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The Rotuman District Chief

A Study in Changing Patterns of Authority

ALAN HOWARD

THIS PAPER CONCERNS CHANGES IN THE ROLE OF DISTRICT CHIEF IN ROTUMA which have taken place as a consequence of European acculturation and colonial administration. The data are drawn from published and archival sources, while their interpretation has been aided by 21 months of field work among the Rotumans in 1959-61. The plan of the paper is to describe the nature of chieftainship within the traditional society, then to evaluate the changes which accrued from pressures exerted by agents of European culture, particularly missionaries and colonial administrators. My role as historian has been largely editorial in function, for I have chosen to quote extensively from the sources, preferring wherever possible to let the parties concerned speak for themselves. Also, for the sake of brevity, I have purposely disregarded many significant incidents in Rotuman history, choosing instead to emphasize the interplay of ideas which the men involved had of their own and one another's place in the social universe.¹

According to legend Rotuma was originally divided into five districts—Itutiu, Faguta, Oinafa, Noatau and Malhaha—each governed by a head chief. On two occasions, however, divisions took place, and at the time of discovery there were seven. Legend holds that a portion of the largest district, Itutiu, was given as a gift by the chief to a sub-chief from Oinafa, thus creating the district of Itumuta.² A second story describes a war in which the district of Faguta was defeated by Oinafa, resulting in a division of the former district into two: Juju and Pepjei.³ Warfare between districts was intermittent, but not apparently very sanguinary.⁴ It was generally motivated by status rivalry rather than economic considerations, and was not a means of territorial aggrandisement.⁵ At any given time the districts were ranked in status, the particular order being influenced in part by the size and power 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

¹ For an account of Rotuman history see W. J. E. Eason, *A Short History of Rotuma* (Suva, 1951).

² C. M. Churchward, 'Rotuman Legends', *Oceania*, VIII (1937-1938), 355-7.

³ 'Histoire de Rotuma', unpublished MS of the Sumi Mission Station, Rotuma.

⁴ P. Dillon, *Voyage in the South Seas* (London, 1829), 95.

⁵ J. S. Gardiner, 'Natives of Rotuma', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, XXVII (1898), 470.

breaches of priority were main causes of inter-district 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.

The *sau* provided, in the words of the Rev. William Fletcher, 'a common but loose bond of union' between the chiefs.⁶ In describing the role of the *sau* shortly before the office was terminated as an institution, Fletcher wrote:

. . . he 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 tumeric. Food is continually taken to the Sau from all parts of the island.⁷

A *sau*'s term of office was normally one Rotuman year, or approximately six months, but if the gods were generous during his reign this was likely to be extended by common consent. The rules of recruitment for this office called for each district chief to select in turn a titled man from his district, so that council meetings were probably quite regular in their occurrence.⁸

Information pertaining to the power of the chiefs within their own districts is sparse, but we have some clues. The 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 title within each district. Titled men from the other *ho'aga* acted as sub-chiefs. They exercise primary authority over their own units, including the allocation of land and women.

Choosing the successor to a title was the right of the cognatic group tracing ancestry to the *ho'aga* which owned the name. Any adult male in the descent group was eligible to succeed to the position. Kinship seniority

⁶ Letter dated 26 Jan. 1865, in *The Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, no. 34 (Jan. 1866).

⁷ *Loc. cit.* For further information bearing on the *sau* the following sources may be consulted: W. L. Allardyce, 'Rotooma and the Rotoomans', *Proceedings of Queensland Branch of the Geographical Society of Australasia*, 1st sets (1885-1886), 139-44; William Allen, 'Rotuma', *Report of Australasian Association for Advancement of Science* 6th meeting (Jan. 1895), 576; George Bennett, 'A Recent Visit to Several of the Polynesian Islands', *United Service Journal*, no. 33 (1891), 473; J. S. Gardiner, *op. cit.*, 460-6.

⁸ Dillon, *loc. cit.*

was heavily weighted as a criterion for selection, but consideration was also given to personal character and other pragmatics.⁹

The role of the district chief was described by Gardiner in an ethnographic reconstruction of pre-contact Rotuman society published in 1898.

The power of the *gagaja* [district chief] 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* [sub-chief] 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*¹⁰ 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.¹¹

It seems clear from Gardiner's account as well as other sources¹² that the power of the chiefs was well controlled by cultural prescription. Abuses of authority no doubt occurred, but the members of a district could have a chief deposed if he got too far out of line. This was done through the members of the chief's descent group, who had the right to take away the family name, and hence authority, and allocate it to another.¹³

Contact with European culture began with the discovery of the island in 1791 and steadily increased throughout the 19th century. In 1879 the district chiefs petitioned the Queen of England for annexation, and two years later Rotuma became part of the Colony of Fiji.

The overall impact of acculturation on chiefly powers prior to British administration is difficult to estimate, particularly since some processes operated toward increased authority while others exerted pressures in the opposite direction. Thus the rise of the commercial economy initially enhanced the status of the chiefs, for they acted as intermediaries between their

⁹ For a more extensive account of succession see A. Howard, 'Land Tenure and Social Change in Rotuma', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, LXXIII (1964), 26-52.

¹⁰ A coarse tuber grown in brackish water swamps and rarely eaten except during food shortages.

¹¹ Gardiner, *op. cit.*, 430.

¹² J. G. Goodenough, *Journal of Commodore Goodenough . . .* (London, 1876), 315; R. P. Lesson, *Voyage Autour du Monde . . . sur 'La Coquille'* (Paris, 1838-1839), II, 433.

¹³ Gardiner, *op. cit.*, 429.

people and ships' captains, receiving a portion of the intake; but commercialism also contributed to individual control of land,¹⁴ with the subsequent decrease in chiefly authority that inevitably accompanies an increase in economic autonomy by subordinates. The missionaries also tended to work through the chiefs, for the people in a district were reluctant to be converted until their chief had. This put the chiefs in a favourable position for bargaining, and they made it clear that their capitulation was conditional upon their being politically supported by the missionaries. In a letter from the Rev. William Fletcher, dated 26 October 1864, we find reported the following substance of a conversation between Wesleyan missionary and heathen 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.¹⁵

There is even some evidence that promises of enhanced chiefly support were part of the competitive arsenal of the Wesleyan and Catholic missionaries.¹⁶

Once the chiefs had been converted they acted as the missionaries' deputies in their district, and in this capacity increased their personal privileges. The missionaries instituted a battery of fines—for fornication, non-attendance at church and other transgressions of the new system of rules¹⁷—from which the chiefs apparently received a percentage; they also encouraged the chiefs to take other forms of uninstitutionalized licence, such as the confiscation of land under certain conditions, but the latter refused, realizing that there were limits to the powers of their office which the people would not tolerate them exceeding.¹⁸ On the other hand, in working to eliminate the office of *sau*, in which they recognized the essential principles of heathenism, the missionaries liquidated one of the more important functions of the chiefs, that of guiding the religious destiny of the island.¹⁹ Furthermore, a new class of indigenous experts emerged in the form of catechists and teachers, who, in addition to the missionaries, pre-empted the chiefs' judiciary role in moral matters. In short, by accepting Christianity, and the religious

¹⁴ cf. Howard, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ *The Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, no. 31 (Apr. 1865).

¹⁶ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁷ Writing of Roman Catholic priests in Rotuma, Boddam-Whetan states: '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'. J. W. Boddam-Whetan, *Pearls of the Pacific* (London, 1865), 265.

¹⁸ Gardiner, *op. cit.*, 485.

¹⁹ The last *sau* held office in 1870.

dominance of missionaries, the chiefs set the stage for narrowing the scope, if not the degree, of their authority.

It will be useful at this point to compare the powers of a Rotuman district chief with that of a Fijian *yavusa* chief, for it was upon their knowledge of the latter's status that the British administrators based their expectations of the former.

The Fijian social structure is basically of the ramage type, as defined by Marshall Sahlins.²⁰ In its ideal form it consists of a series of three agnatic descent groups. In order of their inclusiveness these are known as *yavusa*, *mataqali* and *itokatoka*. The *mataqali* that compose a *yavusa* are ranked according to the seniority of the founding ancestors, who are presumed to be related, usually as siblings. According to Geddes, 'The *mataqali* regarded as being founded by the eldest son is the *mataqali turaga*, that is to say the chiefly *mataqali*. It provides the *yavusa* chiefs'.²¹ Within this *mataqali*, as well as the others, the chiefs come from the senior line 'and thus are supplied constantly from the same *itokatoka*, but there are usually otherwise no significant distinctions of rank among the component *itokatoka*'.²² Within this organization, therefore, the *yavusa* chief held authority over each *yavusa* member by virtue of his real or fictional kinship seniority over them.

The traditional Rotuman social structure corresponds more closely to Sahlins' descent line type,²³ with each *ho'aga* constituting a descent line. Within this organization the district chief's relationship to the various *ho'aga* chiefs and their members was not conceived as one of kin seniority, but rather seniority based on an institutionalized hierarchy of titles.

Superficially viewed, the roles of the Fijian *yavusa* chief and Rotuman district chief were nearly identical. Like his Rotuman equivalent, the *yavusa* chief organized activities in his district, was an arbitrator of disputes, and was ceremonially honoured through precedence in kava drinking. He did not exercise primary allocative rights in the land—this was left to the *mataqali* chiefs—but he received a portion of the first fruits. But despite these similarities there were some significant contrasts. For example, the *yavusa* chief was a ritual leader by virtue of his direct descent from the deified founding ancestors. His political power was therefore backed up by supernatural sanction while the authority of the Rotuman district chief was solely secular in conception. Also, the Fijian chiefs were chosen on

²⁰ M. D. Sahlins, *Social Stratification in Polynesia* (Seattle, 1958), 140.

²¹ W. R. Geddes, 'Fijian Social Structure in a Period of Transition', in J. D. Freeman and W. R. Geddes (eds.), *Anthropology in the South Seas* (New Plymouth, New Zealand, 1959), 206.

²² *Loc. cit.*

²³ Sahlins, *op. cit.*, 140.

the basis of primogeniture, thereby limiting the likely successors to the elder sons of the reigning chief. These were treated with considerable respect from birth, and were socialized with an eye toward the chiefly role. From childhood onward they were trained toward superordination and their peers learned to be subordinate to their wishes. The Rotuman system of succession, in contrast, was much more fluid. The 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 chieftainship was at any one time extensive, and no one was apt to receive the special privileges normally given the Fijian chiefs' elder sons.

These two differences lent to the character of chieftainship in Fiji and Rotuma a distinctly different flavour. Ideologically, both leaders held similar kinds of authority, but while the Fijian chief generally exercised a genuine dominance, in the psychological sense, over his subjects, the Rotuman chief did not. To put this another way, in Fiji, the powers of the office were conceived as being embodied in the proper individual. They were personalized. In Rotuma, the powers belonged to the office alone.

The 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. They simply added to their indigenous roles the rights and duties allocated to them by the Colonial Administration, and these were accepted by the people without much hesitation. Having been successful in developing a system of indirect administration in Fiji, British officials were encouraged to duplicate the design in Rotuma, but they failed to appreciate the significant differences in the status of chiefs in Fiji and Rotuma. The intentions of the Colonial Administration were made clear in a speech by the then Acting Governor of Fiji, William Des Voeux, in October 1879, after receiving the Rotuman chiefs' initial request for annexation:

It will be the same in Rotuma [as in Fiji] should the Queen consent to take you under the shelter of her throne. Thus through you [the Rotuman chiefs] we shall govern the people of the land, to you we shall look for aid in guiding and controlling them.²⁴

That there was going to be some difficulty implementing this administrative scheme was quickly recognized by Hugh Romilly, who was sent to Rotuma in 1880 as Deputy Commissioner with the news of the Queen's acceptance of the annexation petition. In an address to the Rotuma Council

²⁴ Recorded in a dispatch from H. Romilly to Western Pacific High Commissioner, 28 Sept. 1880. Outward Letters, Rotuma District Office, Suva, Fiji, Central Archives of Fiji and W.P.H.C.

of Chiefs he 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 advise. 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 . . .

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.²⁵

This attitude undoubtedly delighted the chiefs, for there are indications that one of their primary motives in ceding the island was the expectation that the British would bolster their authority and assist them to enhance their estates. Thus Commissioner Charles Mitchell reported in a letter to the Governor of Fiji in 1881:

So far as I can judge it appears to me that the chiefs found their control over the people slipping from their hands and imagined that if Great Britain took over the island it would reverse this and place them in the position that Fijian chiefs occupy to their people.²⁶

To the extent that this was true it represents a miscalculation on the part of the chiefs. Instead they found themselves in a dilemma. The commissioners expected them to act authoritatively, but did not permit them to enhance their actual power, while the Rotuman people ridiculed their abortive attempts at dictatorship. The chiefs apparently assumed that they would be granted arbitrary powers that could be used to their own advantage, but the commissioners were only willing to back them up to the point of enforcing English law and established Rotuman custom. The people did not resent the imposition of most English-derived laws, nor were they jealous of the authority of a European commissioner. They had come to accept European culture as superior and were willing to go along with European laws and officials as the price for reaping the material benefits of civilization, but they had nothing to gain by increasing the power of the chiefs. Regarding this Mitchell wrote:

I have repeatedly heard the people say we do not wish our chiefs to be placed

²⁵ *Loc. cit.*

²⁶ Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 26 Jan. 1882. Outward Letters.

in authority over us. We will obey the regulations made by the government but not rules made by the chiefs.²⁷

Most of the chiefs yielded to these pressures quite readily, but Albert, the chief of Itutiu, the largest district, 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.²⁸

Mitchell could not have more succinctly communicated the contrast between the power of his office with that of the chiefs. In another attempt to elicit Mitchell's support Albert evidently confessed his miscalculations, for 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/ 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 £12-0-0.²⁹

But Albert received no gratification and did not raise the issue again until 1885, when A. R. Mackay was Commissioner. In the July meeting of the Council of Chiefs 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 with-out my interference.³⁰

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 that they alter their habits, and Albert, apparently sensing an opportunity to gather popular

²⁷ Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 12 Oct. 1881. *Ibid.*

²⁸ Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 10 Jan. 1882. *Ibid.*

²⁹ Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 16 Feb. 1882. *Ibid.*

³⁰ Minutes of the Rotuma Council of Chiefs, 9 July 1885. Suva, Fiji, Central Archives.

support for a confrontation with the Commissioner, incited his people to refuse co-operation. Mackay publicly censured Albert after which 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, obtaining a strong censure of Albert's conduct from the assembled chiefs.³¹ 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 the chiefly role in subsequent events. From this point on it became recognized by most persons that the advantages involved in the role were beginning to be outweighed by the disadvantages. The only economic advantage accrued from the larger land holdings which accompanied most chiefly titles, but even this was somewhat offset by greater demands on resources. The ceremonial significance of chieftainship provided some incentive for aspirations to the role, with honour being paid at feasts; but this was offset by contradictory role demands, which inevitably led to disaffection.³²

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. Also contributing to this tendency was the active part that most 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.³³ Not only did the commissioners participate actively in choosing chiefs, but at times they also deposed men who failed to meet their expectations. A sequence of events concerning the district of Noatau is illustrative. In a letter dated 17 April 1900, Commissioner H. E. 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,

³¹ *Ibid.*, 10 Aug. 1888; 11 Oct. 1888; 14 Jan. 1889.

³² For a more detailed discussion of the role difficulties of Rotuman chiefs see A. Howard, 'Non-traditional Leadership and Conservatism in Rotuma', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, LXXII (1963), 65-77.

³³ For examples see Minutes of the Rotuma Council of Chiefs, 1 Sept. 1910, and Dispatch from A. E. Cornish to Colonial Secretary, 30 Jan. 1939. Outward Letters of the Rotuma District Office.

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.³⁴

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

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.³⁵

The strategy of the people 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.³⁶

This case illustrates the increased participation of the people in choosing a chief. Whereas formerly choosing a successor was considered strictly a family (i.e. cognatic descent group) matter, the interference of 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 in order to select men who manifested the ideal Rotuman virtues of generosity,

³⁴ Dispatch from H. E. Leefe to Colonial Secretary, 17 Apr. 1900. Outward Letters.

³⁵ Dispatch from H. E. Leefe to Colonial Secretary, 25 May 1900. *Ibid.*

³⁶ Dispatch from J. Hill to Colonial Secretary, 7 Oct. 1901. *Ibid.*

humility and consideration for others. As I have pointed out elsewhere,³⁷ the choice of such a man is mere expediency on the part of the selectors, for his generosity may be tapped in times of need, his humility opens him to persuasion, and his consideration constitutes an assurance that no harsh demands will be made. Under previous conditions these virtues did not carry so much weight in the recruitment of a chief, for when only one family was responsible for the selection, they naturally tended to weight seniority within the family high. They also favoured a quality of assertiveness that would assure the promotion of the family's benefit—against the rest of the community if necessary. This is not to imply that democratization was complete, and that family affiliation was eliminated as a factor. Men who could trace their relationship to a chiefly ancestor were still favoured 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 for the district of Juju by Resident Commissioner 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'.

Tavo complained that he was obliged to send men to build or to help in the building of Iratuofa's house. On one occasion he sent two men. Iratuofa wanted four and got angry with him and ordered the men to do the cooking of the food for those working at the house, by way of punishment. Tavo refused to do this. When Tavo sent his Christmas present to the Chief this month it was taken to Uafta's house. Instead of being accepted, an order was sent to him to take it to Iratuofa's house instead.

Another of his complaints is that Iratuofa has used abusive language to the people and that he even went to the length of assaulting a man . . . when a meeting was being held in his house knocking this man off the veranda.

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.³⁸

³⁷ Howard, 'Non-traditional leadership . . .', 67.

³⁸ Minutes of the Rotuma Council of Chiefs, 6 Jan. 1916.

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

Secondly, the increased democratization led to a weakening of the social controls in district affairs. The events in Noatau previously described were one example. Another is provided by a sequence of events which occurred in 1931. In this instance the Resident Commissioner, William Carew, had difficulty in getting the 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 the way in which they spent their time, and in two districts the men 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 Itumuta, one of the two insubordinate districts, had resigned as a result of the refusal of his people to obey him. As aftermath of this incident, Carew asked the people of Itumuta to nominate other candidates to replace the deposed office-holder. The first two nominees were rejected by Carew as being leaders of the resistance. Two more men were nominated, one of them a Methodist minister and the other a sub-chief. The minister declined the nomination on the grounds that it would interfere with his mission obligations, and the sub-chief was selected by default. This man remained chief until 1960 when he was deposed on the recommendation of the District Officer³⁹ 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 the members of his district.⁴⁰

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.

The Rotumans as a whole, are practically devoid of Race and Tradition, consequently a chief could never acquire the standing of a Fijian Roko, but

³⁹ Following a reorganization of administration in the Colony of Fiji in the 1930s the appointed official in charge of Rotuma was known as the District Officer.

⁴⁰ Dispatch from W. Carew to Colonial Secretary, 5 Feb. 1931. Outward Letters.

he could at least be constituted as a sort of Super-Buli, to be feared and obeyed by his people.⁴¹

Carew's suggestions did not receive the support of A. L. Armstrong, then the Secretary for Native Affairs, and were never acted upon.

Thirdly, the role of the chiefs as administrative agents was affected by these alterations in chiefly status. As has already been indicated, the men who ceded the island had anticipated the support of the commissioners—against the people 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 the views of the Administration did not permit such a presumption to materialize. At most the commissioners were willing to legitimize the *de facto* power of the chiefs at the time of cession. Furthermore, the commissioners made no bones about exercising their own considerable power and 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 manoeuvring by the commissioners on one side and their people on the other—and they adjusted their behaviour accordingly. To the commissioners they granted all the respect due to an acknowledged superior. By Rotuman standards this meant exercising considerable restraint during interaction with the Commissioner, 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 the 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 other words, the chiefs protected themselves from conflict by reducing their decision-making responsibilities to correspond with their reduced privileges. Whenever a communicative impasse occurred between a commissioner and the people of a particular district the former would generally call a district meeting and thrash matters out directly with the disgruntled group.

The eagerness of the chiefs to maintain neutrality led indirectly to a weakening of formal social controls, for to remain uninvolved the chiefs had to be extremely lax in reporting violations to the Commissioner.

⁴¹ *Loc. cit.*

Furthermore, the chiefs did not wish to advertise their ineffectiveness. The commissioners were already making a good job of that!

By the end of the first quarter of the 20th century the chiefly role had become stabilized, and it remained essentially the same until 1958, when the Council of Chiefs was reorganized. In some respects this stabilization represents a successful defence against administrators who would have stripped the chiefs of their remaining functions by replacing them with elected representatives. Thus, in 1939, with the approval of the Governor, Resident Commissioner A. E. Cornish introduced a reform by which a chief was elected for a period of three years in the first instance, after which the members of the family who had elected him would hold a ballot to elect a new chief, or re-elect the old one if they considered that he had been satisfactory, and provided that he had proved satisfactory to the Government. The first chief to be appointed under this procedure failed to get re-elected by his people at the end of his three year term. He complained to the Government against his dismissal on the grounds that the new procedures were not in accordance with Rotuman custom, under which a chief was chosen for life. By this time Cornish had died, and following an investigation the traditional custom was re-instated.⁴²

Again in 1948 J. W. Sykes, who was sent to Rotuma for the purpose of investigating the administration of the island, among other matters, proposed that the Council of Chiefs be abolished and replaced by an elected council.⁴³ Sykes' recommendations probably would have been instituted had not H. S. Evans been appointed District Officer in 1949. In contrast to Sykes' accusations that the chiefs were ineffective to the extreme, Evans maintained that '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 . . .'.⁴⁴ He warned against the sweeping changes proposed by Sykes in emphatic terms.⁴⁵

The conflicting attitudes of Sykes and Evans stemmed from their different views on Rotuma's best interests. Sykes' proposed innovations were designed to speed up 'progress', while Evans was apprehensive about rapid change and perhaps a bit idyllic in his evaluation of the traditional culture. For Sykes, therefore, the chiefs constituted a hindrance; for Evans, a safeguard. Evans' noble pleas won the day for the chiefs, but only temporarily, for in the years following, another process of change was to further diminish

⁴² Sykes Report to the Colonial Secretary, 3 July 1948. Suva, Fiji, Central Archives.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ H. S. Evans, 'Notes on Rotuma', unpublished MS dated 1 Aug. 1951.

⁴⁵ Dispatch to Colonial Secretary dated 22 Sept. 1950. Outward Letters of the Rotuma District Office.

their status. This was the increased number of educated Rotumans who returned to take up positions as teachers, government officials, co-operative society leaders, and so on. Even the District Officer has been Rotuman for the major part of the past two decades. The character of these educated leaders is in marked contrast to that of the chiefs. In order to be successful at their jobs they have had to be assertive, to be capable of making decisions and accepting responsibility. They have been made aware of much of Western culture and have mastered a good portion of it through formal education. At district meetings their voices have been increasingly heard, and in deference to their knowledge, they have been allowed to become the dominant (at times domineering) opinion leaders. As a result, the uneducated chiefs are no longer at the top of the Rotuman system of status ranks. Indeed, they have tumbled far down the ladder.⁴⁶

The need for revision of the Rotuma Council became increasingly apparent and in 1958 it was reconstituted to include one representative from each district, elected by secret ballot, in addition to the chiefs.⁴⁷ The composition of the first group of elected representatives included two school teachers, an independent businessman, a Methodist catechist, a lesser government employee, a returned serviceman who is a carpenter by profession, and a man who spent nine years in Fiji and whose brother holds an M.A. degree from a New Zealand university.

From my observations in 1960 it appeared that the newly constituted Council was functioning reasonably well. The representatives acted as a catalyst for the chiefs, encouraging them to express their opinions rather than suppress them. The fact that the District Officer was Rotuman also appeared to facilitate communication.⁴⁸ Interestingly enough, the alignment on disputed issues almost never opposed chiefs and representatives in blocks. There were progressives and conservatives in both groups.⁴⁹

It is tempting to speculate, in conclusion, on the fate of chieftainship in Rotuma. Will it disappear as an institutional role with further Westernization? I suspect not, or at least not for some time to come. It still has a ceremonial significance that almost every Rotuman, progressive and conservative alike, regards with respect. Instead of the role being eliminated, I expect that the principles of recruitment will shift toward Western standards. But I do not expect these to replace fully consideration of character traits like generosity, humility and consideration for others; nor at

⁴⁶ Howard, 'Non-traditional leadership . . . '.

⁴⁷ Previously each district sent a representative, but the latter was chosen by the chief and acted more or less as his assistant.

⁴⁸ Communication has been vastly enhanced by the fact that the Rotuman language can be used with equal facility by Council members and the District Officer.

⁴⁹ Cf. Howard, *op. cit.*

least nominal concern for family affiliation. Rather I anticipate a synthesis of values that, if successful, will result in a rejuvenation of the chiefly role and provide a key for maintaining the integrity of the culture in a period of rapid socio-economic change.



THE HAWAIIAN SAU OF ROTUMA

Lesson, in his account of Duperrey's visit to Rotuma in 1824, reported that:

At Rotuma, the inhabitants are eager to welcome the newcomers and to furnish them with accommodation, wives and provisions. Before the arrival of the sailors of the 'Rochester' they had given the rank of *chau* or king, to an African black, a convict escaped from New South Wales on the brig 'Macquarie', on a whaling voyage. Singular destiny of this black, bought on the coast of Africa, brought to Europe, then condemned to exile in Australia, and who terminates his days in reigning over a delightful island in the middle of the South Seas.¹

However appealing to the imagination, the negro's vicissitudes make improbable history, for though there was no vessel called the *Macquarie* sailing from New South Wales the Sydney brig *Campbell Macquarie* called at Rotuma in 1814 for provisions, and was in fact the sole ship known to have visited the island between the *Duff* in 1797 and the *Rochester* in 1823 (only a few months before Duperrey himself). Dillon, who stopped at Rotuma in 1827, tells us that on the *Campbell Macquarie* there was:

... a very old Sandwich Islander, well known at Port Jackson by the name of Babahey, who had been for many years employed out of Sydney as an interpreter to the north-west coast of America, the Sandwich Islands, Otaheita, and the Fejees. He was always accounted a faithful servant. ... Babahey finding his end approached fast, begged of Captain Siddons to allow him to remain at Rothuma: which the latter complied with, furnishing him with many necessaries when he put him on shore there. I considered it my duty to inquire after my old shipmate, he being a man for whom I had some regard, and was sorry to learn he had died about eight years ago of a decline, leaving a daughter behind him on the island, who is now twelve years old.²

It would seem from Dillon's account that Babahey recovered his health at least partially on Rotuma for he lived for some five years there, his daughter being born the year after his arrival. Hearing of a non-white stranger having been made *sau*, Lesson might well have conjectured that he must have been a negro, and therefore an escaped convict, but the evidence suggests that it could have been none other than the Hawaiian Babahey: the first person from a European ship to reside ashore, and an intelligent, sober and industrious character, he could understandably have been treated with deference by the Rotumans.

¹ *Transactions of the Fijian Society for the year 1917*, p. 38.

² P. Dillon, *Narrative and successful result of a voyage in the South Seas* . . . (London, 1829), II, 102-3.