authors varies depending on length of their stay, any obvious biases, whether their musings are based on observation or hearsay, and so on. Among the most useful sources for these purposes are the following:

- René Primavère Lesson was a naturalist aboard the French corvette *La Coquille*, which arrived at Rotuma on 1 May 1824. The visit lasted for only one day, but Lesson was given an extensive account of life on the island by a renegade sailor whom he refers to as Williams John, from Northumberland, England. John was one of several deserters from the whaling ship *Rochester*, which had come to Rotuma to trade for provisions two months earlier. Lesson described John as a cooper by trade, with "a gentle, honest nature, good sense and some learning." He commented that "during his visit to our ship, Williams John gave M. de Blosseville a variety of information about native customs which have much in common with those of other South Seas islands. The obvious intelligence of this sailor gave us confidence in the accuracy of his account."<sup>3</sup>

Lesson's account is entitled "Observations on Rotuma and its inhabitants" and was published in 1838 as chapter 12 (pp. 412–439) in volume 2 of *Voyage médical autour du monde exécuté sur la corvette du roi La Coquille, commandée par M. L. I. Duperrey pendant les années 1822, 1823, 1824 et 1825* (Paris: Roret Librairie).<sup>4</sup>

- Peter Dillon arrived at Rotuma on the first of September 1827 and stayed for less than a day. While on the island he encountered two other deserters from the *Rochester*, whom he referred to as Parker and Young. Although his stay was extremely short, Dillon's narrative is valuable because it is one of the earliest available, and because it is based on information from two men who had lived on the island for three years. The account appears in a book entitled *Narrative and Successful Result of a Voyage in the South Seas Performed by the Order of the Government of British India, to Ascertain the Actual Fate of La Pérouse's Expedition* (London: Hurst, Chance, and Co., 1829). The section on Rotuma appears in volume 2, pages 91–107.<sup>5</sup>

- George Bennett, a physician aboard the *Sophia*, visited Rotuma twice in 1830 (during February and again in March–April). On 30 March the *Sophia* was driven to shore by a gale, necessitating a stay until 8 April, when it was able to leave. Bennett's observations, entitled "The Island of Rótuma," were published in 1831 in the *United Services Journal*, number 33, pages 198–202 and 473–482. He commented on a wide range of topics, from chieftainship, beliefs, and medical conditions to physical appearance and dress.<sup>6</sup>

- Edward Lucatt paid two short visits to Rotuma, in July and August of 1841. The account of his travels, entitled *Rovings in the Pacific, from 1837 to 1849: With a Glance at California by a Merchant Long Resident in Tahiti*, was published in two volumes by Longman, Brown, Green, and Longman in London in 1851; the section on Rotuma is found in volume 1, pages 156–202. Like Bennett, Lucatt commented on a variety of topics. Because his account is based largely on his own observations of specific events, it has an immediacy missing from the more generalized accounts of many of his contemporaries.<sup>7</sup>

- Litton Forbes arrived at Rotuma in 1872 as part of a labor-recruiting expedition. He obtained much of his information from a renegade sailor whom he refers to as "Old Bill," and from the chief of Itu'ti'u, the largest district in Rotuma. Old Bill had been on Rotuma since he deserted a whaler when in his twenties; Chief Albert

of Itu'ti'u provided Forbes with an account of a recent war between Methodist and Catholic factions on the island, a war in which Albert had been an active participant. Forbes's book, *Two Years in Fiji*, was published in London by Longmans, Green, and Co. in 1875; the section on Rotuma is found on pages 222–248.<sup>8</sup>

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, several Europeans took up residence on Rotuma as missionaries, traders, and—following an offer of cession to Great Britain—colonial administrators. A number of these individuals took great interest in Rotuma's "traditional" culture and gathered as much information as they could from knowledgeable informants. The most extensive of these accounts were by the following:

- W. L. Allardyce was Acting Resident Commissioner on Rotuma for a short period during 1881, the year of cession. His report, entitled "Rotooma and the Rotoomans," was published in 1885–1886 in the *Proceedings of the Queensland Branch of the Geographical Society of Australasia*, volume 1, pages 130–144 (Brisbane: Watson, Ferguson & Co.).<sup>9</sup>
- The Reverend William Allen served as a Methodist missionary on Rotuma from 1881 to 1886. His account, simply entitled "Rotuma," was published in a *Report of the Australian Association for Advancement of Science*, 6th Meeting, January 1895 (pp. 569–579).<sup>10</sup>

Both Allardyce and Allen wrote about a wide variety of topics in rather general terms. Their accounts mix descriptions of conditions toward the end of the nineteenth century with recollections of the earlier society, but taken in conjunction with other sources they are useful assets for historians.

The most extensive sources for reconstructing Rotuman society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are from three visitors who each spent several months on the island with the specific intent of gathering ethnographic information.

- J. Stanley Gardiner, a naturalist who visited Rotuma for three and a half months in 1896, was a keen observer and conducted extensive interviews on a range of topics. His account, published in 1898 in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (volume



27, pp. 396–435 and 457–524), is the most comprehensive ethnography of Rotuma published in the nineteenth century. It is *the* indispensable source for studies of early Rotuman culture.<sup>11</sup>

- Arthur Maurice Hocart, a teacher by profession while in Fiji, was an extraordinary ethnographer and a talented linguist. Over a period of three and a half months on Rotuma in 1913, he managed to collect over seven hundred pages of notes on an extensive array of topics. His notes are remarkable insofar as he rapidly learned to understand and record narratives in the Rotuman language. The notes are housed in the Turnbull Library in Wellington, New Zealand.

- Gordon Macgregor, an anthropologist on the staff of Bishop Museum, spent six months on Rotuma from 11 January to 9 July 1932. His notes, archived in the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, are exemplary from the standpoint of their organization. They are topically arranged in preparation for a monograph he never published.<sup>12</sup>

For documentation of historical events following European intrusion we have relied heavily on a variety of sources, including:

- Missionary accounts, including letters, reports to superiors, and personal reminiscences. Of particular value are the *Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, which contain letters from resident missionaries on Rotuma, and the archived journals of Catholic missionaries at the Sumi and Upu mission stations (*Histoire de la Station Notre Dame des Victoires*, Sumi, Rotuma and *Historique de la Station St. Michel*, Upu, Rotuma). Both of the latter documents were recorded in French by a succession of Marist priests from France. They are available on microfilm of the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (reel 159).

- Minutes of the Rotuma Council, which was established in 1881 following the cession of Rotuma to Great Britain. During the colonial period, council meetings were conducted in a mixture of English and Rotuman, mediated by a bilingual interpreter, then recorded in English by the Resident Commissioner (from 1881 to 1934) or District Officer (from 1935 to

the present). The minutes are housed at the Fiji National Archives.

- Outward letters from Resident Commissioners and District Officers to the Colonial Secretary, the Governor of Fiji, and other officials. The earliest letters date from December 1879, shortly after the Rotuman chiefs requested cession. The letters contain both factual data (financial reports, censuses, import and export records) and commentaries on Rotuman customs and habitual practices. Like the council minutes, they are a valuable source of information about the nature of the colonial encounter between British administrators and the Rotuman people.

During the postcolonial period we have drawn partly on newspaper and magazine articles, mostly published in Fiji, that describe events, highlight personalities, and express viewpoints. These sources supplement our own ethnographic fieldwork, which began with Howard's dissertation research in 1959 and has continued until the present. Our more recent joint fieldwork has taken us to Rotuma in 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2003, and 2004, for periods ranging from two weeks to six months. In 1994 Rensel was awarded a PhD in anthropology at the University of Hawai'i for research into economic and social change on Rotuma. In addition to field trips to Rotuma, we have visited Rotuman communities in Australia (Sydney and Melbourne); New Zealand (Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch); the continental United States (the San Francisco Bay area, and Utah); Canada (Vancouver), and England (London). We have also been active participants in the Rotuman community in our home state of Hawai'i.

We have consulted many sources in addition to those cited above, including biographies, theses, technical reports, book chapters, and archival materials. The Mitchell Library in Sydney, the Pacific Collection of the Hamilton Library at the University of Hawai'i, and the Fiji National Archives proved to be particularly rich sources of information. A comprehensive *Bibliography of Rotuma* compiled by Antoine N'Yeurt, Will McClatchey, and Hans Schmidt in 1996 was invaluable for identifying obscure but important sources.

One final source of information deserves mention. In November 1996 Howard constructed a Web site dedicated to providing a space on the Internet for members of the now global Rotuman community to communicate with one

another.<sup>13</sup> The site currently includes a vast array of features including a news page, bulletin board, and forum for discussing issues of interest to Rotumans. People have contributed a steady stream of news stories from Rotuman communities around the world and have expressed their views on a variety of issues confronting the island and the Rotuman people. This has proved to be an extremely valuable source for keeping us, and Rotumans everywhere, up-to-date on what has been happening in the various scattered communities.

The process of selection involves much more than choosing which sources to privilege, and which to ignore or marginalize. If history is to be more than a series of unrelated anecdotes, it requires commitment to a limited set of narrative themes. All of our experience with Rotuma—our reading of accounts by Europeans and Rotumans alike, our field research, and the oral reports of visitors to the island over time—have led us to perceive a dominant theme pervading Rotuman experience. In short, we have come to see Rotuman history in the light of continuous attempts to preserve autonomy.

By autonomy we are referring to the capacity to function independently, free from control by others. To a great extent, Rotuman history can be viewed as a continuous struggle between politically powerful groups and individuals who have attempted to impose a social order of their choosing, and politically weaker groups and individuals who have attempted to maintain their autonomy. The struggle has taken place at every level of Rotuman society: individuals within households, households within villages, villages within districts, between districts, and between Rotuma and the outside world.

This book focuses on some of the more dramatic struggles, but the reader should keep in mind that daily life in Rotuma (and perhaps everywhere) involves conflicts similar in kind if not in magnitude. Whether in the face of domination by Tongan invaders in legendary times, by British administrators during the colonial period, or by the government of Fiji in the postcolonial era, Rotumans have always asserted their right of self-determination, sometimes in dramatically defiant ways, sometimes by simple noncompliance and passive resistance. The story we have to tell is of a proud people—a people who have a keen sense of their own worth both as individuals and as a cultural community.

Our account covers four distinct periods, beginning with what is known about Rotuma's history prior to European intervention at the end of the eighteenth century. We present information about Rotuma's geography (chapter 1); its early history as much as we can deduce it from myths, legends, language affinities, and the limited archaeological work done on the island (chapter 2); the nature of Rotuma's culture and society at the time Europeans arrived (chapter 3); and the forms of creative and artistic expression that were present at the time (chapter 4).

The second period extends from the arrival of the first European vessel, the *Pandora*, which made a brief visit in 1791, to the onset of the colonial era following cession in 1881. This was an era heavily impacted by explorers, whalers, beachcombers, and returning Rotuman sailors (chapter 5), as well as missionaries who visited or stayed on Rotuma for varying lengths of time (chapter 6). This period was also characterized by factional strife, culminating in a war between Methodist and Catholic converts, which resulted in an offer of cession to Great Britain by Rotuman chiefs (chapter 7).

The third period covers Rotuma's colonial history, beginning with the events leading to cession (chapter 8). We go on to discuss the nature of political and economic institutions under colonial rule (chapters 9 and 10, respectively); and the health and welfare implications of colonial policies (chapter 11).

The final period covers the Rotuman experience from the time Fiji gained independence from Great Britain in 1970 until the end of the twentieth century. Our account of changes on the island of Rotuma (chapter 12) is followed by a consideration of the somewhat problematic relationship between Rotuma and Fiji (chapter 13), and concludes with a look at the global Rotuman community—a community in the process of formation (chapter 14).

We have written *Island Legacy* primarily for people of Rotuman ancestry rather than for an academic audience. We have therefore attempted to limit the use of specialized vocabulary and to keep theoretical musings and comparisons to other societies to a minimum, except where we felt they helped to highlight the significance or uniqueness of Rotuman customs. The book deviates from traditional histories in several ways. First of all, it is not meant to be a singular narrative that can be read from beginning to end. Rather, we think of it as a "referential history"—a reference

book of Rotuman history—with distinct chapters that can be read in any given order. Some of the later chapters thus begin with accounts of traditional customs and practices and their transformations, which in more orthodox histories might have been included in earlier chapters. We wrote the chapters this way in part so that they could be read separately by those interested in particular topics, and in part because we believe that the logic of different aspects of Rotuman culture deserve their own contextual considerations.

We have also opted to be as inclusive as possible of information about Rotuman culture and society at the time of European intrusion, incorporating lengthy quotes from early European observers. While this material may seem somewhat tedious to a casual reader, we regard it as imperative for the current generation of Rotumans to have access to these sources, selective though they may be. Inclusiveness has also been the result of trying to incorporate as many voices as possible concerning events and aspects of Rotuman history, and particularly Rotuman voices. While it is impossible for us to construct history "from a Rotuman point of view," we at least have tried to include as much of a Rotuman perspective as our field experiences and archival researches permit.

We want to stress that our account of Rotuman history is only one of many that could be presented. Rotuma's local and family histories remain largely undocumented, and others would likely select or stress different parts of the available materials than we have. We present this account with a deep sense of humility, and with the hope that Rotumans will be stimulated by our shortcomings to write their own accounts.

## Notes to Preface

In addition to consulting the sources mentioned in this preface, we have drawn heavily from our own publications on Rotuma in developing this volume, many of which include extensive historical accounts. The sources we have used are acknowledged at the end of each chapter.

A complete set of papers we have published about Rotuma is included on the Rotuma Web site at  
<http://www.rotuma.net/os/howse/papers.html>

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<sup>1</sup> Titifanua and Churchward 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Ladefoged 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Lesson 1838, 418–419.

<sup>4</sup> Available online at <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Lesson.html>. We are grateful to Ella Wiswell who translated the French text to English for us.

<sup>5</sup> Online at <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Dillon.html>

<sup>6</sup> Online at <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Bennett.html>

<sup>7</sup> Online at <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Lucatt.html>

<sup>8</sup> Online at <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forbes.html>

<sup>9</sup> Online at <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Allardyce.html>

<sup>10</sup> Online at <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Allen.html>

<sup>11</sup> Online at <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Gardiner/GdrContents.html>

<sup>12</sup> Online at <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Macgregor/Macgregor.html>

<sup>13</sup> Online at <http://www.rotuma.net/>

## Acknowledgments

We are indebted to so many people that the task of naming them all leaves us overwhelmed and humbled. We ask forgiveness from anyone we fail to acknowledge; please blame our inadequate, aging memories and the enormous nature of the task rather than our intentions. Indeed, we feel a debt of gratitude to the people of Rotuma that we can never repay.

Our research could not have taken place without the financial support of several institutions. The National Institute of Mental Health provided two years of support for Howard's initial research (1959–1961); Rensel's research was funded by a Fulbright grant (1989); and Howard received grants from the Office of Research Administration (1988) and the Conflict Resolution Program (1989) at the University of Hawai'i, in addition to a Matsuda Scholarship (1990–1991). Howard also was awarded a Wenner-Gren Foundation Grant (1989). We offer our thanks for the confidence placed in us by these agencies and hope that we have not disappointed them in any way.

Before attempting to name individuals who contributed to our research, we would simply like to acknowledge all the librarians and archivists who so patiently acceded to our requests for assistance; the scholars who answered our queries and drew our attention to important sources; and most of all, the many Rotumans who so unselfishly gave of themselves to help us in our quest for an understanding of their history and culture.

Howard's dissertation research was made possible by the scholarly dedication of many individuals, most notably in Fiji. The Reverend Alan Tippet provided copies, typed by his secretary, of all the historical documents he could find concerning Rotuma; Dr. Lindsay Verrier went out of his way to facilitate demographic research; and A. Ian Diamond, archivist at the Central Archives of Fiji and the Western Pacific High Commission, provided duplicates of many invaluable documents. The patience and understanding of Dr.

Alex Spoehr at Bishop Museum in Honolulu, and the Governor of Fiji, Sir Kenneth Maddox, made Howard's stay on Rotuma possible under difficult political circumstances associated with a failed land commission that had aroused the ire of the Rotuman people.

As always, ethnographic research relies on the patience and good will of many, many people from the community being studied. While it is not possible to name them all, some went far out of their way to accommodate a naïve and no doubt at times troublesome young intruder from overseas. Among them in Fiji were Josefa Rigamoto, Alexander Rae, and his sister, Faga Hoeflich. On Rotuma, Amāi Sakimi and Rejieli Maropia took on the responsibilities of full-time research assistants. Wilson Inia and Brother Mamao Managreave did their utmost to explain to the otherwise skeptical Rotuman people the purposes of Howard's research. Howard's greatest debt, however, is to the family of Sakimi and Seferosa Farpapau, and their daughter, Akeneta, who took him into their home and treated him like a son and brother for an entire year.

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Our joint research, which began in 1988, likewise has been made possible by a remarkable number of kind and generous individuals. On Rotuma, Tārterani Rigamoto and Elizabeth Inia both provided us with accommodations and sustenance over lengthy periods of time, and several couples went out of their way to make our visits to the island more comfortable and productive, including Gagaj Marāf and his wife Sanimeli, Victor and Hanuarani Atalifo, Sakimi and Sarote Aprama, Maniue and Vika Vilsoni, John and Harieta Bennett, Ian and Flora Croker, Aisea and Katarina Aitu. Rensel owes a special debt to the people of Oinafa Village, who so patiently took the time to respond to her extensive daily interviews during a thirteen-week survey in 1989, and to the schoolteachers who conducted an islandwide survey for her dissertation research. We also must thank the chiefs (*gagaj 'es itu'u*) of Rotuma's seven districts for granting us permission to work in their domains.



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During our visits to Rotuman communities overseas we have been extended the same hospitality and generosity that we experience in Rotuma. We are especially indebted to the late Reverend Jione Langi and his family for greatly facilitating our research in New Zealand, as well as for hosting us for weeks at a time. Arthur, Ravai, and Hatamara Shaw have become family to us in the fullest sense of the term; they have made our visits to Wellington a real joy.

In Australia, Martoa Dickinson hosted us for lengthy stays and greatly facilitated our access to the Rotuman community in Sydney. We owe similar debts to Torike Sanerive and Kapieni Patresio in Melbourne, Tafo'ou Atalifo and Janice Newton in Ballarat, and Oni and Betty Hanfakaga in Adelaide. Our thanks as well to Saumaru Foster at the Mitchell Library in Sydney for helping us to search out Rotuman material at that magnificent repository.

We would also like to extend our gratitude to the families of Richard and Lorraine Tizard-Varcoe in England, to Olav and Sofie Arntsen in Norway, to Konousi and Sandra Aisake in British Columbia, and to Richard and Tiva Sievinen in Florida for making our visits to their homes such a rich and rewarding experience.

Two of our colleagues have contributed to our research beyond measure: Hans Schmidt and Vilsoni Hereniko. Not only has Schmidt's expertise in the Rotuman language been a great asset that we have often called on, but he also provided us with a copy of A. M. Hocart's fieldnotes from his visit to Rotuma in 1913, which Schmidt laboriously typed himself; they have proved an invaluable resource. Hans and his wife, Heike, have also graciously hosted us during visits to their home in Hamburg, Germany.

Vilsoni Hereniko exemplifies the very best of both Rotuman and western virtues. His writings about Rotuma are acutely insightful and have greatly helped us to refine our perspective on Rotuman culture. His feature film, *Pear ta ma 'on Maf (The Land Has Eyes)*, coproduced with his wife Jeannette, is a masterpiece of cultural representation.

Finally, we want to thank Major-General Jioje Konrote, who should be an inspiration to all Rotumans. As former

Force Commander of UNIFIL in Lebanon, as Fiji's High Commissioner to Australia, and now as Rotuma's representative to Fiji's Parliament, he is making history in a big way. We are grateful for his careful reading of a first draft of this book and for his extensive and thoughtful comments. His encouragement has given a significant boost to our motivation to complete this history.

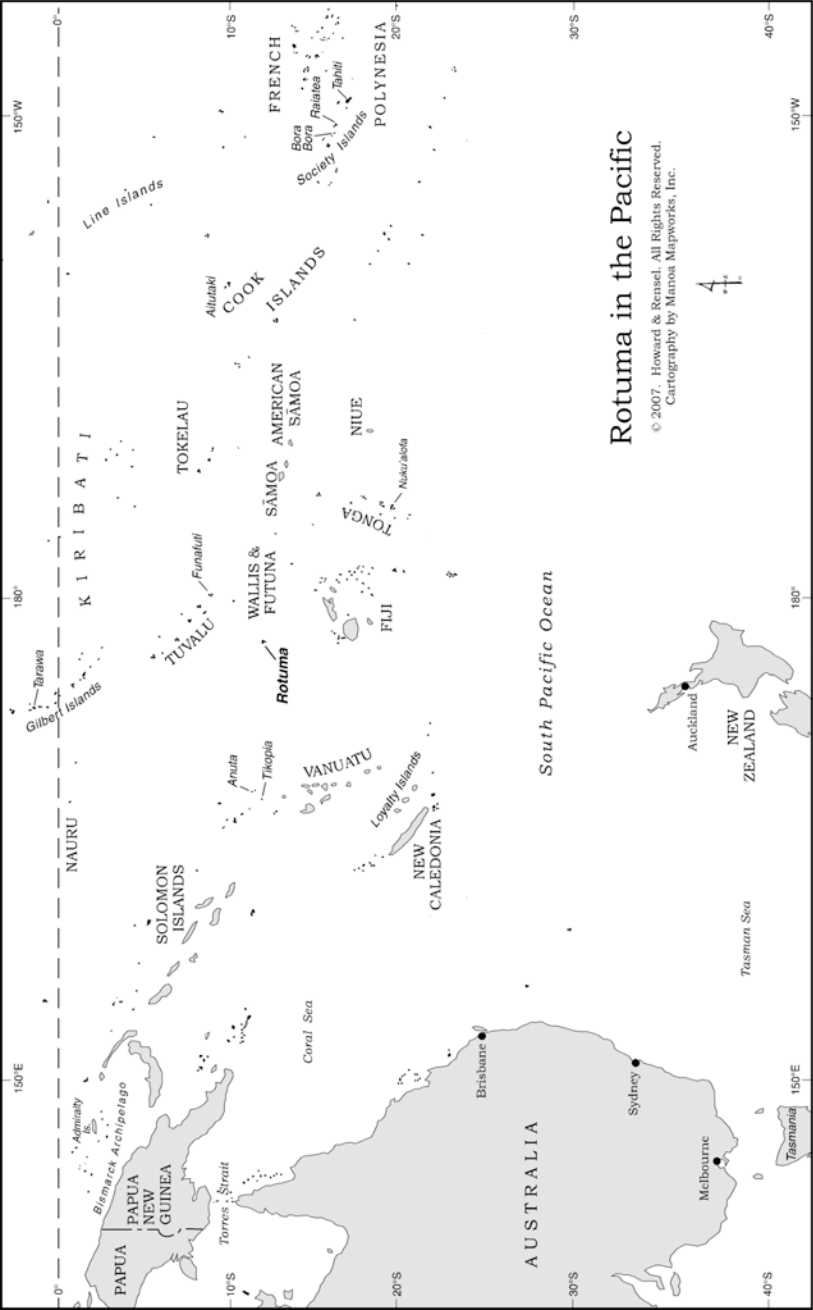
The photographs that illustrate the book come from many sources, both personal and archival. In addition to our own collection, dating back to 1960, we are grateful to Dr. H. S. Evans, Henry Enasio, Richard Mehus, Elizabeth Inia, Francois Deschamps, Bruce Tizard-Varcoe and the Rigamoto family for providing us with items from their albums. We would also like to acknowledge the assistance of the individuals at the following libraries and archives who located and scanned photos at our request: Turnbull Library in Wellington, New Zealand; Marist Archives in Rome, Italy; Fiji Museum, Suva, Fiji; Fiji Ministry of Information, also in Suva; and Uniting Church Assembly, Sydney, Australia. Francois Deschamps, who is Professor of Art and Photography at the State University of New York, New Paltz, was our photographic consultant for the volume. He graciously helped us select relevant pictures and prepared them for publication. He also designed the book cover. We cannot thank him enough.

Maps were drawn to our specifications by Jane Eckelman of Manoa Mapworks, Inc.

We have dedicated this book to the ancestors of contemporary Rotumans for the splendid legacy they have provided. It is a legacy that is not only rich in tradition; it also includes that which is most admirable in the human spirit.



**Photo 0.3** Man sitting atop an ancestral tomb in Rotuma, where the ancestors are ever present. © *Fiji Museum*.



# Rotuma in the Pacific

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Cartography by Marco Mapworks, Inc.

# 1 Ecology and Early History

There sits fair Rotuma in gorgeous beauty, unknown outside the tropics as an emerald isle on a sapphire sea. The shallow water enclosed by the coral reef presents a great variety of green tints; beyond is the deep ocean blue, while the perennial verdure of the island and the glowing azure of the oft-times cloudless sky present to the eye of the beholder such a blending of colour as the earth can scarcely duplicate.

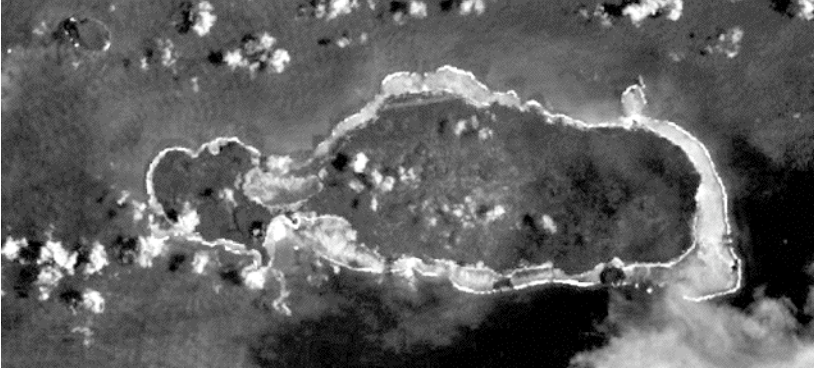
The Reverend William Allen, "Rotuma," 1895

## Geography and Geology

The island of Rotuma is located at 12° 30' south latitude and 177° east longitude, approximately 500 kilometers north of the Fiji archipelago. It is a similar distance south of Tuvalu, while Futuna and Wallis ('Uvea), its nearest neighbors to the east, lie 550 and 740 kilometers away. The main islands of Sāmoa and Tonga are approximately 1,200 kilometers to the east and southeast respectively, while the Tongan island of Niuafo'ou, which figures heavily in Rotuman oral history, is 910 kilometers distant. The nearest archipelago to the west is Vanuatu, at 1,100 kilometers. Rotuma is therefore a geographical isolate, but an isolate within sailing range for traditional Polynesian voyagers. On the one hand, this semi-isolation helps to account for some of the unique characteristics of the Rotuman population; on the other hand, it has contributed to the preservation of Rotuman culture despite nearly two centuries of contact with Europeans. Rotuma's geographical location is an important part of the story told in this volume.

The main island is divided into two parts, joined by an isthmus of sand (see photo 1.1; see also map, page 62). Tradition holds that the two parts were once separate, and

this contention is supported by geological evidence according to J. S. Gardiner, who wrote about the geology of Rotuma in addition to his ethnographic account.<sup>1</sup> Overall the island is 14.5 kilometers long and, at its widest, 4.5 kilometers across, with its lengthwise axis running almost due east and west. Total land area is approximately 43 square kilometers.



**Photo 1.1** Rotuma from space by NASA satellite.

Geologically Rotuma is of volcanic origin, with a number of craters rising to heights of 200–250 meters above sea level. The island is surrounded by a coral reef, which for the most part is fringing, but in places approaches the barrier class. In spots, the edge of the reef extends about 1.5 kilometers from shore, providing a substantial expanse of shallow fishing grounds; in other places, it extends less than 100 meters.<sup>2</sup> Nowhere is there a deepwater lagoon to provide a sheltered anchorage for oceangoing vessels. Until the wharf was built at Oinafa in the 1970s, visiting ships had to anchor outside the reef, with people and goods transported from ship to shore and back by launch, punt, or canoe. Because it was leeward for the greater part of the year, the main anchorage was at Maka Bay, off Motusa, on the north side of the isthmus. It had the disadvantage of lacking a passage in the outer reef; at low tide even a canoe could not cross, so loading and unloading of ships had to be timed with the tides. An alternative anchorage was on the south side of the isthmus, at Hapmafau Bay. A passage in the reef there allowed it to be worked around the clock, but only when the weather was calm; when the sea became choppy it was too dangerous to continue.

On the reef are several islets, including Haua Ti'u and Haua Mea'me'a off Oinafa; Husia Ti'u, Husia Mea'me'a, 'Afgaha, and Solkope off Noa'tau; and Solnohu off Juju.

Solkope and Solnohu are easily accessible from the mainland and have been cultivated with coconut groves and root-crop gardens.

To the west of Rotuma, at distances ranging between 3 and 6 kilometers, lie the offshore islands of Uea, Hatana, and Hāf Liua. The largest of them, Uea, has a conical summit 260 meters high. It is surrounded by cliffs, which to the north and west are high and very steep. There is no fringing reef, and the main landing spot, to the eastward, is hazardous even under the best of conditions. Two freshwater streams flow on the island, which has a land area of 73 hectares. Uea was inhabited until the 1930s, when the Resident Commissioner ordered families off because of difficulties in providing them with medical care. Descendents of these families still maintain gardens on the island and periodically harvest its coconuts for copra.

Hatana is a rocky islet surrounded by a fringing reef. It is a sacred island, considered the burial place of Raho, the legendary founder of Rotuma. People from the village of Losa have proprietary rights to the island and visit it on occasion to hunt seabirds and their eggs. Access is hazardous even by canoe, and landing parties have been stranded for days during periods of rough seas.



**Photo 1.2** Sacred stones on the islet of Hatana, 1959. *Alan Howard.*

Haf Liua, sometimes referred to as "Split Island," is a bare, crescent-shaped islet with cliffs all around. It is 57 meters high and has a vertical cleft through which there is a sea passage.

The eastern end of the main island of Rotuma contains two ranges of hills, roughly forming a U-shape, with the open end facing the Motusa isthmus. On the outer slopes of these hills, toward the shore, are extensive beaches and soil deposits. The hills themselves are of two types. One type has a flat summit with a central depression, containing forest timber and coconut trees on the summit and slopes, and the other runs into a ridge on which gardens are planted, in some instances right across the ridge itself. On both types of hills the slope for the last 50 to 100 meters is fairly steep, with inclines ranging from 30 to 55 degrees. The western end of the island also contains several hills, most of which correspond to the foregoing description, although some are distinguished by precipitous cliffs, from 50 to 100 meters high dropping to the sea. At several places along the coast the sand flats extend inward for a few hundred meters and in some areas run to a depth of four meters. At some points these coastal sand flats drop below sea level, resulting in saline pools and swampland.



**Photo 1.3** View of eastern part of the main island across Maka Bay from Maftoa, 1989. *Alan Howard.*

Rotuma lies within the humid tropics, with a mean annual temperature of approximately 27°C and only a slight variation between summer and winter months. From April through November the prevailing winds are east to south; from December through March they blow north to west and bring with them more rain and a higher humidity. There is some justification for calling the former season "dry" and the latter season "wet" although rainfall is generally plentiful all year round, ranging from an average of 219 millimeters in July to 353 millimeters in December and January. The average annual rainfall is 3,568 millimeters.<sup>3</sup>

Tropical cyclones affect Rotuma sporadically and on occasion have caused severe damage to trees and crops. Gardiner stated that they occur about once every three



years,<sup>4</sup> but once or twice a decade seems to have been the norm for the twentieth century.

Most of the main island is extremely fertile and produces crops of exceptional size and quality. Rotuman coconuts are famous in that part of the Pacific. According to R. L. Hartley, an agricultural officer with the Department of Agriculture in Fiji, "Some idea of the size of the coconuts may be gained from the fact that, normally, eighty nuts are sufficient to produce about ninety pounds of green copra, which in turn means that only a little over 3,600 nuts are required to produce one ton of dried copra."<sup>5</sup>

In his Geographic Information System (GIS) survey of Rotuma in 1991, Thegn Ladefoged classified the soils on the island into four types: well-developed soils (54 percent), rocky soils (37.4 percent), beach soils (7.5 percent), and swampland (1.1 percent).<sup>6</sup> However, the distribution of well-developed and rocky soils is uneven. On the eastern end of the island (the districts of Oinafa and Noa'tau), he classified only 13.5 percent of the soil as well developed and 76.5 percent as rocky; for the rest of the island the percentages of well-developed soil range from 72.1 percent to 85.1 percent. Ladefoged estimated the productivity potential of each soil type and determined that the eastern districts are significantly less productive.<sup>7</sup> This differential in the productivity of different parts of the island is central to Ladefoged's theory concerning the development of the ancient political structure, which we consider in chapter 2.

Because no perennial streams flow on Rotuma, residents had to rely almost entirely on rain for their freshwater supply until the underground freshwater lens was tapped in 1981. A number of wells, many of them ancient, have been constructed on the coastal sand flats, but their water is saline and they have been used mostly during periods of drought.

The luxuriance of the vegetation inspired early European visitors to describe Rotuma's scenic splendor in superlatives. Captain Edward Edwards of the *Pandora* was the first European to record his impressions in 1791:

There are cocoanut trees all along the shore behind the beach, and an uncommon number of boughs amongst them. The island is rather high, diversified with hills of different forms, some of which might obtain the name of mountain, but they are cultivated up to their very summits with cocoanut trees and other articles, and the island is in general as well or better cultivated and

its inhabitants more numerous for its size than any of the islands we have hitherto seen.<sup>8</sup>

George Bennett provided a more elaborate picture, having viewed it in 1831 from ashore as well as from the sea:

It is of a moderate height, densely wooded, and abounding in cocoa-nut trees....Its general appearance is beautifully picturesque, verdant hills gradually rising from the sandy beach, giving it a highly fertile appearance....On landing, the beautiful appearance of the island was rather increased than diminished; vegetation appeared most luxuriant, and the trees and shrubs blooming with various tints, spread a gaiety around; the clean and neat native houses were intermingled with the waving plumes of the coco-nut, the broad spreading plantain, and other trees peculiar to tropical climes. That magnificent tree the callphyllum inophyllum, or fifau [*hefau*] of the natives, was not less abundant, displaying its shining dark green foliage, contrasted by beautiful clusters of white flowers teeming with fragrance. This tree seemed a favourite with the natives, on account of its shade, fragrance and ornamental appearance of the flowers.... When I extended my rambles more inland, through narrow and sometimes rugged pathways, the luxuriance of vegetation did not decrease, but the lofty trees, overshadowing the road, defended the pedestrian from the effects of a fervent sun, rendering the walk under their umbrageous covering cool and pleasant. The gay flowers of the hibiscus tiliaceus, as well as the splendid huth [*hufu*] or *Barringtonia speciosa*, covered with its beautiful flowers, the petals of which are white, and the edges of the stamina delicately tinged with pink, give to the trees when in full bloom a magnificent appearance; the hibiscus rosa-chinensis, or kowa [*kava*] of the natives also grows in luxuriance and beauty. The elegant flowers of these trees, with others of more humble and less beautiful tints, everywhere meet the eye near the paths, occasionally varied by plantations of the ahan [*'a'ana*] or taro, *arum esculentum*, which, from a deficiency of irrigation, is generally of mountain variety. Of the sugar-cane they possess several varieties, and it is eaten in the raw state; a small variety of yam, more commonly known by the name of the Rótuma potato, the ulé [*'uhlei*] of the

natives, is very abundant. The ulu or bread-fruit, pori [*p̄ari*] or plantain, and the vi (*spondias dulcis*, Parkinson) or Brazilian plum, with numerous other kinds, sufficiently testify to the fertility of the island. Occasionally the mournful toa or *casuarina equisetifolia*, planted in small clumps near the villages or surrounding the burial-places, added beauty to the landscape.<sup>9</sup>



**Photo 1.4** Typical vegetation in the uncultivated interior bush, 2001.  
*F. Deschamps.*

Edward Lucatt, describing the island in 1841, also marveled at the lush tropical vegetation and found Rotuma a feast for the senses:

The soil does not seem deep, though it teems luxuriantly, and produces a variety of tropical fruits and vegetables. Magnificent groves of cocoa-nut trees fringe the glowing white beach, and they appear to be the most valuable production on the island....In my walks I was delighted with the great variety of trees, shrubs, and beautiful flowers. At every step, some new floral beauty would burst upon me, glowing with the most brilliant colours; and unlike the flowers and

shrubs of New South Wales, most of them possess a graceful perfume. Fruit, too, and vegetables grow in great abundance, and there are several descriptions of both, which I never saw or heard of before. The Timanu [*hefau*] is a tree deserving of particular notice; it is a widespreading umbrageous tree, with a deep green foliage, its shade furnishing a cool retreat from the noontide sun. There is a fine grove of them on the beach opposite the anchorage, which the natives are very proud of. Like all the plants and shrubs on the island, it is evergreen, and at certain seasons it throws out bunches of white blossoms delightfully fragrant.<sup>10</sup>

Rotuma has been described as one of the most beautiful islands in the South Seas. Its reputation on this account is clearly well deserved.

### Early Cultural Affiliations

Rotuma's geographical location places it very near to the conventional intersection of Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia, and multiple strands of evidence suggest contact with peoples from all three culture areas. Placing Rotuma in the historical context of Pacific migration requires attention to how the people, the language, and the culture of Rotuma are similar to, or differ from, other Pacific islands, as well as the oral histories passed down from generation to generation. Thus physical characteristics such as skin color, hair type, and body structure provide clues to interisland affiliations, as do the degrees to which vocabularies and grammatical patterns are shared.

### PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

The contemporary Rotuman population shows a good deal of physical variation, although first impressions suggest a primarily Polynesian affinity. Most have light skin, with black, wavy hair and Polynesian facial features. On closer examination one finds a number of individuals with features characteristic of the Melanesian peoples to the west: darker skin, more tightly curled hair, and narrower, more aquiline noses. Still others have more Asian features similar to Micronesians. Some of this variability is the result of populations mixing after European contact, but early descriptions are nearly unanimous in relating Rotumans physically to other Polynesians:

In the shape and size of their persons we could distinguish no difference between them and the Friendly Islanders [Tongans], except that we thought them of a lighter colour.<sup>11</sup>

The natives of Rotouma belong to the Oceanic race in all its purity. They bear a striking resemblance to the Tahitians, but in general they are of better build, more developed, and the fullness of their contours better drawn.<sup>12</sup>

The people seem to belong to the same race as the Friendly Islanders...<sup>13</sup>

The natives are a fine-looking and well-formed people, resembling much those of Tongatabu in their appearance.<sup>14</sup>

But even a small sample of nine crania collected by Gardiner in 1896 reflected heterogeneity. They were analyzed by W. Laurence Duckworth and A. E. Taylor, physical anthropologists at Cambridge University, who concluded:

the island is inhabited by people of the tall brown-skinned Polynesian type, and also by individuals of the shorter and much darker-skinned Melanesian type, as well as by individuals possessing physical characteristics (such as stature, skin-colour, hair-colour, form of the hair, and the like) intermediate between those of the two foregoing stocks.<sup>15</sup>

Whether or not their conclusions about different "types" of people were justified, the range of physical characteristics they found is testimony to the fact that, in the nineteenth century, the Rotuman people were a diverse lot, suggesting multiple origins.

#### LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE

The Rotuman language has presented linguists with a provocative puzzle, and although a definitive analysis of the place of Rotuman in Oceanic linguistic history remains to be done, continuing work and new evidence are helping to clarify the picture (see appendix A for an account of research into the history of the Rotuman language). The puzzle is the result of two features of the language: (1) although Rotuman shares a substantial portion of its vocabulary with the Polynesian languages of Sāmoa and Tonga, it contains a large number of unique words, and (2) Rotuman is one of

very few languages in the world that productively employs metathesis, a systematic reversal of vowels and consonants. For example, "Rotuma" becomes "Rotuam" when it is used as a modifier, as in "fäeag Rotuam" (Rotuman language). Metathesis plays an important role in grammatical constructions; it also gives spoken Rotuman a distinctly un-Polynesian sound because it generates complicated vowel sounds (e.g., ä, ö, ü); two consonants can occur together; and words frequently end in consonants.

Hans Schmidt, a German linguist who became fluent in the Rotuman language after two extended visits to the island, published his doctoral thesis on the history of the Rotuman language in 2000. After a careful examination of all the evidence, he concluded that the development of Rotuman took place in several phases:

1. Rotuma was first settled by people who spoke one of the Central-Pacific dialects at a time when its closest related varieties were still spoken in northwest Vanua Levu.
2. Many peculiarities or idiosyncrasies of the language developed during a period of relative isolation caused by its geographical remoteness and negligence in sustaining outside contacts.
3. A first wave of Polynesian borrowings was caused by immigration or multiple visits of speakers of Polynesian languages, who presumably also settled the Polynesian outliers in Melanesia and Micronesia (from around the thirteenth or fourteenth century onward).
4. A second wave of Polynesian borrowings was caused by the conquest and temporary occupation of the island by Tongans (from around the sixteenth or seventeenth century onward).<sup>16</sup>

Regarding later Polynesian influence, Schmidt concluded:

The striking similarity of the Rotuman lexicon with Polynesian languages must be explained as the result of massive borrowing. After a long period of isolation, Rotumans were eager to learn new techniques and to adopt new ideas and fashions from Polynesians who started to visit the island about 750 years ago. My work has demonstrated the large extent of the Polynesian, especially Tongan, influence on the language and culture of the Rotumans.<sup>17</sup>

The problems of written Rotuman have been compounded by the fact that three separate orthographies were developed by Europeans, and all three are still in use. French priests and English ministers who missionized the island during the latter part of the nineteenth century developed the first two independently. Each orthography reflects the phonetics of the writer's mother tongue. The third orthography, introduced by C. M. Churchward, uses diacritics; although more complicated, it is more accurate than either of the others and will be used in this work to designate Rotuman words, except when they appear in quotations (see appendix B).

### LEGENDS

Rotuman legends support the likelihood of Samoan, Tongan, and Fijian influence on the language and culture. One legendary sequence of Rotuman oral history begins with a story about a chief from Sāmoa named Raho. Several versions of the Raho legend have appeared in print, with variations in detail. Basically the plot involves an insult to Raho's daughter or granddaughter; in anger he leaves Sāmoa (Savai'i or Savaiki in some versions) under the guidance of female supernatural beings. Raho is led to either discover or create Rotuma (by pouring out baskets of sand brought with him on his voyage), depending on the version.

Tokaniua (or Tokainiua), whose identity is variously described as Samoan, Tongan, or Fijian, immediately follows Raho to Rotuma.<sup>18</sup> Gardiner's version specifies that he comes from Niuafu'ou, an island to the north of the Tongan group, and makes several return trips between there and Rotuma.<sup>19</sup> Tokaniua disputes Raho's sovereignty over the main island of Rotuma and wins out; as a result Raho exiles himself to the offshore island of Hatana where he lives to the end of his days. Churchward dates Raho's landfall to the sixteenth century.<sup>20</sup>

Another legend links Rotuma's settlement to Fiji. According to this narrative, the founding fathers of the Fijian race, the chiefs Degei and Lutunasobosobo, "offloaded" their only sister, Bulou-ni-Wasa, in Rotuma during the first Fijian migration from the west to east. Bulou-ni-Wasa was allegedly impregnated by one of her brothers during the long migratory journey, and to safeguard the integrity and reverence of the chiefly clan, she was conveniently left behind in Rotuma when the rest of the party left for Fiji. Known on Rotuma as Hānitema'us (the wild woman of the bush), she figures

heavily in Rotuman stories as a heroic spirit-woman who occupies Rotuma prior to Raho. According to one narrative, she stops the enraged Raho from destroying the island after he is bested by Tokaniua.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas the legends of Raho and Tokaniua contain numerous legendary characters and miraculous events, oral histories recorded by Father Trouillet in 1873 and J. S. Gardiner in 1896 appear to be relatively straightforward accounts of significant visitations by canoes from other islands. Trouillet did not attempt to date events prior to Captain Edwards's visit to the island in 1791, but rather placed them in the reigns of various great chiefs (*vakai*) and associated them with occupants of the ritual office of *sau* (see pp. 63-66). Gardiner used genealogical means to date the voyages reported to him, allowing twenty years for each generation, then adding the age of the descendent who provided the information.<sup>22</sup>

According to Trouillet's account, the first visitation by outsiders after those of Raho and Tokaniua occurred during the reign of the great chief Lefuge (Le Foume), who succeeded Tokaniua. Canoes arrived from Tonga and threatened to make war, but they were put to flight. Then, in the time of the sixth great chief, Savoiat (derived from Savaita [Savai'i?]), and while the ritual office of *sau* was held by its sixth occupant, Kaurfose, the paramount chief of Tonga (Tuitonga) sent a gift of a great number of pigs in order to obtain in marriage the hand of a Noa'tau woman named Uonu. Presumably the *sau* took the pigs but refused to send the chosen woman, sending in her place another by the name of Ruepteledi. Taken at face value, this interaction implies a rather intimate knowledge about Rotuma on the part of the Tongans, and suggests that two-way voyaging between Tonga and Rotuma was commonplace. Sometime later in the reign of Savoiat, while the ninth *sau*, Varomua, held office, a Tongan chief by the name of Ma'afu invaded Rotuma and conquered the island. There is no indication of any relationship between the earlier event and the invasion, but it would certainly appear a possibility. If indeed the Tuitonga had sent a grand gift in quest of one specific woman and had instead been sent another, one can imagine he might have been angry enough to send a punitive expedition, and from all accounts Ma'afu's expedition was planned for conquest.

According to Gardiner's account, Ma'afu came from Niuafo'ou around 1650. His party came in several big canoes



and numbered about three hundred men, with no women or children.

They landed at Noatau, where they made friends with the people and learned their language. Physically, they are described as a tall and powerful race. First they assisted the Noatau people to conquer the rest of the island, and then themselves turned round and conquered Noatau. Their chief married the daughter of Urakmata, the chief of Noatau. Henceforth we find the possessor of their chief's name, Marafu, drinking kava second on the island and generally looked up to. Finally, after holding the whole island for a generation, they were conquered by Olili, of Maftau, and confined to Noatau.<sup>23</sup>

(Mesulama Titifanua related a more elaborate version of this story, focusing on the Rotuman revolt against the Tongan oppressors.<sup>24</sup> We consider that version in the next chapter when discussing the evolution of Rotuma's traditional political system.)

Gardiner continued the sequence as follows:

Next came one "immense" double canoe from Tarawa, in the Gilbert Islands, in an absolutely exhausted condition, with both women and children. Fonmon, a Noatau man, brought their canoe to the shore, and then took them before the *sou*, or king, who made a big feast and divided them out among all the districts, where they married and settled down. They stated that they had lost their way owing to a change of wind, and that they had tried to get home again, but were too exhausted to do so; then a fresh wind came up and blew them to Rotuma.<sup>25</sup>

Calculating on the basis of genealogies, Gardiner placed the time of their landfall between 160 and 200 years prior to his visit (between 1696 and 1736). His account continues:

Next came one large canoe from Ruaniua, or according to another account from Tipokia [*sic*], shortly before the advent of the white man, or about 1780....Several families at the present day trace their descent from them. The name of the place, from whence they came, is given indifferently as Ruaniua or Tipokia. If pressed as to which place, they say Ruaniua, and will give you as the direction from which they came due west; the

people are not described as being in any way different from themselves. I have no doubt that Ruaniua is the same as Leuanewa (Lord Howe's Island, or Ontong Java), and that the canoe came by way of Tucopia, or Cheres Island.

The next visitor was from Tonga, apparently just before the advent of the white man. He is supposed to have come in a big double canoe from Fortuna [Futuna], and to have left three women of that island in Rotuma, and to have taken three Rotuma women instead. He is also supposed to have told the people about the white men, and to have left the Marafu of that day, among other things, an iron axe.<sup>26</sup>

Gardiner presumed that this Tongan was "Cow Mooala" (Kau Muala), whose adventures were reported by William Mariner, a European residing in Tonga during the early nineteenth century. After an absence of fourteen years Kau Muala returned to Tonga in 1807 with the following tale:

He had...on board thirty-five of his own people, including fourteen or fifteen Tonga women, besides whom he had four male natives of Fotoona, who begged to go with him that they might visit distant countries. In his way he touched at the island of Lotooma [Rotuma], (about a day's sail from Fotoona), a place noted for the peaceable disposition of the inhabitants, and where he was received with an uncommon degree of respect. As they were little accustomed to the appearance of strangers, they were greatly surprised at the sight of so large a canoe, and considered this chief and his men as hotooas [*'atua*] (gods) or superior beings, and would not suffer them to land, till they had spread on the ground a large roll of gnattoo [Tongan *ngatu*, or tapa cloth], which extended about fifty yards, reaching from the shore to the house prepared for them. At this island Cow Mooala remained but a short time: during his stay, however, the natives treated him with very great respect, and took him to see some bones which were supposed to have belonged once to an immense giant; about whom they relate a marvelous account, which is current at Tonga as well as Lotooma....Cow Mooala shortly took his departure from Lotooma, with three of the native women on board, in addition to his other followers, and sailed for the Fiji Islands.<sup>27</sup>

That Rotumans knew of Tonga prior to European intrusion was reported by Captain Edwards, the first European to report visiting Rotuma, in 1791. He wrote that Rotumans said they were acquainted with the Friendly Islands and had learned from them the use of iron.<sup>28</sup> Since Kau Muala's visit presumably took place after that of Edwards, this suggests iron tools had been brought to the island by Tongans who had come earlier. Such a supposition is supported by Trouillet's report that during the reign of Tua, the twelfth great chief, and while Irava, the twenty-seventh *sau* was in office, two canoes arrived from Tonga with two chiefs who had been beaten in a war where firearms had been used for the first time.<sup>29</sup> Since the thirty-second *sau* held office from 1797 to 1801 (according to Trouillet's calculations), this event probably took place in the late 1780s or early 1790s.<sup>30</sup>

The legend of the giant's bones, related to William Mariner by Kau Muala, may well encode metaphorically a relationship between Tonga and Rotuma. The legend, presumably known in Tonga as well as Rotuma, was recorded by Mariner as follows:

At a period before men of common stature lived at Tonga, two enormous giants resided there, who happening on some occasion to offend their god, he punished them by causing a scarcity on all the Tonga islands, which obliged them to go and seek food elsewhere. As they were vastly above the ordinary size of the sons of men now-a-days, they were able, with the greatest imaginable ease, to stride from one island to another, provided the distance was not more than about a couple of miles; at all events their stature enabled them to wade through the sea without danger, the water in general not coming higher than their knees, and in the deepest places not higher than their hips. Thus situated, no alternative was left them but to splash through the water in search of a more plentiful soil. At length they came in sight of the island of Lotooma, and viewing it at a distance with hungry eyes, one of them bethought himself that if this small island was ever so fruitful it could not supply more food than would be sufficient for himself at one meal; he resolved therefore wisely, out of pure consideration for his own stomach, to make an end of his companion: this he accordingly did, but by what means, whether by drowning him, strangling him, or giving him a blow on the head, tradition does not say. When he arrived at

Lotooma he was no doubt very hungry, but at the same time he felt himself so sleepy that he was resolved to lie down and take a nap, particularly as night was fast approaching, and to satisfy his hunger the next morning; and very lucky it was for the poor natives that he did so, (for it appears this island was inhabited at that time). He accordingly made a pillow of the island of Lotooma, and not choosing to lie in the water, he stretched his legs (for so the story goes) over to the island of Fotoona, making a sort of bridge from one place to the other. By and by he snored to such a degree that both islands, particularly Lotooma, were shaken as if by an earthquake, so as to disturb the peaceable inhabitants. The people of the latter island being roused from their slumbers were greatly alarmed, as well they might be, at this unseasonable and extraordinary noise. Having repaired to the place where his head lay, and discovering that it was an immense gigantic being fast asleep, they held a consultation [about] what was best to be done; and came at length to a resolution of killing him, if possible, before he awoke, lest he might eat them all up. With this intention every man armed himself with an axe, and at a signal given they all struck his head at the same moment; up started the giant with a tremendous roar, and recovering his feet he stood aloft on the island of Lotooma, but being stunned with the blows, he staggered and fell again, with his head and body in the sea, and being unable to recover himself, he was drowned, his feet remaining upon dry land; and thus the great enemy was destroyed.<sup>31</sup>

Kau Muala told Mariner that as proof of these facts the Rotumans showed him two enormous bones that presumably belonged to this giant. He also said that while the people of Tonga were aware of the story, they were not so credulous and told it in a jocular way. When asked by Mariner to describe the bones, Kau Muala replied that he was sure they were bones, but not human, and he supposed they must have belonged to some fish.<sup>32</sup>

The metaphoric content of this story seems straightforward. In the analysis below we have slightly rearranged the text and present our own interpretation.

Text	Interpretation
1. At a period before men of common stature lived at Tonga, two enormous giants resided there...	1. At sometime past, two chiefs of great power (mana) resided in Tonga.
2. As they were vastly above ordinary size they were able, with the greatest imaginable ease, to stride from one island to another, provided the distance was not more than a couple of miles...	2. They, and the warriors they commanded, were so big and so potent they were able to conquer neighboring islands with ease.
3. [On some occasion the giants happened] to offend their god... causing a scarcity on all the Tonga islands...	3. A period of scarcity afflicted Tonga...
4. One of [the giants]...out of pure consideration for his own stomach [resolved] to make an end of his companion...	4. ...resulting in a conflict over resources between the two chiefs. They fought and one conquered the other.
5. Thus situated, no alternative was left them but to splash through the water in search of a more plentiful soil...	5. The defeated group had no option but to leave Tonga in search of a more hospitable land.
6. At all events their stature enabled them to wade through the sea without danger...	6. They were still sufficiently powerful to defeat peoples from other islands they encountered.
7. When he arrived at Lotooma he was no doubt very hungry...	7. They arrived at Rotuma intending to conquer the island and appropriate its resources.
8. He...made a pillow of the island of Lotooma...stretched his legs...over to the island of Fotoona, making a sort of bridge from one place to the other. By and by he snored to such a degree that both islands, particularly Lotooma, were shaken as if by an earthquake, so as greatly to disturb the peaceable inhabitants. The people of the latter island being roused from their slumbers were greatly alarmed...at this unseasonable and extraordinary noise.	8. The Tongans conquered Rotuma and Futuna as well, and became oppressive rulers. They were supported (perhaps reinforced) in their domination of Rotuma by expeditions of their compatriots from Futuna, over which they ruled somewhat less severely. Eventually the indigenous populations of these islands, though basically not rebellious, were aroused to anger by the severe, unreasonable demands of their conquerors.

9. If this small island was ever so fruitful it could not supply more food than would be sufficient for himself at one meal...	9. The Tongans were insatiable in their desire to extract from Rotuma its resources.
10. He felt himself so sleepy that he resolved to lie down and take a nap...and to satisfy his hunger the next morning...	10. Despite their intentions to push their demands to the limit the Tongans were vulnerable because they had become complacent and unvigilant.
11. Having repaired to the place where his head lay, and discovering that it was an immense gigantic being fast asleep, they held a consultation about what was best to be done; and came at length to a resolution of killing him, if possible, before he awoke, lest he might eat them all up.	11. Detecting that the leaders of the Tongans had let down their guard, the Rotuman people conspired to revolt against them before they became so oppressive as to threaten the people's very existence.
12. With this intention every man armed himself with an axe, and at a signal given they all struck his head at the same moment;	12. The Rotumans armed themselves and at a given signal struck at the Tongan leaders.
13. up started the giant with a tremendous roar, and recovering his feet he stood aloft on the island of Lotooma,	13. Jolted by this attack the Tongan chiefs tried desperately to organize a defensive effort,
14. but being stunned with the blows, he staggered and fell again,	14. but the Rotumans pressed their attack and defeated the Tongans.
15. with his head and body in the sea, and being unable to recover himself, he was drowned,	15. With the offending chiefs and their warrior supporters subdued, the oppressive Tongan dominance of Rotuma was broken.
16. his feet remaining upon dry land;	16. Those members of the Tongan party who were of lesser rank, and who did not participate in the oppression, were allowed to remain on Rotuma and live in peace;
17. and thus the great enemy was destroyed.	17. and thus the Rotumans liberated themselves from Tongan oppression.

When interpreted in this fashion, the legend bears a remarkable resemblance to the accounts of Gardiner (above) and Churchward (see chapter 2) concerning Ma'afu's invasion and subsequent overthrow. Such legends notwithstanding, it is apparent that Rotumans continued to recognize Tonga's ceremonial authority over the island into historical times. One indication of Tongan dominance is the high degree of respect shown Kau Muala on his arrival, but more telling is Peter Dillon's account about Rotumans paying tribute to Tonga. Dillon reported having on board two Tongan men and a woman, who had been sent to Rotuma by a chief named "Fuckafinnow" (Fakafinau?) to collect tribute. They were disconcerted to learn that it had already been sent to Tonga some five months previously, by way of Fiji.<sup>33</sup>

#### CONTACT WITH OTHER ISLANDS

Landfalls at Rotuma by occupied canoes have been reported as coming from Niuafu'ou,<sup>34</sup> Tonga,<sup>35</sup> Futuna,<sup>36</sup> the Ellice Islands [Tuvalu],<sup>37</sup> Tarawa,<sup>38</sup> and Polynesian outliers.<sup>39</sup> In turn, early Rotuman voyagers have been reported as ranging as far as Tikopia<sup>40</sup> and Anuta in the west,<sup>41</sup> and Bora Bora in the east.<sup>42</sup>

Lesson reported that Rotumans not only had occasional contact with Fiji and Tonga, but that they also had a vague idea of an island three or four days' sail to the northeast by the name of Noué.<sup>43</sup> He wrote that his Rotuman consultants described it as quite large and high, and that the inhabitants were cannibals.

Dillon also reported that return sailing between Rotuma and Tuvalu was commonplace:

The Rothumans give an account of several islands being in their neighbourhood, one of which they name Vythuboo [Vaitupu]. As this island abounds with a kind of white shells much in demand at Rothuma, the natives of that island make frequent voyages to Vythuboo for the purpose of procuring them; and it is in these voyages that these people get lost at sea, and are drifted to the Feejees, Tucopia, and the Navigators' Islands [Sāmoa]. They describe the inhabitants of one of the islands in their neighbourhood as cannibals, marked or tattooed on the face like the New Zealanders on board. Those islands I suppose to be what are laid down and named on the charts as Ellis's [Tuvalu] and Depestre's Groups, discovered by Captain Depestre in

1819, on his return from South America to Calcutta. There are at present residing at Rothuma, some natives of Vythuboo and of the Newy Islands [Nui atoll?], who expect to sail homeward in a few weeks.<sup>44</sup>

Father Trouillet provided further documentation of intercourse with Nui atoll. He estimated that between 1802 and 1806 a canoe arrived from Nui, and that some of its survivors were still on Rotuma at the time he wrote.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps this is the same landfall mentioned by Gardiner as occurring about 1830. He was told of a large double canoe from Nui sighted off Noa'tau, crowded with people in an exhausted condition. They were reportedly brought on shore and allowed to take Rotuman spouses and settle on the island. Gardiner additionally mentioned a canoe arriving in about 1815 from Funafuti in Tuvalu, with both men and women who arrived in an exhausted and starved condition. He reported that he knew of about thirty people who claimed descent from them and that traces of their legacy could be found in special songs, words, and modes of singing. Since then, Gardiner's informants told him they remembered many single canoes as having come from Tuvalu, and two from Fortuna (Futuna). Only the latter were reported as having an idea of where they were headed, however.<sup>46</sup>

## ROTUMAN SEAFARING

The whole question of interisland sailing has been a matter of some debate in the anthropological literature on the Pacific islands. It essentially involves two components, the capability of Polynesian canoes for long-distance voyaging, particularly into prevailing winds, and the sophistication of native navigational skills. While some have suggested that Polynesians were incapable of purposeful two-way voyages of more than 500–600 kilometers,<sup>47</sup> others have argued that they were capable of much longer return trips.<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately there is only fragmentary data from Rotuma about interisland voyaging, and it is inconclusive. The first report on this topic was the observation by John Eagleston, who visited the island in 1831. He wrote:

Their canoes are small fifteen to twenty feet long by fifteen to twenty inches wide and about the same in depth, with outriggers, and usually made out of one log, without much show of fine finish, and moved with paddles only, though they have two large double ones, sixty to seventy feet long with a depth to correspond,



and put together with rivets made from cocoanut husk, and this is the only article by which timbers and planking are secured. They are not in use but kept in houses to preserve [them from] the weather, and as the natives say were built for making voyages in pursuit of other lands. One of these some years ago they attempted, laying in a full sea stock for the occasion, and in other ways fitted for their bold undertaking, they left their lovely little paradise and aided by the stars and sun steered to the west on which course they intended to run until their object was accomplished, which they thought would be in a few days. After a three or four days pleasant run all their hopes were blasted by a sudden change of wind from the northwest quarter, against which they worked for a short time, but becoming discouraged they bore up for home, where guided by the great solar lamp, and heavenly lights, they fortunately arrived after an absence of sixteen days nearly exhausted and starved, having consumed the last of their supplies a day or two before reaching home, and since that joyful day restored them to sweet home and their families, they have had no wish to try another lark of discovery.<sup>49</sup>

Robert Jarman, who visited Rotuma the following year, mentioned seeing many huts containing double canoes, from sixty to ninety feet in length. He estimated that they were capable of carrying from one hundred fifty to two hundred men. He described them as each formed from a single tree of immense size, and partly decked over from the stem aft. His inquiries concerning their purpose elicited a curious tale:

Soon after the island was discovered, the natives were puzzled to ascertain how a ship could come there. Consultations were held by the chiefs, and it occurred to them, that there must be some opening in the horizon, through which the ship entered; therefore it was resolved to fit out canoes, and send them in search, as the only method of discovering it. Many were accordingly sent to sea upon this strange expedition, and so soon as they lost sight of their native land, were driven by the wind to the neighbouring islands; many undoubtedly perished, some reached the Fejee Islands, and others were driven as far to the westward as Santa Cruz, where their Descendents are still living with the inhabitants.<sup>50</sup>

It is not to such motives, however, that Jarman attributed the continued inclination of Rotumans to take to the sea:

But it is not to be supposed that their former singular ideas of the horizon still prevail. These latter expeditions seem to have been undertaken more from a restless desire of seeing and visiting other lands, than from any other motive. Inquisitiveness is a very prominent trait in the character of these people. The island being very productive, they have not to labor much for their subsistence; which gives them leisure to gratify their curiosity, upon whatever subject may incite it.<sup>51</sup>

Jarman quoted an Englishman, Mr. Emery, who lived on the offshore island of Uea, as observing that since he had taken up residence there, many canoes had put out to sea without any trace of their ultimate destiny.<sup>52</sup>

Edward Lucatt visited Rotuma nine years later, in 1841, and reported seeing several large double canoes, but he indicated that they were falling into disuse and becoming decayed. He was apparently told that in former times expeditions were undertaken at the instigation of oracles when the population of the island exceeded its means of support, or it was feared that it would do so. The voyagers would start off in search of new lands, sometimes finding their way back again after failing, but more often their fate was not known. The canoes seen by Lucatt ranged in length from 50 or 60 feet to 80 or 90, and fitted the following description:

each canoe has from four to five feet beam, but they have no floor; and, looked at separately, without their stem and stern pieces, they would be taken for troughs. They are kept about six feet asunder by cross beams lashed and otherwise made fast to the gunwales of both canoes; the beams are planked over, which furnishes a deck of from fourteen to sixteen feet in breadth. Both canoes are entirely covered in, and there are small hatchways with sliding covers. When a party has determined upon an exploring expedition, they build a house upon the main deck and stow their provisions, &c. in the holds of the canoes. Their sails are made of a species of rush marled together: in form they resemble the New Zealanders, being when set like an inverted triangle.<sup>53</sup>

Contradicting Jarman, Lucatt stated that there were no trees on the island of the proper wood that were tall enough to form the main body of a canoe, and so instead the vessels were built out of several pieces sewn together with coconut-fiber sennit.<sup>54</sup>

Well before the end of the nineteenth century double canoes had disappeared from the Rotuman cultural inventory, as reported by both J. S. Gardiner and Rev. William Allen.<sup>55</sup> Gardiner indicated that when he was there, in 1896, only one double canoe was specifically remembered, referred to in legend as the ahoie [*'ahai*] or *te bau rua*. He stated that canoe sailing was by that time a forgotten art, but that the language still possessed all the necessary terms for it. His inquiries concerning interisland voyaging were futile:

Marafu's reply, as to the effect that formerly they had big canoes of their own and used to voyage in every direction, but that that was before the Niuafouu people conquered the island. The names of the stars are as a rule fanciful now, but Marafu pointed me out some named according to the different islands. On my inquiry as to where Tikopia was one evening, he took me outside and pointed to a star which he said was just over it.<sup>56</sup>

One does not get the sense from these early accounts of a people who were routinely making long-range round-trip voyages. Tongans were apparently making planned expeditions in the region and included Rotuma in their itinerary from time to time, but there is no evidence to suggest that Rotumans were making such journeys. At most, trips to some of the islands of Tuvalu, and perhaps to Fiji, seem to have been within the range of Rotuman navigators, although they undoubtedly were aware of more distant archipelagoes and had some sense of where they were located. However, there is little evidence to support the contention of an anonymous reporter for the *Pacific Islands Monthly*, who wrote in 1938 about a pan-Polynesian confederation, in which Rotuma was a place of great importance, with its chiefs holding high rank in its councils. A Rotuman chief who sailed to Bora Bora and married a princess supposedly forged the confederation. "Together, they voyaged from island group to island group, negotiating alliances which they consolidated into the confederation of Te-Ao-Uri and Te-Ao-Tea, centered in Opoa, in Ra'iatea," the

writer contended.<sup>57</sup> Presumably great convocations of the alliance were held on Ra'iatea until early in the fourteenth century when a quarrel broke up the confederation. The source of this account was apparently a ninety-four-year-old Ra'iatea person who had committed it to memory in the form of poetry.

Yet it is clear that Rotumans did set sail periodically in substantial double canoes, and that they reached other islands at considerable distances from their own, perhaps even Bora Bora.<sup>58</sup> What is less probable is that they sailed back from such far lands; at least there are no recorded instances of Rotumans returning on their own from distant islands. Some emigrants were absorbed into the populations of the islands they reached and left traces in legend if nothing else; some were probably killed by hostile inhabitants; but many more must have been lost at sea, never to be heard from again.

#### SUBSURFACE ARCHAEOLOGY

The answers to many of the most important questions concerning Rotuma's early history no doubt lie beneath the earth, but to date very little subsurface archaeology has been undertaken. The work that has been done supports evidence from linguistics and oral history—that before Europeans arrived, Rotuma was in contact with and was profoundly influenced by Tonga, Fiji, and Sāmoa. Richard Shutler and Jamie Evrard, for example, have interpreted their finding of human bones from a site in Oinafa, dated one thousand years ago, as supporting Rotuman oral tradition that the site was the landing place of the first Tongan arrivals on Rotuma.<sup>59</sup> A more extensive excavation at Maka Bay, conducted by Jonathan Wall, dates back some 1,400 years.<sup>60</sup> The site yielded a range of artifacts including ceramics, shell adzes, shell and bone tools, fishing gear, shell and bone ornaments, as well as later historic material. The ceramic material suggested both that an indigenous pottery industry existed on Rotuma during the first millennium AD and that pottery was imported from Fiji sometime around the turn of that millennium. In general, Wall reported that the Maka Bay artifact assemblage is similar to those found in Western Polynesia, lending additional support to linguistic evidence and oral traditions of influence from Tonga and Sāmoa.<sup>61</sup>

## Rotuma's Place in the Early History of Oceania

As one examines the full range of available data bearing on Rotuma's early history, the most striking impression is one of complexity. It is clear that immigrants from many different island groups have contributed to the population, language, and culture of Rotuma. Here was an island in semi-isolation, within reach of the sailing capacities of canoes from every direction, but far enough away to make purposeful sailing dangerous and problematic. Rotuma is a relatively small island, of only modest height, easily missed in the vast expanse of ocean in which it sits. As a result, intercourse with other islands was probably sporadic rather than regular. Nevertheless, Rotuma is an extremely fertile island and its people have long been noted as relatively peaceful and accommodating, making it an attractive place to stay. Consequently, Rotuma absorbed people from a number of other places, with each incoming group contributing to the development of its unique language and culture. While the island was not remote enough to escape invasion, it was sufficiently isolated to evolve into a unique entity, defying simple classification as Polynesian, Melanesian, or Micronesian.

The linguistic evidence suggests that a population related to that of western Fiji originally settled Rotuma. The time of first settlement remains unknown, but about 3,000 years ago is a reasonable assumption—around or shortly after the time Fiji, Tonga, and Sāmoa were settled. After what may have been several hundred years of insignificant contact with other peoples—insignificant from the standpoint of linguistic and cultural impact—the backward flow of Polynesians, from east to west, affected Rotuma. At first Samoan influence appears to have been dominant, and later Tongan. At some point a Samoan expedition may have landed at Rotuma and established a chiefdom (under Raho?), but it does not seem that contact was routine or that Sāmoa ever formalized its relationship to the island. Some time later, Tongans, led by Ma'afu, invaded, perhaps with the intent of bringing Rotuma into the orbit of the Tongan political empire. Although only partially successful (insofar as Rotumans apparently revolted against the Tongans' secular rule but continued to acknowledge ceremonial dominance), the intrusion had a profound effect on the Rotuman language in the form of borrowed vocabulary and possibly certain grammatical changes (see appendix A). At the time Rotuma was sighted

by Captain Edwards in 1791, Polynesian influence was so extensive that the island's past was almost totally obscured, at least to the casual observer. The Rotuman language has thus far provided the most important clues to this past, but the answers, to the extent that we can ever know them, still lie beneath the soil. It is to the archaeologists that we must leave the fascinating problem of Rotuma's earliest settlement, while we go on to attempt a reconstruction of what life was like there when Europeans first arrived and recorded their observations.

## Notes to Chapter 1

The section concerning Rotuman seafaring is drawn from a chapter entitled "Rotuman Seafaring in Historical Perspective" (Howard 1995), which was published in *Seafaring in the Contemporary Pacific Islands*, edited by Richard Feinberg.

<sup>1</sup> Gardiner 1898b, 2; see also Woodhall 1987, 21.

<sup>2</sup> Woodhall 1987, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Data from Meteorological Service Information Sheet No. 65, 1982, quoted in Laffan and Smith 1986, from records collected between 1912 and 1980.

<sup>4</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Hartley 1963, 58.

<sup>6</sup> Ladefoged 1993, 116.

<sup>7</sup> Ladefoged constructed a Terrestrial Productivity Index (TPI) based on the relative productivity of the different soil types. The formula he used to calculate the TPI for different areas in Rotuma is as follows:

TPI = (% of area that is well developed soil x 1.00) + (% of area that is swamp x 0.3) + (% of area that is beach x 0.2) + (% of area that is rock x 0.1) / 100)

Using this formula he arrived at a TPI for the eastern districts of the island (Oinafa, Noa'tau) of 0.23 compared to 0.87 for the northern district (Malhaha), 0.80 for the southern districts (Juju and Pepjei), and 0.76 for the western districts (Itu'ti'u and Itu'muta).

<sup>8</sup> Thompson 1915, 64.

<sup>9</sup> Bennett 1831, 198–201.

<sup>10</sup> Lucatt 1851, 156, 176.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson 1797/1799, 293.

<sup>12</sup> Lesson 1838, 419–420; translated from the French by Ella Wiswell.

<sup>13</sup> Dillon 1829, 95.

<sup>14</sup> Bennett 1831, 201.

<sup>15</sup> Duckworth and Taylor 1902, 435.

<sup>16</sup> Schmidt 2000, 208; translated from the German by Hans Schmidt.

<sup>17</sup> Schmidt 2000, 208; translated from the German by Hans Schmidt.

<sup>18</sup> Neither "Sāmoa" nor "Tonga" should be interpreted as simply a reference to the corresponding geographical entities. A full examination of the usage of these and related terms suggests a more complex semantic structure. "Savai'i" or "Savaiki" are often substituted for "Sāmoa" in the oral histories, these being cognate forms of the word for the generic Polynesian "homeland." It may well be that only after European contact were they replaced by "Sāmoa"

(the island of Savai'i being identified by Europeans as part of the Samoan archipelago). The term "Tonga" is a generic term referring to a mythical, or quasi-mythical, source of supernatural potency. In some narratives "Tonga" is located beneath the earth or sea. The word is also used as an adjective in reference to the southeast trade wind. The last part of Tokaniua's name suggests he might have been from one of the Niuas.

<sup>19</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 506–508.

<sup>20</sup> Churchward 1938.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Parke 2001, 43.

<sup>22</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 402.

<sup>23</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 403.

<sup>24</sup> Titifanua and Churchward 1995, 255–260.

<sup>25</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 403. In his 1913 field notes, Hocart mentions several cemeteries associated with Gilbertese immigrants.

<sup>26</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 403–404.

<sup>27</sup> Martin 1981, 185–187.

<sup>28</sup> Thompson 1915, 65.

<sup>29</sup> Trouillet 1868.

<sup>30</sup> The appointment period for a *sau* was six months (one Rotuman ritual cycle), although many served multiple terms. According to Trouillet, from 1797 to 1818 six *sau* served in office, averaging 3.5 years each.

<sup>31</sup> Martin 1981, 185–187.

<sup>32</sup> Martin 1981, 185–187.

<sup>33</sup> Dillon 1829, 97.

<sup>34</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 402–403.

<sup>35</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 404; Bennett 1831, 477; Martin 1981, 185–187.

<sup>36</sup> Gardiner 1898b, 406; Romilly 1882, 56.

<sup>37</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 406; Dillon 1829, 103.

<sup>38</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 403.

<sup>39</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 403–404.

<sup>40</sup> Bennett 1831, 477; Firth 1961, 86, 92, 132, 158, 160–161.

<sup>41</sup> Feinberg 1981, 130–131; 1998, 173–200.

<sup>42</sup> Henry 1912, 77.

<sup>43</sup> Lesson 1838, 439.

<sup>44</sup> Dillon 1829, 103.

<sup>45</sup> Trouillet 1868.

<sup>46</sup> Gardiner 1898b, 406.

<sup>47</sup> Sharp 1957.

<sup>48</sup> Finney 1977, 1979.



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- <sup>49</sup> Eagleston 1832, 407–408.
- <sup>50</sup> Jarman 1838, 183–184.
- <sup>51</sup> Jarman 1838, 184–185.
- <sup>52</sup> Jarman 1838, 184.
- <sup>53</sup> Lucatt 1851, 178.
- <sup>54</sup> Lucatt 1851, 177.
- <sup>55</sup> Allen 1895.
- <sup>56</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 407.
- <sup>57</sup> Anonymous 1938, 30.
- <sup>58</sup> Henry 1912, 77.
- <sup>59</sup> Shutler and Evrard 1991.
- <sup>60</sup> The earliest carbon date from Rotuma suggesting human occupation comes from a core sample taken by Thegn Ladefoged in Itu'muta; it yielded a carbon date of about 2,000 years ago.
- <sup>61</sup> Wall 1997.



**Photo 2.1** Men with prize yams at agricultural competition, ca. 1920s.  
*Marist Archives, Rome.*



**Photo 2.2** Calling out food contributions at a feast, 1960. *Alan Howard.*

## 2 A Land of Plenty

The wind being favorable, we made the little island of Rotuma....Being very fertile, it is also very populous. All the productions of the most favored South Sea islands abound here. The day following our arrival, the natives, who seem to be a harmless people, came off in their canoes, in swarms, bringing every variety of fancy and useful article, which their little country afforded. Among the former, were sea-shells, spears, war-clubs, and, perhaps I should include, very fine mats, together with cocoa wood, for canes. The latter, included hogs, oranges, limes, lemons, pine-apples, mangroves, yams, with sweet potatoes, and pumpkins. Of money, they knew not the use.

William Jackman, *The Australian Captive*, 1853

At the time Europeans arrived, Rotuma was a flourishing society. Blessed with a generally benign climate, plentiful rainfall, fertile soil, and a productive fringing reef, the island normally provided its inhabitants with food in abundance. However, periodic droughts and tropical storms that destroyed crops rendered the island subject to occasional famines; hence, the production, distribution, and preparation of food was of central, almost obsessive, concern to the Rotuman people. As the next chapter shows, this concern for food was at the heart of the Rotuman social order. In this chapter, however, we focus on the practicalities of daily living in the days at the time of European intervention.

### Subsistence

None of the early accounts provide detailed information about Rotuman agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, or gathering. Lesson reported trading a few small fishhooks for

coconuts, taro, yams, sugarcane, and breadfruit, but he wrote that the Rotumans brought only a dozen chickens aboard and that no pigs were seen. His inquiries yielded information to the effect that, despite the meager number of chickens brought on board at that time, poultry thrived on Rotuma, but that no more than a dozen pigs were to be found on the whole island.

They told us that a terrible drought had destroyed all their fruit trees so that the natives, deprived of their usual food, had been forced to kill most of their pigs. Even this measure had failed to prevent a famine which caused more than a hundred islanders to die of starvation. Ever since then pigs have not flourished on the island.<sup>1</sup>

Three years later, when Dillon visited the island, it was still recovering from the famine, which, he was told, followed a "dreadful tempest" that had occurred some eight to ten years earlier (i.e., between 1817 and 1819). The Rotumans told him that all the pigs on the island had been killed and eaten, but that whalers had supplied a fresh stock of swine. Dillon estimated that there might have been about a hundred pigs at the time of his visit, "but so careful are the natives of them, that no inducement can prevail upon them to part with one."<sup>2</sup>

### Agricultural Practices

Taken as a whole, the early accounts agree that the most important agricultural products were yams, taro, and breadfruit. Gardiner provided the first substantial description of Rotuman subsistence activities. We quote extensively from his account, and build on it with our own field data and supplementary sources. According to Gardiner:

The chief vegetables cultivated for food are the *papule*, or taro (*Colocasia antiquo*, Schott), *papoi* (*Cyrtosperma edulis*, Schott), *ouhi*, or yam (*Dioscorea ulata*, Linn.), and *pere*, or banana. Taro and bananas are usually planted on the steep hill-sides after the earth has been thoroughly dug up with flattened sticks or English spades; the tops of the taro and the shoots of the banana serve for planting. The Rotuman variety of taro does exceedingly well in such positions, growing very large, and is never planted in swamps. A kind, the *apia*,

is common on wastelands and near the houses, but is not good for food. Of bananas seven kinds are known, but there are only practically two, the one for cooking and the other for eating raw. To ripen they are buried in the sand. The *papoi* is grown in swamps of brackish water and seldom dug except after a hurricane, when food is scarce. For yams the bush is roughly cleared. Rocky land is chosen, and its little existing earth is scraped together with the hands into heaps, in the top of which the yam is planted. After these were dug the land used formerly to be burnt off, the fallen timber by that time being thoroughly dry, and *kava* (*Macropiper methysticum*, Miq.) planted; now it is more frequently tobacco, pineapples, or sugar-cane. Planted, but in no way cultivated, are the breadfruit (*Artocarpus incisa*, Linn.) and the *niu*, or cocoanut, for food, *uta*, or *sago* (*Sagus vitiensis*, Wendl.), for thatch, and the *saaga* (*Pandanus* sp.), for making mats. The food plants growing wild include the *ifi*, or Tahitian chestnut (*Inocarpus edulis*), *fava*, or *dawa* of Fiji (*Pometia pinnata*, Forst.), *mena*, or turmeric (*Curcuma longa*, Linn.), *mara*, or arrowroot (*Tacca pinnatifida*?), *asa*, or pawpaw, and the *hosoa* (*Pandanus odoratissimus*). There is further the *hifo*, or *dilo*, of Fiji (*Calophyllum inophyllum*, Linn.), the oil from the seeds of which is regularly extracted. Of the above the taro, yam, and banana are the staple articles of food, and in such an equitable climate as that of Rotuma can be obtained at any season of the year. Arrowroot can be dug whenever it is desired. The breadfruit is season [*sic*] during October, November, and December, and cocoanuts can be obtained at any season in any condition of ripeness.<sup>3</sup>

Rotumans followed a pattern of shifting agriculture, with plots being kept under cultivation for a few years, generally without any rotation of crops, and then permitted to lie fallow. While it was recognized that land that had not been used for a long period of time was more fertile and gave a better yield, greater weight was often given to considerations such as distance to the homestead and nearness to the plots of one's companions.<sup>4</sup>

The usual method of planting taro was for an area of bush to be cleared of heavy growth, with loose stones being removed and placed in piles. If another person had planted an adjacent plot, the stones were often used to form a low

wall marking the boundary. Trees on the land were generally not cut down, but their branches were trimmed so as not to shade the garden. Holes were made in the earth with a heavy digging stick by pounding it into the ground and twisting it in a rotary motion. This was done until the desired depth was reached, when the taro tops were inserted and covered. Plants were spaced approximately two feet apart. After an entire plot had been planted the earth was covered with leaves and twigs from the previously removed scrub in order to protect the soil from baking and to help it retain moisture. Plots were weeded periodically until ready for harvesting. Taro grows very well in Rotuma and attains enormous size. Not only the corms, but also the leaves of some varieties were used as food, most often as *'ikou*, a dish consisting of taro leaves cooked with coconut cream.

*'Apea (Alocasia macrorrhiza)* was commonly planted on rocky or poor land and was given little attention after planting. The tubers are generally larger than other types of taro, but they were not considered as good eating and also required special processing to remove the irritating oxalate crystals. *Papai*, which was grown in swampy areas, was referred to as "the Rotuman bank." Tough enough to resist hurricanes, it had the additional advantage of being able to remain in the ground in an edible state for a period of years. Hence it was an important hedge against famine in times when other foods were not available. Yams were apparently of only secondary importance to Rotumans and were not as carefully cultivated. The vines were simply permitted to grow over rocks and the cut-away bush, with no special supports generally being provided. Weeding was minimal, and only large bushes and interfering plants were removed. Nevertheless, the fertility of the soil permitted yams satisfactory—and in some instances prodigious—growth, even under these conditions.

Banana and plantain trees were generally planted on the same plots as taro, or as supplementary to yam patches in rocky areas. Bananas were cut while the fruit was green, and the bunches were hung in cooking houses to ripen. If a large quantity of ripe bananas was needed for a feast, Rotumans prepared them by a special process (*fakmamosa*), which involved burying them in a pit for four or five days. The pit was lined with banana leaves, and dried coconut husks were set to smoldering and placed inside. The contents were then covered with leaves and finally with earth, to be uncovered on the day of the feast.<sup>5</sup>

Like other Pacific Islanders, Rotumans used the products of the coconut palm in a wide variety of ways. The sweet, cool liquid inside the green nut was the mainstay of the drinking supply, insuring that no one went thirsty, even in times of drought. The soft meat of the young nut was regularly eaten, usually after being scooped out with the fingers once the liquid has been spent, and the meat of mature nuts was used to feed pigs and chickens. Coconut cream, made from the meat of ripened coconuts, was an ingredient in a wide variety of dishes, including *fekei*, a pudding made by mixing coconut cream with breadfruit, taro, manioc, yams, bananas, and other starches, then baking the mixture in an earth oven (*koua*). Coconuts that were nearly ripe, but still somewhat tender, were used to make *tāhroro*, a fermented sauce; it was prepared by replacing the liquid with salt water, plugging the nut, and allowing it to stand on a rack in the sun for a week or two.

From the grated meat of the mature nut, oil was extracted to use (sometimes mixed with turmeric) as a body lotion. The gratings were placed in a wooden bowl, covered with leaves, and allowed to stand in the sun. Because of its presumed medicinal qualities, the oil was used as a salve for sores and to anoint the sick.

In addition to these uses of the coconut itself, other coconut products enhanced the subsistence economy. The dried husks were a main source of fuel; coconut fronds were used for making baskets, and their central spines were used for making brooms; the wood of the tree trunk was used in constructing buildings.

Tapioca was introduced to Rotuma at an unknown date and is not mentioned in any of the early accounts, but it became popular because its cultivation was less labor intensive and yielded comparatively quick returns. Rotumans regarded its taste as inferior to taro and yams, however.

Agriculture was primarily a masculine occupation, and almost every man was first and foremost a cultivator. The whole operation of preparing, planting, weeding, and harvesting a garden was done by men, although on occasion a woman might assist her husband with any of these tasks, or a widow might plant a garden of her own.

## Animal Husbandry

Pigs were kept in enclosures formed by stone walls three or four feet high to keep them from entering gardens. They were fed daily with coconut meat, surplus fruit, and scraps from the family table. As suggested by Dillon's account, the pig population probably fluctuated, possibly dropping to extinction following severe hurricanes, then rising to substantial numbers after being replenished from elsewhere. Pigs were not part of the everyday diet but were of great significance for ceremonial feasting. Thus, they did supply a significant portion of animal protein at times, and under optimal conditions played an important role in stabilizing the Rotuman diet. Chickens were generally kept on plantations in low, specially built structures fashioned of sticks and thatch. According to Gardiner, Rotumans blew conch shells to call their chickens and seldom ate their eggs.<sup>6</sup>

Feral pigs were caught by digging a trench and covering it with rotten sticks and earth; loose chickens were trapped with a bent stick to which a sennit noose was tied. It is not entirely clear whether dogs were present prior to contact. Gardiner suggested that they were probably introduced not long before his visit in the 1890s, and he reported that people told him they did not eat dogs.<sup>7</sup>

Of the wild fauna on the main island and surrounding islets, seabirds were the only ones that entered into the diet in any significant way. Hāf Liua in particular is mentioned by early visitors as a place where Rotumans went to forage for eggs and to catch birds.<sup>8</sup>

## Exploitation of Marine Resources

Like other coastal dwelling Pacific Islanders, Rotumans made extensive use of marine resources. The waters surrounding the island teemed with fish, and the techniques for catching them were varied. Lesson simply reported that the islanders used huge nets, more than forty feet long, which suggests that they were skilled fishermen,<sup>9</sup> but it was left for Gardiner to describe the basic equipment and techniques for exploiting marine resources. He wrote that Rotuman fishhooks were generally crude, and that most of the fishing took place on the extensive fringing reef rather than in the deep sea.<sup>10</sup>

Fishermen used a variety of nets fashioned from sennit to catch fish, including hand nets (*vao ti*), used for catching lobsters on the reef at night or flying fish attracted by a



torch on a canoe; specially designed nets to catch turtles (*vao hoi*) and mullet (*vao seu*); throwing nets (*vao kiri*) for use at high tide when the fish on the reef came close to shore; and large nets (*vao hapa*) made for fish drives, which often involved entire districts trapping fish in reef passages. Gardiner described fish drives in the district of Noa'tau during his visit:

The net is put down at quarter-ebb and firmly fixed under the direction of an elected chief of the fishermen; at half-ebb the Noatau people come up and range themselves along the lines of stones, and continue these to the shore and reef with canoes or in the water. When this is done a signal is given, and the Oinafa people form a line right across from the shore to the reef close to their village and commence to drive down. As they come up the ends of the net will be carried round and closed in. It will now be about an hour before low tide. Lot after lot of fish will be driven into the pocket, and removed into the canoes. Any fish speared or caught outside the net is the property of the one who catches it, while the rest are equitably distributed....In one drive we obtained, with about 200 people, 648 large fish of different kinds in the net, and estimated weight at rather over 1 1/2 tons. They were laid out on the ground in tens and then again in groups of ten of these, each ten of about the same size....The fish caught in these hauls are all cooked together, and a feast is held; subsequently the net will be lent to any part of the district which desires to use it, or to any other district for the half of the fish it catches.<sup>11</sup>

To catch small fish in shallow water, women made heaps of stones and coral into which they placed coconut scrapings mixed with cuttlefish ink as lure. Periodically they trapped the fish in baskets or nets. Fish poisons, such as that made from the leaves and stems of the *fuha* creeper (*Derris* spp.) or from the fruit of the *hufu* tree (*Barringtonia*) were also used to stun fish and bring them to the surface for easy capture.<sup>12</sup>

The rules governing authority over fishing expeditions were quite explicit. Districts and villages generally appointed a *tautei*, or expert fisherman, whose job it was to organize communal fishing expeditions at the request of the district or village chief he served. Often, but not always, *tautei* were themselves minor chiefs. The position was more or less hereditary within specific families known for their skill; not

only were skills generally taught to apprentices within the family, but success also required mana (potency), which was thought to be transmitted from ancestors through the family lineage. The success of fishing expeditions was thus believed to be only partially a result of the knowledge and skill of the *tautei*; more important were the spiritual powers granted him by ancestral spirits (*'atua*) and his capacity to organize and command other members of the community.

It was the responsibility of the *tautei* to divide up a catch as prescribed by custom. A special share was set aside for the chiefs, and additional shares were sometimes allocated for a particular cause such as a village feast. These special shares, the best of the catch as determined by the *tautei*, were called *tui rere*. Any turtles or sharks that were caught belonged to the district chief, and anyone who ate them without his permission was expected to get sick and probably die if they did not apologize to (*faksoro*) him. After the special shares were parceled out, the remainder of the catch was divided equally among the participants in the expedition. Before a major communal effort the chief sometimes called a moratorium on fishing for a week or so in order to increase the likelihood of a larger catch during the drive.

When only a small group of friends or relatives went fishing, the one who initiated the expedition was said to be "the owner of the net," entitling that person to make basic decisions and to divide the catch, unless a titled person or a *tautei* was also participating.

### Food and its Preparation

Rotumans have traditionally divided food into two basic categories, *tēla'ā* and *'i'ini* (see table 2.1). *Tēla'ā* refers to starchy vegetables such as *'a'ana* (taro), *'uhi* (yams), *pāri* (bananas), *'ulu* (breadfruit), *kumara* (sweet potato), *tapiko* (manioc), and *papai* (*Cyrtosperma*). These have long been the staples of the Rotuman diet, the basic foods on which island life has depended. Thus the meaning of the term *tēla'ā* is extended in much the same way that the term for rice is extended in rice-dependent economies, so that at its most inclusive level it translates as "food." A distinction is made between the staples listed above, which are categorized as *tēla'ā ne pear ta* (food of the earth) and *hue ne 'ai* (fruit of the trees). *Hue ne 'ai* includes indigenous fruits such as *'ifi* (*Inocarpus edulis*), *vī* (*Spondias dulcis*), and *fava* (*Pometia pinnata*), as well as ripe, uncooked, bananas.

**Table 2.1**  
**Tela'a [Rotuman Food Categories]**

<i>Tela'a</i> [starchy vegetables]		Embellishments
<i>Tela'a ne pear ta</i> [food from the earth]	<i>Hue ne 'ai</i> [fruit from trees]	
<i>'a'ana</i> [taro] <i>'uhi</i> [yams] <i>pari</i> [bananas] <i>'ulu</i> [breadfruit] <i>kumara</i> [sweet potato] <i>tapiko</i> [manioc] <i>papai</i> [Cyrptosperma]	<i>'ifi</i> [Inocarpus edulis] <i>vi</i> [[Spondias dulcis] <i>fava</i> [Pom etia pinnata]	<i>fekei</i> [native pudding] <i>tahroro</i> [fermented coconut cream] <i>lolo</i> [coconut cream] <i>niu varvari</i> [coconut flesh] <i>lumu</i> [seaweed] <i>kalofi</i> [eggs] <i>fo'u</i> [sugar cane] <i>po'oi</i> [fruit and coconut dish] <i>koua puha</i> [ritual pudding]

<i>'ini</i> [supplements to <i>tela'a</i> ]					
<i>Tiko</i> [flesh]					<i>'lkou</i>
<i>Manman la hap hake</i> [land creatures]	<i>Manman 'es lavlavi</i> [feathered creatures]	[sea creatures]			
		<i>Te vatvata</i> [crabs]	<i>Tela'a ma'on pilo</i> [shellfish]	<i>l'a</i> [fish]	
<i>puaka</i> [pigs]	<i>moa</i> [chickens] <i>manman ferfere</i> [birds]			<i>i'a</i> [fish] <i>pa'u</i> [eels] <i>he'e</i> [octopus and cuttlefish] <i>te jiji</i> [sea slugs] <i>hoi</i> [turtles] sea mammals	[cooked taro leaves]

The primary referents of 'i'ini are meat and fish, but in its broadest sense the term includes a range of foods that may be translated as "supplements" to *tēla'ā*. This includes not only *tiko* (flesh), but also *'ikou* (cooked taro leaves) and several other prepared foods. The major division within *tiko* is between land and flying creatures (*maṇmaṇu*) on the one hand and sea creatures on the other.

Among the sea creatures are *tē vatvata* (crabs), *tēla'ā ma'on pilo* (shellfish) and *i'a*—primarily fish, but including all edible seafoods with the exception of crabs and shellfish, for example, *pā'u* (eels), *he'e* (octopus and cuttlefish), *tē jiji* (sea slugs, literally, "creeping things"), *hoi* (turtles), and a variety of sea mammals.

*Maṇmaṇu* are differentiated into *maṇmaṇ lā hap hāke* (four-legged animals), including *puaka* (pigs); and *maṇmaṇ 'es lalavi* (feathered creatures), including *moa* (chickens) and *maṇmaṇ ferfere* (flying birds).

*'Ikou* refers to taro leaves cooked in coconut cream, but the term can be applied to most cooked vegetables.

Also regarded as a kind of 'i'ini are a number of relishes, condiments, and sauces, including *tāhroro* (fermented coconut cream), *lolo* (a coconut cream sauce for meat and fish), *lumu* (seaweed, usually prepared with coconut cream), *kalofi* (eggs), and *po'oi* (a fruit and grated coconut dish, usually made with *vī*).

Finally there are foods that fit into neither the category of *tēla'ā* nor that of 'i'ini. They include *fo'u* (sugarcane), *niu vavavari* (the soft flesh of young coconuts), and *fekei* (native pudding), several edible varieties of pandanus fruit, and *koua puha*, a pudding made from the sweet tuberous root of the dracaena (*jī ne peje*). *Koua puha* had special ritual significance and could only be prepared under specific conditions.<sup>13</sup>

## INTRODUCED FOODS

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, various new foods were introduced into Rotuma, mostly by European visitors. These included such fruits and vegetables as *mori* (orange), *esu* (papaya), *kuava* (guava), *magkō* (mango), *ponapa* (pineapple), *merene* (watermelon), *tomata* (tomato), and *kiukama* (cucumber). New sources of animal protein included *kunei* (goats), *kau* (cattle), *taku* (ducks), and tinned meats and fish (*'i'in ne poata*) such as *poat kau* (corned beef) and *sāmāne* (salmon).

A whole new category of items, labeled *tēla'ā ne 'iom tī* (food taken with tea), includes a range of introduced foods that are normally eaten for breakfast but also on other occasions when light meals or snacks are called for. Included are such items as *faraoa funu* (bread), *peskete* (biscuits), *susu* (milk), *suka* (sugar), *pata* (butter), *jisi* (cheese), *jema* (jam), *pareje* (porridge), and *raisi* (rice), as well as *kofe* (coffee), *koko* (cocoa), and *tī* (tea).

#### FOOD PREPARATION

The traditional modes of preparing and consuming food in the domestic setting were extensively described by Gardiner:

The men of the household, when they come down from the plantations, usually carry a couple of baskets of food or bunches of bananas over one shoulder on a stick. Between them they will have everything requisite, even down to the ripe cocoanuts to feed the pigs. Green cocoanuts for drinking purposes will have been all husked on a pointed stake, the *esoa*, and tied up in pairs, a small piece of the husk being left over the soft eye, so that they shall not go bad. At once the men set to work to make the fire and cook the food, an operation never performed for them by the women, who, however, serve the food to the men, when it is cooked, and then retire to their own meal. Fire was formerly produced by simply rubbing a piece of hard wood up and down in a groove in soft wood; the operation was termed *sia*. It would then be nursed and fanned into flame on a dry coconut husk. It was the business of the women always to keep a fire in, and in Noatau at least, I was informed by Marafu, fire could always be obtained from the *atua*, or spirit, house.

In each house the chief man has usually a table, the *umefe ataga*, a very slightly concave board, about 2 feet long by 1 foot broad, with four legs 3–4 inches high; it is carved out of a solid piece of wood. In addition to the above, a ridge, often notched and perhaps an inch high, is left down the middle of the under-surface, and on the same side, between two of the legs along the length of the table, a round piece about 3 inches long is left, with a hole in the centre, through which a piece of sinnet is strung, for hanging it up when not in use. On this a banana leaf is placed; the rest of the men simply have their leaves on the

ground. All sit with their legs crossed in front of them, with their knees touching the ground. The food is brought in in baskets by the women; the chief has a basket to himself, from which no one else is helped, while the rest eat several from the same basket and off the same leaf. The women place the food from the baskets in front of the men, and for the chief further peel the vegetables with their fingers and nails. It was formerly only a woman with the *niglolo* [type of tattoo] that would be entitled to do this. At the end of the meal they hand each man a green cocoanut, the only beverage drunk after the meal has begun, having with a piece of stick opened it by making a hole in the soft eye and having provided a cork, usually a piece of the husk, to prevent it from spilling. This done, the food left is gathered into baskets, and the women retire to another house for their own meal. Essential to the house is the *kokona*, which consists, as it were, of the four sides of a box, about 4 inches deep and 2-3 feet square, with the bottom removed and replaced by netting; this is then suspended from the beams of the house, but the four pieces of sennit from its four corners have generally first to pass through the middle of a flat board, the use of which is to prevent the small native rats from running down the sennit and getting at the food. Its origin...is legendary, and it is said to have come with the *moa*, or fowl.

Cooking is usually carried on in an especial house, the *kohea*, open at the ends and sides, low, and roughly put together. The only method is that of steaming in the native oven. A hole is made in the ground in the centre of the house and lined with stones; on the top of these a great fire of sticks is made. Everything being ready and the stones sufficiently hot, the fire is raked out, and a few green leaves are thrown on the stones. Then the food is placed on top and covered over with green leaves and finally with about 3 inches of earth. Most vegetables are put in exactly as they are, but pigs, fowls, and big fish are ripped open, cleaned, stuffed with cocoanut leaves, and placed in tightly fitting baskets of the same leaves to prevent them from burning. The liver is carefully wrapped up separately, as it is esteemed the greatest delicacy.

The green cocoanuts, after the milk has been drunk, are filled with salt water, and their holes stopped up

with conical corks, made of the leaves of the *saaga* twisted up; they are then placed in the sun on small platforms for some days. A certain amount of fermentation takes place, and the soft kernel rots a little, so that a buttery mass, the *dahrolo*, is obtained; it is much used as a seasoning for puddings of different sorts and for cooking fish. No salt is ever collected, but this doubtless acts as a substitute; almost daily some vegetables are cooked with it. Scraped cocoanut is another seasoning, the scraping being done on the *foa*. To make one of these a bough of a tree is selected with a branch going off at an angle of about 60°; the bough is then scraped flat, 18 inches being left below the branch and 3 above. To the branch, cut off about 9 inches long, is firmly lashed underneath a suitable piece of shell (now iron), with the concavity upwards. The cocoanut is broken in half in its shell, and the kernel of each separate half scraped on this, the worker sitting crosswise on the flattened branch. One I saw still in use has a flat piece of pearl shell, with the edges notched. I have seen also a notched pearl-shell cocoanut scraper for use in the hand. Hollowed-out wooden bowls, *umefe*, are used for making the puddings in; they have no ornamentation, and have every conceivable simple form. All puddings are termed *fekei*, but the term, if not qualified, would be taken as applying to one made of breadfruit, and the juice expressed out of scraped cocoanut; another favourite form is made of beaten arrowroot and cocoanut. Small fish are usually cooked with the *dahrolo*, when the dish is called *te lulu*; fowl, young taro leaves, and *dahrolo* are termed *iko*. All these are simply wrapped in the leaves of the banana or *papoi*, and after being tied up placed in the oven with the other food. Sometimes in them the juice of the sugar-cane is substituted for that of the cocoanut.<sup>14</sup>

Traditionally the pattern was to eat one major meal a day, cooked in an earth oven, or *koua* (photo 2.3). As Gardiner pointed out, this type of cooking was strictly a male task. A proper meal included both *tēla'ā* (starchy vegetables) and *'i'ini* (fish, meat, and/or *'ikou*). To have *tēla'ā* without *'i'ini* was an indication of poverty; *'i'ini* without *tēla'ā* was simply inconceivable. Ordinarily enough food was prepared for the evening meal to assure sufficient leftovers for the following day to sustain household members until another *koua* was

prepared. Only during the evening meal did the family follow the orderly plan of eating described by Gardiner. After awakening in the morning, each member of the family might take a portion of the leftovers, either to be eaten on the spot or taken along for later consumption amidst the chores of the day. The men, for example, sometimes brought food with them to their plantations, particularly if they did not expect to return home until later in the day. As European influence increased, and as many of the men gained experience serving on ships, a breakfast based on tea became the norm, including such items as biscuits, butter, jam, bread, cheese, porridge, and the like. Each member of the household took this meal, ordinarily prepared by women, shortly after they arose, and before they began their main chores.



**Photo 2.3** Men preparing a *koua*, 1960. *Alan Howard.*

While the production of food for domestic consumption formed the basis of the traditional Rotuman economy, it was augmented by the requirements of a ceremonial system involving elaborate feasting and redistribution of subsistence commodities through the offices of chiefs. This necessitated periodic food surpluses well beyond subsistence needs and was thus a stimulus to production. By providing such a stimulus the ceremonial system generated an insurance margin under normal conditions that increased the likelihood of survival following hurricanes, droughts, and other disasters that from time to time threatened subsistence.



## Environmental Concerns

The evidence suggests that despite a dense population and heavy cultivation, prior to European intrusion Rotumans did little to degrade the environment. In part this may have been because of the inherent fertility of the island, in part because of an ethic of conservation supported by a belief in local spirits (*'atua*). Henry Eagleston related the following incident during his visit to Rotuma in 1832, illustrating attitudes toward cutting down trees:

I again visited the shore for the purpose of cutting down three or four beautiful iron wood trees for hand spikes that stood near one of their burying grounds. Could I buy them and obtain Taminah's [Taimanav's] permission to do so, informing him of my wants he very readily consented to my taking all wished for, and fearing there might be an outside squall, sent his son Taminah, a fine boy of about fourteen summers, with me that in case the squall exploded to say it was by his father's permission I was cutting them down. Arriving at the trees many natives were present, mostly young women who watching our movements became as quiet as a clock, but on first swing of two axes they took to their legs and running some distance from us, came to a stand. At the same time an old woman, a priestess, came out of the spirit house and in a wild and excited manner, pleaded hard to save her trees, but Taminah informing her of his father's action in the matter, she immediately hastened to the spirit house, where she set some four or five girls to chewing Cava and making a bowl of grog for the great spirit; meantime the squall increased and she boxed round as if in the centre of a whirlwind and putting herself into all laughable forms possible, while those outside quietly stood looking at us as if they expected to see some great sight and spirit punishment fall upon our heads for despoiling their sacred grounds of their pretty trees. On inquiry we learned that the spirit of departed friends lived in those trees and our cutting them down would bring spiritual vengeance against us and our days to an end. My wants satisfied, we left the old woman still on the squall, with the Cava in place on a bench for the great spirit, but would be cared for by the sly walking spirits that were hovering around.<sup>15</sup>

Chiefs had the power to taboo specific trees or their produce, providing a threat of supernatural sanction to violators, although in this specific case Chief Taminah apparently gave his approval to allow the trees to be cut.

Rev. William Allen reported that prior to the population decrease that followed European contact, the demand for wood for houses and firewood was so intense that no person was allowed to cut down a tree without planting another in its place.<sup>16</sup> Apparently such practices were sufficient to sustain a reasonable ecological balance until well after Europeans arrived, despite the fact that the primary forest had been cleared from approximately 95 percent of the land and replaced by coconut trees, supplemented by a few small areas of secondary forest growth.<sup>17</sup>

### Building Materials and Styles

An idea of housing styles on Rotuma from the early 1800s can be gleaned from the accounts of some of the first European visitors. Houses were constructed of poles and logs, with thatched sago palm roofs and plaited sago or coconut palm walls. Most dwellings were described as small, enclosing a space perhaps 15 to 20 feet wide, but chiefs' houses were noted as being larger, for instance 40 by 16 feet<sup>18</sup> and 25 feet high.<sup>19</sup> These early written accounts describe Rotuman houses as rounded at the ends (photo 2.4), but according to Elizabeth Inia, a retired Rotuman schoolteacher and recognized authority on Rotuman custom, the rounding was due to Samoan or Tongan influence; the ends of Rotuman houses were originally flat.

Low doors, which admitted little wind as a protection against hurricanes, required people to enter on hands and knees. Floors were composed of earth, dry grass, and pebbles or small pieces of coral, covered with rough mats of plaited coconut leaves (*farao*); sometimes with a pandanus mat (*'epa*) overlay.

Cooking and eating took place outside or in a separate outbuilding (*kohea*), also made of poles and thatch. Other buildings of the same materials but of varying sizes and with or without walls were built for meeting houses.

Rotumans customarily built their dwelling houses on a foundation, or *fūag rī*, of raised earth surrounded by stone walls.<sup>20</sup> Most reports indicate that foundations were from 2 to 4 feet high, but descriptions range from 1 foot<sup>21</sup> to 6 feet high.<sup>22</sup> Foundations up to 12 feet high, presumed to have

been used for chiefly dwellings, were discovered inland by Gardiner.<sup>23</sup> Some writers suggested these raised house sites were useful in keeping the floors dry during periods of heavy rains.<sup>24</sup> For Rotumans, however, *fūag rī* were and are significant in notions of kinship. *Fūag rī* are also reference points for eligibility to stewardship of associated *kāinaga* garden lands, and some foundations carry with them chiefly titles.



**Photo 2.4** Traditional Rotuman house. Note raised-earth foundation with stone walls. © *Fiji Museum*.

Young unmarried men ordinarily slept away from their parents and siblings. It was considered improper for them to sleep inside the house, in close proximity to their sisters. Groups of young men often built their own thatched sleeping houses, sometimes on high poles (*rī sipakit*, photo 2.5).

### Home Furnishings and Housekeeping

Early visitors to Rotuma reported but little in the way of house furnishings: "mats, carved bare wood pillows, a few clubs, spears and drinking vessels of coconut shells."<sup>25</sup> Lesson mentioned low tables for eating.<sup>26</sup> Coconut shells strung on sennit for carrying water could be hung up in the house,<sup>27</sup> and "in the centre of the house is generally slung a little koop net on which are deposited their provisions etc."<sup>28</sup> A more elaborate description of a storage device is given by

W. L. Allardyce, who was Acting Resident Commissioner in 1881:

There is scarcely a house which does not possess, suspended from the ridgepole, a kind of large four-sided swinging basket, called kokona, which serves as a larder and cupboard, and general receptacle for things which are intended to be out of the way of the children and rats. To guard against the latter a piece of circular wood, a foot or more in diameter, is obtained, and a hole bored in the centre, through which the main string of the kokona passes. Underneath this piece of wood, when a suitable height, a knot is made, not large enough to pass through the hole in the wood, which is thus kept stationary. However, the slightest weight on any part of it, at once gives the wood a sudden tilt downwards, and the rat is dropped on to the floor, clear of the kokona, and alongside of the cat.<sup>29</sup>



**Photo 2.5** Young men's sleeping house. © *Fiji Museum*.

### Settlement Pattern

As a consequence of European contact, Rotuma experienced significant depopulation (see chapter 11), along with a shift

in residence pattern. Although by the last quarter of the nineteenth century the entire population was situated along the shore, earlier accounts indicate that people had been dispersed inland as well. Dillon, for instance, described the scene in 1827:

Shortly after daybreak we set all plain sail and stood in for the land, which had a beautiful verdant appearance, with plantations and houses from the seaside to the summit of the highest hills. Close to the beach several large houses were strewed, at short distances, among the cocoa-nut and bread-fruit trees.<sup>30</sup>

The actual degree of inland settlement prior to European intrusion remains to be determined by archaeological investigation, although Aubrey Parke has verified the existence of inland house sites (*fūag rī*) and cemeteries (*tamura*).<sup>31</sup>

Through the years observers have speculated about the social significance of inland versus coastal habitation on Rotuma, with some expressing the opinion that the two locations were populated by distinct "tribes." The basic theory was that the inland people were the descendents of an original population that was defeated by invaders and forced into the interior, where they lived in subjugation to their coastal conquerors. Litton Forbes offered the following version in 1875:

Deep in the recesses of that forest there still lived two families, the sole survivors of an inland tribe that once formed the chief population of the island. The present inhabitants of Rotumah live entirely on a small strip of alluvial land lying between the central volcano and the sea. But there was a time when such was not the case. The interior of the country was at some period inhabited by tribes between whom and the coast natives there had existed one long feud. This had at length resulted in a permanent separation between the two sections of the population, namely, between the dwellers inland and the dwellers on the coast. This separation produced in time divergences in language and modes of thought, so that the dialect of one tribe became unintelligible to the other. The sole representatives of the inland inhabitants of former days were the two families whom we were now visiting. Their numbers were too few to justify any general conclusions regarding the race they belonged to. They seemed,

however, decidedly inferior to the coast natives of the present day in physique and intelligence. It occurred to me that these people might be a remnant of an earlier migration to the island, and that on arrival of the present inhabitants they had been driven to seek shelter in the mountains and forests, much as the Britons sought shelter in the fastnesses of Wales on the approach of the English. A study of their language would have tended to throw some light on this point, but in their present moribund condition it is not likely that any inquiry could be made conclusive. There can, however, be no doubt that at one time Rotumah supported a much larger population than at present. Tradition leads us to believe as much, while an examination of the island proves it. In all directions through the forest there are traces of large clearing. Flat stones arranged in a peculiar manner mark the sites of ancient houses and temples. Stone fences and walls, now meaningless, served at one time to divide the lands of one family from those of another. These remains point to some great changes having taken place in the population of the island.<sup>32</sup>

Later, Gardiner also speculated about this division and elaborated the presumed relationship between inland and coastal populations:

Even in such a small island there was at all times a marked line of distinction between the coast and the hill people. The latter lived in certain towns and villages along the inner slopes of the hills, and cultivated exclusively in the great central valley. As a rule, they possessed no land or rights outside this valley, nor had they any claim on the shore waters, i.e., the broad boat channel, four to five feet deep at low tide, between the reef and the shore. They were to some extent under the rule of the coast people, and were only allowed to come down to the coast at certain times. The outer reef, however, was considered as a common property by both peoples, but the right to cross waters of the boat channel had to be paid for, generally in a basket of taro or yams every year, i.e., six months [a Rotuman ritual cycle]. Between the two peoples as such no wars were waged, nor do the hill people seem to have taken much part in the different wars between the coast districts....All giants, strong men, etc., are

represented in legends as coming from the hills, and the hill people generally are stated to have been in stature bigger than the coast people. Graves, dug up on Sol Hof and near the old sites of Rahiga and Lugula, were only one to three feet deep. The bones were too much broken and decayed to be brought home, but from their appearance might well have given rise to the latter statement. Above Rahiga they seem to have been buried in a sitting posture, but a diligent search gave no implements or weapons. I am inclined to believe that most of the inhabitants of this inland division to the east of the isthmus were really tenants of the coast people. There were undoubtedly a few *hoag* [local groups; see chapter 3] among them, but the number of family names among their descendents is very small. Possibly they were the original inhabitants of the island, conquered by some subsequent migration and recruited from the over-crowded *hoag* of their conquerors. First-fruits were rigidly exacted by the chiefs of their districts, and the coast people seem to have had rights of planting on any of their land, not occupied, without any recognition of ownership. They have always been looked upon as a dying people, and the number of their descendents is in no way proportional to their known population of fifty years ago.<sup>33</sup>

It is interesting to note in Gardiner's version the fusion of the idea of hill tribes with another Rotuman legendary conception: that at one time the island was inhabited by a race of giants. Thus, while Forbes in his earlier account had described the few remaining hill people as being of "inferior physique," by the time Gardiner visited he was led to believe they had been of extraordinary stature. William Eason, who was District Officer on Rotuma in the early 1950s, also cited evidence in support of the belief that a race of exceptionally large men once occupied the island. According to Eason's account, bones were uncovered at various locations that were of exceptional size, but none of the finds was ever satisfactorily substantiated.<sup>34</sup>

The notion of two distinct populations—one composed of original inhabitants of the island, and the other of an invading group who had conquered them and forced them to seek refuge inland—appears to stem from two basic conceptions, one Rotuman, the other European. It seems clear that, at least in part, both Forbes's and Gardiner's

accounts reflected Rotuman oral history. Thus Fr. Trouillet, in his version of the encounter between Raho and Tokaniua, recorded about 1873, described the following scene:

Tokaniua accosts Rao [Raho], saying to him: "This country, to whom does it belong?"

"It is my country," answers Rao.

"But where are your subjects?" says Tokaniua.

"They are in the interior," responds Rao.

"No," says Tokaniua to Rao, "this country belongs to me."

"But," says Rao in his turn, "where are your subjects?"

"They are on the seashore," replies Tokaniua. "Let's go see," says Rao, and together they go around Rotuma. Rao notices that indeed the country is inhabited and upon their return to Oinafa the quarrel becomes livelier.<sup>35</sup>

As a result of his conflict with Tokaniua, Raho reputedly went into exile on the islet of Hatana. The interesting point is that the inland-coastal distinction corresponds to two distinct populations, and that the inland population is associated with the losing, exiled chief, while the coastal population is associated with the winning chief.

In Trouillet's version of this legend, Tokaniua derives from Fiji and Raho from Sāmoa, so their followers were presumably linguistically, culturally, and physically different from one another.<sup>36</sup>

The notion of separate inland and coastal tribes, with the latter regarded as conquerors, was by no means limited to Rotumans: It was a common European speculation about many Oceanic islands and probably reflects the "wave theory" of Polynesian migration dominant in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Not seriously considered was the possibility that whatever differences existed between inland and coastal people could have arisen from the varying specializations required to meet somewhat different ecological challenges. It is also probable that both Forbes and Gardiner gave too much weight to Rotumans' statements concerning differences between various groups on the island. Even today, Rotumans often describe the people from adjacent districts with stereotypes appropriate to an alien group, despite the fact that residential and marital histories show the populations to be thoroughly intermixed. Thus it



may well be that when early visitors asked about differences between inland and coastal people, they were led astray by microregional stereotypes, and perhaps by playful exaggeration.

The story of an ancestral race of giants likewise invites sociological interpretation. Rotumans still enjoy telling about the prodigious feats of their ancestors and bemoan the deterioration of their stock since earlier times. People cite as evidence the enormous stones seen in old graveyards—some stones weighing several tons—which had to be moved considerable distances to reach their present locations. They insist that no mechanical devices were employed but that *'atua* (ancestral spirits) may have ridden atop the stones to lighten the load. What we must recognize is that for Rotumans, as for other Polynesians, self-worth is a matter of genealogical inheritance, and that the potency of one's ancestors has direct implications for one's social significance.<sup>37</sup> To derive one's heritage from powerful (gigantic) ancestors is to assert one's value as a social being; to derive heritage from powerless ancestors is to be socially insignificant. This theme is central to interpreting Rotuman history.

The great concern for ancestors is also reflected in the attention Rotumans give to cemeteries, a fact remarked on by many early commentators. The social significance of the deceased was symbolized in the elaboration of gravestones. Thus Lucatt wrote:

Every village possesses a play-house and its own peculiar burial-ground; the latter is constructed at the foot of a hill, by building a stone wall, four or five feet high, and filling in the back of it with sand, till a level is formed against the rising ground to the height of the wall and inclination of the land. The bodies are only deposited just beneath the sand; and after they have lain there three, six, nine, or twelve months, a rough, unhewn stone is placed upon the top of them, the size of the stone being regulated by the importance of the party when living. The stone over some of the chiefs cannot weigh less than seven or eight tons, and the grave-yards have the appearance of Druidical remains. The placing of these covering stones is the signal for a feast provided by the friends and relations of the deceased; the more massive the block, the greater is the number of hands required to raise it. Thus do they furnish lasting memorials of the rank and wealth once held by those who repose beneath them.<sup>38</sup>

The importance of graves, and the ranking system they symbolized, brings us to a consideration of the relationship between supernatural spirits and the foundations of chieftainship, the topics of the next chapter.



**Photo 2.6** *Tamura* (cemetery) in Maftoa, Itu'muta, 1940. *H. S. Evans.*



**Photo 2.7** Young boys atop ancestral tomb, 1913. *A. M. Hocart.* *Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.*

## Notes to Chapter 2

The section on housing in this chapter derives from a chapter by Jan Rensel entitled "From Thatch to Cement: Social Implications of Housing Change on Rotuma" (Rensel 1997), published in *Home in the Islands: Housing and Social Change in the Pacific*, edited by Jan Rensel and Margaret Rodman.

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<sup>1</sup> Lesson 1838, 425; translated from the French by Ella Wiswell.

<sup>2</sup> Dillon 1829, 94.

<sup>3</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 420.

<sup>4</sup> The data on which this and subsequent paragraphs are based come from Howard's 1960 field notes. We use the past tense with the understanding that reference is to that year, but we believe the patterns described are ancient; they also continue to some extent today.

<sup>5</sup> Inia 2001, 142–143.

<sup>6</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 421.

<sup>7</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 421.

<sup>8</sup> Boddam-Whetham 1876, 270–271; Lucatt 1851, 182.

<sup>9</sup> Lesson 1838, 428.

<sup>10</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 425.

<sup>11</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 427.

<sup>12</sup> Boddam-Whetham 1876, 268.

<sup>13</sup> Inia 2001, 145–150.

<sup>14</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 421–423.

<sup>15</sup> Eagleston 1832, 401–402.

<sup>16</sup> Allen 1895.

<sup>17</sup> St. John 1954, 165.

<sup>18</sup> Haley 1948, 259.

<sup>19</sup> Lesson 1838–1839, 433.

<sup>20</sup> Osborn 1834–1835; Cheever 1834–1835; Lucatt 1851, 167.

<sup>21</sup> Allardyce 1885–1886, 134.

<sup>22</sup> Allen 1895.

<sup>23</sup> Gardiner 1898, 433.

<sup>24</sup> Osborn 1834–1835; Lucatt 1851, 167; Boddam-Whetham 1876, 266.

<sup>25</sup> Osborn 1834–1835.

<sup>26</sup> Lesson 1838–1839, 434.

<sup>27</sup> Eagleston 1832.

<sup>28</sup> Cheever 1835.

<sup>29</sup> Allardyce 1885–1886, 134.

<sup>30</sup> Dillon 1829, 91.

<sup>31</sup> Parke 1964.

<sup>32</sup> Forbes 1875, 230–232.

<sup>33</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 481–483.

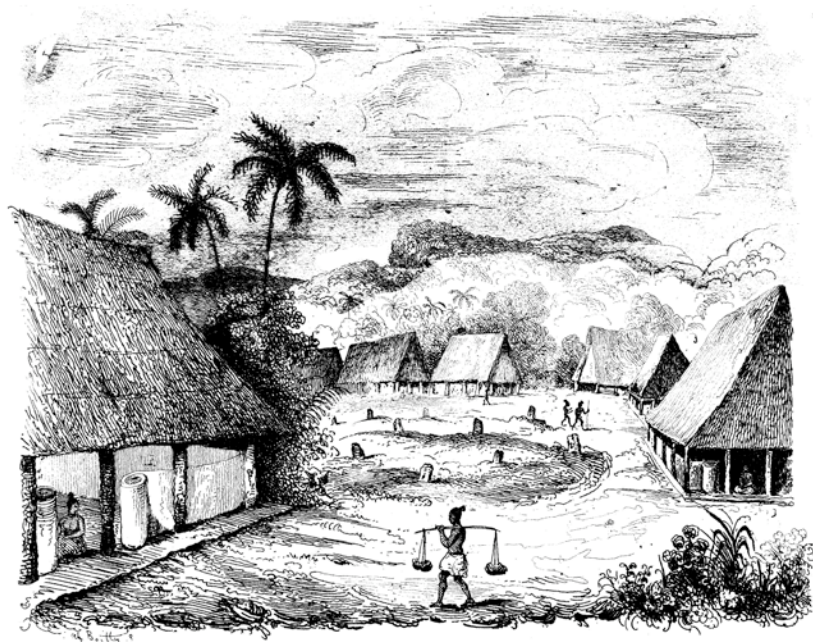
<sup>34</sup> Eason 1951, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Trouillet 1868.

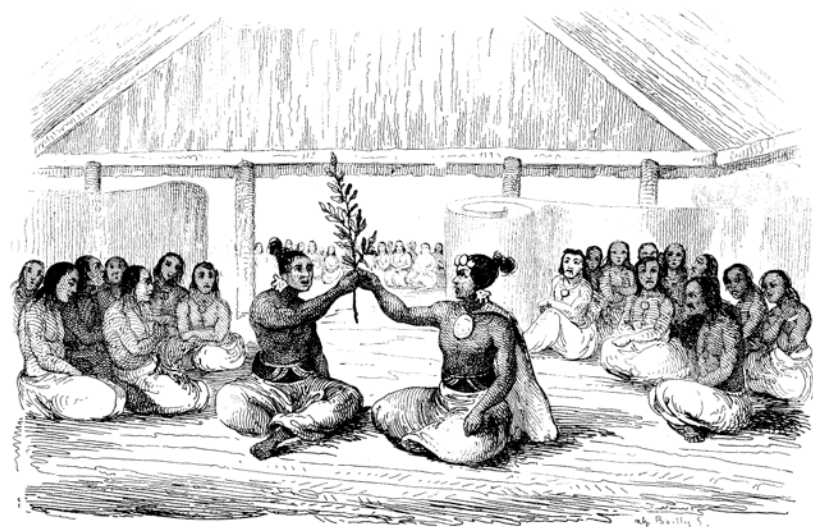
<sup>36</sup> Trouillet 1868.

<sup>37</sup> Goldman 1970.

<sup>38</sup> Lucatt 1851, 166.



**Figure 3.1** *Village à Rotuma (Village in Rotuma). Duperrey 1826.*



**Figure 3.2** *Transmission du Pouvoir à Rotuma (Transmission of Power in Rotuma). Duperrey 1826.*

### 3 The Social Order

Raho and Tokaniua came from Samoa (Sa'moa in Rotuman) to plant Rotuma. They brought two baskets of sand to Rotuma, and landed at Malhaha. Raho stayed at Vāi, and Tokaniua stayed at Farema. Raho then put a *fapui* (sign) at Malhaha to claim that Rotuma should be his. The sign of his claim was a green coconut frond, not yet withered. However, Tokaniua played a trick on Raho. He brought a coconut frond that was completely dry, and put his sign in front of the sign of Raho, and he said to Raho that his sign was the earlier one. Tokaniua said to Raho that they should both go with Fikimarā'e, a man of Vāi, to look at their signs. They saw that the sign of Tokaniua was an old dry coconut frond but the sign of Raho was a green one. Raho was angry with Tokaniua and went and stayed on Hatana, and Fikimarā'e was angry with Tokaniua and chased Tokaniua away to Oinafa.

So this is the reason why Tokaniua claimed Rotuma to be his land because he tricked Raho, and he drank the first bowl of *kava* because he tricked Raho, and Raho no longer drank the first bowl because of this trick.

Gagaj Tokaniua of Oinafa, quoted by Aubrey Parke in  
*Seksek 'E Hatana*, 2001

#### Oral Traditions

Fr. Joseph Trouillet provides the most comprehensive account of Rotuma's legendary history. His narrative focuses on three categories of chiefly positions: the "grand chief *vakāi*" (*fakpure*), the *mua*, and the *sau*. All three were positions of significance for the entire island, which was

divided into autonomous districts headed by district chiefs, or *gagaj 'es itu'u*.<sup>1</sup>

In Trouillet's account the island progressively differentiated through time until there were seven districts, as there are today. The *vakai* is described by Trouillet as the chief of the dominant district, as determined by success in the episodic wars that permeate the oral history. He was therefore perceived as a conquering warrior, whose authority was justified by the support of supernatural beings, his success in warfare being testimony to his *mana*. According to Trouillet, the privileges and responsibilities of the *vakai* included the right to bring together all the other district chiefs in council in order to make peace between them; the right to bestow the status of *sau* on various individuals; and the responsibility of seeing to it that the *sau* was cared for properly.

The *sau* was an object of veneration. While in office he was treated as a demigod and was fed prodigious amounts of food and kava. He was also presented with large quantities of produce at feasts held during the six-month ceremonial cycle.

The third position, that of *mua*, Trouillet described as less feared than the *sau* but more sacred. The *mua*'s role also centered on the ritual cycle, which was specifically oriented toward bringing prosperity to the island by tapping the power of supernatural beings (*'aitu*, *'atua*). There are several parallels in the symbolism associated with the *sau* and *mua*; indeed, Trouillet described a historical sequence in which the position of *mua* was initially established by Raho, the founding ancestor, and then superseded several generations later when the position of *sau* was established following a rebellion against the eighth *mua*. The positions of *sau* and *mua* thus appear to symbolize complementary aspects of sacred chieftainship, with the *mua* representing that component of authority that derives from the principle of first occupancy, traced back to Raho, and the *sau* representing that component of authority derived from conquest and usurpation. The counterpart of Raho, the founder of Rotuma, is Tokaniua (alternatively Tokainiua), the warrior chief who arrives from overseas (Fiji or Tonga, depending on the version) and successfully challenges Raho's claim to preeminence. Thus, in the stories:

Raho is to Tokaniua as *mua* is to *sau*

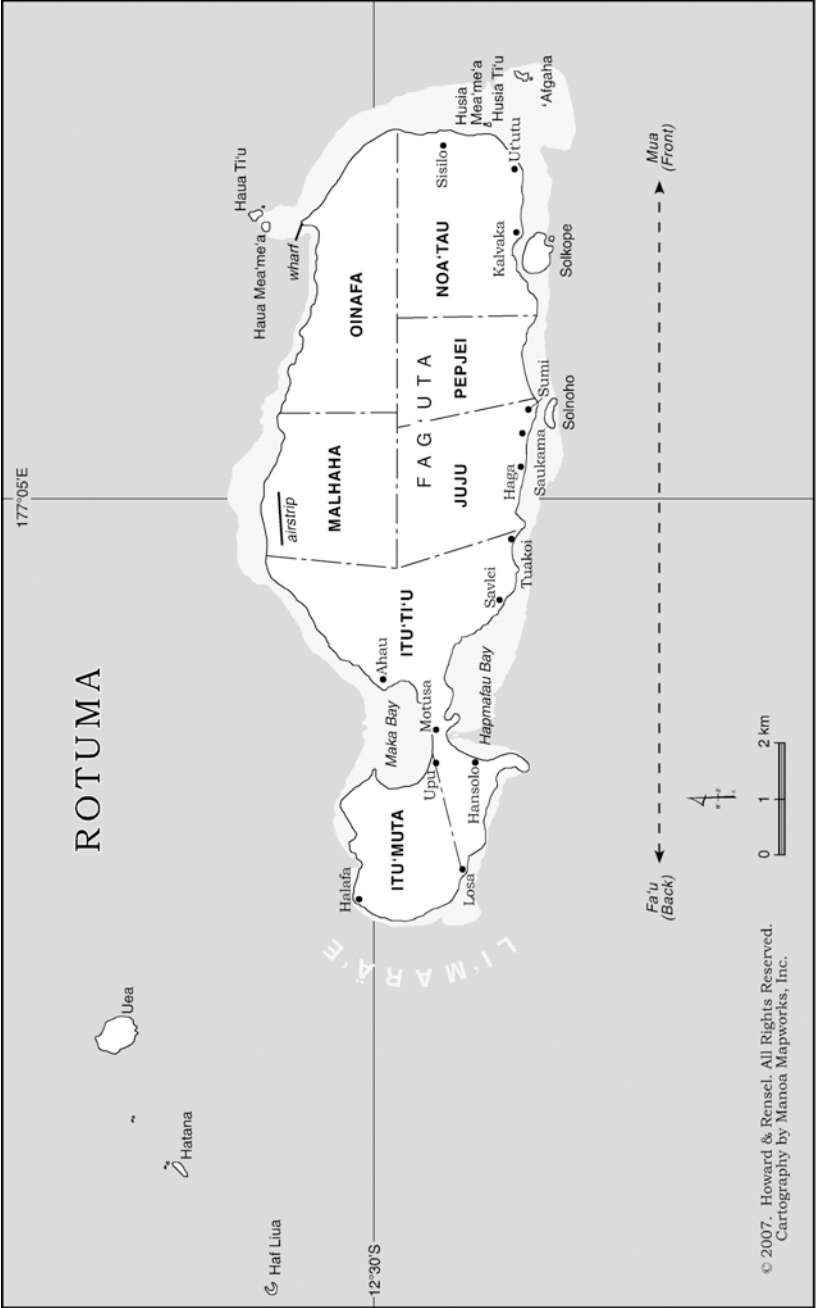


Raho and Tokaniua symbolize a series of systemic oppositions that pervade Rotuman legends: land and sea, earth and sky, inland and coast. Of central importance here is that as a collectivity, the common people are associated with the land (as indigenous planters of the soil), while chiefs are associated with the sea/sky, the presumed sources of supernatural potency that sanctify their authority. Parallel oppositions are encoded into the geography of place names on the island. The fundamental division is between the east or sunrise side of the island, and the west or sunset side. East is associated with chieftainship, and particularly with conquering chiefs who come from outside Rotuma and thus are conceptualized as strangers to the land.<sup>2</sup>

The main source of mana for "foreign" chiefs emanates from "Tonga," to the east, while the indigenous people gain their potency from the spirits of their ancestors (*'atua*), whose abode is in Li'marä'e (*'Oroi*), located by Rotumans under the sea off the west end of the island (see map, p. 62).

Within Rotuma the geographical code is based on a division of the island into three segments along an east-west axis, and a north-south division. That portion of the island to the west of the isthmus is called Fā'u (literally, "back") and is strongly associated with the indigenous people. This contrasts with the remainder of the island, which is termed Mua (literally, "front"). (The west end of the island is also referred to as *sio* [down] the east end as *se'e* [up].) The eastern segment is further divided into an end and middle section. The end section includes Oinafa and Noa'tau, which, being at the extreme eastern part of the island, are most closely associated with stranger-chiefs. The midsection includes Malhaha, Fag'uta, and the portion of Itu'ti'u east of the isthmus. In the accounts, contrasts between the extremities of the island (e.g., between Oinafa/Noa'tau and Fā'u) imply a strong opposition between chiefs and commoners; contrasts between either end and the midsection are somewhat weaker.

Another opposition is between north and south, north being associated with chieftainship, south with common status. This opposition is dramatized in some versions of the founding legend. In these accounts Raho "plants" Rotuma by pouring earth from two separate baskets. The first pouring is from a ceremonial presentation basket at Malhaha on the north side of the island where Raho established his chiefly home (*nohoag gagaja*); the second pouring is from a common



basket tipped out in Pepjei on the south side of the island where Raho's seat of government (*nohoag pure*) was established.<sup>3</sup> Whereas east is used to signify externally derived chieftainship, north is a marker for indigenously derived chiefs. The north-south distinction is only used in reference to the middle part of the island, exclusive of Fa'u to the west, Oinafa and Noa'tau to the east. Again, exclusion of the extreme east and west ends implies a weaker form of opposition.

Taken as a whole, Rotuman legends are quite clear with regard to the basic constitution of authority. It requires a combination of chiefly mana derived from external spirits, including high gods, who dwell either overseas to the east or in the heavens, and indigenous powers derived from the people's ancestral spirits, who dwell in a netherworld to the west of the island. But to be effective, and legitimate, potency must be tempered by domestication. Collectively the stories reveal the pitfalls of either extreme: Those chiefs whose ambitions are unconstrained by concern for the populace bring hardship and misfortune. Their vitality is misdirected. But no matter how compassionate a chief may be, if he lacks divinely derived vitality (mana), he is unlikely to bring prosperity to his people. Thus, domestication without potency is also a formula for disaster.

A proper chief is one whose mana is potent but sufficiently domesticated to be directed toward the welfare of the entire population under his dominion. He eases rather than exacerbates burdens on his subjects. He is entitled to first fruits and a reasonable portion of the produce of the land, but he cannot demand too much. The core of the issue lies in the requirement that a chief demonstrate his mana, which encourages the exercise of power in the form of demands. To be able to make strong demands and back them up is to display potency, but it also intensifies the tension between chiefs and their subjects. Chiefs who go too far are the conceptual equivalents of cannibals—they ravage their people by consuming their crops and labor.<sup>4</sup>

### Pan-Rotuman Social Organization

Most early written accounts focus on the office of *sau*, which generally was translated into English as "king." A curious aspect of this position is that representatives from different districts held it in rotation, for restricted periods. Rotuman chieftainship at this level has been compared with that of

Mangaia and Easter Island, two other Polynesian societies for which rotating chieftainship has been documented.<sup>5</sup>

While the origins of the institution are obscure, archaeologist Thegn Ladefoged argued for a materialistic explanation based on the differential quality of agricultural land in the eastern districts (Noa'tau and Oinafa) and the rest of the island. The rocky soil in the eastern districts, he maintained, would have made it considerably more difficult to produce food crops, and might have stimulated interdistrict aggression. Oral traditions, he suggested, indicate that the districts with lower productive potentials generally participated in more intergroup aggression than the districts with higher productive potentials. This might have led to political integration in the form of the *sau* if the disparity between land productivity was great enough to stimulate intergroup aggression, but not so large as to support vastly disparate population densities. Using a list of *sau* collected by Macgregor in 1932, which includes the districts from which they came, Ladefoged showed that a disproportionate number of the early *sau* (up to 1822) came from the eastern districts. The advantages of political integration were generally beneficial, he argued, including providing insurance against periodic natural disasters that affected some parts of the island more than others. Summarizing his position, Ladefoged wrote:

People living throughout Rotuma would have benefitted from the social buffering that political integration provided against natural disasters. Furthermore, political integration might have allowed some of the commoners to reduce the marginal costs associated with their subsistence activities. Perhaps more important, however, were the advantages that political integration conferred upon a select group of people, the eastern pan-polity rulers. Although political integration provided some benefits to all members of society it was the eastern pan-Rotuman chiefs who seemed to have benefitted the most. The chiefs and commoners from other districts benefitted, but not to the same extent as the residents from the eastern districts. The integration of Rotuma into a single polity was maintained because the environmental constraints were such that the costs of complying for the lesser chiefs and commoners throughout the island were minimal and there were potential long-term benefits. The benefits for the

eastern pan-polity elite were significant and they sought to promote political integration.<sup>6</sup>

Ladefoged labeled the period up to 1822 the "prehistoric-protolithic period." From 1822 until the termination of the institution in 1873, however, the distribution of districts from which *sau* came was much more varied. According to Ladefoged's thesis the early *sau* were conquerors who exercised secular authority over the island's affairs. He cited a passage from Hocart's 1913 fieldnotes reporting that the position of *fakpure* did not exist prior to the 1840 war at Saukama, Juju,<sup>7</sup> to bolster his argument that until that time the *sau* were the supreme secular authorities.

By the time Europeans began reporting on Rotuman society, however, the position of *sau* had evolved into a primarily ritual role. Early European observers agreed about several aspects of the *sau*'s office, including, for example, that the *sau* was appointed by the *fakpure* and ideally was chosen from different districts in turn. They also agreed that the *sau* exercised no secular power and that his main tasks were to eat rather gluttonously on a daily basis, drink kava, and take part in the six-month ritual cycle. Observers disagreed on several important points, however. For example, it is unclear who was eligible to be selected as *sau*. Lesson reported that Rotuma was divided into twenty-four districts, each governed by a chief who succeeded to the office in order of seniority.<sup>8</sup> There is nothing known that corresponds to these units, since there are only seven *itu'u* (districts) and considerably more *ho'aga*, the next smallest unit over which a chief presides.

Nevertheless, there does seem to be agreement among those who did comment that eligibility was limited to individuals of chiefly rank.<sup>9</sup> Whether a person was actually supposed to hold a title in order to be eligible is nowhere stated. The length of the *sau*'s reign is also unclear. Gardiner states that although the term of office was for six months (one Rotuman ritual cycle), an incumbent *sau* could continue in office as long as he could accumulate the great masses of food that were required to support him.<sup>10</sup> Since he did not provide food by working, this may mean either that he was allowed to remain in office as long as the island prospered, or that his reign was extended only so long as the people in his home district were prepared to bear the burden of providing the surplus food needed to maintain feasting at an appropriate level. Lesson mentioned twenty months as the duration of office, which has no correspondence with the

Rotuman ritual cycle, but may reflect his informant's estimate of an average reign.<sup>11</sup> Allen, a Methodist missionary who served in Rotuma during the late nineteenth century, reported that the *sau* was generally "elected" for short periods of six to twelve months,<sup>12</sup> while one of Hocart's informants indicated that two cycles was usual,<sup>13</sup> and Dillon was told:

it sometimes happens that the president does not wish to resign his post at the expiration of six months; when rather than quarrel, they allow him to exceed the time appointed by law: but should he persist in a further maintenance of his power, the other chiefs league together, and compel him by force of arms to retire.<sup>14</sup>

A further puzzle concerns the rules of residence for *sau*. Allen reported that the district whose turn it was to select a *sau* would go to a neighboring district, choose someone, and bring him to their own district to live,<sup>15</sup> and in one narrative recorded by Titifanua, the storyteller stated that if it was one district's turn to provide the *sau*, it would be another's turn to look after him.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Trouillet's oral history records numerous movements of the *sau* from one district to another, although no regularities appear. Perhaps all that can be said definitively is that Rotumans characterized sauship in terms of interdistrict residence, possibly as a way of emphasizing that the role was pan-Rotuman in scope.

The *mua* also seems to have been a rotational position. Allardyce reported that the districts had the honor of *mua* "in a kind of turn," and that he was appointed by the *fakpure* for an indefinite period, though it was customary to resign after about a year.<sup>17</sup>

### Interpreting Rotuman Oral History

How are these early accounts to be interpreted? Just what do they reveal to us about the constitution of Rotuman social organization? And what else might we learn about Rotuman chieftainship by analyzing the texts of oral narratives?

In answer to the first question, it is quite clear that the descriptions were obtained verbally by Europeans from Rotuman consultants, most likely in response to specific questions, rather than from direct observation. None of the accounts describes actual political or ritual events that were witnessed by the writer. At most, then, the descriptions appear to be based on statements concerning conceptions of

these roles rather than on observations of political enactment. If Rotuman oral narratives were primarily a means of recording history in the sense of providing an "accurate" chronological account of events, we might be inclined to treat them as characteristic of actual practice. But our reading of them leads us to believe that they served a different purpose rather, that they were intended to reflect relationships and principles that persisted over time. In essence, then, Rotuman historical and legendary accounts merge with one another, both being powerfully patterned by an underlying system of cultural logic. This is not to say Rotumans were incapable of reporting events accurately; they did so all the time. However, the statements recorded by early observers were not of specific events but of verbal descriptions of usual practice. It is precisely here that the power of the symbolic codes is most in evidence. In one important respect, this simplifies our task, for we can dismiss the problem of interpreting traditional political *practice* on the grounds that we have virtually no usable evidence. All of the data, however, including the legendary texts, are relevant for interpreting Rotuman *conceptions* of chieftainship and political structure.

For these reasons we must treat the conclusions of scholars such as Robert Williamson with skepticism. He accepted Gardiner's speculation that originally the offices of the *sau*, which he translated as "sacred ruler," and *fakpure*, translated as "secular ruler," were united, but that in time they became distinct.<sup>18</sup> Concerning the rotation of *sau*, Williamson offered the following speculative scenario:

The sacred king and his family, the trunk family of the group, would probably continue to occupy the ancestral demesne [estate], and there would be a number of families of chiefs, branches of the original royal family, each occupying its own area. The office and over-riding jurisdiction, so far as retained, of the sacred king, would remain with the trunk family, in which the original godship and sanctity would be believed to be specially immanent, and each chief would be subject to that over-riding authority, such as it was, and to the authority of the secular king, retaining, however, some local jurisdiction over his own area. As time went on, the growth and development of the group would continue; the branch families of the chiefs would increase in numbers; and a powerful aristocracy would be evolved. There would be among them a competition

for power and predominance, which would show itself in intrigue and inter-family fighting within the group; matrimonial connections between families, and inter-family military alliances would affect the powers of the respective families; and the tendency would be for them to group themselves into mutually hostile combined parties who would contend with each other for secular dominance, success first falling to one and then to the other. Thus would come into being the division of the people into two great camps—the conquerors and the conquered, the strong and the weak—as described by writers.

The position and authority of the sacred king himself might readily be affected, and perhaps undermined, by developments of this character. Thus, whilst in some islands, as in Mangaia, he continued to retain immense power, in others as in Tonga, his power, and even his sacred duties as a high priest, died out altogether, or nearly so; whilst in Rotuma his office became a matter of periodic election from one or other of the families of the island, its hereditary character being lost, and indeed the evidence suggests that he was subject at any time to deprivation of office and replacement as the result of conflicts among his subjects.<sup>19</sup>

Noble as such an attempt might be to account for the constitution of Rotuman society, we must recognize that there is virtually no evidence, beyond its inherent plausibility, to support such a conclusion. The answer to the second question is therefore that we know very little about either the historical sequence leading to the political system as described or about the conduct of politics in traditional Rotuma. What we do have is some information about categories of actors and their associations with one another and with types of activities. But this is a reasonable start if we are to set our goal as comprehending the cultural logic of the traditional Rotuman political system.

A close examination of Rotuman oral history reveals a conceptual paradigm that appears to lie at the heart of Rotuman political thought. Of fundamental concern is the issue of prosperity—the prosperity of the island as manifest in human fertility and the productivity of the land. The central symbol is food; its abundance is indicative of a proper political order, its scarcity indicative of political malaise. The ultimate source of prosperity is the spirit world, but it is the



primary responsibility of chiefs to act as intermediaries with the gods who dwell there (some of whom are presumed to be their ancestors) and to influence them to act benignly. Conceptually the distinction between gods and chiefs is somewhat blurred, and chiefs, upon their death, are transformed into powerful spirits. The mythical prototypes of chiefs, Raho and Tokaniua, are best described as demigods, with characteristics of both men and spirits. This conceptualization sets up the central paradox of the narratives—that chiefs are at once like people and like gods. They come from the people but are different from them.

The paradox is expressed in the legends through explorations of themes involving differentiation and reintegration. Rotuma is differentiated from Sāmoa, the land is differentiated from the sea, and people are differentiated from chiefs; then, in various ways, reintegration takes place and constraints are placed on the oppositions involved. Mediating categories such as islets and trees come to predominate over oppositions between sea and land, sky and earth. As part of this reintegration, the opposition between the people (represented by Raho) and the chiefs (represented by Tokaniua) is muted and constrained. The relationship between people and chiefs is finally construed as one of complementarity, with the people producing food (and other goods and services) for the benefit of chiefs, who intercede with the gods, who in turn make the land productive. However, this conception renders the nature of chieftainship problematic, for where is the source from which legitimate chiefly authority derives? Is it from the gods, whose association with the chiefs provides them with supernatural potency (*mana*), or is it from the people, who have elevated the chiefs and supported them with the products of their labor? Both, of course, are sources of legitimacy, but the degree of emphasis on one or the other has important implications. The problem is common to all Polynesian societies, and resolutions differ. Some of them, particularly highly stratified societies like Fiji, Tonga, Hawai'i, and Tahiti, emphasize the affiliation of chiefs and gods. The association is strengthened through lengthy genealogies tracing descent directly to ancestral deities, and the differentiation of chiefs from the people is clearly and sharply drawn. In those societies oral histories seem to reflect a preoccupation with chiefly rivalry, and in practice chiefs vied with one another for ascendance and used their genealogies to legitimate their affiliation with the gods. In

Rotuma the situation was different. While there is undeniable rivalry between chiefs reflected in the narratives (the contest between Raho and Tokaniua being a case in point), a more salient theme concerns relations between chiefs and the people. The relative lack of differentiation between them accentuates the underlying ambiguity, and the resultant tension is expressed through numerous tales of insurrection and rebellion. The basic message appears to be that chiefs are expected to use their godly powers for the benefit of the people, and that if they do not—if they turn mean and selfish at the expense of the people—then rebellion is not only justified, it is likely to be supported by the gods.

The legends also help to clarify the positions of *mua* and *sau* in Rotuman political thought. Both embodied representations of the Rotuman political system: the *mua* represented its original form, prior to the development of chieftainship, and represented commoners after chieftainship arose, whereas the *sau* represented chieftainship alone. Together, the *mua* and *sau* represented the complementary principles of domestication and vitality that together are the essence of legitimate chieftainship.

While the legends encode the fundamental logic of Rotuman political thought, and thus provide a necessary background for interpreting political institutions, such narratives do not provide sufficient information for explaining their specific historical manifestations. To complete the picture we must examine political pragmatics.

It will be recalled that at the time when Europeans arrived, Rotuma was divided into seven districts headed by *gagaj* 'es *itu'u* (district chiefs) and that the *fakpure*, who presumably appointed the *sau* and *mua*, was the head of one of these districts. Within districts, certain kin groups, who could trace their ancestry to a commonly accepted chiefly source, were known as *mosega* (literally, "bed," implying from the same ancestral progenitor). *Mosega* were generally composed of several *kāinaga* (kin groups) that were supposed to rotate the privilege of choosing a successor to district chieftainship. If the man appointed to the position proved unsatisfactory for one reason or another, he could be deposed by members of his *mosega*, who had the right to take away the title (and the authority) and allocate it to another.

In contrast with more stratified societies in which all major chiefs traced their ancestry directly to deified ancestors, Rotuman district chiefs drew their authority more

directly from the people in their locality, and since the districts were autonomous political units, this posed a problem with regard to the relationship of the island as a whole to the gods. The problem was one of mana, for only truly powerful chiefs could exert influence on the gods, who were perceived to be capricious and willful. There was therefore a strong cultural preference for a dominant chief who could demonstrate great potency. Since success in warfare was clear evidence of mana, a chief whose district was on the winning side of a battle was a candidate for paramountcy. All available evidence suggests that wars in Rotuma generally involved shifting alliances between two sets of districts, and that the head of the victorious alliance would assume a position of paramountcy, becoming *fakpure*.

This still left a problem, however. Since the *fakpure* was chief of one district among seven, and since he was engaged in secular politics, he was not a very suitable figure for symbolizing the unity of Rotuma. The position of *sau* was a solution. The *sau* occupied a sacred post, divorced from secular politics. He could personify the total society, and represent it (along with the *mua*, who for these purposes was alter ego to the *sau*) to the gods. His suitability, measured by the net prosperity of the people (bounty minus labor and tribute), was a direct reflection of the suitability of the *fakpure*, whose secular power kept the *sau* in office. The solution was elegant, but it still left some practical problems associated with the selection of candidates and the burden of supporting the *sau* in an appropriate manner. In the system of ranked lineages that characterized the great Polynesian chiefdoms, selection did not pose the same kind of problem, since rank was relatively unambiguous and primogeniture provided a definite rationale for choice. As a corollary, persons of lesser rank were obligated to provide support for their superiors by the extension of kinship rules. In Rotuma, however, where locality outweighed kinship as a political principle, ranking was far more problematic. Thus, there were multiple contenders for sauship, making succession a recurrent issue of potential dispute. Warfare was one mechanism for resolving such status ambiguities; rotation, as Williamson pointed out, was another. Rotation appears as an early solution in Rotuman oral history, but never to the exclusion of warfare. Indeed, Trouillet's narrative relates repetitive challenges to *fakpure* and *sau*, suggesting that rotation between districts did not settle the issues involved.

A key issue seems to have been the appropriate length of a *sau*'s reign. Rotation ingeniously involved selecting a person from one district and setting up his residence in another, thus symbolizing both qualities—indigenous and foreign—that combine to constitute paramount chieftainship. It seems from the narratives, however, that the people of the host district bore the brunt of responsibility for supplying the gluttonous needs of the *sau*, and for them the balance of benefits versus costs may have quickly shifted. Resentment of such burdensome demands is a prominent theme throughout the oral history of the island. There is evidence to suggest that over time the term of office for *sau* shortened, and by the time the institution was terminated in 1873 *sau* were serving for minimal periods. From Trouillet's documentation of sauship during historic times (1797–1870), three periods can be distinguished (table 3.1).

**Table 3.1**  
Average Reign of *Sau*

<u>Period</u>	<u>Years</u>	<u>Rotuman Cycles</u>
1797–1820	2.5	5.0
1820–1850	1.0	2.0
1850–1870	0.6	1.2

One might hypothesize that this decline resulted from the depopulation that was the result of diseases and other misfortunes brought by Europeans. This may have led Rotumans to question the efficacy of individuals who occupied the office of *sau*. It may well have been, as James Frazer pointed out many years ago in *The Golden Bough*,<sup>20</sup> that as the public image of a chief approached impotence, the need to replace him increased. Rotumans seem to have used the institutionalized mechanism already available to them—installing a series of new *sau*—in an attempt to revitalize a declining office.

The Rotuman Version of Polynesian Chieftainship

Ultimately it appears that the main problem confronting Rotumans in conceptualizing their political system arose from a set of paradoxes associated with chieftainship: that chiefs are gods, but are human; that they are of the people,

but are different from them; that they represent the unity of the society, but have personal interests within it. Although these paradoxes appear as oppositions within Rotuman legends, we believe they represent an underlying set of ideas common to all Polynesian systems: that human beings are more or less godlike along a continuum, with chiefs toward the divine end of the spectrum. Paradoxical dilemmas emerge in relation to specific instances (the legends provide, in this view, a way to talk about such instances).

Two principles were involved: rank and distance. Rank was conceived primarily in genealogical terms, traced through first-born children of first-born parents to founding ancestors, and, ideally, back to the gods of creation. In smaller, less-stratified Polynesian societies, remembered genealogies tended to be shorter, as in Rotuma.

The principle of distance had both physical and social aspects. Physically, removal of a person from normal social situations served to make him more remote; socially, distancing was achieved through ritual prohibitions and other means of differentiating the person's behavior from normal patterns. At the extreme, and particularly in mythical accounts, such persons reversed social norms (e.g., committed incest, ate human flesh), thus emulating the behavior of gods. Distancing involved the principle of *mystification*, rendering the person more like the gods than like fellow humans.

At the apex of rank and distance were the high gods of Polynesian mythology; at the base were slaves, persons utterly without rank or sanctity. Local secular chiefs enjoyed some rank but were only slightly distanced; local gods held somewhat higher rank and a moderate degree of distancing; while high chiefs were in the upper ranges of both dimensions, at least in the more stratified societies. However, positions were not fixed, but were relative—a chief may have been godlike to a commoner, but just another man to a person of comparable status, while a commoner may have been perceived as godlike by his children. In addition, the Polynesian concept of mana involved a notion of inherent instability since it was manifested in action.<sup>21</sup> Hence all statuses vis-à-vis one another were continuously waxing or waning.

This underlying Polynesian cultural logic unfolded differently in different societies, depending on historical circumstances. In archipelagoes containing large islands and substantial populations, where chiefly lines were particularly

powerful, these principles were carried to their logical extremes. Genealogies were traced back to creator gods, and high chiefs were distanced from commoners both physically and socially to the point where their mystification approximated that of high gods. As a class they were so far removed from the realm of the people that their significant relationships were confined to each other and to the gods. Oral traditions from these societies reflect this situation.

In contrast, Rotuma was a small isolated island with a medium-sized population. Practical considerations favored local autonomy and set limits on the degree to which chiefs could be distinguished from other people. Distancing was difficult both physically, because of the small size of the island, and socially, because the population was too small to facilitate a distinct breeding population of chiefs, keeping kinship distance within boundaries. As a result, Rotuman chiefs were not in a strong position to be either elevated in rank or mystified to a level approximating gods. Conceptually they were much closer to the people than to gods.

### District Organization

According to legend, Rotuma was originally divided into five districts—Itu'ti'u, Fag'uta, Oinafa, Noa'tau, and Malhaha—each governed by a head chief (*gagaj 'es itu'u*). On two occasions, further divisions took place: Legend holds that a portion of the largest district, Itu'ti'u, was given as a gift by the chief to a subchief from Oinafa, thus creating the district of Itu'muta.<sup>22</sup> A second story describes a war in which the district of Fag'uta was defeated by Oinafa, resulting in a division of the former district into two: Juju and Pepjei.<sup>23</sup> By the time of European intrusion there were seven districts.

At any given time the districts were ranked in status, the particular order being influenced in part by the size and manpower of each district and in part by the results of the last war. The rank order was reflected in priority of ceremonial kava drinking, and breaches of this priority were cause for interdistrict strife. The chiefs met periodically to discuss matters of common interest, one of their main concerns being the overall prosperity of the island. Of paramount significance for this goal was the selection of a suitable person to fill the office of *sau*, whose role it was to ensure the prosperity of the island through the performance of proper ritual.

Districts were divided into territorially distinct kinship communities known as *ho'aga*, each of which was headed by a titled male. These titles were ranked, and indications are that district chiefs were chosen exclusively from the *ho'aga* owning the highest-ranking titles within each district. Titled men from other *ho'aga* acted as subchiefs. They exercised primary authority over their own units, including the allocation of land.



**Figure 3.3** A Rotuman chief sketched by A. T. Agate, engraved by R. H. Pease. *Wilkes 1844*.

Choosing the successor to a title was the right of the group of individuals who could trace their ancestry to the *ho'aga* that owned the name. Any adult male in the group was eligible to succeed to the position, with kinship seniority heavily weighted as a criterion for selection, but consideration was also given to personal character and other practical considerations.<sup>24</sup>

The role of the *gagaj 'es itu'u* was described by Gardiner:

The power of the *gagaja* in his district was not arbitrary; he was assisted by a council of the possessors of the *hoag* names, which might reverse any action of his. Conflicts between the chief and his Council were rare so long as his decisions were in accordance with, and he did not infringe, the Rotuman customs. He was called upon to decide disputes about land between *hoag*, or within a *hoag*, if its *pure*

[subchief] could not settle it; disputes between individuals of different *hoag* were referred to him. He could call out the district for fish-driving, war, or any work in which all were interested, and had the power of fining any individuals who did not come. If the walls or paths of his district were in disrepair, he ordered out all the *hoag*, interested, to do the work; he had further to keep a watch to see that a proper number of cocoanut trees were planted, and that all the *papoi* land was cultivated. Any one receiving the *hoag* name had to be recognized by him on their election before they could take it. As a set-off to these, he received to some extent first fruits and a present of food from each of the parties to any suit, which might have been held before him in his district.<sup>25</sup>

One can only roughly estimate the number of *ho'aga* that existed prior to the arrival of Europeans. A comprehensive list of *ho'aga* names collected by Dr. H. S. Evans in 1950 included 105 such names, many of which were no longer in use at the time. It is likely that some *ho'aga* came into existence through the expansion of certain kin groups while others died out, so a figure of a hundred active *ho'aga* units at any given time seems reasonable. If one assumes the island's population to have been between 3,000 and 4,000 at the time of European intrusion, *ho'aga* would have averaged between thirty and forty members each.<sup>26</sup>

Ceremonially, the prestige of the various *ho'aga* titles was recognized in the precedence of kava drinking on ceremonial occasions and in the seating arrangement during district meetings. Practically, the order coincided with degree of authority and a division of labor. The second-ranking *fa 'es ho'aga* (*ho'aga* subchief) in each district was the *faufisi*. He acted as a lieutenant to the district chief and was known as the chief's "right hand." The *faufisi* was in charge of all ceremonial affairs involving the district as a unit, including the management of kava ceremonies. He was also the war leader in times of interdistrict strife. In addition, the *faufisi* generally was in charge of one portion of the district, holding direct authority over several lower-ranking *fa 'es ho'aga*. The third-ranking *fa 'es ho'aga* was known as the chief's "left hand." He was usually in charge of the remainder of the district but had no specific role in district affairs comparable to that of the *faufisi*. In the larger districts, authority was sometimes subdivided even further, with intermediate-



ranking chiefs exercising decision-making authority over two or more low-ranking ones.

One *fa 'es ho'aga* in each district was generally designated as *tautei*, the fishing expedition leader (discussed in chapter 2). Another was ordinarily in charge of the district *kohea* (kitchen), with his job being to organize food preparation during district feasts. Each of these positions was hereditary, remaining within the same kin group (or *ho'aga*) unless a crisis dictated a change. For example, cowardice on the part of a *faufisi* or ineptitude by a *tautei* might lead the district chief, with popular support behind him, to award the role to the holder of another title.

### Authority and Autonomy

Although the paramount chiefs from each district met in an islandwide council, each of Rotuma's seven districts has operated more or less independently from precolonial times to the present. According to Captain J. G. Goodenough, who visited the island in 1874:

The island is in seven districts....These divisions come down from old times, and they have always been independent. No one is higher than another, but they speak of Maraf [of Noa'tau] as being the highest, while I should think that Albert of Ituten [Itu'ti'u] is really the one of most influence. He seems to have most people....They told me that they have a meeting of chiefs occasionally, which they call Fon [*fono*, that is, food eaten by chiefs after drinking kava] and another name; and that before attending this meeting they speak each to their own people and ascertain their wants.<sup>27</sup>

In anticipation of cession to Great Britain, the district chiefs recorded a memorandum of agreement explicitly affirming their essential autonomy vis-à-vis each other:

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 [regarding the petition for cession] 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 arrangement holds good for one year. Wednesday July 16, 1879 (Sgd) G. Bower, Lt. Commdg., H.M.S. *Conflict*.<sup>28</sup>

The degree to which people disregarded the authority of chiefs in pursuit of their own self-interests was obvious to British administrators from the beginning of colonial rule. In a letter written in 1880, Deputy Commissioner Hugh Romilly expressed his apprehensions:

In my opinion the great difficulty to be contended with here is the want of obedience and respect paid by the young men to their chiefs. The chiefs are chiefs only in name and though anxious for power are afraid to enforce any commands of their own or indeed to give any commands at all to their people.<sup>29</sup>

In this letter Romilly attempted to account for this lack of authority in a number of ways. He blamed the missions for eroding chiefly powers and castigated the Rotuman lay teachers of the Wesleyan Mission in particular for refusing to obey their chiefs. He cited the propensity of young men to go away to sea and to live in foreign places, returning with new ideas that undermined old customs. But the nature of Rotuman chieftainship, and the autonomy associated with it, clearly goes much deeper. As Romilly himself noted:

They say they are all chiefs and indeed it is difficult to discover who are the common people if any such exist. They can all trace their ancestors back many generations, many of them, my interpreter for instance, for some 300 years. As the population was never very large every man's ancestors have at some period or another married into a noble family and he is in consequence noble himself.<sup>30</sup>

*Ho'aga* leaders were chiefs in their own right and did not always cooperate with the district chief.<sup>31</sup> Colonial officials also remarked on the independent behavior of individuals and *ho'aga* in relation to their chiefs. In the words of Resident Commissioner William Carew:

[An] 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 [titled *ho'aga*

leaders] 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.<sup>32</sup>

It seems clear from these accounts that the power of chiefs within districts and that of subchiefs within their *ho'aga* was well controlled by cultural rules. Abuses of authority no doubt occurred, but members of a district or *ho'aga* could have a chief deposed if he got too far out of line, provided the kin group that owned the title agreed.<sup>33</sup>



**Photo 3.1** A Rotuman chief. © Fiji Museum.

A further indication of how relationships between chiefs and people were enacted historically can be found in the letters and diaries of Catholic and Wesleyan missionaries, who first arrived on Rotuma in the late 1830s. Although the missionaries usually tried to work through the chiefs to spread the Christian message, it is telling to note that they often won over the people before their leaders came around. This created difficulties when the missionaries forbade the new converts to contribute to or participate in feasts for unconverted chiefs or for the *sau*. Backed by the new spiritual authorities, people successfully resisted chiefly demands.<sup>34</sup>

Following cession to Great Britain, Resident Commissioners (and later, District Officers) continued to complain about the independent attitudes of Rotumans, and what they perceived to be a lack of leadership on the part of the chiefs.<sup>35</sup>

The ability of chiefs to force compliance was limited by the fact that most households were economically self-sufficient and though they clearly benefitted from cooperating with other households, it was rarely a necessity to do so. Thus, following a dispute with a *ho'aga* headman, a household might withhold their labor, or even break away and join another *ho'aga*, where they would be welcomed for the additional labor they could provide for communal projects.

Even within households (*kaunohoga*) autonomy tempered authority. The household head (*pure*) was responsible for organizing activities of the group but he, too, had little power to force compliance. The fact was that individuals had options if the *pure* (whether he or she was a parent, sibling, aunt, or uncle) got too oppressive. Household members could usually find other relatives willing to take them in, especially if they were able to contribute to the household in some way.

Clearly, autonomy pervaded Rotuman culture from top to bottom. It was a value that was instilled in children from infancy—it is a Rotuman maxim that one cannot force children to do anything they do not want to do. And it is a theme that has patterned Rotuman history from time immemorial until the present day.

## Notes to Chapter 3

This chapter draws on information previously published in several journal articles and books, including Alan Howard's *Learning to Be Rotuman* (1971). Chieftainship is a main topic in "Conservatism and Non-Traditional Leadership in Rotuma" (Howard 1963b), "The Rotuman District Chief: A Study in Changing Patterns of Authority" (Howard 1966a), "History, Myth and Polynesian Chieftainship: The Case of Rotuman Kings" (Howard 1979), "Cannibal Chiefs and the Charter for Rebellion in Rotuman Myth" (Howard 1986), "Money, Sovereignty and Moral Authority on Rotuma" (Howard 1996), and "Ritual Status and Power Politics in Modern Rotuma" (Howard and Rensel 1997).

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<sup>1</sup> The word *vakai* (*uakai*), as a verb, translates as "to be on the look-out, to watch or look out for, to look into the distance (for or at something)" (Churchward 1940, 344). Hence the reference is to the chief, who is responsible for looking after the welfare of the island as a whole. The word *fakpure* is composed of the prefix *fak-*, "pertaining to" and *pure*, "to decide," "rule," "control," "judge," and hence as a noun it implies "decision maker" or "governing authority" (Churchward 1940, 190, 291). The word *sau*, which is cognate with the Tongan *hau*, is translated simply as "king" by Churchward (1940, 307), but a clue to its core proto-Polynesian meaning is the Rennellese usage "abundance of gifts from the gods" (Elbert 1975, 251). The word *mua* means "to be or go in front or before or first—either in place or in time or in order of merit, etc." (Churchward 1940, 268). *Gagaj 'es itu'u* translates as "person of rank or merit in possession of a district" (Churchward 1940, 209). It is unfortunate that we have only the undifferentiated English word "chief" to refer to all of these positions.

<sup>2</sup> In Rotuman oral traditions, true chiefs are external and non-indigenous—they are strangers to the land. This does not necessarily mean that they are actually of foreign origin, only that the assumption of chieftainship involves symbolic entrance into the society from outside (see Sahlins 1981). Thus Raho, as the founder of the island, is an anomaly, being both an outsider and indigenous, while indigenous Rotumans who assume chieftainship are in a similar position. Variations on these themes feature in many Rotuman legends (see Howard 1985).

<sup>3</sup> See Titifanua and Churchward 1995, 7. In Trouillet's version of the story, Rotuma was first formed so that its foundation ran from north to south, but was ordered rotated so that it would lay from east to west (see map, p. 62). A clockwise rotation would shift north to east, south to west, thus suggesting their equivalence.

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<sup>4</sup> See Howard 1986 for a fuller account of cannibal themes in Rotuman narratives.

<sup>5</sup> Williamson 1924.

<sup>6</sup> Ladefoged 1993, 270.

<sup>7</sup> Ladefoged 1993, 153–154.

<sup>8</sup> Lesson 1838, 432.

<sup>9</sup> Even the criterion of chiefly rank was called into question by one of Hocart's informants, who referred to a time when there was only one eligible person in Rotuma, the legendary Fonmon. He was supposed to have impregnated ambitious women from around the island, making their offspring eligible. The informant added, however, that sometimes an individual was appointed as a result of hard work (Hocart 1913, 4573–4575). Several narratives also suggest that a person might conceivably be appointed *sau* for achievements.

<sup>10</sup> Gardiner 1898, 461.

<sup>11</sup> Lesson 1838, 432.

<sup>12</sup> Allen 1895.

<sup>13</sup> Hocart 1913, 4576.

<sup>14</sup> Dillon 1829, 95.

<sup>15</sup> Allen 1895.

<sup>16</sup> Titifanua and Churchward 1995, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Allardyce 1885–1886, 142.

<sup>18</sup> Gardiner 1898, 460.

<sup>19</sup> Williamson 1924, 427–428.

<sup>20</sup> Frazer 1890.

<sup>21</sup> See Firth 1940.

<sup>22</sup> Titifanua and Churchward 1995, 33–35.

<sup>23</sup> Trouillet 1868.

<sup>24</sup> For a more extensive account of succession, see Howard 1964, 26–52.

<sup>25</sup> Gardiner 1898, 430.

<sup>26</sup> Early population estimates range from 5,000 (Tromelin 1829) to 2,000–3,000 (Lucatt 1851). A review of the current ecological situation and an evaluation of the various estimates suggests a figure between 3,000 and 4,000 (see chapter 11).

<sup>27</sup> Goodenough 1876.

<sup>28</sup> Eason 1951, 62.

<sup>29</sup> Outward Letters, 25 September 1880.

<sup>30</sup> Outward Letters, 25 September 1880.

<sup>31</sup> Gardiner 1898, 430.

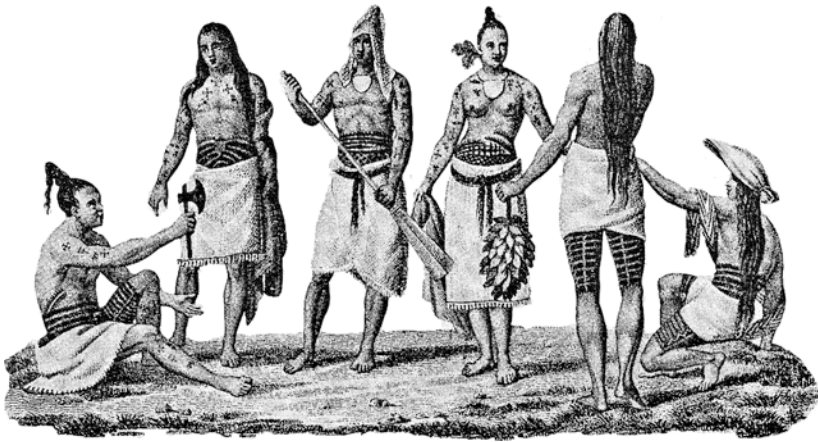
<sup>32</sup> Outward Letters, 26 February 1931.

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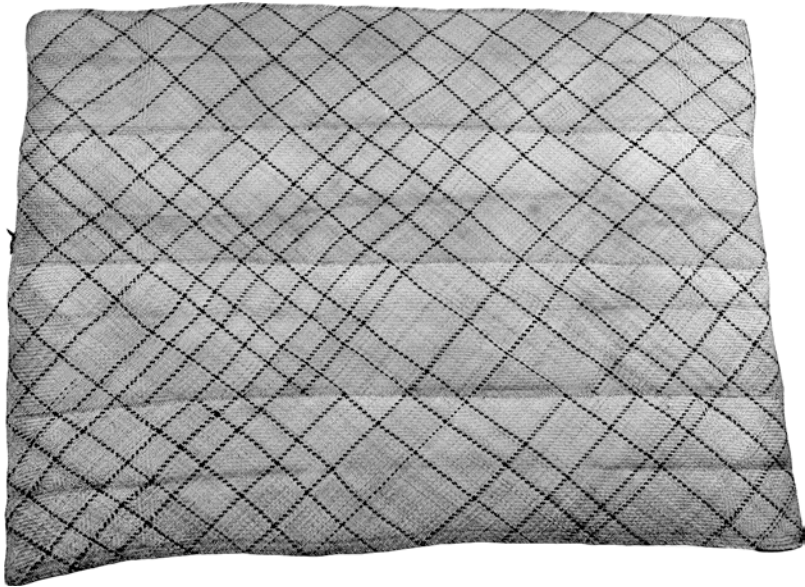
<sup>33</sup> Gardiner 1898, 429.

<sup>34</sup> Methodist Church of Australasia, Wesleyan Missionary Notices No. 34 (January 1866); No. 5 Vol. II (April 1868); No. 13 Vol. III (April 1870).

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Outward Letters, Annual Reports of 1928, 1930, 1931, 1937, and 1939.



**Figure 4.1** Les habitants des îles de Rotouma (The Inhabitants of the Rotouma Islands). Note the tattoos depicted. *Duperrey 1826.*



**Photo 4.1** Woven mat from Rotouma. © *The Trustees of the British Museum.*



## 4 Creativity in Arts and Crafts

A Rotumah mat is valued in other islands much as an Indian shawl is valued in Europe. Compared to Rotumah mats, the finest Batique mats from Fiji are coarse and ugly; while the mats of Samoa and Tonga do not deserve to be mentioned in the same breath. A good Rotumah mat will take many years to make, and will cost at least five pounds of our money. To an Englishman's eye, there is nothing in them of such surpassing excellence. I, however, brought two of them back with me to Fiji; and, on showing them to the Queen of Cakadrovi, she expressed such admiration, and begged so earnestly to have them, that I could not refuse her.

Litton Forbes, *Two Years in Fiji*, 1875

When Europeans first arrived Rotumans were engaged in a range of creative activities including plaiting mats and other items, manufacturing bark cloth, making shell ornaments, tattooing, and a range of performance arts, including oratory, chanting, singing and dancing, ritual clowning, and kava ceremonies. These are forms of creativity that are widespread throughout Polynesia, yet each island or island group gives them their own unique stamp.

### Weaving

Rotumans plaited a variety of useful and ceremonial items, including mats, baskets, and fans from materials such as pandanus leaves, coconut fronds, and the bark of certain trees.

Bennett reported that four kinds of mats were manufactured on the island in 1830, including one ordinary mat (*'epa*) and three grades of fine white mats (*apei*). The lowest grade of fine mat, *apei sala'a*, was made from *sa'aga*, a species of pandanus. Finer than this was the *apei niau*, which was

woven from hibiscus bark. Finer still, and most highly valued according to Bennett, was the *arnea*, plaited from the bark of the paper mulberry tree.<sup>1</sup>

Mats of various kinds were used for a wide range of domestic and ceremonial purposes, including sturdy coconut-leaf mats for floor coverings and doors, ordinary pandanus mats for sitting and sleeping, and finer mats for clothing and ceremonial presentation. Gardiner described the manufacture of two types of plaited material used for common, wraparound dress (*taktakai*) for men and *arumea* (*arnea*) for women, both of which he claimed were made from hibiscus fibers at the time of his visit.<sup>2</sup> At weddings, burials, and feasts, he wrote, fine mats of large size were proper dress.<sup>3</sup>

One type of fine mat, the *tofua*, was made from pandanus leaves (*sa'aga*) and trimmed with feathers; it was worn by chiefs and the *sau*.<sup>4</sup> Chiefs also wore a woven girdle (*titi*) over their wraparounds. Macgregor described *titi* as wide bands with long fringes, their total length being rather short, not reaching to the knees.



**Photo 4.2** Woven girdle (*titi*). © The Trustees of the British Museum.

A type of *apei* was reportedly worn by warriors when going to battle:

The war mats are of the same texture as the [*apei*], but of smaller size; four of these are worn together, fastened round the waist, when going to meet their enemies; they placed each over the other, and so arranged so as to display two deep vandykes decorated with red feathers on the edge of each, except the upper one, which has two oblong strips ornamented in a similar manner.<sup>5</sup>

The *sau* and other high-ranking persons also wore special garments signifying their social positions. According to Gardiner:

The dress of the *sou* [*sau*] consisted of a fine mat, over which the *malhida* [*mal heta*, or chiefly girdle] was

worn. This dress was made of the leaves of the *saaga* (*Pandanus* sp.?), split up, and plaited together like sinnet at the top, and hanging down loose. They were stained for the most part red, but some might be left white. Black was sometimes introduced by means of the bark of the *si*, a species of banana, which on drying turns a dull black. Another dress, pertaining to some of the officers, was the *ololi*; it appears to have been really a sort of apron, made of a fine mat, and hung down in front. It was almost completely covered with the red feathers of the *arumea* (*Myzomela chermesina*, Gray); its use was restricted to particular feasts.<sup>6</sup>

Gardiner asserted that it was taboo for anyone other than the *sau* to wear a *malhida*.

Fine white mats (*apei*) were the main items of wealth in the prestige economy. They were consecrated by the sacrifice of a pig prior to their manufacture, and therefore symbolized life (and, by extension, human life—since pigs were sacrificial substitutes for humans). They were and throughout the twentieth century remained the primary items of exchange at births, first birthdays, weddings, welcoming ceremonies, funerals, headstone unveilings, and just about every other significant ceremonial event. The presentation of an *apei* also lent enormous weight to any form of request or apology; it was very difficult indeed to turn down an appeal accompanied by one.<sup>7</sup>

Making mats was the main occupation of adult women in the traditional economy. Bennett commented that the manufacture of fine mats was such a tedious process that it took six months or more to complete just one.<sup>8</sup> The making of an *apei* was highly ritualized and disrupted the everyday life of a community. Macgregor described the social implications in his fieldnotes:

Women of district called to make a mat—a *sa'a*—a special fine white mat for some purpose. They have a *manea* [clown]<sup>9</sup> who calls on people for anything she likes or workers like. Dancers, food, etc. She has powers to demand anything of anybody. When the workers are tired or hungry, they call the *manea* and ask for food or men to dance for them. Any person passing by that this clown catches, must do her bidding. When it is known that a district had called each *hoag* [village] to supply their best weavers to work on a *sa'a*,...all Rotuma will attempt to avoid this place,

because of the *manea*. During the work each *hoag* will take a day at feeding the workers.

*Apei* were prominently displayed during ceremonial events. At weddings, for example, they were carried by the highest-ranking women and formally unfolded for all to see. The bride and groom's seat (*päega*) was topped with an *apei*, and another *apei* was placed above them as protection from malevolent spirits. The uncooked food brought by the groom's side was covered with mats and topped by an *apei*. Formal weddings included a ritual (*fau*) during which bride and groom were wrapped in *apei* (photo 4.3).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, *apei* were given in gratitude to chiefs and other participants, such as the female clown (*hân mane'āk sū*, discussed below), who contribute to the success of an event. The bride's and groom's parents exchanged mats, as did the couple's namesakes (*sigoa*). Ultimately, most of the *apei* presented at a wedding were redistributed among the main participants.



**Photo 4.3** Bride and groom being wrapped in *apei* during *fau* ceremony, 1960. Alan Howard.

*Apei* were used to top off seats (*päega*) in a number of ritual contexts besides weddings. Honored guests at most ceremonies were seated on an *apei*, symbolically elevating them to chiefly status.

Inspired by the story of 'Äeatos, Vilsoni Hereniko, a Rotuman scholar, playwright, and moviemaker, has sug-

gested that *apei* might be considered the equivalent of "woven gods." In the course of the 'Āeatos narrative, humans ward off threatening, cannibalistic spirits ('*atua*) by making loud noises and entangling them in woven nets. Symbolically weaving '*atua* into mats, Hereniko argued, promotes their transformation from freely wandering, malevolent beings into "bound" spirits ('*aitu*) whose powers could be harnessed via propitiation and prayer. Central to Hereniko's thesis are a group of uncircumcised male '*atua*, known as *sa'aitu*. Insofar as *sa'aitu* were regarded as both dangerous and potentially helpful in warfare, they encapsulate the ambivalence with which Rotumans regarded free-roaming spirits, and the need they felt to constrain them. As Hereniko put it:

Since the term *sa'aitu* refers to a group of uncircumcised male '*atua* who wandered freely, and the weavers an assembly of a considerable number of women, it is likely that the weaving was, symbolically, believed to be constraining the *sa'aitu*....Weaving an '*atua* into a mat was the same as transforming it into an '*aitu*: a potentially malevolent '*atua* could be physicalized and made benevolent or harmless. By being physicalized in the form of a mat, '*atua* were brought into the moral order, making it possible for human beings to exercise control over their disposition. Rotuman fine mats, from this standpoint, are a supreme symbol of domestication, more specifically, of domesticated *mana* 'potency.'<sup>11</sup>

Hereniko's thesis helps to make sense of the Rotuman custom of wrapping a bride and groom with *apei* at weddings (the *fau* ceremony). In this instance, the act of wrapping the couple can be seen as symbolically binding spiritual powers in the service of the couple's fertility.

### Bark Cloth

Early European commentators reported that Rotumans manufactured a kind of bark cloth (*uha*), but they gave few details of the designs. Lesson reported that the Rotumans made a fabric out of breadfruit and mulberry bark, similar to that of the Sandwich and Society Islands, which they dyed a deep reddish-brown. He saw little of it used as clothing, however.<sup>12</sup> Bennett also mentioned bark cloth, reporting that it was stained various colors procured from native plants.<sup>13</sup>

The most detail concerning bark cloth comes from the field notes of Gordon Macgregor. According to one of the Rotumans he consulted, the juice from the bark of the *sa'a* tree [*Macaraga spp.*] was used for painting the cloth a dark reddish color; according to another, the paint was a mixture of turmeric and the juice squeezed from the bark of one kind of tree (*favrau* [*Pometia pinnata*]) and the root of another (*'ura* [*Morinda citrifolia*]). Designs were painted on by hand rather than stenciled, he was told.<sup>14</sup>

Bark cloth seems never to have been a main fabric for clothing,<sup>15</sup> and its ceremonial significance seems to have been much more limited than it was, for instance, in Tonga or Hawai'i.<sup>16</sup> Macgregor was told that the finished bark cloth was used as mosquito netting by hanging it over a center pole in the manner of a pup tent, the ends being closed with additional pieces of cloth. Reportedly the fabric was very thin.<sup>17</sup>

### Wood Carving

Rotumans did not produce elaborate carved forms such as those produced in the larger Polynesian archipelagoes and by the New Zealand Māori. Carving on Rotuma was essentially utilitarian, and included such practical items as canoes, fishhooks, headrests, coconut graters, food tables (*'umefe*), kava bowls, slit drums, war clubs (see photos 7.2–10, page 166), and spears. With the exception of canoes, descriptions of carved wooden objects are conspicuously missing from the accounts of early European visitors. War clubs were one of the few wooden items that had decorative (geometric) designs carved into them, but they were not particularly distinctive.

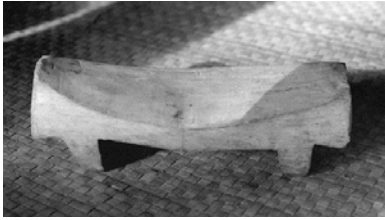
### Shell Ornaments

Ornaments of various types were quite popular among the early Rotumans, and some were used to designate rank. Lesson's observations are worthy of quotation:

The principal ornament of those who came on board [the ship] who seemed to enjoy a certain rank was a large pearl-oyster shell on the breast called a *tifa*.



**Photo 4.4** Coconut graters and bowl, 1940. *H. S. Evans.*



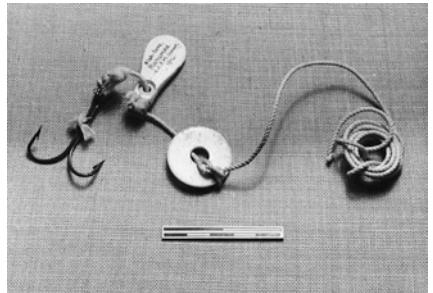
**Photo 4.5** Headrest, 2001.  
*F. Deschamps.*



**Photo 4.6** 'Umefe (chiefly eating table). © Fiji Museum.



**Photo 4.7** Fishhook. © The Trustees of the British Museum.



**Photo 4.8** Fish lure of bone mounted with European hoods. © Fiji Museum.



**Photo 4.9** Outrigger canoe, 1940. *H. S. Evans.*

Apparently, there are no oysters around their shores, so they try to obtain them from whomever they can, offering one of their fine straw weavings for five or six shells of this testacean. Some wore porcelain ovules called *poure* [in Fiji, *tabua*]; some wore a white braid on their breasts called *toui* while others wound long strings of shells around their bodies. None of these paltry decorations, however, seemed designed as a mark of rank or authority. Around the necks of some young people, I noticed necklaces made of balls of ivory. This ornament, usually worn by women, is so highly prized by the islanders, that they zealously collect the teeth of the cachalot [sperm whale], an excellent trading article for whalers. They prefer them to fabrics, even to metal axes, even though they can only turn them into ornaments.<sup>18</sup>

Dillon reported that whales' teeth were among the most desired trade items sought by Rotumans: "With the whales' teeth and tortoise-shells they ornament their clubs, spears, &c., and make neck and ear-ornaments of bits of turtle shell, which among them are valued as gold is with us."<sup>19</sup>

Gardiner, summarizing the available information at the end of the nineteenth century, commented that whales' teeth necklaces were only worn by chiefs. He reported that they were generally buried with their possessor, as one of his most valued possessions. Beads of whales' teeth were called *lei*, necklaces *tēfui*. Hence, according to Gardiner, these necklaces were termed *tēfui lei*. They were, he claimed, "the money of the old days."<sup>20</sup>

Gardiner was told by the Rotumans he consulted that the *sau* and *mua* both wore *tēfui lei*, and, on each wrist, a round piece of turtle bone (*mulele*). He found, however, that a *mulele* from the grave of a *mua* he excavated was not made of bone, but of something resembling the outer part of a pearl shell. This *mulele* was about two inches in diameter and had a large hole in the center.<sup>21</sup>

As for pearl-shell breastplates, *tiaf hapa* (half an oyster shell), Gardiner affirmed that only chiefs wore them. He wrote that they were shaped by taking off the horny layer and smoothing it down, so that the shell retained its original shape. "The convex side was rubbed down till the outer coats were quite removed and the nacre was reached, and this side was hung outwards."<sup>22</sup>

In his field notes Macgregor described a necklace of three shells strung together with one-eighth-inch braided sennit.



He noted that mother-of-pearl half shells were made into necklaces for *sau*, who wore them around their necks, and that such items were found in their tombs. Macgregor also mentioned *mulele*, which he described as made of two projecting pieces from the tail end of a turtle shell, and worn around the neck or wrists on a string.

### Tattooing

Following his visit to Rotuma in 1791, Captain Edward Edwards of HMS *Pandora* wrote that Rotumans were "tattooed in a different manner from the natives of the other islands we had visited, having the figure of a fish, birds and a variety of other things marked upon their arms."<sup>23</sup> George Hamilton, who was also aboard the *Pandora*, commented, "Their bodies were curiously marked with the figures of men, dogs, fishes, and birds, upon every part of them; so that every man was a moving landscape."<sup>24</sup>

Lesson, commenting on his visit in 1824, wrote:

Their most outstanding and characteristic ornamentation is tattooing, which they call *cache*. The body, from the lower chest to just above the knee, is completely covered with a regular tattoo strongly reminiscent of the thigh-pieces of the knights of old. A broad strip behind the thigh prevents the bands of tattooing from completely encircling the leg. The stomach and loins are covered with curving scalloped lines whose blackness contrasts agreeably with the natural color of the untouched skin. The chest and arms receive another kind of design. Where the former is notable for the black mass it forms on the skin, the latter is distinguished by the delicacy of its designs: the fragile shapes of flying fish, flowers and other graceful objects. Some natives had rows of black dots on their legs, while others displayed raised scars on the shoulders of the type common among the African negro race as among its scattered branches in the Pacific.<sup>25</sup>

Lucatt arrived in Rotuma seventeen years later and found the practice of tattooing still very much in vogue. He described the process in some detail:

The natives of Rotumah do not tattoo their faces, but their bodies, particularly from the waist to the knees, are ornamented with various designs, some of them

very elegant; and when I first saw them at a distance, I thought they had got on close fitting blue drawers. Their arms are covered with fantastic devices, and being desirous of witnessing the operation I induced a native to tattoo a small figure on one of mine. Very few are skilled at the art of tattooing, and I was surprised at the number of instruments used by the operator: they are made of small pieces of tortoise-shell of different widths neatly secured to handles, and resemble miniature garden hoes, with fine serrated teeth cut in the edges of the blades, sharp as needles. Having rubbed down the nut of a peculiar tree that had been burnt to charcoal, the operator mixed with it the juice of a herb, and water to render it sufficiently fluid. Without first tracing the design, he dipped the teeth of the instrument into the mixture, and placing it on my arm tapped it gently with a light piece of wood so as just to draw the blood, and he kept changing the instrument from very broad to very narrow, as the nature of the figure he intended to produce, required. The operation is painful, at least I found it so, and should think it must be very severe to those who submit their whole bodies to the puncturing process; but it is the "fashion of Rotumah," and the fear of being ridiculed by their companions overcomes every other dread.<sup>26</sup>

A half-century later, Gardiner reported that the men were always tattooed with a pair of drawers reaching from the waist to just below the knee. Typical designs on men's shoulders included the *periro*, representing a strong-smelling flower commonly given to one's sweetheart; the *māiro*, a common bush; stars, circles, crosses and other geometrical designs. He wrote that women's tattoos were confined to the arms and consisted of circles enclosing designs (figure 4.2).<sup>27</sup>

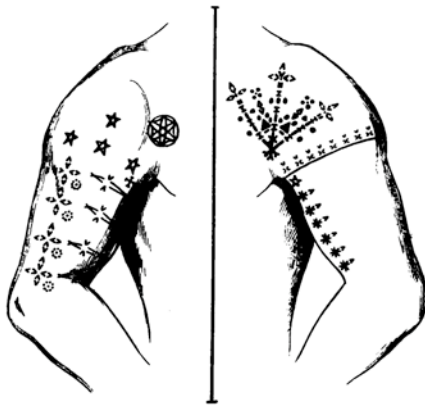
A. M. Hocart was told during his visit in 1913 that victims in a war could be identified by their tattoos, suggesting that tattoos were individualized. "One man tattooed one part and not another, and they recognized him thus. One would leave a blank space on belly, another over his knees, and they knew him by it."<sup>28</sup>



Typical tattoo marking of the drawers



Tattoo mark of the women



Tattoo markings of the shoulders

**Figure 4.2** Tattoo patterns. *Gardiner 1896.*

Macgregor, who visited Rotuma well after missionaries had terminated the practice of tattooing, included in his field notes drawings very similar to those of Gardiner. He reported that the patterns were irregular and "said to be made out of the operators' minds." He explicitly compared the Rotuman practice with that of the Samoans:

The tattooing of the body went to the lower ribs, and the string lines were just under the nipples. This is at least four inches more tattooing than is done on Samoans. The design was criss-cross or latticed work and not filled in as solidly as in the Samoan practice.<sup>29</sup>

According to one of the Rotumans Macgregor consulted, women formerly tattooed their entire arms and hands, and some their jaws. A line was also drawn around the ankle. He remarked that, for women, ankle and hand tattoos were most in evidence at the time of his visit.

Tattooing was done by specialists (*majau*) using a dye made either from candlenut (*si'esi* [*Aleurites moluccana*]), which was burnt into a charcoal-like state, or from the roasted shell of the *hefau* nut (*Callophylum*). The powder was mixed with water and the instruments dipped into it. The tattooing comb was made of fish vertebrae or tortoise shell, with a handle like the ones used by Samoans. The *majau* marked a design on the skin, then used the comb to tap in the lines. Another of Macgregor's consultants told him that when a chief was being tattooed, a complementary tattoo had to be made on someone else. Since the chief was being wounded and spilling blood, someone else also had to be hurt in payment for the chief's suffering.<sup>30</sup> Another individual told Macgregor that men who were tattooed were considered properly dressed and could appear in public without a loincloth and still retain their modesty. This same man told him that only women who had their arms and hands tattooed could make kava, and that an untattooed man could not make *fekei* (pudding).<sup>31</sup>

These reports suggest that tattoos were not only symbolically important but also probably encoded information about an individual's placement in Rotuman society. On another level, tattooing appears to have symbolized the domestication and restraint of antisocial and violent impulses. This is clearly evident in the legend of Kirkirsasa (*kirkiri* = armpits, *sasa* = tattooing or tattoo marks of a certain type). To summarize the story:

Kirkirsasa was a woman who lived on the western end of Rotuma. Her armpits were completely tattooed. One day she sent her two maidservants down to the sea to fetch some seawater so that she could make *tāhroro* (a fermented coconut condiment). Instead of getting the seawater the two girls went for a stroll along the beach and encountered a sleeping giant with fiery red teeth. The girls threw stones at the giant's teeth until he woke in a rage and chased them back to Kirkirsasa's home. The girls told Kirkirsasa what had happened and begged her not to be angry. Kirkirsasa admonished the girls, and told them the giant would come to eat them.

When the giant appeared he was exhausted and sat down. Kirkirsasa then offered to dance for him while he rested, before eating the two girls. "Dance away," said the giant, "and let us have a look." Kirkirsasa danced, slapping her tattooed armpits, jumping up and down and singing a song:

Slap the armpits before the king,  
With a ho! hi! hey!  
Raise arms, lower them, dance and sing,  
With a ho! hi! hey!

The giant went into a fit of laughter, and when Kirkirsasa stopped he asked her if she could make his armpits like hers. If she could do so, he said, he would not eat the two girls.

Kirkirsasa then instructed her people to build a fire and heat up stones until they were red hot. They bound the giant with sennit to the centerposts of the house and placed hot rocks in his armpits. The giant yelled with pain, saying he would eat the whole lot of them when he got free. However, the people continued applying hot stones to the giant's armpits, and rubbed them on his stomach and face until he was dead.

Kirkirsasa then scolded her two maidservants for their disobedience and warned them never to do such a thing in the future.

In his interpretation of this tale, Vilsoni Hereniko suggested that the giant symbolizes males, chiefs, and kings, while Kirkirsasa symbolizes females, commoners, and people of the land. Her tattoos reinforce her association with culture and domesticity, in contrast to the giant who is not tattooed and therefore wild and uncultured.

In Hereniko's view, the giant symbolizes oppression. He sleeps during the day, signifying laziness, and his fiery red teeth suggest gluttony (and cannibalism). The word for giant, *mam'asa*, also translates as "cruel" and "monster." By pelting the giant's teeth the maidservants denounce and challenge his oppressiveness.

The girls' plea to Kirkirsasa that she not get angry is significant to Hereniko. He wrote:

To be angry is to be out of control, an emotional state that Rotumans view as destructive to interpersonal relations and the community....To be able to contain one's anger is a sign of strength; even better is to be able to humor one's opponent. To dance in the midst of adversity, however, is to display total control, for it is impossible to dance when frightened, particularly if one is confronted with a cannibal.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the story presents Kirkirsasa as the very essence of cultural control. Her interactions with the giant prior to his submission follow the rules of etiquette to the letter, suggesting that compliance with cultural rules has a potency of its own (as contrasted with the maidservants' rude behavior, which was ineffective).

Hereniko acknowledged the obvious equivalence in the account between tattooing and cooking, and further observed that the rubbing of hot stones over the giant's body was reminiscent of *sarao* (massage). All of these operations—tattooing, cooking, and massage—have symbolic associations in Rotuman culture with the domestication of uncultured, wild, and unrestrained forces. The epitome of such an uncultured state for Rotumans is a cannibal, who must be cooked, tattooed, and/or massaged to bring him under cultural control. Tattooing on Rotuma therefore can be interpreted as a means of binding a person's inner, wild nature (as epitomized by a cannibal's gluttony, anger, and cruelty) for the protection of society.

### Performance Arts

Traditional forms of performance in Rotuma can be divided into four distinctive types: oratory, musical performances, clowning, and kava ceremonies.

## ORATORY

Little has been written on Rotuman oratory, perhaps because it is not as highly developed an art form for Rotumans as it is for some Polynesian societies. Nevertheless, oratorical skills are valued by Rotumans, and it is likely that they always have been. In the past, the telling of legends was one form of oratory. When chiefs wished to be entertained they would prepare a feast and invite a storyteller to perform,<sup>33</sup> and elders would get together on occasion in order to share their knowledge of genealogies and local history, some of which was preserved in chant form.

A more widely witnessed form of oratory involves speeches made on various occasions, mostly to thank those who have donated labor, food, and other goods on ceremonial occasions. Chiefs of all rank, as well as untitled individuals who are particularly invited, are expected to make speeches in such circumstances. Chiefs also make speeches in order to inspire their subjects to work hard, to donate food or labor to a cause, or to promote community harmony.

## MUSICAL PERFORMANCES

Traditional Rotuman musical performances included a variety of chants, paddle dances, and group dances known as *tautoga*.

### *Chants*

Mosese Kaurasi distinguished three types of Rotuman chants: (1) those composed for action songs and dances; (2) those sung before battles or wrestling matches; and (3) *temo*, which were sung during a chief's funeral or at a reception for a visiting chief.<sup>34</sup>

(1) Action songs commemorated special events or occasions, such as war-provoking incidents, the death of a notable person, a successful seafaring venture, or a festival involving two or more communities. Their sentiments depended on circumstances, varying in mood from solemn to exultant.

(2) To mobilize sentiment and muster courage (*mäeva*), the songs and dances performed before battles were verbally belligerent and aggressive in their movements. In form, they resembled songs for traditional wrestling matches (*hula*), though the latter, usually tempered by good-natured teasing, alternated in exchanges between hosts and visitors.<sup>35</sup>

Bennett's Rotuman hosts entertained him one day during his 1830 visit with a war dance that included mock combat, which, he reported, was intended to demonstrate their mode of conducting warfare:

The party consisted of upwards of one hundred men, armed with hoibéluongs [*ʻāi peluga*] (clubs), spears, and baskets of stones; the highest chief present, who in this instance was the king's brother, headed the party. The preparation for action commenced by deafening shouts and shrieks, and furious stamping, which was done to intimidate their adversaries; this was followed by a propitiatory song to the spirits for victory.<sup>36</sup>

Bennett commented that "it was a formidable sight to witness so many clubs brandished in the air, accompanied by deafening war shouts and yells."<sup>37</sup>



**Photo 4.10** Action dance performed during centennial session celebration, 1981. Note *miolmilo* headdresses. *Fiji Ministry of Information*.

In 1932, Tigarea of Losa described for Macgregor the performance that preceded battles:

When two armies meet for battle there is a dance (probably taunting and attempting to look fearful) and then they sing a song called the *arfaki*.

*Tanifa tehu te Kelega*  
*Jiji mea poa alelea.*

*Tanifa* is the shark with a big mouth; *tehu* = near; *Kelega* = a point off Itu'ti'u where a big shark can be



seen; *jiji* = come; *poa* = bait; 'a *lele'a* = cannibals, or to eat people.

This song means that the warriors are like sharks and they are going to fight the other people, whom they will not spare as a shark will not spare them. They will kill like a shark because of the *poa*, or bait, which means some ancient cause for which they fight.

After this song the armies sing their *ki*.<sup>38</sup>

(3) *Temo* were chants in praise of dead or living chiefs and places. They sometimes recounted great deeds of illustrious men, but most commonly eulogized deceased persons at their funerals. Macgregor provided an extensive description of the *temo* performances he had observed:

At such a time the old men gather inside the house, sit closely together, and chant in very low tones, their old songs. On the death of a chief of note or man of great favor in the district, a new *temo* will be composed to be sung at his funeral. In the evenings, old men of a village meet in a house and sing these old songs. A young girl will walk among them anointing each man with a little scented coconut oil.

The song leader is called the *purotu*. He sits with three others who face each other, and around them crowd all the other singers. The *purotu* chooses each *temo* and starts it. *Temos* are sung in groups of four, the first three are very slow and dreary, the fourth is sung brightly and quickly, while the hands are clapped in double time. The fourth song is called a *tipo*. The leader commences his *temo*, sings the first line, and the chorus of men join him on the refrain of one line, which follows each line of verse.

This chanted refrain is the *asura*. The songleader goes on to the next verse which he sings alone while the chorus hums or drones the last note of the refrain through one half of the verse that the leader is singing, and then change to a note two tones above. This change was heard in most of the *temos* that were sung for me. It was made to effect harmony. The tones varied accordingly.

The droning is an accompaniment without losing the note for a break in taking a breath. However in some songs, the accompaniment comes in on each accented note of the verse. Thus in the line "*Ká hanuá on a 'úmutaonót*" the *ka*, *a*, *u*, *not* are the accented

syllables, which the chorus accent while humming. In this particular song the note of the chorus was an octave below the note of the leader.

The melody of the verse is usually limited to three or four notes of half tones or minors. Some notes are slid or wailed, giving an effect which strongly resembles the Japanese manner of singing. A note is slid a half tone down and then back again before it is left. The singing sounds very nasal and slow. The chants are ended by sliding the last note down almost to a speaking tone with diminishing volume, with a "running down" effect. This is also a Samoan fashion of singing, but the Rotumans do not make it so exaggerated. Repeating the first line of the chant is a signal to the chorus that the leader has finished. In the chants that were sung for me one evening, three tempos could be observed. In the first tempo the hands were clapped on the first beat of every measure, in four beat time.

In another tempo, the group clapped their hands on the first and third beat, while one man alone clapped his hands on the second and fourth beats.

The third tempo might be called a "time round." The chant was sung in three beat time, and each beat of a measure was marked by a different group of the singers. The first beat was clapped by one group and as the chant got under way, a second and third group took up the second and third beats. The accent was on the first beat, and the clapping suggested the words clickety, clickety, clickety. This was a fast song or *tipo*. The remainder of the *tipos* that were sung that evening were all in fast four beat time.

Not all the chants had refrains. In the text, the refrain where it exists is marked in the last line. In the singing, each vowel is carefully pronounced, although they may be elided or dropped in the spoken language. However, the singing is very low, so low that one feels that those outside the circle are not supposed to hear or understand the words. The clapping too is very soft. The best chanting of *temos* "resembles the singing of toothless old men."<sup>39</sup>



**Photo 4.11** Men in *miolmilo* headdresses prepared for dance.  
© Fiji Museum.

### *Paddle dances*

Paddle dances (*mak paki*) were performed as part of the ritual cycle associated with the offices of the *sau* and *mua*.

In 1865, William Fletcher, the first European Methodist missionary to reside on Rotuma, witnessed a paddle dance of "mostly elderly men":

each performer had a small paddle in his hand. The *sau* and the *mueta* [*mua*] stood together, all the rest squatted down near them. Rising up, they commenced a song, raising the legs alternately, and brandishing the paddles. The song over, they rushed, one half one way, and one half the other way, and meeting in the centre of the square, stood in two lines, the *sau* and the *mueta* being in the centre of the front line. A man sat before a native drum to beat time, and lead the chanting. All joined, moving the legs, and gently

brandishing the paddles, now giving them an oscillating movement on the front of the head, and again striking them gently with the tips of the fingers of the left hand. At intervals, the back line dividing into two went round and joined again in front of the line, where stood the *sau* and the *mueta*, which line in its turn divided, and passed to the front. In each song these evolutions were gone through five or six times. The whole may have lasted about half an hour.<sup>40</sup>

He added that the songs seemed to be invocations of the deities.

Severed from their original context by the 1880s, paddle dances continued to be performed in secular settings, where they highlighted special celebrations.

### *Tautoga*

*Tautoga* were standing dances generally performed by men and women, although all-male performances (*tautoag fā*) occurred on occasion. In a performance by men and women (known as a *hafa*), the men typically were positioned in rows on one side, the women on the other. Participants danced to a text that they also sang.

In form, a *tautoga* was a suite of three distinct types of dance, performed sequentially: *sua*, *tiap hi'i*, and *tiap forau*. A complete *tautoga* included at least one dance of each type.

*Sua* normally consisted of four-verse stanzas, whose words alluded to the occasion. The music consisted of a single phrase in duple meter, repeated many times. The performers sang a melody in parallel fifths, with women on the upper part. Sometimes singers sounded other notes, creating three- or four-note harmonies. Elders provided accompaniment by rhythmically beating wooden sticks on a pile of folded mats. While performing a *sua*, dancers stood in place: men, with their feet apart; women, with their feet together. The basic movement involved lifting the hands from the sides, clasping them together in front of the waist, and releasing them to the sides. Dancers repeatedly bent and straightened their legs. Each row of dancers took its turn in front; after completing a set of verses, the dancers in the first row dropped back, and the row behind them came forward.<sup>41</sup>

After *sua* came *tiap hi'i*, dances of two kinds. In one, *hi tägtäg* (languid drone), women sang *hi'ie*, *hi'ie*, *hi'ie*, *hi'ie*, while the men grunted to the effect of *hü'ü*, *hü'ü*, *hü'ü*,

*hū'ū*. The performers focused on a major triad: men sang the root, women the third and fifth. A subdominant triad served as an auxiliary. The performers clapped their hands on downbeats. In the other kind of *tiap hi'i*, the *hi' sasap* (sustained drone), the men dragged out their *hū*. In both types, some of the singers breathed while others vocalized, so the performance spun a continuous thread of sound. Performances of *tiap hi'i* marked the contrast between feminine constraint and masculine freedom. As in the *sua*, women stood in place, and confined their movements to graceful, subtle motions of the hands and arms. Men sometimes jumped from side to side, or in circles. Also as in the *sua*, each row of dancers took its turn in front.

Unlike *sua* and *tiap hi'i*, which had a temperate character, *tiap forau* featured exuberant yelping and clowning on the part of the dancers, with spectators often spontaneously joining in. During the dance the back row split, with the men coming up one side of the group, the women down the other, until they met in front, replacing the first row. The process continued until each row had had its turn in front. The texts usually acknowledged distinguished personages (especially the chiefs acting as hosts), and praised people whose labors had contributed to the event.<sup>42</sup> As with the *sua*, elders provided accompaniment by rhythmically beating with wooden sticks on a pile of folded mats.

In pre-missionary times, youths of courtship age frequented dance houses and played beach games (*manea' hune'ele*) that included singing and dancing. The beach games provided culturally controlled frames for courtship,<sup>43</sup> but the missionaries, fearing immorality, curbed them. Lucatt, describing conditions during his 1841 visit, wrote that every village had a playhouse in which "they scarcely suffered a night to pass without meeting...to sing and dance." He described the songs as composed of sentences, "repeated over and over again to a monotonous but not unmelodious chant, accompanied with peculiar movements of the body," and described Rotumans as "admirable time keepers" although they had no musical instruments.<sup>44</sup>

It is likely that the dances described by Lucatt were an early form of *tautoga*, as were the dances Bennett depicted during his visit eleven years earlier:

The dances at this island are peculiarly interesting, and take place by torch-light; they resemble those I had previously seen at Tongatabu; by the men they were performed with much action in both slow and quick

movements, with the usual accompaniments of clapping of hands, keeping accurate time with a monotonous but pleasing song from the party who composed the orchestra. The spectators applauded and encouraged the dancers by frequent shouts of "Mariai, Mariai!" (well done). The females executed their part with considerable grace, in a slow and regular movement, which, added to the tasteful manner in which they had decorated themselves with flowers for the occasion, produced a pleasing effect. One dance by the whole "*corps de ballet*" was peculiar; the women formed the first row, and the men two other rows; much grace was displayed by the females in the sinking of the body, forming the graceful curtsy of the European ladies; the song which accompanied this dance was agreeable, though plaintive; the slow movement was concluded by one of very quick and rapid action by the male dancers, the women merely singing, clapping the hands, and making a slight movement of the feet in perfect time with the dance.<sup>45</sup>



**Photo 4.12** *Tautoga* performed at a wedding, 1960. Alan Howard.

Contemporary Rotumans consider the *sua* and *tiap hi'i* indigenous dances, while acknowledging that *tiap forau* (foreign dance) is a more recent addition. That the *tautoga* was influenced by Tongan dancing at an early time, if not imported wholesale, is conceded by most Rotumans. Hereniko, for example, noted that the term *tautoga* itself

suggests this: *tau* (to learn) + *toga* (Tonga), and he is convinced by the striking similarities between *tautoga* and Tongan dance.<sup>46</sup> Ad Linkels, in the booklet accompanying a CD entitled *Tautoga*, likewise noted the similarity between *tautoga* and Tongan dance, specifically the *lakalaka*. He speculated that Tongans may have brought with them the original predecessor of the *lakalaka* (called *me'elaufola*) at the time of Ma'afu's invasion in the eighteenth century.<sup>47</sup>

#### RITUAL CLOWNING

Rotumans, like Polynesians everywhere at informal gatherings, have a tradition of engaging in light hearted banter, teasing, and various forms of clowning around. At weddings, however, a female clown (*hán mane'ák sū*; literally, "the woman who spoils the wedding") engaged in a scripted performance with profound social undertones. In her book on Rotuman ceremonies, Elizabeth Inia described the role of the *hán mane'ák sū* as follows:

The *hán mane'ák sū*...continued to entertain the crowd the whole day. She ordered everyone to do whatever she wanted; she even had the power to order the chiefs around. All the people had to do as she said, for instance, to kneel in the sun, to dance, to bring drinks. She carried a big stick as a sign of her authority; she used it to point at people when telling them what to do, and could even hit them if they were reluctant to act. Her antics made everyone laugh.<sup>48</sup>

In his analysis of clowning on Rotuma, Hereniko saw the *hán mane'ák sū* as fulfilling several vital functions beyond that of mere entertainer, including:

1. Mediating between the conflicting interests of the parties involved, thereby allowing tensions to be diffused, redefined, and resolved in socially acceptable ways.
2. Fulfilling the role of a significant cultural symbol. As Hereniko put it, she "embodies the Rotuman conception of a person as a 'many-faceted gem.' She is humorous, yet serious in intent. She is capable of emphasizing one identity and playing down another, or choosing to remain 'betwixt and between' and have the best of both options. She is an actor, playing different roles depending on the demands of the moment, refusing to

be wholly one or the other. She is inconsistent, with many sides to herself. She is Rotuman."<sup>49</sup>

3. Acting as master of ceremonies by seeing to it that proper protocol is observed, though she may do so in a joking manner.

4. Serving as a link to ancestral spirits. Clowns in the past blackened their features and often wore men's clothing, while carrying a stick, which Hereniko has suggested, could well have served as a phallic symbol, thus representing an ambiguous character, suggestive of an 'atua (see photo 5.4).<sup>50</sup>

Given the focus on fertility in Rotuman legends and religious thought, the clown at weddings drew attention to a central aspect of the event—the fact that a new reproductive unit was being formed, and that the success of the couple in reproducing was up to the discretion of ancestral spirits. Her role, therefore, had sacred overtones as she both acted in a spirit-like manner, and served to link the world of humans to the spiritual abode of ancestors.

#### KAVA CEREMONY

Finally, mention should be made of the kava ceremony, which can be considered a form of dramatic performance. As in other Polynesian societies, important ceremonies on Rotuma require the preparation, presentation, and serving of kava to chiefs and dignitaries.

The basics of the traditional kava ceremony in Rotuma are well described by Gardiner,<sup>51</sup> Macgregor,<sup>52</sup> and more recently by Elizabeth Inia,<sup>53</sup> from whose accounts the following composite description draws.

At feasts chiefs took their place in the "front"<sup>54</sup> of the ceremonial site, with the highest-ranking chief in the middle. Behind him was his *mafua* (spokesman), who conducted the ceremony. The kava roots were brought to the site at the head of the men's procession, which also brought food for the feast. The roots of the kava were placed to point toward the chiefs, the leaves away. This presentation was acknowledged by the *mafua*, who called out "Kava." The man who tended the kava then broke off a small branch from the root and stabbed it into the root, shouting "*Mānu!*"<sup>55</sup> The *mafua* then delivered a *fakpej*, a chant-like recitation.<sup>56</sup> If two or more bundles of kava roots were being presented the performance would be repeated, with additional *fakpej* being chanted.





**Photo 4.13** Serving kava to chiefs in early times. Note the white lime in the kava preparers' hair, signifying that they are virgins. © *Fiji Museum*.



**Photo 4.14** Serving kava to chiefs in modern times, 1981. *Fiji Ministry of Information*.

After this the *mafua* called the names of the chiefs to whom a piece of kava root was to be presented. The man tending the kava cut off one piece of the root for each chief. A final piece was cut off and given to the women to be washed and chewed. After it was sufficiently chewed, the *mafua* called out for the woman who would mix it to wash her hands. The chewed kava was then put into a *tano'a* (kava bowl) with water and mixed with a *vehnau* (a mass of finely shredded strips of cloth from the bark of the hau tree). The kava maker strained the brew through the cloth, then passed it back to an attendant who wrung it out, while a second attendant poured water over the kava maker's hands. When the kava maker finished the preparation she called out, "*Kava ite te'.*"

The *mafua* called out *mārie'*, *mārie'*, *mārie'!* which drew attention to the proceedings, much in the manner that "hear, hear!" does in English-speaking settings. The kava maker then laid down the *vehnau* and clapped her hands, twice with her hands cupped, then with her palms flat, which made a loud clap. The *mafua* again called *mārie'*, *mārie'*, *mārie'!*

The second attendant brought an *ipu* (coconut shell cup) to the kava bowl, and the kava maker lifted the *vehnau* and drained kava into it. The attendant then called out, "*Kava tau viā.*"

The *mafua* then called out "*Tau kav ite' se Marāfu*" [or the name of the highest ranking person present] (Take the kava to Marāf). The attendant brought the kava to the person whose name had been called out and stooped low, handing it to him. She then returned to the bowl and when the cup was refilled called out again, "*Kava tau viā.*" The process was repeated until all the chiefs and dignitaries were served in order of rank.

## Conclusion

Although Rotuma did not have the well-developed, high art forms Europeans found on the more heavily populated and politically developed Polynesian islands when they first arrived, creativity was nevertheless very much in evidence. Even in relatively mundane areas, such as house construction, creativity was expressed in the form of unique patterns of sennit lashings (see photo 4.16).

Rotumans had high standards of excellence, perhaps most clearly manifest in the quality of the fine mats they produced. As in other Polynesian societies, creativity in all

its forms was very much bound up with indigenous spirits. Fine productions—those that were most highly valued—were therefore thought to require more than the finely honed skill of an accomplished artisan or performer; they were considered to be divinely inspired and infused with mana.



**Photo 4.15** House building with double-sided top plate, 1940. *H. S. Evans.*



**Photo 4.16** Detail of timbers and roof at junction of side and curved end, 1940. *H. S. Evans.*

## Notes to Chapter 4

This chapter includes substantial sections from three of our previously published papers: "Symbols of Power and the Politics of Impotence: The Mölmahao Rebellion on Rotuma," published in *Pacific Studies* (Howard 1992); "Rotuma" published in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, Vol. 9, *Australia and the Pacific Islands*, edited by Adrienne L. Kaeppler and J. W. Love (Howard 1998); and "Une profondeur qui s'arrête à la surface de la peau: ordre social et corps à Rotuma," published in *La production du corps*, edited by Maurice Godelier and Michel Panoff (Howard and Rensel 1998; originally written in English as "Only Skin Deep: Social Order and the Body on Rotuma," and translated into French).

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<sup>1</sup> Bennett wrote "Amea," which he identifies as the Rotuman name for a species of *Urtica*. Churchward's dictionary glosses *armea* as "tree (paper mulberry?) the inner bark of which was formerly used for making cloth" (1940, 176).

<sup>2</sup> This may in fact have been the case during Gardiner's visit, since the *armea* (paper mulberry) tree was apparently already rare, if not extinct, by the time of his visit. If that were the case, the women's type of dress cloth, though made from hibiscus bark, might still have been called by its original name.

<sup>3</sup> Gardiner 1898, 411–412.

<sup>4</sup> Gardiner 1898, 412; Macgregor 1932.

<sup>5</sup> Bennett 1831, 476–477. Warriors also wore feathered bonnets, called *miolmilo*, which Gardiner described as "a wooden or bamboo framework covered with tappa and ornamented with the long tail feathers of the boatswain bird" (Gardiner 1898, 471). According to one of Macgregor's informants, once one of these hats was donned it could never be removed while the state of war existed. A man could not even doff it to the *sau*. He had to wear it until killed in battle. Because these hats were worn in war, and signified fighting, it was taboo for anyone to wear such a headdress in peacetime. Wearing such a headcover through a village was an insult for which a man could be killed (Macgregor 1932). See photos 4.10 and 4.11.

<sup>6</sup> Gardiner 1898, 462.

<sup>7</sup> In this respect a gift of an *apei* is comparable to the Fijian presentation of a *tabua* (whale's tooth), an equivalence explicitly recognized by Rotumans.

<sup>8</sup> Bennett 1831, 477.

<sup>9</sup> *Mane'a* is a generic term for play, and is used in certain contexts (e.g., weddings) in reference to an individual who acts as a clown with license to violate normal social rules. See pages 107–108 for a discussion of clowning in early Rotuman society.

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of the symbolic significance of the *fau* and other rituals at a wedding, see Howard and Rensel 1994a.

<sup>11</sup> Hereniko 1995, 115.

<sup>12</sup> Lesson 1838–1839, 424.

<sup>13</sup> Bennett 1831, 477.

<sup>14</sup> Macgregor 1932.

<sup>15</sup> One of Macgregor's informants told him that bark cloth was often worn around the head to keep the hair up, as well as for lavalavas (Macgregor 1932).

<sup>16</sup> We are only aware of one prescribed use of bark cloth for ceremonial purposes, although there were undoubtedly others. Before a wedding, the bride was presented with a small purse, called *'atfara*, which in traditional times contained a small container of oil, some turmeric, and a piece of bark cloth. The oil was for lubrication on the wedding night, the turmeric was used to prevent infection, and the bark cloth was to wipe up with. For some years now it has been customary for the *'atfara* to be filled instead with money by friends of the bride.

<sup>17</sup> Macgregor 1932.

<sup>18</sup> Lesson 1838–1839, 422–423.

<sup>19</sup> Dillon 1829, 94; see also Bennett 1831, 475.

<sup>20</sup> Gardiner 1898, 412.

<sup>21</sup> Gardiner 1898, 462.

<sup>22</sup> Gardiner 1898, 413.

<sup>23</sup> Thompson 1915, 64–66.

<sup>24</sup> Thompson 1915, 138–139.

<sup>25</sup> Lesson 1838, 426–427; translated from the French by Ella Wiswell.

<sup>26</sup> Lucatt 1851, 178–179.

<sup>27</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 414–415.

<sup>28</sup> Hocart 1913, 4768.

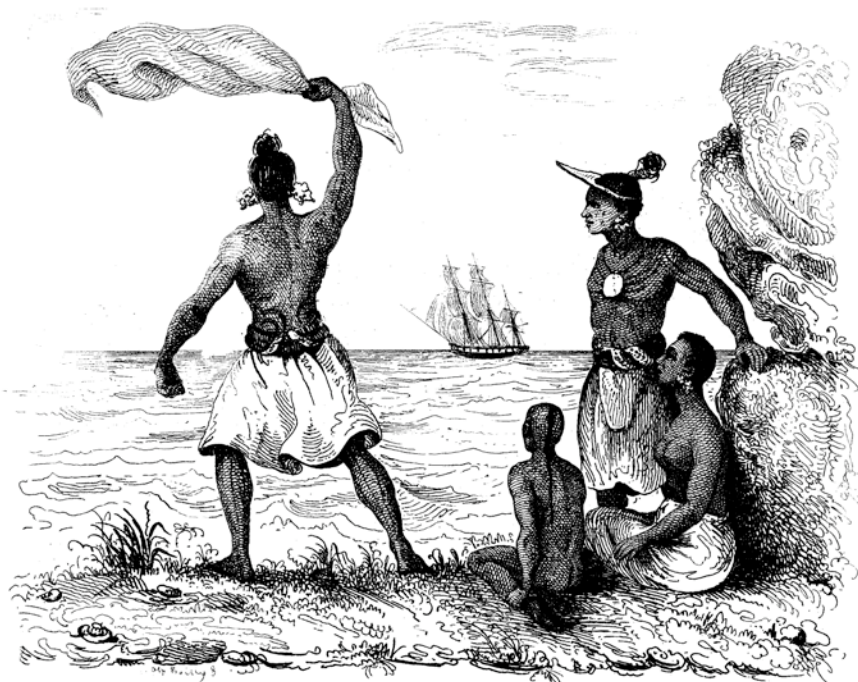
<sup>29</sup> Macgregor 1932.

<sup>30</sup> According to the Rev. William Allen, "The process was an exceedingly painful one, some even dying through it. Only a little was done at a time, just as much as the person seemed able to bear. Tattooing only commenced when they were young men, and no one was considered a man and competent to marry until he had been tatooed" (Allen 1895).

<sup>31</sup> Macgregor 1932.

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- <sup>32</sup> Hereniko 1995, 57.
- <sup>33</sup> Macgregor 1932.
- <sup>34</sup> Kaurasi 1991.
- <sup>35</sup> Kaurasi 1991, 147–149.
- <sup>36</sup> Bennett 1831, 479.
- <sup>37</sup> Bennett 1831, 480.
- <sup>38</sup> Macgregor 1932. A *kī* is a rhythmic chant used to stir men to peak effort, whether in warfare or to perform a ceremonially arduous task.
- <sup>39</sup> Macgregor 1932.
- <sup>40</sup> Letter dated 4 November 1865, *Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, 1866.
- <sup>41</sup> Hereniko 1991, 128–130.
- <sup>42</sup> Hereniko 1991, 130–131.
- <sup>43</sup> See Howard 1998, 157–158.
- <sup>44</sup> Lucatt 1851, 167.
- <sup>45</sup> Bennett 1831, 479.
- <sup>46</sup> Hereniko 1991, 121.
- <sup>47</sup> Linkels 1998, 3.
- <sup>48</sup> Inia 2001, 166.
- <sup>49</sup> Hereniko 1995, 91.
- <sup>50</sup> Hereniko 1995, 88–93.
- <sup>51</sup> Gardiner 1898, 424–425.
- <sup>52</sup> Macgregor 1932.
- <sup>53</sup> Inia 2001, 77–82.
- <sup>54</sup> In Rotuma the "front" side is generally the side toward the sea, but under certain circumstances it may be on the east, or sunrise side.
- <sup>55</sup> The word *manu'* (*manu'u*) has no known denotative meaning other than as an exclamation during the kava ceremony.
- <sup>56</sup> The content of the *fakpej* is described by Gardiner as telling a "story of the old times or whale fishing" (1898, 424). Macgregor includes the texts of some *fakpej* in his field notes. They are mostly stories about how kava came to Rotuma, which may have been the dominant theme of such chants in traditional times. The language of some *fakpej* is archaic, however, and not well understood by contemporary Rotumans, sometimes not even by the person reciting.





**Figure 5.1** *Naturels de Rotuma (Natives of Rotuma)*. Duperrey 1826.



## 5 Expanding Horizons

Beachcombers...were strangers in their new societies and scandals to their old. They left behind them the roles that made their world orderly and its gestures meaningful. On the beach they were no longer the sailors, the husbands or even the men that those roles made....On the beach, they needed to assume roles recognizable to their new world....This new world could not be the one they left: it lacked all the essential ingredients. It could not be the world on which they had just intruded: none could be born again so radically. So on the beach they experimented. They made wives, children, relations, property in new ways....But they were not bound by the rules of their new world. By breaking its rules and not suffering for it, they weakened its sanctions, made absolutes relative to their condition.

Greg Dening, *Islands and Beaches*, 1980

Captain Edward Edwards in HMS *Pandora* made the first recorded European citing of Rotuma in 1791 while searching for the mutineers of the *Bounty*. According to the accounts of Captain Edwards and the ship's surgeon, Dr. George Hamilton, the Rotumans received the vessel cautiously. They approached in canoes prepared for combat, but the *Pandora*'s crew eventually overcame their reluctance with friendly overtures and presents, and successfully negotiated for water and other supplies.<sup>1</sup>

Six years later, on 16 September 1797, the missionary ship *Duff*, under the command of Captain James Wilson, called at the island. The *Duff* was headed for China after dropping off missionaries in Tongatapu. Reluctant to trade, it being a Sunday, the crew engaged in only a minimum exchange with a few Rotumans who came to meet the vessel in canoes. Wilson sailed along the north shore from east to west, and noted the anchorage off Maka Bay, but chose to

sail on. An account compiled from the journals of the officers and missionaries on board is of interest for the details it contains despite the brevity of the encounter:

The main island far exceeds in populousness and fertility all that we had seen in this sea; for in a space not more than a mile in length we counted about two hundred houses next to the beach, besides what the trees probably concealed from our view; this was at the east end, and there was reason to think almost every part of it equally well inhabited. In the shape and size of their persons we could distinguish no difference between them and the Friendly Islanders, except that we thought them a lighter colour, and some difference in tattooing, having here the resemblance of birds and fishes, with circles and spots upon their arms and shoulders; the latter are seemingly intended to represent the heavenly bodies. Two or three of the women we saw were tattooed in this last way; at Tongatapu they keep the upper parts clear of all tattooing. The women here wear their hair long, have it dyed of a reddish colour, and with a pigment of the same, mixed with cocoa-nut oil, they rub their neck and breast. The men who were on board appeared to have much of the shrewd, manly sense of the above people, and many of their customs. One of them made signs, that in cases of mourning they cut their heads with sharks' teeth, beat their cheeks till they bled, and wounded themselves with spears, but that the women only cut off the little fingers, the men being exempt from it; whereas at Tongatapu there is hardly man or woman but what has lost both.

Their single canoes (for we saw no double ones) were nearly the same in all respects as at the Friendly Islands, being of the same shape, sewed together on the inside, and decorated in the same manner seemed not so neat and well finished. The only weapons we saw were spears curiously carved, and pointed with the bone of the sting ray. The natives expressed great surprise and curiosity at the sight of our sheep, goats, and cats. Hogs and fowls, they said, they had in great plenty, which, added to the evidently superior fertility of the islands, and the seeming cheerful and friendly disposition of the natives, makes this, in our opinion, the most eligible place for ships coming from the

eastward, wanting refreshments, to touch at: and with regard to missionary views, could one or two young men, such as Crook, be found willing to devote their lives to the instruction of perhaps five or six thousand poor heathen, there can hardly be a place where they could settle with greater advantage, as there is food in abundance; and the island lying remote from others, can never be engaged in wars, except what broils may happen among themselves.<sup>2</sup>

One suspects that this account proved alluring to ships' captains and and missionaries alike. The attraction of such a fertile island, promising a bountiful reprovisioning opportunity, surely must have appealed to the captains of whaling ships and other European and American vessels that plied this part of the Pacific with increasing frequency during the first half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Rotuma became a favorite port of call for whalers seeking provisions, beginning in the 1820s and lasting until the decline of the industry around 1870.

### Renegades and Beachcombers

The first record of a person from a European vessel taking up residence on Rotuma was from the Sydney brig *Campbell Macquarie*, which called at Rotuma in 1814 for provisions. Peter Dillon, who visited Rotuma in 1827, reported that an old Sandwich Islander by the name of Babahey, whom he knew and had sailed with, had asked to be left ashore and was granted permission by the *Campbell Macquarie*'s captain. He was told that Babahey had died eight years previously, leaving a daughter behind.<sup>3</sup>

Lesson, who arrived at Rotuma on the French corvette *Coquille* on 1 May 1824, was told that two months earlier eight men from the ship *Rochester* had deserted and were still on the island. The story behind the desertion was related by Lesson in a footnote:

This vessel rounded Cape Horn, sailed up the coast of Chile and Peru, stopped at Truxillo, went on to the Marquesas where it made contact with the natives, dropped anchor at Tonga-Tabu and then on to the shores of New Zealand and an anchorage at Island Bay. The crew had long been justified in complaining of the captain. He had killed one man on the coast of Peru

and committed another murder at Island Bay. A meeting was called on board, consisting of five or six whaling-ship captains and presided over by Mr. Williams, a missionary. Each sailor took an oath on the Bible and the transcript of the trial was forwarded to England. The "Rochester" then left New Zealand, heading for Fiji, Mowala and the western islands. They made contact with the natives, keeping chiefs on board for days at a time without causing the least friction with the islanders. Arriving at Rotuma, they met a large school of whales and cruised in the vicinity for 15 days. When they sent boats ashore they were well received and went into several villages without insult. Several sailors deserted but when the captain put five of their chiefs in irons they delivered up the deserters. But his behavior had been so barbarous and he had pushed folly so far as to threaten to blow up the ship, that on the day of departure, at ten o'clock that night, eight men, including the third and fourth officers, let down a whaling dinghy with some books and instruments aboard. They rowed all night and in the morning, being out of sight of the ship, they set sail back to the island. As soon as they arrived they were surrounded, their instruments broken, their clothing torn off and the pieces used to decorate the islanders' heads. They were given matting to wear and were eagerly invited into the chiefs' houses. They became increasingly delighted with the kindness of their hosts, however, no one would allow them a woman until they had had enough time to know if they liked living on the island. Twice they went to the king with their request. He gathered his Council and gave them some public women to help them be patient. Finally, after a month, they assembled all the nubile girls from the villages they were living in, and those chosen seemed very proud. We must attribute this desire to possess Europeans to a feeling of inferiority and curiosity, because the natives of Rotuma confess that they are very ignorant.<sup>4</sup>

Four of the English sailors who had deserted the *Rochester* came aboard the *Coquille*. According to Lesson they were dressed "like the savages," in nothing more than a piece of matting around their waists. They had been tattooed in Rotuman fashion and were smeared with turmeric powder. One of the men, whom Lesson identified as "Williams John"

from Northumberland, a cooper by trade, asked and received permission to join the ship. He was described by Lesson as a gentle man of honest nature, good sense, and some learning, and provided most of the information about Rotuman life and customs in Lesson's account. The other deserters, Lesson wrote, chose to remain on the island.

Lesson went on to report that two liberated convicts whom they had picked up at Port Jackson begged insistently to be left on the island. He commented that the Rotumans vied for the chance to receive them into their families and carried them ashore in triumph.<sup>5</sup>

Three years later, Dillon met two of the deserters, Parker and Young, whom he reluctantly employed as pilots and interpreters. In contrast to John's account of abused crewmen escaping a tyrannical captain, Dillon relates an alternative account told him by a Captain Bren, master of a whaler. According to Bren, when the *Rochester*, under the command of Captain Worth, arrived at Rotuma for refreshments,

the crew were mutinous and disorderly, and gave the captain and his officers much trouble in preserving order on board. Several of them attempted to desert, but were prevented by the captain's vigilance. While laying to off Rothuma on the whaling station, the captain's brother-in-law, a young man named Young, who had charge of the watch on deck, with the carpenter's mate, Parker, and four others, lowered down a whale-boat with all her whaling tackle, robbed the ship of her arms and various other articles, and made off to Rothuma, where the natives received them kindly. Each married two or three wives, according to the custom of the country, and have now large families growing up.<sup>6</sup>

Dillon reported that three of the deserters (presumably including John) had since left the island, but that three others from a ship that recently anchored off the island had replaced them.<sup>7</sup>

The number of deserters and escaped convicts from Australia who took refuge on Rotuma increased significantly over the next couple of years, and in May 1830, Captain William Waldegrave of HMS *Seringapatam* wrote the following to Governor Ralph Darling of New South Wales:

I beg leave to state that I was requested by several Masters of Merchant Vessels trading amongst the

Feejee and Friendly Islands, to go to the Island of Rotumah...to take away thirty English persons,<sup>8</sup> one half of which were said to be Convicts, the other half deserters from British Merchant Vessels. [They are] residing on that Island to the terror of all Merchant Vessels Visiting that Island, in their habits were such so to excite the Natives to evil; their intention was supposed to be to seize upon some small Merchant Vessel and commence Piracy.<sup>9</sup>

Darling asked Commander Sandilands of the sloop *Comet* to undertake the task of removing these Englishmen from Rotuma, but circumstances did not permit.

The tensions created for ships' captains by these renegades are vividly conveyed in the log of the brig *Spy* by Captain John Knights:

there are at least *twenty convicts* among them who are *dangerous fellows*. I was aware of this, as I knew Captain Eagleston had landed an English sailor here the voyage previous, by his request, and paid him and these rascals murdered him the first night for his money which was tied round him, in gold. Besides, I had been frequently cautioned by several English captains, if I stopped here, to admit none of them on board. I had *never* allowed any sailor from shore to come on board at New Zealand and here I gave my mate strict orders to the same effect. Several were alongside the first day but were ordered off. The next day twelve or fourteen were alongside in the different canoes with the natives and in spite of the mate, two came on board. I soon drove them over the bow with a few cuts with a ropes-end, as they knew my previous orders and *were insolent*.

The next day I was under the necessity of going on shore to purchase a lot of yams, and on landing on the beach I was met and surrounded by *nine* of these *vagabonds*, part of them entirely naked. They saluted me with "You threatened to flay *me* if I came on board your ship." I answered that I did and *would either* or *any of them* who did so contrary to *my orders*. They told me then, with much insolence, "*We were on equal terms* and to do *it then*." Being armed with loaded pistols and a dirk, which they had not seen, I drew a *pistol*, cocked it and then *assured them solemnly*, if a *hand* was raised or an *impediment* put in my way of

proceeding, I would silence *at least* a pair of them and then proceeded through the gang without seeming to take further notice and finished my business. When I got back to the boat with the yams, these fellows were still about but not game enough to run the risque of attacking me. I must confess I did not feel very easy, while on shore, and I well knew that the least signs of dread or moving from the purposes of my visit would, in all probability, be the *finishing of me*. Consequently I was *not* a *little* happy on getting once more safe on board.<sup>10</sup>

Eventually, however, if we are to take Litton Forbes's narrative of "Old Bill's" experience at face value, the beachcombers took care of the problem by killing one another. Forbes visited Rotuma in 1872 and sought out white men on the island. He found an old man named Bill who claimed to have settled on Rotuma some forty years before, when he was about twenty years old. Bill said that at the time there were over seventy whites on the island,

all, with scarcely an exception, runaway convicts from van Diemen's Land and Botany Bay....One of these men had managed to extemporise a rough still, and the daily occupation of himself and fellows was distilling "grog" from the shoots of the cocoa-nut trees. As might be imagined, these lawless men, freed from every restraint and inflamed by drink, abandoned themselves to every excess, scaring even the savage natives by the wildness of their orgies. Desperate conflicts with each other, and with the natives, gradually thinned their numbers, and old Bill assured me that of all the seventy men were on the island when he first landed, there was not one who escaped a violent death....At length he found himself the sole survivor of a bygone generation.<sup>11</sup>

Old Bill took on the role of intermediary between ships' captains and Rotumans and thereby gained influence with both. He also became something of an entrepreneur:

He could procure either seamen, or labourers, or provisions, or firewood, as the case might be, better than any other man in Rotumah. If allowed to have his own price he would see that no one else cheated you, and most shipmasters were glad enough to agree to his terms, and thus prevent further misfortunes. In his old age Bill had taken to purchasing cocoa-nut oil, and had

amassed a good deal of money in this way, though what use his wealth could be in such a place no one, probably not even himself, could tell.<sup>12</sup>

An Englishman by the name of Emery also acted as a go-between (and pilot) for visiting ships. More is known about him than about Old Bill, thanks mainly to the log of the ship *Emerald*, captained by John Eagleston, which visited Rotuma in 1834 and again in 1835. Emery had taken up residence on the islet of Uea, about 3.25 kilometers off the northwest coast of the main island (see map, p. 62). He had been an officer on the English whaler *Toward Castle*,<sup>13</sup> which called at Rotuma around 1829 (in 1835 Emery told the officers aboard the *Emerald* that he had been there about six years).

Joseph Osborn, an officer aboard the *Emerald*, wrote that Emery was treated as a chief by the sixty or so people living on Uea, and that he was fluent in the language. He had married a Rotuman woman and built a wooden house after the English fashion, which was admired by his European visitors for its comfort and neatness (including pictures and furniture, English cooking utensils, and books).<sup>14</sup> Cheever described it as "well furnished & somewhat tastefully decorated."<sup>15</sup>

Emery gained a reputation for reliability and was sought out by ships' captains, but this put him at odds with the beachcombers, who were envious of his popularity. He had to be cautious, but Uea is a natural fortress with a very difficult landing, which Emery guarded with a twelve-pounder cannon mounted on a swivel.

Not only white men arrived on Rotuma's hospitable shores during the early part of the nineteenth century. In addition to castaways from the Ellice (Tuvalu) and Gilbert (Kiribati) Islands, and no doubt other islands in the vicinity, a variety of non-Europeans borne by European vessels ended up there. In 1829, Boki, paramount chief of the Hawaiian island of O'ahu, along with several other chiefs, organized an expedition to collect sandalwood in the New Hebrides (Vanuatu). Boki, who had accompanied Kamehameha II on an excursion to London in 1823, was heavily in debt and evidently saw this venture as an opportunity to make his fortune by selling the sandalwood in China. He set out with two schooners and a total complement of four hundred men. On the way one of the vessels, the *Kamehameha*, stopped in Rotuma, leaving a few of its passengers ashore.

When the London Missionary Society vessel *Camden* called at Rotuma in 1839 the crew found some natives from



Aitutaki in the Cook Islands, as well as a group of New Zealand Māori who had arrived aboard a whaling ship. The missionary John Williams, who was aboard the *Camden* and is credited by Rotuman Wesleyans with introducing Christianity to the island (he allowed two Samoan teachers to disembark there), reported that the Cook Island and New Zealand Māori were Christian and had built a little chapel for their own use.<sup>16</sup>

The *Velocity*, a labor-recruiting ship out of Sydney, stopped at Rotuma sometime before mid-nineteenth century and, according to Walter Lawry's account, forty natives from the island of "Uea" near New Caledonia jumped ship and swam ashore.<sup>17</sup> The *Velocity* tried to retrieve the men, to no avail:

The Chief was applied to, in vain, to give them up. He said he would not meddle with it; he did not bring them there, and should not interfere one way or the other. The Europeans then resorted to harsh measures, with a view of compelling the Chief to send back the escaped natives. A scuffle took place between the parties, and some were shot, on both sides. The vessels thereupon sailed without the men, whom they had brought from their homes.<sup>18</sup>

There were others, including an Indian from Madras by the name of Antonio encountered by the Catholic missionary Father Pierre Verne on his visit to Rotuma in 1847, and a man known as West India Jack who in 1879 claimed to have been on the island for fifty-five years.<sup>19</sup> In addition, Rotuman oral histories include reference to Australian Aborigines, Solomon Islanders, and at least one Chinese man who married a Rotuman woman.

### The Impact

An assessment of the impact of these early visitors must begin with a consideration of their numbers. According to Robert Langdon's study of American whalers and traders in the Pacific,<sup>20</sup> between 1825 and 1870, the logs of sixty-three whalers recorded calling on Rotuma, many of them multiple times; most stayed for a day or two, some for as long as two weeks. This does not take into account whalers from other countries or American whalers whose logs were incomplete.

In addition to the whalers, a variety of other vessels called at Rotuma, including labor recruiters, missionaries, and

traders. Narrative accounts of these early visitors frequently mention encountering other vessels visiting the island at the same time, or ships that had recently departed from Rotuma. It seems reasonable to assume that for much of this period ships were appearing at the rate of at least one or more a month, although there were no doubt significant annual and seasonal variations.



**Photo 5.1** Examples of imported clothing styles, 1913. A. M. Hocart. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

Estimates of renegade seamen residing on the island at any given time range from around 30 to between 70 and 100.<sup>21</sup> The numbers surely fluctuated over time, but the higher figures are poorly documented and are probably unrealistic. There was also a lot of circulation, with vessels at times dropping off some sailors and taking on others who decided to leave Rotuma after having stayed a while.

The degree to which Rotuman women were available to renegade sailors is not entirely clear. The English renegade John described a system of temporary marriage in which a young girl would marry a sailor for the duration of his stay in exchange for presents to her parents and chief,<sup>22</sup> but Lesson's account of the *Rochester's* deserters, cited earlier, suggests that Rotumans were unwilling to provide wives for deserters unless they verified their intentions of remaining on the island. In the meantime, they were provided with "public women." This suggests a Rotuman classification of

unmarried women into two categories: those without sexual experience, whose restricted status required a man to make a long-term marital commitment to gain sexual access, and others known to have had sexual experience, who were free to indulge in sexual liaisons at will.

Indeed, young women who were considered virgins had a special place in ancient Rotuman society. They were key participants in kava ceremonies and were distinguished by the way they wore their hair. Prior to marriage they were required to cut their hair close and plaster it with a mixture of burnt coral and the gum of the breadfruit tree, a practice that earned them the name of "whiteheads" from European sailors. After marriage the cement-like mixture was removed and women were allowed to grow their hair long (see photo 4.13).<sup>23</sup>

Virgin brides were able to contract more favorable marriages, so they were well guarded by their male kin and chiefs,<sup>24</sup> who stood to benefit economically, politically, or both from such unions.<sup>25</sup>

It seems likely, therefore, that most of the renegade sailors had only limited access to Rotuman women, and then only if they were in a position to provide benefits in exchange. Their offspring were probably quite limited and may well have been stigmatized by being born to single, lower-status women. But several of the foreign sailors—Williams John, Emery, and "Old Bill" among them—evidently married and had substantial numbers of progeny. Charles Howard, an English sailor from Yorkshire, was another settler (see photo 5.2). Howard arrived at Rotuma in 1836 and married twice, first to a Rotuman woman from Haga, Juju; after she died, he married a Gilbertese woman residing on the island. He is reputed to have founded a large family, and today a considerable number of Rotumans claim to be his descendents.<sup>26</sup> Later in the nineteenth century came a stream of traders, several of whom married Rotuman women and raised large families. Among the surnames they passed on are Morris, Olsen, Gibson (see photo 5.3), Foster, Kaad, Whitcombe, Missen, and Croker.

It appears that these men infused more than their share of genes into the Rotuman pool, in part, perhaps, because their offspring appear to have had somewhat greater immunity to diseases, like measles, that proved lethal to so many Rotumans.<sup>27</sup>



**Photo 5.2** Charles Howard. © *Fiji Museum*.



**Photo 5.3** Alexander and Annie Gibson. *Gibson family album*.

## Rotuman Sailors

That Rotuman men were eager to leave their home island aboard European vessels, and took every opportunity to do so, is clear from the reports of nearly all of the early commentators.<sup>28</sup> Europeans praised the qualities that made Rotumans desirable sailors. The remarks of Joseph Osborn, aboard the whaling ship *Emerald*, are typical:

They love to visit foreign countries & great numbers of them ship on board the English whaleships....On board a ship they are as good or better than any of the South Sea natives: diligent, civil & quiet, 3 very necessary qualities. They soon learn to talk English & there is but few of them but what can talk a few words.<sup>29</sup>

John Eagleston, captain of the *Emerald*, echoed Osborn's sentiments. "They make good ship men," he wrote, and "for a trading vessel are preferable to any of the other natives which I am acquainted with, they being more true & faithful & more to be depended on."<sup>30</sup> He noted that he had had a number of Rotumans aboard as crewmen in the past, as well as other islanders, but found Rotumans to be the best.

Some forty years later Litton Forbes wrote:

The men of Rotumah make good sailors, and after a few years' service in sea-going vessels are worth the same wages as white men. Scarcely a man on the island but has been more or less of a traveller. It is no rare thing to find men who have visited [Le] Harve, or New York, or Calcutta, men who can discuss the relative merits of a sailors' home in London or Liverpool, and dilate on the advantages of steam over sailing vessels. Thus the average native of Rotumah is more than usually capable and intelligent.<sup>31</sup>

W. L. Allardyce, who was on Rotuma about this time, commented on the shift in traveling destinations resulting from the demise of the whaling industry, as well as the social price paid by those who stayed at home:

Nearly all the men on the island have at one time or another been to sea, and while in the old whaling days Honolulu and Behring [Bering] Straits formed the goal of their ideas, the sailors of the present day must needs visit New Zealand, Australia, China, and India, while others still more ambitious are not satisfied till they

have rounded the Horn and passed the white cliffs of Dover. The few who have never been to sea at all have often to endure a considerable amount of banter at the expense of their inexperience.<sup>32</sup>

### From a Rotuman Point of View

One cannot help but be curious about how Rotumans digested their early experiences with Europeans. Unfortunately information is scanty because most of what we know is through the writings of Europeans. Rotuman stories about their ancestors' naiveté in early interactions with Europeans survive in the custom of *tē samuga*, in which individuals are teased by reference to the humorous actions of their ancestors. Thus some people are nicknamed "buttons" after a woman who mistook coins given her by a ship's captain for buttons and complained because they had no holes in them; others bear the appellation "shake hands with the mirror" after an ancestor who tried to do just that when he first saw a full-length mirror; and best known of all, the nicknames "biscuit" or "biscuit planter" refer to an incident in which a woman who found hardtack biscuits to her liking attempted to plant one to see if she could grow her own. But we know little about the attitudes Rotumans held toward Europeans, although a Rotuman saying, *fā asoa* (assistant), holds a clue. According to Elizabeth Inia, the saying refers to a foreigner who in the past acted as assistant to the chiefs to do their work. She wrote that the saying refers

to renegade white sailors in the nineteenth century who used their practical knowledge and skills to help the chiefs of Rotuma. Nowadays can be said of people of foreign parentage (including part-Rotumans) who do not properly follow custom but try to help. The phrase excuses them for their inappropriate behaviour. However, if said to Rotumans it is an insult, implying that they are not really Rotuman.<sup>33</sup>

Indications are that Rotumans rapidly became accustomed to white men and their ways, and that whatever novelty or awe the newcomers may have held for them in the early years wore off quickly. The Rotumans' treatment of the beachcombers suggests that they made clear distinctions between those who were transient and up to no good (they ignored or ostracized them) and those who were prepared to take on the responsibilities of citizenship (they incorporated

them into community). Eason remarked that "the word for a European, *fafisi*, became a term of opprobrium and insult" among Rotumans,<sup>34</sup> but may have been more in the context of accusing one another of violating custom than of characterizing the behavior of white men as such.



**Photo 5.4** Comic dance at a wedding, 1913. Teasing people about their forefathers' misadventures with European visitors is a common theme of comic performers. A. M. Hocart. *Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.*

Our guess is that Rotumans recognized character differences among Europeans as they did among themselves, and acted accordingly. We suspect they extended the principle of autonomy to encompass Europeans, by which we mean that they put little pressure on them to conform to any preconceived or stereotyped set of expectations. By treating white men as individuals rather than as representatives of a category (*the white man*), Rotumans took a significant step in defending their own autonomy insofar as this treatment implied a resistance to granting individuals special status on the basis of race or ethnicity alone.

## Notes to Chapter 5

Our account of the success of Rotuman sailors aboard European vessels in this chapter was adapted from Howard's 1995 article, "Rotuman Seafaring in Historical Perspective."

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson 1915, 64–66, 138–139.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson 1799, 292–294.

<sup>3</sup> Dillon 1829, 102–103. In his account of Duperrey's visit to Rotuma in 1824, Lesson reported that Rotumans had given the title of *sau* to an African black, an escaped convict from New South Wales who arrived on the brig *Macquarie* (Lesson 1838, 419). Dillon's account is more credible since he actually knew the man and correctly identified the vessel (see *Journal of Pacific History* 1966, 78). We regard as problematic the assertion that Babahey occupied the position of *sau*.

<sup>4</sup> Lesson 1838, 415–416; translated from the French by Ella Wiswell.

<sup>5</sup> Lesson 1838, 416.

<sup>6</sup> Dillon 1829, 99.

<sup>7</sup> The ship may well have been the whaler *Independence*, which visited Rotuma shortly before the *Research*, Dillon's vessel.

<sup>8</sup> Eason stated that the number of convicts and runaway sailors numbered between 70 and 100, but cited no sources. He also claimed that "it is recorded that as many as nine whalers were at anchor there together" (1951, 35). We have no idea from where he obtained his information.

<sup>9</sup> *Historical Records of Australia*, Series I, volume 16, page 49.

<sup>10</sup> Knights 1925, 193–194; italics in the original.

<sup>11</sup> Forbes 1875, 224. Forbes's own narrative belies this statement. He later made reference to "an old white man" of threescore years who had been stranded as a youth on Rotuma following a shipwreck. The man reportedly had been taken off by a passing vessel only to be wrecked again some years later at nearly the same spot, and then was taken off by another vessel but left on shore again by the ship's captain (Forbes 1875, 229).

<sup>12</sup> Forbes 1875, 225.

<sup>13</sup> Cheever referred to Emery in one place (1834) as "first officer," in another (1835) as "mate." Captain John Knights of the brig *Spy* and Robert Jarman on the whaling ship *Japan* referred to him as "second mate" (Knights 1925, 192; Jarman 1838, 162).

<sup>14</sup> Osborn 1834–1835.

<sup>15</sup> Cheever 1834.

<sup>16</sup> Prout 1843, 562.

<sup>17</sup> The reference is no doubt to the island of Ouvéa in the Loyalty Islands (New Caledonia), although Eason thought that they more



likely came from Wallis Island ('Uvea) to the east of Rotuma (1951, 37).

<sup>18</sup> Lawry 1850, 219–220.

<sup>19</sup> Westbrook 1879, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Langdon 1978, 128.

<sup>21</sup> Historical Records of Australia, Series I, volume 16:49; Eason 1951, 35.

<sup>22</sup> Michelena y Rojas 1843, 167.

<sup>23</sup> Bennett 1831, 202; Lucatt 1851, 159–160.

<sup>24</sup> Lucatt reported that the chiefs "have the absolute disposal of the young women born upon their estate, and their sanction is necessary before they can be given in marriage" (Lucatt 1851, 159–160).

<sup>25</sup> See Inia 2001 regarding ancient Rotuman marriage rituals confirming and celebrating virginity.

<sup>26</sup> Eason stated that he remained on Rotuma until his death in the 1870s (1951, 36), but according to the caption under a photo of Charles Howard published by Russell (1942, 236), he was last heard of in Sāmoa about 1881.

<sup>27</sup> Using registry data between 1903 and 1960 from Rotuma, we calculated the survival rate beyond the age of ten years old for individuals with these surnames and compared it with the survival rate of all Rotuman births. The survival rate of children with these surnames was 84.9 percent (N=192); the survival rate of all children was 74.5 percent (N=9,253).

<sup>28</sup> For example, see Bennett 1831, 480.

<sup>29</sup> Osborn 1834–1835.

<sup>30</sup> Eagleston 1832.

<sup>31</sup> Forbes 1875, 226.

<sup>32</sup> Allardyce 1885–1886, 133. Gardiner also commented on the disgrace endured by Rotuman men who had not been to foreign lands (1898, 407). He speculated that although it was not uncommon for a hundred or more young men to leave the island in a year, not more than one-third ever returned (1898, 497).

<sup>33</sup> Inia 1998, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Eason 1951, 35.



**Photo 6.1** The Reverend William Fletcher and family, Rotuma 1865. *Fletcher family archives.*



**Photo 6.2** First Methodist mission house in Rotuma. *Fletcher family archives.*

## 6 The Missionary Experience: Transforming the Rotuman Religious Imagination

I wonder what the future holds. Spirituality thrives on a sense of mystery. In the past we Rotumans associated spirits with the mysteries of nature: with the bush and the sea, with sunshine and rain, with birth and death. The spirits of our ancestors gave us comfort in this somewhat unpredictable world. But now we live in the age of technology, and confront the mystery of machines like computers that do marvelous things we do not understand. Is this where contemporary spirits reside—a modern-day 'Oroi? If so, can we rely on them to comfort us?

Elizabeth Inia, *Kato'aga: Rotuman Ceremonies*, 2001

When considering the conversion of indigenous peoples to Christianity, it is useful to contrast the notions of religious *imagination* and religious *beliefs*. Religious imagination refers to an experiential universe inhabited by supernatural or mysterious entities in a variety of forms, ranging from gods of various qualities and character, to benign and malevolent spirits, ghosts, and so on. In societies where religion is based on personal experience rather than established theologies, individual imagination plays a profound role in shaping the way in which the supernatural world is perceived. Even within relatively tight-knit communities, religious imagination tends to be expansive, heterogeneous, unsystematized, and unrestricted. Characteristically, the question of whether an idea is true or false does not arise.

Religious belief, in contrast, tends to reduce the scope of religious imagination, relegating various components of it to obscurity. Although belief is multidimensional,<sup>1</sup> it primarily

involves propositions that can be deemed either true or false. To believe is to accept the truth of a proposition; to disbelieve is to reject it. Belief is ultimately a mental phenomenon, located in individual minds, and is subject to verification only through inference from talk or action. Underlying beliefs are presuppositions or basic assumptions about the nature of reality.

An emphasis on belief tends to restrict and confine religious imagination by shifting the focus from the world of experience to the world of discourse. Because belief places the emphasis on "truth," that which is not deemed true must be false and hence discarded. Thus believing in "one true God" requires rejecting much of the experience that otherwise would engage religious imagination. The Christian emphasis on belief—on "the word of God"—also lends itself to systematized theology and orthodox behavioral prescriptions and proscriptions, thus constraining the ways in which individuals are supposed to interpret their experiences, including their experience of the supernatural. Religious orthodoxy also lends itself to hierarchy, either within an organized church or by those with knowledge of "the truth" presiding over and instructing those without that knowledge, or with lesser knowledge.

In this chapter we explore the dynamics of interaction between Rotuman religious imagination and Christian missionization in the mid-nineteenth century. Our aim is to shed light on the nature of religious transformation as it occurred following European intrusion.

### The Rotuman Religious Imagination

At the time of European intrusion, the Rotumans lived in a world they shared with a wide range of mysterious, supernatural beings, including ghosts of varying dispositions (*'atua*), and gods (*'aitu*), ranging from local spirits who inhabited the bodies of animals to a high god, Tagroa, who lived in the heavens and controlled weather, crops, and human fertility. Ancestral ghosts took up their abodes in various offshore locations under the sea, while other *'atua* were said to dwell in trees, wells, rocks, cemeteries, and isolated localities on the island. Some spirits were free roaming and could be encountered anywhere in the form of animals or apparitions. Spirits could be called on for assistance in solving problems, but they could be dangerous as well—the cause of disease and ill-fortune—requiring

people to exercise caution, to follow a variety of prescriptive and proscriptive rules, and to pay attention to omens of various kinds. Bush areas away from villages and hamlets and the surrounding reef were enchanted regions where one expected to have encounters with a variety of supernatural beings, some benign and helpful, others malevolent and dangerous.

Some of these roamed about in companies. For example, the *sa'aitu* consisted of the spirits of deceased chiefs and men who had been uncircumcised during their lifetime. Men who died in war also joined the company. This "big company" helped the living in wartime when they were summoned by men chanting a special song to work up their fighting spirit. Another company was called *la'oag ta*. They roamed about looking to recruit the souls of women approaching childbirth. Then there were the *uarepa*, the spirits of prematurely born babies or miscarriages, which Rotumans regarded as being particularly potent. The souls of such children had particular dwelling places, such as caves. When seen by humans, they appeared to glow like rotten wood or phosphorescent centipedes. The lower surface of the *uarepa* was a mass of children's legs.

It appears that a haunting concern about death and separation provided the main fuel for the Rotuman religious imagination. This preoccupation was evident in the elaborate death rituals and graveyards, which were the source of much commentary by early European visitors.<sup>2</sup> Prevailing rituals were ways of maintaining social continuity with remote ancestors as well as recently deceased relatives.

Spirits and gods were well incorporated into the social world of the Rotuman people. Relationships with them were maintained indirectly through symbolic exchanges or directly through mediums and possession. The spirits of close family members were especially likely to communicate with the living and to protect them from harm when called on. They could also be implored to bring justice to bear on people who had wronged family members; however, they could also vent their wrath on family members who quarreled or otherwise caused dissension within the family unit.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, pre-missionary Rotuman society incorporated a rich pantheon of supernatural beings, reflecting a lively, active religious imagination.

## Encounters with Europeans

Early European visitors to Rotuma had difficulty coming to grips with the Rotuman religious imagination, in part, it seems, because their inquiries were framed in terms of beliefs rather than experiences with the spiritual realm. They were disconcerted by the lack of systemization in Rotuman thinking about supernatural beings, as is evident in the account of Lesson, who visited Rotuma in 1824, prior to the arrival of any missionaries:

As far as one can tell, their religious ideas are extremely superficial; they believe only in a supreme being or spirit who inflicts death by suffocation. They call this death *atoua*. They believe that after death, all is dissolved. We tried to make them understand the tenets of the Christian religion, the punishment of evil and the reward of good, all of which seemed to astound them greatly.<sup>4</sup>

It seems likely that the conclusions of such early commentators were based on Rotumans' responses to a way of talking they found unfamiliar. Instead of discussing spirits in the abstract, Rotumans probably talked about spirits in rather specific contexts—when telling stories, expressing apprehension or a sense of foreboding, attempting to explain anomalous occurrences, coping with uncanny feelings and unnatural sensations, and so on. Not surprisingly, Rotuman "religious beliefs" are described in European accounts as "superstitions," a term that suggests irrationality as well as inconsistency and incoherence.

In fact there was no word for "belief" in the Rotuman language prior to European intrusion. The missionaries had to introduce "*pilifi*" as a Rotumanization of the term. The closest Rotuman equivalent is *aier'aki* (to accept as true, correct), which derives from *aire* (true, correct). The antonym of *aire* is *siko* (false, untrue or incorrect). However, *aire* and *siko* are primarily used as terms of affirmation or denial of a speaker's claims (whether about events, rights and obligations, or other phenomena). They are not ordinarily used in reference to an individual's personal convictions about what is metaphysically true or real; in essence they are relational concepts. Thus *aire* is used to signify agreement, and *siko* to signify disagreement, with a speaker's statements. This usage reflects a distinctive theory of truth based on an implicit link between mana and truth. Since

mana derives from spirits, such notions of truth reflect an assumed linkage between the world of humans and the world of spirits. This meant that the missionaries, when they did come, were judged more on the basis of their perceived potency as social beings than by the persuasiveness of their theologies.

The first missionary encounter on Rotuma took place in 1839, when John Williams of the London Missionary Society left two Samoan teachers there, in response to the requests of Tokaniua and Fürsefaua, two Rotuman chiefs.<sup>5</sup> The Samoans were eventually replaced by Tongan Wesleyans and still later by Fijian teachers, but progress was slow. By 1847 Rev. R. B. Lyth reported only sixty-eight Rotuman Christians on the island.<sup>6</sup> The Wesleyan mission relied on Tongan and Fijian teachers until 1864, when Rev. William Fletcher took up residence on Rotuma. He was followed by a succession of English and Australian missionaries until the mid-twentieth century.

In 1846 two Roman Catholic priests, Fathers Pierre Verne and Gregoire Villien, arrived from Futuna and attempted to establish a mission. They, too, found the Rotumans resistant to conversion and left the island in 1859, but the mission was reestablished by Fathers Pierre Dezest and Joseph Trouillet in 1868.



**Photo 6.3** Monument commemorating first mass performed on Rotuma, 1996. *Alan Howard.*

## Initial Resistance to Christianization

In his Bachelor of Divinity thesis, Jione Langi noted that one source of resistance to the missionaries' conversion efforts was "the intense propaganda against missions which had been carried on for many years by the early white settlers."<sup>7</sup> For the most part these men were hostile to missionaries in general and island teachers in particular, and they did not hide their feelings. Collectively, they were "'a thorn in the flesh' and an object of terror to many Fijian and Tongan teachers."<sup>8</sup>

The presence of a less than morally obsessed class of white men also diminished any sense Rotumans may initially have had about European superiority. Thus the Reverend Fletcher rued the fact that:

They have had much intercourse with white men, and have seen something of the world...money and property have circulated largely amongst the people. All this has tended to give them a very fair opinion of themselves, and their knowledge of white men would have been for the better had it embraced a wider circle.<sup>9</sup>

Langi also noted, however, that one of the main difficulties Rotumans had in accepting Christianity was that while their own spirits seemed to give material evidence of their mana by bringing misfortune on individuals, Christianity provided them with no material proofs. The miracles related in the Bible, which the missionaries so often talked about, were merely stories to Rotumans. They could see no miraculous interventions on behalf of Christians to impress them.<sup>10</sup>

Although some of the chiefs were favorably disposed to Christianity and even sought the presence of a missionary, most were apprehensive about how it would affect their prerogatives. An incident in 1858 crystallized their opposition:

Rev. J. Carey arrived from Sydney, but was not allowed to remain. In an interview with the chiefs, he was told that not only he must go, but the teachers as well. The church (*lotu*) had made just enough impression on the people to disturb the equanimity of the chiefs, devoted to things as they were. There was a shrewd suspicion that the *lotu* was not only antagonistic to the customs of the past, but that it would eventually carry all before



it. Whist thus regarded with misgiving, the promptings of a renegade Tonga man led the few *lotu* people at a Christmas festival to act very injudiciously. A beautifully dyed girdle of dracaena leaves is at certain times worn by the "Sau," and by him alone. But now all the professing Christians put on such girdles; and the heathen were greatly incensed, fighting ensued, and many Christians were killed.<sup>11</sup>

After the Reverend Carey left, the chiefs ordered the chapels closed or pulled down, preaching ceased, and people were forbidden to honor the Sabbath. They were successful in their special efforts to win over leading men who had favored the *lotu*, with one exception. A chief by the name Zerubbabel Urakmata held fast to his Christian profession, and though his firmness angered the chiefs, they did him no harm.

Church historians generally credit Zerubbabel with saving the Wesleyan mission, in large measure because he knew how to read. As recounted by Churchward:

Just at this time a number of young men, Rotumans, who had been abroad, arrived back on Rotuma. These men had been to Australia, and thence to the Torres Strait, where they had been employed in pearl-fishing. On their travels they had seen a lot, and learnt a lot, and had been greatly impressed by the white man's progressiveness as compared with the backwardness of their own people. So, on returning to Rotuma, they recounted their experiences, and endeavoured to show their fellow-countrymen, and particularly the young men, how important it was that they should wake up and seek the education which was obviously the secret of the white man's progress and prosperity. "And the first step in education," they added, "is to learn to read and write one's own language."<sup>12</sup>

The young men were impressed, and they were agreed that they must find some way of learning to read and write. They found Zerubbabel more than willing to teach them, but on three conditions: that every lesson begin and end with prayer, that the readings be from Matthew's Gospel (3,000 copies of which had been left by Rev. Carey), and that the book be used reverently as the message of God.<sup>13</sup>



**Photo 6.4** Zerubbabel (center) with the four Fijian teachers who went to Rotuma with Rev. William Fletcher in 1864. *Uniting Church in Australia, National Assembly Historical Reference Committee.*

Zerubbabel began to hold "love feasts" (the traditional Wesleyan fellowship meeting) and even quarterly meetings (regular business meetings) as a means of organizing an indigenous church. When James Calvert visited Rotuma in 1864, shortly before Zerubbabel's death, he found 1,200 people worshipping in eleven chapels, with 22 local preachers and 250 members meeting regularly in classes.<sup>14</sup>

The initial impact of Christianity on the Rotuman religious imagination seems to have been limited, with the apparent exception of the notions of hell and damnation. Rev. Fletcher acknowledged as much when he wrote in 1865, "There is little of what can be called religious experience, but all give prominence to their ruin as sinners, and to their hope of salvation through Christ alone. The dread of everlasting burning is referred to by many."<sup>15</sup>

The concept of eternal suffering as a consequence of sin, along with the prospect of harnessing the mana of the Christian God in the interest of worldly riches, allowed Christianity to take root. The testimony of Mataiase during a Methodist love feast, recorded in a letter from Rev. John Osborne on 20 March 1873, is indicative:

I desire, first of all, to render thanks unto God for his goodness in giving me His holy Spirit to help me at all times. When first I joined the Church I strove to do God's will because of my dread of Eternal punishment, and also because I imagined I should be greatly

prospered in my worldly affairs. But now I try to do God's will because of my love to Jesus. Formerly I had a great desire to possess riches, but now, I am not anxious to be wealthy. I desire spiritual riches. The only thing that I really value is the love of God. I greatly rejoice when men abandon their sins, and turn to God and love him.<sup>16</sup>

Once missionaries succeeded in drawing converts into their orbit, they strove to teach them to display, in words and behavior, forms they regarded as indicative of commitment and conviction. Thus, in the same letter, Osborne wrote:

It will be seen that I have taught my people to speak short. I do not pretend to assert that what they said is as edifying as the Love Feast Experiences of the Church in York Street or Bourke Street, but nevertheless it has the Methodist ring, and shows that the Rotuman Christians are trying to possess an intelligent piety.<sup>17</sup>

### The Missionary Assault on Custom

Rev. William Fletcher was the first European missionary to take up long-term residence on Rotuma. Because there was already a sizeable Christian following by the time he arrived in 1864, he set out to consolidate the hold of the mission on converts' lives. The chiefs remained skeptical—one of them told Fletcher that he feared a missionary would try to do away with all the powers and prerogatives of the chiefs—but after assuring the chief that the *lotu* instilled respect and obedience to rulers, Fletcher embarked on a program designed to reshape the political, along with the social, landscape. He focused his attention on the institution of the *sau*.

In describing the institution, in a letter dated 26 January 1865, Fletcher wrote that the *sau*

holds the highest social place, drinking kava before the chiefs yet he gains his dignity at some expense. The poor fellow has to eat, and drink kava, many times during the twenty-four hours, by night as well as by day. He presides at certain dances, regularly held, when as at his drinking kava, the old atua, or gods are invoked. These atua appear as old chiefs, whose history is not as well known as their names. With all this there

is the most profuse daubing with turmeric. Food is continually taken to the Sau from all parts of the island.<sup>18</sup>

Fletcher considered the *sau* to be the greatest hindrance to the acceptance of Christianity because would-be converts continued showing deference to the *sau* as "a high priest or a living god." Anyone appointed to the position had to give up his church membership because of its heathen associations. In his report to the 1869 district meeting, Fletcher reported that people had asked him whether they might have "a lotu Sau," i.e., a Christian type of *sau*, but he had told them that was impossible; "it would be like trying to unite Jehovah and Baal."<sup>19</sup>



**Photo 6.5** The Reverend William Fletcher and Mary Fletcher in later years. *Uniting Church in Australia, National Assembly Historical Reference Committee.*

Fletcher, obviously disconcerted over Rotuman willingness to retain their traditional rites while professing Christian beliefs, remarked in a 26 January 1865 letter, "The opinion...appears to be, if we serve God, it is well, but if we do as our forefathers did, it is well." In reaction, he attacked the institution head on, focusing not only on the rites of homage but also on the dancing and smearing with turmeric that accompanied the rites. Writing on 12 November 1867, Fletcher reported:

Just at present this dancing, and the homage paid that living god, called the "sau," are our great difficulties, unless I include the use of turmeric. All the members of society are forbidden to recognise in any [way] the sau, or his adherents, and no attempt has been made to compel them, especially as I have refused to admit as a member, or to continue as one, any one who wavered on this point. But of the non-members, many at heart like the old doings, and appear unable to feel aught but reverence for that miserable object of homage, the sau. Many professedly Christian are helping to uphold heathenism by their vacillating conduct, by their want of a little pluck, by their secret love of sin....Our prayers and our hopes are that the "sau" now in office, may close the long list of such officials, extending to generations of the distant past. The proximity of the dancing houses, the taunts and coaxings of heathen relatives, the want of judgement on the part of our own members, and office bearers, the neglect of private prayer, and the natural indolence of the people, with their ignorance over and above, all retard our work, and exercise our patience. I never felt so much in Fiji, as I have done, and do here, there we are face to face with a foe, who by authority, by craft, and by every available means, short of violence would drive us off the field....Though I am told all are at liberty to join us, yet there is a private, and very effectual check put upon the people by their chiefs, who promise to lotu all together soon.<sup>20</sup>

In his condemnation of dancing, Fletcher implemented a resolution unanimously adopted by the Methodist assembly, which read as follows:

The conference has observed, with sincere regret, the existence in some quarters of a disposition to indulge in and encourage amusements which it cannot regard as harmless or allowable. The obligation which rests on Christians to "do all to the glory of God" must be held to extend even to their recreations: and recreations which lead to association with the ungodly and promote a trifling spirit which indispose persons for devotional exercises, and do not harmonize with that use of "the word of God and Prayer" by which the social intercourse of Christians should be hallowed, can never be safely or innocently followed by any who desire to "adorn the

doctrine of God our Saviour." It behooves all such to keep at the utmost distance from evil, and to set an example which shall at once instruct and improve the ungodly. The original rules of our Society are express [*sic*] against such music and other diversions as do not accord with these general principles and subsequent regulations have specified dancing as incompatible with Christian propriety. The well known rule which forbids the teaching of dancing in schools conducted by Methodists proceeds upon the principle of its unlawfulness, not merely in schools and among pupils, but among Methodists in general. To the views long since indicated the Conference still entirely adheres, and entreats heads of families...to watch against every practice which tends to lower the tone of devotional feeling.<sup>21</sup>

In some respects his condemnation of the use of turmeric was even more indicative of the degree to which Fletcher and the missionaries who succeeded him strove to transform lifeways on Rotuma. The missionaries brought with them a certain sense of order, which was represented and supported by particular forms of bodily appearance and types of dwellings. Turmeric, which Rotumans smeared over themselves as both practical and ritual protection against bodily insults from external sources,<sup>22</sup> disgusted Europeans because it came off readily and stained their own clothes and possessions. When converts seemed to be adopting at least some aspects of European dress Fletcher was pleased:

The contrast between the skins and garments, stained with turmeric and the clean shirts and dresses, was too marked to be overlooked. The young men of the district appeared in a sort of uniform, clean white shirts, and clean cloth wrapped about them in place of trousers. The idea was their own: the effect was good.<sup>23</sup>

Contrasting "heathen" and Wesleyan sections of a village, Fletcher remarked: "As I reached the houses of the heathen part of the village, the difference was very marked. Everything was dirty. Turmeric was on all sides."<sup>24</sup>

Rev. John Osborne served on Rotuma in the interval between Fletcher's two periods of service. In a letter of 1 March 1873, praising his predecessors' efforts, Osborne seemed to equate changes in appearance and housing with sincerity of conversion:

It is pleasing to note the delightful changes that have taken place in the circumstances of the people during the past ten years. Before Wm. Fletcher's last appointment to the island, there was a comparatively large number of Christians, but they were necessarily very ignorant; while the majority of the inhabitants were thoroughly degraded. Their houses were the meanest hovels imaginable, and they themselves were unutterably filthy. They wore European cloth round their loins, but it was so daubed with turmeric and impregnated with dirt, the accumulation of months, as to be in the highest degree offensive. Through the instrumentality of Mr. & Mrs. Fletcher, and several really superior Fijian teachers, the most gratifying changes were effected. Hundreds *lotu'd*, and when they *lotu'd* they got rid of the turmeric. Then they purchased soap, and tried to make their scanty garments more presentable. Bye and bye numbers of them became convinced of sin, and entered the Church. Then they grew dissatisfied with their hovels, and commenced the erection of substantial and neat houses. So rapidly did they advance, that when I was appointed to take Mr. Fletcher's place, nearly four years ago, I found that there was a membership of upwards of 450, & a large attendance at the schools. There were also scores of well-constructed wattle and lime houses neatly whitewashed, having doors and glazed windows. At that time about 300 or 400 of the people were still heathen, and they tried hard to keep up their system of filth and sensuality. But they utterly failed in the attempt; and about two years ago they abandoned heathenism forever.<sup>25</sup>

### The Contrast between Wesleyans and Catholics

In this chapter we have focused on the Wesleyan mission for several reasons. For one, more documentation is available; for another, the Catholic missionaries were considerably more tolerant of "heathen" practices and less intent on altering personal appearance and the prevailing lifestyle. Rather, they put their effort into building impressive churches and schools. Father Lucien Soubeyran, who served on Rotuma from 1907 to 1954, provided the rationale. He later remarked in a letter that Rotuman Christians were impressed with what they saw, so that good buildings meant

more attention to Christianity and its teachings. They believed what they saw, he said, and although they could not see God, they saw the Host in the monstrance [receptacle] and prayed and sang; they understood that the Lord was there and were more fervent in following their religion.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the French priests built two impressive cathedrals on Rotuma, importing many of the materials from France, including gargoyles, stained glass windows, statues of saints, etc. They also erected a two-story school building on the grounds of the main church at Sumi.

The Methodist missionaries were disdainful of Catholic tolerance for traditional customs and lifestyle. Thus, on 26 October 1864, Fletcher wrote that Catholicism

is but heathenism hallowed and Christianity degraded....It were hard here, even as in Fiji, to tell a Papist from a professed heathen by his outward gait and demeanour. There is the same unkempt head of long hair, the same daubing with turmeric; indeed, the same wild, and unpolished, and unwholesome appearance. If by searching, you do at last catch sight of a little figure of Mary hanging around the neck, you may suppose the man to be a Papist and not a heathen.<sup>27</sup>

Rev. John Osborne, writing a few years later (1 March 1873), commented on why he considered the Catholics less successful than the Methodists in their missionary endeavors:

The heathen could not see the difference between the religion which the priest preached, and that which was professed by themselves, and they did not see the use of abandoning their own system to embrace what in their opinion was no better. It is painful to be compelled to state that Roman Catholicism in Rotumah is really no better than heathenism. It does not raise the people socially or morally; their houses and their persons are nearly as filthy as ever they were. It does not teach the people to respect the Sabbath: they buy and sell on that sacred day as on other days; and it certainly does not teach them to be obedient to their chiefs.<sup>28</sup>





**Photo 6.6** Frs. Gustave Griffon and Lucien Soubeyrand. *Marist Archives, Rome.*

### Some Consequences of Conversion

When chiefs, along with everyone else, finally converted to Christianity, they severed their ties with their ancestral spirits and the other gods, and so lost the traditional basis of their moral authority. In compensation, the missionaries supported the chiefs so long as they conformed to the Church's teachings, but it soon became clear that it was the missionaries, and *not* the chiefs, who controlled communication with the Christian God. Moral authority now came from this new God, but it came only indirectly, through white missionaries.

In some ways the missionaries encouraged the chiefs to take more prerogatives than they had been entitled to in

earlier times. A system of fines was established for various offenses against the new religion, including neglect of school, absence from the preaching services and from prayer meetings.<sup>29</sup> To encourage enforcement, the chiefs were given a percentage of the income from fines. But on the whole, with the acceptance of the missionaries and Christianity, the chiefs found themselves one step further removed from the divine source of their authority.

How did conversion affect the Rotuman religious imagination? Initial contact with Christianity probably expanded it by suggesting new entities: God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, Mary, saints, etc. Progressive commitment to Christianity, however, resulted in a steady pressure to constrict religious imagination through an emphasis on belief in the church's dogma, a direct assault on practices associated with traditional spirits (especially on the institution of the *sau*), and indirect attacks that removed people from circumstances where their imaginations could operate in an expansive manner. This embodied a shift away from a focal concern for continuing relationships with deceased ancestors to a concern for individual salvation.<sup>30</sup> In contrast to traditional rituals, which relied on the immediate experiencing of the supernatural and mysterious, Christian church rituals depended on proclaiming prescribed dogma in word and song. Wesleyans in particular were encouraged to go to church services several times a week, to attend prayer meetings, and to participate in various other church activities that affirmed belief. There was little room for exercising religious imagination, particularly within the Wesleyan camp.

Outside of church, however, in the bush, in cemeteries, in the dead of night, Rotumans continued to experience encounters with spirits of various kinds. They paid heed to omens in the cries of birds and animals, in the appearance of anomalous creatures. Indeed, aspects of the Rotuman landscape remained the unquestioned abode of indigenous spirits throughout most of the twentieth century. It was not until the last quarter of the century that the combined impact of such modern influences as electrification, the widespread use of motor vehicles, increased exposure to formal education, and periodic visits to cosmopolitan centers generated a secular template for experience that seriously reduced the sense of the uncanny, resulting in an eclipse of a once enchanted universe.<sup>31</sup>



**Photo 6.7** Fr. Griffon and Rotuman men. *Marist Archives, Rome.*



**Photo 6.8** Sr. M. Pierre and young girls. *Marist Archives, Rome.*

## Notes to Chapter 6

Chapter 6 is largely based on two previous papers. The section detailing Rotuman concepts of supernatural beings draws on "Speak of the Devils: Discourse and Belief in Spirits on Rotuma" (Howard 1996b), which was published in *Spirits in Culture, History, and Mind*, edited by Jeannette Mageo and Alan Howard. The description of the Rotuman conversion experience derives from an unpublished paper entitled "Transforming the Rotuman Religious Imagination" (Howard and Rensel 2000), delivered at a conference on religious conversion in Oceania, at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, held in Paris in May 2000.

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<sup>1</sup> See Howard 1996b, 136–142, for an extensive discussion of belief.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of Rotuman death rituals, see Inia 2001.

<sup>3</sup> See Inia 2001 and Howard 1996b for more detailed descriptions of pre-Christian beliefs.

<sup>4</sup> Lesson 1838, 437.

<sup>5</sup> For a full account of Williams's visit and the events leading to his decision to leave the Samoan teachers, see Prout 1843. For summaries of Williams's account, see Eason 1951 and Langi 1971; Langi's comments on the encounter are especially interesting and insightful.

<sup>6</sup> Wood 1978, 121.

<sup>7</sup> Langi 1971, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Forbes 1875, 224.

<sup>9</sup> Methodist Church of Australasia, *Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, no. 31 (April 1865).

<sup>10</sup> Langi 1971, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Methodist Church of Australasia, *Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, no. 13 (April 1870).

<sup>12</sup> Churchward 1938, 302–303.

<sup>13</sup> Williams and Calvert 1870, 567.

<sup>14</sup> Wood 1978, 122.

<sup>15</sup> Methodist Church of Australasia, *Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, no. 35 (April 1866).

<sup>16</sup> Methodist Missionary Letters from Rotuma, 1872–1879.

<sup>17</sup> Methodist Missionary Letters from Rotuma, 1872–1879.

<sup>18</sup> Methodist Church of Australasia, *Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, no. 34 (January 1866).

<sup>19</sup> Wood 1978, 123.

<sup>20</sup> Methodist Church of Australasia, *Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, no. 5 (April 1868).

<sup>21</sup> *Methodist Magazine*, 1856, Pt. II, p. 839; as quoted in Eason 1951, 75–76.

<sup>22</sup> See Howard and Rensel 1998.

<sup>23</sup> Methodist Church of Australasia, *Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, no. 35 (April 1866).

<sup>24</sup> Methodist Church of Australasia, *Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, no. 37 (October 1866).

<sup>25</sup> Methodist Missionary Letters from Rotuma, 1872–1879.

<sup>26</sup> Letter dated 18 November 1865, Pacific Manuscripts Bureau, Reel 467, Section 5, Miscellaneous Papers Chiefly Historical.

<sup>27</sup> Methodist Church of Australasia, *Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, no. 31 (April 1865).

<sup>28</sup> Methodist Missionary Letters from Rotuma, 1872–1879.

<sup>29</sup> The fines were evidently initiated by the teachers rather than by Fletcher, who, on returning for his second term on Rotuma in 1874, commented in a letter dated 5 March:

On my arrival I found that fines were imposed not only for neglect of school, but for absence from the preaching services, or from prayer meetings. I could not sanction such rules, and the chiefs gave them up. Tobacco and Kava too were stringently forbidden to all members of society....It is in these and some like matters that I have thought our native agents likely to act injudiciously & mischievously. (Methodist Missionary Letters from Rotuma, 1872–1879)

<sup>30</sup> The emphasis on individual salvation, at the expense of both community and relationships with ancestors, is even stronger in the newer Christian religions (e.g., Assembly of God, Jehovah's Witnesses) introduced in recent years. One's relationship with Jesus Christ as personal savior is given priority over all other relationships.

<sup>31</sup> See Howard 1996b.



**Photo 7.1** Men dressed in war garb. © *Fiji Museum*.

## 7 Religious Strife

There was general hatred between the natives among themselves before the arrival of the missionaries. There were disputes, quarrels and ill-feelings between district and district and among various tribes. These were made even worse when, finally, two branches of the Christian Church arrived. They both claimed to be the true religion, so that the already rival districts found more basis for abusing each other....The words of Dr. Langham, head of the Fijian Mission...reveal this point. "The parties," he wrote, "were not hostile to one another because they were of different religions; they were of different religions because they were hostile to one another."<sup>1</sup>

Jione Langi, *The History of the Church  
in Its Rotuman Setting*, 1971

### The Clash of 1871

By 1871 most of Rotuma had converted to Christianity, with the districts of Noa'tau, Oinafa, Malhaha, and Itu'muta mostly Wesleyan, and the districts of Juju and Peppei mostly Catholic. In Itu'ti'u, the largest district, however, an enclave of unconverted Rotumans lived side by side with Wesleyans and Catholics. The chief of Itu'ti'u, Tauragtoak, was the lone district chief who was not yet committed to Christianity. As such, Tauragtoak took responsibility for perpetuating the *sau's* role, and accommodated a *sau* in the village of Savlei. When some Wesleyan subchiefs refused to donate provisions to support the *sau*, Tauragtoak declared that he would force them into submission. He asked support from Catholics in his district and received it, whereupon he prepared to press the issue. Thus, on the evening of 27 February 1871, Father Joseph Trouillet baptized recently converted Catholics late

into the night, sanctifying them for an expected battle.<sup>2</sup> At nearby Motusa, Rotuman Wesleyans spent the night fortifying their houses and constructing a defensive wall of earth. The following morning, after Mass, the combined Catholic and unconverted forces set out to engage the Wesleyans.<sup>3</sup> Soon the Wesleyans were routed from their positions and fell back, but reinforcements sent from nearby districts turned the battle in their favor. The Wesleyans forced Tauragtoak and his allies to flee to Fag'uta, which was the headquarters of the Catholic mission and under the Catholic chief Riamkau. In the aftermath of this defeat, a large number of "heathens," along with some Catholics, converted to Wesleyanism.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Tauragtoak was deposed as chief of Itu'ti'u and replaced by a man by the name of Albert.<sup>5</sup>

Although some of the Wesleyans prepared to attack Fag'uta, the situation cooled as word came from several leading Wesleyan chiefs that they would not participate, provided all the Catholics at Itu'ti'u either converted to Protestantism or joined the exiles in Fag'uta.<sup>6</sup>

For months after the initial fighting an uneasy peace prevailed, punctuated by rumors that one side or the other was rearming. On 29 August 1871, a Russian corvette arrived bearing a letter from Bishop Elloy, announcing that a French warship was being sent to take charge of the situation and protect the interests of the Catholic missionaries, who were French citizens.<sup>7</sup> This news produced some consternation among the Protestant missionaries and teachers who had been sent by the Wesleyan Missionary Society and thus owed political allegiance to England. On 10 September the French warship *Hamelin* arrived, bearing as one of its passengers Bishop Bataillon. Following a Mass said by the bishop at Fag'uta, Commander Poulthier of the *Hamelin* called a meeting of Rotuman chiefs. With some reluctance, the Wesleyan chiefs agreed to the meeting and gathered the next day at Motusa, along with the commander and the two Catholic chiefs, Riamkau from Juju and Mora' from Pepjei.<sup>8</sup> At the end of the meeting Commander Poulthier, in the name of France, drew up an agreement, known as the Treaty of *Hamelin*, which was signed by the chiefs on both sides. Neither side would be punished for its actions during the war; henceforth Catholics were to be allowed free exercise of their religion and to enjoy equal civil and political rights, and Catholics in exile could return to their houses and property unobstructed.<sup>9</sup>



Almost immediately after the *Hamelin's* departure, the situation began to deteriorate. A few days later Albert wrote to Marāf, the chief of Noa'tau, announcing his refusal to accept Catholics back in Itu'ti'u, or to allow Catholic churches to be built in his district. In March 1872, Marāf, in direct defiance of the treaty, ordered his Catholic subjects either to convert or to join the exiles at Fag'uta.<sup>10</sup> On 25 July 1872 a second French warship, the *Vaudreuil*, arrived to see if both parties were abiding by the terms of the treaty. Learning of the actions of Marāf and others, Commander Lefevre requested that the Protestant chiefs meet with him. They refused his first two invitations but finally accepted after he sent a third, threatening letter. In consequence of their violations of the *Hamelin* treaty, Lefevre fined the Wesleyan chiefs fifty barrels of coconut oil, to be paid within six months if they wanted to avoid severe punishment from the next French warship that passed by.<sup>11</sup> Marāf and the other Protestant chiefs steadfastly refused to pay the fines or abide by the treaty. They lodged a complaint against Commander Lefevre with the Governor of New Caledonia, and in August 1872 they petitioned the British government to annex Rotuma as a way of heading off French interference. At that time Britain was considering the annexation of Fiji (which was ceded to Great Britain in 1874, but did not include Rotuma).<sup>12</sup>

### The Interim

In 1872 there was movement on both sides toward reconciliation, or at least repatriation of the ousted Catholics. Fr. Trouillet wrote to the Wesleyan chiefs asking that Catholics be permitted to return to their homes, that their property and homes be restored, that they be permitted to build churches and have catechists, that the chiefs stop forcing their conversion to Wesleyanism, and that Wesleyans be allowed to convert to Catholicism if they wished.<sup>13</sup> Apparently Albert and Manava, the chief of Itu'muta, finding the absence of so many of their subjects damaging to their material interests, seriously considered allowing the Catholics to return. They evidently sought and received Rev. Osborne's approval.<sup>14</sup> Throughout 1872 there followed a heated exchange of letters between Marāf/Osborne and Riamkau/Trouillet, with the former demanding that the exiled Catholics return home unconditionally and the latter

holding out for assurances that Catholics would be given their rights under the terms of the treaty.<sup>15</sup>

The tension between the two sides abated considerably in 1873 when Osborne's tour of duty ended and he was replaced by Rev. William Fletcher, who had served on Rotuma from 1865 until relieved by Osborne in 1870. By all accounts, Fletcher was far less belligerently anti-Catholic than his colleague and was displeased with what had happened in his absence. Fletcher went so far as to write to the Wesleyan Missionary Secretary asking that Osborne not be allowed to serve again on Rotuma.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the mid-1870s relative peace prevailed, although the situation was little changed. Severe hurricanes struck the island in 1873 and 1874, and repairing damage kept both sides from renewing their quarrel. The 1874 hurricane leveled the Catholic church at Sumi, leading to a rift between Riamkau and the Catholic missionaries, who insisted the chief and his people rebuild it immediately. Fearing that his power was being undermined, and encouraged to rebel by the Wesleyan chiefs and missionaries, Riamkau asserted his authority as high chief and declared himself in charge of all the affairs of Fag'uta including the schools and other missionary projects.<sup>17</sup> For several years Riamkau, who was nominally Catholic, appears to have been allied with neither religious faction despite being actively pressed by missionaries and chiefs from both sides. By August 1876 he had decided to recommit himself as Catholic and in 1877 he asked to be appointed to a minor religious office.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Fletcher had left Rotuma and been replaced by Rev. Thomas Moore, who was staunchly anti-Catholic. Tensions again began to build.

### The War of 1878

Early in 1878 Marāf called together all Rotuman district chiefs, including Riamkau, who, informed that if he did not become a Wesleyan another war might ensue, refused to convert or attend future meetings. Marāf, with the consent of the other chiefs, imposed a fine of 6 pounds on any chief absent from council meetings; Riamkau refused to pay, and both sides began to take up arms and talk of war. In an attempt to avert war Albert and Zerubbabel went to Fag'uta and asked Riamkau to come with them to Noa'tau to discuss the situation. At Noa'tau, the Wesleyan chiefs showed Riamkau their assembled forces, three times as numerous as his own, and gave him an ultimatum: convert and pay the

fine or face a war. Seeing the hopelessness of his situation, Riamkau paid the fine and converted to Wesleyanism. At the ceremonies celebrating his conversion, the chiefs announced that they now wished all the chiefs on Rotuma to become Protestant.<sup>19</sup>

There remained only one Catholic chief, Mora' at Pepjei, who steadfastly refused to convert. Maraʻf and his combined forces then declared war on Mora'.<sup>20</sup> On 28 May 1878, the Protestant forces attacked Pepjei. Outnumbered, the Catholics under Mora' abandoned their positions on the night of 29 May and fled to the missionary station at Juju where they joined other Catholic forces and Riamkau, who had deserted the Wesleyans after the initial battle.<sup>21</sup> For over a month the situation continued as an uneasy standoff, with periodic skirmishes. The final decisive encounter took place on 2 July, when an estimated one hundred fifty Wesleyans attacked eight Catholics serving sentry duty. The beleaguered Catholics sounded the alarm, and others, including Riamkau and Mora', joined the battle. Riamkau was mortally wounded and Mora' was wounded three times in his left arm. The Wesleyans eventually fell back, and that evening Riamkau died at Juju, after receiving the last rites of the Catholic Church.<sup>22</sup>

With Riamkau's death, the war ended. As victor, Maraʻf appointed a new chief for Fag'uta, a Wesleyan with the title Osias, but he refused to permit any confiscation of land and he also gave protection to the Catholic missionaries, their church and property.<sup>23</sup> On 30 October 1878 a French warship, the *Segond*, arrived and Commander Richier met both sides separately, securing from the Wesleyans an agreement to abide by the Treaty of *Hamelin*.<sup>24</sup>

### The Catholic Perspective

Although the Catholic priests had been first to establish a European-led mission on the island (in 1846), they were forced to close it down in 1853 as a result of persecution by non-Christian chiefs and a lack of converts, and they did not return to Rotuma until 1868.<sup>25</sup> In the interim (1865), Rev. William Fletcher established the Wesleyan mission. Although the native teachers preceding Fletcher had only limited success in converting Rotumans, they laid the groundwork for his more fruitful efforts. During his three years as sole European missionary on the island Fletcher consolidated previous gains, accelerated the pace of conversion, and

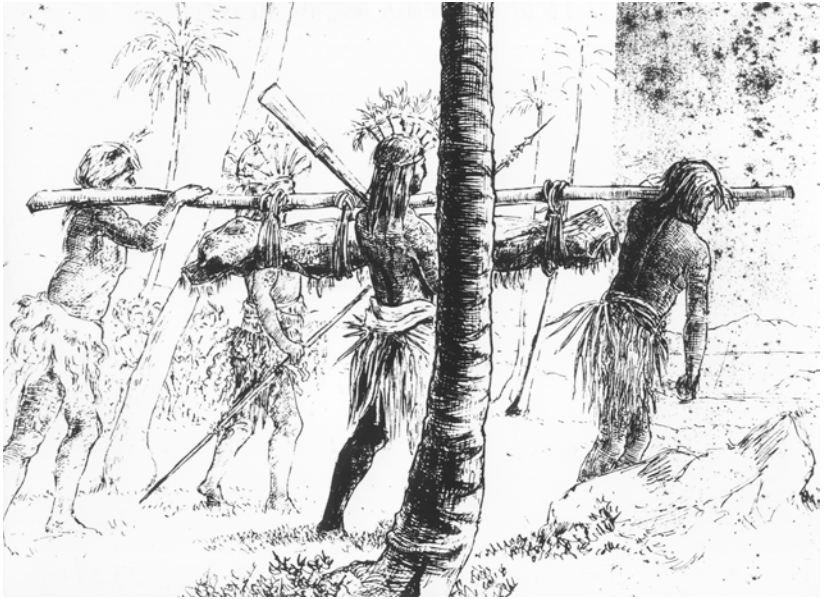
secured the support of several powerful chiefs. Thus, when Fathers Trouillet and Dezest arrived on Rotuma in 1868, they faced an uphill battle for Rotuman souls and the allegiance of the chiefs.

These circumstances came to define the Catholic agenda, which aimed at surviving in the face of great difficulty. Confronted with a choice of staying and contending for Rotuman allegiance against a well-established competitor, or leaving, the Catholic priests saw in their situation a test of faith, for themselves and their converts. The resulting agenda lent itself to the rhetoric of martyrdom, a language they knew would be appreciated by their compatriots. This rhetoric heavily colored the writings of Fr. Trouillet, who served on the island from 1868 until 1906. His letters, journals, and unpublished manuscript "*Histoire de Rotuma*" are prime sources of information on the wars of 1871 and 1878. Trouillet was the only European missionary present on the island for both conflicts and his Catholic fold twice suffered defeat. But it is the very notion of defeat and survival in adversity, followed by eventual "success," that Trouillet employed as a central theme. In his construction of history Trouillet turned the plight of Rotuma's Catholics into a Pacific version of a "Saint's Life"—a tale replete with piety, persecution, martyrdom, and the survival of the "true" faith with the help of God.

Soon after reestablishing their mission, the Catholic priests began to write of impending persecution at the hands of the "heretics." In his journal entry for 2 October 1869, Fr. Dezest wrote that the Wesleyan minister was preaching to his congregation that "it is necessary to make away with the lotu pope [Catholic mission] because it is impeding the progress of the heretical religion."<sup>26</sup> As tensions built over the next two years, so did the rhetoric of martyrdom, culminating in an account of the 1871 fighting written by Trouillet to his superior, R. P. Poupinel, in which Trouillet presented himself in the standard image of a Catholic martyr.<sup>27</sup> He depicted the Protestants as always on the move, threatening hostility, while the Catholics simply want to live peaceably. He wrote of the "lies of heresy" versus the "truth" of Catholicism, of the values of "faith, baptism, confession, and communion" that would keep the Catholic cause alive through their "martyrdom on Rotuma."<sup>28</sup>

The fighting of 29 February 1871 produced the first "authentic" Rotuman martyr, Jean Ninaf. Ninaf, a Catholic convert who had first warned the Catholics of the

approaching Protestant forces, was fatally wounded in a subsequent skirmish and is said to have been the "best" Catholic and to have died "while reciting his rosary."<sup>29</sup>



**Figure 7.1** Men with headdresses and clubs carrying body wrapped in mat. Sketch by A. J. L. Gordon, University of Aberdeen.

A Catholic account of the 1878 war based on Trouillet's diary is also couched in the rhetoric of martyrdom. The clearest example of Trouillet's construction of a figure in the role of "martyr" is his changing treatment of Riamkau, the unpredictable chief of Juju on whose support the Catholics largely depended for their long-term survival. Trouillet's writings initially depict him as an opportunist: "Riamkau was a Wesleyan for political reasons at our arrival, the missionaries being established in his country, he quickly became Catholic always for political reasons."<sup>30</sup> In June 1868 Riamkau is described as "a very difficult character, constantly opposing himself to the fathers."<sup>31</sup> On 26 November 1874, Trouillet wrote: "At this time continual difficulties with Riamkau; one would say that authority diminishes him, so much is he arrogant and jealous."<sup>32</sup> Throughout the years that followed, Riamkau's image in Trouillet's writing continually shifted as he vacillated between Catholicism and Wesleyanism and demanded specific honors and privileges in exchange for his support. Although Trouillet's account of the early phases of the 1878

war suggests that he saw Riamkau as a coward who was largely responsible for the defeat of Mora', following his death in the final skirmish of the war Riamkau is abruptly transformed into a heroic martyr:

Riamkao wanted enough time to receive the succor of religion and to repair the scandals that he had given to his country; he publicly repented anew of all that he had done against his people and the religion; recognized and adored the hand of God who struck him, finally he died in the best disposition, after having again ordered his wife and his children to never become Wesleyan.<sup>33</sup>

So, after a checkered career, Riamkau was cast as the grandest (and last) martyr in the Catholic ordeal, a repentant sinner dying a noble death in a holy cause. Trouillet's account of religious trials and tribulations came to an elegant close with the sanctified death of one of its central characters.

Trouillet's history contains another central theme—French nationalism. French warships served the Catholic cause on more than one occasion. The Marist order of missionaries, to which Trouillet belonged, was founded by the French in 1836 in response to the colonial and missionary success of British interests in the Pacific.<sup>34</sup> Being in most cases latecomers to islands already missionized by the Wesleyans, the Marists were usually fighting an uphill battle. But they were aided by the threat that French warships would punish those harming the Marist cause.<sup>35</sup> Marist missionaries in Tonga were helped repeatedly by the arrival of French warships, whose captains both intimidated their enemies and drew up treaties guaranteeing Catholics the right to practice their religion freely.<sup>36</sup> In Trouillet's view, a fear of French warships restrained Rotuma's Wesleyan chiefs from further attacks on the Catholics and was instrumental in securing their position.<sup>37</sup>

### The Wesleyan View

Trouillet's history, then, was meant to be read by both bishops and government ministers, in the style of a parable of Catholic courage and an appeal for protection of French national interests. Wesleyan accounts of the 1871 and 1878 wars were sparse by comparison. In letters and reports from John Osborne (serving on Rotuma 1870–1873) and Thomas

Moore (1875–1878), the wars seem little more than a mild disturbance of the missionization process. Wesleyan sources, whether describing converts, houses, or barrels of coconut oil, read more like the account books of an emerging corporation than of a sacred mission. This difference undoubtedly has to do with the divergent philosophies of the missionary groups. While the Catholic Church explicitly ordered their missionaries to convert people and live amongst them while following the principles of "poverty, celibacy, and obedience,"<sup>38</sup> for Protestants the central notion was that "Christianity and civilization advanced hand in hand."<sup>39</sup> Their mission was not only to gain converts but also to westernize, to make the world more like England and, perhaps most importantly, to have the mission pay for itself in the process.

As a small station in a remote part of the Pacific, the Wesleyan mission on Rotuma was involved in a constant effort to convince its superiors that it could be turned to profitable ends. Shortly after his arrival Fletcher struck this theme:

There is much in the peculiar circumstances of the island and in the character of its inhabitants, to check the fair and prosperous development of the work of God. Still all past outlay of labour and money have already been well repaid.<sup>40</sup>

The rhetoric of profit and loss in letters and reports sent by Wesleyan ministers was so pervasive that the number of souls saved seems a commodity whose production was set against the necessary outlay. Just before the war of 1878, Moore summed up the "business" of conversion as follows:

What have we got for the labour and money expended on [Rotuma]? about 600 converts & something over 2000 nominal adherents (compared to 30,000 Fijians, for instance). These are facts to be thankful for, but there are other fields in these seas which for the same amount of labor & money would have yielded 6000 converts....Here we have one of the richest Islands in the South Pacific, & yet from the outset she has not anything like defrayed the current expenses. She has been a dead loss financially from the first.<sup>41</sup>

With regard to the conflicts, Osborne and Moore portrayed themselves as peacemakers while placing blame on the Catholic priests. Two years after the 1871 war, Osborne asserted, "My personal influence alone has prevented the

Protestants from chastising the Papists as they deserve."<sup>42</sup> Moore was even more adamant in his disavowal of responsibility for the conflicts, insisting that the 1878 war was the result of Riamkau's political ambitions, although he also accused the priests of encouraging Riamkau and providing bad advice. The Catholics are portrayed as rebelling against a legitimately constituted government headed by Marāf. Moore's assessment following the war included the following passage:

There has been a combination of causes, but I can assure you that the causes were purely political; I state this emphatically....The priests have complicated matters very much by their meddling and by their persistent reiteration that the war was one of religious persecution carried on by the Government party for the extermination of Roman Catholics generally on the island....The Government party sent letter after letter, and by every possible means endeavoured to show them that the war was purely political....The Papists continue now, as they did before, in the enjoyment of full religious liberty.<sup>43</sup>

In a subsequent letter Moore stressed the material rather than the human costs of the conflict:

The war lasted over two months. The whole of the tribes being involved there was fearful destruction of property—livestock, gardens, & nuts were destroyed not only in the immediate vicinity of the battle-ground, but all through the Island. A good deal of money was wasted on fire arms, ammunition & war costumes. All this was going on just at the time when we ought to have been holding our Missionary meetings. My hopes were not very high for this year's contribution. But now though late we are holding our meetings, and we will not do so badly after all.<sup>44</sup>

Moore insisted that the war "had nothing to do with either Wesleyans or Roman Catholics as such," and castigated the French priests for raising the rallying cry of religion and telling their people that "the heretics" would massacre them.

Osborne and Moore marginalized the wars, making them all but irrelevant to the more important processes of profitably running their mission and continuing their conversion and building programs. What to Trouillet were the heroic struggles of martyrs to a religious cause, to Osborne



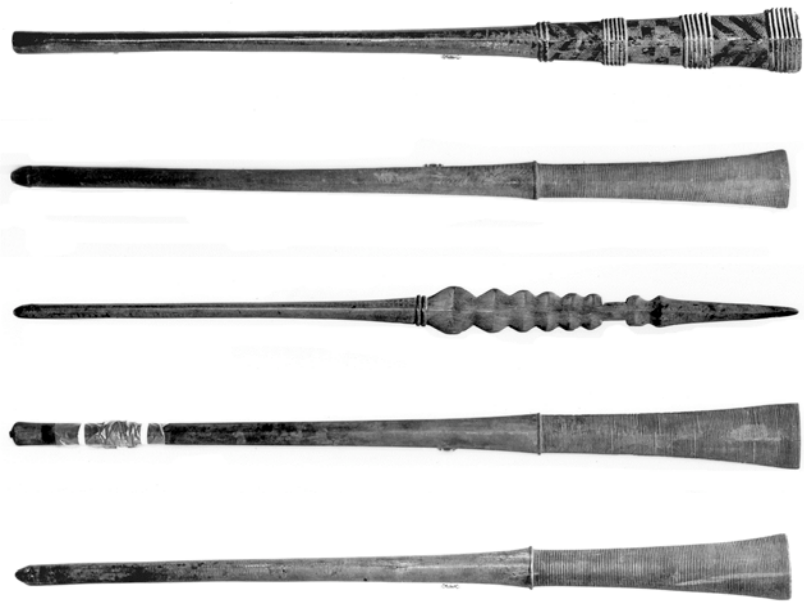
and Moore appear to be little more than negative items on a balance sheet.

### From a Rotuman Standpoint

Reconstructing Rotuman chiefs' agendas during the nineteenth century is more difficult. They wrote little, so we must rely on oral histories as told to European recorders, augmented by an analysis of chieftainship and warfare on Rotuma. Two oral accounts are particularly valuable. Chief Albert of Itu'ti'u gave one to J. Stanley Gardiner in 1896, when Albert was in his late sixties. He was a main participant in both wars, and a leading figure in the period leading up to, and immediately following, Rotuma's cession to Britain. Fr. Trouillet, who recorded Rotuma's oral history from unnamed Rotumans around 1873, provides the other account. Additional sources include brief narratives told to A. M. Hocart, who visited Rotuma in 1913, and Gordon Macgregor, who was there in 1932, as well as short accounts by a trader named George Westbrook and Rev. George Turner of the London Missionary Society. Finally, we have drawn on understandings handed down to present-day Rotumans and reported to us during our recent ethnographic research.

### ROTUMAN WARFARE

According to Gardiner's and Macgregor's Rotuman consultants, warfare on Rotuma was conducted in a rather ceremonial fashion. It was common practice for chiefs to send challenges announcing a particular time and place for combat. The day before, each side conducted a ceremony and feast featuring chants (*kī*) and war dances. Typically battles were conducted on flat stretches of beach, precluding ambushes. Prior to engagement each side danced menacingly and tauntingly, and sang verses proclaiming their ferocity. Then each side chanted to solicit the support of their gods. Warriors dressed for the occasion. They tied up their hair in topknots and wore conical (*miolmilo*) or crescent-shaped (*suru*) hats of basketry decorated with tapa and feathers. (see photos 4.10 and 4.11, and figure 7.1). Round their necks they wore charms, and smeared their bodies with coconut oil mixed with turmeric. Prior to the introduction of firearms, the main weapons were spears, clubs, and stones, thrown both from a distance and at close quarters.



Photos 7.2–6: Rotuman war clubs. © *The Trustees of the British Museum.*

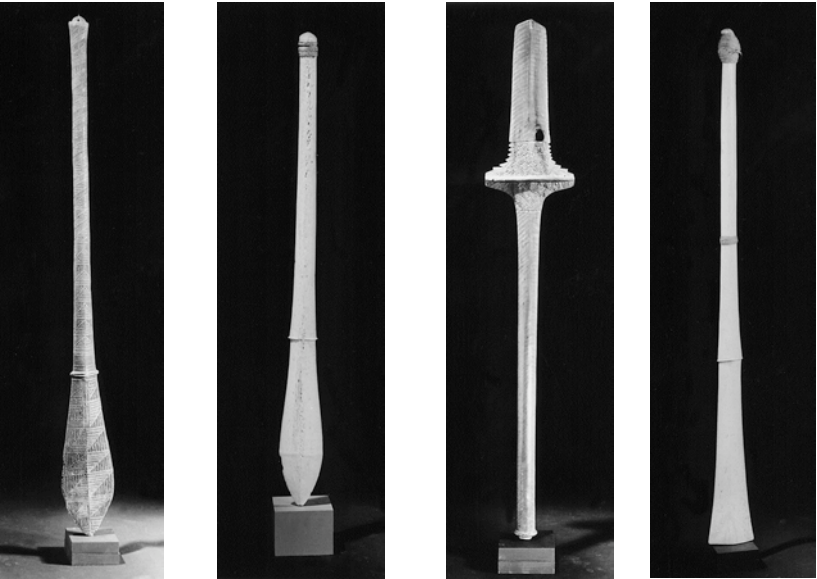


Photo 7.7–10 Rotuman war clubs: © *Fiji Museum.*

Wars were usually held for one day only, with the goal of killing the leading chief on the other side. When this occurred, the supporters of that chief would withdraw, ending the fighting. As for the spoils of victory,

Gardiner wrote:

There were no great advantages to be gained from the war by the winning side. The villages of the vanquished might be sacked, but they were seldom burnt; their plantations might be overrun, but there was little willful destruction. All pigs were, of course, regarded as legitimate spoil. The vanquished would perhaps promise to pay to the conquerors so many baskets of provisions or so many mats and canoes, a promise which was always faithfully and speedily performed, even though they might accompany the last part of the payment with a fresh declaration of war. The victorious side obtained no territorial aggrandisement, as it was to the common interest of all to maintain the integrity of the land, and the victors might on some future occasion be themselves in the position of the vanquished. Nominally first-fruits were claimed by the victors from the chief of the vanquished, or perhaps the victors might depose the conquered chiefs, and put nominees in their places....Such a course had, however, relatively little permanence....There was not such thing as indiscriminate slaughter or debauchery of the women after a fight.<sup>45</sup>

One of Macgregor's consultants, Varomua, also alleged that some of the large and high *fūag rī* (house foundations) were built by labor from defeated districts, suggesting the possibility of labor as a form of tribute.

#### ROTUMAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE WARS OF 1871 AND 1878

Rotuman custom prevailed in the 1871 and 1878 wars; the former was a one-day encounter while the latter involved three separate, limited fights. In 1871, although the interior of the Catholic church was damaged, the victorious Wesleyans did not pursue their foes, and in 1878 Marāf refused to allow confiscation of property following his victory. There were some innovations, however. Holy Communion and Christian prayers took the place of chants and supplications to local gods, and George Westbrook described the new type of clothing the warriors wore:

It was the custom to dress a dead or dying Rotuman in his best suit of clothing and during the heavy fighting [in the 1871 war] they wore their best European clothes, collar and tie included.

As soon as the war commenced there was a concerted rush for European clothiers—black suits, frock coats, and even dress suits. One Fiji firm made quite a good thing out of it by buying up all the dark clothing in Levuka, then the principal port of Fiji.

The oddest part of the islanders' battle ensemble was this: though dressed as European gentlemen in black suits and starched, stiffly-ironed shirts, they wore a head-gear of basketware. This skull-covering [*miolmilo*] was bravely trimmed with feathers and red cloth.<sup>46</sup>

For Rotumans the wars of 1871 and 1878 were part of a sequence of chiefly struggles, primarily involving Riamkau and Marāf.<sup>47</sup> Rotuman accounts stress places, with wars named for the locations of the battles, while causation was generally attributed to insults and abuses of power.

Albert began his account much earlier, with the "great Malhaha War," dated by Gardiner at around the beginning of the nineteenth century;<sup>48</sup> it was provoked, according to Albert, by a *sau*, residing in Savlei, who proposed to take a Malhaha woman as his wife without first sending away his current spouse. While this in itself was not improper, the *sau* asked the woman directly when she and her two brothers brought an offering of food, rather than sending an official delegation to their home in Malhaha. In retaliation, the woman's brothers made the chief of Malhaha *sau* and established him in Motusa. Later they brought him back to Malhaha, leaving a substitute in his place, whereupon Riamkau went to Motusa, conferred the sauship on a man of his own choice, and brought him to Fag'uta. In consequence, Marāf stepped in and a war ensued involving Noa'tau, Oinafa, and Malhaha on one side, and Fag'uta, Itu'ti'u, and Itu'muta on the other, led by Marāf and Riamkau respectively. Albert reported that fighting was widespread and took place over several days, with heavy casualties; he told Gardiner that nearly all the young men on both sides were killed with many villages entirely depopulated.<sup>49</sup> The brunt of the fighting, however, was said to have involved Noa'tau and Fag'uta.

After a quiescent period, and increased traffic with Europeans, Marāf acquired a cannon from one of the many

whalers that reprovisioned at Rotuma. Given this perceived advantage, according to Albert, Maraf spoiled for a fight with Riamkau. An opportunity soon arose when a chief from Tuakoi, Itu'ti'u, on his way to see Maraf, passed by Fag'uta in his canoe without respectfully lowering its sail. Since the *sau* was residing in his district, Riamkau was furious at the insult and protested to Maraf, but the latter responded by sailing past Fag'uta on his way to Tuakoi with his sail set, and without untying his hair topknot.<sup>50</sup> Riamkau sent a message challenging Maraf to a fight on his return home and received an acceptance. Alerted, the Noa'tau people came through the interior to Tuakoi, dragging the cannon with them. After holding a big dance in Tuakoi, Maraf led his contingent up the coast and met Riamkau at Saukama, Juju. At first the cannon struck terror into the Fag'uta people, but after a few shots it clogged, and they rallied. In the ensuing battle, Albert reported, more than one hundred Noa'tau men, including Maraf, were killed, while Fag'uta's losses were slight. Riamkau allowed Maraf's body to be taken to Sisilo, the burial place of *sau*, as he had formerly been *sau*; the faulty cannon served as a headstone. A great number of pigs and an immense quantity of vegetables and mats were paid as indemnity.<sup>51</sup>

The battle took place in January 1845, according to Rev. George Turner, who visited the island three months later. Turner reported that "27 men fell" in addition to Maraf, and Riamkau lost 2 sons and 30 men. He added that Maraf's younger brother Fakraufon took his place.<sup>52</sup>

Another version of the war in Saukama was provided to Hocart in 1913 by Akanisi, a woman from Noa'tau, and was translated into English by another Rotuman, Sosefo. Hocart interspersed his notes with Rotuman words, which, in the interest of providing a readable narrative, we have translated. We have injected some connectives for the same reason. The text is valuable because of the insight it provides into Rotuman notions of the relationship between politics and war in the pre-Christian culture:

Maraf was [a warrior]. Maraf [whose previous name was] Sorkiav was taking [something] to Murorou in Tuakoi and came back in [a] boat. He picked all his best men. The [war party] had gone to sing songs. He picked the best to go by boat, expecting a fight. The rest [were told] to go [inland]. They [danced] all that night till next morning. In the morning Riamkau knew that Maraf would pass and waited in Saukama. Maraf

started rowing up and down before Saukama. The people of Riamkau fired a gun to let them know. When they reached the shore they jumped off and put the boat ashore. Maraf put on his [peaked headdress]. The enemy kept shooting at them. When they had finished dressing, they shot back. Riamkau's people withdrew to [an open area within the village]. Usu, a good stone thrower, threw at Maraf but missed. Maraf [stuck out his chest], shot and missed. Usu ran away and told Riamkau [that Maraf] was [super-human]. Faguta drew back. A lot of people were killed on the beach on both sides. One bullet hit Maraf, who then [shook with rage] and shot dead a man on the other side. They fired at him again and wounded him, but he did not faint. He tried to get at Riamkau, but could not, but Riamkau's two sons [were] killed. Maraf was killed, full of bullets. Utut and Kalvak [the people of adjacent parts of Noa'tau] then ran away firing in [the] air. [The people of] Fagut killed the remaining. They made a big grave and put all into the grave with Maraf....

All the [war party] brought in the boat were finished, and Faguta nearly so. Fakrofon, brother of Maraf Sorkiav, was angry with Faguta and sent [a] message to Fonoagrottoi of Oinafa, [suggesting that they join together to avenge Maraf's death].

[The people of] Oinafa went through the bush and Fakrofon [went] on the beach. Oinafa got there first. Riamkau knew it and came to Fonoagrottoi and [begged] Fonoagrottoi to [convey his apology to] Fakrofon....But Fakrofon had sent a message that he would kill men, women and children. Riamkau offered to return the [paramountcy of Rotuma]. Faguta had taken [the paramountcy] of Rotuma which belonged to Noatau. They knocked off the war and came and dug up Maraf, ended the war and buried him near Emele Tue's place.

When they had buried him, Fakrofon [was grateful to] Fonoagrottoi [and] Muamea, because they had come to fight when he asked. So he gave the [paramountcy] to Fonoagrottoi, [including the right to choose all the *sau*], etc. To Muamea he gave [the district] of Noatau. Muamea lived on Maraf's big [house foundation] in Vairahi.<sup>53</sup>

The war in Saukama was immortalized by Rotumans in a *temo* (chant) that has been passed down to the current generation. The words are as follows:<sup>54</sup>

Mose vāhi ma Ferei Tua'naki	Had spent the night with Ferei Tua'naki
Irava tofi te ma vāhi	Irava had arranged them in columns
Tiporotu noho ma t̄ari t̄ari	Tiporotu was awaiting
La'oag 'e ufa, suag 'e s̄asi	Some came by land, some came by sea
Taio ta surua 'ona lal̄avi	Taio's war headdress of feathers was on
Suakmas ta soni sa'aki	Suakmas ran while striking
Sapo la mou 'omura terān	Go forth and make it your day.
Furi ta to ma ho'i 'e s̄as	The booming of the big gun sent them away by sea,
'Itake vere ta so'so'āk	Strong people fell in heaps.
Furi ta to ma ho'i 'e s̄as	The booming of the big gun sent them away by sea,
'Aura vāh'ia, l̄agi ta h̄a'	When you two finished fighting it looked like a storm had struck,
Tohia 'e Poi ma pelu ta vāh	Reaching Poi, the fighting stopped.
Suru ta f̄ai r̄ani ma soko t̄ar	The warriors named the date and the opponents responded,
Tohia 'e Poi ma pelu ta vāh	Reaching Poi, the fighting stopped.

In a later war (around 1858 according to Trouillet, when Tokaniua of Oinafa attempted to install a Wesleyan *sau*), Mar̄af and Riamkau were allies. This was before either Mar̄af or Riamkau had converted to Christianity. According to Trouillet's unidentified consultant, it was at this time that Riamkau handed over the position of *fakpure* to Mar̄af, as a reward for his assistance, and on condition that Mar̄af remain loyal and not abuse his power. But Trouillet's consultant told him that once Mar̄af consolidated his authority he declared his "independence" and the struggle was renewed.<sup>55</sup>

### Factoring in the Missionaries

When European missionaries arrived, considerable maneuvering took place among the chiefs as they sought to align themselves with the denomination that would bring them the most benefits. Mar̄af, Riamkau, and others shifted their affiliations between Wesleyanism, Catholicism, and "heathenism" according to each new situation—a source of endless consternation to the missionaries. Thus, as Trouillet observed, religious allegiances were often made "tousjours

pour politique" rather than for other motives. Trouillet speculated that Marāf initially had been inclined to join the Catholics but changed his mind when he discovered that, since the Catholics were situated in Riamkau's district, this would mean that he would be expected to submit to Riamkau's authority.<sup>56</sup> In May 1868 Trouillet reported Marāf's conversion to Wesleyanism and noted that Riamkau, as yet unconverted, was leaning in that direction.<sup>57</sup> During the Wesleyan rebellion against Tauragtoak in 1871 both Riamkau and Marāf appear to have remained relatively neutral, although Riamkau's refusal to aid the Catholic side is said to have angered the people in his district and eroded his power base.<sup>58</sup> With Tauragtoak's defeat, the office of *sau* was effectively ended.

Albert's account of the 1871 conflict, recorded by Gardiner, emphasizes political maneuvering and chiefly abuses of power (as well as an apparent lack of modesty). Indicative of the Rotuman emphasis on place, Albert referred to the "Motusa War" but apparently was unable to date it accurately since Gardiner placed the event "in 1869 or 1870."

While the rest of the island was for the most part Roman Catholic or Wesleyan, the south side of Itoteu [Itu'ti'u] and to some extent the north side also still clung to the old religion; the people of Matusa [Motusa] and Losa, and indeed the whole of the west end of Itoteu, were Christian. Taurantoka [Tauragtoak] was chief of Itoteu, and had a *sou* in Savalei [Savlei]; Morseu [Marseu] was the minor chief of Losa and Halafa, while Mafroa was acting for his father along the north side of Itoteu; none of these were Christians. It really commenced by Morseu keeping on continually taking pigs from Losa and Halafa, till these places got exasperated and refused to give him any more, threatening to shoot anyone they might find taking them. Their leader in this was Fakamanoa, a big name in Itoteu, and the father of the present chief [i.e., Albert]. Induced however by a native Fijian missionary, they took as a *faksoro* [formal request<sup>59</sup>] to Morseu a pig and a root of *kava*. He accepted it, but on the next day seized a pig, and on the day after, trying to seize another, he was resisted, and a deputation sent to Taurantoka with a root of *kava*; Taurantoka, in reply, promised to take Losa and Halafa under his own charge. Meantime Mafroa and his father had been baptised into the Wesleyan body, and refused *ipso*



*facto* to have anything to do with the *sou*. Taurantoka at once declared war; the white missionary stepped in and tried to stop it, but a fight was inevitable. It was then the south side of Itoteu, under Taurantoka and Morseu, against the rest of Itoteu, under Fakamanoa, Mafroa, and Albert. The latter was a man of considerable influence, owing to his connection with the missions, of a chief[ly] family, and living in Matusa. The battle took place almost in Matusa, on the road along the south side of the island, at dawn, lasting until midday. Nearly all the fighting was on the relatively open beach flat; it consisted of desultory firing from behind cocoanut trees. About sixty of Taurantoka's people were killed before he took to flight. As a result the office of *sou* was abolished, Taurantoka and Morseu baptised, and Albert, who had shown throughout very conspicuous bravery, made chief of Itoteu.<sup>60</sup>

Elizabeth Inia, a retired schoolteacher and great-granddaughter of Tauragtoak, has told a similar story. Her home is in Savlei, where Tauragtoak kept the *sau*. Inia wrote an account of the war in a reader she prepared in the Rotuman language for schoolchildren. Her narrative corresponds in most respects with Albert's, and indeed may have been influenced by it, but she added interesting details and twists. She also differed with Albert regarding the role played by Osborne, the Wesleyan missionary. Inia pointed out that Marseu was Riamkau's son, and Tauragtoak his sister's son; thus Marseu and Tauragtoak were first cousins. According to her narrative, after the pig incidents, Marseu, worried that the Wesleyans would attack him, sent kava to Tauragtoak to ask for his help. In her account, Albert and Fakmanoa, encouraged by Osborne, initiated the attack on Tauragtoak, who was on his way to aid Marseu. Tauragtoak turned to Riamkau for aid, but none came, in part, Inia wrote, because Marāf told Riamkau not to assist.

In the years that followed, more and more chiefs converted to Wesleyanism and became loyal to Marāf, whose position as paramount chief was consolidated. Riamkau, although he, too, laid claim to paramountcy, was increasingly isolated. According to Trouillet, as Marāf's power grew, so did his ambition to eliminate Riamkau: "The great power is still there: by fact, in Malafu, Wesleyan, and by right in Riamkau, Catholic, here is the source of both the political and religious quarrel."<sup>61</sup> Gardiner's text reporting the final

clash in 1878, apparently constructed from discussions with Albert and the current Marāf (in 1896), again provides a scenario more complex than that presented by European observer-participants:

The last great war was in 1878, and was practically Wesleyans v. Roman Catholics. Really it was largely brought about by white men, working on the old enmity between Marafu and Riemkou. It arose through the intrigues of Albert, who wished at the council meetings of the chiefs to get his name called for *kava* before that of Tavo, the chief of Oinafa. Riemkou was supporting him, as he was jealous of Marafu, who was both chief of his district and *fakpure*, or head chief, of the island. Albert then in a meeting at Oinafa brought up his own matter and that of Marafu's two offices; Marafu replied through his brother Hauseu, who was his spokesman, or *hoasog* [*haiasoag* (helper)], that, as far as the chieftainship of his district was concerned, it was no business of theirs, and that, as he was entitled to receive the *kava* first, it was his business to see that it was called to all in their proper order. Riemkou did not attend the next meeting of the council, and, as he refused to pay a fine, it was considered equivalent to a declaration of war. A white missionary then, called Moore, seems to have gone to Albert, and also into Malaha [Malhaha] and Oinafa, practically preaching a war against the Roman Catholics. As a result, Riemkou brought a *faksoro* [formal apology] to Marafu, who accepted it; and to settle the matter Riemkou let himself be baptised a Wesleyan. The Wesleyans, who had begun to gather, were dispersed, and Riemkou at once turned Roman Catholic again. Marafu...informed me that then there was no question of war, and that the affair was considered settled until this missionary came and practically began to preach a war of extermination against the Roman Catholics.<sup>62</sup>

Felise Vuna, a Catholic warrior at the time, gave clear voice to the Rotuman view of the conflict: that to kill the opposing chief was to win the war. As the Wesleyan forces advanced on the Catholics, he shouted, "Where is Marāf that I may kill him?"<sup>63</sup> After months of sporadic skirmishes, it was the death of Riamkau, rather than the defeat of the Catholics, that ended the conflict.

## The Death of Riamkau: Conflicting Accounts

Riamkau's death, perhaps more than any other event, epitomizes the irony behind the contrasting accounts. Trouillet wrote that Riamkau died while directly confronting the Wesleyans, and that he offered his life and the authority resting in him for the propagation of the Catholic religion in Rotuma.<sup>64</sup> George Westbrook made him seem even more a hero:

The native chief who distinguished himself most in the war was Remkau, the Catholic leader, who put up a very strong fight. Unfortunately for his party, he, in an excess of bravado, jumped out single handed and challenged the Wesleyans with the result that he fell riddled with more than 40 bullets.<sup>65</sup>

The story told by many Rotumans, down to the present, is quite different. They say that Riamkau was killed by one of his own people. As Elizabeth Inia told it, he was killed by a man from Fag'uta whose pig Riamkau had allegedly appropriated while the man was away from home. The man's wife told her husband that Riamkau had not come to her; he just took the pig without asking. The man then went after Riamkau, who was fighting the Wesleyans, and shot him in the back.<sup>66</sup> In Inia's version Riamkau did not reconvert to Catholicism until he was mortally wounded.

## Chiefs, Missionaries, and Warfare: Historical Complexities

Rotuman accounts focused on chiefly rivalries on the one hand, and on chiefly abuses of power vis-à-vis their own people on the other. In both the Motusa and Fag'uta wars, chiefs who took pigs from their own people without consent were portrayed as provoking the conflicts. In both instances they were defeated in warfare. The confiscation of pigs symbolically epitomizes authority abuse in Rotuman culture, and the ultimate fate of the offending chiefs satisfies Rotuman notions of immanent justice.<sup>67</sup>

The wars on Rotuma during 1871 and 1878 were the outcomes of a complex web of historical conjunctures involving French Roman Catholic priests, English Wesleyan missionaries, and Rotuman chiefs. Others influencing these events included European traders, who provided guns and ammunition; French ship captains, who drew up treaties and

made threats; British colonial officials in Fiji, whose presence was always imminent; and perhaps most crucially, a host of Rotumans with vested interests, kinship alliances, and grievances. In the final analysis the Rotumans did the fighting.

The simplest perspective was that the wars were purely religious in nature. Such a view appealed to critics of missionization. Forbes and Westbrook, both writing for general audiences,<sup>68</sup> placed the blame squarely on the European missionaries. They implicitly juxtaposed images of knowledgeable, but hypocritical, Europeans, and innocent, unknowing, and easily manipulated Rotumans. One senses in their accounts a pandering to romantic images, popularly held by European and American readers at the time, of noble savages being corrupted by jaded agents of civilization. By attributing causality in such a one-sided manner, however, their reports deny Rotumans agency—a responsibility for the conduct of their own affairs—and diminish their humanity.

Roman Catholic accounts, produced mostly by French priests, and particularly by Fr. Trouillet, focused on the trials and tribulations of the faithful (including, of course, themselves). Their sense of audience was strong. Their narratives seemed structured to evoke compassion and sympathy, to elicit moral as well as material support. They drew on images of martyrs and saints as a way of translating Rotuman history into a discourse familiar to European Catholics. In the process, they created martyrs out of men like Riamkau.

Letters and reports by the British Wesleyan missionaries reveal a preoccupation with "civilizing" the Rotumans and with cost accounting. They give the impression of a business enterprise in which the products were converts, who in appearance and decorum, inside church and out, should aim to project an image of European gentility.



**Photo 7.11** Tomb of the Catholic “martyrs” of the 1878 war, decorated for the Catholic mission’s centennial celebration, 1996. *Jan Rensel.*

The issue that preoccupied many of the Wesleyans was whether the expense of supporting a white missionary on Rotuma was worth it. The wars were mere distractions; they imposed additional costs and so affected the profit/loss equation. The Wesleyan missionaries also recognized the importance of chiefly rivalries and preferred to portray the wars as indigenous affairs in which they played no significant part.

However, we should not exaggerate the differences between the agendas and proclivities of the two sets of missionaries. To a great extent their agendas overlapped. When we take all their writings into account we find the differences to be one of foreground and background: what one group emphasizes, the other treats as of secondary interest. It would be wrong to infer that the Catholics were unconcerned about "civilizing" the heathen Rotumans—according to Forbes they took pains to provide "instruction in the useful arts of civilisation"<sup>69</sup>—or with financial matters. Like the Wesleyans, they had to make their missions pay. The main difference, it appears, is that the Catholic priests, perhaps consistent with their vows of poverty, were motivated to downplay finances in their correspondence. Nevertheless, they were deeply involved in the money game, as reported in an account by John W. Boddam-Whetham, who visited Rotuma a few years after the 1871 war:

At Rotumah I was struck by the ingenious method the Roman Catholic priests have adopted for paying the natives for their labour. They, the priests, are all poor men, having as a rule barely sufficient means to support themselves except in a native fashion, and consequently they have no money to expend in wages. They have therefore adopted a system of fines, which when enforced are usually found to exceed in amount the sum due for service. 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. The chief source of revenue comes from absence from church, as service goes on two or three times a day, and most probably just when the poor people are fishing or cultivating the ground.<sup>70</sup>

The reports of the Wesleyan missionaries, for their part, included occasional references to hardships, which were

obviously aimed at evoking sympathy. They too employed the image of suffering to elicit support, although to a lesser degree. And both groups were concerned with acquiring land for churches and mission stations, a matter that is muted in their accounts.

Both sides also played upon international rivalries and sectarian competition. Sprinkled through the narratives are amusing anecdotes illustrating the follies of their rivals. Sometimes rough language proved an embarrassment to outside readers anxious to preserve a notion of Christian virtue based on tolerance, if not brotherly love.<sup>71</sup>

Rotuman accounts of the wars, cryptic as they are, and filtered through translation, European recorders, and generations of oral transmission, remain the most complex. They are vibrant with a sense of place and persons, with actors who have justified or unjustified grievances, whose ambitions led them to break rules and violate protocol. In other words, from a Rotuman perspective, they themselves were the key actors, and the missionaries were merely on the sidelines.



**Photo 7.12** Cannon used as grave marker, 1960. *Alan Howard.*

## Notes to Chapter 7

We have chosen in this chapter to emphasize the contrasts in the perspectives of the English Wesleyan ministers, the French Catholic priests, and the Rotumans regarding the so-called "religious wars." Our narrative draws heavily on a paper entitled "Martyrs, Progress and Political Ambition: Reexamining Rotuma's 'Religious Wars'" by Alan Howard and Eric Kjellgren (1995), published in the *Journal of Pacific History*.

For more extensive accounts of Rotuma's missionary history, from first arrival until well into the twentieth century, see Rev. Jione Langi's thesis, "The History of the Church in Its Rotuman Setting: An Introductory Outline" (1971), and *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church*, volume III (Fiji-Indian and Rotuma), by Rev. Alfred Harold Wood (1978). A short but still useful account is Rev. C. M. Churchward's "One Hundred Years of Christian Work in Rotuma," published in *The Missionary Review* (1939).

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<sup>1</sup> Langi 1971, 59. The quote is from a letter sent by the Rev. Frederick Langham to Arthur Gordon, 3 May 1880; see Gordon 1897, 288.

<sup>2</sup> *Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires* 1949. Translation from the French by Eric Kjellgren.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Trouillet to Poupinel, 10 March 1871 [Pacific Manuscripts Bureau Reel 428].

<sup>4</sup> A narrative by Litton Forbes, who visited Rotuma shortly afterwards, places responsibility for these events largely in the hands of the missionaries. Forbes attributed the battle to the Wesleyan minister Osborne's advising his converts not to support the *sau*. See Forbes 1875, 241.

<sup>5</sup> This apparently arbitrary appointment has been a source of continuing conflict in the district of Itu'ti'u. According to Jioje Konrote (personal communication, 2004):

The deposing of Tauragtoak...created a very bad precedent in violating traditional protocols regarding the selection of a *fa 'es itu'u*. The victors of the so called "clash of 1871" arbitrarily selected Albert, who was not from a chiefly *mosega*. Consequently this has continued to plague the district of Itu'ti'u...because the members of the traditional *moseg*...[have] continued to dispute and reject successive claims of Albert's descendents to the office of *fa 'es itu'u*.

<sup>6</sup> Trouillet to Poupinel, 10 March 1871 [Pacific Manuscripts Bureau Reel 428].



- <sup>7</sup> Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires 1949, 27.
- <sup>8</sup> Historique de la Station St. Michel, Upu, Rotuma, Fiji, 1949; Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires 1949, 27–28. Translation from the French by Eric Kjellgren.
- <sup>9</sup> Roman Catholic Archives, Fiji (RCAF 5/4/31/49, 9).
- <sup>10</sup> Roman Catholic Archives, Fiji (RCAF 5/4/31/49, 9–10).
- <sup>11</sup> Roman Catholic Archives, Fiji (RCAF 5/4/31/49, 10–11); Wood 1978, 127.
- <sup>12</sup> Wood 1978, 127. A proposal that Rotuma be included with Fiji had in fact been made, but a misreading of a cable to the Governor of Fiji lead to its exclusion (Eason 1951, 60).
- <sup>13</sup> Roman Catholic Archives, Fiji (RCAF 5/4/31/49, 11).
- <sup>14</sup> Roman Catholic Archives, Fiji (RCAF 5/4/31/49, 11).
- <sup>15</sup> Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires, 1949, 35–52.
- <sup>16</sup> Wood 1978, 128.
- <sup>17</sup> Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires, 1949, 57–58.
- <sup>18</sup> Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires, 1949, 71.
- <sup>19</sup> Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires, 1949, 73–74.
- <sup>20</sup> Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires, 1949, 74–75.
- <sup>21</sup> Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires 1949, 76, 81; Historique de la Station St. Michel 1949, 15.
- <sup>22</sup> Historique de la Station St. Michel 1949, 16–17. By comparative standards this, and the war of 1871, were mere skirmishes. Even if the highest estimates of casualties are granted, considerably fewer than 100 were killed or wounded in each. If only reports of casualties on one's own side are considered the figures range from 20 to 40 in each instance.
- <sup>23</sup> Eason 1951, 58.
- <sup>24</sup> Historique de la Station St. Michel 1949, 15–16.
- <sup>25</sup> Roman Catholic Archives, Fiji (RCAF 5/4/31/49, 1–3).
- <sup>26</sup> Historique de la Station St. Michel 1949, 2.
- <sup>27</sup> Trouillet to Poupinel, 10 March 1871, Catholic Diocesan Office, Suva, Fiji [Pacific Manuscripts Bureau Reel 428].
- <sup>28</sup> Trouillet to Poupinel, 10 March 1871, Catholic Diocesan Office, Suva, Fiji [Pacific Manuscripts Bureau Reel 428].
- <sup>29</sup> Historique de la Station St. Michel 1949, 2.
- <sup>30</sup> Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires 1949, 6.
- <sup>31</sup> Historique de la Station St. Michel 1949, 1.
- <sup>32</sup> Historique de la Station St. Michel 1949, 14.
- <sup>33</sup> Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires 1949, 82.
- <sup>34</sup> van der Grijp 1993, 136.
- <sup>35</sup> van der Grijp 1993, 138.

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<sup>36</sup> van der Grijp 1993.

<sup>37</sup> Rotumans were aware at a very early date that the struggle between Christian sects was confounded by national politics, as shown by a comment recorded by Fletcher in 1866: "They [the Rotumans] do not understand what the lotu is, especially as some speak of a rotu [*sic*] Lonidoni and a rotu Franise [French]." Methodist Church of Australasia, *Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, no. 37 (October 1866).

<sup>38</sup> van der Grijp 1993, 146.

<sup>39</sup> Horne 1904, 40.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Williams and Calvert 1870, 586.

<sup>41</sup> Methodist Church Archives, Mitchell Library, Sydney. Moore to Chapman, 6 May 1878; see also Osborne to Rabone, 11 July 1872. That South Sea Islanders were well aware of the Wesleyans' obsession with profit was testified to by John W. Boddam-Whetham (1876, 263), who visited Rotuma shortly after the 1871 war.

<sup>42</sup> Osborne to Chapman, 1 March 1873, quoted in Wood 1978, 127.

<sup>43</sup> Moore to Chapman, 18 July 1878, quoted in Wood 1978, 129.

<sup>44</sup> Methodist Church Archives, Mitchell Library, Sydney. Moore to Chapman, 23 September 1878.

<sup>45</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 470–471.

<sup>46</sup> Westbrook 1935, 147.

<sup>47</sup> The chief of Noa'tau has almost always, to the present, taken the title Maraf; the title Riamkau belongs to Juju district and was in constant use from the time European recording began (in the 1820s) until the death of Riamkau in 1878. In the accounts below, references to Maraf and Riamkau are to titles, not to individuals.

<sup>48</sup> Gardiner (1898, 474) made his estimate by using 30 years per generation, based on the participation of Albert's paternal great-grandfather, Foragmontou.

<sup>49</sup> This report of carnage should be taken with caution; exaggeration of casualties on the opposing side during warfare appears to be a pan-human propensity.

<sup>50</sup> Since tying up one's hair in a knot was identified with warfare, not loosening one's hair was considered a challenging gesture (see Macgregor 1932, box #1, war and weapons).

<sup>51</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 474–475.

<sup>52</sup> Turner 1861, 356.

<sup>53</sup> Hocart 1913.

<sup>54</sup> We are grateful to Elizabeth Inia for providing us with the text of this *temo*; the translation to English is hers.

<sup>55</sup> *Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires* 1949. It should be noted that Trouillet's informant was almost certainly from Fag'uta, whereas Hocart's was from Noa'tau. The discrepancies in

accounts most likely represent different historical perspectives influenced in large measure by district politics.

<sup>56</sup> Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires 1949.

<sup>57</sup> Historique de la Station St. Michel 1949.

<sup>58</sup> Historique de la Station St. Michel 1949.

<sup>59</sup> The Rotuman word *faksoro* can be used either to designate a formal apology (as in Gardiner's text describing the previous war between Marāf and Riamkau in Fag'uta), or as a formal supplication, as in this context.

<sup>60</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 475–476.

<sup>61</sup> Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires 1949.

<sup>62</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 476.

<sup>63</sup> Historique de la Station St. Michel 1949.

<sup>64</sup> Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires 1949.

<sup>65</sup> Westbrook 1879, 6.

<sup>66</sup> See also Eason 1951, 58.

<sup>67</sup> Howard 1990.

<sup>68</sup> Although Westbrook's account was actually written by Julian Dana, one presumes that Westbrook knew a popular book would result, and constructed his oral narrative with a general audience in mind.

<sup>69</sup> Forbes 1875, 237.

<sup>70</sup> Boddam-Whetham 1876, 265.

<sup>71</sup> Wood 1978, 126–127.



**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 Chieftdom 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 wise<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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)<sup>3</sup>—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.<sup>4</sup>

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."<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

### 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.<sup>8</sup>

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."<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

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).<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup>

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."<sup>16</sup>

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."<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

### 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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."<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup>

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."<sup>24</sup>

Gordon went on to present a strong case for annexing Rotuma. Contrary to Bower's opinion,<sup>25</sup> 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."<sup>26</sup> 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 distrusting 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.<sup>27</sup>

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."<sup>28</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup>

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."<sup>31</sup>

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,<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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, 1879<sup>34</sup>

Shortly after his arrival, Acting Deputy Commissioner Gordon was confronted with expressions of discontent, not with the cession proceedings, but with Osias, the chief Marāf 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'."<sup>35</sup>



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."<sup>36</sup>

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."<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup>

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."<sup>41</sup>

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."<sup>42</sup>

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."<sup>43</sup>

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!<sup>44</sup>

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.<sup>45</sup>

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.<sup>46</sup>

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.<sup>47</sup>

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."<sup>48</sup> 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 Gordon<sup>49</sup>

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."<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> 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."<sup>52</sup>

On 5 November 1880, High Commissioner Gordon issued a proclamation that the island of Rotuma was now a part of the Colony of Fiji.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup>

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."<sup>55</sup>

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.<sup>56</sup>

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.<sup>57</sup>

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.<sup>58</sup>

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.<sup>59</sup>

### 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Colonial Secretary's Office Records 1443/1879.

<sup>3</sup> Deutsche Handels und Plantagen Gesellschaft für Sud-See Inseln zu Hamburg.

<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> Eason 1951, 60.

<sup>6</sup> Eason 1951, 62.

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

<sup>8</sup> Letter dated 12 July 1879, quoted by Eason 1951, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Eason 1951, 60.

<sup>10</sup> Eason 1951, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Eason 1951, 61.

<sup>12</sup> Eason 1951, 61.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> Eason 1951, 61.

<sup>15</sup> Eason 1951, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Eason 1951, 63–64.

<sup>17</sup> Eason 1951, 64.

<sup>18</sup> Eason 1951, 64.

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

<sup>20</sup> Dispatch No. 97, 1879. Colonial Secretary's Office Records.

<sup>21</sup> Colonial Secretary's Office Records 1973/1879.

<sup>22</sup> Dispatch No. 115, 1879. Colonial Secretary's Office Records.

<sup>23</sup> Dispatch No. 115, 1879. Colonial Secretary's Office Records.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> Dispatch No. 115, 1879. Colonial Secretary's Office Records.

<sup>28</sup> 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).

<sup>29</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 1.

<sup>32</sup> 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).

<sup>33</sup> 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).

<sup>34</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 7, Enclosure 2.

<sup>35</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 8.

<sup>37</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 8.

<sup>38</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon 1897–1912, Vol. 4, 141.

<sup>40</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 16.

<sup>41</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 16.

<sup>42</sup> Gordon 1897–1911, Vol. 4, 141.

<sup>43</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 9.

<sup>44</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 16.

<sup>45</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 36.

<sup>46</sup> Eason 1951, 70.

<sup>47</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 37.

<sup>48</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 46.

<sup>49</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 46.

<sup>50</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 48.

<sup>51</sup> 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).

<sup>52</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Cession of Rotumah, No. 52.

<sup>53</sup> *Fiji Royal Gazette*, No. 20, Vol. 6, 5 November.

<sup>54</sup> *Fiji Royal Gazette*, No. 22, Vol. 6, 27 November.

<sup>55</sup> Des Voeux 1903, 26–27.

<sup>56</sup> 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.)

<sup>57</sup> Des Voeux 1903, 27–28.

<sup>58</sup> Des Voeux 1903, 29.

<sup>59</sup> Des Voeux 1903, 33–35.



**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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

There is even some evidence that Wesleyan and Catholic missionaries used promises of enhanced chiefly support in their competition for converts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>—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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

### 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 Marāf 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 Maraf and Albert would assume the title of "Puertiu" (head chief), and that the other chiefs would be known as "Pueritu" (district chief).<sup>7</sup> Subject to the Governor's approval, Maraf 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.<sup>8</sup>

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 Marāf and Albert.<sup>9</sup>

### 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."<sup>10</sup>

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."<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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."<sup>13</sup>

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."<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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:

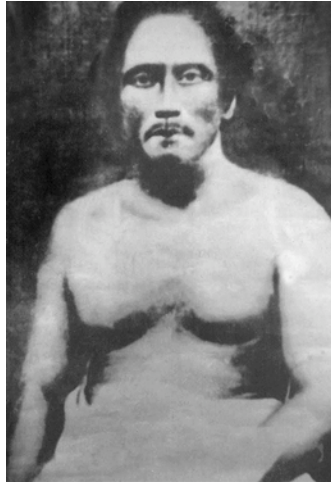
Albert asked me about his getting food from the landholders of his district and asked me to make an order regarding it. I said to him "why cannot you get along with your people as Vasea, Marof and others do? If I have to make any order regarding such things I must first assemble the land holders in your 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.<sup>16</sup>

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."<sup>17</sup>



**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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup>

### 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 Marāf 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, Marāf 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup>

### 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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup> 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 Maraf 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. Maraf complained, "If the people go on like this, they will laugh at us bye and bye."<sup>25</sup> 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."<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup>

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,<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup>

### 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

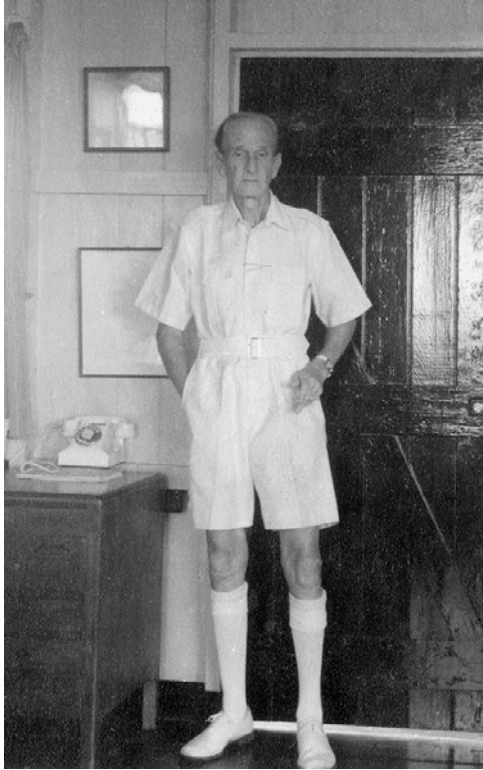
Council is "to consider and advise the District Officer on any matter communicated or submitted to the Council" and it is the main organ of government on the island. I have attended three meetings of this Council during my stay on the island and read through the minutes of the meetings for the past few 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.<sup>36</sup>

Sykes proposed that the Council of Chiefs be abolished and replaced by an elected council.<sup>37</sup> 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."<sup>38</sup> In emphatic terms, he warned against the sweeping changes proposed by Sykes.<sup>39</sup>



**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.

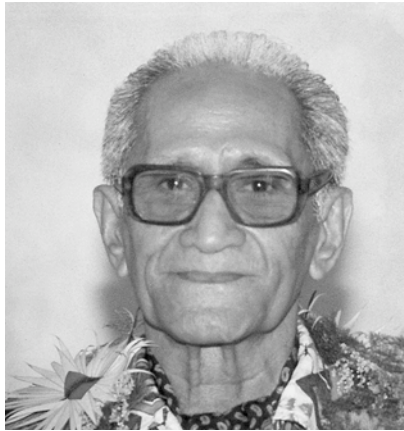
### Rotuman District Officers

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,<sup>40</sup> 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,<sup>41</sup> 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.

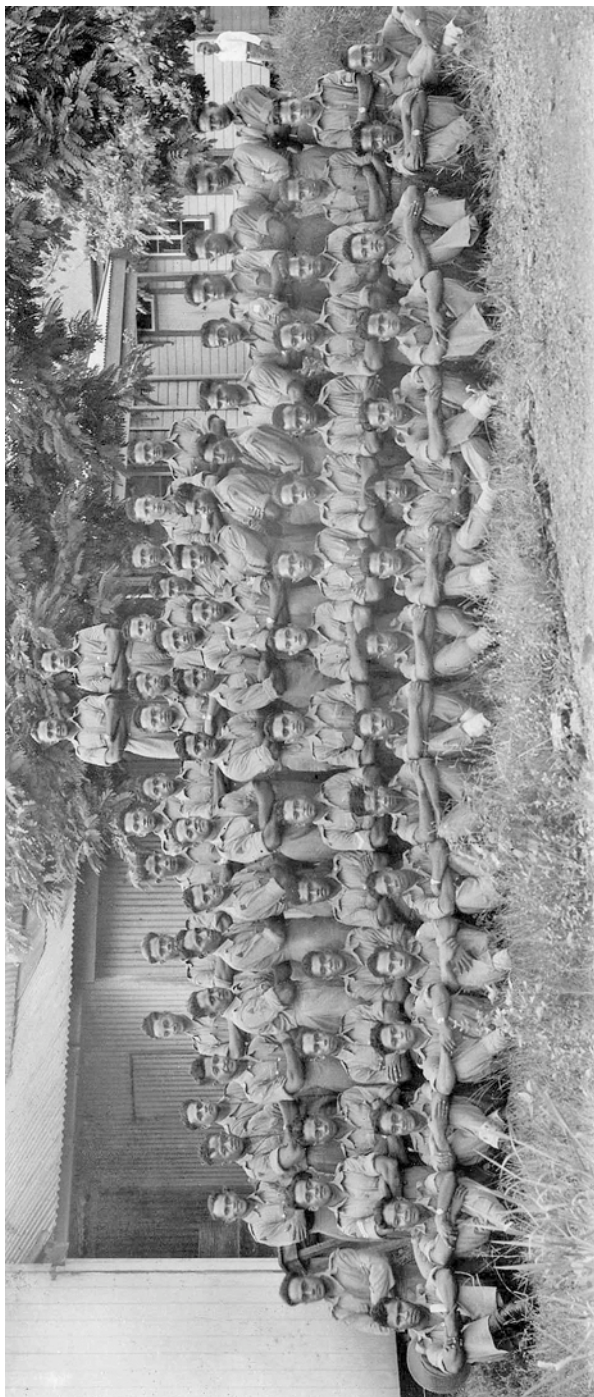
Carew summed up Rotuman attitudes toward personal autonomy in his Annual Report for 1930:

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.<sup>42</sup>

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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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Methodist Church of Australasia, *Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, no. 31, April 1865.

<sup>3</sup> Methodist Church of Australasia, *Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, no. 31, April 1865.

<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> Dispatch from H. Romilly to Western Pacific High Commissioner, 28 September 1880. Outward Letters.

<sup>6</sup> Dispatch from H. Romilly to Western Pacific High Commissioner, 28 September 1880. Outward Letters.

<sup>7</sup> Dispatch from H. Romilly to Western Pacific High Commissioner, 28 September 1880. Outward Letters.

<sup>8</sup> Dispatch from H. Romilly to Western Pacific High Commissioner, 13 January 1881. Outward Letters.

<sup>9</sup> Dispatch from H. Romilly to Western Pacific High Commissioner, 3 January 1881. Outward Letters.

<sup>10</sup> Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 12 October 1881. Outward Letters.

<sup>11</sup> Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 12 October 1881. Outward Letters.

<sup>12</sup> 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).

<sup>13</sup> Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 12 October 1881. Outward Letters.

<sup>14</sup> Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 12 October 1881. Outward Letters.

<sup>15</sup> Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 30 October 1881. Outward Letters.

<sup>16</sup> Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 10 January 1882. Outward Letters.

<sup>17</sup> Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 28 January 1882. Outward Letters.

<sup>18</sup> Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 16 February 1882. Outward Letters.

<sup>19</sup> Dispatch from W. Gordon to Governor of Fiji, 20 October 1882. Outward Letters.

<sup>20</sup> 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).

<sup>21</sup> Dispatch from W. Gordon to Colonial Secretary, 17 November 1882. Outward Letters.

<sup>22</sup> Dispatch from W. Gordon to Colonial Secretary, 17 November 1882. Outward Letters.

<sup>23</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 9 July 1885.

<sup>24</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 10 August 1888, 11 October 1888, 14 January 1889.

<sup>25</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 6 February 1896.

<sup>26</sup> 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).

<sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup> Dispatch from H. E. Leefe to Colonial Secretary, 17 April 1900, Outward Letters.

<sup>29</sup> Dispatch from H. E. Leefe to Colonial Secretary, 25 May 1900, Outward Letters.

<sup>30</sup> Dispatch from J. Hill to Colonial Secretary, 7 October 1900, Outward Letters.

<sup>31</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 6 January 1916.

<sup>32</sup> 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.

<sup>33</sup> Dispatch from W. Carew to Colonial Secretary, 5 February 1931, Outward Letters.

<sup>34</sup> Dispatch from W. Carew to Colonial Secretary, 5 February 1931, Outward Letters.

<sup>35</sup> Sykes 1948.

<sup>36</sup> Sykes 1948, 3–4.

<sup>37</sup> Sykes 1948.

<sup>38</sup> Evans 1951.

<sup>39</sup> Dispatch from H. S. Evans to Colonial Secretary, 22 September 1950, Outward Letters.

<sup>40</sup> Eason 1951, 109–110.

<sup>41</sup> Rigamoto was reappointed District Officer in 1964 and served until 1966.

<sup>42</sup> Annual Report for 1930, 26 February 1931. Rotuma District Office, Suva, Fiji, Central Archives of Fiji and Western Pacific High Commission.



**Photo 10.1** Unloading supplies brought by the *Yanawai*, anchored off the reef at Maka Bay, 1960. *Alan Howard.*



**Photo 10.2** Unloading cargo from Fiji at Oinafa wharf, 1988. *Alan Howard.*

## 10 Economic Transitions

The people here are all individuals in independent circumstances; they own cattle, horses, pigs, fowls, etc. and each family has real estate that may be called extensive, and which produces abundance of food of all description. They are wealthy in cocoanut groves, as evidence the quantity of copra yearly shipped; and they all go clothed at all times.

Letter from Resident Commissioner  
A. R. Mackay, 21 December 1887

### Beginnings of Commerce

Following European intrusion, early encounters between Rotumans and ships' crews focused primarily on trade. As mentioned in chapter 5, ships' captains were intent on replenishing their provisions, and Rotuma's reputation for abundance was the main attraction. Whalers obtained coconuts, root crops, fruit, pigs, and chickens, as well as lumber for repairing ships and "some very fine mats" in exchange for cloth, tobacco, whales' teeth, tortoise-shell, beads, muskets, and tools such as knives, axes, and fishhooks.<sup>1</sup> George Cheever, who was aboard the *Emerald* when it visited Rotuma in 1834, reported that tobacco "is worth almost its weight in gold at this place. Most everything you wish for, that the natives have, can be purchased with it. We bought about 1200 old coconuts here for 5 or 6 lbs of tobacco."<sup>2</sup> The following year the *Emerald* purchased "about 5000 old coconuts for the use of our livestock, for which we paid as usually in tobacco at the rate of about one lb of 300."<sup>3</sup>

Cheever described "the trade for the island" as follows: cloth (bleached, unbleached, or common print), tobacco (large head leaf being the most highly valued), thick-edge

pieces of turtle shell, hand axes, large knives with sheaths, small pocket knives, scissors, blue beads, powder (unspecified as to kind), and muskets. Regarding the latter, he reported that they were not much wanted because the islanders were already well supplied.<sup>4</sup>

Like other Polynesian peoples Europeans encountered, Rotumans were often accused of thievery when they came aboard ships. Lesson provided the following commentary:

The chief fault of the natives of Rotuma is thieving and there is no denying their great fondness for this vice so repugnant to our principles. Everything they can lay their hands on is fair game, and when caught in the act, they laughingly return the booty. It became necessary to resort to stern measures and to punish the guilty. Men were posted on deck to guard easily stolen objects. Whenever a thief was caught in the act, he was chased from the ship with a whip and made to restore what he had stolen. Although they knew very well that they were committing a punishable offense, the natives showed no sign of shame, and the punishment they received never inspired them to vengeance. Even his comrades, the receivers of his stolen goods, seemed unconcerned at his misfortune or laughed at his clumsiness and kept on stealing whenever an occasion presented itself. In spite of our precautions, it was impossible to supervise the crowd of savages who swarmed over the boat. Although we were able to retrieve some bundles of scrap-iron, in the end six were missing along with twelve or fifteen iron or copper belaying-pins. The frenzy of these child-men to possess whatever caught their lively imaginations was so great that we even saw them trying to untie the tackle and make off with a cannon. While one islander was stealing something the others distracted our attention. So adept were they at stealthily cleaning our pockets they could have taught a course in pick-pocketing in Paris or London!<sup>5</sup>

Attempts at appropriating European goods were not such a simple matter as it seemed to the ships' crews. Whereas Europeans were obsessed with rights over property (and passed laws to severely punish theft), Polynesians took a much more casual view of the matter (and thus, perhaps, the game-like quality to "theft" that Lesson described). The values of generosity and sharing in Polynesian cultures

placed much more emphasis on interpersonal relationships than on the material goods being exchanged or appropriated. Furthermore, it was common practice for Polynesians to appropriate a vessel and all its contents when it drifted ashore from elsewhere; in turn, the hosts were obliged to provide the voyagers with necessities that they themselves produced. Regardless, the problem was hardly unique to Rotuma and encounters were more often than not fraught with cultural misunderstandings and ambiguity.<sup>6</sup>

How much trade on the Rotuman side was controlled by chiefs is not clear, but evidence suggests that competition to control trade was intense between rivals. Thus Cheever reported that the chief they were trading with was "quite anxious to keep the other party [under a rival chief] from trading with shipping, the more effectually to prevent them from procuring arms."<sup>7</sup>

In any case, Rotumans learned to play the game of trading well enough to elicit complaints from Europeans about the high prices they charged for provisions. Thus Forbes observed in 1872 that basic foods were not nearly so cheap there as in the New Hebrides [Vanuatu] or the Admiralty Islands [in the Bismarck Archipelago]; he also said, "Of late years the wealth of the little community has largely increased, and the price of every kind of provisions has become so high that whalers have almost ceased to visit the island"<sup>8</sup> Rev. William Fletcher, writing in 1875, commented on the exorbitant prices charged by Rotumans in comparison with those charged by the natives of Sāmoa, Fiji, Tonga, and many other places.<sup>9</sup>

The island's wealth grew from two other sources. Rotuman men eagerly seized opportunities to sign on as crew for passing ships, earning both good wages and a reputation for competence and reliability.<sup>10</sup> Besides sailing, a considerable number of Rotumans worked in the pearl fisheries in the Torres Strait, not only diving but also managing the boats.<sup>11</sup> Going to sea became an expected part of the life cycle of young Rotuman men.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes chiefs were given trade goods such as cloth, rifles, and Jew's harps to allow their young men to emigrate.<sup>13</sup> The money and goods the men sent or brought back to their families were valued income sources.<sup>14</sup>

Rotumans also began a brisk trade in coconut oil, which gave way to copra in the 1870s. By the early 1880s there were five trading firms on Rotuma, exporting about 250 tons

of copra annually.<sup>15</sup> Both Catholic and Methodist missionaries encouraged their Rotuman converts to make contributions and to pay fines for breach of regulations in the form of coconut oil or copra, which they in turn would export.

### Changes in Land Tenure

The introduction of a cash economy completely altered the significance of land as a resource in Rotuma. Previously land was valued primarily for its food-producing capacity, and rights to land were invested in extended kin groups (*ho'aga*). A system of shifting agriculture was used, with the head of the *ho'aga* responsible for reapportioning the land from time to time to insure that a portion of it was kept in a fallow condition.

Coconut trees were for the use of the whole *ho'aga*, although Gardiner mentions lifetime use rights for those planted by a specific person beyond the needs of the *ho'aga*.<sup>16</sup> But as coconut products took on commercial value, the land on which they grew correspondingly increased in value, and since coconut trees are a long-term proposition, vested interests developed in specific blocks of land. If communalism had been strictly adhered to, the income from coconuts would have gone to the chief for redistribution, but no such pattern was established. Instead, each individual sold the products of the land on which he worked and kept the cash income to himself. Had the *ho'aga* been a more strictly defined kinship unit, such as a lineage or clan, the authority of the headman (*fa 'es ho'aga*) might have been sufficiently entrenched to perpetuate a system of communal tenure, but a pattern of strong authority was not characteristic. As a consequence, *ho'aga* landholdings tended to fragment under the pressure of individual interests.

The activities of the missionaries also resulted in deep-seated changes. They treated land parcels as though specific individuals enjoyed exclusive rights in them. By the time the missionaries established themselves, changes in land rights were already taking place, but their selective interpretation of Rotuman custom, based on the needs of the mission, accelerated the process. One of the missionaries' first tasks was to acquire land for church sites, and to do this the faithful were induced to make gifts to the mission. This was often done without the consent of family members who shared rights in the land, and many disputes arose as a

result. Gifts of communal land to missions, and the building of churches on such property, played a significant role in the generation of antagonisms between the Catholics and Methodists.



**Photo 10.3** The Catholic church at Sumi. *Marist Archives, Rome.*

Gardiner, in summarizing the changes that had taken place in the system of land tenure, cited some of the effects of missionization:

Since the introduction of missionaries...much land has been seized by the chiefs, who, as a rule, in each district were its missionaries, as fines for the fornications of individuals. A certain amount of coconut oil was then given by the chiefs to the Wesleyan Mission, apparently in payment for their support. The mission in the name of which it was done, though generally without the knowledge of the white teachers, was so powerful that the *hoag* had no redress. The mission and chiefs obtained this power as the result of many wars waged against the adherents of the old religion; the confiscation of all the lands of the vanquished was proposed by the mission, but resisted by all the chiefs. Much land left to and bought by the Roman Catholic Mission is similarly situated; the

individuals had no right to dispose of it without the consent of the whole *hoag*.<sup>17</sup>

By the time cession took place, after which further sales or gifts of land by Rotumans to non-Rotumans were prohibited, the two missions combined had acquired an estimated 132 acres of land.<sup>18</sup>

The growth of the commercial economy and the effects of missionization, along with a significant depopulation (see chapter 11), resulted in a major disruption of the precontact system of land tenure. Whereas the *ho'aga* had previously been based primarily on kinship, it was transformed into a territorially based social unit, with kinship of only marginal concern. As a result land rights came to be dissociated from residence in a *ho'aga*, and the land itself was divided up among surviving members, each becoming steward (*pure*) over the area in which he (or she) planted and worked.

We surmise that this change in land tenure principles did not take place as a consciously executed plan, but rather as a gradual process involving a growth of vested interests in specific blocks of land, and a loss of authority on the part of the *fa'es ho'aga*. The validity of our supposition rests on the assumption that authority and property rights in precontact Rotuma were linked to the system of kinship relations, rather than to an overarching legal or political system. The evidence strongly suggests that this was indeed the case.

Another basic change concerned the rules by which land rights were transmitted. Under the *ho'aga* system, land had been inalienable, but as *ho'aga* headmen lost control of the land, those who were exercising stewardship over specific tracts assumed the right to dispose of them according to their own wishes. Individual *pure* began to treat land as private property, dividing it up and selling it, making gifts of it, and willing it to whomever they wanted. As a result, *ho'aga* lands were fragmented into smaller, separate blocks.

Despite the shift toward individuated landholdings, the relationship between kinship and land rights was by no means eliminated. What happened is that land became a form of negotiable property, and since custom closely prescribed the rights of kin in one another's property, the operating principles were simply extended to include rights over land and products from the land. The transmission of land rights thus came to be dominated by two sets of principles, one based on the *pure*'s right to dispose of property in accordance with his or her own wishes, the second based on the rights of kin in one another's property.



Thus, rights in land shifted from being vested in the *ho'aga* to being vested in individual landholders, with all the descendents of a landholder having rights in the land. The complications and ambiguities that these changes introduced over time led to a dramatic increase in the number of disputes over land.

### Taxation

Shortly after cession the colonial administration introduced a system of taxation to finance the costs of governing Rotuma. Each district was assessed a certain amount of copra, to be paid annually, based on its size. The original assessment, amounting to 56 tons, was distributed as follows:

Noa'tau	10 tons
Oinafa	12 tons
Itu'ti'u	12 tons
Malhaha	5 tons
Juju	7 tons
Pepjei	5 tons
Itu'muta	5 tons

Copra was sold by the government and the total receipts were the taxes for the year. In 1884 the Governor of Fiji determined that the tax would be a land tax and should be paid by persons according to the land that they possessed. Soon afterward, a figure of £500 per annum was fixed as the amount due. It was still paid in copra, but quantities varied each year according to the prevailing price, which was attained by tender prior to announcing the assessments. The amount assessed each district was determined by the original ratio.

The 56 ton ratio continued until 1902 when Resident Commissioner John Hill informed the council that he considered the existing ratio to be inequitable. He readjusted it as follows (in tons):

Noa'tau	10.0
Oinafa	10.0
Itu'ti'u	11.0
Malhaha	4.5
Juju	6.5
Pepjei	4.5
Itu'muta	5.5

Although Hill considered this adjustment temporary, the chiefs offered no objections and the ratio was used until June 1920. However, the way in which the system was administered introduced significant discrepancies. For example, if in one year it took 60 tons of copra to attain £500 and in the next year it took 53 tons because the price of copra had risen, each district received the same absolute reduction, without regard for ratio.

In July 1922, Resident Commissioner Hugh Macdonald informed the council that lacking offers in copra for that year he would receive the taxes in cash. The total remained at £500, but it was reapportioned as follows:

Noa'tau	£109
Oinafa	127
Itu'ti'u	145
Malhaha	20
Juju	59
Pepjei	20
Itu'muta	20

With a population averaging 2,200 through the 1920s, the annual tax per capita would have been between 4 and 5 shillings if it had been equally distributed, but it was not. Macdonald's formula departed from the previous ones, with the three larger districts paying considerably more than the smaller districts. This ratio continued until 1925 when the subchiefs of Itu'ti'u lodged a complaint with Resident Commissioner William Carew. Carew agreed that the burden of taxation was unfair and reverted to the original 56 ton ratio, with the exception that, because he considered Itu'ti'u larger than Oinafa, he raised Itu'ti'u's assessment to 13 tons and lowered Oinafa's to 11 tons (or units, as taxes were now paid in cash). On this basis each district was required to pay the following amounts:

Noa'tau	£89.12.0
Oinafa	98.00.0
Itu'ti'u	115.18.0
Malhaha	44.16.0
Juju	62.02.0
Pepjei	44.16.0
Itu'muta	44.16.0

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£500.00.0

Whenever the general Rotuma assessment was reduced by the Legislative Council in Fiji, each district was to receive a proportionate reduction. In the 1930s, because of the precipitous drop in copra prices resulting from the worldwide depression, annual taxes were reduced to between £220 and £289. The Rotumans were, however, cash poor during this period, and many were unable to pay taxes or license fees. Beginning in 1933, Rotumans were legally obliged to work twelve days a year on island roads or pay a commutation fee of 10 shillings. Whereas in 1936 they were all paying the road duty commutation, from 1938 to 1940 many Rotumans elected to work on the roads instead.<sup>19</sup>

In 1936 school attendance for children ages 6–14 was made mandatory. The Fiji Education Department covered salaries for school headmasters and some teachers, but a local fund was set up to cover costs of assistant teachers, materials, equipment, building repairs, and so on. During the second half of 1940 many people could no longer pay their school fees in cash because the firms had stopped paying cash for copra and had instituted a barter system. The money paid by those who could afford it was set aside for school maintenance; other parents were allowed to pay teachers in products such as yams, taro, and chickens, to the value of their fees.<sup>20</sup>

Despite some complaints, Carew's land tax formula remained in force until 1942 when District Officer A. E. Cornish negotiated a reassessment with the chiefs in council. The problem all along was that the land areas of the districts had never been surveyed, so it was all a matter of guesswork. Cornish asked the chiefs which district was smallest, and all agreed that it was Itu'muta. He then had them estimate how much larger each other district was in comparison, which resulted in an agreement that Itu'ti'u was 4 times its size, Oinafa 3 times, Noa'tau 2.75 times, Malhaha 2.5 times, Juju 2 times, and Pepjei 1.5 times. Based on this, Cornish proposed using a division of fifty units, resulting in the following distribution ratio and, given a total assessment of £252, the following payments:

<u>District</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Payments</u>
Noa'tau <sup>21</sup>	8.0	£40.06.05
Oinafa	9.0	45.07.02
Itu'ti'u	12.0	60.09.02
Malhaha	7.5	37.16.00
Juju	6.0	30.04.10
Pepjei	4.5	22.13.08
Itu'muta	3.0	15.02.05

Following World War II, with the worldwide economic recovery copra prices rebounded temporarily and land taxes were again raised to £500. The chiefs were still charged with collecting assessments within their respective districts. In addition, a road duty commutation was assessed at a level of around £250 in 1950, but this tax proved highly unpopular and was often in arrears. As a result, District Officer H. S. Evans recommended that the road tax be abolished and that the land tax be raised to £1,000:

Such a change would get rid of the Road Tax which was a never-ending exasperation to all of them, and would bring their total taxation to a sum more fair and reasonable in comparison with all other people in the Colony—though still at a very low level in relation to the very high copra payments they received.<sup>22</sup>

Evans's recommended increase was accepted, but even this was considered low by William Eason, who followed Evans as District Officer. He argued that the land tax for 1953 should be between £5,000 and £10,000, which, he contended, would only amount to six pence to a shilling per basket. At current prices, for every £10 a man earned for copra, he would only be paying two shillings (1 percent) in taxes.<sup>23</sup>

Faced with the possibility of increased taxes over which they would have no control, the Rotuma Council opted for a plan proposed by District Commissioner Southern J. W. Sykes. During a meeting of the council over which he presided, Sykes suggested that Rotumans follow the example of the Fijians by establishing a Rotuman Development Fund based on a £10 cess per ton of copra produced. He made it clear that the government would not appropriate the money, but that it would simply act as a bank. The council would have complete control of the funds and would determine how they were to be used. The council members responded

enthusiastically. They said that they had for a long time wished to collect funds for such things as overseas scholarships and improvements to the water supply, but had never been able to work out a satisfactory and efficient means of doing so.<sup>24</sup>

The project proved enormously successful. By 1960 the Rotuman Development Fund had accumulated £145,537 in capital and was funding a wide variety of projects, including contributions toward teachers' salaries, the purchase and maintenance of school buses, the salary of a junior clerk, scholarships for higher education, support of a craft center, and sundry lesser projects. A substantial sum was also allocated for an ill-fated land survey.<sup>25</sup>

Following a visit by Acting Governor of Fiji P. D. Macdonald in December 1963, a development team led by Ratu Kamasese Mara, who was then Commissioner Eastern, was sent to Rotuma

To formulate, in consultation with the Council of Rotuma, an economic development plan to develop the island, and in particular, its natural resources, to the best advantage over the years 1964–68 inclusive.<sup>26</sup>

The meeting resulted in a set of eleven recommendations covering the development of a proper water supply, ways to improve the road and agricultural practices, and the possibility of building an airstrip. Among other projects, the plan resulted in the construction and maintenance of some fifteen miles of feeder roads into and through the interior, paid for by the Rotuma Development Fund.<sup>27</sup>

### Copra Production

After the island was closed as a port of entry following cession, copra had to be shipped through Fiji. Until 1904 the trade was carried between Rotuma and Fiji on sailing ships, but in 1905 a steamer service was initiated.<sup>28</sup> Various firms handled copra and sold imported foods and other goods on Rotuma, the most long-lived being Morris Hedstrom and Burns Philp.

Rotuma's copra production fluctuated dramatically over the years in response to several contingencies: environmental and economic conditions on Rotuma, demand for copra on the world market, and local prices offered by the firms handling copra sales. Hurricanes in 1939, 1948, and 1972

resulted in marked drops in production. The Rotuma District Officer's annual report of 1943 blamed an outbreak of coconut bud rot for low yield in that year, and the 1968 report cited aging trees for falling production. Local infrastructural factors also affected copra sales. The availability of motorized transport allowed increased output in 1924, while insufficient drying and storage facilities, combined with inadequate shipping, forced Rotumans to limit production in the 1940s and the late 1960s.

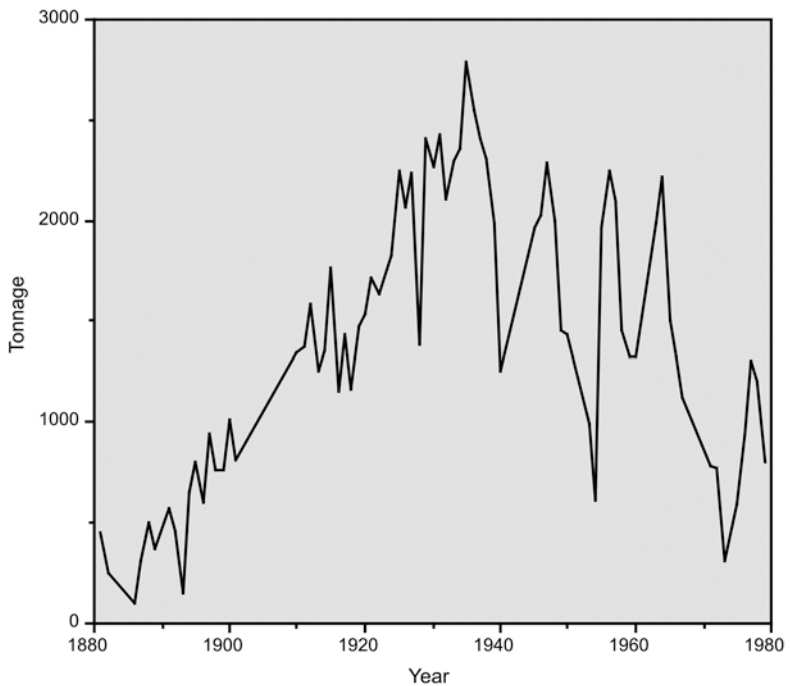


**Photo 10.4** Devastation to coconut trees following Hurricane Bebe, 1972.  
*Richard Mehus.*

Copra prices also had an impact on the amount of copra Rotumans cut, although the direction of impact was not always consistent. For instance, in 1935 Rotumans produced a record amount of copra when the price was low. More often, however, they responded to low prices by turning to food gardening, or to raising pigs, which "always command a large money price on the island."<sup>29</sup> When demand for copra increased, as it did during World War II, Rotumans "dropped everything and cut copra," so much so that the Rotuma Council decided to limit the number of days people could make copra in order to ensure they also worked in their gardens (see graph 10.1).<sup>30</sup>

Although world demand set the overall price for copra, local prices paid on Rotuma reflected additional costs in bagging and shipping it to ports in Fiji such as Suva or Levuka. This discrepancy in price was an issue of much

concern to Rotumans, who were also upset about price fluctuations, and suspected the firms of treating them unfairly. In 1926 Rotumans boycotted the firms for about six months, buying nothing and selling no copra.<sup>31</sup> Resident Commissioner Hugh Macdonald explained to the chiefs the mechanics of the copra trade, including the extra costs of shipping to Fiji, but relations between Rotumans and the firms became congenial again only after prices improved on the world market.<sup>32</sup>



**Graph 10.1** Estimated copra exports in tons, 1881–1979. Source: Rotuma District Office, Outward Letters: Annual Reports.

Another source of contention was the wages paid to men who worked for the firms, drying and bagging copra and loading vessels. When copra prices rose, Rotumans could earn more by cutting copra than by working for the firms, who then were hard pressed to find laborers. Sometimes Rotumans even hired Fijians or other Rotumans to cut their copra.<sup>33</sup> As explained in the next section, in order to pay higher wages and maintain their profits, the firms cut the

rate paid for copra and charged higher prices for store goods.<sup>34</sup>

### Income and Standard of Living

Little longitudinal information on income other than copra revenues has been recorded on Rotuma. Even using available information on copra income, assessing the financial prosperity of the island over time is a complicated process. Records are fragmentary, reported in different terms by successive colonial officials (for example, copra income before or after taxes, value of copra shipped, or copra produced). In addition, currency values fluctuated,<sup>35</sup> as well as local prices for consumer goods. Per capita estimates give the impression that all households participated in copra production, and that households with many dependents produced proportionately more, which is not necessarily the case. However, it is possible to obtain a general sense of income levels in various periods from colonial records. We have attempted to contextualize income estimates for each period with examples of contemporaneous monetary needs and uses.



**Photo 10.5** Amai Sakimi cutting copra, 1960. Amai was awarded an MBE for his service on cable ships in 1998. *Alan Howard.*

In the first two decades of colonial rule the Resident Commissioners estimated annual per capita income by dividing copra revenues by population. From 1881 to 1899,



yearly income per person ranged from a low of 6 shillings (in 1887) to a high of £2/5 (in 1894), averaging a little over a pound and a half. Resident Commissioner Mackay reported that incomes were supplemented by remittances.<sup>36</sup> Since taxes were not paid in cash until the 1920s, Rotumans only needed money for licenses if they had dogs, guns, or bicycles.<sup>37</sup> People also used what money they had to buy clothing, tools, and luxury foods. In 1888, for instance, Resident Commissioner Mackay noted that the island's financial prosperity was reflected in the large amount of store goods purchased around Christmas time.<sup>38</sup>

Following the practice of early colonial administrators, we obtained estimates of annual per capita income for later periods by dividing copra income by population.<sup>39</sup> Per capita copra earnings generally increased in the decade 1910–1919, fluctuating from around £6 to a high of £11, with an average of £8/12. Yearly income peaked at over £20 per person in 1920, then averaged £10/12 over the next seven years.

Few figures are available for copra revenues in the 1930s, but income slumped with the worldwide economic depression. In 1938 the estimated annual per capita income from copra was about £3, dropping to £2 in 1939 and just under £1 in both 1940 and 1941. Rotumans adapted by intensifying subsistence activities and all but ceased buying imported goods and food items. Reflecting on the abundance of locally produced food, Resident Commissioner Cornish suggested that Rotumans were better off in 1938 than they had been in 1921 when they had more money but spent it all on imports:

Although the price of copra was low, no real hardship occurred unless the shortage of money in a land of plenty can be termed a hardship. Rotuma is one of the lands which prove the adage that money does not necessarily bring happiness. Here, money frequently only brings to the people such luxuries as might very well be done without.<sup>40</sup>

In Cornish's 1940 annual report he continued to praise the island's nonmonetary fortunes, including a description of a huge feast which, other than his contribution of a small case of tinned meat, consisted totally of native products: beef, pork, turtle, fowl, duck, yams, taro, bananas, breadfruit, watermelons, pineapples, and various native puddings.

Monetary income picked up sharply during World War II. Estimated annual copra earnings rose in 1942 to about £7 per capita, and over the next ten years soared to an average of £18. Also in 1942, a platoon of 28 Rotumans was drafted to the artillery of the Fiji Defence Force (see photo 9.6). In addition 173 men, representing about 31 percent of the men from each district, were recruited as laborers. They were given quarters, rationing, and wages, plus free transportation to and from Fiji. These men were employed in Fiji until May 1943, at which time others volunteered to take their places.<sup>41</sup>

It was around this time that the commercial firms found it difficult to get enough men to work for them drying and bagging copra. The manpower shortage caused by the war was exacerbated by the fact that while the firms were offering 4 shillings/day, Rotumans were paying each other up to 10 shillings/day to cut copra, and around 7 shillings/day for assistance in such activities as planting yams.<sup>42</sup> The firms resorted to reducing the price they paid for copra in order to raise the wage they paid copra workers to 6 shillings/day. The chiefs tried, with difficulty, to convince their people to pay one another less, but the people resisted; by 1952 some Rotumans were giving £1 plus food to those who cut their copra. It was also during this period that the Rotuma Council moved to set fixed prices for cattle and other animals in order to prevent their people from charging each other exorbitant prices.

Rotumans wanted to support the British in the war. In February 1940 they held a special Red Cross fund-raiser on the island but only managed to raise a little over £37. They made no further collections that year because they lacked cash, but did send Rotuman mats to the Red Cross Carnival in Suva, where they were sold for high prices.<sup>43</sup> In 1942 the Rotuma Council discussed how they might contribute to the Fiji Fighter Fund, since by this time they "had money to spare."<sup>44</sup> At the District Officer's suggestion they set up a voluntary program of deductions from copra earnings. The going price for green copra was 1 shilling for 19 pounds; the people unanimously agreed to accept 1 shilling for 20 pounds, with the balance donated to the Fighter Fund.

After three months, the Colonial Secretary sent a telegram to the Rotuma Council, thanking them for their generous support but suggesting that only 25 percent of the monies collected in this way be given to the Fighter Fund. He suggested that the balance be put into a savings bank to

form a fund for infant welfare or other community purposes after the war. While the money was deposited in a savings bank, he explained, it was remitted to the United Kingdom and was thus helping the war effort. The Council agreed to this arrangement, and the Rotuma Provincial Fund was established.<sup>45</sup>

In 1951, District Commissioner Southern J. W. Sykes met with the Rotuma Council and reported that in that year approximately £90,000 would be paid for copra purchased from Rotumans; given a population of fewer than 3,000, the average income per person was over £30. The minutes of the meeting included his reflections:

Evidence of the wave of prosperity that [is] sweeping the island [is] provided by the large number of new bicycles, radios, and expensive store goods purchased by the people and also by the fact that three cinemas [are] able to exist and presumably make a profit. [I understand] that a fourth cinema [is] to be opened early next year and also an ice cream factory.<sup>46</sup>

In 1960 Howard estimated household income to range between US\$250–500, which would convert to approximately £100–200 per household or £14/8 to £29/16 per person.<sup>47</sup> Although the subsistence economy was still flourishing, Howard noted that by this time many European products had become necessities rather than luxuries. Tools, building materials, cloth, and kerosene for lanterns and cookstoves were considered essentials. Tea, biscuits, butter, salt, and sugar were used on a daily basis; corned beef was important for special meals and feasts. A wedding might be postponed if copra prices were too low, because people needed money and the things money could buy in order to put on a proper ceremony. If Rotuma were cut off from access to imported supplies for an extended period, Howard suggested, people would suffer as much as they would in rural communities in Europe or the United States.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, Rotumans continued to pay taxes, licenses, and fees, and to make donations to churches and other community purposes.

### The Cooperative Movement

Over the years Rotumans made a number of attempts to gain control over the copra trade and shipping. Acting Resident

Commissioner A. E. Cornish recorded some of this history in a 1934 letter to the Colonial Secretary in Suva:

- (1) They bought a schooner, the "UJIA," and carried their copra in their own vessel to Fiji. This vessel was later wrecked at Rotuma, uninsured.<sup>49</sup>
- (2) They invited the Fiji Planters Cooperative Association to open branches at Rotuma. In this case they gave all labour for the loading of vessels, bagging of copra etc., free. Upon the withdrawal of this concern from the Island, many of them lost sums of money up to £40 for copra owing to them.
- (3) They later subscribed a sum of about £1120 for the initial payment for a schooner which was to cost £5000. This was for the purpose of carrying their copra to Sydney and to return with goods. The sum was later dealt with in the Rotuma Shipping Fund.
- (4) They invited A. M. Brodziak Ltd. to trade in Rotuma and supported that firm with free labour etc. as in the case of (2). In this case they also signed contracts for the supply of quantities of copra over a period of one year....The contracts were broken to an extreme by A. M. Brodziak three months after signing but the signees still sold their copra to Brodziak Ltd. for the remainder of the year at £1 per ton less than other traders offered simply because they had "signed."
- (5) They invited the owner of the "LEI VITI" to make periodic trips to Rotuma for the purpose of bringing their copra to Suva for sale. In this case although they were definitely receiving, after all expenses were paid, at least £1 per ton less than they could have got at Rotuma with no trouble to themselves, they persisted with this scheme for about 18 months.
- (6) They commenced, in a small way, in 1933 a Cooperative Association, called the Rotuma Cooperative Association. This concern is supposed to be registered in Suva...they sold shares and opened a store. The store is now closed and the shareholders are wondering where is their money.<sup>50</sup>

In 1947 the colonial administration of Fiji passed an ordinance establishing the position of Registrar of Cooperative Societies for the Colony and encouraging the formation of local cooperatives.<sup>51</sup> In response, several groups on Rotuma started cooperatives in order to combat the firms' control of business on the island. Eventually five groups,

classified as "canteens," emerged in Oinafa village, Lopta, Malhaha, Itu'muta, and Noa'tau. With no prior experience in managing a business, little capital to work with, and antagonism from the firms, it was difficult going. Only the fierce determination of members kept the fledgling groups from a quick demise.

Circumstances improved briefly when a new manager, a Mr. Roe, took over at Burns Philp. He agreed to assist the co-ops and even offered them material support, thereby gaining their confidence. However, the Burns Philp branch shopkeepers, themselves Rotuman, saw the co-ops as a threat to their well-being and maintained their enmity, resorting to threats and rebukes and rejecting overtures for cooperation. In 1951 Roe was replaced by Mr. Stock, who was far more antagonistic to the co-ops; indeed, he openly declared that he would put them out of business altogether. He refused to supply the co-ops with any goods whatsoever, or to do business with any known co-op members. As a result, the co-ops transferred their business to a Chinese shop on the island owned by Gock Chim Young. Antagonisms came to a head when a cargo shipment arrived for the co-ops and was off-loaded at Motusa, the main anchorage at the time. The task was to transport the goods to the individual co-ops, the most distant being in Noa'tau, some fifteen kilometers away. To accomplish this they needed a truck. In the past the firms had freely rented a vehicle out, but not this time. Stock decided to withhold even that business courtesy. Faced with seeing their perishable goods rot in the hot sun, the co-op members and their supporters carried sacks of flour and sugar, cases of corned beef and other tinned foods, and rolled forty-four-gallon drums of fuel over the rough road. So contrary to Rotuman notions of decency was the firms' denial of transportation, and so heroic were the efforts of the co-op members, that the incident galvanized support for the co-ops in a way that had previously been missing. The incident became a rallying cry whenever difficulties arose, like "Remember Pearl Harbor" was to Americans after it was bombed by the Japanese at the beginning of World War II.

An examiner from the copra board visited Rotuma in 1952 and issued a report criticizing the co-ops for producing inferior copra. He accused the members of ignorance and having no experience in running a business, and commented that he expected them to operate at a heavy loss and

eventually to fail. The co-op members were disappointed and disheartened but did not give up.

In 1953 Wilson Inia, a Rotuman who had been teaching school in Fiji, came to Rotuma on furlough with his wife, Elizabeth, and was persuaded to stay and start a high school on the island. In the interim he was appointed headmaster of one of the primary schools. Inia immediately took an interest in the fledgling cooperative movement and advised the groups to seek government aid. He wrote to the registrar of cooperatives and asked for assistance. In response, the registrar sent Inspector Butadroka to teach basic business skills and advise the groups on a variety of matters relating to cooperative management. At the time of his arrival, nine local groups were operating as cooperatives, and within a matter of weeks five more were formed, raising the total to fourteen. Butadroka organized a class in bookkeeping, and Inia joined him to co-teach it. Each co-op sent three representatives, although a number of other people, members and non-members alike, elected to attend. The class turned out to be so large that it had to be divided into two groups. One class was taken by Butadroka, the other by Inia.

During this period Inia and Butadroka held meetings all over the island in order to educate the populace and to discuss with them the nature of cooperatives. They considered a variety of possible ways to strengthen the movement and devised a structure somewhat at variance with the usual scheme favored by the Department of Cooperatives. The new plan called for establishing an association of the local co-ops, to be called the Rotuma Cooperative Association (RCA), so that a more solid capital base could be formed. A union would also allow for better coordination in importing goods and exporting copra. A portion of each co-op's shares was to be invested in the association, with the remainder left on hand to meet local needs. A central committee was set up comprising a chairman, an adviser (Wilson Inia), a manager, two representatives from each group, and an internal auditor. Central facilities were constructed in Noa'tau, at the opposite end of the island from where the commercial firms' main branches were located.

The scheme was supported by the Rotuman District Officer at the time, Fred Ieli. He helped Inia organize RCA and used his influence and office for the union's benefit. But the firms did not give up easily. They still had the advantage of a much stronger capital base, and they controlled both shipping to the island and internal transportation, owning

the only trucks for transporting copra and supplies. Until 1955, when RCA became fully operational, the co-ops still had to sell their copra and order their goods through the firms. The firms also operated the punts and launches required for loading and unloading cargo from ships, which had to anchor offshore, since there were no docks. This added shipping and handling charges to already high freight charges, thus lowering copra income and raising the price of imported commodities.

The early years of RCA's development were very difficult and required great sacrifices. For the first several years, co-op members worked without pay in order to keep their businesses afloat. Despite these hardships the movement endured and gained momentum. In 1956 five of the local co-ops, with a total of 140 members and £8,865 subscribed capital, met the criteria for registration, making them eligible for government assistance. By 1958 two more qualified, totaling 239 members and £13,160 in subscribed capital, in addition to RCA's £10,169; and by 1960 a total of thirteen societies boasted 513 shareholders (involving 84 percent of the households on the island) and £25,051 in subscribed capital, plus RCA's £20,632.



**Photo 10.6** Wilson Inia. *Family album.*

In 1958 Inia was awarded a scholarship, sponsored by the British Council, to study the operation of cooperatives in England and Scotland. On the way back he stopped in India and Sri Lanka to look at how cooperatives were run in those countries. He was away from Fiji for six months and came

back with some very definite ideas. What he saw convinced him that careful accounting, and regular audits, were the keys to success. If money could not be accounted for accurately, it would disappear and the groups would bleed to death. Without proper accounting, he believed, trust would dissolve and the whole basis for cooperation would fall by the wayside. He also determined that maintaining a substantial capital base was vital for the success of cooperatives, and that a strong central committee was needed to supervise and check on the work performed by cooperative members.

To implement these ideas he recommended maintaining a high profit margin on sales in order to insure a stable capital base, then giving dividends at the end of the year based on overall profitability. Workers would also be paid from year-end profits. This meant charging higher prices for goods than the firms did. The registrar of cooperatives viewed these innovations as a violation of the spirit of cooperation, and he accused RCA of operating like a company, subject to taxation. He advocated decentralized decision making, investing accumulated capital in equipment such as hot-air dryers in order to improve the quality of copra, paying workers direct salaries, lowering prices, and eliminating the profit/dividend method of distributing benefits. The Rotumans, however, under Inia's leadership, refused to budge. As a result, RCA found itself in a constant struggle with the Division of Cooperatives.

Nevertheless, the Rotuma Cooperative Association continued to gain strength under Inia's guidance, and eventually turned the tables on the firms. Co-op members were forbidden to transact with the firms, and the consequent fall in business led Morris Hedstrom and Burns Philp to close up shop on Rotuma before the end of 1968, leaving RCA with a total monopoly over commerce on the island. Whereas the history of the cooperative movement in the rest of Fiji was dismal, with failures the rule, RCA was a resounding success. In 1969 RCA's subscribed capital rose to £97,834, and it handled a copra turnover worth more than £280,000.

The development of RCA was not without strains. Rotuma's long history of interdistrict rivalry, compounded by the division between Catholics and Methodists, was a challenging impediment. In the 1950s and 1960s antagonism between the Catholics, who predominated in the districts of Juju and Pepjei and adjacent sections of Noa'tau and Itu'ti'u, and the Methodists, who occupied the rest of the island, was

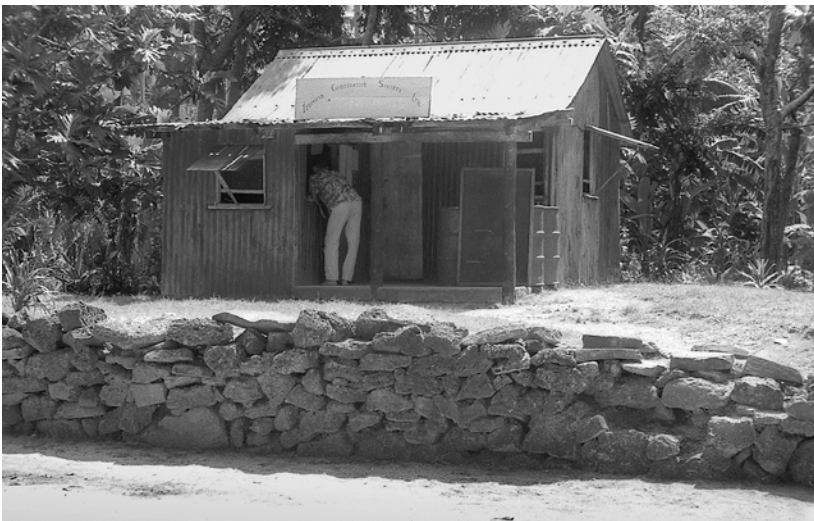


still intense and sometimes bitter. Neither would participate in the events and ceremonies of the other. Furthermore, people were extremely reluctant to sacrifice local autonomy, so getting co-op groups based in villages to yield control to a centralized association took some doing.

More than any other activity or series of actions, the development of RCA is indicative of the Rotumans' passionate desire to control their own destiny. The fact is they made great sacrifices in order to support the organization, often against their immediate self-interest. RCA managed to bridge the gaps between districts and between Catholics and Methodists. By the end of the colonial era it had nearly complete control of Rotuma's commerce.



**Photo 10.7** Rotuma Cooperative Association headquarters in Noa'tau, 1971. *Fiji Ministry of Information.*



**Photo 10.8** Itu'muta Cooperative store, 1960. *Alan Howard.*

## Notes to Chapter 10

Rotuma's economic history is dealt with extensively in Rensel's doctoral dissertation, "For Love or Money? Interhousehold Exchange and the Economy of Rotuma" (1994). The sections of this chapter that describe the development of commerce during the early postcontact period, and the vicissitudes of the copra trade, are adapted from the parts of her thesis concerned with these topics. Changes in land tenure were the subject of Howard's doctoral dissertation (1962), from which two publications derived: "Land, Activity Systems and Decision-Making Models in Rotuma," published in *Ethnology* (Howard 1963a), and "Land Tenure and Social Change in Rotuma," which appeared in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (Howard 1964). The section on land tenure in this chapter represents a synthesis of these writings. The history of the cooperative movement on Rotuma during the colonial period derives from two publications by Howard, both focusing on the leadership of Wilson Inia: *Hef Ràn Ta (The Morning Star): A Biography of Wislon Inia* (Howard 1994), and "Money, Sovereignty and Moral Authority on Rotuma," in *Leadership and Change in the Western Pacific*, edited by Karen Watson-Gegeo and Richard Feinberg (Howard 1996a).

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Dillon 1829, 94; Bennett 1831, 475; Jarman 1832; and Lesson 1838–1839, 424.

<sup>2</sup> Cheever 1834.

<sup>3</sup> Cheever 1835.

<sup>4</sup> Cheever 1835.

<sup>5</sup> Lesson 1838, 430–431; see also Dillon 1829, 98; Bennett 1831, 201; and Cheever 1835.

<sup>6</sup> The issues that lay beneath European accusations of thievery are discussed by Borofsky and Howard 1989, 250–260.

<sup>7</sup> Cheever 1835.

<sup>8</sup> Forbes 1875, 226.

<sup>9</sup> Methodist Missionary Letters from Rotuma, 24 May 1875.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Boddam-Whetham 1876, 272.

<sup>11</sup> Outward Letters, 24 November 1884; Allardyce 1885–1886, 132.

<sup>12</sup> See Howard 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Forbes 1875, 247.

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<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Outward Letters, 10 January 1887.

<sup>15</sup> Allardyce 1885–1886, 137.

<sup>16</sup> Gardiner 1898, 485.

<sup>17</sup> Gardiner 1898, 485.

<sup>18</sup> Records of Land Titles Commission, Rotuma, 1882–1883: Preliminary Inventory No. 2, Fiji National Archives, Suva. Given an estimate of 1,510 hectares of soils "with slight or moderate physical limitations for cropping" (Laffan et al. 1982), 132 acres amounts to about 3.5 percent of such arable land.

<sup>19</sup> Outward Letters, 30 January 1937, 23 February 1938, 30 January 1940, 5 February 1941.

<sup>20</sup> Outward Letters, 5 February 1941.

<sup>21</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 5 February 1942. Although the total (16.75 x 3) came to 50.25, Cornish rounded off to 50 by reducing Noa'tau's assessment from 8.25 to 8.0.

<sup>22</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 13 April 1950.

<sup>23</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 15 May 1952.

<sup>24</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 14 December 1951.

<sup>25</sup> The British colonial government proposed to survey boundaries and register landownership on Rotuma as a means of reducing what they considered an excessive number of land disputes. Insofar as they considered the Rotuman bilineal system of land tenure (allowing inheritance through both mother's and father's lines) to be a cause of the problem, they decided to simplify matters by instituting a system of exclusively patrilineal inheritance, based on the Fijian model. The people on Rotuma reacted with considerable dismay and refused to cooperate with the land commissioner assigned to implement the policy, so the survey was cancelled. As of this writing, the land on Rotuma has still not been surveyed or registered.

<sup>26</sup> Rotuma District Office, Memorandum from the Colonial Secretary, 11 February 1964 (No. F.9/8).

<sup>27</sup> Rotuma District Office, File RA/10.

<sup>28</sup> Outward Letters, 27 July 1911.

<sup>29</sup> Outward Letters, 10 January 1887.

<sup>30</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 5 March 1942.

<sup>31</sup> Outward Letters, 29 January 1936.

<sup>32</sup> See Minutes of the Rotuma Council from 1914–1921.

<sup>33</sup> Outward Letters, 5 January 1921; Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 8 October 1942 and 14 March 1952; Sykes 1948.

<sup>34</sup> Outward Letters, 1 July 1924; Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 7 January 1943.

<sup>35</sup> Currency in Rotuma was British pounds until Fijian independence in 1970; thereafter it has been Fiji dollars (F\$). In 1989 a Fiji dollar was worth about US\$0.67.

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<sup>36</sup> Outward Letters, 10 January 1887.

<sup>37</sup> Stores and vehicles were also licensed, but until the 1980s most of these were owned by either the commercial firms or cooperatives.

<sup>38</sup> Outward Letters, 2 January 1889.

<sup>39</sup> For years in which population figures are not available, we estimated population based on intermediate values between years when censuses were reported.

<sup>40</sup> Outward Letters, 30 January 1939.

<sup>41</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 2 July 1942, and 6 May 1943.

<sup>42</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 8 October 1942.

<sup>43</sup> Outward Letters, 5 February 1941.

<sup>44</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 7 May 1942.

<sup>45</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 13 August 1942.

<sup>46</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 14 December 1951. To our knowledge no ice cream factory was ever opened on Rotuma.

<sup>47</sup> The average was 6.9 persons per household (Howard 1991, 241), yielding an average annual per capita income of between US\$36–72. We used a conversion figure of US\$2.50 to the pound for an estimated £14/8–£29/16 per person.

<sup>48</sup> Howard 1970, 18.

<sup>49</sup> The wreck occurred in 1903 according to Eason 1951, 113.

<sup>50</sup> Outward Letters, 16 November 1934.

<sup>51</sup> No. 11 of 1947.



**Photo 11.1** Hospital at government station in Ahau, 2003. *Alan Howard.*



**Photo 11.2** Inside the children's ward at the hospital, 2001. *F. Deschamps.*

## 11 Population and Health

*Resident Commissioner Macdonald:* The vaccinations carried out of late have nearly all proved unsuccessful and this I believe due to the parents of the children vaccinated washing the lymph off with Sea water after the vaccinator's back was turned. Now this is very bad conduct on the part of the people and they are liable to punishment if they are caught at these practices. The government goes to the expense of procuring lymph and paying a man to vaccinate, for what reasons do you think?

*Chief Tuipenau:* We are not quite sure, but some people say that all the people who belong to England are to be marked this way.

Minutes of the Rotuma Council of Chiefs,  
6 February 1908

### Depopulation Following European Intrusion

Rotuma's early encounters with Europeans set in motion a process of depopulation that lasted until early in the twentieth century. In this respect, Rotuma was affected in much the same way as other Oceanic peoples. The degree to which depopulation took place cannot be measured precisely, nor even estimated with confidence. Early visitors gave divergent estimates of the island's population, so there is no reliable baseline from which to measure change. Calculations range from 5,000 by Tromelin,<sup>1</sup> to 2,000 or 3,000 by Lucatt.<sup>2</sup> Gardiner, taking into consideration abandoned house sites, native estimates of fighting men from different localities, evidence of planting remains, burial grounds, and the relocation of people around churches, concluded that "the population in 1850 cannot have been short of 4,000, and

that at the beginning of the century there were nearly 1,000 more."<sup>3</sup>

The first official census, taken shortly after cession, in 1881, showed a population of 2,452. By 1891 this figure had dropped to 2,219 and in 1901 to 2,061. After a steady increase for a few years, the population fell to a low of 1,937 following a measles epidemic in 1911.

The declining population (of Fiji in general) got the attention of the colonial administration early on. Responding to a circular from the Colonial Secretary dated 3 February 1892, Acting Resident Commissioner H. E. Leefe expressed the opinion that inbreeding was the main cause of the high mortality rates. He wrote, "The mortality among the children of whites married to Rotumans is very small." Further, he thought, "The healthy young men go away to Torres Strait and Fiji: and the sickly ones remain and beget children."<sup>4</sup> As for remedies, Leefe suggested:

the importation of new blood. This would have to be done by bringing women, as male strangers would have no rights here. Fijians would not be welcomed, but those from Samoa, the Ellice Group, and some of the Line Islands would amalgamate well with the Rotumans. I fully recognize the difficulty of this measure, but I firmly believe it would be the only way of saving the race, which is, without exception, the nicest one I have ever had to deal with; and the extinction of which would be a general loss to the whole Australasian Archipelago.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to being overly simplistic, Leefe's argument is not supported by demographic evidence. A check of registry data between 1903 and 1920 shows approximately the same percentage of children born to parents of mixed ancestry died before the age of eighteen (71%) as to those born to Rotuman parents (70%).<sup>6</sup> Leefe also paid insufficient attention to the emigration of Rotuman men as laborers and as crewmen aboard European vessels.

From a low of 1,937 persons following the measles epidemic of 1911, the population began to slowly rebound. By 1921 the number of Rotumans on the island had increased to 2,112. The next census, taken in 1936, yielded a figure of 2,543. Subsequent censuses, taken at ten-year intervals, showed a steady increase: 2,711 in 1946, 2,993 in 1956, and 3,235 in 1966. This tells only part of the story, however, because from the 1920s on Rotumans migrated to



Fiji at an accelerating rate. Thus the number of Rotumans living in Fiji increased from 123 in 1921 to 2,550 in 1966. Throughout the period from 1911 to 1966 the crude birth rate remained relatively constant (between 40 and 50 per thousand per annum) while the death rate dropped steadily (from over 50 to less than 10 per thousand per annum), resulting in a rapid increase in the overall population. From a low of less than 2,000 in 1911, the total number of Rotumans in Fiji (including Rotuma) had climbed to over 6,000 by the end of the colonial period in 1970. In addition, an increasing number of Rotumans migrated abroad, taking up residence in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, and elsewhere, a subject dealt with in chapter 14.

### Early Emigration

As discussed in chapter 5, large numbers of young men left the island on European vessels as soon as opportunities presented themselves. Although many returned after a few years' adventure, there was a distinct tendency for emigration to exceed return migration. Commenting in 1867 on the extent of emigration, Rev. Fletcher wrote that more than 700 young men were known to have left the island in recent memory.<sup>7</sup>

The colonial administration recognized the seriousness of the problem and ordered an inquiry even before cession took place. Deputy Commissioner Gordon inquired into labor recruiting on Rotuma in 1879 and obtained figures from five districts (Itu'ti'u, Itu'muta, Juju, Pepjei, and Malhaha). He reported that 177 men were known to be away, approximately one-third of them married.<sup>8</sup>

The chiefs were unanimous in their agreement that some kind of regulation controlling emigration would be desirable. As a consequence Gordon suggested, and the chiefs passed, two provisional regulations, one prohibiting boys under the age of sixteen from leaving the island, the other restricting emigration to unmarried men over sixteen years, with the permission of their district chiefs, for a period not to exceed one year.<sup>9</sup> These regulations were not enforced, however, and emigration was never effectively controlled.

Although the chiefs expressed the opinion that "the hard rules made by the missionaries" were to blame (see chapter 8),<sup>10</sup> there is reason to doubt that religious restrictions played a significant part in encouraging young men to leave

the island. The simple desire to see new places and peer pressure were probably more powerful motivations. Emigrant men who returned encouraged travel by virtue of the stories they told recounting their adventures. Even today, a number of songs sung in the traditional style refer to the adventures of these early travelers. The way this affected young men is reflected in the annual report of the Resident Commissioner for the year 1886:

After inquiring I find that there are not more than 30 adult male Natives on the island that have not been abroad. Large numbers have stayed away many years and wandered to the furthest corners of both hemispheres. It is a cutting reproach to cast at a man that he has not been away from the island; hence, partly, the anxiety of the young men to accomplish their long cherished dream.<sup>11</sup>

The 1881 census showed a gender imbalance in the 15–40 year age groups of 440 males to 638 females. The Resident Commissioner at the time, Charles Mitchell, attributed the surplus of females to the fact that so many young men had left the island.<sup>12</sup> A significant portion of the men who were away had been recruited as laborers to work in the Hawaiian Islands and Sāmoa, and they faced difficulties in returning. In a series of dispatches during 1883, Resident Commissioner William Gordon requested assistance in having the 50–60 Rotuman men in the Hawaiian Islands, and an unspecified number from Sāmoa, repatriated. He commented that the men in Sāmoa had been paid in goods instead of money and were thus unable to pay for passage home.

An increase in the death rate following exposure to new diseases such as measles, dysentery, tuberculosis, and whooping cough played an even greater role in reducing the population. Rotumans both lacked immunity and culturally appropriate medical practices with which to respond to introduced diseases, resulting in many more deaths from such diseases than in European populations. It is also likely that, given the sex imbalance that resulted from male emigration, the birth rate declined as well.

### Early Medical Conditions and Traditional Healing Practices

The first European observer to comment on medical conditions in Rotuma was René Lesson in 1824. He described

Rotumans in terms that suggest robustness and a concern for hygiene:

The inhabitants of Rotuma are tall and well-built.... Their facial appearance is gentle and engaging, full of fun and gaiety. Their features are regular and the young, with their light coloring, are very good looking. ...Their large, black eyes are full of spirit, their noses somewhat flat and their large mouths furnished with two rows of the whitest teeth....Their limbs are well-proportioned, their legs shapely; more than one of the young men who came on board could have served as sculptors' models. Their bodies are pleasantly rounded, with soft smooth skin of a light copper color, though some are darker-skinned. Since they are frequently in the water, they are very clean and take good care of their hair.<sup>13</sup>

From the renegade sailor referred to as Williams John, Lesson obtained information concerning Rotuman medical practices:

most ailments are as simple as their remedies, aside from chronic ulcers, chest diseases, and another which ultimately eats away the legs [yaws]. Doctors do not seem to form a specific professional class, although one chief was himself the king's [*sau's*] doctor. John himself had witnessed the manner in which an intestinal ailment was treated. The doctor went to the patient's home and had him transported to a nearby dwelling where he was laid on his back, naked to the waist, on several woven mats. There, he was roughly massaged with oil all over his body. Then, moving to his head, the doctor rubbed his temples as though trying to express something by this action. The patient was then turned on his stomach and after a few days had completely recovered.

For cuts and wounds, they make a kind of poultice from the bark of a tree and various plants. They apply it to the wound with leaves and John felt obliged to praise its salutary effect.<sup>14</sup>

Dr. George Bennett, the physician who visited the island in 1830, also described the Rotumans as a well-formed people who were cleanly in their persons and habits, but he observed that dysentery and ophthalmia were prevalent

diseases, the latter being particularly common among infants. He also reported treating a chief for rheumatic joints, in return for which he was offered a fine mat.<sup>15</sup>

Edward Lucatt visited the island eleven years later and observed that Rotumans "are subject to huge swellings of the members called by us elephantiasis, but by them *fe-fe* [*fā'fā*]; to scorbutic eruptions, and to the breaking out of virulent tumors, which eat into and decay the bone."<sup>16</sup> He confirmed Bennett's observations concerning the prevalence of eye disease, describing it as "a blight, which at seasons affects the atmosphere, and many are apt to lose sight of one or both of their eyes."<sup>17</sup>

Gardiner noted at the end of the nineteenth century that older men claimed yaws was introduced to Rotuma following European contact, and cited as supporting evidence that older people of both sexes did not seem to have as many or such large scars from it as did the younger generation.<sup>18</sup> He also reported a consensus among Rotumans that coughs, colds, pleurisy, and pneumonia had been introduced following European intrusion. He considered that to be unlikely, but found compelling testimony for a great intensification "due to changes in the mode of life." He was convinced, however, that phthisis (pulmonary tuberculosis) had been introduced in recent years, and commented that "it is a disease of the nature and duration of which the people are absolutely ignorant."<sup>19</sup>

Gardiner's account supports the view that Rotumans remained committed to a high level of personal hygiene and modesty throughout the nineteenth century:

Their habits are cleanly in the extreme. Both sexes daily wash themselves all over with fresh water and soap. The women wash themselves, in addition, morning and evening in the sea. Formerly, they used a red earth, which lathers slightly with water. It was a not inconsiderable source of profit to the islet of Uea, where it is quite abundant. Bathing in public without the *kukuluga*, or sulu, round the waist is absolutely unheard of, and would be much looked down upon.<sup>20</sup>

Early European visitors also commented on the ubiquitous use of turmeric (*mena*) mixed with coconut oil as a body ointment—particularly on ceremonial occasions such as weddings, funerals, and chiefly installations. Lesson wrote:

Their bodies are daubed with dust of red, orange or yellow color mixed with coconut oil. They extract this

makeup from the root of the curcurma [*sic*; *Curcuma*] and preserve it in cone-shaped blocks. Sometimes they cover their bodies completely with this coloring, sometimes only in widely separated bands.<sup>21</sup>

Lucatt gave a similar account:

Male and female are clad alike; they have, according to our ideas, a very disagreeable fashion of lubricating their bodies with a yellow powder made from the root of the tumeric [*sic*], mixed with oil, so that if you enter their houses, or come in contact with their persons, you quickly contract a similar dye, and it requires many ablutions before you can get rid of it; they say they use it as an antidote to the stings of mosquitoes and other insects.<sup>22</sup>

There is much evidence to suggest that *mena* was used ceremonially to mark transitions from one social status to another, e.g., from fetus to baby, single to married, commoner to chief, living to dead. In addition, Gardiner mentioned that warriors smeared their bodies with coconut oil mixed with turmeric before going into battle.<sup>23</sup> The practice seems to suggest a belief that this ointment would protect the surface of the body from intrusion and penetrating injuries, especially the spilling of blood.

*Mena* reportedly also was used medicinally, mixed with coconut oil, to treat skin diseases, cuts, skin infections, and wounds. According to Will McClatchey, a botanist who researched the production and use of turmeric on Rotuma:

Introduced diseases such as filariasis, yaws, influenza, cholera and measles were also treated with *mena* and oil externally in an effort to combat these diseases for which the Rotumans had no traditional remedies or resistance.<sup>24</sup>

The two major forms of Rotuman therapeutic practice mentioned by early observers are cutting and burning, and massage. Bennett's comment that "burning and cutting are the remedies principally used for all their diseases"<sup>25</sup> was qualified by Gardiner, who reported burning as the cure "for all wounds and sores," the practice being "to roast them for several hours in front of a slow fire."<sup>26</sup> The only type of surgery reported was in conjunction with elephantiasis. According to Gardiner, when an affected scrotum became too large, it was lanced with a shark's-tooth lancet, or, using the

same instrument, the scrotum was removed, the operation being performed in front of a huge fire and taking about two days. He also reported that filarial arms and legs were cut down at the surface so the scar tissue would prevent them from swelling further.<sup>27</sup>

The great Rotuman cure for aches and pains was, according to Gardiner, "massage of a very severe nature, either with coconut oil or the oil of the *hifo* nut (*Calophyllum inophyllum*); usually a small quantity of the second is applied, and then the part rubbed vigorously with coconut oil."<sup>28</sup>

It is apparent that cold water, along with turmeric, coconut oil, and purgatives, was considered to be a central aspect of purification rituals. Thus one of the first Resident Commissioners, H. E. Leefe, reporting on Rotuman birth customs in 1898, wrote that upon birth infants were bathed in cold water and dosed with coconut oil or the milk from the nut, after which they were not washed for as much as a month or more. Leefe stated that the Rotumans "will not hear of the use of hot water in any sickness."<sup>29</sup>

Gardiner also commented on the Rotuman practice of using cold water and asserted that it was only by using threats that he could get people to allow him to use hot water for washing wounds or sores.<sup>30</sup>

The comments of these early visitors suggest that Rotumans had great confidence in their own externally applied medicines and resisted adopting such remedies offered by Europeans, although they were open to taking new forms of *internal* medicines. Thus Bennett reported that "the lotions which I frequently gave them [for ophthalmia]...were seldom or never used, but all internal remedies they took readily and with confidence."<sup>31</sup>

### The Rotuman Theory of Health and Illness

According to Rotuman conceptions, the power for causing, preventing, and curing diseases rested with the *'atua*. A person's soul (*'ata*) was believed to wander during sleep and if it did not return to the body before waking, or if it was carried off by an *'atua*, the person would get sick and die. When a person was seriously ill and apparently dying, it was presumed that his soul was wandering and efforts were made to coax it to return. The *'atua* of a recently deceased relative was often called on for advice or assistance in such circumstances.

Should a man be sick, the most powerful way of curing him was for the parents of a child, which had recently died, to go to its grave and call out for its soul to come out, saying that the kava is all finished. After a time their cries will be heard, and they will pray the child's ghost to go and prevent any other soul from interfering with the sick man's soul, this being in former times thoroughly believed to be the cause of all bad sicknesses and death.<sup>32</sup>

The spirits of prematurely born children who had died were thought to be particularly powerful and trustworthy.<sup>33</sup>

Everyone concerned would gather around the sick person's bed, eagerly seeking signs of the soul's return. The sneezing of an apparently dying person was looked on as an omen of recovery, of the spirit returning to the body. At the first sneeze all in the room would cry "*se fua!*" [don't burst!]. At the second they cry "*ora!*" [better], at the third "*mauri!*" [life].<sup>34</sup>

Spirit mediums (*ape'aitu*) were also called on to help heal afflicted individuals. Gardiner gave an account of two spirit mediums whose '*atua* appeared in the form of a hammerhead shark (*tanifa*):

To take the *tanifa*, the god of Maftau: for him there was a priest, termed an *apioitu*, who officiated on all great occasions, and a priestess, called by the same name, whose business it was to cure sicknesses, and indeed, to see to all minor troubles. For the *apioitu* was a house of some sort, round which the people were forbidden to sing and dance. Should Maftau be in trouble or be going to war, a big feast would be held, and the best of everything would be placed in the sea for the *tanifa*: a root of kava, a pig, taro, yams, etc., and always a cocoanut leaf. Much, too, would be given to the *apioitu*, but always uncooked. Presently sounds would be heard from the house in which the *apioitu* was, and he would come out, smeared with paint, foaming at the mouth, quivering all over, and falling into the most horrible convulsions. He would perhaps seize a *kava tanoa* [kava bowl] and drain its contents, tear a pig in pieces and eat it raw, or take great mouthfuls of uncooked yam, the taste of which is exceedingly fiery. Presently he would fall down in convulsions and speak; he did not speak for himself,

but the *tanifa*, who was in him, spoke, nor did he remember at all afterwards what he said. For the time he was all-powerful, and, what he told the people, they had to do; but, when he recovered, he was simply one of themselves again. The priestess was, on the other hand, really more a doctress, called in by the present of a pig and a mat. She would get into a frenzy, and so drive the devil which was troubling the person away. At the same time she never failed to give them herbs and other remedies.<sup>35</sup>

Gardiner's account of the healer's role supplemented an earlier report by Lucatt, who observed that in response to sickness, spirit chiefs

pretend to address the Evil Spirit, and exhort him to cease troubling the persons of the indisposed. Sometimes they will endeavour to propitiate the demon of evil by hanging up green boughs in the house where the sick may be lying, and by assembling all the friends of the afflicted party to a solemn feast when much hog's flesh and kava is consumed at other times, when the complaint is obstinate or of long continuance they will use the most angry threats to scare the evil demon away.<sup>36</sup>

The power to deal with the *'atua*, and hence to heal, was transmitted within families. This was done by teaching a favored descendent the details of ritual and anointing the person with coconut oil. Although some less sociable persons were thought to be able to use their access to supernatural power to harm others, there are no indications that sorcery or witchcraft was either especially feared or widely practiced in the traditional society. *'Atua* responded primarily to propitiation by human beings, or their failure to do so in a proper manner. An ancestral spirit who was properly provided for was a protector to be called on when needed; one who was improperly provided for was apt to show wrath by creating misfortune for the culprits.<sup>37</sup> The power to cure in the traditional medical system was therefore indirect. It depended on the commitments of healers to their ancestral spirits more than the personal powers or qualities inherent in the medicines they used.



## Changing Medical Conditions

We cannot be certain when the first epidemics occurred as a consequence of European intrusion, what they were, or what toll they took. The first mention of an epidemic we have been able to find is in the diary of Father Trouillet,<sup>38</sup> who reported being told that during the reign of the eighty-seventh "high chief" Kaunufuek, there was a very bad dysentery epidemic—so bad, in fact, that there were not enough people to bury the dead. He determined the year to be 1861. Trouillet also recorded the first documented epidemic, in 1871. In March of that year dysentery broke out among the Catholics and claimed 16 to 18 lives, subsequently spreading to the Methodists, causing 30 to 40 additional deaths.

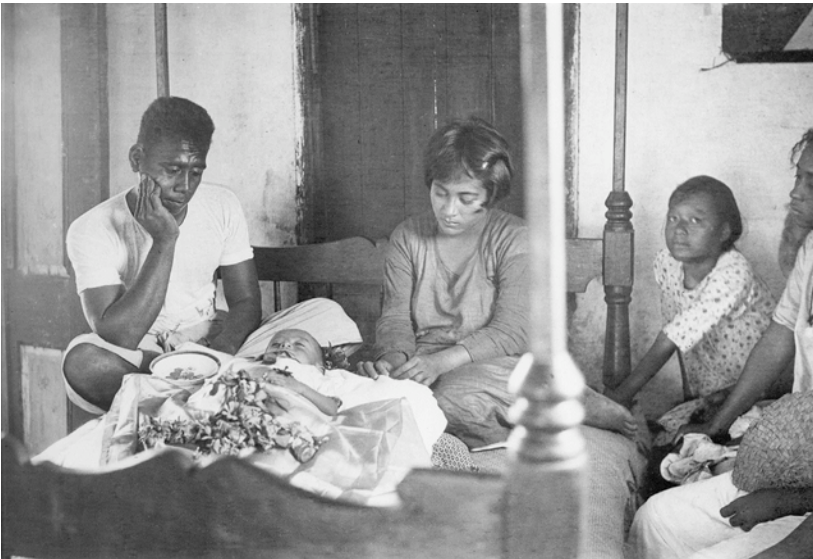
Cession marked the beginning of systematic record keeping, including registration of vital events and reports on the health status of the island. The records show that in the first two decades following cession, epidemics continued to plague Rotuma and took a heavy toll. A dysentery epidemic swept the island in 1882, followed by whooping cough in 1884, dengue fever in 1885, influenza in 1891 and 1896, and dysentery again in 1901. Fish poisoning was also reported as reaching epidemic proportions in the years between 1885 and 1887. The crude death rate during this twenty-year period was approximately 46 per thousand, for a population averaging about 2,250 persons.

The prevalent diseases during this era, in addition to epidemic afflictions, were reported as scrofulous sores, yaws, inflammation of the eyes, rheumatism, and elephantiasis. Resident Commissioner William Gordon estimated in 1884 that 10 percent of the population had scrofulous sores "which were allowed to remain uncovered and entirely uncared for."<sup>39</sup> He reported being told that such sores had increased greatly in number in recent years. Gardiner also commented, some twelve years later, that "terrible ulcerations of the skin of the body and limbs, particularly the leg, are not uncommon among adults, especially women."<sup>40</sup> He reported the most prevalent disease to be yaws, but regarded elephantiasis to be the worst disease that adult Rotumans had to contend with, estimating that at least 70 percent of the men and 20 percent of the women over the age of forty had it in a more or less virulent form.<sup>41</sup> Gardiner also confirmed Gordon's observation concerning the prevalence of eye disease, stating that "periodical epidemics of bad eyes

pass over the island; the cornea gets clouded, and sight is considerably impaired....Cases of blindness from this disease are now quite common owing to neglect."<sup>42</sup>

Of central concern to the Resident Commissioners during this period was the high rate of infant mortality. In 1898 Resident Commissioner Leefe reported that 52 of the 90 persons who had died that year were under the age of fifteen. Leefe laid blame for high infant mortality on traditional Rotuman practices associated with birth and a failure to take proper hygienic measures:

If Rotumans could be induced to wash their children more and not place them in draughts, and if they could be punished for giving medicines which they do not understand the properties of, I feel sure that the mortality would be smaller....I should also urge that the Regulation forbidding suckling women to smoke and drink kava which has been passed by the Rotuman Regulation Board should be approved of by the Legislative Council.<sup>43</sup>



**Photo 11.3** Mourning a dead child. *Marist Archives, Rome.*

In discussing the matter at a meeting of the Rotuma Council of Chiefs, Leefe asserted that an additional cause was mothers going out at night, leaving their children in a warm house, then coming back "bitterly cold" to suckle them. He claimed to know of two cases where death ensued shortly after a mother had done this. At the meeting, one Rotuman

chief claimed that women who had been to Fiji had learned to use abortion-producing medicines that were sometimes ineffective but resulted in sickly children. Another suggested that changing infant-feeding customs was partially responsible, asserting that in "the old times" a child was fed entirely on young coconuts during the first few days, whereas "now when a child is born, it has herbal medicines given to it which often makes it sickly."<sup>44</sup>

The contrasting explanations of the Resident Commissioner and the chiefs are of considerable interest. Leefe was pointing at traditional behavior patterns as a source of infant mortality; what was needed, in his view, was the abandonment of Rotuman practices and the adoption of European customs. The chiefs contrarily saw the causes in divergence from traditional practices; what this implied was a need to return to customary purity. Implicit in these views were contrasting theories of causation. To the British colonial administrator, causes for illness were to be sought in material conditions that directly affect the physical organism. To the Rotuman chiefs, it is likely that causes were to be sought in the dispositions of the *'atua*. For Leefe, change was necessary for improvement; for the chiefs, change was threatening because it created discontinuities with one's ancestors, inviting their wrath.

These differing perspectives were manifest in a long sequence of episodes between colonial administrators and the Rotuman people, beginning shortly after cession and carrying on well into the twentieth century. Resistance to medical advice offered by Resident Commissioners was first reported a few months after cession, by Mitchell in 1882, following a dysentery epidemic:

I had the greatest difficulty at first making the parents keep the flannel belts on their children, who in many cases whenever a child complained of unusual pain in its bowels would remove the belt thinking by this means to relieve the sufferer.

They also expected medicines to cure in one or two doses and when they did not do so ceased to give them. I also experienced considerable difficulty keeping the patients on a proper diet.<sup>45</sup>

Mitchell reported that in Noa'tau, the district in which he was residing, only one dysentery death had occurred in a population of 472 persons; he attributed this low mortality

rate to the fact that he was able to see patients more frequently than in more remote districts. Perhaps this played a part, because the highest toll was in Itu'ti'u, the district farthest removed from the Resident Commissioner's headquarters. In any case, Mitchell stated that the failure of parents in Itu'ti'u to follow his instructions regarding diet, medicines, and the wearing of flannel belts was the chief cause of this difference.

Mitchell's successor, William Gordon, also complained of Rotuman resistance to medical advice, reporting that the response he received to instructions that scrofulous sores be covered was "that it was a good thing to let the flies settle on the wounds, as it cleaned them." He asserted that although medicines were asked for and given, there was no one on the island who had any practical knowledge of medicine.<sup>46</sup>

A. R. Mackay, who succeeded Gordon, was no less irritated than his predecessors at Rotumans' reluctance to follow instructions. He wrote:

The people seem to be quite helpless in any case of sickness. They are not nearly such good nurses in a sickroom as the Fijians. If they were only to follow the few simple directions I give them perhaps the mortality would not be so disastrous, but I have met with such vexation of spirit in finding that if the remedy I give does not instantly cure it is abandoned and substituted by their own anti-physical [*sic*] nonsense of what they call "sarau," which invariably consists of rubbing the disordered part of the body with the palm of the hand with copious applications of coconut oil.<sup>47</sup>

It seems that Rotuman responses to illness during this period gave the impression of helplessness not only because of resistance to European healing practices, but also because much of their own traditional lore had been lost in transition. During his 1896 visit Gardiner observed that "the Rotuman of the present day is singularly ignorant of even the most elementary medicine and surgery."<sup>48</sup> This he attributed to the fact that previously, when traditional priests were the doctors, medical knowledge was carefully guarded. With the coming of Christianity, Gardiner speculated, the information was so carefully guarded that it was lost. An added factor contributing to the loss of knowledge was the elimination of the role of *ape'aitu* (spirit mediums), brought about by missionization. During the time of his visit, Gardiner reported that the Roman Catholic priests and the Resident

Commissioner were dispensing medicines, but that if instantaneous cures were not effected, Fijians resident on the island were very generally called in, presumably to administer native cures.<sup>49</sup>

The essence of relations between the Resident Commissioners and the Rotuman people is neatly epitomized in an exchange between Leefe and the chiefs in Council. Leefe had attempted to institute a tax of one shilling per man in order to establish a medicinal supply. The chiefs agreed in council but returned the following month with reports of opposition from the people. Several chiefs said the residents of their districts claimed they were too poor to pay such a tax. The exchange, as reported by Leefe, was as follows:

R.C.: I am surprised at your reports. I thought the Rotumans had more sense, now I find that you are greater fools than the Fijians, the plea of poverty you put forward is absurd. I have lived 22 years among natives and have never seen a richer race than the Rotumans....the people of Oinafa can afford to buy gravestones and only the other day you spent £30 in passage money and every day you spend several pounds in feeding your pigs. I shall therefore have to report to His Ex that if it had been for dead people, for depopulating the island or for pigs that the money would have been easily forthcoming but for sick or living people you cannot afford it. I am ashamed of you.

Chief A: I have heard some people say that they might pay a shilling and then never get sick.

R.C.: Yes...and they might get sick and others would then pay for their medicines. You are a race of Scotch Jews or rather worse.<sup>50</sup>

What Leefe did not realize, of course, was that while insurance for him meant having medicines on hand, for Rotumans it meant careful propitiation of the *'atua*. Pigs for sacrifice, and elaborate gravestones, were their insurance. Rotumans were prepared to pay their dues, far more than Leefe demanded, but in a different form. From their standpoint, they were simply putting their money where the power was.

### The Period of Dr. Macdonald: 1902–1923

The first qualified physician to assume the post of Resident Commissioner was Dr. Hugh Macdonald, who arrived in Rotuma in mid-1902. He served in this capacity until December 1923, and spent a total of sixteen years and eight months on the island, being relieved occasionally for intervals ranging from one to fourteen months.

Looked at as a whole, the mortality figures showed no significant improvement during Macdonald's regime (see table 11.1). The crude death rate for the period was approximately 48 per thousand, slightly higher than for the previous period. This, however, is misleading, for the figures are inflated by the measles epidemic in 1911 that took 335 lives. In the years following the epidemic, from 1912 to 1923, the death rate declined from a rate of about 62 per thousand for the period from 1903 to 1911 (including the measles epidemic) to about 32 per thousand. Infant mortality showed a drop from approximately 270 per thousand during the earlier period to 217 per thousand for the later one. Even with the measles epidemic, therefore, the average population for the entire era dropped only slightly to about 2,200 persons and was permanently on the rise after 1911. Aside from measles, the only epidemics during these years were outbreaks of whooping cough in 1907 and 1914, which took a heavy toll among children. Rotuma's isolation proved an asset in 1918 when the Spanish flu ravaged Fiji and the rest of the world. As a matter of policy, Rotuma was isolated from November 1918 until February 1919; as a result, a potentially devastating sequel to the measles disaster was averted.

In general, the epidemiological situation did not dramatically alter from the period prior to Macdonald's, with skin diseases (including yaws), eye problems, and elephantiasis remaining the scourges that they were in the past.

In one of his first reports, Macdonald, like his predecessors, commented on Rotuman reluctance to follow medical advice. He mentioned that people were not at all backward in seeking advice, but were not careful in following it, often simply tasting medicines and setting them aside if the flavor was not agreeable.<sup>51</sup> They were also quick to discard them and to withdraw from treatment if they did not see immediate improvement in their symptoms. Such behavior must be understood in the light of Rotuman ideas

concerning the causes and cures of illness. Minor ailments, and short-term conditions, were evidently regarded as a normal part of life; their causes were not attributed to supernatural involvement, and thus lotions, tonics, pills, and the like could be used to treat them. The mana required to deal with these ailments was not great, and was readily available; almost everyone, including the Resident Commissioner, was probably thought of as having sufficient power for such purposes.

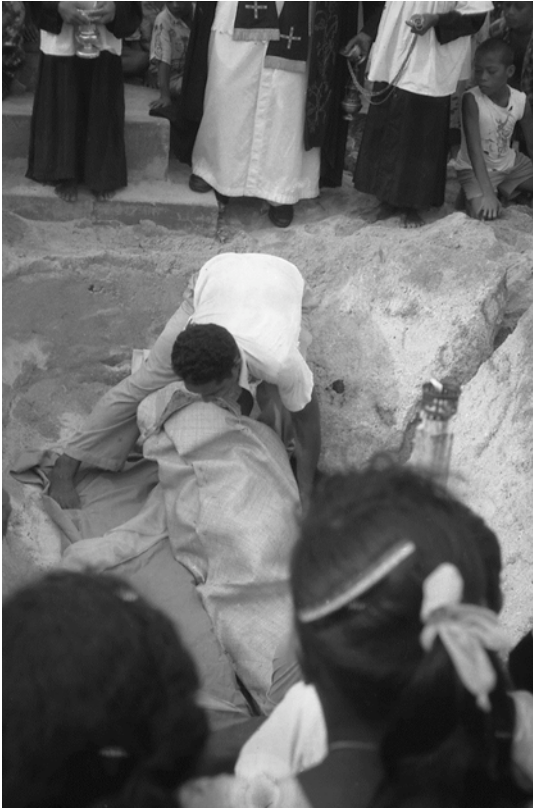
**Table 11.1**  
Crude Death Rates, 1881–1959

Years	Estimated Population	Death Rate per 1000
1881–1884	2452	45.5
1885–1889	2294	48.6
1890–1894	2219	43.8
1895–1899	2225	40.5
1900–1904	2230	51.7
1905–1909	2340	46.1
1910–1914	2087	81.3
1915–1919	2173	32.2
1920–1924	2357	39.0
1925–1929	2393	45.6
1930–1934	2680	27.3
1935–1939	2758	23.5
1940–1944	2852	23.2
1945–1949	2939	13.0
1950–1954	3049	13.8
1955–1959	3160	8.6

Figures in this table are approximations only; numbers of deaths and population figures are based on available data, which are incomplete. Multiple sources.

When a condition persisted, however, the specter of supernatural causation was raised, and the issue was no longer one of relieving symptoms, but of placating an angry or malicious *'atua*. Because Europeans viewed cures as inherent in medications and techniques, they expected cures to take time and were encouraged when a patient's condition

improved gradually, from critical to merely incapacitating. But for Rotumans, the power to cure serious illness lay with the *'atua* (and later, with God), and thus it was a matter of influencing the *'atua*'s will. If the treatment was effective, the cure should be quick and complete; a mere reduction in symptoms could be interpreted as evidence that the spirit was too determined to take a victim. Despairing, they saw death as inevitable.



**Photo 11.4** Burial of a body wrapped in a fine mat, 1960. *Alan Howard.*

Understanding these ideas can help to explain Rotuman reluctance to resort to hospitalization, which they associated with serious illness. According to Rotuman notions, what was needed under such circumstances was not medicine, but supernatural potency. This could best be tapped in one's home locality, where one's ancestral spirits resided. The comforting of friends and relatives engaged in the common cause of influencing the spirits was more available at home and, no doubt, added to the patient's reluctance to leave it.



But the European medical officers found this reluctance inexplicable, and resistance to helping pay for medical facilities frustrating. Among Dr. Macdonald's first actions was an attempt to increase taxes in order to generate funds for a hospital. His proposals were met with the same kind of resistance that Leefe experienced when trying to inaugurate his one-shilling tax for medicine. Macdonald wrote that Rotumans would like to have medicines and a physician but were not willing to pay for them. He pointed out that the tax would amount to a little over one day's pay and should not give grounds for complaint, "except such as are dictated by their inherent meanness."<sup>52</sup> He insisted that stinginess rather than poverty lay behind this resistance, citing extravagant expenditures for feasts at weddings and funerals as evidence for the availability of resources. Macdonald described the conclusion of this particular strategic battle between district commissioner and the Rotuman people:

I waited patiently during these months, giving the people every chance to come round to a right way of thinking but in the end was forced to take proceedings against the ringleaders....I gave them a week to pay in and I must say they bluffed up to the last moment; when I was waited on by deputations from the disaffected districts who then expressed their willingness to pay.<sup>53</sup>

Rotumans' acceptance of dispensed medicine was more rapid than their acceptance of the hospital as a location for inpatient treatment. Macdonald reported providing medicine for 509 patients during the first four months of 1903, as much as had been dispensed in the preceding eight months, and by 1910 the outpatient department of the hospital was receiving 4,000 visits per year, an average of nearly 2 visits per person. In contrast, from the time the hospital was opened in May 1903 until 1910 Macdonald reported a meager average of 60 inpatients per year. He continued his struggle for acceptance of the inpatient facilities, but was bucking a tenacious cultural tradition. Macdonald attributed Rotuman reluctance to use inpatient facilities to four factors: (1) the fear of dying away from home and one's friends; (2) the difficulties involved in feeding patients (people tired of bringing food to their relatives and friends in the hospital); (3) opposition to the hospital tax among a segment of the population; and (4) "the novelty of the matter."<sup>54</sup>

The second problem, food, Macdonald attempted to ease by supplying a few articles "such as arrowroot, biscuits, cocoa, tea, milk, sugar, etc." in accordance with the practice of provincial hospitals in Fiji.<sup>55</sup> This did not substantially alleviate the strain on a patient's relatives, however, as Macdonald himself acknowledged in a subsequent communication, for basic subsistence foods still had to be brought in, sometimes over a distance of several miles.<sup>56</sup>

Macdonald's frustration is poignantly expressed in a letter describing the death of a young man on whom he had operated. The man was presumably making good progress toward recovery, but a dream he had was interpreted as an omen of death, leading him to leave the hospital for home, where he might die among family and friends. He succumbed shortly thereafter, although Macdonald was convinced that he would have survived with continued treatment. The letter expressed despair over the Rotuman willingness to accept death as inevitable when patients did not show dramatic improvements following treatment for serious illnesses.<sup>57</sup>

On another occasion Macdonald complained that he quickly dispatched a stretcher for removal to the hospital of a man who had fallen from a tree and been severely injured, only to have hours pass without the patient being delivered. Finally a messenger arrived to say that the injured party would be brought to the hospital later in the day; from him Macdonald extracted the information that the delay was caused by the administration of last rites by the church and by the holding of a Rotuman ritual (*hapagsū*).<sup>58</sup>

Dr. John Halley, who relieved Macdonald during a fourteen-month period from March 1908 until May 1909, was equally upset by Rotuman stubbornness and continued to pound the message home. Using the Rotuma Council of Chiefs as a forum he made his dissatisfaction known and demanded a change:

I must again call your attention to the necessity for making more use of the Medical Officer stationed here and of the hospital. As I have on more than one occasion told you, very often the first information I receive about serious sickness among you is after the death of a sick person when some relative appears to register the death. It appears to me that you think a great deal more of your friends after death than during life. You appear to imagine that the correct behavior to your sick ones is to prop them up in bed, call all your friends together, perhaps send for a bottle of medicine,

and certainly give orders for the preparation of a large feast. To call the Doctor to help to alleviate or cure the sick one is quite your last—if any—thought. Now this must stop.<sup>59</sup>

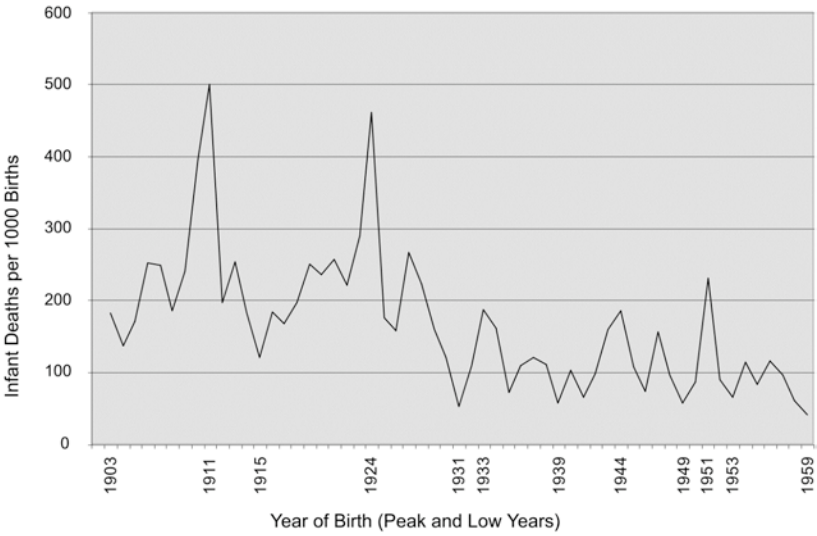
The measles epidemic that struck Rotuma in February 1911 wreaked havoc. From 26 February to 28 June, 401 persons died, 335 from measles. According to Macdonald, deaths were induced mostly by secondary reactions brought on by inappropriate responses to the primary symptoms. He particularly placed blame on indulgence in unsuitable articles of diet such as fruit, which led to ileocolitis, and reported that "parents to satisfy the cravings of their children when sick...will give them anything they cry for, such as oranges, bananas, and other kinds of fruits, although they have been frequently warned not to do so."<sup>60</sup> Our ethnographic evidence, and inference from Rotuman customs, indicate that it was dangerous to be on bad terms with departing spirits. It was safer to indulge patients, thereby placing them (and, by implication, their spirits) under obligation.

The struggle between Resident Commissioners, attempting to impose European medical practices, and Rotumans following their own cultural imperatives, continued with some vigor into the mid-twentieth century, but the former steadily gained ground after the measles epidemic. Inpatient admissions to the hospital rose from an average of 60 per year before the epidemic to over 100 during the next decade, and in the 1920s annual admissions topped 200 several times.

### The Period of Child Welfare and Public Health Programs: 1924–1952

In January 1924, Dr. W. K. Carew replaced Macdonald. Carew was an Irish Catholic who, according to the priest at Upu Mission Station, had been obliged to leave Ireland because of the revolution. However, Carew became seriously ill three weeks after his arrival in Rotuma and asked to be transferred; he left in April after serving less than four months. Many Rotumans saw his departure as confirmation of a curse proclaimed by Marafu, chief of Noa'tau and leader of the Methodists in the 1878 war, that a Catholic Resident Commissioner would never be able to stay in Rotuma. A previous confirmation had occurred in 1915 when a Mr.

Farrington arrived to finish his term of foreign service in Rotuma while Dr. Macdonald was on leave. By nightfall of the day of his arrival, he had died. It was therefore with some relief that Catholics witnessed the fifteen-month term of office of Dr. W. Desmond Carew, the 24-year-old son of W. K. Carew. Also, after an interval of two years and four months, in which William Russell was Resident Commissioner, the senior Carew returned to Rotuma and served four years. The curse evidently had lost its power, but the fact that it had "worked" earlier served to validate Rotumans' faith in the potency of their ancestral spirits.



**Graph 11.1** Infant mortality rates, 1903–1959. Registry data, Rotuma district office.

This was a period of steadily declining death rates accompanied by a dramatic drop in infant mortality. The crude death rate for the 1920s averaged 38 per thousand; during the 1930s it declined to 23 per thousand, and in the 1940s to 20 per thousand. Infant mortality dropped from 282 per thousand (1920s), to 145 per thousand (1930s), to 103 per thousand (1940s). As a result, the population continued to increase, reaching 3,000 in the 1950s.

Three killer epidemics occurred during the time span, all of whooping cough. They struck the island in 1925, 1934, and 1952 and took a heavy toll among infants and young children (see tables 11.1, 11.2, and graph 11.1).

**Table 11.2**  
Recorded Epidemics

Year	Disease	Source	Comments
1861	Dysentery	Trouillet 1868	"There weren't enough people to bury the dead."
1871	Dysentery	Trouillet 1868	46 to 58 victims
1882	Dysentery	Outward Letters 1882: C. Mitchell	Epidemic affected mostly children; 44 deaths
1884	Whooping Cough	Outward Letters 1884: W. Gordon	
1885	Dengue	Gardiner 1898a, 497	
1885	Fish Poisoning	Eason 1951, 120	
1887	Fish Poisoning	Outward Letters 1888: A. R. Mackay	A continuous condition
1891	Influenza	Eason 1951, 120	
1896	Influenza	Gardiner 1898a, 497	Mild epidemic; 8 mostly old people died from it
1901	Dysentery	Eason 1951, 120	
1907	Whooping Cough	Death Register	37 deaths
1911	Measles	Death Register	401 deaths
1914	Whooping Cough	Death Register	19 deaths
1925	Whooping Cough	Death Register	34 deaths
1928	Influenza	Death Register	43 deaths
1928	Measles	Death Register	5 deaths
1934	Whooping Cough	Death Register	46 deaths
1952	Whooping Cough	Death Register	39 deaths

Despite this dramatic decline in death and infant mortality rates, the old afflictions of yaws, filaria, and skin and eye diseases remained prevalent throughout most of the period. But the battle against these was begun in earnest following a health survey conducted by Dr. S. M. Lambert in 1928. Lambert examined approximately 85 percent of the population. He found 97 percent of children between the ages of two and sixteen had a positive history of yaws; 30 percent of the adults showed some signs of filaria, 67 percent of all persons had scabies, and 18 percent suffered eye afflictions. In addition, examination of a sample of persons over two years old revealed that 73 percent were

infected with hookworm and 57 percent with *Trichocephalous trichiuris* (roundworm). In the conclusion of his report, Lambert asserted that medical conditions on the island were relatively simple, with yaws and hookworm being "outstanding causes of direct and indirect death."<sup>61</sup> He provided treatment for both conditions and recommended concentration on wiping out yaws, suggesting that penalties be imposed for unreported cases.

The Carews were among the least sympathetic commentators on Rotuman character and customs; they wrote harshly of the people's morals ("non-existent"), work habits ("lazy" and "impossible"), and personality ("dour, consequential, and very self-opinionative"). Nevertheless, they were conscientious physicians and made valiant efforts to improve health conditions on the island. Two health issues were salient during this period: infant mortality and sanitation.

The younger Carew attributed the previously high level of infant mortality in part to the "apparent dislike which exists in the mind of the people in calling for the assistance of the obstetric nurse when her services would be valuable."<sup>62</sup> His pet theory was more sociological than medical, however. He focused on the Rotuman custom of fosterage by grandparents, which he felt "makes women careless as to the existence of their families and homes, which, here, results in incontinency; thereby destroying the hope, and perhaps the desire, of a happy home and a large family." He regarded the custom as "contrary to human nature and...conducive to all kinds of trouble."<sup>63</sup> Carew's attempt at a remedy was to force a regulation through the Rotuma Council of Chiefs "to provide for the better security and freedom of marriage and due discharge of parental duties in the Island of Rotuma."<sup>64</sup>

The elder Carew, following his return to Rotuma in 1928, took a somewhat more direct step toward curbing infant and child mortality. In May 1930 he created the position of child welfare nurse and assigned his daughter to the post.

In his medical report for 1930 Carew pointed to the importance of personal relationships between health practitioners and the Rotuman people in effecting change:

For many years previous to her arrival various Medical Officers stationed here were alert to the conditions that brought about a heavy infantile mortality. Pamphlets in Rotuman language on the care of infants were from time to time issued for distribution amongst the people, and frequent advice given to the mothers on the subject, with poor results. However, the personal factor

of village-to-village visits and inspection of children, as in the present movement, has in a short period brought about a vast improvement. The mothers now respond eagerly and seldom is one missing from the roll-call on the day scheduled for inspection. They seem interested, and accept freely the advice and directions given for their infants' welfare, and whilst occasional deaths do occur—mainly from broncho-pneumonia—the general condition of the infants and young children is so improved that one cannot but be impressed with the movement.<sup>65</sup>



**Photo 11.5** Child welfare nurse. © *Fiji Museum*.

Subsequent Resident Commissioners continued the program with the assistance of the Catholic nuns at the two mission stations.

Carew Sr. was also convinced that an improvement in sanitary conditions would have a beneficial effect. (He was not the first commissioner to show a concern for sanitation; as early as 1884, William Gordon raised an issue concerning burial practices and their possible health consequences. Gordon pointed out in council that many graveyards were very close to houses in which people were living; the chiefs acknowledged that according to custom nearly every family had its own burial ground, often close to their houses, and in some cases actually buried the dead beneath the earth floors of their homes.)<sup>66</sup> For Carew, however, the issue focused on the pig population of the island. In 1928 Lambert estimated that there were close to 4,000 pigs on Rotuma; Carew placed the count at 5,000. Since before cession Rotumans had kept pigs out of the villages by a stone fence circumscribing the entire island, and Lambert noted that "a stench arises from this huge sty which is offensive when the breeze is right."<sup>67</sup> Lambert also conceded that pigs were a prolific source of the flies that transmitted eye disease, but he was undecided as to the significance of the pigs as a health hazard. In his opinion the extinction of pigs would mean the loss of fresh meat and fresh animal fat with its vitamin A content, as the people would probably turn to tinned meat and tinned fish.<sup>68</sup>

Carew was much less equivocal. To him the pigs were a health hazard pure and simple, and he determined to get rid of them. Pigs existed on Rotuma, he wrote, only "for the purpose of wanton waste at feasts."<sup>69</sup> On grounds of "hygiene and public health," Carew passed a regulation restricting the number of pigs and requiring more attention to the repair of fences, cleanliness, and the like. As a result, the Rotumans killed or consumed most of the animals. In his medical report for 1930, Carew reported that only 29 large and 33 small pigs remained. The lands used previously for the pigs were being used as food gardens, he wrote, "with much benefit to the general health."<sup>70</sup>

The 1920s were also notable for improved transport, with accompanying impacts on health practices. About 1924 the first motor vehicles were imported into Rotuma, and by 1927 the road had been improved to make all the villages accessible. This made it possible for people to get to the hospital more quickly and for the native medical practitioner to make regular rounds. However, since there were no



telephone facilities (indeed there were none until the 1990s, although the first discussion of the possibility of installing some occurred in a 1924 meeting of the Rotuma Council of Chiefs), the delivery of medical services, although vastly improved, remained less than optimal.



**Photo 11.6** Fr. Griffon driving early vehicle, ca. 1920s. *Marist Archives, Rome.*

Communication with the outside world was vastly improved in the latter part of 1933 with the inauguration of a wireless station. This made it possible for supplies, including medical supplies, to be ordered until such time as a ship left Fiji for Rotuma, whereas previously a letter had to be written and sent on one ship with a wait until the next one arrived, often involving a period of many months. In the 1930s long delays were usual, for the Great Depression resulted in a sharp drop in the copra market, and few boats were willing to make the trip to remote places, such as Rotuma, to pick up the output.

During the late 1930s, there was continued emphasis on reducing infant and child mortality, with particular attention to ridding the island of yaws and other serious skin diseases. During this period, the first native medical practitioner (NMP), Jione Fatiaki, a Rotuman, was appointed to the

island. Fatiaki, who was given the paramount title of Marāf in the district of Noa'tau, served as the main medical officer on Rotuma from the time Carew left early in 1932 until March 1940, when he was replaced by Ieni Semantafa (also a Rotuman). A second Rotuman native medical practitioner, W. Fonmoa, was appointed to assist Fatiaki in September 1939. In addition, during the late 1930s several Rotuman native obstetric nurses, including Marieta Mataere, Mary Solomone, and Tipo Jieni, served on the island. The District Officer during the late 1930s, A. E. Cornish, was full of praise for the Rotuman personnel who were responsible for the health of the island in the absence of a European medical officer. He described them as "painstaking, diligent and very attentive to their duties,"<sup>71</sup>

Working for the most part without European professional guidance, Fatiaki continued the program of arsenical injections for yaws, but apparently with little effect.<sup>72</sup> According to Dr. Evans, who first visited Rotuma in 1940, the arsenical dosages given were hopelessly inadequate and unsystematic, although up to 1,000 doses were given in one year. The figures for year-end inspections from 1935 to 1939 actually showed a rising incidence of yaws, and only a slight decrease in impetigo.

In October 1939 a Dr. Macpherson visited Rotuma and conducted a health survey in which he personally examined every man, woman, and child on the island. His report shows that conditions had not changed greatly with regard to prevalent diseases since Lambert's visit eleven years before. His comments on sanitation, however, suggest that although improvements were still needed, particularly with regard to latrines, significant progress had been made in some areas. He specifically pointed to the reduction in the pig population engineered by Carew as responsible for sanitary improvement.<sup>73</sup>

When NMP Fonmoa arrived in Rotuma, he helped to systematize arsenical treatment for yaws, apparently with good effect, for the prevalence of the disease, as measured by the annual year-end inspections, declined dramatically. Within two years, the prevalence of yaws fell from 25.6 percent to 1.6 percent, and impetigo among preschool and school-aged children examined fell from 6.8 percent to 1.6 percent. However, following his visit to the island for three months at the end of 1940, Dr. Evans conjectured that Rotuman attitudes toward the injections were less a "rational therapeutic measure" than "a traditional practice of hopeful

witchcraft."<sup>74</sup> Evans also noted that people were still reluctant to enter the hospital, an observation confirmed by NMP Fonmoa.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the child-welfare program continued to occupy a central place in the public health regime on Rotuma. A district nurse was appointed whose primary responsibility was to carry out the program, and she received assistance from some of the Catholic nuns and, later, from child-welfare helpers appointed by village chiefs. Significantly, it became customary for first births to take place in the hospital, while subsequent births were either attended at home by a nurse or at the hospital.

This period is in marked contrast to those before with regard to Rotuman acceptance of major medical reforms. The child-welfare program was adopted with apparent enthusiasm, and, if sanitation measures were not welcomed wholeheartedly, they were not seriously resisted. The success of these measures simply required Rotumans to build latrines, clean up areas designated as unsanitary, receive the district nurse when she came to their village, and follow some prescribed routines. In these matters they were prepared to comply with the secular authority of the government administrator. They were even prepared to drastically reduce their pig population—probably so long as they had enough available for ritual purposes when needed. They were also willing to go to the hospital for first births, despite costs—births did not involve placating *'atua*.

But significant resistance to medical treatment by western practitioners continued, as indicated by the periodic complaints of Resident Commissioners and District Officers that people did not make proper use of available staff or facilities. And as Dr. Evans implied, their willingness to receive treatment was based less on western than on traditional Rotuman assumptions. Still, it is apparent that by mid-century Rotumans were far more engaged with the European medical system than they were when the twentieth century began.

### The Achievement of Medical Modernity: 1953–1960

The last major killer epidemic of whooping cough occurred in 1952, during which 83 children under the age of ten years died. It was the first year in residence of Fatiaki Taukëve, a young Rotuman assistant medical officer. Despite his initial

discouragement, brought about by his helplessness in facing the epidemic, Taukāve proved to be an active and innovative official.

In 1953, with the help of the District Officer, Taukāve persuaded the chiefs to arrange for an "Annual Baby Show" and to collect money to buy prizes for the healthiest babies and winning mothers. Individual district shows were held in November, and all the prizewinning babies and children were brought together at the hospital in December for the main show. The district with the most points was ceremonially presented a trophy cup. The idea caught on immediately and aroused a great deal of interest in modern baby care on the part of mothers.



**Photo 11.7** Prizewinning baby, 1960. *Alan Howard.*

Taukāve also requested passage of a regulation by the Rotuma Council of Chiefs aimed at improving sanitation on the island. The regulation required all able-bodied adults to spend four hours a week cleaning and weeding their villages. Dwelling houses were required to have an adequate latrine under penalty of law, and village inspections were to be carried out weekly. Taukāve reported that the fly and mosquito populations were greatly reduced by these measures and village cleanliness greatly improved. Although a mild epidemic of gastric influenza struck the island in 1953, the crude death rate dropped to 14.4 per thousand (see tables 11.1 and 11.2).

Ieni Semantafa was reassigned to Rotuma and replaced Taukāve as assistant medical officer from 1954 to 1956. Semantafa continued the programs initiated by his predecessor with considerable success, and with the help of newly introduced wonder drugs, yaws was virtually eliminated. The year-end inspection in 1956 revealed only one active case of the disease. Taukāve returned in 1957 and during the following two years, under his skillful and dedicated guidance, the crude death rate dropped to lows of 7.9 and 5.1 per thousand.

Several factors seem to have contributed to Rotuma's dramatic mortality decrease during the late 1950s. Better infant care and improved sanitation undoubtedly played a part, although there was still room for improvement. More important were the expansion of the medical staff and the greater range of skills available. In 1952 the newly appointed Taukāve was assisted by only two staff nurses; in 1959 the same man, considerably more experienced, could rely on support from six full-time staff nurses, one full-time district nurse and another working three days a week, an ambulance driver trained as a dresser, and five laymen who helped run the hospital.

But most important of all was the availability of more potent drugs, particularly penicillin and other antibiotics. Not only did these "wonder drugs" eliminate yaws and stave off other infections, they also cured ailments in such a dramatic fashion that there could be little doubt about their inherent potency. Whereas previous medicines and treatments had been slow enough to allow observers to attribute curative power to external agencies such as the *'atua*, the wonder drugs forced Rotumans to acknowledge the basic premise of western medicine—that the power to cure at least certain conditions is inherent in the material aspects of treatment. Rotumans did not abandon their own premises, but rather pushed them farther to the margins of their now expanded medical system.

Against this historical background one can better understand why *sarao* (ritual massage) is the main form of Rotuman folk medicine that has survived. The persistence of *sarao* is an indication that even with the wonder drugs, western medicine did not satisfactorily alleviate the stresses of illness for Rotumans. The main source of anxiety that illness posed for Rotumans is, we would argue, the vulnerability imposed by social and economic dependency.

Any persistent condition that threatened incapacitation tended to be treated as a social rather than an individual matter. When an illness was exposed, it seems, an implicit message was communicated to all those with obligations to the victim that he or she might have to depend on them for a period of time. This threat of imbalanced obligations amounted to a social test and was a source of anxiety for the ill person. In response, he or she was likely to be visited by a stream of kin, friends, and neighbors. The visits may be seen as a mechanism of social reassurance; they contained an implicit pledge of support on the part of visitor to patient.

Within this context, massaging can be viewed as a powerful social message. It was a form of reassurance used by parents with children, and was rooted in a socialization process that placed a premium on touch. In normal social intercourse intimacy, concern, and commitment were expressed as much, or more, through touching as through any other medium of communication. As therapy, therefore, massage constituted a reaffirmation of relationship to socially vulnerable persons. When performed by family members or others close to the victim, it was a personal affirmation; when performed by a recognized specialist, with greater attendant ritual, it constituted an affirmation of support by the community.

Such an explanation, based on the fulfillment of psychosocial needs, would account for only part of the form *sarao* takes. It may help to explain why massage rather than some other physical or mechanical operation was employed, but it does not account for the central concern with mana, and the use of ritual forms designed to tap it. To explain this we must move to a cultural level.

We would argue that the practice of *sarao* was one of the primary means by which Rotumans maintained an active relationship with their ancestors. By attributing to the '*atua*' the power to heal, they symbolized the potency of their forefathers. In so doing, they affirmed their own worth as human beings and their heritage as Rotumans. For in the Polynesian tradition, a person's potency, his or her status as a human being, is regarded primarily as a matter of genealogical inheritance.<sup>75</sup> If one's ancestors were impotent, and had little social worth, then by implication one is also impotent and socially insignificant. Even in the face of European domination, Rotumans were not prepared to accept such a social assignment.

Rotuman resistance to European medical innovations must be understood in this light. Attacks on their medical ideas and practices were indirect attacks on their integrity as a people—on their collective worth. Had they succumbed to the pressures of colonial administrators to abandon their customary approach to healing they would have been symbolically denying the validity of their heritage and their efficacy as a people. Rotumans tell many stories that affirm the opposite. They tell of ancestors who were gigantic and powerful. They tell of the apprehensions of Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, the great Fijian chief, when he visited Rotuma. According to the story, he left the island in panic after a brief visit, exclaiming that the power of Rotuma was too much for him to bear. The power of the island is the power of the *'atua*, of the ancestors. The conflict over medical ideas and practices can therefore be understood as an attempt by Rotumans to preserve their sense of potency as a people in response to the application of secular political power by colonial administrators. With the smallpox vaccinations in 1908, Rotumans feared they were being marked as subjects of England; they preferred instead to rely on their ancestors to keep them safe and well. This, then, was another way that they strove to maintain their autonomy as a people.

Although it could be argued that traditional Rotuman medical ideas and practices were somewhat maladaptive in regard to their consequences for immediate physical health, it should be clear that as adaptive strategies they aimed at alleviating a much wider range of stresses than merely physical ones. Assessing their effectiveness as strategies to ensure well-being—psychological, social, and cultural, in addition to physical—requires a more complex set of criteria than indices of mortality and morbidity alone.



**Photos 11.8–9** Scenes from a wedding. Note dignitaries seated in chairs facing the dancers, 1940. *H. S. Evans.*



## Notes to Chapter 11

The medical history of Rotuma contained in Chapter 11 draws heavily on "The Power to Heal in Colonial Rotuma," which was published in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (Howard 1979), while our analysis of demographic changes prior to Fiji's independence stems mostly from "Rotuma as a Hinterland Community," which also appeared in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (Howard 1961).

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<sup>1</sup> Tromelin 1829, 42.

<sup>2</sup> Lucatt 1851, 158.

<sup>3</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 497.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Eason 1951, 122.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Eason 1951, 122–123.

<sup>6</sup> The birth records were kept by Resident Commissioners, and often included parents' ethnicity or country of origin. We include in our category of "mixed ancestry" all instances where one parent is European, part-European, or from another Pacific Island. The extraordinarily high death rate reflects the toll taken by several epidemics, including the measles epidemic of 1911, which took a heavy toll on children.

<sup>7</sup> Methodist Church of Australasia, *Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, no. 5, Vol. 11 (April 1868).

<sup>8</sup> Outward Letters, 4 December 1879.

<sup>9</sup> Outward Letters, 4 December 1879.

<sup>10</sup> Outward Letters, 4 December 1879.

<sup>11</sup> Outward Letters, 10 January 1887.

<sup>12</sup> Outward Letters, 1 October 1881.

<sup>13</sup> Lesson 1838, 420; translated from the French by Ella Wiswell.

<sup>14</sup> Lesson 1838, 428

<sup>15</sup> Bennett 1831, 475–476.

<sup>16</sup> Lucatt 1851, 168.

<sup>17</sup> Lucatt 1851, 168.

<sup>18</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 492. Note that Lesson reported seeing several men with skin lesions that may well have been yaws in 1824 (1838, 427–428). However, the fact that Bennett did not mention skin diseases in 1830 suggests that it was not a significant problem at that time, and may well have intensified with increased contact with Europeans.

<sup>19</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 494.

<sup>20</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 410

<sup>21</sup> Lesson 1838–1839, 421.

- <sup>22</sup> Lucatt 1851, 158.
- <sup>23</sup> Gardiner 1898, 471.
- <sup>24</sup> See McClatchey 1993 for an account of the preparation and medicinal uses of turmeric on Rotuma.
- <sup>25</sup> Bennett 1831, 475.
- <sup>26</sup> Gardiner 1898, 492.
- <sup>27</sup> Gardiner 1898, 495.
- <sup>28</sup> Gardiner 1898, 492.
- <sup>29</sup> Dispatch dated 3 October 1898. Outward Letters.
- <sup>30</sup> Gardiner 1898, 492.
- <sup>31</sup> Bennett 1831, 476.
- <sup>32</sup> Gardiner 1898, 469.
- <sup>33</sup> Churchward 1939, 470.
- <sup>34</sup> Russell 1942, 251.
- <sup>35</sup> Gardiner 1898, 468.
- <sup>36</sup> Lucatt 1851, 161.
- <sup>37</sup> Gardiner 1898, 466.
- <sup>38</sup> *Historique de la Station Notre Dame de Victoires* 1949.
- <sup>39</sup> Outward Letters, 9 June 1884.
- <sup>40</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 493.
- <sup>41</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 492, 494–495.
- <sup>42</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 495.
- <sup>43</sup> Outward Letters, 14 January 1899.
- <sup>44</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 5 May 1898.
- <sup>45</sup> Outward Letters, 15 April 1882.
- <sup>46</sup> Outward Letters, 9 June 1884.
- <sup>47</sup> Outward Letters, 4 November 1885.
- <sup>48</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 491.
- <sup>49</sup> Gardiner 1898a, 491–492.
- <sup>50</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 9 November 1893.
- <sup>51</sup> Outward Letters, 26 July 1902.
- <sup>52</sup> Outward Letters, 14 August 1902.
- <sup>53</sup> Outward Letters, 7 June 1904.
- <sup>54</sup> Outward Letters, 2 September 1903.
- <sup>55</sup> Outward Letters, 7 June 1904.
- <sup>56</sup> Outward Letters, 9 July 1911.
- <sup>57</sup> Outward Letters, 27 July 1906.
- <sup>58</sup> See Inia 2001, 109–114.
- <sup>59</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 7 January 1909.

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- <sup>60</sup> Outward Letters, 30 April 1911.
- <sup>61</sup> Lambert 1929, 14.
- <sup>62</sup> Outward Letters, 1 January 1925.
- <sup>63</sup> Outward Letters, 1 January 1925.
- <sup>64</sup> Rotuma Regulation No. 2 of 1925
- <sup>65</sup> Annual Report for 1930. Fiji Medical Department Records.
- <sup>66</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 7 August 1884.
- <sup>67</sup> Lambert 1929, 14.
- <sup>68</sup> Lambert 1929, 13.
- <sup>69</sup> Outward Letters, Annual Report for 1928.
- <sup>70</sup> Outward Letters, 26 February 1931.
- <sup>71</sup> Outward Letters, Annual Report for 1940
- <sup>72</sup> The next physician to act as the administrative officer was Dr. H. S. Evans, who served from December 1949 to January 1952.
- <sup>73</sup> Health Survey of Rotuma, 1939. Fiji Medical Department Records.
- <sup>74</sup> Evans n.d.
- <sup>75</sup> Goldman 1970, chapter 1.



**Photo 12.1** First plane to arrive at Rotuma, 1981. *Fiji Ministry of Information.*



**Photo 12.2** Satellite dish at government station, 1996. *Alan Howard.*

## 12 Postcolonial Rotuma

When those of us who live in a "developed" environment visit Rotuma we often think, "Oh, if only we could have this or that on the island it would make life so much easier." But I think I rather enjoy Rotuma as it is, with its flies and mosquitoes and pigs at the *pa puaka*. It's the special uniqueness that I hope we would all want to keep.

Yvonne Aitu, *Rotuma Web site*, 1999<sup>1</sup>

When Great Britain granted independence to the Colony of Fiji on 10 October 1970, it also yielded responsibility for the governance of Rotuma, which was recognized as part of the colony. In this chapter we reflect on the changes that have occurred on the island since Rotuma became part of the newly formed state of Fiji.

### Physical Changes

During the 1970s and 1980s material conditions on Rotuma were transformed in several ways. A wharf was completed at Oinafa in 1975, making it possible for ships to load and unload directly instead of having to transport people and cargo between ship and shore by launch. More significantly, an airstrip was opened in 1981, in time for the centennial celebration of Rotuma's cession to Great Britain.

One might expect these new facilities to have greatly diminished Rotuma's isolation, but relief was partial at best. Airfares were too expensive for most Rotumans, and because of low passenger loads Fiji Air decreased its original bi-weekly flights to once a week.<sup>2</sup> And although the wharf made unloading and loading easier, shipping schedules remained unreliable, so that even at the end of the twentieth century, isolation was still one of Rotuma's major problems.

Also of consequence were changes in housing. In 1972, Hurricane Bebe destroyed almost all of the thatch-roofed, native-style houses. They were mostly replaced by concrete houses with corrugated iron roofs. The New Zealand Army came on a relief mission following the devastation and supervised the building of some 300 houses in about three weeks' time. A 1966 survey of house types by the Rotuma Council categorized 240 (50.7%) as *rī hāfu* (concrete or stone), 60 (12.7%) as *rī 'āi* (wood), 84 (17.8%) as *rī pota* (iron), and 89 (18.8%) as *rī fakrotuam* (Rotuman style). In a subsequent count, during 1981, 82.8 percent of the houses were categorized as *rī hāfu* and the count for *rī fakrotuam* was zero (table 12.1).<sup>3</sup>

**Table 12.1**  
Rotuman House Styles, 1951–1989

Walls of:	1951[a]		1966[b]		1981[b]		1989[c]	
Limestone or cement	—	35%	240	51%	269	83%	361	82%
Wood	—	32%	60	13%	31	10%	24	5%
Iron	—	9%	84	18%	25	8%	46	10%
Thatch	—	24%	89	19%	0	0%	8	2%
Total Houses	—		473		325		429	

[a] Reported by H. S. Evans, Resident Commissioner of Rotuma. Percentages only.

[b] Records of Rotuma Council, compiled and reported by district chiefs.

[c] Survey of 414 households (85% of all households on Rotuma) conducted by Jan Rensel and Alan Howard.

An increase in hurricane-proof housing is only part of the story, however. During these two decades Rotumans put more and more of their resources into modernizing and improving their homes. A number of two-story homes were built, and such features as verandahs, louvered windows,



**Photos 12.3–4** Aftermath of Hurricane Bebe. *Richard Mehus, 1972.*

and rubber-tiled floors were added. Whereas formerly furnishings had been very simple, European-style furniture became commonplace. Almost every home had tables and chairs; most had sofas and standing beds. People also made their domestic lives more comfortable by importing a variety of household appliances, including radios and sewing machines, gas stoves, refrigerators, and deep-freeze units.

Furthermore, the underground freshwater lens was tapped in 1976 making piped water available around the island, so people no longer had to depend on rainwater storage tanks. Most homes subsequently added indoor kitchens, with sinks and running water. Also, thanks to additional assistance from New Zealand, water-seal toilets, either inside or just outside the main building, were installed. These replaced pit latrines in the near bush and outhouses on piers over the tidal flats. (One of the purposes for installing water-seal toilets was to eliminate some of the main breeding environments for flies and mosquitoes, but in fact little improvement occurred. The flies and mosquitoes were as much a nuisance at the end of the century as they had been in colonial times.)

Electrification also transformed life on Rotuma. During the late colonial period, the only generators were located at the government station in Ahau and the Catholic Church stations at Sumi and Upu. By the end of the twentieth century several villages had generators that provided electricity for at least a few hours per day, and quite a few individual households had their own generators. This made it possible for many people to use electric appliances and to keep their homes lit until late in the evenings.

Power lawn mowers were introduced in quantity during the 1980s and 1990s. In the past, most homes were surrounded by packed sand, kept tidy by frequent sweeping. The availability of mowers encouraged people to plant lawns, giving a somewhat different appearance to villages. The sound of power mowers became a familiar experience in the previously quiet ambience of village life.

In addition to an increase in noise pollution, the importation of increasing quantities of tin and plastic containers precipitated a waste disposal problem. Although such items were supposed to be deposited in pits, they often found their way to beaches, where they were both hazardous and unsightly.

The number of motor vehicles on the island increased greatly during the last quarter of the twentieth century.



Whereas at the end of the colonial era only a few private and government vehicles were present, by 1989 our islandwide survey turned up 21 privately owned cars or trucks and 150 motorbikes in working condition, or nearly one for every three households (there were perhaps a hundred more vehicles not in working condition). This was in addition to numerous vehicles operated by government and cooperative agencies. Thus mobility on the island had greatly increased. In colonial times a trip to the other side of the island had been a major excursion, but by the late 1980s it became routine.

The dramatic increase in fuel-consuming appliances and motor vehicles, when coupled with an erratic shipping schedule, led to recurrent fuel shortages. Chronic complaints resulted in the construction in 1997 of a fuel depot by Mobil Oil at Hansolo, in the district of Itu'ti'u. The tanks at the depot were filled periodically by oil tankers pumping fuel through a pipeline built over the reef connecting to the tanks. Mobil Oil also opened a petrol station at Upu in Itu'ti'u that became the main outlet for fuel on the island. However, because they found this arrangement unprofitable, Mobil Oil subsequently ceased their operations, requiring people on the island to revert to reliance on fuel sent by ship.



**Photo 12.5** Mobil Oil depot at Hansolo, 2001. *F. Deschamps.*

Despite the massive increase in number of vehicles, the main road around the island was little improved by century's end. It remained quite rough in places, which was hard on automobiles and pickup trucks, and required caution by motorbike riders. However, the network of feeder roads built to replace footpaths into the bush made it considerably easier for people to access their gardens, and to bring out food crops and copra. The sight of men carrying baskets on a shoulder pole or on horseback, so common during the colonial era, was a distinct rarity in the latter part of the century.

During the late colonial period communication with the outside world had been limited to a radio-telephone at the government station and shortwave radios. Mail came and went with ships, which often meant waiting several weeks or even months. After air service was established in the 1980s, mail was carried on the weekly plane (if it wasn't off-loaded in favor of more lucrative cargo). The plane also brought copies of Fiji newspapers for regular subscribers.

The old radio-telephone, noted for its erratic reception and transmission, was replaced in 1990 by a new, more powerful and reliable radiophone. Telephone lines were laid around the island during the 1990s, and a switchboard was installed at Ahau with trained operators in attendance. As a result, it was no longer necessary to dispatch someone by bicycle or motor vehicle to convey a message to someone elsewhere on the island.

The telephone system also made it easier for people to keep in contact with their kin abroad. Telephone contact thus became a major source of information exchange between Rotuma and the outside world, transmitted on a daily basis. It also provided a ready vehicle for requesting money and assistance, a source of some concern for wage-earning Rotumans overseas. In 1995 Fiji Post and Telecom installed a satellite earth station and digital telephone exchange, making Rotuma accessible by direct dialing and greatly improving the quality of voice transmission.

Live television was not yet accessible on Rotuma at century's end, but VCRs made their appearance in the 1990s. Videos completely replaced the outdated films formerly shown to large audiences in makeshift theaters. Rotumans are therefore much better informed nowadays about modern trends, at least as they are portrayed in the movies.

## Political Change

Following Fiji's independence, it did not take long for a crisis to develop over the prerogatives of chiefs versus those of the District Officer. Under the colonial administration the District Officer had been *gagaj pure*, "the boss." His authority came from the Governor, whom he represented, and ultimately from the British Crown. With independence, the basis of his authority became ambiguous. The District Officer at the time of independence was Fred Gibson, an educated Rotuman who had his own ideas about how Rotuma should be governed. Gibson was a commissioned naval officer and an active member of the Rotuman Association in Fiji. Dissatisfaction with Gibson was forcefully expressed by the Rotuman chiefs in 1968, two years after his appointment and two years prior to Fiji's independence. In a letter to the colonial administration, the seven district chiefs complained about Gibson's alleged high-handedness. The letter begins:

We, your humble Chiefs of Rotuma, wish to lodge a very strong complaint against the treatment meted out to us by your representative the District Officer, Mr. F. Gibson during the two years he has been with us.

Because of the great loyalty and respect we have for Her Majesty and her Government, we did our best to overlook his harsh and disrespectful attitude to us and our people, but we now have reached a stage when we cannot tolerate it any longer. Never have the dignity and honour of Rotuman Chiefs and the people they represent fallen so low [as] at the present moment through his administration. As we are the great defenders of our custom and our way of life, we felt it our duty to appeal for help, and get him removed.<sup>4</sup>

The letter goes on to document instances of Gibson humiliating individual chiefs in public venues and in council and of his interference in the process of selecting new chiefs. The chiefs also complained about Gibson's treatment of Fijians on the island, and particularly the Fijian medical officer whom he allegedly reprimanded and told that the people of Rotuma did not like him. The chiefs wrote that they wished to dissociate themselves from the District Officer's attitude to Fijians on the island, "which if allowed to continue might be wrongly interpreted as it is our policy to gradually push Fijians out of Rotuma. The Fijians might take

up the same attitude to the Rotumans in Fiji and what a mess!"<sup>5</sup>

The response of L. P. Lloyd, the chief secretary, was dismissive of these complaints. His letter in reply to the chiefs concluded with the comment that he was asking the Commissioner, Eastern Division, to look into the matter, but he also stated, "In the meantime it is the desire of Government that the Chiefs do not allow trivial matters of personal animosities to hinder the peace and progress of Rotuma."<sup>6</sup>

The chiefs continued to complain, but it was not until after Fiji's independence that they received a sympathetic hearing. The newly elected Prime Minister, Ratu Kamisese Mara, went to Rotuma and personally ordered the District Officer's removal, replacing him with Konrote Marorue, an experienced government clerk.

Mara's action signaled the beginning of an entirely different relationship between District Officers and the Council of Rotuma. Whereas previously the council had been merely an advisory body, it was now empowered as a genuine legislative organization. The District Officer was relegated to the role of adviser and administrative assistant to the council. This meant that council members—chiefs and district representatives alike—found themselves in a position of legislative authority for the first time since cession. The council, charged with overseeing local affairs, received a government subvention that increased substantially in the years following Fiji's independence. As a result, the position of district chief became increasingly attractive, and competition for relevant titles intensified.<sup>7</sup> On occasion, in three districts—Itu'muta, Oinafa, and Itu'ti'u—different individuals have simultaneously claimed chieftainship, resulting in bitter disputes and divided loyalties. In each case outside intervention was required to resolve the dispute; in the case of Oinafa it was decided by Fiji's Chief Justice.

Offsetting this increase in political power, chiefly authority was undermined to a certain degree by the success of Rotumans who migrated to other locations in Fiji. Well-educated migrants attained positions of responsibility in the professions, business, and national government. Their kin on Rotuma came to rely more on them for assistance and support, and less on the chiefs, since the chiefs controlled comparatively fewer resources vis-à-vis the national government.

Migration also affected symbols of status. In times past, a chief's home was the main indicator of his rank. It was the biggest and best in his district, and was built and maintained by communal labor. The chief's house served as a receiving center for visiting dignitaries and was an important symbol of the district's prosperity and organizational ability. In the postcolonial period, however, modern-style houses requiring significant capital investment were built by persons without titles. Motorbikes and automobiles were also accessible to anyone with the money to pay for them. Chiefs could only participate in this competition for prestige items if they, too, had ready access to cash. Much of the money for these commodities came from abroad, in the form of remittances from migrant kin. In addition, Rotumans who, like teachers and government employees, held full-time jobs on the island, often invested in prestigious housing and transportation. Since the chiefs received only modest stipends for their council duties, they were sometimes tempted to use public funds in ways that aroused criticism, such as dubious expensive excursions to Fiji. At various times serious charges were made against individual chiefs and the Rotuma Council concerning alleged mismanagement of public funds, placing them in a position of having to continually defend their actions.

Many successful migrants took an active interest in developments on Rotuma, and offered to help the Rotuma Council with their projects. The reactions of the council members were ambivalent. In some instances they welcomed the assistance of their better-educated kin; in other instances they expressed resentment over what they considered unwarranted intrusion into their affairs. For the most part they welcomed initiatives by Fiji-based Rotumans, but demanded control of implementation.

Complicating relations between chiefs and successful Rotumans in Fiji was the fact that few of the latter took titles. From the chiefs' perspective, this suggested their own superior status, and generated an expectation of deference, if not obeisance. From the standpoint of Rotumans enmeshed in modern commercial establishments, professions, and government bureaucracies, Rotuman titles and chiefly positions were largely irrelevant away from the island.

Status distinctions within the Rotuma Council became more fluid following Fiji's independence. Recall that in the precolonial period, district ranking depended on the outcome

of interdistrict wars. As a result of cession, however, and the termination of warfare, the ceremonial rank order of districts was frozen as of 1879 in the following sequence: Noa'tau, Oinafa, Itu'ti'u, Malhaha, Juju, Pepjei, Itu'muta. There is no evidence that this order was ever disputed during the colonial period, and it is likely the Resident Commissioners and District Officers would not have permitted a change to occur. They were interested in political stability and maintaining their own view of tradition; their writings suggest they considered the ceremonial rank order of districts to be a central feature of Rotuman tradition.

When the Rotuma Council was finally empowered as a policy and decision-making body, it therefore seemed natural for Maraf, the chief of Noa'tau, to be chairman, and indeed, he was elected to the post by the council members. But in 1981 the council chose as chairman the district representative (*mata*) from Juju, Toa'niu. This stirred considerable controversy. Maraf complained bitterly and gained a good deal of support. A number of ministers in the Methodist Church preached against the change, citing it as an example of "the tail wagging the head"—of the system being turned upside down. Both sides gathered signatures and sent petitions to Fiji, but the government let the change stand, refusing to interfere. Since then the chairmanship has changed hands several times, to chiefs or *mata* from different districts, and the issue has faded away.

While the institution of chieftainship remained firmly embedded in Rotuman culture, the practical aspects of chiefly roles became increasingly complicated and problematic. Whereas during the colonial era chiefs were intermediaries between a Resident Commissioner or District Officer and the people in their districts, the new arrangement presented them with the much more complex task of maneuvering between the central government in Suva and the people of Rotuma as a collectivity. Whether they liked it or not, they were held responsible for fulfilling the material as well as the political aspirations of the Rotuman people—a task that demanded a completely different set of skills.

In general, Rotuma in the postcolonial era became a much more political community than it had been under British dominion. During colonial times people rarely discussed political issues and were reluctant to express personal viewpoints in public. Dissatisfaction with government policies and directives were given expression by grumbling and passive resistance. With the change in regime, people

were more prepared to speak out openly, to debate issues, and to criticize those in authority directly. If Rotuma was factionalized during colonial times, the cleavage was mainly along religious lines; in the postcolonial period the divisions became political. One of the most prominent political issues to arise was the advisability of promoting tourism.

Tourism became a hotly debated issue in 1986 over the proposed visit of the *Fairstar*, an Australian tourist ship. Opposition, led mainly by the Methodist clergy, was based on the anticipated changes in Rotuman lifestyle that large numbers of tourists might provoke. Several influential ministers, in Fiji as well as Rotuma, argued that young Rotumans would be susceptible to corrupting influences, and that sexual modesty would give way to bikinis and promiscuous sex. They also expressed fears that greed would replace neighborly cooperation in the scramble for tourist dollars. Many people on the island were persuaded, but others saw no harm in such a brief (one-day) visit. Ultimately the *Fairstar* visited Rotuma in June 1986. The visit proved relatively uneventful, and it was followed by two visits in 1987, one by the *Society Explorer*, the other a return visit by the *Fairstar*, which visited once more in 1989. Opposition softened, although the debate over the pros and cons of tourism continued.

One of tourism's underlying dilemmas was the question of who would benefit financially from such visits. Visiting vessels paid substantial docking fees, and the tourists spent significant sums on food, handicrafts, shells, and other souvenirs. The money from the 1986 and 1987 visits went to landowners of the beach area at Oinafa where the ships docked, to workers who helped prepare for the visits, to dancers who entertained, to handicraft makers, and other direct participants. Later tourist-ship visits were cancelled when different parties could not reach agreement over the allocation of landing fees. Also, no plan was formulated for using a portion of the money to benefit the island as a whole. The question of a more intensive commitment to tourism—the building of hotels for example—was put off for future consideration.

On reflection, the removal of the British-based colonial administration provided Rotumans with a renewed opportunity to express their desires for autonomy and self-governance. They immediately tested the waters and got a



**Photo 12.6** Passengers from the *Fairstar* watch as Rotuman men ceremonially prepare for a feast, 1989. *Jan Rensel.*



**Photo 12.7** Selling handicraft to a *Fairstar* passenger, 1989. *Jan Rensel.*



favorable hearing from Ratu Mara, whose sympathy for chiefly authority should not be surprising. As a result, chiefs abandoned the strategy of passive resistance they had honed to a fine art during the colonial period, and they began to speak their minds. Their subjects were no less encouraged to speak up, resulting in a genuine transformation from a politically passive to a politically vibrant society. With colonial constraints lifted, the Rotuman passion for autonomy was able to gain full expression.

### Economic Change

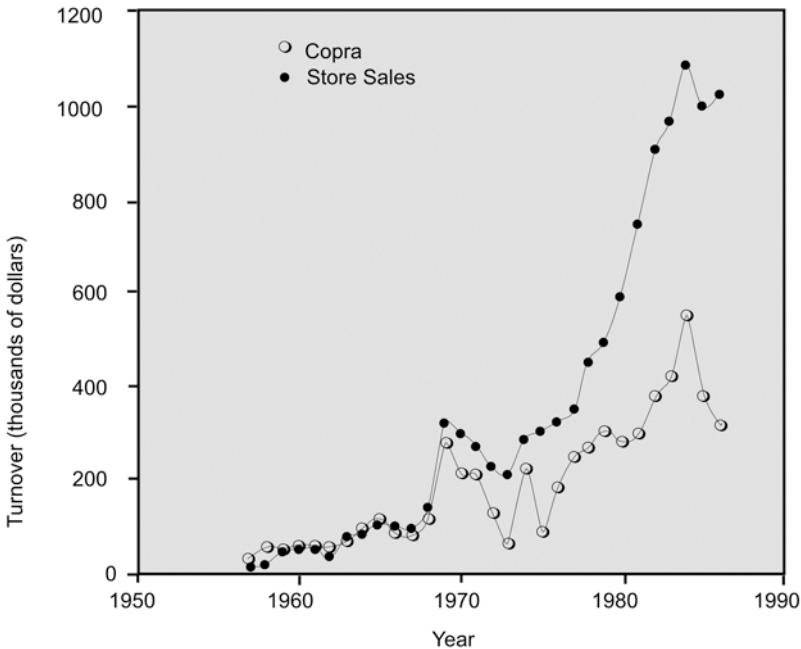
Throughout most of the colonial era, business on the island had been dominated by foreign companies, particularly Morris Hedstrom and Burns Philp, but by the time the colonial era ended the Rotuma Cooperative Association (RCA) had put the firms out of business and thoroughly dominated commerce on the island, as detailed in chapter 10.

Income to Rotuma in colonial times was almost entirely dependent on copra exports, supplemented by a small number of wage-earning positions. For example, in 1960, only 16 Rotumans worked for the commercial firms; 23 held wage positions with the Rotuma Cooperative Association; and 28 were employed by the government, half of them as schoolteachers. Although employment opportunities grew after Fiji's independence from Great Britain—in 1992, there were 37 schoolteachers and 69 other government employees, RCA employed 79 workers, and another 30 worked for the Raho Cooperative—wages and copra exports still accounted for only a small portion of total income.

In 1970, the year of Fiji's independence and two years after the firms closed their shops, RCA reported a store turnover of F\$319,044. By 1986 RCA's volume of sales had increased 237 percent and surpassed F\$1,000,000 annually. Income from copra, however, which remained the island's chief export, only increased by 49 percent. Whereas in 1970 store turnover exceeded copra income by only 40 percent, by 1986 the discrepancy was 217 percent. It is apparent, therefore, that most of the money spent in the shops at that time was coming from somewhere other than copra sales (see graph 12.1).

A portion of additional revenue came from entrepreneurial activities by people on the island, including yam, vanilla, bêche-de-mer, and lobster exports, but these were small-

scale family operations. Increased wage earnings, and the availability of bank loans from the Rotuma branch of the National Bank of Fiji, also contributed to increased purchasing power. Cash remittances also grew considerably and were a major income source. In 1976 the average monthly total sent to Rotuma by telegraphic money order (TMO) was between F\$5,000 and F\$6,000.<sup>8</sup> The amounts sent by TMO for the years 1982–1988 averaged over F\$10,000 per month.<sup>9</sup> Money orders were but one means by which remittances reached Rotuma; cash and checks were also sent by mail or brought by visitors.



**Graph 12.1** Rotuma Cooperative Association turnover, 1957–1986.

Source: Rotuma Cooperative Association.

Our 1989 survey showed that just under half (49 percent) of Rotuman households reported receiving remittances; the number of individuals listed as contributing financial resources to a given household ranged from none to seven. Reported amounts ranged from F\$10 to F\$4,000 at a time, with a median amount of F\$100. Cash was sent primarily for general support, that is, to be spent on food and other household needs. Other remittances came as gifts for special occasions—Mother's and Father's Days, birthdays, Christmas, funerals—or periodic needs such as school fees. Larger amounts were often sent in response to requests for church

fund-raisers, for house construction, or community improvement projects.

Rotuma Post Office records show annual income from remittances in the form of TMOs increased dramatically during the 1990s, from F\$256,365 in 1994 to F\$815,374 in 1997.<sup>10</sup>

Rotuma's economy was also dramatically affected by the opening of a branch of the National Bank of Fiji (NBF) on the island in 1988. The opening was initiated by Visanti Makrava, a Rotuman who was appointed General Manager of the National Bank of Fiji after the 1987 coup. NBF began making modest loans to individuals and businesses at rather high interest rates (from 11 to 16 percent depending on security). By mid-1989, the bank had provided personal loans totaling F\$424,330 to 128 individuals, and F\$246,371 to 14 businesses.

#### THE RAHO COOPERATIVE

The Rotuma Cooperative Society continued to dominate commerce on Rotuma through the 1980s despite a challenge from an upstart cooperative named for the legendary founder of Rotuma, Raho. The new co-op had its origins in discontent with RCA's management, which grew more pronounced over time.

It was primarily the trust most people had in Wilson Inia that allowed people of both faiths, and all districts, to keep co-operation alive in the early years. Inia's extended absence from the island during his early adulthood had kept him free of parochial politics, and although he was a leader in the Methodist Church, he preached tolerance and understanding. But even he could not be a strong leader and remain free of conflict. The inevitable clashes occurred over mismanagement of funds on the part of some members. Despite the training in bookkeeping, shopkeepers or local co-op officers often could not account for money. Inia suggested a rule—that any shortfalls at the time of audit would have to be made up personally by the shopkeeper or officer involved. People who persisted in draining money were dismissed from their positions, and if their culpability were flagrant they could be expelled from the association. Although most people accepted these rules, those who were expelled became antagonistic. Their expulsion was all the more bitter after the firms went out of business, because RCA's monopoly left expelled members with no place to sell their copra or buy

imported goods. Disputes also developed over repayment of expelled members' shares in the association.<sup>11</sup>

The most serious instance of money mismanagement occurred during 1977 in the village of Oinafa, where the local RCA shopkeeper failed to report a serious shortfall in his accounts, and the internal auditor allegedly doctored the books to disguise the deficit, which amounted to several thousand dollars. Although they and their relatives in Fiji eventually restored the shortfall, both were dismissed from their positions with RCA. The auditor then went to RCA's central committee and formally apologized. His apology (*faksoro*) was in high ceremonial fashion, involving a sacrificial pig, kava, and fine white mats. He went *hen rau'ifi*, with leaves around his neck, symbolically offering his life to atone for the offense. This is a rare event in Rotuma and is usually reserved for instances in which a life has been taken. It is virtually inconceivable for the offended party to refuse acceptance of an apology so presented.

But Inia did indeed refuse the apology. He argued that *hen rau'ifi* was a custom relevant to interpersonal offenses, as when one party injured another, but that it did not apply to business matters where money was involved. He said that embezzlement could not be undone that way. Many people were shocked by Inia's decision, but he held fast to his position. Members of the auditor's family were especially upset. His father sent a letter to RCA demanding that the Oinafa Co-op copra shed and shop, which were on family land, be removed. RCA members disassembled the wooden shed and moved it. The store was made of concrete, however, and could not be moved. Some of the men wanted to destroy it, but Inia told them to leave the building as a "gift."

Soon afterward, another family member, Atfoa Varea, who held a high position with the government in Fiji, arranged for loans to begin a rival cooperative called Raho. One of Atfoa's brothers, who held the subchiefly title Toa'niu in the district of Juju, was put in charge of operations on the island.

Raho operations initially foundered. Inadequate bookkeeping and general mismanagement of funds kept it from developing a stable capital base, so it posed no serious immediate threat to RCA's dominance. Two other breakaway groups emerged in opposition to RCA, both short-lived. From 1963–1967 the Rotuman Planters' Association handled a small portion of the island's copra, and the Rotuman Development Corporation did likewise from 1975–1979. Neither group developed the infrastructure to compete

successfully, but both, along with Raho, were indications that satisfaction with RCA's operations was far from universal.

In 1990 Atfoa Varea moved to reorganize Raho. He solicited assistance from Visanti Makrava, whose position as general manager of National Bank of Fiji provided access to extensive financial resources and an influential personal network spanning Rotuma and Fiji.

Makrava agreed to take on the supervision of Raho and immediately set out to pay off the organization's considerable debts and to challenge RCA's dominance of trade. He did so by providing bank loans to local businesses already in competition with RCA, in addition to loans he made available for Raho's operations.

With the aid of the bank loans and several grants, Raho expanded its operations and developed its infrastructure. New copra dryers were constructed, fuel dispensing facilities were installed, a walk-in freezer was imported for frozen foodstuffs, and trucks were purchased to transport goods and copra. The new management made a conscious practice of responding to customer demand for imported products and offered a better price for copra than RCA. By 1992 Raho reportedly was handling more copra than RCA and had dramatically increased its share of store sales.

To undermine RCA's domination of the copra trade, Raho instituted a scheme in which people contracted to lease copra rights in land under their control in exchange for materials or goods sold by or through Raho. The lessors were not required to pay interest on the line of credit they received. Raho then contracted with NBF for an interest-free loan to buy the materials or goods ordered by the lessors. Employees of Raho cut the copra and were paid for their labor from the proceeds; the remainder, less a percentage to Raho, was placed in a savings account from which loan payments were made.

The scheme was cause for consternation among many Rotumans who argued that although the lands being leased were mostly *kāinaga* (extended family) lands, only the family of the *pure* (steward) was receiving benefits. In response, Makrava maintained that the scheme allowed for people who did not control land to get lump sums of money. He said that in most cases, the *kāinaga* did discuss the option of leasing land with the *pure* and that there were only a few complaints.

In addition, Raho bought husked coconuts for the same price they were getting paid for them, making no profit, a business practice RCA could not match.

By 1993 RCA was losing money and in dire straits. Even long-time members succumbed to the lure of doing business with Raho, and soon thereafter RCA experienced a complete collapse, leaving Raho with a near monopoly of the island's commerce.



**Photo 12.8** The Raho Cooperative complex in Oinafa, 1994. *Alan Howard.*

All was not well with Raho, however. By the end of February 1995 Raho was in debt to the tune of F\$1,443,667 from the Rotuma branch of NBF, with an additional debt of about F\$432,298 to the Samabula branch. In addition to Raho's indebtedness, an associated company, Tieri Distributors, which was set up in Suva to act as a buying agency for Raho, had a debt amounting to F\$1,048,088. Tieri also supplied goods to people on the island and received payments through Raho. Unfortunately, payments were lax and Tieri was dissolved while still heavily indebted.<sup>12</sup>

Raho, in conjunction with NBF, fostered a business culture of excessive consumption and an attitude of "get what you can get while you can get it." Those who took out business loans and the employees of Raho sensed that the bubble would burst because so much depended on Makrava's beneficence. As a result they kept asking for more rather than repaying debts, and Raho employees "borrowed" freely from the shops. The atmosphere of this period was in stark

contrast to that of the early days of RCA, when a spirit of self-sacrifice and economic restraint prevailed.

Excessive loans to Rotumans were only a small part of NBF's plight (only 1.26 percent of the total loans given by NBF, according to Makrava),<sup>13</sup> and following an audit in 1995 the bank was declared insolvent and a reorganization was mandated. By the end of the year Makrava was out as general manager and had retired to Rotuma. The collapse of NBF signaled the end of Raho as a viable business entity and its assets were dissipated. This left only a few small entrepreneurs in control of Rotuma's commerce until the Post Office opened a shop at Ahau and became the island's main retailer. Thus, at the end of the twentieth century the business infrastructure on the island was more fragmented and disorderly than at any time since cession, when the firms had controlled commerce.

### Health and Demographic Changes

As detailed in chapter 11, from the time of initial European intrusion throughout most of the colonial period the main threat to the health of the Rotuman people had been contagious diseases: influenza, whooping cough, measles, tuberculosis, yaws, etc. Only with the advent of the wonder drugs in the 1950s were these diseases brought under control.

During the last decades of the century, however, the diseases of affluence and a modern lifestyle became more prevalent and now confront the people of Rotuma with daunting new health challenges. A July 1996 survey of 915 adults on Rotuma by Dr. Temo Kiloni revealed that 51.1 percent of the men and 78.7 percent of the women were overweight or obese, with the highest rates in the 40–59 age group. The incidence of diabetes rose with age, from 0.7 percent in the 20–29 age group to 29.7 percent in the 60–69 group, which clearly suggests that it was primarily of the adult-onset variety and a function of lifestyle risk factors. Hypertension rates likewise rose among older people, from 2.0 percent in the younger group, to 32.8 percent in the 60–69 group. Interestingly, the rates of all three conditions *decreased* among Rotumans 70 and over, which may reflect the maintenance of a more traditional, pre-affluence lifestyle, or possibly, that members of their cohort who had these conditions had already died off. Ominously, in his survey, Dr.

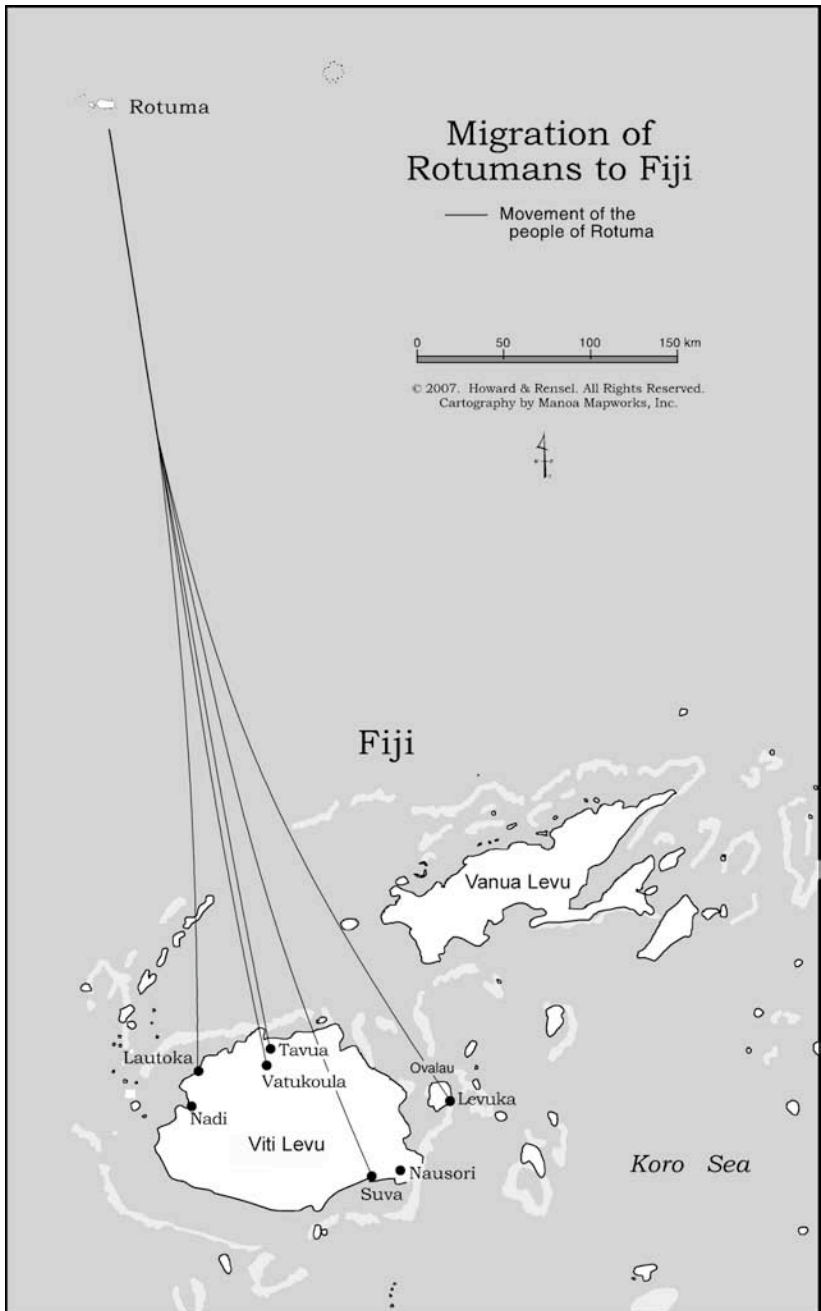
Temo discovered 89 previously undiagnosed cases of hypertension and diabetes, suggesting a vital need to monitor apparently healthy individuals more closely.<sup>14</sup>

As elsewhere, changes in diet and exercise patterns were largely responsible for these threats to health.<sup>15</sup> The Rotuman diet has shifted from one consisting primarily of subsistence crops (taro, yams, cassava, etc.) and fresh fish, to a diet consisting of a much higher proportion of store-bought, processed foods, high in fat and salt. Whereas people in the past were likely to die of contagious diseases, gastro-intestinal disorders, or pneumonia, by the end of the twentieth century they were dying from heart disease, stroke, and complications stemming from diabetes. These diseases of modernity reflect changes in lifestyles made possible by increased affluence (leading to increased reliance on store-bought foods), and less-demanding physical labor. Whereas men in the past got plenty of exercise walking back and forth to their gardens, putting in long hours there, fishing on the reef, and preparing earth ovens on a regular basis, they were now able to go to their plantations by motor vehicle, spend less time gardening because they could buy food, let their wives do the cooking, spend long hours sitting at kava-drinking sessions, and generally do less arduous work. The combination of a fat- and salt-laden diet, along with less-than-adequate exercise, ushered in a health transition that will require people to adopt new patterns of eating and exercising if morbidity and mortality are going to be controlled.

### Migration

By the end of the colonial period it was clear that the flow of people from Rotuma to Fiji was accelerating and would have a major impact on the future of the island. In the 1960s there were well over 3,000 Rotumans on the island and nearly that many in Fiji. On Rotuma one could sense the pressure on land, manifested in a preoccupation with land issues and an increasing frequency of disputes. One could also sense, particularly among youths, the pull of Fiji's urban centers as sources of employment, education, and a more modern lifestyle.



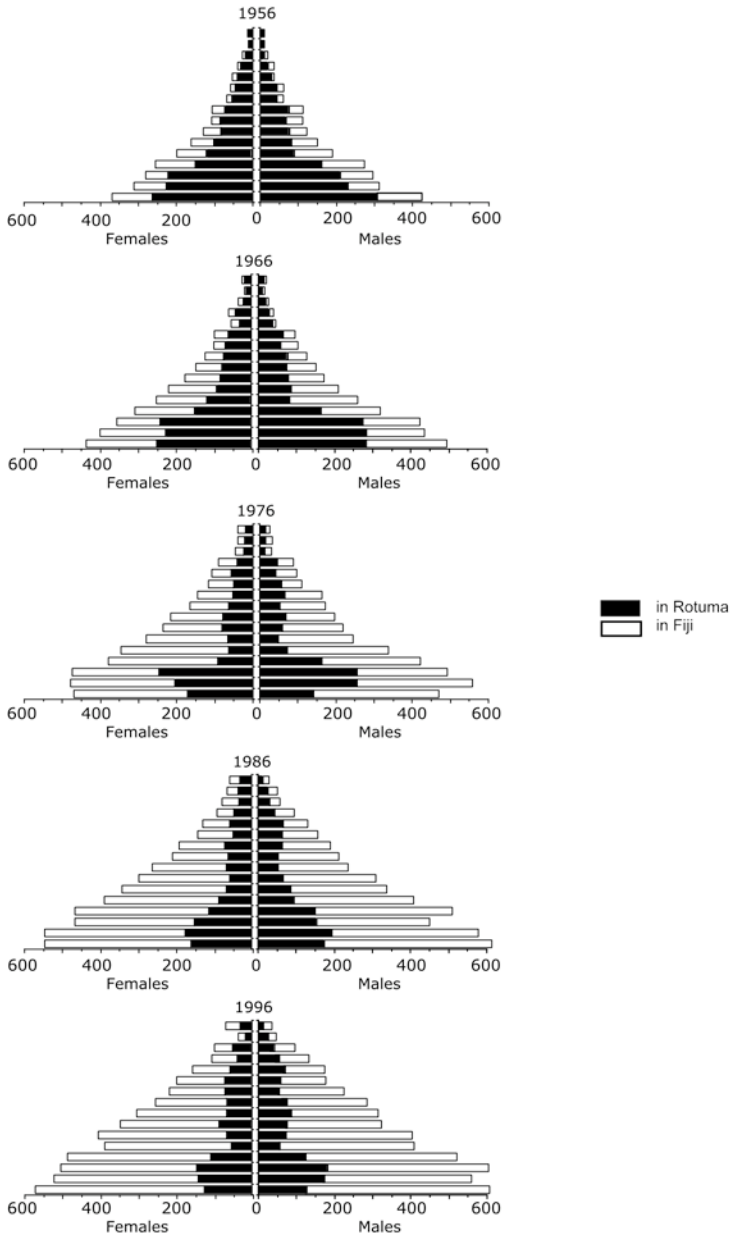


Census data collected since that time vividly shows that although the overall Rotuman population continued to grow, out-migration from Rotuma to Fiji reduced the population of Rotuma (see table 12.2). Using the 1966 census as a baseline, when the number of Rotumans on the island was reported as 3,235, the population decreased to 2,707 in 1976 and 2,588 in 1986, at which point it stabilized (the 1996 census yielded a count of 2,580). During the same thirty-year period, the number of Rotumans in Fiji (not including Rotuma) nearly tripled, from 2,562 to 7,147.<sup>16</sup>

**Table 12.2**  
Distribution of Rotumans in Rotuma and Fiji, 1881–1996

	Rotuma		Fiji		Total
Year of Census	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent of Total	Number
1881	2452		no data		2452
1891	2219		no data		2219
1901	2230		no data		2230
1911	2176		no data		2176
1921	2112	94%	123	6%	2235
1936	2543	90%	273	10%	2816
1946	2744	83%	569	17%	3313
1956	2993	68%	1429	32%	4422
1966	3235	56%	2562	44%	5797
1976	2707	37%	4584	63%	7291
1986	2554	30%	6098	70%	8652
1996	2580	27%	7147	73%	9727

Out-migration significantly affected Rotuma's age structure. In 1956 the age structure resembled that of any rapidly increasing population, with a broad base of youngsters, tapering to a peak of elderly individuals. While the overall Rotuman population continued to have this pyramidal shape, as the twentieth century came to a close the population on Rotuma showed a pronounced reduction in the middle age ranges, resembling the shape of an hourglass, with smaller proportions of young children than previously, an indentation in the middle age groups, and relatively high proportions in the older age categories (see graph 12.2). This suggests that out-migration increasingly involved young couples who either migrated with their children, or left Rotuma single, married in Fiji, and had their children there.

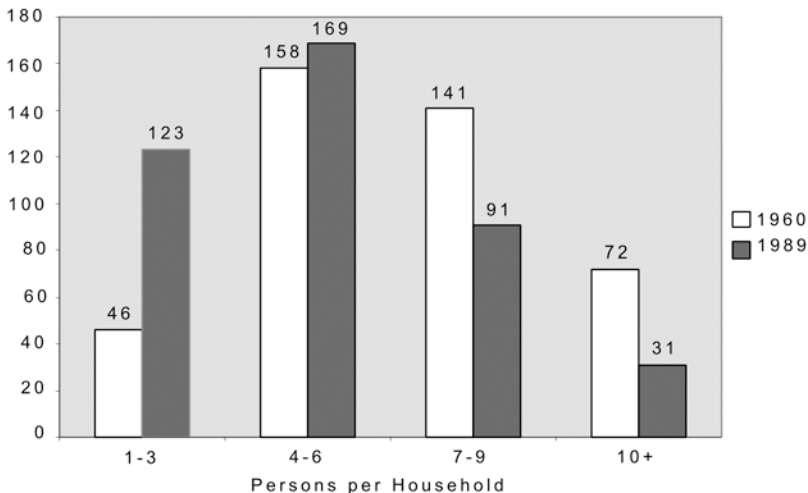


**Graph 12.2** Rotuman age and sex cohorts in Fiji Censuses, 1956–1996. Each bar represents a five-year cohort, with 0–5 year olds at the base of the pyramid and persons of 75 or older at the top.

In addition, the population pyramids reflect a trend of earlier migrants returning to Rotuma following retirement.

Household size and structure changed as well during this period. According to census reports the number of persons per household on Rotuma decreased from 7.3 to 5.3 persons between 1956 and 1996. In part this reflects the loss of individuals from existing households through out-migration, but that is not the whole story. There was a substantial increase in the total number of households as well, from 428 in 1956 to 493 in 1996. The drop in average household size can be accounted for mainly by a substantial increase in the number of small households, those with three or fewer persons, and to a lesser extent by a decrease in the number of large households, those with seven or more persons.

Our own censuses, taken in 1960 and 1989, showed an increase in the proportion of households composed of 1–3 persons from 11.0 percent in 1960 to 29.7 percent in 1989; (graph 12.3).<sup>17</sup>



**Graph 12.3** Household size, 1960 and 1989

To some extent the increase in small households was a result of returning migrants who opted to establish their own households rather than join existing ones. It also reflects investments by Rotumans abroad in maintaining active links to the island. By building or refurbishing a home and having it occupied by a close kinsman, out-migrants insured that they, or their immediate family, would have a place to return to in Rotuma. A number of houses on Rotuma were in fact occupied on a caretaking basis for relatives who sent

remittances to have new homes built or old ones improved. In other words, the occupants of many small households were in the position of protecting the resettlement rights of their close kin abroad.

### Social Change

The most pronounced social change following the departure of colonial administrators was a healing of the rift between the Catholics and Methodists. A new generation of ministers and priests took positive steps to encourage cooperation and participation in each other's events. Catholic priests and nuns began attending Methodist Conference fund-raisers, even donating money. It was a landmark event when Pepjei, a predominantly Catholic district, hosted the Methodist Conference in 1989. Likewise, Methodists took to donating labor, money, and goods to events sponsored by the Catholic Church.



**Photo 12.9** Interior of home in Malhaha, 2001. *F. Deschamps.*

Another religious change was the establishment of new denominations on the island, including Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Assembly of God, and Mormons.

Given the importance of church activities in the social life of Rotuma, these changes suggest that communities were becoming more fragmented, and that religion was becoming more a matter of individual choice than of community commitment.

More generally, the rules governing social relations between various categories of people relaxed. In earlier times relations between young unmarrieds, for example, were more constrained. Boys and girls who were romantically interested in one other were extremely careful to hide their feelings, lest they be teased unmercifully. Although courtship behavior was by no means flaunted in public, by the end of the twentieth century flirtations were more open and obvious. Also less constrained were relations between adolescent brothers and sisters. In the past brothers and sisters of courting age avoided each other, especially in contexts where one or the other might be with an actual or potential sweetheart. In general the respect behavior between brothers and sisters infused their relationships with an air of formality, perhaps even tension. While respect was still evident in the 1990s, formality and tension were considerably reduced.

Parallel changes took place between chiefs and their subjects. Much of the formality and ceremonial respect behavior that marked interactions between chiefs and commoners in the past was relaxed. Low bowing in the presence of chiefs, and lowered voices when addressing them, were much less in evidence. Respect protocol, such as getting off one's bicycle when passing a gathering of people or a chief's house, became a rarity (perhaps because it is more cumbersome to get off and walk a motorcycle than a bicycle). Except during ceremonial presentations, chiefs came to be treated more like ordinary individuals than persons requiring ritual respect.

The most obvious change in social life between the late colonial period and the new millennium was the degree to which men met in groups to drink kava. In days past kava was drunk on Rotuma almost exclusively at ceremonies. However, the Fijian custom of drinking kava socially caught on among men who spent time in Fiji, and most villages spawned kava-drinking groups who met frequently—often for several hours a day—spending time engrossed in casual conversation. In the past men used to complain that women spent too much time sitting around gossiping; during this later period it seemed to be the men around the kava bowl

who were the greatest offenders. Many critics, including a number of outspoken preachers, claimed that excessive kava drinking was at least partially responsible for a decline in agricultural productivity.

The change that possibly had the most significant effect on social life was the attainment of higher levels of education. At the end of the colonial era, only a small number of adults on Rotuma attended school beyond standard (class) 8. In the 1990s, most younger adults had completed Forms 5 or 6. Overall, the educational achievements of younger adults lent a greater air of worldly sophistication to Rotuman social life. Young adults on Rotuma read more, were better informed, and were less prone to accept authority in an unquestioning fashion than in the past.

### Cultural Change

Corresponding with the more cosmopolitan sophistication of young Rotuman adults was a change in worldview. In colonial times people were greatly in touch with their past; they had a stronger sense of cultural tradition. This was often expressed in concerns about the ancestors, who had a strong "presence" in Rotuma at the time. In postcolonial Rotuma people became much more interested in the present and future. The kinds of experiences that would have raised hair on the back of one's neck before, like walking past a graveyard at night, no longer aroused apprehension. For better or worse, such changes in perspective are a reflection of the degree to which Rotuma has been drawn into the modern world.

Changes in language and language usage also occurred. As a reflection of education many more Rotumans became fluent in English, and as a result of greater exposure to Fijian, fluency in that language became widespread. It became commonplace for speakers to switch from English to Fijian to Rotuman several times within the course of a speech without losing the attention of a Rotuman audience. Correspondingly, many English and Fijian words became part of everyday conversation; in some instances they replaced Rotuman words that were commonly used before.

By the end of the millennium people had more choices and a wider set of experiences to draw on. Life on the island became more complex, and more integrated into the world

beyond. All of this is not to say, however, that Rotuman culture lost its distinctive character. Life on the island was still governed by the same general rules of social interaction, of caring and sharing, as in the past.





**Photo 12.10** Men constructing a thatched-roof house with timber walls, 1989. *Alan Howard.*



**Photo 12.11** Men painting a modern, two-story home, 1989. *Jan Rensel.*

## Notes to Chapter 12

Information in this chapter has been drawn from several previously published articles, including "Reflections on Change in Rotuma, 1959–1989," which was included in the volume *Rotuma, Hanua Pumue: Precious Land* (Howard 1991), and "Rotuma in the 1990s: From Hinterland to Neighbourhood," which was published in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (Howard and Rensel 1994b). Of special relevance for the section on political change were "The Resurgence of Rivalry: Politics in Post-Colonial Rotuma," in the journal *Dialectical Anthropology* (Howard 1989) and "Ritual Status and Power Politics in Modern Rotuma," which appeared in *Chiefs in Modern Oceania*, edited by Geoffrey White and Lamont Lindstrom (Howard and Rensel 1997).

Observations about social, cultural, and linguistic change rely to a great extent on the contrast between Howard's experiences in 1960 and his and Rensel's experiences during visits to Rotuma in the late 1980s and 1990s. These observations are subjective in nature and could readily be given a variety of alternative interpretations.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum16.html>

<sup>2</sup> Subsequently Fiji Air abandoned the route because it was financially unproductive. Sunflower Air took over the route for several years in the 1990s, but was forced to give it up because it was unable to comply with safety requirements, after which Fiji Air resumed service on a weekly basis.

<sup>3</sup> See Rensel 1997 for a discussion of housing changes on Rotuma from precolonial to contemporary times.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Chief Secretary L. P. Lloyd, 12 December 1968. Fiji National Archives.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Chief Secretary L. P. Lloyd, 12 December 1968. Fiji National Archives.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to the chiefs of Rotuma dated 4 February 1969. Fiji National Archives (C9/30).

<sup>7</sup> Howard 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Plant 1991, 210.

<sup>9</sup> Rotuma Post Office records.

<sup>10</sup> Vilsoni n.d.

<sup>11</sup> See *Fiji Times* account of a complaint registered by Pat Managreve in the *Fiji Times*, Wednesday, 3 April 1974.

<sup>12</sup> *The Review*, Nov. 1995, p. 57.

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<sup>13</sup> *The Review*, Jan. 1996, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Kilioni 1996.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Baker, Hanna, and Baker 1986.

<sup>16</sup> Census Reports, Fiji Government.

<sup>17</sup> The official 1996 census showed similar results to our 1989 survey, with households of 1-3 persons accounting for 29.4 percent of the total. The 1956 census did not include a breakdown by household size.



**Photo 13.1** Gagaj Maraf Nataniela of Noa'tau greets Ratu Kamisese Mara, who visited Rotuma for the centennial celebration of Rotuma's cession to Great Britain, 1981. *Fiji Ministry of Information.*



**Photo 13.2** Ratu Mara and Adi Lala Mara being carried ashore to attend the 150th anniversary of the Catholic mission in Rotuma, 1996. *Jan Rensel.*

## 13 Rotuma and Fiji

I think that for many of us who talk about Rotuman independence our main concern is that Rotuman identity and culture, changing as they are, be preserved forever. This simply cannot depend on the goodwill of another race. Control must be in the hands of Rotumans (legitimately representing the interests of ALL Rotumans regardless of where they live)...it's the Rotumans' lack of ultimate control over their identity and culture which is the worry.

Saumaru Foster, *Rotuma Web site*, 1998<sup>1</sup>

As a result of political affiliation, there have been no barriers to movement between Rotuma and the rest of Fiji. Rotumans began migrating to Fiji for education and jobs soon after cession was formalized, and by 1936 nearly 10 percent of Rotumans lived there. At the end of the twentieth century the figure was closer to 75 percent. The flow has not been one-way or permanent, however. Individuals of both genders and all ages go back and forth frequently, staying with family members while schooling, getting help while seeking employment, participating in sports or church events, or helping out relatives in various ways while enjoying a holiday.<sup>2</sup>

Rotuma's special connection with Fiji has contributed to the island's prosperity in a number of ways: (1) by permitting in-country access to wider education and employment opportunities; (2) by supplying government support to the island's infrastructure and providing jobs on the island (approximately one hundred government employees in the 1990s); and especially (3) by allowing ease of interaction among Rotumans in Fiji and on the home island. On the one hand, ready access to in-country travel has facilitated an increasingly consumer-affluent lifestyle on the island; on the

other, it has facilitated the provisioning of Fiji Rotumans with important cultural resources like pandanus mats and favorite foodstuffs from home.

The opening of the airport on Rotuma in 1981 and the increased frequency of ships calling at the island have facilitated opportunities for travel back and forth, resulting in an intensification of interaction and a dramatic reduction in Rotuma's isolation. The resulting ease of travel affords people in both places opportunities to visit one another repeatedly and to experience variant lifestyles.<sup>3</sup>

The vast majority of Rotumans who migrated to Fiji settled in urban areas, with the highest concentrations in Suva/Lami/Nausori, Lautoka, Nadi, Tavua, Vatukoula, and Levuka. The 1996 Fiji census classified 89.9 percent of Rotumans in Fiji as urban-dwellers.<sup>4</sup> On the whole, Rotumans in Fiji are a well-educated, productive population who have contributed significantly to the nation's economy. They are overrepresented in the professions and mid- to high-level managerial positions in both private industry and government. It appears that the same character traits that led nineteenth-century European ship captains to favor Rotumans as crewmen have facilitated Rotumans making a successful adaptation to the modern, global system, and taking an active role in Fiji's political economy.

Rotuma's political relationship to Fiji since Fiji gained independence from Great Britain has been solid, but not without controversy. Questions about Rotuma's status within an independent Fiji arose following the Fiji Constitutional Conference held in London during July and August 1965, and ensuing events, including the 1970 Constitutional Conference and the coups of 1987, generated considerable debate within the broader Rotuman community.

### The Constitutional Conference of 1965 and Its Aftermath

No Rotumans were in attendance at the 1965 Constitutional Conference. The resulting interim constitution established communal rolls for Fijians and Indians, and a general roll for all other ethnic groups. For legislative purposes, Rotumans, and other Pacific Islanders were classified as Fijians, and for purposes of regional representation Rotuma was combined with the Lau group.

Opinion in the Rotuman community was divided over the acceptability of this arrangement. The Rotuman Association

in Fiji, led by Aisake William, a schoolteacher at Toorak Boys School, made a case for Rotumans having separate representation in the Legislative Council. This opinion was endorsed by Fred Gibson, who at the time was District Officer on Rotuma. They argued that Rotumans are not an immigrant race in Fiji like the Indians or other Pacific Islanders, and therefore deserved special consideration.

This opinion was sharply criticized in the *Pacific Review* by someone who identified her- or himself as "Rotuman Observer" (RO):

The question of separate representation for Rotuma and other Islanders has been quite rightly objected to by Mr. A. D. Patel during the Constitutional Conference in London in 1965. The reasons are too obvious to require further explanation. Fiji cannot afford to allow any further fragmentation of the present communal (voting) representation. Common roll is the present objective and the encouragement of communalism will be incompatible with the principle of common roll.<sup>5</sup>

RO went on to argue that the size of the island's population does not qualify it for separate representation, nor are there any compelling economic or political reasons to warrant it. RO asserted that Rotumans benefited disproportionately from their association with Fiji:

The island population is comparatively small and very few pay taxes. There are not many Rotumans in the urban centres who pay taxes since they are mostly small wage earners. All the same, the Rotumans enjoy without restriction all the modern amenities provided at the expense of the peoples of Fiji. The services provided by Government on the island are out of all proportion to the island population and the taxes paid by the people. No other island in the Fiji group enjoys such services and privileges.<sup>6</sup>

RO scoffed at those Rotumans who advocated a referendum be held on Rotuma to see if majority opinion favored independence from Fiji:

The economy of the island is based exclusively on the copra industry and any attempt to diversify the economy would make no difference at all to the overall island economy. Would those Rotumans who are advocating independence be able to provide employ-

ment for the people or extra land for the expansion of their coconut plantations?<sup>7</sup>

Rotuman Observer's caustic criticisms were responded to in *Pacific Review* by two members of the Rotuman Association. One, identified as "Rotuman Critic" (RC), expressed dismay over "the complete misinterpretation of what the Rotuman Association was fundamentally trying to achieve." RC distanced the views of the Rotuma Council and the Rotuman Association from any advocacy of independence:

The Rotuma Council and the Rotuman Association have never ever claimed "Independence" in any of their meetings. They have only expressed their loyalty to the Crown and their realization of the fact that Rotuma is part and parcel of the Colony of Fiji.<sup>8</sup>

RC also took Rotuman Observer to task for excluding the approximately 3,000 Rotumans in Fiji from consideration. "Are they not Rotumans to be included in the Rotuman population census?" he asked.

The second response was from "Speedy Recovery" (SR), an apparent, rather sarcastic, reference to RO's infirm state at the time. SR forcefully made the case for separate representation:

Does he [RO] believe that the fundamental rights of a minority race in a democratic society [should] be suppressed?...Most Rotumans consider we should have separate representation while the communal system lasts. Is not this reasonable? I have yet to see an Indian representing Europeans in Council and vice versa....As Rotuma is part and parcel of Fiji, are we to be regarded as indigenous Fijians (taukeis)? Will our Fijian brothers (taukeis) accept or regard us as an immigrant race? Are the Rotumans' interests protected in the Legislature?<sup>9</sup>

SR went on to dispute the allegation that Rotuma receives much more from Fiji than it contributes, arguing that the island's development plan was implemented with hardly any government aid, and that Rotuman contributions to Fiji had been substantial both in terms of financial support and services.

RO responded to the letters that defended the Rotuman Association's endorsement of separate representation with a vitriolic, personal attack, referring to RC as "an impulsive



lunatic, completely incapable of analysing and understanding a simple equation."<sup>10</sup> The nasty tone of this reply suggests that feelings concerning the issue of separate representation ran very high within the Rotuman community in Fiji.

What, RO asked, was the Rotuman Association trying to achieve: "Is it communism, tribalism, nationalism, or racial segregation?" He asserted that further fragmentation of the existing communal representation would "serve only to perpetuate inexplicable racial fear, hatred and suspicion of one another."<sup>11</sup>

Regarding the issue of including Rotumans in Fiji on a proposed Rotuman communal roll, RO wrote:

there is nothing more absurd than to suggest that all the Rotumans in Fiji should be included in the Rotuman Constituency for voting purposes. It naturally follows from the argument of the "Rotuman Critic" that all the Fijians in the urban areas should only vote in the constituencies in which their provinces are located.<sup>12</sup>

RO went on to argue that further fragmentation of the rolls would result in mediocre and unworthy members of the community being elected to the Legislative Council. "It will be a real pity if our affairs in Fiji are conducted on [a] racial basis and not on merit," RO argued. The minority groups would suffer the most because of their small numbers.<sup>13</sup>

### Constitutional Conference of 1970

The allocation of Rotumans to the Fijian constituency remained in place until the Constitutional Conference of 1970, which was also held in London. In their initial representation to Lord Shepherd, British Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, who visited Fiji early in 1970 to prepare for the conference, the Rotuma Council sent a telegram pledging their support for the proposed change in dominion status provided that (1) a link to the Crown would always be maintained; (2) Rotuma would be given a separate constituency for election of a member to the lower house; (3) a chief would represent Rotuma in the upper house; and (4) safeguards would ensure that the Rotuman Lands Ordinance and the Rotuman Development Fund would be preserved, as in the current constitution.<sup>14</sup>

On 24 March, Gagaj Maraf Nataniela and Wilson Inia visited with Sir Robert Foster, the Governor of Fiji, to speak about the constitutional changes proposed for Fiji. According to Foster, "They spoke at length about their loyalty to the Queen and how well they had been treated since their Cession Day." Foster assured them that the proposals for the new constitution were such that the Queen would remain Queen of Fiji and Rotuma and that there was no question of altering this. Gagaj Maraf and Inia also reaffirmed the Rotumans' desire that the Rotuman Lands Ordinance and Rotuman Development Fund be preserved, and they were again given reassurance. Regarding the issue of representation in Parliament, they said that in the Upper House "they would wish this member [to be] appointed by the Rotuma Council and that he should be a person who lived in Rotuma," to which Foster offered no objection, although he suggested that it would be unwise to include the residence requirement in the written document because it might prove overly restrictive in the future. In response to their request that Rotuma have representation in Legislative Council, Foster explained his view that constituencies be more or less even in the number of votes, which would preclude Rotuma's having a representative of its own because of its limited population. Foster reported that he was "left with the clear impression that although they would very much like to have a member of their own in Legislative Council they did appreciate that this was probably not to be and that they would almost certainly have to be joined with others in a representation as indeed they are now."<sup>15</sup>

Inia and Gagaj Maraf attended the conference in London as observers. Although they advocated separate representation for Rotumans their voices were not heeded, and the previous arrangement was incorporated into the soon-to-be-independent Fiji's constitution. Rotuma was given representation by a senator (one of twenty-two), but no seat in the House of Representatives, which consisted of 12 members elected by voters on the Fijian Communal National Roll and 10 additional Fijian members elected by voters on the National Roll; 12 members elected by voters on the Indian Communal National Roll and 10 additional Indian members elected by voters on the National Roll; and 3 members elected by voters on the General Communal Roll with 5 additional members elected by voters on the National Roll. "General" was defined as "persons who are neither Fijian nor Indian as defined in the present Constitution."<sup>16</sup>

The Rotuman senator was to be nominated by the Rotuma Council, but Rotuman representation in the House of Representatives was destined to be in the hands of non-Rotumans because of the comparatively small size of the Rotuman population. Rotumans would be able to stand and vote in the Legislative Council elections as electors in the constituencies covered by the Eastern Division (which included the Lau Islands).

In an appeal to the Governor of Fiji, Sir Robert Foster, the Rotuman chiefs complained that Rotuman requests had been either refused or ignored at the Constitutional Conference. The chiefs asserted that "the majority of Rotumans had been distressed to learn that requests submitted by Chief Marāf and Mr Wilson Inia on behalf of the Council of Rotuma and the Rotuman people at the London conference had not been approved."<sup>17</sup> The chiefs expressed the view that Rotuma should not be a colony of Fiji, but should be a federal part of the new nation consisting of Fiji and Rotuma. They specifically requested a provision in the Constitution for a seat in the House of Representatives allocated to an elected representative of Rotuma, and went on to add:

We believe it is absolutely necessary for these safeguards to be written into the new Constitution in order to protect and perpetuate our identity, our birthrights, customs and traditions, which are very dear to us and are very highly valued by the chiefs and the people of Rotuma.<sup>18</sup>

The petition was signed by Gagaj Marāf Tirio of Noa'tau, Gagaj Tavo Rupeni of Oinafa, Gagaj Aisea of Pepjei, Gagaj Osias of Juju, Gagaj Albert Vanike of Itu'ti'u, Gagaj Manav of Itu'muta, and Gagaj Vasea of Malhaha.

Their appeal fell on deaf ears, however, and the new nation of Fiji began its existence on 10 October 1970 with only a senate seat representing the interests of the Rotuman people.

### Rotuman Responses to the Coups of 1987

On 14 May 1987, Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka led a successful coup overthrowing the government of Timoci Bavadra. Five days later, on 19 May, the Rotuma Council called an emergency session to discuss the position of Rotuma.

Members of the council resolved to pledge their support to the new government and to remain part of Fiji.

In a letter to the Rotuma Council dated 3 June 1987, Henry Gibson, a part-Rotuman resident of New Zealand, expressed his apprehension that the position of the people of Rotuma would deteriorate under the new arrangement. Gibson, the great-grandson of a Scottish man who lived on Rotuma during the mid-nineteenth century and a Rotuman woman of high rank from the district of Noa'tau, had been raised on Rotuma before emigrating to Fiji as a youth. He took up martial arts, including training in Japan, and attained the status of grand master, subsequently founding the Jyoishin Mon Tai Kiok Kuen Kung Fu Society, with numerous branches in the Pacific region, including Australia and New Zealand.

In 1981 Gibson returned to Rotuma for the centennial celebration of the island's cession to Great Britain. As part of the festivities he was invited by the Rotuma Council to give a martial arts demonstration, during which he broke cement blocks and timber with his hands and threw mock attackers into the sea. The demonstration earned him a significant following, and many joined classes that he offered. After a period of time on Rotuma, Gibson went home to New Zealand, where he said he had "an astral experience with the ancient ones," during which he was urged to assume the title of Lagfatmarō by an ancestor who held the title.<sup>19</sup> Gibson returned to Rotuma and was formally given the title of Gagaj Sau Lagfatmarō on Christmas Eve, 1982, by members of his kin group. The title was associated with the Mōlmahao foundation in Kalvaka, Noa'tau district. In his view, the original Lagfatmarō was the first Rotuman *sau*, and as his successor Gibson claimed to be "King of Rotuma." In his correspondence with the Rotuma Council and others he signed his name as H. R. H. King Gagaj Sau Lagfatmarō. When asked what the H. R. H. stood for he replied, "H. R. H stands for 'His Royal Highness' and is used when referring to or addressing a King. It is a form of respectful address used in civilized countries throughout the world."<sup>20</sup>

On 11 June 1987, Lagfatmarō met with the Rotuma Council and told them that he would not accept the council's decision to remain with Fiji; he left for New Zealand five days later.

At the July council meeting the members resolved to send representatives to attend the Great Council of Chiefs meeting in Fiji to express Rotuma's desire to remain part of Fiji, and

on 15 July the delegation, led by Council Chair Aisea Aitu, attended the Great Council and pledged their loyalty. Following the return of this delegation, meetings were held in each of Rotuma's seven districts to ascertain the views of the Rotuman people. According to the deposition of the District Officer, Viki Epeli, it was the overwhelming view of the majority of the Rotumans who attended these meetings that Rotuma should remain part of Fiji, even if Fiji were to become a republic. In late July the preference of the people and the chiefs of Rotuma to remain part of Fiji was communicated to Governor-General Ratu Sir Penaia Kanatabatu Ganilau.

On 25 September 1987, Rabuka led a second coup, overthrowing the interim bipartisan government. The Rotuma Council met four days later and again resolved that Rotuma would remain part of Fiji. On 10 October Rabuka declared Fiji a republic, effectively severing Fiji's formal ties with Great Britain. The Rotuma Council sent its resolution to remain with Fiji to the President of the new republic with a copy to the Prime Minister.

Soon after the September coup, Lagfatmarō declared Rotuma independent of Fiji and in October he wrote to Queen Elizabeth, with copies to the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand. Claiming racial harassment of Rotumans, Lagfatmarō invoked the United Nations charter on freedom from persecution on the basis of race, religion, or belief. He assailed the overthrow of the prior democratic government, the racially discriminatory policies of the Rabuka regime, and the position taken by the Rotuma Council, which reflected, in his opinion, their vested interest as chiefs and not the will of the people. Seventy-five percent of the people on Rotuma and many Rotumans in Fiji, he claimed, supported secession.<sup>21</sup> In response to criticisms that he aspired to rule over Rotuma as a sovereign monarch, Lagfatmarō wrote in the *Fiji Times*:

My leadership concerns only my people of Molmahao, decided in 1982. We make our stand clear. For other Rotumans it is a matter of conscience or convenience, whichever is important to them, whatever course they decide to follow.<sup>22</sup>

In a letter to the council admonishing them for their stand, Lagfatmarō argued that the resignation of the Queen's representative in Fiji placed Rotuma in the position of a

dependency of Great Britain as per the Deed of Cession of 1881, irrespective of the close ties Rotuma had had with Fiji over the past years. He claimed to have one thousand signatures supporting this position.

On 29 December 1987, the fifth anniversary of Gibson's taking the Lagfatmarō title, his supporters raised the British flag over the Mōlmahao Cultural Centre, which he had established in a thatched building in Kalvaka. The District Officer, Viki Epeli, outraged by this act of defiance and allegedly in a drunken state, went to the center and shot at the flag with a shotgun. The threat of violence resulted in a thirteen-man all-Rotuman military team being sent to Rotuma from Fiji, reportedly "to help control a sudden outbreak of extensive damage to food crop plantations by wild pigs," according to the Fiji Ministry of Information. Epeli was replaced as District Officer by Major Tiu Malo, who was called out of retirement from the Fiji Military Forces to head the team.

Lagfatmarō did not back down, however, and hired a well-known Suva lawyer of Tongan ethnicity, Tevita Fa, to draw up a constitution for an independent Rotuma. The proposed constitution associated Rotuma with New Zealand with the Queen of England as its head, thus allowing Rotumans free access to New Zealand. Under the arrangement, the Governor-General of New Zealand would also be the Governor-General of Rotuma; he would be represented on the island by a High Commissioner. A new house of chiefs would be created consisting of seven district chiefs, and a legislative assembly consisting of two elected members from each district would have an advisory role. A premier and a cabinet of not more than five would be appointed from the assembly members. There was also a provision for a high court, with a chief justice as its head, and a land court. This constitution was presumably modeled on the constitutions of the Cook Islands and Niue. It did not institutionalize any role for a *sau*, or "king."<sup>23</sup> New Zealand Prime Minister David Lange rejected Lagfatmarō's approach, saying that his government would not interfere in a dispute between Rotuma and Fiji.<sup>24</sup>

Lagfatmarō's supporters met in Juju on 15 April 1988, and proceeded to select from among themselves seven individuals to represent the seven districts. They called themselves "cabinet ministers," although they also referred to themselves as the "new district chiefs." In a letter to Rabuka dated 27 April 1988, the self-appointed cabinet

asked for the right to use the grounds of the government station at Ahau for the Rotuma Day celebration on 13 May, the anniversary of Rotuma's cession to Great Britain:

Your Most Honourable,

We, the undersignees wish to inform You Sir, that as we are the only legal Cabinet in Rotuma representing the welfare and interest of Rotumans living here and abroad, that we shall be using the grounds at the Government Station at Ahau on May the 13<sup>th</sup>.

Preparations and repairs to be carried out require at least 2 weeks before in advance for the Celebrations, and request that you advise the District Officer, Rotuma to be aware of the situation.

Confrontations must be avoided for the safety of all concerned. It is understood that Rotuma is a Crown Colony now as we all believe and we are still recognised as British Subjects as before the Coup in Fiji.

Your response will be greatly appreciated.

Respectfully yours,

The letter was signed by Hiagi Apao, who identified himself as "Noatau District Chief"; Jioje Aisea, as "Oinafa District Chief"; Fereti Emose, as "Malhaha District Chief"; Mausio Managreve, as "Itutiu District Chief"; Uafta Versoni, as "Juju District Chief"; Iane Savea, as "Pepjei District Chief"; and Garagsau Mose, as "Itumuta District Chief." Afasio S. Mua is listed as Security Officer and Ian S. Croker as Secretary.

In the meantime, Tevita Fa accompanied Lagfatmarō to Tonga in a fruitless effort to solicit support from the Tongan government; while in Nuku'alofa, Lagfatmarō (described in a newspaper account as "a self-styled 'king' of one clan") declared that his followers would lower the Fiji flag and replace it with a Union Jack on Rotuma Day.<sup>25</sup>

The Fiji government's response was less than sympathetic. It sent a gunboat to Rotuma with thirty soldiers "to investigate reports of alleged sedition on the island," and proceeded to arrest the seven new "chiefs" along with Afasio Mua, Ian Croker, and Vesasio Mua, an active supporter from Juju. Charges against two of the "chiefs," Mausio Managreve and Garagsau Mose, were dropped because of their advanced age.

On 16 May the Magistrate's Court, with Acting Chief Magistrate Apaitia Seru, who flew in from Fiji, sitting,

prepared to hear the case against the defendants. However, Tevita Fa, their lawyer, argued that the Fiji judiciary had no jurisdiction over Rotuma after Fiji was declared a republic. "After the second coup," Fa contended, "the constitution was abrogated, throwing overboard all the existing legislation including the Rotuma Act. It's on this issue that I stand here now and submit that you do not have any jurisdiction to sit and hear this case," he contended.<sup>26</sup> He added that the declaration of Fiji as a republic did not bind Rotuma because Rotuma was not mentioned in the declaration, which only made reference to indigenous Fijians. The only piece of legislation not affected by the coup, Fa asserted, was Rotuma's Deed of Cession to Great Britain. He said that the matter should be adjudicated by the High Court of Fiji.

The prosecutor, Isikeli Mataitoga, agreed that the question of jurisdiction should be determined by the High Court, although he argued that the Rotuma Act, which provided for a magistrate's court, remained in force. In his brief to the High Court he argued that the fact that the same laws that existed before the second coup had been preserved after a republic had been declared clearly indicated that the applicability of existing laws to Rotuma were never in doubt despite the political upheavals. Besides, he contended, there was overwhelming evidence that the chiefs and the people of Rotuma had expressed their desire to continue their historic association with Fiji. He also expressed the view that not to regard Rotuma as part of Fiji would have disastrous consequences for the people of Rotuma.

Seru ruled that the High Court should consider the jurisdiction issue, and after consultation with District Officer Tiu Malo and the chair of the Rotuma Council, Aisea Aitu, who both said that the eight defendants would constitute a security risk if allowed to go free, they were remanded in custody.

The mood on the island was rather tense at the time. While some thought the Mölmahao group was a serious threat to the peace of the island, others were more sympathetic, or saw the whole affair as a tempest in a teapot. In fact there was a good deal of ambivalence regarding the issue of independence. Quite a few Rotumans thought it worth considering, but most were critical of the way the Mölmahao group had gone about it. Not only did the vast majority reject the "new chiefs" on the grounds that they were not chosen according to custom, but several of the selectees would not even have been eligible in the districts



they were supposed to represent. In addition, according to Council Chair Aisea Aitu, Lagfatmarō's followers were disrupting district and village administration by boycotting community work. District Officer Tiu Malo accused them in one instance of interfering with a health inspection.<sup>27</sup> Although the chairman and spokesman for the "new chiefs," Hiagi Apao, said that the group's fight for independence was a peaceful struggle, many, including Aitu and Malo, feared that violence would erupt if the group's political activism were not restrained.

After hearing the arguments by Fa and Mataitoga, Chief Justice Sir Timoci Tuivaga ruled on 9 June 1988 that:

The de facto situation governing the present state of affairs in Fiji and Rotuma shows that all laws existing immediately before the 25<sup>th</sup> September in so far as they have not been revoked continue to be operative and valid.

Among these laws are the Interpretation Act (Cap. 7) and the Rotuma Act (Cap. 122).

Section 2(1) of the former Act defines "Fiji" as also including Rotuma while section 3(1) of the Rotuma Act states as follows:

"Except in so far as Rotuma has been expressly excluded from the provisions thereof, all Acts are hereby declared to apply to Rotuma."

The above provisions leave no doubt that the Penal Code as part of the laws of Fiji applies just as much to Rotumans living in Rotuma as it does to any other people living in Fiji.

That being so and having regard to the relevant provisions of the Rotuma Act, I am satisfied and would hold that the District Officer's Court in Rotuma is lawfully vested with the power, authority and jurisdiction to hear the case of all eight plaintiffs who are presently facing charges of sedition in Rotuma.

On a broader plane I also hold that for legal and other purposes Rotuma continues to be a part of the independent sovereign State of Fiji.<sup>28</sup>

However, the Chief Justice left the door open for those seeking Rotuma's independence from Fiji:

I should imagine that if Rotuma should ever want to sever its historic and well established links with Fiji the least that would be expected of them following the

noble precedent set by their illustrious forebears would be to conduct full consultations with the government for the time being representing the independent sovereign State of Fiji.<sup>29</sup>

After being sent to Suva and placed in custody for a short period, the eight defendants were let out on bail and allowed to return to Rotuma on the conditions that they report to the police station once a week and that they not take part in any meetings.<sup>30</sup> They arrived back on Rotuma on a government ship that brought a number of department heads to the island for hearings concerning the wants and needs of the people. Most Rotumans saw the visit as provoked by the dissension on the island and many credited the Mölmahao dissidents with finally getting the government in Suva to pay some attention to Rotuma. The dissidents also gained some admiration for their determination and willingness to go to jail for their cause.

Hearings were held by Magistrate Seru on Rotuma in October 1988, with Tevita Fa acting as defense counsel, assisted by a lawyer from New Zealand, Christopher Harder, and Isikeli Mataitoga acting as prosecutor. The Rotuman chiefs were not represented by counsel, and according to reports Fa took advantage of the situation by attacking the chiefs' credibility and diverting attention away from the defendants. Seru declared a year's recess with the explicit hope that tempers would cool and that Rotumans would settle the matter among themselves. When that hope was not realized—the Mölmahao faction remained defiant in attitude, although they violated no laws in the interim—the trial was reconvened in October 1989. From New Zealand, Lagfatmarō issued several pleas in the public media asking that he be guaranteed safe conduct to visit Fiji in order to attend the trial but was informed that he faced arrest if he returned.<sup>31</sup>

This time the chiefs were represented by counsel but that did not stop Fa from systematically intimidating them. The chiefs' testimonies were central to the prosecution's case, but since the proceedings were held in English (with high school principal Ieli Irava translating from Rotuman when required), the chiefs were at a disadvantage. The prosecutor, Babu Singh, had his witnesses present their evidence for sedition in straightforward accounts, but Fa's cross-examinations were often devastating. Nevertheless, the chief magistrate found the defendants guilty and fined them F\$30 each (which was F\$20 less than the fine for riding a motorbike on the island without a helmet); he also put them

on two years' probation. The conviction, combined with such mild punishment, seemed to satisfy both sides sufficiently to cool antagonisms and resulted in a return to a semblance of normality on the island over the next few years.

The sedition conviction was overturned by a higher court in 1991, after which Lagfatmarō again requested permission to return to Fiji and Rotuma. His request was granted initially, but following the counsel of Jioje Konrote, Gagaj Marāf Solomone, who was then chairman of the Rotuma Council and Rotuma's senator in the Fiji Legislature, wrote to Ratu Mara, the Acting President of Fiji, requesting that Lagfatmarō be declared a prohibited immigrant. The letter contained the following passages:

As Chairman of the Council and on behalf of the Chiefs and the people of Rotuma, may I humbly request that you reconsider Government's decision to allow this rebel (and someone whom we consider to be a non-Rotuman, but more importantly as an embarrassment and insult to the indigenous Rotumans) to return to Fiji and Rotuma.

We consider him as a threat to our normal protocol of chiefly customary laws and traditions by his self appointed title and claim to chiefly status (which we do not recognise nor acknowledge) within our society. In this regard we therefore conclude that his return would be detrimental to the maintenance of peace and stability on the island.

As a result of his disrespect, arrogance and blatant disregard to traditional values and behaviour, we would like to therefore declare him as a PROHIBITED IMMIGRANT under the appropriate Section of the Rotuma Act and the Laws of the Government of Fiji.

May I also take this opportunity to re-assure you of the Council, the Chiefs and the people of Rotuma's strong allegiance and support for the Government and the people of Fiji.<sup>32</sup>

This letter was followed up by a more formal request, unanimously endorsed by the Rotuma Council, on 19 November 1992. As a result, the government reversed its earlier decision and Lagfatmarō was kept from visiting Rotuma again.

## The 1990 and 1997 Fiji Constitutions

Following the 1987 coup, Rabuka repealed the 1970 constitution and set in motion a process resulting in a new constitution. Recognizing the possibility that an enhanced voice in the governmental structure might emerge, the chairman of the Rotuma Island Council wrote to the Governor-General of Fiji on 25 May 1987 requesting three seats in the House of Representatives for Rotuma—one communal seat for Rotumans in Rotuma, one communal seat for Rotumans living in mainland Fiji, and a national seat for all Rotumans in the country.

There was no official response to the letter, nor to a subsequent memorandum to the Prime Minister dated 18 February 1988 from the chairman of the Rotuma Council that reiterated the request, with the justification that Rotuma's inclusion in Fiji annexed "thousands upon thousands of square miles of exclusive economic zone the potential of which has yet to be properly gauged."<sup>33</sup>

Jioje Konrote, son of former District Officer Konrote Marorue and a colonel in the Fiji Military Forces at the time, presented the following account of his involvement in these events:

I was recalled back to Fiji from the US Pacific Command in Hawai'i immediately after Rabuka led the military coup which usurped control of the country and toppled the Dr. Bavadra-led Indian-dominated Labour Government on 14th May 1987.

During the period of military rule, and in my capacity as Deputy Commander and Chief of Staff of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, I was very involved in the discussions and negotiations which took place both in Suva and Rotuma to ensure that the Rotuman people assumed their rightful place within the overall Fijian community and became represented in Parliament.

As Rabuka's emissary I was initially sent to Rotuma to explain to the chiefs and the people of Rotuma the reason for the military take-over, but more importantly to determine from the Rotuman people whether they would like to remain as part of Fiji or secede because of what had happened. Following a very emotional and somewhat sobering council meeting, I was asked to

convey the consensual views of the Council and the people of Rotuma as follows:

"The chiefs and the people of Rotuma understand and support the military in its actions and pledges its *[sic]* full support and wish to maintain the status quo and remain part of Fiji; and

"The chiefs of Rotuma and people expect to be represented in the Executive governing body of the new Government, whatever form it takes."

The Council had wanted a representative from each of the seven districts, but I had to intervene and advised them that it was more acceptable and justifiably appropriate that they consider requesting three seats only, as follows:

- 1 seat for Rotumans who reside on the island
- 1 seat for emigrant Rotumans in other parts of Fiji
- 1 common seat for all Rotumans

Before returning to Suva, I made every effort to accompany the chiefs to their various districts to explain to the people what had transpired at the Council meeting. There was overwhelming support from the community (except for Lagfatmarō's clan) as people realised that they will be represented in the new government.

The proposal by the Council that Rotuma be allocated three seats in the new Parliament was presented to a newly convened Constitutional Review Committee chaired by Paul Manuelli, who, as a former Commander of the army, had been very much against the military intervention. I had strongly advised the chiefs to base their request for the three seats on sovereignty; however, following much argumentation amongst the members of the Constitutional Review Commission, Rotuma was only allocated one seat.<sup>34</sup>

When the new constitution was instituted in 1990, it explicitly recognized Rotuman interests in Chapter III, which read as follows:

Protection and Enhancement of Fijian and Rotuman Interests

21. (1) Notwithstanding anything contained in Chapter II of this Constitution Parliament shall, with the object of promoting and safeguarding the economic, social,

educational, cultural, traditional and other interests of the Fijian and Rotuman people, enact laws for those objects and shall direct the Government to adopt any programme or activity for the attainment of the said objects and the Government shall duly comply with such directions.

(2) In carrying out any direction given under subsection (1) of this section, the Government through the Cabinet may

(a) give directions to any department of Government, Commission or authority for the reservation of such proportions as it may deem reasonable of scholarships, training privileges or other special facilities provided by Government;

(b) when any permit or licence for the operation of any trade or business is required by law, give such direction as may be required for the purpose of assisting Fijians and Rotumans to venture into business; and

(c) may give directions to any department of Government, Commission or authority for the purpose of the attainment of any of the objects specified under subsection (1) of this section; and the department or the Commission or the authority to which any direction under paragraph (a), (b) or (c) of this subsection is given shall comply with such directions.

(3) In the exercise of its functions under this section, the Cabinet shall act in consultation with the Bose Levu Vakaturaga, or the Council of Rotuma, as the circumstances may require.

Rotuma's seat in the House of Representatives was to be elected by a roll of registered Rotuman voters. Fijians were given 37 seats, Fiji Indians 27 seats, and 5 members from a roll of voters who were neither Fijians, Indians, nor Rotumans. One of 34 Senate seats was allocated to the Rotuman constituency. As before, the Rotuman senator was to be appointed by the President of Fiji on the advice of the Rotuma Island Council. The new Fiji Constitution was adopted in 1990 and Paul Manueli was sworn in as Rotuma's first Member of Parliament after the 1992 general elections.

The 1990 constitution guaranteed Fijian ethnic hegemony, making it virtually impossible for Fiji Indians to hold power.

As a result it was criticized as racist and Fiji was voted out of the British Commonwealth.

Yielding to pressure from Commonwealth countries, a Constitution Review Commission was formed in 1995 under the chairmanship of Sir Paul Reeves from New Zealand, assisted by commissioners Brij V. Lal and Tomasi R. Vakatora. The commission took submissions from a wide range of individuals and groups, including persons representing the views of the Mölmahao group and members of the Rotuma Council.

### Submissions by the Mölmahao Group

One of the Mölmahao group's most extensive submissions was from Alifereti Arapio, a retired schoolteacher from Juju. He presented himself as president of the "Association for Independence and Democracy Sau-Kamata Rotuma Island," asserting that the association had 450 members. While arguing for independence, Arapio did not advocate severing Rotuma's links to Fiji, "for Fiji will always be an influence and a big brother," he wrote. He advocated a referendum, which he claimed would prove that the number of Rotumans favoring independence "is improving greatly." He confirmed that if the movement succeeded, "our Head of State will be Gagaj Sau Lagfatmaro II," and asserted that the Mölmahao group and their supporters comprised 75 percent of the population of Rotuma, although the document was affixed with only 48 signatures.<sup>35</sup>

Another of Lagfatmarō's supporters, Sakimi Sai Riogi, a Rotuman residing in Australia, sent several submissions to the commission. He had been given the title of Gagaj Rafeok by the Mölmahao group and signed his submissions as "chief minister of the Mölmahao-Rotuma Cultural Organization." He invoked the United Nations declaration on granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples,<sup>36</sup> and claimed that the previous constitutions violated many UN human and democratic rights conventions that had been ratified by Fiji. In an attempt to provide Fiji with a justification to grant Rotuma sovereignty he characterized Rotuma as a burden on Fiji that would be relieved if it were allowed to stand on its own feet as an independent nation.<sup>37</sup> He also deplored the refusal of the Fiji government to grant Lagfatmarō safe passage to Rotuma and berated the Rotuman chiefs as stupid, uneducated, corrupt, lazy,

irresponsible, without mana, unworthy of their titles, and "not fit to look after the Rotuman people."<sup>38</sup>

In response to assertions by some individuals that Rotumans should be considered *taukei*, a Fijian term for indigenous people, Gagaj Kausakmua, who signed his submission "Chief Minister and Clan Elder," wrote:

It is total madness for any Rotuman to be called Taukei Rotuman....We are not Taukei and if any title be given, we wish to be known as indigenous FAMOR or KAINAG ROTUMA. We again strongly objected to the 1970 and 1990 Constitution and view the Fiji Constitution as a legalised robbery of our identity and to be called Taukei is an element of colonial and dictatorial oppression of our rights and dignity as a race.<sup>39</sup>

Lagfatmarō testified in person before the commission in Suva on 12 September 1995. His statement to the commissioners was as follows:

By virtue and authority bestowed upon me by the Royal Mulmahao Clan Elders, members and supporters on the island of Rotuma and abroad, based on ancient Rotuman traditions and cultural law, I stand before the Fiji Constitution Review Commission to present and justify the consensus wishes, desires and aspirations of the indigenous Rotuman people for the future of their island.

The people most strongly oppose and resent fervently any idea whatsoever, to include or cede the island of Rotuma to Fiji.

It is their belief that the Deed of Cession between Rotuma and Great Britain in the year 1881 is still a binding contract between our nations.

There has been no consensus agreement by the people of Rotuma to alter or refute the Deed of Cession since that date.

The people of Rotuma have looked with extreme concern at the histories of contact between colonial powers and the indigenous peoples of North America, Australia, Asia and other Pacific Islands. They see the broken promises, abuses of indigenous rights, culture, landownership, religious beliefs and the unique right to autonomy.

In most cases these unfortunate peoples have lost the right to be themselves in their own land. This violation of indigenous birthright and heritage is the



direct result of a dominant colonial culture or larger ethnic group sharing a constitution with the indigenous minority. The outcome is always the same—the needs of the dominant colonial culture are served whilst the indigenous culture is devalued and undermined. It must be remembered that Rotuma existed as a separate entity well before the great Fijian migration right down to British annexation.

Our island still stands separate in international waters, our language is still intact, our culture practiced, our way of life unique with the Pacific.

We are of Polynesian heritage. Our ways of organising land ownership differs greatly to those of Melanesian Fiji. This is an issue of extreme concern to all landowning Rotumans who wish to continue handing down land in the ways known and respected by their ancestors.

I would now like to stress two very important points strongly emphasized by Gagaj Rafeok and Gagaj Kausakmua at the Constitutional Review panel held in Rotuma on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July, 1995.

The "so called Rotuma Island Council" is not the legal authority over the island and people of Rotuma.

They, as chiefs know all too well that they are elected to their positions by their *mosega* (clans), to serve and present their wishes and best interests of the Rotuman people.

Also, they, as chiefs, cannot finalise or conclude any decisions regarding the island's future without first consulting the clan elders, *mosega*, and the people.

They, as chiefs, are aware that ancient Rotuman tradition and culture dictates that should any chief commit actions contrary to the wishes of the people, the result is instant termination of his right to bear a title.

To violate this ancient tabu is to commit an act of desecration upon the life core of Rotuman heritage.

The Rotuman Deed of Cession with Great Britain is a clear indication of the process of traditional Rotuman decision making according to our culture.

It is the only surviving document still honoured and respected today by the people of Rotuma.

Therefore, to conclude, I find that on grounds of our historic autonomy, our unique culture and traditions,

and sad experiences of other ethnic populations under colonial control, that the best path for our island's future lies in independence.

The islands of Tonga, Tuvalu, Niue, Cook Islands, Vanuatu, the Solomons, and Fiji itself, all have eventually gained autonomy.

We wish no less for ourselves in the immediate future.<sup>40</sup>

### Submission by the Chiefs and Council of Rotuma

On 18 September 1995, a group of Rotumans presented a submission to the commission on behalf of the chiefs and the Council of Rotuma. The group included Aisea Atalifo, Chairman of the Council; Fatiaki Misau; Gagaj Taksās of Itu'ti'u; and two Rotuman lawyers, Sosefo Inoke and Kafoa Muaror. Paul Manueli, the Rotuman representative to the lower house and a member of the cabinet, attended the hearing.

The submission included a review of documents germane to cession from which the submitters concluded that:

- (a) Rotuma was ceded as a separate and distinct island nation to Great Britain;
- (b) Notwithstanding that cession our forefathers wished our lands, seas and people to be absorbed into the Colony of Fiji;
- (c) The laws governing Fiji, where appropriate for the maintenance of peace and good order of our people, would apply to us.

They expressed the view that this special relationship with the Fijian people had endured the test of time, and the hope that it would continue and be further strengthened by the new constitution. Nevertheless, they left the door open for the possibility of Rotuma becoming independent sometime in the future.

Unless and until the present Rotuman Community in Fiji and Rotuma express an overwhelming view e. g. by referendum, that Rotuma should break away from Fiji, the wish to be part of Fiji must be honoured and we now affirm our fore-fathers wish.

In any event, such talk of independence is premature and unrealistic.

In the meantime, they expressed the view that the Rotuman community must strive for financial autonomy in terms of new and improved infrastructure on the island such as roads, water, hospital and other medical facilities, electricity, communication but to name a few.<sup>41</sup>

According to the submitters, whereas the 1970 Constitution failed to recognize the special position of the Rotumans, the 1990 Constitution went a long way toward putting things right. Still, they argued, more effective representation was required if the needs of the community were to be met. Specifically, they asked for two representatives in the lower house, two representatives in the upper house, and the creation of a special ministry for Rotuman Affairs. The notion was that the Rotuman community would be divided into two constituencies, one confined to the island of Rotuma, the other encompassing all Rotumans living elsewhere in Fiji. A special ministry for Rotuman Affairs was needed, the submission held, to "effectively cater for the full protection and promotion of the rights, interests and concerns of the Rotumans as an indigenous race." This did not have to be a full ministry, the submitters wrote, but could be part of Ministry of Home Affairs, Fijian Affairs, or some other ministry.

The submitters also requested that the Council of Rotuma be officially recognized by the constitution, and that all matters relating to Rotumans and Rotuma be decided if and only if approved by the council. In addition they asked that the constitution explicitly recognize Rotuman customary laws and traditions, and that Rotumans be given the explicit right to set up their own court system, as the Fijians had done. All matters pertaining to Rotumans living in Rotuma including land matters should be governed by the Rotuma Act, the Rotuma Lands Act, or other such acts that might be promulgated from time to time. Furthermore, they argued, any amendment or promulgation of such acts should require the approval of the Council of Rotuma.

In response to the assertions of the Mölmahao group, Gagaj Marāf Solomone, the chief of Noa'tau and senator from Rotuma, stated that the Rotuma Council did not recognize the title of Lagfatmarō because the Mölmahao group had failed to follow customary procedures in bestowing the name. He also asserted that the council was the only lawful body that could speak on behalf of the Rotuman people, and that

the Mölmahao group had only around one hundred people, being just one of many "clans" on the island.<sup>42</sup>

The Constitution Amendment Act of 1997 resulted from the commission's hearings. As in the 1990 constitution, Rotumans were given only one seat in the House of Representatives, elected from a roll of voters registered as Rotumans. The request of the chiefs and council for two members, one representing Rotumans on the island, the other representing Rotumans elsewhere in Fiji, was denied. In the newly formed Senate, consisting of 32 members, the President of Fiji was to appoint a Rotuman senator on the advice of the Council of Rotuma. The document specifically required Parliament to make provision for the application of customary laws and for dispute resolution, and in doing so, to have regard for the customs, traditions, usages, values, and aspirations of the Fijian and Rotuman people.<sup>43</sup>

Although the 1997 act did not allow for the creation of a special ministry of Rotuman Affairs, Marieta Rigamoto, the Rotuman elected to the House of Representatives in the first election held under the Act, in 1999, was given an influential position as assistant minister in the Prime Minister's office, where she was put in charge of the "Blueprint for Fijian and Rotuman Development and Village Improvement Scheme."

### The Economics of Integration

The postcolonial Fiji government continued British public welfare policies and provided infrastructural and personnel support on Rotuma for health services, education, public works, and communication. The Rotuma Island Council received a government subvention that increased substantially, from F\$52,000 in 1984 to F\$160,000 in 1999.<sup>44</sup> In addition, the Fiji government contributed to the construction of district meeting halls and supported other self-help projects on Rotuma through annual grants; from 1989 to 1992 self-help grants amounted to F\$10,000 each year. Assistance for economic development, however, was comparatively minor.

Many Rotumans complained that Rotuma did not receive sufficient support from the central government, and like the Mölmahao group, expressed the view that it would be of greater advantage to affiliate with a more developed nation like New Zealand, Australia, or the United Kingdom. The desirability of unrestricted access to urban areas with all that they offer was apparent to most. If Rotumans had been

unable to migrate freely to Fiji during the twentieth century, overpopulation would have put a serious strain on the social fabric. When the population of the island exceeded 3,000 in the 1960s strains were already apparent, particularly with regard to land matters. Thus, even some of the strongest advocates of independence foresaw the need to affiliate with some country or other. However, no country other than Fiji expressed the slightest interest in granting Rotuma affiliation and, in an age of decolonization, it was rather unrealistic to expect them to do so. Indeed, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, the government of New Zealand explicitly rejected the possibility.



**Photo 13.3** Ratu Mara and British High Commissioner T. R. Williams meet with members of the Rotuma Council at the inauguration of the council house in Ahau, 25 October 1971. *Fiji Ministry of Information.*

Nevertheless, some Rotumans advocating independence argued that the island would be viable economically if it were a port of entry and could export produce (for example, root crops) directly to Tuvalu, Kiribati, and elsewhere. One of the most thoughtful proponents of independence, Hiagi Apao, suggested Rotuma could lease its fishing rights from the 200-mile zone of ocean resources they would control, produce wine from the island's bounteous orange crop, and expand tourism, in addition to obtaining foreign aid. As a

model he pointed to Tuvalu, a country with a small population and limited resources.

Government officials responded to the accusation of neglect by pointing out that Rotuma received proportionately more assistance than most other parts of rural Fiji. Beyond direct assistance, they contended, all Rotumans in Fiji, including those on the home island, have benefited from Rotuma's affiliation with Fiji. The opportunities for unrestricted travel back and forth enabled Rotumans to seek advanced education and job opportunities that were not available on Rotuma.

Indeed, a case could be made that the ease with which information, cash, and goods flowed between Rotuman communities in Fiji and the home island resulted in a multilocal community that benefited all Rotumans by allowing them to choose among a variety of opportunities and income sources, resulting in a considerable degree of flexibility when responding to fluctuating circumstances within the global economy.

The pros and cons of Rotuman independence were discussed in 1998 on the Rotuman Forum, a section of the Rotuma Web site.<sup>45</sup> The discussion was initiated by a thoughtful contribution from Saumaru Foster, a Rotuman living in Sydney, Australia:

I have nothing but admiration and good will towards Fijians—and I include amongst them ethnic Indians and other minority groups. I believe that peace and friendship and justice amongst all the different peoples of Fiji should always be encouraged.

I therefore believe that it is precisely for these reasons that the question of Rotuman independence deserves to be seriously discussed—not the least because it is so intertwined with the notions of Rotuman culture and identity....

No one should oppose such a discussion either. Not the international community because it is a crucial point of the UN charter that independence for a group of people in such a situation should be supported. Not the Fijians because they have endured two coups in an attempt to assert their own indigenous identity and independence. And certainly not the Rotumans themselves who have lived unconquered by any other nation for centuries. (Of course, I am not implying here that conquest automatically confers on the conqueror the right to absorb the conquered.) In any case, it was

by a treaty that Rotuma was ceded to the British. Fiji had its own treaty.

To suggest that Rotuma should be independent is not a flippant flight of fancy. Anyone who knows world history will understand that more unlikely propositions have come to fruition. And I dare suggest that as the world shrinks with the increased internationalisation of its means of communication, the more likely and easier it will be for such a proposition to be actualised.

By independence for Rotuma, I'm not necessarily suggesting secession from Fiji. There are many types and levels of independence for a people and the nation state is not always the best option at a given time.

However, what I certainly mean by Rotuman independence is this: Rotumans, as a distinct indigenous group (within the Fijian nation), should have the ultimate say in matters which affect their culture—the law (especially those governing land and its ownership and use), the language and customs and the chiefly system.

I would suggest that, given the present Fijian constitution and the way Rotumans, as such, are represented or not at the supreme decision-making bodies of their public—Parliament, the Council of Chiefs and the Public Service—such independence is far from being the case!<sup>46</sup>

Others were more skeptical, calling attention to Rotuma's limited resources and a global economy that subjects small societies to circumstances they cannot control. As one anonymous contributor put it:

Size and resources matter. Fiji's bigger and has more resources than Rotuma can dream about. If Fiji's going nowhere, goodness knows that an independent Rotuma will barely achieve! There aren't enough Rotumans on the island as it is, and who's to say that all Rotumans living away from Rotuma will remain committed to the good of their ancestral homeland 2, 3, etc. generations down the road from now. Where will the patriotism of peoples of even a little Rotuman blood lie?<sup>47</sup>

Foster responded:

Rotuma is in the same position as Fiji—it's just that it's smaller. Fiji survives economically because of international agreements which protect it from total competition. Can you imagine Fiji (or any other small nation) surviving otherwise? So, in a similar manner, when Rotuma becomes independent it will survive under similar agreements—not handouts, not donations, not charity but agreements which ensure a fair exchange of resources be they fruit, vegetables or people (any nation's most valuable resource). Again, such a Rotuma would be no different from Fiji in principle. Fiji survives because other nations have agreed to treat her in a particular way—not because she has gold and sugar and tourism. Other nations can produce and deliver any of these commodities much more cheaply. Independence or autonomy is an issue which needs to be discussed rationally—not emotionally.<sup>48</sup>

Although some Rotumans complained about neglect by the Government of Fiji, others pointed to all the contributions it had made to the island's infrastructure and economy, many of which were taken for granted. Lavenie Coy drew attention to these contributions and what their withdrawal would entail should Rotuma become independent:

Presently the Fiji Government pays for the following:

1. The cost of a number of Rotuma residents and the equipment to maintain the roads.
2. The cost of a number of Rotuma residents and the generators and pumps and fuel for them to provide and maintain the water system for the island.
3. The cost of maintaining the hospital and its doctor, dentist, nurses, and other staff, mostly residents of Rotuma, and for medical treatment and medicine for the residents. And if a resident becomes seriously ill or injured and needs more extensive care/treatment at Suva the government pays for the airfare or an emergency flight to transport them.
4. The cost of a generator and maintaining it to provide power for the hospital and the entire Ahau complex and Council offices and garage.
5. The cost of all the teachers, mostly highly qualified Rotumans trained by the Fiji Government, to provide a good education for the children and



maintaining the various school facilities, except for the Catholic school.

6. In addition, the Rotuma Council is provided school buses to get the children to/from school as well as funds for fuel and maintenance of them.

7. And they also provide funds for/pay the seven district chiefs and other Council staff/expenses so the Rotumans don't have to.

8. Also costs for maintaining the Post Office and telephone services as well as some smaller services such as an agricultural and fishing specialist to assist Rotumans with such.

This, in itself, is an enormous cost to the Fiji Government for which they ask for NOTHING in return except that Rotumans abide by the laws and good morality of Fiji; an "enormous" expense that is required for the benefit of the residents of Rotuma, BUT who can't afford to take over even 1/10 of such costs and more themselves.

And, in addition, the Fiji Government:

1. Has built an airport to handle air service from Fiji and maintains it (though a better job could be done) and radio facilities needed.

2. Subsidizes the service of a boat providing passenger and cargo service to the island monthly to assure that Rotuma has lower cost transportation for supplies to the island and other products on the return trip. The residents would be hard pressed just to provide this subsidy, let alone the other costs.

However, by declaring independence from Fiji you can be sure that:

1. The Fiji Government will withdraw ALL personnel from Rotuma that are on their payroll back to Fiji, or will cease paying those that don't want to transfer back to Fiji, as well as the equipment they provided.

2. They will cease to maintain the airport and radio facilities and will recall these personnel or cease paying those that don't want to transfer back.

3. And what about those in Rotuma receiving pensions or other financial assistance from Fiji? Will Fiji continue to provide these? I don't think so, further causing hardships for the older Rotumans.

4. They will discontinue providing medical services on the island and will no longer provide the emergency

medical flights or medical services in Fiji for the island's residents, so residents—your family members—will die instead of getting the more extensive treatment they need.

5. They will withdraw approval of air service between Fiji and Rotuma leaving Rotuma without such air service and contacts.

6. They will withdraw not only the subsidy but approval for the Fiji based operator of the boat to serve Rotuma leaving Rotuma with no shipping services for supplies to or copra and other products from the island.

7. And due to restrictions on importation of Agricultural Products from other Countries/Non-Fiji Islands Rotuma would lose their market for Copra, their only means of earning money.

And, you may ask, how about replacement of air and boat service from New Zealand or elsewhere?

1. The cost of the long flights would be prohibitive for Rotuma residents and even with an enlarged airport to accommodate the necessary aircraft for the longer trip the amount of traffic wouldn't support operation of an aircraft/air service.

2. And the same would apply to boat service as there would be NO subsidy and the longer trip would make shipping costs prohibitive.

Is this what you want for your family/relatives living in Rotuma, total isolation setting the progress of Rotuma back 100 years?<sup>49</sup>

Still others, and they may well have constituted the majority of Rotumans, wanted to see Rotuma remain part of Fiji, but with a greater degree of autonomy and recognition. Sosefo Inoke was a spokesman for this position. In a posting on the Rotuman Forum he articulated his vision of what was needed:

That Rotuma is a sovereignty is not an issue. The 1881 Deed of Cession to Great Britain is testimony to that fact. Now that we have been associated with Fiji ever since, our standing and status in that union is the real issue. I challenge you to tell me what it is exactly. You will not find it in a document anywhere. Neither will you find it in unwritten conventions. At best I suggest all we have is a loose understanding as to what that relationship entails. A frightening situation. You may

well say that we have been in this situation for over 100 years and things have been going on pretty well. That may well be true but there has been no reason or occasion to put that relationship to the test.

We need more than the Rotuma Act giving the Rotuma Island Council of Chiefs the power to make laws for the order and good government of Rotuma.

I give you an example. Suppose that a rich mineral deposit is found just north of the serene Malhaha coastline. The Government says since you are part of Fiji we will take all of the income from mining that deposit as part of revenue for the whole country. Are we able to say, "Hold on, that is ours, we will decide how much we give to the country?" Can we turn to some document or convention or some law that will help us? I doubt that the Rotuma Act will help us.

Is this such an unrealistic scenario? How do we address this problem?

One thing that will help is to have a treaty signed between the Fiji Government and the representatives of Rotuma. That is the normal way nations set out their agreements and arrangements with each other. It is a different thing altogether from secession. Our leaders need to sit with the Government and put pen to paper as to what exactly the relationship was and what it will and should be. Having an arrangement based on unclear conventions and loose understandings is a recipe for misunderstanding and discontent. I go so far as to suggest that this is one of the reasons why we can ask as often as we like but we will not get the parliamentary representation we may deserve.

Do we need a treaty?

Well, having a written agreement, because that is what a treaty really is, will make everyone aware of all the rules of play. It may not have all of them but it will have all the important ones. Secondly, in the process of making those rules the parties will address their minds to the issues that are important to their relationship and may find ways of avoiding conflicts before they arise. They will also become aware of the contentious ones and may even find a workable compromise.

You may be able to achieve the same result by having an act of Parliament passed by the Fiji Parliament. The trouble with this is that like any act it

can be changed at any time at the whim of the Government. Sure, you can put all sorts of safeguards in the act but that will not fix it. All they do is make it more difficult to amend the act.

What should the treaty contain? First, it will acknowledge our sovereignty over our territory yet at the same time acknowledge that Rotuma is part of Fiji. It will set out the terms on which the Government and Rotuma will have access to that territory. The treaty will also set out the terms of our political relationship with Fiji: e.g., the number of seats in the lower house and the senate, the right to self government as and when we need it, possibly the setting up of a special ministry or department for Rotuma affairs. The right to set up our own court systems and dispute resolution processes will be acknowledged. Similarly, our financial relationship with Fiji, e.g., the right to impose taxes and fees on activities within our territory. I am sure you can think of a whole lot more things that should be in such a document.

I liken it to a partnership and the partnership agreement. You are together and yet at the same time separate. For the relationship to flourish you must acknowledge each other's rights and privileges and not allow one to be overborne by the other. Is it such an unreasonable expectation?

Inoke concluded:

I am not here talking about secession or independence in its widest sense. I am talking about establishing and maintaining an identity and the rights and privileges that come with it.

As a minority group we must guard against policies of assimilation and integration. One of the safeguards is the establishment of a treaty. If you accept that Rotuma is a sovereign nation then you will have no difficulty accepting the creation of a treaty and the notion of increased Lower House representation. You will also accept that it is a necessary document to have.

The longer we proceed without such a document the greater the risk of losing our identity. We will become assimilated and absorbed into the rest of the country. A minority group with an identity we will not be. Is this what we want?<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

At the close of the twentieth century there was a diversity of viewpoints among Rotumans with regard to Rotuma's relationship with Fiji, but one thing is clear—that the cultural tradition that places a premium on autonomy and self-determination remains a dominant part of the Rotuman heritage. Just as individuals have jealously guarded their autonomy within households, as have households within villages and villages within districts, Rotumans have expressed concern about preserving the autonomy of Rotuma Island, either within Fiji or as an independent nation. The Chief Justice left open the possibility for Rotuma to renegotiate its status vis-à-vis Fiji in his ruling on the legitimacy of the trial of the Mölmahao rebels. Rotumans have discussed the issues involved with considerable vigor; it remains to be seen what form this thrust toward autonomy will take in the twenty-first century.



**Photo 13.4** Unveiling a monument to Rotuman chiefs at Ahau government station during dedication of council house, 1971. *Fiji Ministry of Information.*



**Photo 13.5** List of Rotuman chiefs on monument unveiled at dedication of council house, 1971. *Fiji Ministry of Information.*

## Notes to Chapter 13

While most of the information in this chapter has not appeared in any of our previous publications, we have included material from two articles: "The Fiji Connection: Migrant Involvement in the Economy of Rotuma," which appeared in *Pacific Viewpoint* (Rensel 1993), and "Symbols of Power and the Politics of Impotence: The Mōlmahao Rebellion on Rotuma," published in *Pacific Studies* (Howard 1992).

We have striven here to give voice to the disparate views within the broader Rotuman community concerning Rotuma's relationship with Fiji, hence our reliance on magazines, newspapers, and contributions to the Rotuma Web site.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum3.html>

<sup>2</sup> See Kaurasi 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Rensel 1993.

<sup>4</sup> 1996 Census of Fiji, Bureau of Statistics.

<sup>5</sup> *Pacific Review*, 22 October 1968, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Pacific Review*, 22 October 1968, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Pacific Review*, 22 October 1968, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Pacific Review*, 29 October 1968.

<sup>9</sup> *Pacific Review*, 29 October 1968.

<sup>10</sup> *Pacific Review*, 15 November 1968, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Pacific Review*, 15 November 1968, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Pacific Review*, 15 November 1968, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Pacific Review*, 15 November 1968, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Representation for Lord Shepherd (No. 16), 3 February 1970; The National Archives, Ref.: FCO 32/593.

<sup>15</sup> Sir Robert Foster, Discussion with Chief Maraf and Wilson Inia of Rotuma. Typed report, c. 24 March 1970; The National Archives, Ref: FCO 32/593.

<sup>16</sup> Report of the *Fiji Constitutional Conference* 1970. However, "Fijian" was defined as including the descendents of parents from any island in Melanesia, Micronesia, or Polynesia, including Rotuma.

<sup>17</sup> *Fiji Times*, 12 June 1970.

<sup>18</sup> *Fiji Times*, 12 June 1970.

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication, letter to Howard, 26 September 1988.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Lagfatmarō (Henry Gibson) to "The Seven Chiefs," 30 December 1988. Copy in authors' files.

<sup>21</sup> *Fiji Voice*, No. 3, December 1987.

<sup>22</sup> *Fiji Times*, 24 December 1987.

<sup>23</sup> *Fiji Times*, 12 May 1988.

<sup>24</sup> *Fiji Times*, 14 May 1988.

<sup>25</sup> *Fiji Times*, 9 May 1988.

<sup>26</sup> *Fiji Times*, 17 May 1988.

<sup>27</sup> *Fiji Times*, 19 May 1988.

<sup>28</sup> *Fiji Times*, 10 June 1988.

<sup>29</sup> *Fiji Times*, 10 June 1988.

<sup>30</sup> *Fiji Times*, 13 June 1988.

<sup>31</sup> *Fiji Times*, 28 November 1989.

<sup>32</sup> Letter dated 11 April 1992. Copy in authors' files.

<sup>33</sup> Sosefo Inoke, "A Commentary on Parliamentary Representation and Rotuman Statehood," Rotuman Forum, Rotuma Web site (<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum9.html>).

<sup>34</sup> Personal communication, 4 March 2004. Konrote was eventually promoted to Major-General and Commander of the Fiji Military Forces. He subsequently served as an Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations and Force Commander of UN peacekeeping operations in Lebanon (UNIFIL), from September 1997 to December 1999, and was appointed Fiji's High Commissioner to Australia in 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Submission dated 5 September 1995.

<sup>36</sup> General Assembly Resolution 1541 (XV), 14 December 1960.

<sup>37</sup> Submission dated 3 July 1995.

<sup>38</sup> Submission dated 9 June 1995.

<sup>39</sup> Submission dated 1 June 1995.

<sup>40</sup> Constitution Review Commission, Verbatim Notes, Uncorrected Copy, Tuesday, 12 September 1995.

<sup>41</sup> Submission dated 18 September 1995

<sup>42</sup> *Fiji Times*, 15 June 1995.

<sup>43</sup> The Constitution Amendment Act of 1997, Article 186.

<sup>44</sup> Parliamentary Debates, 11 December 1984; Marieta Rigamoto, personal communication, October 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Rotuman Forum, Rotuma Web site (<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum3.html>).

<sup>46</sup> Rotuman Forum, Rotuma Web site, 26 January 1998. (<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum3.html>)

<sup>47</sup> Rotuman Forum, Rotuma Web site, 8 March 1998 (<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum3.html>).

<sup>48</sup> Rotuman Forum, Rotuma Web site, 15 March 1998 (<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum3.html>).



<sup>49</sup> Rotuman Forum, Rotuma Web site, 19 August 2000  
(<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum20.html>).

<sup>50</sup> Rotuman Forum, Rotuma Web site, 5 April 2002  
(<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum9.html>).



**Photo 14.1** Rotuman teachers at language workshop in Suva, discussing ways to introduce mathematical terms into Rotuman for the purpose of teaching the vernacular language in Fiji schools, 2006. *Alan Howard.*



**Photo 14.2:** Rotumans in Melbourne, Australia, holding a fund-raiser (*kati*), 1998. *Alan Howard.*

## 14 Rotuman Identity in a Global Community

I know that I'm more Rotuman now than when I was growing up in Rotuma. Why, you ask? I have now realised the value of what I have always taken for granted, my island Rotuma. I know I'm lucky, I have the best of two worlds.

Sosefo Avaiki, *Rotuma Web site*, 1998<sup>1</sup>

Rotumans began to migrate internationally from the time European vessels first recruited them as crewmen in the 1800s. While many of these early travelers found their way home, others ended up in faraway lands. Because they were isolated from their homeland, they ended up assimilating to new cultural environments, their attachments to Rotuma severed. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, however, new categories of migrants emerged: those marrying expatriate Australians, New Zealanders, Americans, Canadians, and Europeans who went to live in their spouses' home countries; those who went overseas for further education or training; and those employed by international companies who were transferred to other countries. Although some stayed for a limited period of time before returning to Fiji, others settled in locations around the world. In addition, some Rotuman men serving as sailors on modern vessels have chosen to remain abroad. These transnational migrants have provided the foundations for Rotuman communities in several countries. This chapter concerns the formation of the more prominent of these communities and discusses the ways in which local contexts have affected Rotuman cultural identity.

### The Genesis of Rotuman Identity

While confined to the island, Rotumans had little reason to think of themselves as a distinct ethnic group. Rather, they

paid far more attention to internal distinctions: between family lineages, between villages and districts, and following missionization, between religious denominations. They were well aware of "others," such as Fijians, Samoans, Tongans, and Europeans, but their conception of "Rotuman" remained vague—in large part because the great majority of people on the island interacted with non-Rotumans in limited, distinctly Rotuman, contexts. It was only after people gained a sense of what it was like to be treated *as a Rotuman* (rather than as a farmer, a man from the district of Oinafa, a chief) that a sense of ethnicity crystallized. This did not occur until a substantial number of Rotumans had migrated to Fiji.

In Fiji, Rotumans were recognized as a distinct group because they differed from Fijians physically and culturally, and their language was unique. They were somewhat marginal under British colonial rule in Fiji, where the categories of Fijian, Indian, and European formed the main template for colonial administrators. Rotumans, being a relatively small population, were often bureaucratically classified in the catchall category of "other." As they came to specialize in certain industries and occupations, and clustered in residential neighborhoods, however, other groups began to develop stereotypes about them. In response, Rotumans started to think about themselves in new ways.

Sexual unions between Europeans and other ethnic groups disrupted the "purity" of these distinctions and resulted in the category of "half-caste."<sup>2</sup> Initially "half-caste" was a pariah category for the British, emblematic of the breakdown of a proper hierarchy in which Europeans were distinguished conceptually as "civilized," while the rest, to varying degrees, were considered "uncivilized." By the mid-1930s attitudes had changed, and the term "half-caste" gave way to the label "part-European," which had very different, distinctly positive, connotations. Part-Europeans were placed immediately below Europeans in the reformulated hierarchy, with their European "blood" now considered an advantage. Part-Europeans were given preferential treatment and granted privileges sometimes overlapping with those of Europeans.

Rotumans had been engaging in sexual alliances with and marrying Europeans since the early 1820s (with renegade sailors and resident merchants), which contributed to their somewhat favored status within the colonial hierarchy. The 1936 Fiji census report describes Rotumans as follows:

The people of Rotuma are Polynesian stock, but are, nevertheless, somewhat of a mixture. During the last century the Island was not infrequently visited by Whalers, and it is known that at least three Europeans either settled ashore or deserted their vessels and remained on the Island. The men had large families who, intermarrying with inhabitants, were absorbed into the race.

Tradition says that at some time or another, either a Chinese or Japanese vessel was wrecked on the Island or perhaps arrived and stayed there. The definitely Mongolian features which are observable in many Rotumans may thus be accounted for.

The race to-day is a mixture of Polynesian, European and Mongolian, and it is in some cases extremely difficult to distinguish between a European-Rotuman and a so-called full blooded Rotuman.<sup>3</sup>

This confounding of racial categories gave Rotumans, if not a relatively privileged place in the hierarchy of non-European ethnic groups, at least some latitude for proving their worth, which they did through education and hard work, soon acquiring a reputation for responsibility and honesty. During the latter part of the colonial era Rotumans were considerably overrepresented in professional, management, and supervisory positions.<sup>4</sup> One could therefore be proud of being Rotuman in Fiji, and Rotuman identity there coalesced into a distinctly positive self-identification.

Rotumans in Fiji organized into social networks when their population in an area reached a critical mass. In both the greater Suva area and in Lautoka/Nadi, where their numbers were greatest, they organized according to district of origin on Rotuma, suggesting that locality on the island remained uppermost in their minds as a basis for group identification. However, as Rotumans were exposed to higher forms of western education, they learned to think about their heritage in abstract terms—in terms of laws, social organization, beliefs, and most importantly, in terms of culture. "Rotuman culture" became an object of thought, analysis, discussion, and debate. This required both the capacity to distance themselves from their cultural experience and the ability to make meaningful comparisons with other cultures. The result was the development of a heightened cultural consciousness and a refined sense of Rotuman identity.

## Australia

The first Rotuman migrants to Australia were participants in the Torres Islands pearl-diving industry, which was at its peak in the late nineteenth century. Resident Commissioner William Gordon reported in 1884:

A very considerable number of men...go to Torres Strait, to obtain employment in the pearl fisheries, where exceptionally high wages can be earned. There are at present over one hundred Rotumah men at Torres Strait—of these the majority are merely employed in the management of boats, at a comparatively small wage. About forty or fifty, however, are engaged as divers (who earn up to £40 per month).<sup>5</sup>

Gordon went on to bemoan the allegation that after the short fishing season the men usually went to Sydney and were relieved of their wages by "sharpers and prostitutes of the lowest class," who were on the watch for them on their arrival in Sydney—a lament repeated by W. L. Allardyce, the Acting Resident Commissioner in 1881.<sup>6</sup>

An unknown number of the men who had engaged in the pearl industry remained and married local women. Descendents of these early migrants have been identified in northern Australia and on Thursday Island (in the Torres Strait),<sup>7</sup> and in recent years some have attempted to trace their Rotuman heritage via Internet inquiries or visits to Rotuma.

A later immigration stream began in the 1950s and accelerated throughout the remainder of the century. It followed two trajectories, distinguished by gender. The majority of Rotuman women who migrated to Australia married Australian men. Many met their husbands in Fiji before emigrating; others went to Australia for schooling or work and met their husbands there. In her study of Rotuman migrants in the Sydney area, Seferosa Michael estimated that "70–80% of all migration to Australia has been the result of marriage to non-Rotuman spouses, most of whom were Australian citizens."<sup>8</sup> Australian men working in Fiji mostly occupied managerial positions with firms and banks or served in professional capacities. They were generally of middle-class background, and on returning to Australia, they brought their wives into middle-class Australian society, to which the women successfully adapted. These women and their children adjusted to mainstream Aussie culture and did

not consider themselves members of a disadvantaged ethnic group.

The circumstances of migration to Australia have been somewhat different for Rotuman men. Many of the first migrants came as sailors and jumped ship. Some were caught and sent home in disgrace, but others married Australian women and settled down. Most eventually legalized their status, although some did not do so for many years, placing them in a tenuous social position in the meantime. Compared to Rotuman women in Australia, Rotuman men spanned a broader range in the occupational structure, from unskilled workers to positions of management. On the whole, however, our research suggests that they aspired to middle-class living standards, which many if not most achieved.

By far the largest Rotuman enclave in Australia at the end of the twentieth century, consisting of well over one hundred families in which at least one person was of Rotuman extraction, was in Sydney, where migrants organized around churches. Rotuman Wesleyans initially joined a Polynesian congregation established by Rev. Jione Langi, who was assigned by the Fiji Methodist Church to serve migrants from Fiji in Sydney before he was posted to New Zealand. When the various Polynesian enclaves grew large enough, they split off, each establishing its own church and supporting its own minister. Soon after inception, the Rotuman congregation divided over the issue of language. Whereas a core group of cultural conservatives insisted that services be conducted in the Rotuman language exclusively, others requested English be used as well. The latter group started their own congregation, without benefit of an ordained minister. Catholic migrants in the Sydney area organized into a social group that met periodically; not until October 1999 was the first Catholic mass conducted entirely in the Rotuman language.

Other, smaller Rotuman enclaves developed in Brisbane and Melbourne. In both cities Rotumans organized and met on a more or less regular basis.

Rotumans, along with other non-white immigrants, experienced a shift in policies and attitudes in Australia over the years. During the post-World War II years, Australian immigration policy was exclusionist; the so-called "White Australia" policy prevailed. The category of "Rotuman" was essentially unknown; to respond "Rotuman" when asked one's ethnicity by white Australians required further

explanation and was generally avoided. One could say "Fijian," "Pacific Islander," or "Polynesian," or, if light-skinned enough (and especially if one had a European-sounding last name), one could pass as an "Aussie." For the most part, however, it was best to avoid ethnic categorization whenever possible.

With the demise of the White Australia policy and its replacement by a commitment to making Australia a "multicultural" society, the position of Rotuman migrants changed. It became chic to be "ethnic." Multiculturalism encouraged an emphasis on distinctiveness as opposed to identification with the unmarked, connotatively bland concept of "Aussie." Rotumans have therefore been encouraged to reevaluate their ethnic identity, to organize into groups based on their Rotuman heritage, and to give public cultural performances of various kinds. They are still confronted with the fact that, for many white Australians, Rotuma is unknown; thus, in most encounters they still identify themselves as from Fiji or Polynesia. Nevertheless, the climate has become much more favorable for maintaining a positive Rotuman self-identification.

### New Zealand

In many respects Rotuman migration to New Zealand parallels the Australian experience. An additional factor in this instance was the presence of the New Zealand Air Force in Suva until Fiji gained independence in 1970. A number of Rotuman women married airmen—some officers, others enlisted men of varied backgrounds. Most melted into the social circles of their husbands, and those who could do so took advantage of their part-European identification possibility, which served them well in Pākehā (white New Zealander) society.

In 1994, with the assistance of Rev. Jione Langi, who by then was pastor at large for the Fiji Wesleyans in New Zealand, we were able to identify 125 families in the country that included at least one person of Rotuman extraction. Langi also helped provide information regarding occupation, year of immigration to New Zealand, and spouse's ethnicity if married. Of the 74 Rotuman women for whom we had marital information, 40 were married to or had been married to white New Zealanders, 15 to Rotuman or part-Rotuman men, 16 to other Polynesians (including Fijians or part-Fijians), 2 to Indians, and 1 to a Chinese man. Of the 36 Rotuman men in



our survey, 14 were married to Pākehā women, 10 to Rotumans, and 12 to other Polynesians. A higher proportion of women thus married Pākehā spouses (55 percent compared to 39 percent of men). Rotumans married to Rotumans or part-Rotumans accounted for only 23 percent of the New Zealand couples we identified, which suggests, along with the Australian data, that for Rotumans intermarriage and migration are strongly correlated.

Our information on year of immigration indicates that Rotuman migration to New Zealand began in the 1950s and reached a peak during the 1970s and 1980s, when New Zealand immigration policy was most receptive. For the seventy individuals on whom we have such data, 20.0 percent arrived before 1970, 35.7 percent came in the 1970s, 38.6 percent came in the 1980s, and only 5.7 percent immigrated during the first four years of the 1990s.

The largest concentration of Rotuman migrants in New Zealand was in Auckland, with smaller but nevertheless vital communities in and around Napier and Wellington. In the 1970s a first attempt was made to organize the growing Rotuman enclave in Auckland, but the effort was ill-fated and short-lived; a second attempt met with failure in the 1980s. Factional strife reportedly broke out, leading to disenchantment and bad feelings. Then, following the appointment of Rev. Langi to Wellington in 1985, a gradual process of reincorporation took place. Based on his experience with the Rotuman community in Sydney, Langi made an effort to identify Rotuman families in New Zealand and to organize them. In 1992, when he was appointed "pastor at large" to the Fiji Methodist community in New Zealand, he relocated to Auckland. He helped to establish the Rotuman New Zealand Fellowship as a formal organization with a written constitution, dues, and biannual meetings. The fellowship hosted Rotuman groups traveling to New Zealand, organized a Christmas sojourn to Fiji and Rotuma, and held fund-raising drives for various purposes. It was nonsectarian in character and divided into three chapters based on regions within New Zealand (Auckland, Wellington, and Waikato/Bay of Plenty).

Despite Langi's charismatic leadership, disputes jeopardized the integrity of the fellowship at times. Following a trouble-plagued group trip to Rotuma in 1993, during which limited transportation required some families to remain in Fiji rather than traveling all the way to the home

island, several members protested and dropped out of the fellowship, threatening the group's cohesion. After Langi was reassigned to Fiji, most of the protestors returned to the group, and the fellowship regained its vigor, with well-attended biannual meetings.

As in Australia, Rotumans in New Zealand have largely been integrated into the urban middle class. This is reflected in our data on occupation, which showed a preponderance of both men and women, and their spouses, in managerial/supervisory, professional, or white-collar occupations (75.0 percent of Rotuman women, 70.6 percent of their spouses; 55.9 percent of Rotuman men, 85.7 percent of their spouses).

Circumstances for Rotumans in New Zealand have been affected by the social visibility of the indigenous Māori population. The initial division between Pākehā and Māori remained the anchor of New Zealand ethnic distinctions, although substantial immigration of other Polynesians (particularly Cook Islanders, Samoans, and Niueans) following World War II made the situation more complex. As in Australia, "Rotuman" was a largely unknown category, and migrants generally identified themselves as from Fiji or Polynesia, but the connotations associated with being Polynesian in New Zealand are complicated by ambivalent feelings frequently expressed by Pākehā. The association of Māori and Samoans in many people's minds with violence and presumed irresponsibility have offset proclaimed liberal commitments to a society in which race is of no consequence. Rotumans found that the Polynesian component of their identity could be problematic at times and contextually variable.

### Spreading Far Afield

Rotuman communities of lesser size and varying cohesion developed elsewhere, including Hawai'i, the San Francisco Bay Area, Vancouver in British Columbia, and Fort McMurray in Alberta, Canada. A substantial number of Rotumans emigrated to England, where they were widely scattered, making organization impractical. A few families with Rotuman members settled in other places, including Sweden and Norway, for example. Individual Rotumans, serving in various professional and skilled capacities, scattered around the globe. Everywhere they have gone, Rotumans have adapted well and successfully.

## Success and the Problem of Community Formation

One characteristic that facilitated Rotuman success abroad is a highly developed social sensitivity that is ingrained in Rotuman culture. In foreign environments, this has translated into an ability to adapt quickly to a wide variety of social conditions. The drive for autonomy has been another contributing factor. Socialized to the importance of self-reliance, most Rotumans have been able to draw on their own internal resources when away from home. Rotuman socialization seems to result in what Vilsoni Hereniko calls "a quiet confidence,"<sup>9</sup> which fosters a "can do" attitude. Repeatedly, in widely varying contexts, Rotuman migrants tell how they observed complex activities and role performances by seasoned veterans and said to themselves, "I can do that!" They go on to tell how they in fact learned to perform and achieved success.

A consequence of educational and occupational success abroad is that Rotuman migrants did not form ghettoized enclaves. Being readily employable, they have had multiple options, not only in places to work but in places to live. This dispersion means that they have interacted far more with others than with Rotumans, both as workmates and as neighbors. It also has made it difficult to sustain a strong sense of Rotuman identity, or to "do" Rotuman culture in an active way.

On the island of Rotuma, people do Rotuman culture as a matter of course. They do it unself-consciously, in an all-encompassing manner. People interact with one another according to generally accepted rules of conduct that are characteristically Rotuman; dress in suitable clothes according to context; sit on mats in gender-specific ways; plant crops, fish, and even buy food in shops in identifiably Rotuman ways. The way people eat, drink, sing, dance, plan events—the very rhythm of daily life—is clearly patterned by Rotuman cultural principles, regardless of how one chooses to define "culture." Even individuals who were socialized on the island as children but have been abroad for many years readopt the patterns they learned when young upon their return. Those who do not do so are targets of criticism, especially if they have the temerity to disregard the rules of decorum, or worse, to try to change the rules by fiat. In such a context, where the few non-Rotumans who live on the island have been largely assimilated, issues of cultural

identity are virtually nonexistent, or at least are heavily muted. People don't *choose* to act as Rotumans, or to honor their Rotuman heritage, so much as to "go with the flow" of social life on the island.

In Fiji, the situation is more complex. In some places—parts of Suva, Vatukoula, Lautoka, and Nadi, for example—the density of Rotuman communities is sufficient to sustain a daily routine that is comparable in many ways to that on Rotuma. People may be able to get along speaking Rotuman most of the time, interacting mainly with Rotuman kin, eating Rotuman dishes, and so on. But even so, people come into frequent contact with Fijians, Fiji-Indians, and others, requiring them to monitor their behavior in ways that are unnecessary on Rotuma. Furthermore, when holding characteristic Rotuman events, like weddings and funerals, dances and fund-raisers, certain accommodations must be made (e.g., substitute materials, untitled men taking the roles of chiefs) that require making choices. The process of deciding what substitutions would or would not be acceptable brings cultural consciousness to the fore and heightens a sense of Rotuman identity.

Migrants living apart from other Rotumans have more choices, and have to make a more self-conscious effort if they want to maintain their affiliation with one or more of the Rotuman communities in Fiji. Attending functions may require extensive travel, forgoing competing commitments, and other sacrifices. In general, however, Fiji offers the vast majority of Rotumans an opportunity to interact with one another relatively frequently, and to sustain a lifestyle that is not significantly different in many respects from the way of life on Rotuma. The fact that Fijian culture is in many ways compatible with Rotuman culture makes the transition easier, and the choices less drastic. Cultural identity under these conditions, while heightened in many respects, does not become salient, and for most people is subordinated to local, occupational, and other identities.

For Rotumans living in countries dominated by western cosmopolitan elites, the circumstances are quite different. Daily life in cities like Sydney, Auckland, and Vancouver requires patterns of behavior dramatically different from those on Rotuma. Most individuals spend their weekdays working as wage earners, attending school, or running their households. Since families tend to be geographically dispersed, there is little time for socializing, other than with workmates, schoolmates, and neighbors, few of whom are

likely to be Rotuman. This means that Rotumans abroad who decide to organize themselves into communities are restricted to weekends if they plan events that are distinctively Rotuman. A few of the larger enclaves, in Sydney and Auckland, for example, are able to sustain church congregations with Rotuman ministers who conduct services in the vernacular language. This allows people to socialize with one another as well, reinforcing ties and heightening cultural awareness (it also provides a venue for conflict, however, and for personal antagonisms to flourish). In such instances, Sunday is a day when one's Rotuman identity can be foregrounded. But the vast majority of Rotumans overseas attend churches where services are conducted by ministers or priests unfamiliar with the language or culture. For these individuals, the only time that can be allocated for Rotuman events is Saturday. Likewise, Saturday is the only day available for events that are inclusive of members of nearly all religious denominations.

Given these circumstances, organizing activities or events is no simple task. People often have conflicting commitments, even if they desire to spend time with their fellow Rotumans. Their children may be engaged in sports or other activities during the weekends that pull them away; non-Rotuman spouses may have obligations to their families and friends. Individuals' commitment to the local Rotuman community varies greatly, so that while some are eager participants, others have to be coaxed to become or remain involved, or even to attend an occasional event. Keeping an overseas Rotuman community viable thus requires the leadership of some committed individuals who are prepared to give the time and energy to organizing activities, to keep people informed by making phone calls, sending newsletters, or setting up Web pages, and to take responsibility for raising and allocating funds to meet expenses incurred by the group. Where there is no established hierarchy, however, leadership is a delicate matter, and concerns over the management of money have plagued overseas Rotuman communities wherever they have emerged.

### Maintaining Rotuman Identity Abroad

When asked about which aspects of Rotuman culture are most important to preserve, the first thing mentioned by most migrants, particularly those of the older generation who

grew up on the island, is the Rotuman language. Language is key for many reasons. Not only does it encode aspects that are unique to the culture; it also provides the nuances of communication that are at the heart of intimacy and social life on Rotuma.

Independent of language, the ability to discuss genealogical connections, as well as politics, events, and personalities on Rotuma, identifies individuals as active members in the Rotuman community. Control of information about Rotuma, or about Rotumans in Fiji or elsewhere, is a valuable asset. Videotapes of key events have become an important cultural commodity, allowing migrants to experience them vicariously, or to remember and relive them. Migrants, their spouses, and children are increasingly acquiring books, musical CDs, and other publications about Rotuma. By seeking out and incorporating such information, they engage in the process of preserving and interpreting Rotuman culture and history as well as enhance opportunities for participating in discussions about it.

Of all the activities fostered by migrant organizations none is more important to cultural identity than Rotuman dance. Dance performances contribute to formation of Rotuman cultural identity in three fundamental ways:

1. They provide opportunities for Rotumans to interact with each other, especially during practices, in characteristically Rotuman ways (with much joking and banter) and thus create a venue for consolidating relationships.
2. The lyrics of dances characteristically idealize Rotuma and its culture. They place heavy emphasis on such notions as the beauty of the island, the bounty of food, gardening and fishing, and Rotuman values of hard work and generosity.
3. Dance engages people in performing publicly as representatives of Rotuman culture and thus encourages identification of performers as Rotumans.

Cultural artifacts also play a role in promoting identity, depending on availability. Rotuman fine mats are available in Fiji, for example, although they are mostly made on the home



**Photo 14.3** Rehearsing for a *tautoga* dance performance at meeting of the Rotuman New Zealand Fellowship at a Maori marae in Auckland, 1994. *Alan Howard.*



**Photo 14.4** Hugag'esea Club of British Columbia, Canada, performing a *tautoga* in a hotel ballroom for members of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania, 2003. *Alan Howard.*

island and are very costly. Still, they are presented at most ceremonies, along with the distinctive Rotuman *tēfui* garlands, and are highly prized as cultural emblems. In Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere, however, fine mats are in short supply, so they have, for the most part, been withdrawn from circulation, or they may be used for display only, rather than exchanged. Other, more accessible items have come to signify Rotuman (or more generally, Polynesian) identity abroad. Dressing for special events in island-style clothes, eating island foods, and decorating homes with shell leis, woven fans, and photographs or paintings of scenes from Rotuma are all ways of making public or personal statements about cultural identity.

### Communication and Cultural Identity

The pattern for early out-migrants from Rotuma—those who left in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries and did not return—was to break ties to the culture and, since they were not great letter writers, to terminate contact with friends and relatives. Descendents of some of these migrants have informed us that they were told almost nothing about the island by their Rotuman elders, who appeared to have had no interest in maintaining a Rotuman cultural identity. In part, this was a consequence of Rotuma's isolation. Ships went to the island only a few times a year, requiring major commitments of time for visits, and the only means of communicating with people there was by letter or, after World War II, a problem-plagued and erratic radio telephone.

As mentioned in chapter 12, the situation changed in 1981 with the construction of the airstrip on Rotuma and the inauguration of weekly flights from Fiji. Along with a more frequent shipping schedule, visits to Rotuma became more feasible for people abroad, with a consequent explosion of traffic between migrant communities abroad and Rotuma. During the 1990s a number of family reunions were staged on the island, in addition to group visits organized by Rotumans living overseas. Migrant communities in Australia and New Zealand have also hosted visits by groups from Rotuma. The installation of a satellite dish and telephone service in the late 1990s, which made possible direct dial telephone calls, further enhanced the degree of regular contact between migrants and their relatives on Rotuma. Making a telephone call, expensive though it may be, seems



to be much more congenial to Rotuman styles of communication than the more formal process of writing letters.

These developments have acted to bolster the cultural consciousness of Rotumans abroad by reinforcing ties between migrants and their kin on the home island. The emergence of e-mail in the 1990s provided an additional vehicle for emigrants with computer access to stay in touch, although finding one another on the Internet was not so easy at the beginning. Not long after getting wired for e-mail ourselves, we began to share news concerning Rotuma with a few colleagues who had also done research on the island. The network expanded through firsthand contact with Rotumans, or spouses of Rotumans, who were online. Eventually, in 1995, we started ROTUMANET, an e-mail list of interested parties with whom we shared news from any Rotuman community. People sent us news via e-mail, fax, or regular mail, and we relayed it to everyone on the list, which came to number more than sixty e-mail addresses.

In November 1996 we took the next step—to construct a Web site that would provide a place in cyberspace where emigrant Rotumans could not only keep up on news from Rotuman communities around the world, but also find and communicate with one another. Our primary goal was to do what we could to preserve a cultural heritage we greatly admire and to facilitate the development of a global Rotuman community. The Rotuma Web site features frequent postings of news and events contributed by members of various Rotuman communities, discussions of important issues, a members database that allows the scattered population to locate one another, an interactive Rotuman-English dictionary and many other features of interest to the broader Rotuman community.

If we define community as a body of persons having a common history or common social, economic, and political interests,<sup>10</sup> then it is fair to say that an international Rotuman community indeed exists. It is a community whose focal point is the island itself, in which membership depends, to some extent at least, on an interest in Rotuman history, language, and culture. More importantly, it is a community defined by a common interest in one another's lives by virtue of kinship, marriage, friendship, or shared experience. Most people with attachments to the island want to stay in touch with friends and relatives; they want to share news and stay

informed of what's going on in Rotuma and in overseas enclaves where they have kin, schoolmates, and friends. Abroad, however, they must also contend with the demands of cultural contexts that require setting aside, or at least muting, their Rotuman identity.

The centrifugal forces that act to weaken Rotuman cultural identity abroad will probably increase with each passing generation. The Rotuma Web site represents a concerted effort on our part, as well as all those who contribute to it, to counteract those forces, and to promote Rotumans' engagement with their cultural heritage. We are committed to doing so because we believe that something vitally important would be lost if that heritage were forgotten. We see a link between the success Rotumans have enjoyed overseas and their childhood socialization into Rotuman culture, and believe that by nurturing the development of a global Rotuman community, and a continuing pride of heritage, that the children and grandchildren of migrants will be well served in the future.

At the heart of Rotuman culture has been a strong sense of personal and group autonomy. It has sustained Rotumans through Tongan invasions, European intrusions, colonial regimes, and in adapting to postcolonial cosmopolitan society. It is the foundation of a legacy of which Rotumans everywhere can be justifiably proud.

## Notes to Chapter 14

Issues of Rotuman identity represent our most recent research interests and have resulted in two articles from which this concluding chapter draws its material and inspiration: "Where Has Rotuman Culture Gone? And What is it Doing There?" was published in *Pacific Studies* (Howard and Rensel 2001), and "Rotuman Identity in the Electronic Age," in *Cultural Identity and Politics in the Pacific*, edited by Toon van Meijl and Jelle Miedema (Howard and Rensel 2004). We have also included material first presented in "Rotumans in Fiji: The Genesis of an Ethnic Group," a chapter in *Exiles and Migrants in Oceania*, edited by Michael Lieber (Howard and Howard 1977).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum5.html>

<sup>2</sup> See Fiji Census of 1911, Fiji Government.

<sup>3</sup> Fiji Census of 1936, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Howard 1966b, 1970.

<sup>5</sup> Outward Letters, 24 November 1884.

<sup>6</sup> Allardyce 1885–1886.

<sup>7</sup> See Shnukal 1992.

<sup>8</sup> Michael 1991, 8–9.

<sup>9</sup> Vilsoni Hereniko, personal communication.

<sup>10</sup> Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 1993, 233.



## Appendix A

### Research into the History of the Rotuman Language

The first linguist to classify Rotuman was Horatio Hale, philologist with the United States Exploring Expedition under Captain Wilkes. He interviewed some Rotumans in Tonga in April 1840 and concluded on the basis of this evidence that

their dialect is a mixture of Polynesian words, very much corrupted with those of some other language, unlike any which has been elsewhere found. They show, also, in some of their usages, and some words of their language, traces of communication with their Feejeean neighbours to the south.<sup>1</sup>

R. H. Codrington, working with data compiled by missionaries in the mid-1800s, rejected the classification of Rotuman as an "Eastern Pacific" (Polynesian) language and held that it should be classified as Melanesian, although he acknowledged that "many words and perhaps forms of expression have been in recent times derived from Tonga, Samoa, and Fiji."<sup>2</sup>

According to C. M. Churchward, the Methodist missionary linguist who spent many years on Rotuma and made an extensive study of the language, Rotuman is in no sense a dialect of any other known language, but can best be explained as the result of a fusion of several earlier languages:

It appears to show two Polynesian strata, a distinct Melanesian stratum, and perhaps a slight admixture of Micronesian and some very important elements, which are peculiarly Rotuman. The two Polynesian strata may reasonably be traced to the invasions under Raho and Tokaniua from Samoa (the earlier stratum), and to that under Ma'afu from Tonga (the later stratum).<sup>3</sup> As to the Melanesian stratum, this is too marked and too deep-seated to be explained as due simply to Fijian influence during the past two or three generations. It is more likely, I think, that there was a Melanesian, or partly Melanesian, race on the island when Raho landed. As to the purely Rotuman elements, comprising many of the commonest words in the language, together with its peculiar grammatical structure, these must be

regarded, I consider, as older still: we may speak of them as the aboriginal substratum.<sup>4</sup>

The linguist George Grace, working mainly with phonological and grammatical evidence, and using the criterion of shared innovations to determine family-tree relationships, brought the language into the limelight in 1959 with his conclusion that "Rotuman, Fijian, and the Polynesian languages have passed through a period of common history apart from all the remaining languages of the Austronesian family."<sup>5</sup>

Isadore Dyen, a prominent linguist at the time, rejected Grace's collection of alleged shared innovations as not being robust enough, in themselves, to require his conclusion,<sup>6</sup> and Ward Goodenough argued that any assessment of Rotuman's position must take into account the large number of words borrowed into Rotuman from Polynesian languages.<sup>7</sup>

New Zealand linguists Bruce Biggs and Andrew Pawley compared the vocabularies of Rotuman with Polynesian languages and affirmed a high degree of borrowing by Rotuman.<sup>8</sup> Biggs's contribution has been especially important because he worked out a reliable method for distinguishing the various layers represented in the Rotuman vocabulary. By reconstructing earlier forms of Rotuman and several other Oceanic languages, Biggs found that Polynesian contributions to the Rotuman vocabulary were even greater than had been suspected. He estimated that approximately 20 percent of the basic vocabulary (a 200-word list used by linguists for comparison) and perhaps as much as 43 percent of the total vocabulary had been demonstrably borrowed from Polynesian languages.<sup>9</sup>

Precisely because of such heavy borrowing in Rotuman, Pawley expressed skepticism regarding the use of vocabulary comparisons as a means of assessing Rotuman's genetic connections.

Pawley summarized his thesis as follows:

1. Rotuman but not Fijian has borrowed a considerable proportion of basic vocabulary from Polynesian, and probably from Tongan and Samoan in particular.
2. When this borrowing is excluded, Fijian and Polynesian stand significantly closer in respect to basic vocabulary than do Rotuman and Fijian or Rotuman and Polynesian.
3. That as far as Rotuman is concerned, basic vocabulary has not been stable and the usual assumptions

about retention rates in basic vocabulary cannot be made when dealing with this particular language. Borrowing from Polynesian is demonstrably extensive, and borrowing from other sources may have occurred on a significant scale. Therefore, vocabulary comparisons are not a reliable method for assessing the genetic connections between Rotuman and other languages.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, Pawley did not regard his findings as contradicting Grace's position, since the latter's methods were based primarily on phonology and grammar, with only minor dependence on vocabulary comparisons.

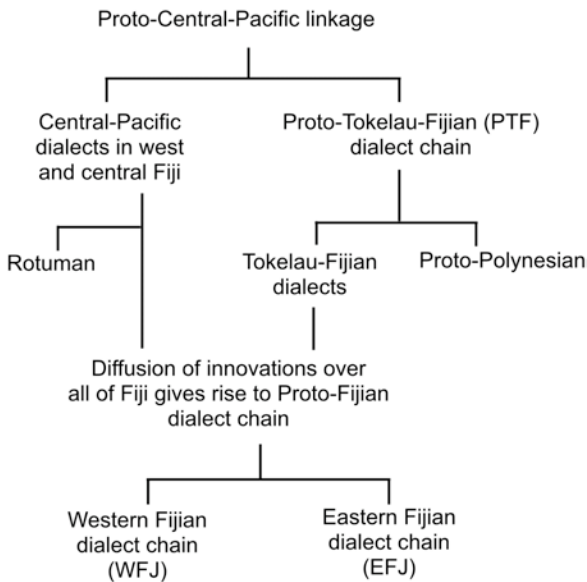
Both the phonology and grammar of Rotuman have presented comparative linguists with additional problems to ponder. For example, authorities have differed in their listing of Rotuman vowel sounds, with Codrington listing seven, A. M. Hocart twelve, and Churchward fourteen.<sup>11</sup> Biggs, after working with a Rotuman informant in Auckland, concluded that the proper number is ten, which have been derived from the five original Polynesian vowels.<sup>12</sup> These disagreements and an important part of the dynamics of phonological and grammatical change in the Rotuman language appear to be the result of a process called metathesis, in which the placement of the final vowel (V) and consonant (C) in a morpheme ("base") or meaningful part of a word are switched when the words are used in different ways. This switching results in a new phonetic pattern.

Summing up his thesis on this topic, Biggs suggested:

At some time in pre-Rotuman, the dynamic being unknown, the language innovated wholesale metathesis of final syllables of bases. The metathesis had grammatical function and the non-metathesised forms continued to exist side by side with the innovated forms. Previously base shapes had been (C)V(C)V; now final consonants occurred in the base shapes (C)VVC. Possibly simultaneously with the metathesis, but more probably after an interval of time each metathesised form was reduced one syllable, by (a) reducing the less sonorous of two vowels to a semi-vowel, or (b) coalescing two similar vowels in the quality of one of them, or (c) coalescing two unlike vowels and retaining features of the quality of each.<sup>13</sup>

The main grammatical function of metathesis is the designation of what Churchward has termed "definiteness and indefiniteness," a role comparable to that played by articles in English (e.g., *a* and *an* versus *the*),<sup>14</sup> for example, *famori* 'ea (the people say), but *famör* 'ea (some people say).

In a later development, Pawley and his associates researched such nonstandard languages in Fiji as the dialects of Vanua Levu, Taveuni, and the Yasawas, and although he did not regard the evidence as completely convincing, Pawley asserted that it points rather consistently in one direction—that Rotuman belongs in a sub-grouping (Central Pacific) that includes Fijian and the Polynesian languages, and that within this group there is a special relationship between Rotuman and the Fijian group, and particularly between Rotuman and the languages on the western side of Fiji.<sup>15</sup>

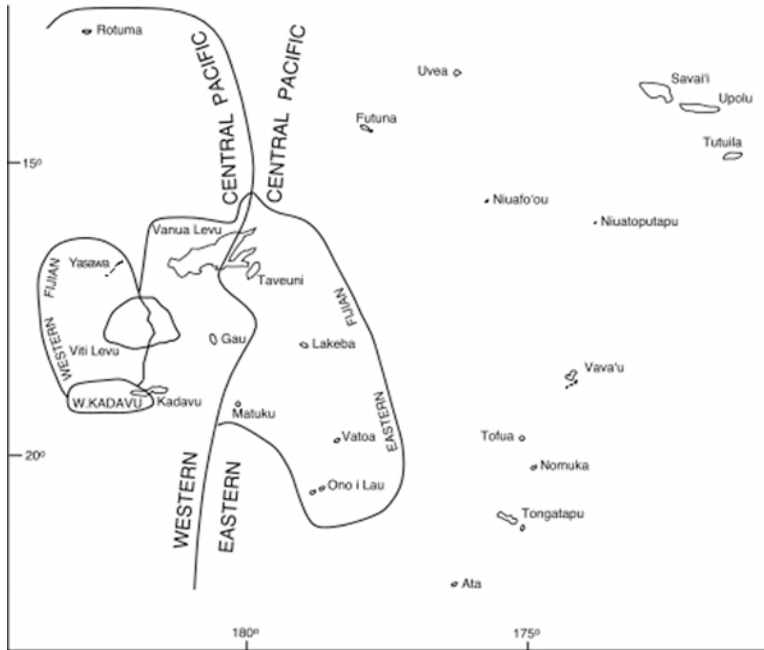


**Figure A.1** Language family tree showing position of Rotuman

The recent work of Hans Schmidt has by and large confirmed Pawley's hypothesis that Rotuman belongs to the Central-Pacific language group and that its closest relatives are Fijian dialects in northwest Vanua Levu (see this volume pp. 10–11).<sup>16</sup> Paul Geraghty argued that after the people who settled Rotuma departed from their homelands in Fiji, these areas were conquered by the militarily superior



chiefdoms in east Viti Levu (Bau, Rewa, etc.), and consequently their dialects today resemble the East-Fijian ones more closely than the West-Central-Pacific ones they had belonged to earlier (see map).<sup>17</sup>



Intersection of primary subgroups of Central Pacific with contemporary subgroups of Fijian. From Schmidt 1999, 203; adapted from Pawley 1979, 39.

## Notes to Appendix A

<sup>1</sup> Hale 1846, 103–104.

<sup>2</sup> Codrington 1885, 402.

<sup>3</sup> The reference here is to Rotuman legends concerning such events. See Titifanua and Churchward 1995, 7–14, 23–28.

<sup>4</sup> Churchward 1938, 80.

<sup>5</sup> Grace 1959, 65. The Austronesian language family comprises over 1,000 languages, including many of the languages spoken in New Guinea and the rest of Melanesia, in Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. Also included are some languages spoken in parts of Taiwan, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

<sup>6</sup> Dyen 1960, 1965.

<sup>7</sup> Goodenough 1962, 406.

<sup>8</sup> Pawley 1962; Biggs 1965.

<sup>9</sup> Biggs 1965, 412.

<sup>10</sup> Pawley 1962, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Codrington 1885, 402; Hocart 1919, 256; Churchward 1940, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Biggs 1959.

<sup>13</sup> Biggs 1965, 6–7.

<sup>14</sup> Churchward 1929, 1940.

<sup>15</sup> Pawley 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Schmidt 2000

<sup>17</sup> Geraghty 1983, 1996

## Appendix B

### Rotuman Phonetics

CONSONANTS (14): *f*, *g* (like *ng* in "sing"), *h*, *j* (nearly like *tch* in "pitch"), *k*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *p*, *r*, *s*, *t*, *v*, and ' (glottal stop).

VOWELS (10): *a*, *ɤ*, *á*, *ä*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *ö*, *u*, and *ü*. The principal vowels (*a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*) are pronounced as in Fijian and Samoan, or roughly as in calm (but shorter, unless written *ā*), set, sit, obey, and put; *ɤ*, which is between *a* and *o*, is nearly the same as *a* in "want" or "swan" or as *o* in "cot"; *á* and *ä*, which are between *a* and *e*, approximate, each in its own way, the sound of *a* in "cat" or "fan"; *ö* and *ü* are pronounced as in German. The sound of *ö* is somewhat like that of *er* in "her" or *or* in "word." The sound of *ü* may be produced, or approximated, by endeavoring to pronounce *ee* as in "see" while the lips are kept rounded as if pronouncing *oo* in "boot" (adapted from Churchward 1940:13).



## Appendix C

### Administrative Officers (Rotumans in Italics)

#### Deputy Commissioners

Arthur J. L. Gordon	1879
F. P. Murray	1880
Hugh Romilly	1880
W. L. Allardyce	1881

#### Resident Commissioners

Charles Mitchell	1881
W. M. Gordon	1882
A. R. Mackay	1884
F. C. Fuller	1889
H. E. Leefe	1891
John Hill	1901
Dr. Hugh Macdonald	1902
Dr. J. Halley	1908
Dr. Hugh Macdonald	1909
W. M. Ramsay	1913
A. A. Wright	1914
Dr. Hugh Macdonald	1914
J. S. Neil	1916
A. E. S. Howard	1918
Dr. Hugh Macdonald	1918
R. C. C. Higginson	1920
W. G. Cornish	1921
Dr. Hugh Macdonald	1921
Dr. William K. Carew	1923
W. Desmond Carew	1924
W. E. Russell	1926
Dr. William K. Carew	1928
Dr. C. J. Austin	1929
Dr. William K. Carew	1930
C. A. Caldwell	1932
W. Burrows	1933
J. McLeod	1933
K. J. Allardyce	1934
Dr. William K. Carew	1934

#### District Officers

A. E. Cornish	1935
H. G. R. McAlpine	1940
Dr. H. S. Evans	1943
A. E. Cornish	1944
F. G. Forster	1944
<i>Josefa Rigamoto</i>	1945
Williame Wainiqolo	1946
<i>Josefa Rigamoto</i>	1947
<i>Fred Ieli</i>	1949
Dr. H. S. Evans	1950
William Eason	1952
W. V. C. Baker	1952
<i>Fred Ieli</i>	1953
Ratu W. G. Bose	1955
<i>Fred Ieli</i>	1955
<i>Paul Manueli</i>	1960
<i>Fred Ieli</i>	1960
Aubrey Parke	1964
<i>Josefa Rigamoto</i>	1964
<i>A. M. Konrote</i>	1966
<i>Fred Gibson</i>	1966
<i>A. M. Konrote</i>	1968
<i>Fred Gibson</i>	1968
<i>A. M. Konrote</i>	1970
<i>F. T. Nakaora</i>	1975
<i>John Tevita</i>	1978
<i>F. T. Nakaora</i>	1978
<i>A. M. Konrote</i>	1980
<i>Firipo Nakaora</i>	1983
Kameli Koto	1985
<i>Viki Epeli</i>	1987
<i>Tiu Malo</i>	1988
<i>Fred Susau</i>	1990
<i>Fuata Fakraufon</i>	1992
<i>Mesulame Solomone</i>	1994
<i>Semesi Kauata</i>	1998
Luke Moroivalu	2000



## Appendix D

### Gagaj 'es Itu'u 1881–2000

#### Noa'tau

Maraf Terio  
Maraf Horosio  
Maraf Manueli  
Maraf Aisake  
Maraf Konrote  
Maraf Fatiaki  
Maraf Marseu  
Maraf Nataniela  
Maraf Solomone

#### Itu'ti'u

Alpat Vanike  
Tiugarea Horosio  
Garagsau Tukagasau  
Teviat  
Rak  
Jiotam  
Alpat Kaitu'u  
Far Atalifo  
Marekao Antonio  
Taksäs  
Kautarfon  
Markao

#### Juju

Osias Tavo  
Tuiporotu  
Vuan  
Uafta Nafaere  
Uafta Tuilakepa  
Titofag Kapieni  
Saititu  
Vuan  
Titofag Aleksio

#### Itu'muta

Manao Iane  
Tuipenau  
Manao Semese  
Pen  
Fagmanuia Sopapelu  
Ravak Arosio  
Fasaumoea Injimo  
Manao  
Osias

#### Oinafa

Tavo Rupeni  
Tavo Fakraufon  
Poar Rupeni  
Tokaniua Emose  
Kausiriaf Jione

#### Malhaha

Vasea  
Fatafes Fesa'itu  
Tua'ui  
Hanfakag Viliama  
Ufiamorat Kikorio  
Hanfakag Apao  
Fatafes Ufiamorat  
Aisea Tivaknoa  
Fatafes Aisea  
Asoatemur Jiotama  
Tuipeua Savike

#### Pepjel

Mou Aisea  
Mou Nataniela  
Turag  
Firma'oli  
Veragtiarma'oi  
Aufau  
Turag Petero  
Suakma'as





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## Name Index

Page numbers in **boldface** refer to photos

- Aisea (chief of Pepjei), 343  
 Aisea, Jioje, 347  
 Aitu, Aisea, 345, 348, 349  
 Aitu, Yvonne, 305  
 Akanisi (consultant to Hocart), 169  
 Albert Vanike (Alpat, chief of Itu'ti'u),  
     xix, 77, 156, 157, 158, 165,  
     168–169, 172–173, 174 180n5,  
     182n48, 188, 189, 192, 194, 197,  
     205, 208n13, 209n32, 216–217,  
     218, 219–**220**, 222, 343  
 Allardyce, W. L., xx, 48, 66, 129, 378  
 Allen, William, xx, 1, 23, 29, 46, 56,  
     66, 114n30  
 Alpat. *See* Albert Vanike  
 Antonio (Indian from Madras), 125  
 Apao, Hiagi, 347, 349, 361  
 Armstrong, A. L., 227  
 Atalifo, Aisea, 358  
 Avaiki, Sosefo, 375  
 Axeman, Captain, 187  
 Babahey, 119, 132n3  
 Baker, Thomas, 188  
 Bavadra, Timoci, 343  
 Bennett, George, xix, 6, 85–86, 87, 89,  
     100, 105, 113n1, 113n5, 271–272,  
     273, 274, 301n18  
 Biggs, Bruce, 394, 395–396  
 Boddam-Whetham, John W., 178,  
     182n41, 235n4  
 Boki (Hawaiian chief), 124  
 Bower, Graham, 78, 187–191,  
     209n25  
 Bren, Captain, 121  
 Bulou-ni-Wasa, 11  
 Butadroka (co-op inspector), 258  
 Calvert, James, 142  
 Carew, W. Desmond, 288, 290  
 Carew, William, 78, 226–227, 228,  
     233, 246, 247, 287, 290–292, 294  
 Carey, Rev. J., 140–141  
 Cheever, George N., 124, 132n13,  
     239–240, 241  
 Churchward, Rev. C. Maxwell, **xvii**, 11,  
     19, 141, 393, 395, 396  
 Cicero, Marcus Tullius, xv  
 Codrington, R. H., 393, 395  
 Cornish, A. E., 227, 229, 247, 253,  
     256, 294  
 Cow Mooala. *See* Kau Muala  
 Coy, Lavenie, 364–366  
 Croker, Ian, 347  
 Darling, Ralph (Governor of New South  
     Wales), 121  
 Dawson, Edward, 204  
 Degei, 11  
 Dening, Greg, 117  
 Des Voeux, George William, 185, 188,  
     190, 203–205, 210n56  
 Deschamps, Francois, xiv, xxx, 7, 91,  
     266, 309, 329  
 Dezest, Fr. Pierre, 139, 160  
 Dillon, Peter, xix, 19–20, 32, 36, 49,  
     66, 92, 119, 121, 132n3  
 Duckworth, W. Laurence, 9  
 Dyen, Isidore, 394  
 Eagleston, John Henry, 20–21, 45,  
     122, 124, 129  
 Eason, William J. E., 51, 131, 132n9,  
     187, 200, 231, 248  
 Edwards, Capt. Edward, 5, 12, 15, 26,  
     93, 117  
 Elloy, Bishop, 156  
 Emery (renegade sailor), 22, 124, 127,  
     132n13  
 Emose, Fereti, 347  
 Enasio, Henry, xxx  
 Epele, Viki, 345, 346  
 Evans, H. S., xvi–xvii, xxx, 76,  
     229–**230**, 248, 294–295,  
 Evrard, Jamie, 24  
 Fa, Tevita, 346, 347, 348, 350  
 Fagmanuia, 220  
 Fakafinau, 19  
 Fakraufon (brother of Maraf), 169  
 Farrington (Resident Commissioner),  
     288  
 Fatiaki, Jione, 293  
 Fatiaki, Maraf. *See* Maraf Fatiaki

- Fletcher, Rev. William, 103, **134**, 139,  
140, 142, 143–147, **144**, 148,  
153n29, 158, 159, 163, 182n37,  
214, 241, 269
- Fonmoa, W. (Native Medical  
Practitioner), 294
- Fonmon (man from Noa'tau), 13
- Fonmon (legendary chief) 82
- Forbes, Litton, xix–xx, 49–50, 51, 52,  
85, 123, 129, 132n11, 176, 178,  
180n4, 241
- Foster, Robert, 342, 343
- Foster, Saumaru, xxix, 337, 362–363,  
364
- Frazer, James, 72
- Fuckafinnow. See Fakafinaiu,
- Fürsefaua (a Rotuman chief), 139
- Ganilau, Ratu Penaia Kanatabatu, 345
- Gardiner, J. Stanley, xx–xxi, 2, 4, 9,  
11, 12–14, 19, 20, 23, 32–33, 36,  
37, 41–43, 47, 50–51, 52, 65, 67,  
75–76, 82–83, 86–87, 92, 94, 96,  
108, 133, 165, 167, 168, 172–173,  
174, 242, 243, 267, 272, 273–274,  
275–276, 277, 280, 396
- Geraghty, Paul, 397
- Gibson, Alexander and Annie, 127,  
**128**
- Gibson, Fred, 231, 311, 339
- Gibson, Henry. See Lagfatmarō
- Goodenough, Capt. J. G., 77
- Goodenough, Ward, 394
- Gordon, Arthur H., 185, 190,  
191–194, 195, 196, 197–198, 199,  
200, 201, 202, 203, 216
- Gordon, Arthur J. L., 192, 194,  
196–202, 216, 269
- Gordon, William, 220–222, 270, 277,  
280, 292, 378
- Grace, George, 394
- Griffon, Fr. Gustave, **149**, **151**, **293**
- Hale, Horatio, 393
- Halley, John, 286
- Hānitema'us, 11–12
- Harder, Christopher, 350
- Hartley, R. L., 5
- Hereniko, Vilsoni, xxix, 88–89, 97–98,  
106–107, 108, 383
- Hill, John, 224, 245
- Hocart, Arthur Maurice, xxi, 65, 66,  
82n9, 94, 165, 169, 395
- Horasio (subchief adviser to Maraʻi),  
190
- Horosio Maraʻi. See Maraʻi Horosio
- Howard, Charles, 127, **128**, 133n26
- Ieli, Fred, xxviii, 231, 259
- Inia, Elizabeth, xxviii, xxx, 46, 107,  
108, 130, 135, 173, 175
- Inia, Wilson, xxviii, 258, **259**, 260,  
263, 319–320, 342, 343
- Inoke, Sosefo, 358, 366–368
- Iratuofa, 225–226
- Irava (27th sau), 15, 171
- Irava (in war at Saukama), 171
- Irava, Ieli, 350
- Jackman, William, 31
- Jarman, Robert, 21–22, 23
- Jieni, Tipu, 294
- John, Williams, xviii, 120, 126, 127,  
271
- Kau Muala, 14–16, 19
- Kaunufuek (87th vakai), 277
- Kaurasi, Moses, 99
- Kaurfose (Tuitoga), 12
- Kausakmua, 356, 357
- Kilioni, Temo, 323–324
- Knights, John, 122
- Konrote, A. M. (Marorue), 232, 312
- Konrote, Jioje, xi–xii, xxix–xxx, 351,  
352
- Ladefoged, Thegn, xvii–xviii, 5, 27n7,  
64–65
- Lagfatmarō (Henry Gibson), 344–347,  
349, 350, 351, 353, 355, 356–358,  
359
- Lal, Brij, 355
- Lambert, Sylvester M., 289, 292, 294
- Langdon, Robert, 125
- Lange, David, 346
- Langham, Rev. Frederick, 155
- Langi, Rev. Jione, xxix, 140, 155, 379,  
380, 381
- Lawry, Walter, 125
- Leeffe, H. E., 223–224, 268, 274,  
278–279, 281, 285
- Lefevre, Commander, 157
- Lefuge (Le Foume), 12
- Lesson, René Primavère, xviii, 19,  
31–32, 36, 47, 65, 89, 90, 93,  
119–121, 126, 138, 240, 270–271,  
272
- Lloyd, L. P., 312



- Lucatt, Edward, xix, 7–8, 22–23, 53, 93–94, 105, 133n24, 267, 272, 273, 276
- Lutunasobosobo, 11
- Lyth, Rev. R. B., 139
- Ma'afu (Tongan chief), 12, 19, 25, 107, 393
- Macdonald, Hugh, 225–226, 246, 267, 282, 285–286, 287
- Macdonald, P. D., 249
- Macgregor, Gordon, xvi, xxi, 64, 86, 87–88, 90, 92–93, 96, 100, 101–102, 108, 165, 167
- Mackay, A. R., 222, 239, 253, 280
- Macpherson, Dr., 294
- Makrava, Visanti, 319, 321, 322–323
- Malo, Tiu, 346, 348, 349
- Managreve, Mausio, 347
- Manava (chief of Itu'muta), 157, 188–189, 192, 194, 197, 209n32, 213, 217
- Manueli, Paul, xxviii, 353, 354, 358
- Mara, Ratu Kamasese, 249, 312, 317, **336**, 351, **361**
- Marāf (Marafu, Marof; chief of Noa'tau), 13, 14, 23, 41, 77, 110, 157, 158, 159, 164, 167, 168–170, 171, 173, 174, 182n47, 185–186, 187–188, 189, 190–191, 192, 194, 196–197, 205, 209n32, 216–218, 221, 223–224, 287, 314; Marāf Fatiaki, 294; Marāf Horosio 224; Marāf Nataniela, **336**, 342; Marāf Solomone, xxviii, 351, 359; Marāf Sorkiav, 169–170; Marāf Tirio, 343
- Mariner, William, 14, 15–16
- Mataere, Marieta, 294
- Mataiase (Wesleyan convert), 142
- Mataitoga, Isikeli, 348, 350
- McClatchey, Will, xxii, 273
- Michael, Seferosa, 378
- Misau, Fatiaki, 358
- Mitchell, Charles, 203–204, 210n56, 218–220, 236n12, 270, 279–280
- Moore, Rev. Thomas, 158, 163–164, 174, 182, 189
- Mora' (chief of Pepjet), 156, 159, 162
- Morisio. *See* Tiporotu
- Mose, Garagsau, 347
- Mua, Afasio, 347
- Mua, Konrote, 224
- Muaror, Kafoa, 358
- Murray, F. P., 200, 201, 210n51
- Nataniela, Marāf. *See* Marāf Nataniela.
- Ninaf, Jean, 160
- Niumfaga (Niomfang, chief of Oinafa), 188, 208n13
- Old Bill (renegade sailor), xix, 123–124, 127
- Olili, 13
- Osborn, Joseph, 124, 129
- Osborne, Rev. John, 142–143, 146–147, 148, 157–158, 162–164, 173, 180n4
- Osiav Tavo (chief of Juju), 159, 188, 196–198, 208n13, 343
- Parke, Aubrey, 49, 59
- Parker (deserter from the *Rochester*), xix, 121
- Patel, A. D., 339
- Pawley, Andrew, 394–395, 396, 397
- Pierre, Sr. M., **151**
- Poulthier, Commander, 156
- Poupinel, R. P., 160
- Pullack, Carl, 187
- Queen Elizabeth, 231, 345
- Rabuka, Sitiveni, 343, 345, 346, 352
- Raho, 3, 11, 12, 25, 52, 59, 60–61, 63, 69, 81n2
- Rao. *See* Raho.
- Reeves, Paul, 355
- Riamkau (Riamkao, chief of Juju), 156, 157, 158–159, 161–162, 164, 168–171, 173–176, 182n47, 198
- Richier, Commander, 159
- Rigamoto, Josefa, xxviii, 231, **232**, 237n41
- Rigamoto, Marieta, 360, 372
- Rigamoto, Tarterani, xxviii
- Riogi, Sakimi, 355
- Roe, Mr. (manager of Burns Philp), 257
- Romilly, Hugh, 78, 201, 202, 215–217
- Rueptekei, 12
- Rupeni, Tavo (chief of Oinafa), 343
- Russell, W. E., **212**, 288
- Sakimi, Ama'i, xxviii, **252**
- Sandilands, Commander, 122
- Savea, Iane, 347
- Savoiat (6th vakai), 12

- Schmidt, Hans, xxii, xxix, 10, 397–398
- Semantafa, Ieni, 294, 297
- Seru, Apaitia, 347–348, 350
- Shutler, Richard, 24
- Solomone, Marāf. See Marāf Solomone
- Solomone, Mary, 294
- Sorkiav, See Marāf Sorkiav
- Sosefo (translator for Hocart), 169
- Soubeyran, Fr. Lucien, 147, **149, 184**
- Stammerjohn, Captain, 187
- Stock, Mr. (manager of Burns Philp), 257
- Suakmas (in war at Saukama), 171
- Sukuna, Ratu Lala, 231, 299
- Sykes, J. W., 227–230, 248, 255
- Taio (war at Saukama), 171
- Taksās, 358
- Taukāve, Fatiaki, 295–297
- Tauragtoak (chief of Ituʻtʻu), 155, 172–173, 180n5
- Tavo (chief of Oinafa), 174, 197, 208n13, 209–210n33; Tavo (of Juju), 225; Tavo Rupeni, 343
- Taylor, A. E., 9
- Thurston, John, 209n25
- Tigarea, 100, 223
- Tiporotu (chief of Juju), 171, 198, 225
- Tirio, Marāf. See Marāf Tirio
- Titifanua, Mesulama, xvi, xvii, 13, 66
- Toaʻniu, 314
- Tokaniua (legendary figure), 11–12, 27–28n18, 52, 59, 60–61, 69, 70, 393;
- Tokaniua (chief of Oinafa), 139, 171; Tokaniua Emose, 231
- Tromelin, L. de, 267
- Trouillet, Joseph, xvi, 12, 15, 20, 52, 59–60, 66, 71, 72, 81n3, 139, 155, 157, 160, 161–162, 164, 165, 171, 173, 175, 176, 277
- Tua (12th vakāi), 15, 171
- Tuaʻnāki, Ferei, 171
- Tuipenau (chief of Ituʻmuta), 223, 267
- Tuitonga, 12
- Tuivaga, Timoci, 349
- Turner, Rev. George, 165, 169
- Uafta (chief of Juju), 225
- Uafta Versoni, 347
- Uonu (woman from Noaʻtau), 12
- Urakmata (chief of Noaʻtau), 13
- Varea, Atfoa, 320–321
- Varomua (9th sau), 12
- Varomua (consultant to Macgregor), 167
- Vasea (chief of Malhaha), 188, 197, 219, 343
- Verne, Fr. Pierre, 125, 139
- Victoria, Queen, 85
- Villien, Fr. Gregoire, 139
- Vilsoni, Maniue, xxviii, 416
- Vuna, Felise, 174
- Waldegrave, Captain William, 121
- Wall, Jonathan, 24
- West India Jack, 125
- Westbrook, George E. L., 167, 175, 176, 187, 208n4
- Wilkes, Charles, 393
- William, Aisake, 339
- Williams, John, 125, 139
- Williams, T. R., **361**
- Williamson, Robert W., 67–68, 71
- Wilson, James, 117
- Worth, Captain, 121
- Young (deserter from the *Rochester*), xix, 121
- Young, Gock Chim, 257
- Zerubbabel Urakmata, 141–**142**, 158

## Subject Index

Page numbers in **boldface** refer to graphs, tables, and photos.

For alphabetizing purposes, glottal stops (ʻ) are treated as the last letter in the Rotuman alphabet.

- Admiralty Islands (Bismarck Archipelago), 241
- aggression, interdistrict, 64. *See also* warfare; specific wars
- agricultural practices, 32-35. *See also* breadfruit; taro; yams
- Ahau, **266**, 308, 310, 323, 347, **361**, 364, 370
- airport, 338
- ancestors, xxx, xxxi, 331; concern for, 53, 150, 331, 357; potency of, 38, 53, 279, 298, 299; remote, 60, 73, 137, 215
- ancestral spirits, 61, 63, 69, 108, 135, 136, 149, 276, 284, 288. *See also* 'atua
- ancestral tombs, **xxx**, **55**. *See also* burial grounds; graves; tombs
- ancestry: chiefly, 70, 75, 78, 225, 344; mixed, 268. *See also* chieftainship
- animal husbandry, 36. *See also* cattle; chickens; goats; horses; pigs
- Anuta, 19
- apei*, 113n7, 85-89
- ape'aitu*, 275-276, 280
- archaeology, xvii-xviii, 24, 29n60
- autonomy, xxiii, 74, 77-80, 131, 186, 205-206, 213, 233, 261, 299, 315, 317, 356, 357-358, 359, 364, 366, 369, 383, 390
- atua*. *See* 'atua
- Australia, Rotumans in, 378-380
- bark cloth. *See* *uha*
- beachcombers. *See* renegades
- birth: customs concerning, 87, 274, 278, 295; government regulations concerning, 202; rates, 269, 270; role of spirits in, 135, 137
- Bora Bora, 19, 23, 24
- breadfruit, 31, 32, 33, 35, 38, 39, 43, 89, 127, 253
- burial grounds (graveyards, *tamura*): importance of, 53-54, 137; location of, 3, 49, 51, 292; of sau (Sisilo), 169, 184; spirit occupants of, 136, 150. *See also* graves, tombs
- canoes, 2, 20-24, 37, 90, **91**, 118, 167. *See also* seafaring
- Catholic: churches, 157, 158, 167, **243-244**, 308; conflict with Methodists (Wesleyans), xx, xxiv, 148, 155-179, 187, 196-198, 200, 223-224, 243, 260-261, 329; converts, 155-156, 157, 159, 160; districts, xvi, xx, 155, 157, 196, 218, 223, 260; missionaries, xvi, xxi, xxviii, 125, 139, 156, 199; missionary practices, 79, 147, 148, 163, 178, 199, 214, 235n4, 242, 280-281, 292, 295; representation on the Rotuma Council, 218-219, 228; Resident Commissioners, 287-288; schools, 365. *See also* missionization
- cats, 48, 118
- cattle, 40, 239, 254. *See also* animal husbandry
- cemeteries. *See* burial grounds; tombs
- cession to Britain: Bower report regarding request for, 187-189; process leading up to, 190-198; reasons for, 205-206; Rotuman reactions against, 218-221, 236n12; Rotuman request for, 185-187. *See also* Deed of Cession
- chiefs: relations with commoners, 69, 78-80, 175, 205-206, 216, 218-226, 233, 254, 313, 330; Council of, 60, 74, 77, 202, 216, 228-231, 233; monument to, **370**; homage paid to, 38,n 51, 88, 101, 108, **109**, 110, 221; ranking of, 75, 77, 189, 236n26; relations with missionaries, 143, 145, 148, 149-150, 157, 158-160, 171, 173, 213-214, 243; rivalry between, xv,

- 66, 69–70, 165, 174, 187, 190, 213, 217; selection of, 215, 223, 225, 227, 357; symbolic associations of, 61, 63, 81n2; traditional role of, 44, 46, 63, 69, 99; involvement in trade, 241, 242. *See also* chieftainship; mana
- chickens, 32, 35, 36, **39**, 40, 239, 247. *See also* animal husbandry
- chieftainship: chiefly authority, 77–80, 81n2, 330; colonial government and transformation of, 222–226; democratization of, 226–227; economics of, 221–222; Fijian and Rotuman models of, 214–216; postcolonial changes in, 314; missionary impact on, 213–214; Polynesian patterns of, 72–74; Sykes report concerning, 227–231. *See also* chiefs; mana
- Christianity. *See* Catholic; Methodist; missionization
- climate, 4–5
- clothing (dress), 90, 96, **126**, 253, 383, 388; chiefly, 86–87; of female clown, 108; missionary attitudes toward, 146; of warriors, **153**, 167–168
- clowning. *See* *hán mane'ák sū*
- colonial administration: establishment of, 200–205; and Rotuman chiefs, 232–233; Rotuman district officers during, 231–232, 401
- commerce: and missionization, 242–244; in the postcolonial period, 317–318; trade with European ships, 239–242
- communication, 310; and cultural identity, 388–390
- community formation abroad, 383–385, 389–390
- Constitution, Fiji: of 1990, 352–355; 1997 amendment to, 355–360
- Constitutional Conferences: of 1965, 338–341; of 1970, 341–343
- contact with other islands, 19–20. *See also* Sāmoa, Tonga, Tuvalu
- Cook Islands, 125, 346, 358
- cooperative movement, 256–262. *See also* Rotuma Cooperative Association; Raho Cooperative
- copra, 3, 5, 239, 310, 339–340; cess on, 245; compulsory contributions of, 200–201, 216, 220, 222, 245–249; control of trade, 241–242, 256, 319, 320–322, 365; cooperatives and, 258–260, 321; income from, 205, 252–253, 254, 255, 293, 317; fluctuations in production of, 249–252. *See also* taxation
- coups in Fiji: Rotuman responses to, 343–351
- courtship, 330
- cultural identity, 375–377, 383–390. *See also* ethnicity
- dance, 99–101, 103–107; comic, **131**; as entertainment for guests, 204, 315; of Kirkirsasa, 97–98; Methodist missionary opposition to, 143, 144–145, 199; in migrant communities, 384, 386–388; restrictions on, 275; as preparation for war, 165, 169
- death: attitudes toward, 135, 137, 138; causes of, 275, 277, 278, 279, 284, 286, 287, **289**, 290, 291; of chiefs, 69, 99, 101; government regulations concerning, 202; rates, 269, 270, 277, 282, **283**, 288, 296, 297. *See also* infant mortality
- Deed of Cession, 185, 194, 346, 348, 356, 357, 366
- depopulation, 48, 51, 72, 244, 267–270. *See also* emigration; migration; population
- diabetes, 323–324. *See also* health and illness
- diet. *See* food; health and illness
- dogs, 36, 93, 253
- dress. *See* clothing
- education, 331, 337. *See also* schools
- electrification, 308
- emigration: early concerns about, 269–270, 133n32. *See also* migration
- employment, 337, 338

- English: language, xvii, xxi, 63, 110, 169, 194, 229, 331, 350;  
 law, 216, 219; missionaries, 11, 139, 175, 205; renegade sailors, 22, 120, 122, 124, 126, 127; Rotuman attitudes toward, 188; ships, 129; traders, 189, 205  
 environment. *See* natural environment  
 epidemics, 268, 277, 279, 282, 287, 288, **289**, 296. 301n6. *See also* health and illness; death  
 ethnicity, 131, 375–377, 378, 378–380. *See also* cultural identity  
*fakpure (vakai)*, xvi, 12, 59–60, 65, 66, 67, 70–71, 81n1, 171, 174  
*fauḡisi*, 76, 77  
 fertility: of land, 7, 34, 45, 68, 118; of people, 68, 89, 108, 136  
 fishing, 36–38  
 food: as homage to chiefs, 219, 221–222; in hospitals, 285–286; imported, 40–41, 249, 253; preparation of, 41–**44**; production of, 44; symbolic significance of, 68–69; types of, 32–33, 38–41. *See also* agricultural practices; animal husbandry; fishing  
 French: national interests, 162, 190; priests, xxi, 11, 148, 164, 175, 176, 187, 188, 197, 205; ships' visits to Rotuma, 119, 156–157, 159, 162  
 fuel: depot, **309**; shortages, 309  
 Funafuti. *See* Tuvalu  
 Futuna, 1, 14, 17, 19, 20, 139, 194  
 goats, 40, 118. *See also* animal husbandry  
 geographic code. *See* symbolic code  
 geographic location of Rotuma, 1  
 geology, 1–4. *See also* soil; water  
 Gilbert Islands. *See* Kiribati  
 ghosts. *See* 'atua  
 graves, 7, **55**, **179**, 281, 284. *See also* burial grounds; tombs  
*hān mane'āk sū*, 88, 107–108, **131**  
 Hāf Liua, 3, 4, 36  
 Haga, 127  
 Halafa, 172  
 Hansolo, **309**  
 Hapmafau, 2  
 Hatana, **3**, 11, 52, 59  
 hair, 8, 9, 109, 118, 127, 148, 165, 169, 271  
 health and illness: achievement of medical modernity (1953–1960), 295–299; changes in diet and exercise, 324; changing conditions in 19th century, 277–281; child welfare and public health programs (1924–1952), 287–295; diseases of modernity, 323–324; hygiene, 271, 272; Rotuman concepts of health and illness, 274–276; sanitation, 290, 292, 294, 295, 296, 297; traditional healing practices, 270–274. *See also* epidemics; death  
 home furnishings, 41, 42, 47–48, 306–308  
 horses, 239, 310. *See also* animal husbandry  
 households: autonomy of, xxiii, 80, 369; economy of, 41, 43, 80, 252, 255, 259, 318; size of, **328–329**  
 houses, 6, **47**, **48**, 49, 118, 147, 148, 313; of chiefs, 313, 330; construction of, 46, 110, 112, 213, 306–307, 319, **333**; cooking, 34, 42; dance (play), 53, 105, 145; foundations of (*fūag rī*), 46–**47**, 49, 167; first Methodist mission house, **134**; types of, **306**  
 hurricanes, 36, 44, 46, 158, 249, 306, **307**  
*ho'aga* (local kin groups), 65, 70, 75–77, 78, 79, 80, 242, 244–245, 344  
 hypertension, 323–324  
 income, 252–255, 265n47, 317–319  
 independence from Fiji: attitudes toward, 337, 339–340, 348, 349, 355, 358, 361–368; high court ruling regarding, 349–350  
 infant mortality, 278–279, 282, **288**, 289, 290–291  
 islets, 2, 3. *See also* Hatana; Hāf Liua; Uea  
*kāinaga*, xi, 47, 70, 321  
 Kalvaka, 344, 346  
 kava, 6, 33, 324; attitudes toward drinking, 178, 278, 330–331; bowls, 90, 275; ceremony, 108–110,

- 115n55, 115n56; ceremonial gifts of, 172, 173, 320; rank order of service, 13, 59, 74, 76, 143, 174, 214, 217, 223; servers, 96, 127; serving to chiefs, 60, 65, **109**; and sickness, 274, 275, 276, 324
- kin groups. See *ho'aga*, *kainaga*, *mosega*
- kinship, 17, 71, 74, 75, 176, 225, 231, 244, 389-390. See also *kainaga*
- Kiribati (Gilbert Islands), 13, 19, 28n25, 124, 127, 361
- Kirkirsasa, 96-98
- labor recruiting, xix, 125, 199, 269
- Lami, 338
- language, Rotuman: characteristics of, xv, 10, 138, 399; history of, 9-11, 25, 26, 49, 50, 331, 393-**397**; retention of, xi, 23, 357, 363, 379, 385, 386, 389; teaching of, 141, 173, **374**
- land tenure, 242-245, 264n25; missionization's effect on, 244-245
- Lautoka, 338, 377, 384
- legends. See oral history
- Levuka, 168, 204, 250, 338
- Limaräe, 61; see also 'Oroi
- Losa, 3, 100, 172
- Maka Bay, 2, 4, 24, 117, 238
- mana, xii, 73, 138-139, 140; chiefly, 17, 63, 71, 356; healing, as component in, 283, 298; and skill in producing artifacts, 38, 89, 111; source of, 61, 63, 69, 142; and warfare, 60, 71. See also chiefs, chieftainship
- Mangaia, 64, 68
- marriage, 12, 126, 127, 133n24, 202, 290, 378, 381, 389
- massage. See *sarao*
- mats. See *apei*; weaving
- measles. See epidemics
- medicine. See health and illness; *mena*
- mena*: as body ointment, 120, 143, 144, 145, 165, 272-273; as food, 33; as medicine, 35, 274; missionary reaction to, 146, 147, 148; as paint, 90
- Methodist (Wesleyan): congregations abroad, 279, 281, 380; conflict with Catholics, xx, xxiv, 148, 155-179, 187, 196-198, 200, 223-224, 243, 260-261, 329; converts, 79, 143, 144, 146, 149, 156, 159, 163, 173, 176; districts, 155; lay teachers, 78, 125, 139, 141-142, 199; missionaries, xvii, xx, 66, 103, **134**, **144**, 393; missionary practices, 79, 145-147, 148, 150, 153n29, 188, 214, 242, 243; opposition to tourism, 315; representation on Rotuma Council, 228, 231
- migration, 324-329, 337, 378-382; to Australia, 378-380; to cities in Fiji, **325**, 338; and community formation abroad, 383-385; and distribution of Rotumans in Rotuma and Fiji, **326**, **327**; effect on household size and structure, **328**; to New Zealand, 380-382; and symbols of status, 313. See also emigration, population
- missionization: Catholic versus Wesleyan, 147-148, 329; conflict with colonial government, 198-200; consequences of conversion, 149-150, 155; resistance to, 140-143; and Rotuman custom, 143-147
- Mobil Oil. See fuel
- Mömahao, 344, 346, 348, 350, 355-360, 363, 369
- motor vehicles, 308-310
- mosega*, 70, 225, 227, 357. See also *kainaga*
- Motusa, 2, 4, 156, 168, 172, 175, 204, **212**, 257
- mua* (ritual leader), xvi, 59, 60, 66, 70-71, 92, 103-104
- musical performances: chants, 99-102; paddle-dances, 103-104; *tautoga* (group dances), 104-107. See also dance
- Nadi, 338, 377, 384
- National Bank of Fiji (NBF), 319, 321, 322-323
- natural environment, attitudes toward, 45-46
- Nausori, 338
- New Zealand, Rotumans in, 380-382
- Niuafou'u, 1, 11, 12, 19, 396
- Oinafa village, xxviii, 257
- oral history, 11-19, 52, 59-63, 66-72

- oratory, 99  
 ornaments, shell, 90–93  
 Ouvea (New Caledonia), 125, 132n17  
 pandanus, 33, 41, 46, 85, 86, 87, 338.  
     See also *sa'aga*  
 performance arts, 98–110  
 pigs, 35, 36, 39, 40, 41, 250; cooking  
     of, 42; as a health hazard, 292;  
     numbers of, 32, 118, 292; as a  
     sacrifice, 87, 281; as a valued  
     commodity, 12, 31, 167, 169, 172,  
     175, 239. See also animal  
     husbandry  
 physical characteristics of Rotumans,  
     8–9, 271. See also hair  
 political organization: changes  
     following Fiji's independence,  
     311–312. See also chieftainship;  
     colonial administration; *sau*; social  
     organization  
 population, 267–303; distribution of,  
     64, 76, **326**, **327**; precontact, 45,  
     50, 51; political implications of, 74,  
     78, 205, 339, 342, 343; pressures,  
     22, 361; of districts as basis for  
     taxation, 246. See also taxation.  
 Queen of Cakadrovei, 85  
 Queen of England, 77, 185, 188, 189,  
     192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 201, 342,  
     346,  
 Raho Cooperative, 319–323  
 Ra'iatea, 24  
 religion: religious beliefs, 45, 135–136,  
     138, 144, 150; religious  
     imagination, 135–137. See also  
     *ape'a'itu*; *sa'a'itu*; 'atua;  
     missionization; natural environment  
 remittances, 318–319  
 renegade sailors, 119–125, 132n8,  
     132n11; impact on culture,  
     125–127; Rotuman reactions to,  
     130–131  
 roads, 310  
 Rochester, deserters from, xviii, xix,  
     119–121, 126  
 Rotuma Cooperative Association  
     (RCA): formation of, 258–**262**; in the  
     postcolonial period, 317–322; store  
     turnover, 317–**318**. See also  
     cooperative movement; copra  
 Rotuma Council, 229–231, 313–314,  
     340, **360**. See also chiefs, Council of  
 Rotuma Web site, xxii–xxiii, xxvi, 362,  
     371, 389–390  
 Rotuman language. See language,  
     Rotuman.  
 sailors, Rotuman, 129–130  
 Sāmoa, xviii, 1, 27n18, 52, 186, 187,  
     241; contact with, 19, 24, 25; in  
     Rotuman oral history, 11, 69;  
     Rotuman laborers in, 270  
 Samoan: influence on Rotuman  
     culture, 46, 95, 102; influence on  
     Rotuman language, 9, 10, 25, 394,  
     399; legendary figures, 11;  
     Wesleyan teachers, 125, 139,  
     152n5  
*sarao*, 98, 271, 273, 274, 297–298  
*sa'a'itu*, 89, 137  
*sa'aga*, 33, 43, 85, 86, 87. See also  
     *apei*, pandanus, weaving  
*sau*: burial ground for, **184**; ceremonial  
     performances of, 103–104; as  
     ceremonial title, 197–198, 344, 346;  
     Christianity's impact on, 79,  
     144–145, 150, 199, 214; clothing  
     and symbols of, 86–87, 92–93, 141;  
     institution of, 59, 60, 63–64,  
     143–144; oral traditions regarding,  
     xvi; as basis of political integration,  
     64–65, 66, 70, 71; selection of, 74,  
     82n9, 132n3, 170; term of office of,  
     28n30, 65–66, **72**; relation to *vakai*  
     (*fakpure*), 12, 15, 63, 67–68, 70  
 Saukama, 65, 169–171  
 Savlei, 155, 168, 172, 173  
 schools, 147, 148, 158, 247, 258,  
     331, 365, **374**, 384  
 seafaring, 20–24, 25. See also sailors,  
     Rotuman  
 settlement pattern, 48–54  
 sex, customary control of, 127, 315.  
     See also virginity  
 Sisilo, 169, **184**  
 social organization: island-wide, 63–66;  
     district, 74–77. See also  
     chieftainship; political organization  
 social relations, changes in, 330  
 soil, 4, 5, 7, 27n7, 31, 34, 63, 264n18  
 spirit mediums, See *ape'a'itu*  
 spirits. See *ape'a'itu*, *sa'a'itu*, 'aitu, 'atua

- subsistence, 31–32. See also  
     agricultural practices; animal  
     husbandry; fishing; food  
 Sumi, xxvi, xxviii, 148, 158, **243**, 308  
 Suva, xxix, 192, 250, 254, 256, 322,  
     338, 352, 364, **374**, 377, 384  
 Sykes report. see chieftainship  
 symbolic code, geographic, 61–63, 67,  
     81n3, 115n54  
*tabua*, 92, 113n7  
 tapa cloth, 14, 165  
 tattooing, 42, 82, 93–94, **95**, 96–98,  
     114n30, 118, 120  
 Tarawa. See Kiribati  
 taro (*a'ana*), 6, 32, 38, **39**, 253, 324;  
     as a commodity, 50, 247, 275;  
     planting of, 33–34; methods of  
     cooking, 35, 40, 43  
 Tavua, 338  
 taxation, 188, 189, 200–201, 218,  
     221–222, 245–249, 252, 253, 255,  
     260, 281, 285, 339, 368  
 telephone, 293, 310, 365, 388–389  
 television, 310  
*temo*, 101–102  
*tē samuga*, 130  
 Tikopia, 13, 14, 19, 23  
 tombs, ~~xxx~~, **55**, 93, **177**. See also  
     burial grounds; graves  
 Tonga, xviii, 1, 25, 27n18, 60, 61, 68,  
     69, 85, 90, 119, 162, 241, 347,  
     358; contact with, 9, 12, 14–19, 24,  
     25, 396; in Rotuman oral history, 1,  
     11, 12, 13, 15–19  
 Tongan: influence on culture, 46,  
     106–107; influence on language, 9,  
     10, 24, 393, 394; Wesleyan  
     teachers, 139, 140  
 Torres Strait, Rotuman migration to,  
     378  
 tourism, 315, **316**  
 transportation: to Fiji, 305, 365, 381;  
     commercial firms' control of, 257,  
     258–259; motorized, 250, 292, 321;  
     school buses, 365  
 Treaty of *Hamelin*, 156–157, 158, 159  
 Tuakoi, 169  
 turmeric. See *mena*  
 Tuvalu, 1, 19, 20, 23, 124  
 Uea, 3, 22, 124, 272  
*uha*, 89–90, 114n15, 114n16  
 Upu, xxi, xxviii, 287, 308, 309  
*vakai*. See *fakpure*  
 Vaitupu, 19  
 Vanua Levu, 10, 396, 397  
 Vatukoula, 338, 384  
 vegetation, 5–8  
 virginity, 109, 127  
 Viti Levu, 397  
 Wallis Island. See 'Uvea  
 warfare, Rotuman style of, 100–101,  
     113n5, 115n38, 165–167, 182n50  
 war in Saukama, 168–171  
 war of 1871, 155–157, 180n4,  
     181n22  
 war of 1878, 158–159, 181n22, 187;  
     Catholic perspective on, 159–162,  
     176; conflicting accounts of,  
     175–179; missionaries' role in,  
     171–174; Rotuman perspective on,  
     165, 167–171, 175, 179; Wesleyan  
     perspective on, 162–165, 178  
 water, access to fresh, 5, 308  
 weaving, 85–89. See also *apei*  
 Web site. See Rotuma Web site  
 Wesleyan. See Methodist  
 whalers: number of visits by, 125;  
     Rotuman sailors aboard, 129–130;  
     trade with, 32, 92, 119, 169, 239,  
     241. See renegade sailors  
 whales' teeth, 92  
 wharf at Oinafa, 2, **238**, 305  
 wood carving, 90–91  
 yams. See 'uhi  
 'aitu, 60, 89, 136  
 'atua: as ancestral spirits, 38, 53, 61,  
     108, 136, 299; as animal spirits,  
     136, 275; as gods, 14, 60, 143; as  
     local spirits, 41, 45; as malevolent  
     spirits, 89, 136, 283; role in illness  
     and healing, 274–275, 276, 279,  
     281, 284, 295, 297, 298. See also  
     *ape'aitu*, *sa'aitu*, 'aitu  
 'Oroi, 61, 135  
 'uhi, 6, 30, 31, 32, 38, 39, 51, 324; as  
     a commodity, 50, 122–123, 247,  
     253, 275, 317; method of cooking,  
     35; planting of, 33, 34, 254  
 'Uvea, 1