

**THE TACTICS OF *FAKSORO*:
ROTUMAN APOLOGY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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When talking about wrongs, and the processes for righting them, Rotumans present an ideal model of social relations in which everyone on the island (or in the community being discussed) is an insider. Implicitly, sometimes explicitly, everyone residing on the island, and certainly all Rotumans, are incorporated into a collective "we." This inclusiveness masks myriad divisions in society—acknowledged differences between localized interests, between chiefs and their people, between economic competitors, between kin groups with conflicting claims to the same title or land. From the standpoint of the ideal model, relationships among insiders are presumed to be positive, or at least neutral, until one party perceives that another has committed a wrong against them.

The prototypical wrong is an insult, especially an insult implying an intention to offend (as opposed to one that is perceived as inadvertent). Swearing at someone, demeaning their status either verbally or by action, ignoring them when protocol calls for acknowledgment, are clear examples. Insults are sometimes responded to in kind, but more often the offended individual reacts by systematically avoiding the perpetrator and his/her close associates.

The potential is high for personal insults to escalate into factional disputes, as friends and kinsmen are called on to support one side or the other. In the process, one or both groups frame the other party as outsiders, that is, as people who do not know or respect Rotuman custom, as wrongdoers whose behavior has gone beyond what is tolerable.

Since factional disputes are counter to the ideal of social harmony, insults and injury quickly generate social pressure to rectify the situation. Mediation by elders, chiefs, or kinsmen is one avenue for reconciliation; *faksoro*, which we translate loosely as "apology," is another (see

Howard 1990 for a discussion of dispute management strategies). It is our contention that whereas Rotumans historically used *faksoro* to redress threats both to status relations and to the perceived ideal of social harmony, recently its use has stressed not so much community cohesion as personal strategies of one-upsmanship. After providing some background on Rotuman notions of status and respect, we explore the custom of *faksoro* and the ways it has responded to demographic, political, economic, social and cultural changes in the extended Rotuman community. Specifically, we aim at documenting the shift from a socially consensual, highly ritualized implementation of *faksoro* to a more individualized, tactical use of the custom. For purposes of analysis we examine *faksoro* as one type of symbolic exchange.

Status and Respect in Rotuman Society

The potential for insult in Rotuman society develops from a subtle blend of hierarchical and egalitarian concerns, exemplified in the nature of Rotuman chieftainship. Each of the seven districts on Rotuma has a paramount chief and a number of subchiefs. Social distance between current title holders and other Rotumans is minimal; mystification through separation of chiefs from commoners cannot be supported by the island's relatively small population, which has ranged between 2000 and 3300 over the past 75 years (Fiji Government census reports). Eligibility for titles is genealogically limited only insofar as candidates must be able to trace descent from an ancestor who lived on a designated house site (*fuag ri*). Most Rotumans, it seems, can make at least one such connection; indeed, a colonial official in 1880 reported:

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 generationsAs 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 (Rotuma District Office, September 25, 1880).

Successors to chiefly titles are chosen when adult. Unlike the sons of Fijian chiefs, for example, Rotuman title holders are not socialized from childhood for chiefly roles. One day a Rotuman is working alongside everyone else; the next day he is a chief. In fact, much of the time a Rotuman chief is "out of role," that is, carrying on with his ordinary household and extended family responsibilities, doing his own gardening, fishing, construction etc. As chief, though, he has additional obligations, and if his people are happy with him, they generally support him with periodic gifts of food and assistance. On ceremonial occasions, when he represents the group (district or subdistrict), they honor him and present him with traditional gifts of white mats, kava, and the head of a pig, cooked whole for the occasion. Rather than commanding labor, paramount chiefs announce what needs to be accomplished in the districts and subchiefs organize the workers. Chiefly prerogatives to the labor of their people may have been greater prior to the colonial period (see below), but there is no indication that Rotuman chiefs ever commanded the powers of leaders in larger Polynesian chiefdoms such as Hawaii or Tonga.

Although degrees of deference vary, for instance with regard to age or position, every Rotuman considers him or herself worthy of respect and consideration. In daily interactions, social protocols and courtesies express this extension of regard for all. For example, the Rotuman word *gagaja* translates as "chief," but is also used regularly as a respectful term for people collectively (as in *gagajfa*, *gagaj hani* "gentlemen, ladies"), or as a complimentary adjective (as in *'ou han gagaja* "your [honorable] wife," *'omuar Idea' gagaja* "your [esteemed] children").¹ *Gagaja* can also be used as a verb, meaning "to respect someone" (Churchward 1940:209).

Public verbal interactions especially are peppered with expressions which can be seen as social lubricants to avoid potential offense. Especially if someone is preparing to publicly disagree with another person, he or she will invariably preface his or her remarks with "*Figalelei sefek...*" "please don't be angry..." On the positive side, people are careful to formally recognize and express their appreciation of any and all who attend gatherings, make contributions, etc. so that no one may feel slighted. Hosts also display deference to all their guests, for example, by kneeling to

address them as a group, by apologizing for the quality and quantity of food (even though it is delicious and abundant), and by eating last if at all.

Despite the lack of social distance between chief and nonchief, relative rank does enter into consideration, especially on formal occasions. Seating positions of chiefs and other special guests are carefully negotiated, with the most honored places being on the eastern and the seaward sides of a gathering. Latecomers take a low place and wait for someone else to insist they move to a higher status location. The order of serving in the kava ceremony is particularly significant, and in precolonial days, to usurp another chief's position in the kava drinking order was a way of challenging his rank relative to one's own. Such provocation sometimes led to interdistrict battles. The relative ranking of district chiefs has been frozen since cession to Great Britain in 1881, however, and the person who calls out the order of kava drinking is well-informed (or carefully coached on the spot) so that all dignitaries are recognized in proper sequence.

Well-socialized Rotumans are aware of subtle rank distinctions, but more importantly in everyday life are extremely socially sensitive and careful to avoid giving offense (see Howard 1990). Knowing the boundaries of proper behavior is important as a marker of Rotumanness and is reflected in language.

The Language of Righting Wrongs

An examination of Rotuman terminology supports the notion that insiders, or members of the community, are those who behave properly, in contrast to outsiders whose actions go beyond the pale. The Rotuman language includes several words signifying proper comportment, including *fakauta* (glossed by Churchward (1940:191) as "to exercise one's discretion or commonsense; to be careful about one's behaviour, to be discreet, to mind one's P's and Q's") and *'atmai*, which translates as "sensible, intelligent, wise" (Churchward 1940:352). The latter is often used in the construction *huag 'atmai*, where *huag* refers to the inside of the body, suggesting disposition, but knowable only through actions. Parallel constructions include *huag aire* "sincere, faithful," *huag maeav hanisi* "kind-hearted," and *huag ma'ma'a* "pure minded, pure-hearted" (Churchward

1940:224-5). People who act in accordance with these concepts are careful to follow proper protocol, are courteous and considerate, generous and sincere. Their behavior can be described as *agfakgagaja* "chiefly conduct" (Churchward 1940:191).

Terms referring to wrongful behavior include *siri* "to go beyond; transgress, to do wrong" and (*ag*) *sara*, whose core meaning is "to fail to hit its mark," or "to slip out of position" (Churchward 1940:305, 311). Both terms convey the notion of deviation from an expected course of action, hence from a consensual code of conduct. The terms *a 'raksa 'aki* and *mane 'aki* both refer to injuries caused someone; both imply the spoiling of something that was whole and undamaged, again suggesting deviation from an optimum state (Churchward 1940:185,259). Verbal insults are covered by the phrase *faeag a 'raksa'aki* "to spoil with talk."

The concept of *faksoro* is translated by Churchward as "to entreat, beseech; to apologize; to beg to be excused"(1940:193), but it means much more than this because of the weight of custom that it carries. *Faksoro* can be used in the most casual manner to apologize for a minor accident or incidental breach of protocol, or it can serve high political purposes to heal major fractures in the social fabric. At least five gradations can be distinguished:

1. A verbal apology in private (i.e., on the spot) following an accidental occurrence in which one individual was in the wrong. In general it seems that for most Rotumans the inconveniences caused by such an occurrence are of less significance than the expectation of an apology. An (apparently) sincere apology following an accident usually offsets damages. For example, if someone accidentally injures another, or damages their property, monetary or material compensation is not expected; a proper apology alone is sufficient to set things right.

A negative example may be instructive. When a ship arrives (quite irregularly), traffic at the wharf is rather chaotic since there is so little room for vehicles to maneuver. On one recent occasion, the driver of a truck, rather than yielding to permit another driver to pass, forced his way through, scraping some paint off the other fellow's new,

previously unblemished, truck. When the victim called the offending driver's attention to the damage, the latter simply protested, "I couldn't help it." It so happened, however, that a policeman on duty witnessed the incident and suggested to the victim that he file a complaint. The victim, who said he would not have done so if an apology had been offered, decided to formalize the complaint. After being called to the police station the offending driver came to apologize and asked how he could compensate. The victim settled for a can of white paint to repair the damage. When telling the story, he stressed the failure of the driver to apologize as the main reason he filed the formal complaint and demanded compensation (which was really symbolic; in fact the paint was not the right type or color for the car, and was used for other purposes).

2. A verbal apology made in public. This, of course, lends greater weight to an apology since it constitutes a public admission of culpability. Typically such an apology would be made at a village or district meeting. Public apologies of this type are appropriate for various forms of verbal insults. In the heat of an argument someone might say something demeaning another's character or contributions to the community. Such offenses threaten community solidarity and pressure is likely to be generated by mediators for the offender to *faksoro*. If the insults were not too grave, a public verbal apology is usually sufficient to restore relationships to normal.

3. A formal presentation of a *koua* "pig cooked whole in an earthen oven." Prepared this way a pig is a sacrifice to the gods. Furthermore, a pig is a substitute for a human being (Rotuman myth is specific on this point; see Churchward 1939:462-469). Under such circumstance, the *koua* is brought to the aggrieved party's home and is formally presented, with appropriate speeches admitting culpability and beseeching forgiveness. To lend weight to such an occasion a chief, or other respected elder, might be asked to make the plea on the offender's behalf.

4. A formal presentation of a *koua* plus a presentation of *kava* and/or the giving of a fine white mat (*apei*). Both *kava* and fine white mats are of central significance for Rotuman ceremonies. As elsewhere in Polynesia (especially Samoa), fine white mats are the traditional form of wealth. They are mandatory prestations at weddings, funerals and other life-crisis events, and lend great weight to any ceremonial presentation. *Kava*, the root of the *Piper mythicum* plant, is drunk ceremonially on special occasions. In the past, its consumption was confined to chiefs, although today it is drunk more generally as a social beverage. Ceremonially presented, however, *kava* signifies "life fluid," and is symbolically associated with blood. A gift of *kava* therefore is comparable to a blood sacrifice. Likewise, a white mat is symbolically comparable to a life insofar as the manufacture of an *apei* must be preceded by the making of a *koua*. Thus, by adding *kava* and/or a white mat to *afakoro* presentation, much additional weight of custom is added. Again, if the presentation is made by a chief, or respected elders, on behalf of the offender, weight is added to the plea.

5. The strongest *fakoro* an individual can make is called *hen rau'ifi* "to hang leaves." This is in reference to a garland of leaves that the person who comes to *fakoro* wears around his neck. The person coming *hen rau'ifi* is essentially offering his life in a plea for forgiveness. Here, too, it may not be the offender, but a chief or distinguished elder who comes in his place.

Generally, *hen rau'ifi* are performed only in the gravest circumstances, as when a life has been taken. A *koua*, fine white mat, and presentation of *kava* are expected to accompany the plea. Theoretically, the offended party is entitled to take the life of the presenter, whether he is the offender or a stand-in, or he can offer forgiveness by undoing the knot by which the garland is tied around the presenter's neck.

By "*going faksoro*" one simultaneously lowers one's status vis-a-vis the person from whom forgiveness is sought, and elevates one's standing in the eyes of the community. For by acknowledging that one was in the wrong, one demonstrates acceptance of community standards for behavior and effectively petitions for re-admission as an "insider." In a community where common values are widely shared, one is fairly guaranteed re-integration.

Changing Historical Contexts

Since the chiefs of Rotuma's seven districts ceded the island to Great Britain in 1881, Rotuma has been governed as part of Fiji. Cession was perceived as a means of stopping interdistrict wars that erupted intermittently, usually as a result of status insults to opposing chiefs (Howard and Kjellgren 1994). The colonial government placed a resident commissioner (RC) on the island to act as magistrate and to solve disputes. Resident commissioners, and later the district officers (DO) who replaced them, were also given sweeping administrative powers. The chiefs were reduced to middlemen who took the RC's or DO's instructions to their people and reported back. Officially the chiefs met in council to advise the official in charge, but they rarely opposed his decisions and gained a reputation for being "yes men." The government official also acted as magistrate, and his decisions in most instances were final. With the exception of land disputes, overt confrontations were muted during this period since people preferred to avoid the magistrate's court, except as a last resort. Sentiment supported informal settlement, or rather settlements in accordance with Rotuman custom not involving colonial officialdom. A premium was therefore placed on *faksoro* as a mechanism for keeping disputes from escalating.

When Fiji gained independence in 1970, the Rotuman chiefs opted to remain with Fiji and, not without controversy, affirmed their decisions after the military coups of 1987. With the departure of colonial rule the lid was taken off public controversy and disputes were brought more readily into the open (Howard 1989). The district officer remained in position of magistrate on Rotuma, but his powers were otherwise reduced to that of an advisor to the Rotuma Council, composed of the ranking chief and an elected representative from each of the seven districts, along

with selected professionals serving on the island. Further complicating matters, most of the DOs in recent years have been Rotuman, and are seen as having partisan interests of their own.

Taken in conjunction with other significant changes over the past three decades, the context for *faksoro* has changed considerably. Much of the change is rooted in a demographic shift that has the vast majority of Rotumans now living off island. Whereas in 1966, 56 percent of the Rotuman population in the Fiji Islands were on Rotuma, by 1986 the figure had dropped to 30 percent. In addition, significant emigration has taken place to Australia, New Zealand and North America. Circulation between communities is extensive, resulting in the rapid cosmopolitanization of the entire population. Rotumans have become acquainted with a variety of options for pressing claims against antagonists, including employing the power of newspaper print (Howard 1990:288; Howard and Rensel, in press). They are also more familiar with courts, and are less reluctant to use them. The fact that several Rotumans have obtained law degrees and are now practicing in Fiji has facilitated matters. Although it still carries the force of valued tradition, the place of *faksoro* in this more cosmopolitan context is increasingly problematic.

Of special significance is a relatively new distinction of business activities as separate from other aspects of social life. A watershed event took place in the mid-1970s that changed Rotuman's perspective on *faksoro* vis-a-vis business. The Rotuman Cooperative Society (RCA) had enjoyed enormous success under the leadership of Wilson Inia, headmaster of Rotuma High School. The RCA actually succeeded in putting the firms, Morris Hedstrom and Bums Philp, out of business on the island, and held a monopoly on commerce for decades thereafter. Inia was a man of great integrity and a stickler for proper bookkeeping, which he taught during evenings to co-op members. He came down hard on storekeepers who mismanaged funds, holding them personally responsible for making up shortfalls. If culpability was flagrant, or members persisted in taking money for personal use after being warned, they were expelled from the association, leaving them with no place to sell their copra or buy imported goods. The watershed event involved a district chief and his son-in-law, who was a shopkeeper. The chief had been appointed internal auditor for RCA, but after discovering a serious shortfall he allegedly doctored the books

to disguise the deficit, which amounted to several thousand Fiji dollars. When this came to light, he allegedly embezzled money from the Methodist Church to reimburse RCA. Eventually the chief and his son-in-law obtained funds from relatives in Fiji to restore what they had taken, but both were dismissed from their positions with the co-op. The chief then went to RCA's central committee and formally apologized. His *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 his offense. As noted above, this is a rare event in Rotuma, usually reserved for instances in which a life has been taken. For a chief to come *hen rau'ifi* and ask forgiveness is of great consequence, and it is virtually inconceivable for the offended party to turn down such an apology.

Wilson Inia refused to accept the apology nevertheless. He argued that *faksoro* 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. Many Rotumans were shocked by what they considered Inia's breach of traditional etiquette, but he held fast to his position, and his action effectively *removed faksoro* from the business arena thereafter (see Howard 1994 for more details).

Delimiting the contexts for *faksoro* is but one example of the continuing evolution of the concept, as members of the Rotuman community define by their uses not only when it is appropriate, but what it can accomplish, and for whose benefit. In the remainder of this paper we consider other shifts in the practice of *faksoro* as symbolic exchange.

Faksoro as Exchange

The notion of wrongdoers as outsiders who pose a threat to social order underlies Nicholas Tavuchis' (1991) sociological treatise on apology and reconciliation. Tavuchis stresses that wrongs are not only an affront to individuals but a threat to social order if apologies are not forthcoming. He discusses apology as symbolic exchange between actors in "morally asymmetrical positions"—where one essentially says he has nothing, not even an excuse, to offer,

and comes before the aggrieved party completely at their mercy (1991:33-34). In an analysis of the etymology of the English word apology, Tavuchis traces the "gradual evolution whereby the expression of regret itself serves as reparation without requiring additional actions on the part of the transgressor...the apology itself...constitutes restitution" (1991:16). Later he reiterates: "The apology itself...constitutes...'compensation'" (1991:33).

Similarly for Rotumans, varied usages of the *itrm faksoro* provide clues to its nature as exchange. Most obvious is the proffering of admission of culpability, and hence relative status, in return for resumption of normal relations between the offending and injured parties and reintegration into the community. Indeed, it is precisely the offer of status, signified by self-abnegation in the form of humble speech and body posture, that lies at the heart of *faksoro*. The more serious the offense, the greater the degree of self-humiliation required to right the wrong.

The status implications of *faksoro* can be clarified by contrasting it with the term *fara* "to beg, request, ask for" (Churchward 1940:195). Both terms can be used in reference to a request for assistance, support or a valuable commodity. However, *fara* generally is used in situations where humility is not called for, where the person asking feels entitled to the object or service requested and fully expects compliance. An older brother may *fara* a tool or assistance from a younger brother, for instance, without concern for the status implications of making a request. *Fara* implies some degree of intimacy, although one may make requests of someone not so close, who because of circumstances is in no position to refuse (e.g., a distant relative with copra land to spare). In contrast, to *faksoro*, whether as a request for something tangible or for forgiveness, necessarily involves a humbling on the part of the beseecher, and a recognition of the right to refuse on the part of the person being asked. By acknowledging that the other party's status is (perhaps only temporarily) higher than one's own, the implicit message is a plea for magnanimity, the *noblesse oblige* normally expected of those in superordinate positions.

Faksoro should not be seen, however, as exchange in a material sense. Even when symbolic goods are transferred, Rotuman apology is not conceived of as compensating the injured party. In extensive interviews on Rotuma in 1989, during which subjects were presented with a number of

hypothetical situations involving physical injury or damage to property, no one said they would demand compensatory payment. *Faksoro* is what was expected, whether a life was taken or a house destroyed. When asked specifically about replacement of damaged property, interviewees typically responded that if the person responsible had enough money to replace the items he should do so, but that it was not mandatory.

Rather, in ceremonial apologies especially, the presentation of symbolic goods—the kava, cooked pig and fine white mat—solemnize an apology by engaging ancestral spirits and local gods in the exchange. It is these numenals who would bring ill fortune if no apology were forthcoming by a wrong-doer, so the gifts are directed to appeasing their appetites for revenge (see Howard, 1996). Thus it would be misleading to conceive of *faksoro* exchanges as confined to the parties involved.

The involvement of the broader community in *faksoro* exchanges also can be seen when chiefs are called on to represent the party offering an apology. By having a chief represent him, a supplicant implicitly engages the support of the households served by the chief, and correspondingly owes them a debt of gratitude, or more if they contributed pigs, kava or mats to the event.

Thus *faksoro*, especially in its more formal guises, is a complex form of exchange involving the offending and offended parties, ancestral spirits and local gods, and at least a segment of the broader community. The force of *offaksoro* rests with the moral weights this web of obligations attaches to the act. To be maximally effective *faksoro* requires a high level of moral consensus and a conviction that the gods (or God) ultimately will see justice done.

Underlying the custom of *faksoro* is a set of presuppositions concerning human nature, beginning with the notion that other people's thoughts and feelings are essentially unknowable. It is behavior that counts, specifically interpersonal behavior. People are assumed to be capable of radical changes in character; they are therefore not judged so much on the cumulative deeds of a lifetime as on the current state of their interpersonal relationships. The community places a high value on inclusiveness, and on maintaining social harmony; therefore the door is always open for

wrongdoers to re-establish balance to disrupted relationships. *Faksoro* is the prime mechanism by which this takes place. It aims at readjusting, through the medium of symbolic exchange, status imbalances set askew by insult and injury.

Changed Parameters and Tactical Faksoro

The postcolonial changes outlined above have altered the parameters of *faksoro* in several ways. The expansion of the Rotuman community, incorporating enclaves in Fiji, Australia and New Zealand, has eroded the moral consensus upon which the power of *faksoro* depends. Whereas in the past it was nearly unthinkable to reject a formal apology, today it is relatively commonplace. With the social pressure for compliance weakened, the act of apology has become a much more risky venture. No longer can a supplicant count on forgiveness and a solid base of social approval for going *faksoro*. He thus risks both admission of culpability (perhaps even liability) and self-humiliation without a guarantee of commensurate social rewards. At present, in most contexts, *faksoro* still has enough currency to warrant the risk in many circumstances. But the changing parameters also open up possibilities for manipulation, for using *faksoro* as a tactical instrument in disputes or contests of influence and power. The following example is illustrative:

The paramount chief of Rotuma had continually opposed the efforts of a high-placed Rotuman in Fiji, a bank manager, to implement development projects on the island. The paramount chief and another district chief sent several letters to another high-placed Rotuman, a cabinet minister, complaining about the bank manager's activities on the island and asking that he not be permitted to return. The government minister took no action, but the paramount chief allegedly initiated a protest against one of the bank manager's projects, caused a minor hassle until it was settled.

Subsequently, when the bank manager and the minister visited the island, the paramount chief called a meeting of the chiefs and invited both the visitors to attend. The bank manager said he knew what the chief had in mind, to *faksoro* in front of the other

chiefs, which would put the bank manager in an awkward position. The implication, as we understand it, is that by apologizing in front of the rest of the chiefs the paramount chief would place the bank manager in a vulnerable position; he would look bad in the future should he reject any of the chiefs requests, since it would look as if he were insincere in his acceptance of the apology—if indeed he did accept it. Not to accept would make the bank manager look even worse, and by apologizing publicly the chief would make himself look magnanimous and well-intentioned.

It seems that the chief was engaging in theater, tactically employed. The bank manager said it would have been much more meaningful if the chief had come to him privately, admitted his wrong-doing and apologized. By making it theatrical, the chiefs sincerity was in doubt and his motives questionable.

The bank manager explicitly said he did not want to go to the meeting if the chief was going to *faksoro*, but the government minister urged him to go. When they got to the meeting the chief got up to *faksoro*, but the bank manager responded by saying it was inappropriate for him to do so at Council, that it was a matter between the two of them and didn't involve the others. He reported later that he was backed up by several of the chiefs present who said they did not want to be involved.

The shift from a consensual moral system to one increasingly dominated by self-interested maneuvering is transforming Rotuman *faksoro* from a mechanism for insuring social solidarity to a tactical instrument for gaining social advantage. It therefore reflects more comprehensive changes taking place on Rotuma, changes that are common to many other Pacific societies.

Note

¹ The place of children in Rotuman society is an important index of balance between concerns for rank and equality. In contrast to some other Polynesian societies, Rotumans generally feed their children before the adults have their meals. Rotuman parents seldom use physical force to

discipline their children. In contrast to Samoan children who learn service and obedience to adults, Rotuman children are socialized for autonomous action and decision-making (for more on autonomy in Rotuman society, see Howard 1990:269, Rensel 1994:115-117).

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