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Author(s): Alan Howard

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# DISPUTE MANAGEMENT IN ROTUMA

Alan Howard

Department of Anthropology, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, HI 96822

*This essay concerns the genesis and management of disputes on the island of Rotuma in the Republic of Fiji. Although disputes are endemic to the culture, they rarely lead to physical violence. The analysis presented here aims to illuminate the mechanisms that keep disputes from escalating to violent confrontations. The mechanisms discussed include a socialization pattern based on a high valuation of children, shaming rather than physical punishment, and respect for others' autonomy; a strong belief in immanent justice; the use of avoidance as a means of reducing vulnerability and allowing passions to cool; institutionalized mediation; and a custom of formal apology that puts great pressure on the person or persons approached to accept. Several disputes are discussed in detail to illustrate how these mechanisms operate in context.*

IN MANY OF THE world's developing countries, both the genesis of disputes and the dynamics of their management remain firmly embedded in traditional cultural contexts, despite dramatic economic and political change. Such is the case on the island of Rotuma, which is located some three hundred miles north of Fiji in the South Pacific.<sup>1</sup> The Rotuman people form a cultural enclave in the newly declared Republic of Fiji. They resemble their Samoan and Tongan cousins to the east, both physically and culturally, more than they do their Fijian countrymates. In contrast to all three cultural groups, Rotumans are remarkable for their gentleness—physical violence is a great rarity on the island.<sup>2</sup> Yet disputes are not infrequent and, in rhetoric at least, can be quite bitter. This paper examines the cultural mechanisms Rotumans employ in constraining physical violence and containing, if not always resolving, disagreements. Background information concerning the Rotuman social system, particularly insofar as it relates to claims to land and chiefly titles, provides a context for understanding the nature of disputes and the processes they set in motion.

## KINSHIP, LAND, AND CHIEFLY TITLES

The Rotuman social system is based on the concept of *kainaga*, which in its broadest sense refers to beings, or things, that are categorically the same. The question *Ka kainag 'ai tese tā'a?* translates as "What kind of plant is that?" Applied to human beings, the term, in its most general sense, signifies relatedness, as in the statement *Ia 'otou kainaga*, "He/she is my relative." The term is used in more restricted ways, however, in order to specify certain types of relationship. Most important for our concern is the reference individuals make to common ancestry as signified by interest in a specific piece of land. Thus, to say *Gou kainag 'e 'Utmarae*, "I am genealogically derivative from an ascendant who lived at 'Utmarae," is to claim rights in the land at

'Utmarae and any associated chiefly titles. Invariably the land referred to is a house site (*fuag ri*), although most house sites have several affiliated blocks of garden land attached to them. All individuals with a claim to rights in a particular piece of land constitute a group (*kainaga*) responsible for transactions involving the land or for dispensing privileges associated with it. Since Rotumans inherit privileges equally from both parents, each person theoretically can make claims in the land of all their known ancestors. The ideal model, regularly referred to by Rotumans, is that a person has eight *kainaga*, each corresponding to the home territory of a great-grandparent. In practice, most people remain actively involved in the affairs of only three or four such groups.

Politically Rotuma is divided into seven districts, each headed by a titled chief (*gagaj 'es itu'u*). Each district contains a number of house sites with titles attached to them, and members of the appropriate *kainaga* are eligible to assume those titles when vacant; collectively they have a responsibility to decide who should succeed to a vacant title. Titles are ranked, so that some are considered more desirable than others. Competition is keenest for those titles eligible for paramountcy. In most districts three or four *kainaga* claim rights to a title suitable for the district chief. Collectively these groups are referred to as *mosega* (literally, "a bed," the implication being that the claimants are descendant from the same original source). The eligible *kainaga* are thus related to each other as siblings. Ideally the *gagaj 'es itu'u* should be chosen successively from each branch of the *mosega* in turn, but in practice, as we shall see, the process of selection is highly politicized. The second ranking title in each district is that of *faufisi*, whose holder serves as the district chief's "right hand." He customarily acts as head of the district when the *gagaj 'es itu'u* is absent. Lesser titles belong to village chiefs and to those occupying special roles (such as head fisherman and messenger), while some titleholders play no functional role in district administration.

Titles are bestowed in special rites during which a ceremonial bowl (*'umefe*) is turned up, ready to receive food that is ritually presented to chiefs at special events, including weddings, funerals, and a variety of church and governmental functions. Titles are bestowed for life, but they may be abandoned by reversing the initial ritual act. Thus a man gives up his title and reverts to common status by ritually turning his *'umefe* face down in a public ceremony. If a man is particularly remiss in his role or otherwise earns the enmity of his fellow *kainaga* members, he may be put under great pressure to yield his title. Whether the *kainaga* has the right to take back a title once it has been given is currently under dispute.

## AN OVERVIEW OF DISPUTES

Ironically, despite Rotuma's history of nonviolence, two of my visits to the island, nearly three decades apart, occurred when the rhetoric of violence was rampant. In 1959, when I headed for Rotuma to do dissertation research, I

was almost prevented from going there by a colonial administration (British) which was trying to pick up the pieces of an ill-fated land commission. The colonial government, in consultation with a few Rotuman residents in Fiji, decided that it would be desirable to legally codify the Rotuman system of land tenure and to survey boundaries. In order to simplify what they considered to be a confused situation, an ordinance was passed (Ordinance No. 13 of 1959) restricting the registration of each individual to one *kainaga*, normally his or her father's. In their rationale, the authors of the ordinance pointed to a large number of outstanding disputes and the difficulty of arbitrating them when individuals were able to make claims in so many parcels through so many routes. In effect, they were proposing to transform a system of bilineal inheritance to a unilineal (patrilineal) one. The ordinance authorized a commission to be sent to Rotuma to register owners of land and to survey landholdings.

The response of the Rotuman people was dramatic: they refused to cooperate with the commissioners. Threats of violence were made, and in short order the commission was withdrawn. In order to obtain permission to do research on Rotuma in the wake of this fiasco, I had to convince the governor of the colony that my work would not exacerbate an already delicate situation. After providing such assurances, I was permitted to go to Rotuma "provided that I did not inquire into land or related matters." What I found, of course, was that what Rotumans wanted to talk about most was precisely land and related matters. There was no way I could avoid it. After I had been there a few months, however, and had obviously established reasonable rapport, I was asked by the commissioner eastern, under whose jurisdiction Rotuma fell,<sup>3</sup> to please include land matters in my researches. Counter to my original plans, I ended up doing my dissertation on land tenure.

There are several reasons why disputes over land were particularly intense during that period. For one thing, the population of the island at that time had surpassed three thousand people, and the people-to-land ratio was creating increasing pressure on resources. Since the main source of money (indeed virtually the only source for most people) was *copra*—the dried meat of coconuts—control of land was vital. Problems were also created by the fact that Rotumans had begun to emigrate in substantial numbers to Fiji, where wage employment, educational opportunities, and other advantages of urban living were available. Most of the *émigrés* wished to retain land rights in Rotuma, so issues of genealogical precedence versus occupancy came to the fore. When persons who had been away for some time returned to claim their rights, they were often met with stern opposition by those who had stayed behind and had occupied, and often improved, the land. In addition to these pragmatic issues is the symbolic significance land has for Rotumans, as it does for all Polynesians. Being associated with one's ancestors, land is at the very heart of one's sense of identity. To deny people's claims to land is to threaten the very core of their social essence and, by implication, their social worth. Given this mix of practical and symbolic factors, it was no wonder that disputes over land became passionate. One of the two murders that have occurred on Rotuma since cession

to Great Britain in 1881 was over a land dispute; the other was a murder/suicide triggered by romantic jealousy.

Complicating the picture still further is the ambiguity of boundaries. Rotumans have traditionally used natural features such as trees and rocks to mark boundaries, and this vital information is transmitted orally. Given normal propensities to interpret ambiguous information in one's favor, it is not surprising that disagreements over boundaries occur with some frequency. At times when land is plentiful vis-à-vis human needs, potential disputes may be sidestepped, but when land pressure intensifies, boundaries are of critical concern. Such was the case in 1959, and surveying the lands and fixing the boundaries was a major priority of the ill-fated commission.<sup>4</sup>

I did not return to Rotuma until 1987, when my wife and I stopped there for two weeks on a sabbatical leave. Many things had changed. A wharf had been built in the late 1970s, and an airstrip was inaugurated as part of the hundredth anniversary of cession in 1981. This made the island much more accessible than it had been previously. Hurricane Bebe in 1973 had destroyed most of the Rotuman-style thatched houses, and they were mostly replaced by cement and corrugated iron structures. An underground freshwater lens had been tapped, and most houses now have running water; many have flush toilets. There had been significant social and economic changes as well, but far from being disillusioned, I found that life on the island retained much of the charm and allure that made my first experience such a marvelous adventure. I decided to resume my research, focusing on the history of changes over the past three decades. I returned in 1988 for three months and again in 1989 for six months; a two-month stay in 1990 is the basis for the epilogue.

As my wife and I prepared to leave for Rotuma in the spring of 1988, we were startled to find, just a few days before departure, that this remote little island was the subject of the front-page story in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*. The headline read, "Fiji 'King' Vows to Secede." The story focused on a part-Rotuman man by the name of Henry Gibson, a resident of New Zealand, who claimed to be "King of Rotuma." Following the second coup in Fiji and the declaration of Fiji as a republic, Gibson declared Rotuma independent and petitioned the English Crown (to whom Rotuma had originally been ceded) for recognition. A karate expert with some charisma, Gibson has a small but dedicated following on Rotuma, including many of his kinsmen and a variety of dissidents. Following his lead, they disputed the legitimacy of the Rotuma Council's decision to stay with Fiji following the coup.<sup>5</sup> Tempers flared and there was talk of violence. In response, a gunboat with a contingent of armed soldiers was sent to the island from Fiji to quell the "rebellion." My friends in Hawaii feared for my safety and assumed I would cancel my trip. Anyone who knew Rotuma (and had a healthy skepticism regarding journalistic sensationalism) would have realized how ludicrous the situation was. When I arrived a week later, the gunboat was still anchored offshore, but the soldiers were enjoying a pleasant holiday. No violence had occurred and none seemed likely.

Yet the story did signify a shift in the nature of disputes—from land to political issues. During my first visit to Rotuma, in 1959–60, Fiji was still a colony. As part of the Colony of Fiji, Rotuma was governed by a district officer appointed by the governor of Fiji. The district officer was very much in charge. He had the authority of the Crown behind him, and his decisions had the force of law. He was assisted by the Rotuma Council, composed of the chiefs of the seven districts, a representative from each district nominated by the district officer (but in fact usually chosen by the chief), the headmaster of the high school, and the resident assistant medical officer. The council served strictly in an advisory capacity; it had neither policy-making nor legislative authority.

For the most part, the chiefs and representatives served as communicative conduits between the district officer and the people in the districts. They would relay the DO's orders and were responsible for seeing to it that the orders were carried out; then they would report back to the DO, often explaining why his orders were not complied with (Rotumans learned to cope with this system by becoming masters of passive resistance—the chiefs would agree to anything the DO wanted in order to avoid offending him, but the people would generally ignore unpopular demands on their time or resources). The point I wish to make here is that during the colonial period, Rotuma was essentially a non-competitive society. Most individuals were extremely cautious about expressing their opinions, especially if they were in opposition to the DO's. Being a chief or a representative held very few privileges, aside from ceremonial ones, and often involved incumbents in awkward positions vis-à-vis both their district constituents and the all-powerful district officer. Given the burdens of office, competition for chiefly titles was not particularly keen. However, following Fiji's independence in 1970, the situation changed dramatically.

During my return visits in the 1980s, I was struck by the degree to which Rotuma had become politicalized. The roles of the Rotuma Council and the district officer had been reversed; today the DO is advisor to the chiefs and representatives (now elected by popular vote), who hold policy-making and legislative authority. Now that the chiefs control resources and have political power, competition for titles has dramatically increased and has become the focus of disputing. Relieved of the burden of a supreme decision-maker with extraordinary status, people are less reluctant to voice their opinions in public. Passive resistance has been replaced by vigorous and sometimes quite bitter debating.

Although disputes involving land still occur, they have definitely receded into the background. The passion is still there, but the occasions for disputing have been diminished as the result of several factors. For one, despite a very high rate of natural increase, the population of the island has actually fallen by approximately 10 percent to around 2,700, reducing the pressure on terrestrial resources. Furthermore, a substantial portion of the population now earns money from wages or receives remittances on a regular basis from relatives overseas. Income from copra now accounts for less than a third of the money

obtained by Rotumans. The economic importance of land has therefore been greatly reduced. A new form of disputing—over money—is just beginning to emerge, as the issue involving a village generator, cited below, illustrates.

## CONTROL FACTORS

Before analyzing specific disputes, it will be instructive to examine some of the central factors that keep disputes from escalating into violent confrontations. These include a pattern of socialization that minimizes aggressive dispositions, a set of culturally sanctioned beliefs that promises immanent justice for wrongdoing, social provision for mediation when impasses occur, and perhaps most importantly, the custom of *faksoro*—a ritual of apology that, under most circumstances, must be accepted by the aggrieved party. In addition to these customary beliefs and practices are the sanctions imposed by the political-legal system of the State of Fiji.

### *Socialization for Nonviolence*

In contrast to their Polynesian counterparts in Samoa and Tonga, as well as to their Fijian countrymates, Rotumans are noticeably gentle in their treatment of children. Whereas all Polynesian peoples are noted for indulging infants, in Rotuma older children are honored as well (see Howard 1970 for a discussion of Rotuman childrearing). They are generally fed *first*, before adults, and are given the choice foods. In Methodist churches, children sit in special pews in front, as do the chiefs and dignitaries, and services include special sermons directed specifically to the children. While parents will physically punish their children when exasperated, the blows are almost always restrained. They are more on the order of a light slap or two on the legs, a flick of the finger on the top of the head, or a pinch of the ear. Only a couple of times in the nearly three years I have spent in the company of Rotumans have I witnessed a child being struck with force that seemed meant to hurt. Children are discouraged from fighting with each other, and a child who acts the role of a bully is likely to pay a heavy price in ridicule from adults and ostracism from peers. There are specific injunctions against potential violence as well, as in the expression *Ha' 'e 'ap ser het*, ("It is forbidden to raise a knife" toward another person, even in play).

The most effective mechanism for teaching children to behave properly is shaming through ridicule—a technique that is adopted by peer groups early on. Children are also warned to behave in order to avoid the wrath of strangers and authority figures (doctors, chiefs, ministers, etc.). I was puzzled why small children were so restrained in my company until I discovered that parents were telling their children to behave properly or the white man would get angry with them. The overall effect is to produce individuals who are avoidant of strangers, overtly respectful of authority figures, and strongly drawn to those with whom they are familiar.

In dealings with people, the great concern is not making others angry. This

derives from the extreme social sensitivity such a childrearing pattern produces. One is constantly on the alert for signs of anger or incipient displeasure that might lead to anger. Depending on circumstances, people either take steps to alleviate the conditions or to avoid those who are perceived as angry or likely to become angry. In describing their own emotional responses to frustration and mistreatment, Rotumans almost never use the term *feke*, "angry," since *feke* implies being out of control, hence prone to violence. Rather, they describe their feelings as "disappointment" or "sadness." People also generally precede utterances that might conceivably give offense by saying *se fek*, "don't be angry."

Although socialization proceeds more by rewarding proper behavior than by punishing misbehavior, the power of shaming is such that *fear of failure* seems to become a dominating motivational force. Thus Rotumans are reluctant to engage in activities, including disputes, where they do not feel reasonably assured of success. Avoidance of vulnerability, both social and emotional, is the rule.

By Western standards, Rotuman children are granted an astonishing degree of autonomy. Parents rarely force children to do things they do not want to do. I have witnessed innumerable instances in which children who were asked to do something by their parents have simply ignored the request, without apparent consequence. The overriding principle is that it is undesirable to force people, children included, to do things against their will. One expression of this emphasis on autonomy is the frequently heard phrase *Puer se aealirisa*, "It's up to you/them," when people are asked about expected behavior, contributions, etc. As we shall see, this principle can be a source of disputes as well as a mechanism for avoiding them.

The principle of autonomy operates throughout the Rotuman social structure. Not only do individuals exercise autonomy within their households and communities, but villages are autonomous vis-à-vis one another, and districts are essentially independent political units. Rotuma's relationship with the government of Fiji is likewise colored by this principle. For example, following a cyclone in the 1970s, in which Rotuman crops were badly damaged, the government sent a relief ship with supplies to the island. Before the ship could unload, the Rotuma Council met and decided to send the vessel back, with the message that Rotuma could take care of itself. They suggested that the supplies be sent elsewhere.

The results of this socialization pattern are a people who are socially sensitive, ready to react defensively when their sense of autonomy is threatened, but definitely nonviolent in disposition. In defense of their autonomy, people are prepared to stand up for what they perceive to be their rights, even against their own chiefs.<sup>6</sup> They may even talk a good fight on occasion—verbal skills are encouraged and rewarded—but talk rarely translates into violent action.

### *Immanent Justice: The Spirits' Revenge*

Rotumans, including many with advanced education, express a belief in im-



manent justice. Just about everyone can tell a story about someone who had committed, from the teller's standpoint, some kind of egregious act, only to receive their just desserts soon thereafter. The cultural roots of this belief precede Christianity; it is based on ancestral spirits who, when offended or otherwise angered, make their wrath felt. Prototypical are the presumed consequences of land disputes between close relatives. The underlying assumption is that the spirits of one or more common ancestors of the disputants will be upset and punish the person in the wrong, or perhaps both parties if they share the blame. Justice is distributed in the form of luck—those in the right prosper, while those in the wrong suffer ill-fortune. The consequences of wrongdoing may simply follow from the acts, recognized retrospectively, but they are often called for by an aggrieved party. Curses of immanent justice are generally made without overt rancor, in the form of "the land has eyes" or "we shall see who is right," publicly stated by the party who has been forced to yield.

The most powerful curses are from the lips of chiefs, who traditionally were perceived as intermediaries with the spirit world. When a chief calls for immanent justice, it is usually because someone unknown has committed a serious offense within his district and refuses to confess and put things right. A number of classic cases are known by almost all Rotumans. An example is the case of Chief Fer's son, who presumably killed a cow with his cane knife without his father's knowledge. When his father called a meeting to seek out the culprit, he did not confess. Shortly thereafter (I do not know the actual time lapse involved, but it is usually spoken of as short), the son threw his knife up into a tree; it rebounded and hit him just below his shoulder, blade first, killing him. Storytellers invariably point out that he was struck in precisely the same place the cow was struck. The chief was extremely grief-stricken and reportedly vowed never again to use a curse for justice.

This belief in immanent justice affects the dynamics of disputing in several ways. For one, it tends to restrain individuals from making spurious claims, claims that might backfire. But for those who are more sure of themselves (especially those whose claims are based on information from deceased grandparents), immanent justice provides a backup position. One may lose initially but, if truly justified, will at least be vindicated. There are numerous instances in which the victors in a dispute have apologized and abandoned their claim after a period of horrendous ill-fortune. The important point is that hovering over any dispute, or potential dispute, are supernatural sanctions that can compensate for secular social impotence. More is at stake in most disputes than the immediate spoils of victory.

### *Avoidance: Out of Harm's Way*

As pointed out above, Rotuman socialization practices tend to produce individuals who avoid strangers and authority figures. When forced into interaction with such individuals, their behavior is restricted to formalities and guided by polite etiquette. Aside from serving the purposes of social decorum, such behavior insulates individuals emotionally: it serves to diminish vulnerability.

In similar fashion, a typical way of dealing with individuals with whom one has quarreled is to avoid them. This serves the same purpose: it reduces emotional vulnerability. I have come across many examples of individuals changing their allegiance from one subchief to another following a quarrel. Even more drastic are instances of families moving to another district or leaving the island altogether. The value placed on autonomy, exemplified in the childrearing pattern, allows disgruntled individuals to dissociate themselves from others for as long as they like, without any formal penalties being imposed. They simply do not reap the rewards of mutual exchange that mark positive relationships. But most Rotuman families are self-sufficient, at least with regard to subsistence, so economic penalties are likely to be minor.

In those instances in which disputants remain within the same community, avoidance seems to allow emotions to cool, and ruptures are likely to heal over time; but it may take a long time—years in fact. By its very nature, avoidance removes individuals from the mechanisms, such as apologetic discourse, that may be utilized to bring about reconciliation. It often takes some kind of dramatic event, such as a death, wedding, or community celebration, to get disputing parties back into contact.

### *Mediation: Chiefs as Problem-Solvers*

One of the most important functions of chiefs is to act as mediators between disputants within their domains. For lesser issues, those confined to a couple of households within the same *ho'aga* (work unit composed of neighboring households under the direction of a subchief, or *fa'es ho'aga*), the subchief may talk to the individuals involved, try to calm irate tempers, and suggest an equitable solution. If he appears to be partisan, however, he may exacerbate the problem and prompt the unsupported disputant to switch his allegiance to another group. This has the effect of weakening the *ho'aga*, to the subchief's disadvantage. He is therefore likely to be motivated to seek equitable solutions whenever possible (unless, of course, one party has been a constant troublemaker and a disruptive influence, in which case the loss might be welcomed).

In more pervasive disputes, those involving land matters and families from more than one *ho'aga*, district chiefs are mediators. A district chief's reputation is based significantly upon the success of his mediations. If he is seen as favoring his own parochial interests in disputes, the district is likely to factionalize and his authority diminish accordingly; if he is seen as impartial and balanced in his judgments, his stature is enhanced. But in matters of land, the main source of disputes in the past, impartiality was neither easily attained nor readily recognized. Disputes over land therefore often went unresolved or, more accurately, were only temporarily resolved, despite a chief's mediation and/or decision. The installation of a new chief was often the occasion for grievances to be resurrected, with parties who felt shortchanged on prior occasions hoping for a more favorable decision. If an individual was dissatisfied with justice at this level, he could make a final appeal to the resident colonial administrator, who served as magistrate (see below).

The Christian churches also play an important role in providing mediation. Each Methodist congregation has a catechist attached, and one of his or her foremost responsibilities is to calm troubled waters, within as well as between families. A deaconess also resides on the island; her main job is to meet with troubled individuals and to help them solve problems and disputes amicably. The priest and lay brothers play similar roles on the Catholic side of the island.

The point I wish to make here is that mediation of disputes is institutionalized in Rotuma and is readily available as a mechanism for conflict resolution. Furthermore, not only chiefs and church personnel act as intermediaries. Any interested party, particularly respected elders related to both sets of disputants, may intercede. They appeal to common sense and common interests, to community and kinship loyalties. Their goal is more often to disentangle the knots of anger and hostility than to bring about any particular solution. Prolonged and bitter disputes, it seems, are as disturbing to live elders as they are to spiritual ancestors.

### *Faksoro: Apologies with Weights Attached*

Without question, the most powerful conflict resolution mechanism available to Rotumans is faksoro, which is translated by Churchward (1940:193) as "to entreat, beseech; to apologize; to beg to be excused." But it means much more than this because of the weight of custom that it carries. Although the term is used in reference to a verbal apology following an inadvertent accident, this is only one end of a spectrum that includes more formal entreaties. At the other end of the spectrum are symbolic offers of one's life to atone for a grave injury or insult. At least five gradations can be distinguished, as follows:

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, 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 his/her property, monetary or material compensation is not expected; a proper apology sets things right.

A negative example may be instructive. When a ship arrives (quite irregularly), traffic at the wharf is rather chaotic since vehicles have little room 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, as yet 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 said he would not have done so if an apology had been offered; but since none had been forthcoming, he 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 truck 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 1939:462–69). Under such circumstances, 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*, prepared from the root of the *Piper myrthisticum* 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 a *faksoro* 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 *faksoro* an individual can make is called *hen rau'ifi*, "to hang leaves," referring to a garland of leaves that the person who comes to *faksoro* 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 who pleads, but a chief or distinguished elder who comes in his place.

*Hen rau'ifi* are only performed in the gravest circumstances, usually 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 round the presenter's neck.

My informants could only recall one instance in recent times when someone went *hen rau'ifi* to another. In this case a man struck and killed a child while driving his car through a village. Even though everyone acknowledged that the accident was unavoidable, the man was so distressed that he went in this dramatic fashion to ask forgiveness from the child's family.

What makes *faksoro* such a powerful custom is that when done properly, acceptance is virtually mandatory. Furthermore, even while the person soliciting forgiveness admits culpability and accepts blame, and is thus humbled, he gains compensatory status, for to go *faksoro*, particularly in formal fashion, is an honorable act. Should the aggrieved party refuse a proper apology, he may be subjected to severe criticism, while the offender might be socially exonerated.<sup>7</sup> As far as disputes go, *faksoro* thus provides a means by which someone who finds himself in a weak or untenable position can escape the social effects of losing a confrontation and perhaps even gain a degree of status in the bargain.

### *The Apparatus of Government: Law and Enforcement*

Following cession in 1881, a resident commissioner was sent to govern Rotuma and, with some allowance for customary practice, to administer British justice. In addition to the Rotuma Council, which advised the commissioner, another body, the Rotuma Regulation Board, composed of the commissioner and five to ten appointed Rotumans, was charged with constituting (and periodically reconstituting) a set of regulations governing land matters, public health, marriage and divorce, road maintenance, and criminal violations, among other matters. A system of fines was imposed and a small jail constructed to punish wrongdoers. The resident commissioner was also appointed magistrate, with the power to pass judgment on all but the most serious crimes (Eason 1951).

Resident commissioners and the district officers who succeeded them following an administrative reorganization in the 1930s provided recourse to individuals who were dissatisfied with resolutions to disputes arrived at by customary procedures. They could bring their case to the commissioner, who would hold a hearing and make his own judgment. Since commissioners usually held the post for only a few years, a disputant who was dissatisfied with the judgment of one man could wait until another took office and try again. This was particularly the case with long-standing disputes over land (Howard 1963b, 1964). Resident commissioners and district officers also intruded into processes for selecting district chiefs and, at times, contrary to custom, deposed those whom they considered unsuitable.

This situation prevailed until 1970, when Fiji gained independence. At that point, the Rotuma Council pledged its loyalty to the new nation and its laws. The governance of Rotuma continued to be in the hands of the council and a district officer, but with the reversal of roles described above. The council now

has decision-making authority, and the district officer is an advisor. Although he retains the power of a regional magistrate, the district officer is less able to intervene directly in disputes than before; individual Rotumans can now take their grievances directly to government agencies in Fiji if they are dissatisfied with judgments rendered on Rotuma.

There is a police station on the island with a two-cell jail. Few serious crimes occur, however, and one cell was being used for storage when I last saw it (in December 1989). Usually only two or three police officers are on active duty. They are responsible to their superiors in Fiji but are supposed to be responsive to the orders of the district officer in his role as magistrate. The police officers hold the ultimate responsibility for keeping the peace on the island.

## CASE STUDIES

### *1. A Case of Immanent Justice*

During my 1960 field trip, I encountered a number of instances in which land disputes had resulted in curses of immanent justice, and stories abounded of injustices that resulted in sorry misfortune for those in the wrong. In some instances, as in the case reported below, faksoro was used to lift the curse and restore harmonious relations.

I was told that approximately ten years prior to my presence on the island, a question arose as to how a certain parcel of bush land should be allocated. The land did not belong to a fuag ri, so it was not attached to a particular household. A man named Jotama<sup>8</sup> insisted that the right of allocation belonged to his branch of the kainaga, of which he was the senior representative. He was supported in his claim by the district chief, with whom he was good friends.

Jotama called a meeting of the kainaga and acted as chairman. One of the first steps he took was to discredit the claims of several groups who asserted that they had rights in this land. This effectively excluded them from making requests to cut copra and excluded their offspring from access to the land. Jotama finally allotted the land to Sakimi, a close relative, even though other kainaga members, whose claims Jotama could not deny, should have been given priority by virtue of their genealogical seniority. The dispossessed members of the kainaga invoked a curse of immanent justice by proclaiming that in time "the truth would be known."

After several years, one of Jotama's sons went insane and was committed to a mental institution. Other things also went awry, and his family was troubled. This convinced Jotama that he had acted wrongly and was being punished by ill-fortune, so he made a koua and invited all branches of the kainaga, including the ones he had previously expelled. He made a faksoro to the people and confessed that he knew now that he had done wrong. The previously wronged members of the kainaga accepted his apology, but they decided to allow Sakimi to continue to exercise stewardship over the land, since he had improved it by planting coconut trees. The expelled sections of the kainaga were readmitted, however, and their rights were restored.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. *Dissension among Chiefs: Avoidance and Reconciliation, Case 1*

Over a decade ago a man was given the title Toaniu in one of the districts, putting him in charge of a village. Toaniu, a highly political individual, was elected to the Rotuma Council as district representative and in 1981 was elected chairman of the council. At first the district chief was pleased with Toaniu's successes and supported him. But not long afterwards, at a district meeting, the two men reputedly had harsh words with one another. Toaniu, along with some other subchiefs and their followers, walked out of the meeting.

Following the clash, Toaniu and the families who were aligned with him refused to cooperate in district activities. They also did not connect their houses to the village generator for electricity; Toaniu bought his own generator. Several prominent individuals, including some from other districts, tried to patch things up but failed. Neither man would faksoro the other. One highly placed woman even offered to provide a fine mat and pig—but both men stubbornly refused to make a move toward reconciliation. The two men avoided each other for several years, thus minimizing overt conflict, but district cooperation suffered.

This situation prevailed until July 1988 when Toaniu's mother died. The district chief came to the funeral and directed the proceedings. He gave a moving speech, full of compassion, and expressed regret over the past dissension. Although he did not apologize, his gesture of good will was accepted by Toaniu. Since then the two men have been cordial to one another, and most of Toaniu's followers have resumed cooperating in district events presided over by the district chief.

## 3. *The Generator Dispute: Avoidance and Reconciliation, Case 2*

A few years ago one of the villages installed a generator to serve its approximately thirty households. The equipment cost approximately F\$18,000,<sup>10</sup> but the costs were met in part by a district club in Fiji;<sup>11</sup> the remainder was provided through a grant from a Fiji self-help program. Problems began almost at once. To install the reticulated system required digging ditches and laying lines for more than a kilometer. Since there was no money to pay for this work, installation depended on donated labor. As often happens when there is communal work to be done, some people put in a great deal of effort, others put in less, which was the source of some grumbling. Also, electricity meters were not supplied, and since they cost F\$15 each (a considerable amount of money for some families), none were installed. This raised the issue of how fuel and maintenance costs were to be distributed among the households. The grant provided each household with two light fixtures and a power point, but some of the more affluent families installed additional fixtures and power points at their own expense. The initial agreement within the village was that each household would pay in proportion to the number of fixtures and power points installed.

The plan called for the generator to be turned on for three hours per day, from 6:00 to 9:00 P.M. It uses approximately 7½ liters of fuel for each session,

which, at roughly F\$0.50 per liter, would cost the village in the vicinity of F\$120 per month. Even though the cost per household was only about F\$4 per month, some complained that it was too much for them, that they could not come up with the cash every month. As a result, a village meeting was held at which it was decided to leave it up to each household to pay what they could afford each month. For a very brief time this scheme worked; during the first month there was even a surplus. But thereafter, shortfalls were the rule. In order to keep the generator running, a few individuals with both the resources and the inclination contributed the bulk of the fuel.

The issue resulted in the development of two factions. One faction, supported by the district chief (who lives in the village), advocated a flat rate be paid by each household, regardless of use. The other faction, led by a man named Eliesa, advocated payment according to the number of light fixtures and power points. Interestingly this individual had installed seven additional light fixtures and would have had to pay disproportionately more, so his self-interest was not at issue. His support came mainly from the poorer segment of the village.

At a village meeting during which the issue was discussed, the debate became heated, and angry words were exchanged. The district chief was absent, and the meeting was chaired by a designated subchief who supported the district chief's position. As the debate heated up, he allegedly accused Eliesa (who also held a title) of not carrying his weight in village affairs and insulted his title. The incident was extremely distressing to Eliesa, and as a result he renounced his title and isolated himself from village affairs for more than two years. One of his supporters did likewise. Both men disconnected their houses from the reticulated village electrical system and bought their own generators. They steadfastly refused to participate in village events and kept to themselves, despite numerous attempts by friends, relatives, and neighbors to institute social repairs.

About the same time that the flap over the generator took place, a more pervasive issue emerged which added fuel to the fire. Up to the present, no tourist facilities exist on Rotuma. A few visitors come from time to time, but they must arrange accommodations with families. However, in 1986 a brother of the district chief, who had had a successful career as a government official, arranged with an Australian shipping line to have a tourist vessel visit Rotuma. The ship, the *Fairstar*, carries approximately a thousand tourists and was to discharge them for a day at a beach bordering the village. The substantial docking fees (approximately F\$4,000) were to be divided among kainaga owning beachfront property, with a portion reserved for expenses. A proposal was made that some of the money be set aside for repairing and maintaining the generator, but following the dispute over the generator and the shattering of village unity, the villagers decided to use this portion of the fees to pay (invited) groups to provide entertainment for the tourists.

The plan to have such a large tourist vessel visit the island on a regular basis stirred a spirited debate within the Rotuman community, both on Rotuma and amongst Rotumans in Fiji. Those opposed, led by the Methodist clergy,



argued that Rotuman morals would be threatened by tourists who could be expected to dress immodestly, drink and perhaps introduce illegal drugs, and seduce young women. Several individuals who had been abroad brought up examples from places like Bali and Hawaii, whose cultures had been devastated by tourism. Those supporting the idea pointed to the economic benefits to be gained and argued that this form of tourism was preferable to hotel development. Within the village, the majority supported the plan, but Eliesa and some of his supporters did not. Again, they refused to cooperate in community efforts to prepare the beach area and the village for the prospective tourists.

The tourism issue created a split between this village and a neighboring village in the district. In the neighboring village most people opposed the arrival of a tourist vessel, many bitterly. As a result, district solidarity suffered, and cooperation was seriously impaired on district projects.<sup>12</sup> For example, about this time a water pipeline was being laid in the district using local labor, but the men from the neighboring village reportedly refused to work beyond their community's limits. This put a heavy burden on the men from the first village, since they had to lay pipe through a long stretch of uninhabited land. The recalcitrant men cited the tourism dispute as their reason for not cooperating.

The *Fairstar* made its first visit during 1986, without incident. In addition to the F\$4,000 docking fee, the tourists reportedly spent an additional F\$6,000 on food and souvenirs. None of this money was set aside for the generator, however (much of the income from food and souvenirs went to people from other villages). The village failed to pay the F\$100 annual maintenance fee; so when the generator broke down early in 1987, it was not covered by a maintenance contract, and the village was stuck with a F\$1,400 repair bill. For the discontents, this had the flavor of immanent justice, and they related the sequence of events to us with some satisfaction. If raising F\$120 per month to pay for fuel was a problem, raising F\$1,400 within the village was simply out of the question. The generator was shipped to Suva, to the Public Works Department (PWD), for repairs, where it languished for nearly two years. Several high-ranking Rotumans in Fiji attempted to intervene, unsuccessfully at first, but eventually the PWD agreed to lower the charges to F\$300. This was paid by a villager from earnings as my research assistant, but after a subsequent visit of the *Fairstar*, he was reimbursed from the docking fees.

When my wife and I visited Rotuma in 1987, the generator was again down, and feelings were still tender. Eliesa and some of his supporters remained aloof during village activities, but no direct expressions of antagonism were evident. The following year we were able to witness the healing process take place. Eliesa had taken the initiative in forming a group that would seek funds to sponsor entrepreneurial enterprises on the island. He invited some of his key supporters and some neutral individuals to join the "board." Meetings were held in his home. After a few meetings, when it looked like the project might succeed, several members of the group persuaded him that it would be advantageous to invite the district chief to join them. Eliesa subsequently asked

the chief's son-in-law, who was a member of the newly formed board and neutral vis-à-vis the previous disputes, to accompany him and the other main dissident to the chief's house. The son-in-law agreed and reportedly opened their visit to the chief by announcing that the two men had come to seek reconciliation. Eliesa said that he had not come to justify himself or to claim he was right and the chief wrong. He said he just wanted to start again and forget the past. The son-in-law then told the chief about the board meetings and asked if he would like to join the group. Belatedly Eliesa chimed in, seconding the invitation. According to witnesses, the chief did not respond immediately, but his wife said, "He'll come" (thus assuming the role of an intermediary in her own right). The chief then accepted the invitation. After this meeting the son-in-law commented that "sometimes you have to use tricks," referring to his issuing the invitation in advance of, and presumably without the prior approval of, Eliesa.

This invitation provided a basis for reconciliation and reintegrating the discontents back into village life. The next board meeting (which we attended) was interesting insofar as everyone was aware that it was a momentous occasion, and talk was guarded. Some differences in viewpoint were expressed, but the tone was exaggeratedly conciliatory. It no doubt helped that Eliesa was in the position of chairman; he was in control of the meeting rather than being subordinated. The chief accepted the chairman's authority in this context, although he expressed his own viewpoints without undue restraint. After this, Eliesa attended more and more village functions and even began to assume increased responsibility when called for. By the time we concluded our research at the end of 1989, the village split was, to all appearances, completely healed. Even the relationship between Eliesa and the subchief who had publicly insulted him was healed to the point that they were seen sitting together, engaged in conversation, at several recent events. Time and avoidance had healed the wounds.

The hard feelings between villages that erupted over the tourism issue also eased with time. Reconciliation occurred in somewhat more dramatic fashion, as the result of a grand-scale wedding between a village man and a woman from the neighboring community. Significantly, the guardian of the bride had been one of the most outspoken critics of tourism, while the groom's father had been an active supporter. During the wedding, both sides gave a number of emotional speeches acknowledging past conflicts but glorifying the cooperation that had taken place to produce such a gala affair. As festivities drew to a conclusion, a spokesman for the bride's side declared the formal rules of protocol (which act to keep the bride's and groom's parties separated) inoperative, since "we are all one family." To confirm his verbal gesture, the final meal was served without the normal formalities.

Toward the end of 1989, district solidarity reached a crescendo with the celebration of the 150th anniversary of Methodist missionization on Rotuma.<sup>13</sup> Since the district was the location of the first missionary landing, it was the

center of celebration. Numerous important visitors were expected from Fiji and overseas, and much effort went into planting vast quantities of food, sprucing up the villages, and making other preparations. Spirits were high throughout, and the level of cooperation was remarkable. No overt signs of prior antagonisms could be seen.

The above two cases demonstrate the healing effects of long-term avoidance followed by an event, or set of events, that provides opportunities for parties to a dispute to interact without losing face. Under such circumstances apologies are rarely offered, although mention of previous differences is likely to be made during speeches. It should also be pointed out that with time, new contingencies may emerge that make it increasingly advantageous for disputants to cooperate, thus lending impetus to the forces of reconciliation. Furthermore, reconciliation generally has advantages for individuals who enjoy cordial relations with both parties to a dispute; as in the case of the chief's son-in-law, they can make excellent mediators.

#### 4. *The Battle for the Maraf Title: The Power of External Mediation*

The title of Maraf is the most highly prized in all of Rotuma. It belongs to the head chief of Noatau, the highest ranking district. The holder of the Maraf name is entitled to deference from all Rotumans, including the other chiefs. When, in 1981, the man holding the title died, a dispute arose concerning the choice of a successor.

It appears that the mosega having the right to choose a successor was split into two main segments, one centered in Noatau, the other in another district. Mosega members from the other district allege that the faufisi of Noatau called a meeting with the idea of excluding them. They say that the faufisi told their district chief (himself a member of the mosega) that a meeting was planned, "but you don't have to come." They say they were told that only people from Noatau would attend, but in fact members from two other districts came. The meeting was held without the excluded contingent, and much to their consternation, the man chosen to assume the Maraf name was not living in Noatau, but elsewhere.

Members of the excluded faction insisted that if the process had been carried out properly, they would not have objected. But upset by what they saw as deception, they called a meeting of their own "to show that we have rights, too." They decided to choose someone else to hold the title of Maraf and to install him. Agreeing upon a candidate was not easy, but after several additional meetings, a woman who had married a Chinese man in Fiji offered to ask her son, Jale Yee, if he would come to Rotuma to take the position.

Jale Yee was described to me as "a man in Fiji who works as a computer specialist." His mother is from Noatau, although when she comes to Rotuma, she stays with relatives in another district. Her father was a previous Maraf. Jale Yee has lived most of his life in Fiji but speaks Rotuman fluently. He has

an M. A. degree in mathematics from an American university. Although as Maraf he would have received only F\$35 per month, he was apparently willing to give up his high-paying job in Fiji to assume the title.

The disaffected group selected Jale and, following his arrival in Rotuma, installed him. This act of defiance, unprecedented in modern Rotuma, led to angry words and threats of violence. As a result, the brother of the previously installed Maraf, who worked for the police at the time, radioed Fiji to send reinforcements because "there would be a fight." A contingent of nine policemen came by plane and camped at the government station, ready to quell eruptions of violent behavior. Soon thereafter, two of the most prominent living Rotumans, Josefa Rigamoto and Paul Manueli, arrived in Rotuma to act as mediators, along with the commissioner eastern.

Josefa Rigamoto is the son of a previous district chief and has only recently, at the age of eighty, concluded a distinguished career with the Native Lands Trust Board. His retirement was delayed several times because of his indispensability to that agency. Rigamoto was a close friend of Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, the revered Fijian paramount chief, who led Fiji during World War II. At Sukuna's request, he commanded a group of Rotuman volunteers in the Solomons campaign. Following the war, in 1947, Rigamoto was the first Rotuman appointed to the post of district officer. He served in that capacity for four years and is widely respected among all ethnic groups in Fiji as a fair and just man.

Paul Manueli, whose roots are in Noatau, is a graduate of Sandhurst Military Academy in England. He had a distinguished career with the Fijian military and, while still a lieutenant, was appointed to the post of district officer on Rotuma for an interim period (this was in 1960, while I was doing my initial research there). He went on to become a colonel and head of the Fiji Military Forces. Following his retirement, he has enjoyed considerable success as a business leader and has served on the boards of numerous corporations.

Although both of these men are from chiefly families, neither has ever held a title. Rather, their prestige is based upon their accomplishments and their worldly experience. They made it clear that they were not going to Rotuma to choose the chief, but simply to help the disputants find a resolution. They met first with each group independently to hear its side of the story, then met with both sides jointly. They guided the discussion and appealed to both sides to be reasonable, to consider the good of the whole island. Finally, the head chief of the excluded district relented and asked Jale Yee to step down in the interests of harmony. Yee returned to Fiji, where he resumed his career as a computer specialist.

Had there been no mediation by individuals of such stature, it is unlikely that the dispute would have been successfully resolved, at least not without bitter feelings and lingering resentment. While relations between the two districts involved remain competitive, the reigning Maraf is now accorded the formal deference and privileges due to the title, and whatever ill-feelings remain are thoroughly subdued.

### 5. *The Dispute over the Tokaniua Title: The Power of Faksoro*

During our 1988 visit to Rotuma, the man holding the title of Tokaniua died. He had been absent from the island for several years, residing in the Rotuman community at Vatukoula, the site of the Emperor Gold Mines, in Fiji. Traditionally the Tokaniua title belonged to the faufisi of the district, but it was given additional prestige by the fact that the previous district chief had once held it as faufisi and had elected to retain it after his elevation to district chief. For several months, people within the district waited expectantly for the current district chief to hold a meeting of the kainaga in order to choose a successor. Two men from the chief's village, both of whom were hard workers and generous in their contributions to community efforts, were singled out by gossipers as likely candidates. But no meeting was called.

Much to my surprise, when we returned to Rotuma in July 1989, a Rotuman man who had been living in Fiji for many years had been installed as Tokaniua. I had met him the year before on one of his visits to Rotuma. He was a friend of the chief and had stayed with him. The chief made the appointment without holding a kainaga meeting.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, the title was bestowed when one of the prime contenders was away in Fiji. This man insisted that he would have accepted the appointment without rancor but for the fact the the new appointee attempted to justify his eligibility by claiming the title actually belonged to a fuag ri (house site) with which he was associated, rather than to the fuag ri of the other contenders.

When he returned from Fiji, the disgruntled contender called a meeting of the kainaga and confronted the chief and the newly appointed Tokaniua. I was told that strong words were used and accusations of impropriety made. Apparently enough of the kainaga members were upset by the lack of consultation to have forced a resignation, but both the district chief and a tearful Tokaniua offered their apologies (faksoro). They begged forgiveness from those present and pleaded with them to give the new appointee a chance. By thus humbling themselves, instead of attempting to justify a dubious procedure, they disarmed the opposition. The apology was accepted, although a threat was made that if Tokaniua did anything wrong or got out of line, he would be ousted.

During our presence on the island, it was indeed clear that Tokaniua was being cautious in the way he fulfilled his role. He seemed overly anxious to please and was especially diligent in fulfilling his responsibilities. Nevertheless, support from the disgruntled faction was slow in coming, and when the district chief left on a brief trip to Fiji, a delegation, led by the incensed contender, urged him not to appoint Tokaniua, who now held the position of faufisi, as his stand-in. Instead, they implored him to appoint the subchief who had filled that role in the absence of the previous titleholder. The chief complied, contrary to prevailing custom. Despite the underlying tension, however, Tokaniua is treated with the respect owed his title, and there are few signs of hostility towards him.

### 6. *The Case of the Defiant Chief: Government as Arbiter*

In 1960, the aged head chief of the district in which I lived, Itumata, died, and a new chief was installed. When I returned in 1987, I learned that this man had also died earlier in the year and was replaced by a subchief who took the title of Manav. The selection process did not go smoothly, however. Disagreement arose over which kainaga's turn it was to select the new chief. A man named Akerio claimed it was his kainaga's turn to select the chief, but he was unable to muster sufficient backing within the district to support his case.

It was reported to me that a subchief by the name of Fagmanuia was senior within the kainaga whose turn it was and should have been chosen, but the man who became Manav, himself a subchief, pleaded *Figalelei ma na la gou 'a 'ase faroa he ta*, "Please give me a chance to taste your bread," and Fagmanuia yielded. This created a special bond of obligation between Manav and Fagmanuia.

Following Manav's installation, Akerio refused to attend district meetings or participate in community activities led by Manav. During our 1988 visit, I learned that some moves toward reconciliation had taken place and that Akerio was again attending district meetings. When we arrived on Rotuma in July 1989, however, a new dispute had split the district, and Manav's leadership was being seriously threatened.

It seems that sometime during our absence Manav took a trip to Fiji and appointed Fagmanuia to stand in for him. This was considered a serious breach of protocol by the faufisi, a man who holds the title of Ti'u.<sup>15</sup> At a district meeting during which the issue was discussed, Manav argued that the faufisi should be from a chiefly mosega, as was true of Fagmanuia, but not of Ti'u. Therefore he was justified in choosing Fagmanuia; besides, he argued, Fagmanuia is traditionally supposed to be faufisi in the district. Ti'u responded by pointing out that during a past war (prior to cession), the man holding the Fagmanuia title, who was faufisi at the time, had proved to be a coward: he had refused to lead the district's army, a responsibility of the faufisi. The district chief at the time appointed Ti'u in his stead, and since that time Ti'u had been faufisi of the district.

Manav allegedly then demeaned Ti'u's title, saying it was from the bush. This was equivalent to accusing Ti'u (and his kainaga) of being "uncultured" and was taken as a grave insult. Ti'u then wrote a letter of complaint to the prime minister of Fiji, who asked the district officer to intervene. The district officer called a meeting and, acting as mediator, persuaded Manav to verbally apologize to Ti'u. After the meeting they reportedly shook hands. I was told that Ti'u said that while he himself was satisfied with the apology, Manav had in fact insulted his entire kainaga and that he owed them a formal faksoro; but Manav refused, and the dispute continued. The district factionalized into supporters of Ti'u and supporters of Manav. Ti'u's supporters signed a petition urging that Manav be deposed and sent it to the prime minister. Ti'u left

Rotuma and went to Fiji to press his case. I met him in Fiji in June 1989, and he vowed not to return until a new chief was installed.

Dissatisfaction with Manav's leadership continued to grow, even among members of his own mosega. At a district meeting in July, Manav was urged to step down, but he refused to consider the possibility, stating he would rather go to jail. He said he would wait for the prime minister to make the decision. In August Manav called a meeting of his mosega. He invited people from all over the island, even those whose membership in the group was extremely doubtful. Such a strategy is often used by individuals when they are unsure of support among the core members of a kinship unit. In fact, because of the bilateral nature of Rotuman kinship, membership boundaries in any mosega are blurred. Even the flimsiest of possible relationships can be the basis for claims, thus opening the door for a good deal of manipulation. By recruiting people from outside his district, Manav evidently hoped to defuse complaints from within the district.

The meeting was attended by a number of people from outside the district, including the head chiefs of two other districts and several subchiefs. These titled men had expressed serious concern about the petition to the Fijian prime minister and especially about allowing decisions concerning chieftainship to be decided by officials from Fiji. They hoped to mediate a solution that would leave matters in the hands of Rotumans in Rotuma. They also were concerned about the very possibility of deposing a chief, which they claimed was contrary to Rotuman custom. Titles are given for life, they argued, and cannot be taken away against the titleholder's will; likewise, a chief cannot be deposed against his will.

According to informants,<sup>16</sup> the visiting chiefs urged Manav to *faksoro* in the strongest possible way—to go *hen rau'ifi*, symbolically offering his life. The majority of the mosega, however, did not agree. They argued that the petition should stand and that the prime minister should make the final decision. The general feeling (throughout the island) seemed to be that Manav had had plenty of time to *faksoro* but that now it was too late. A *faksoro* is only credible, and honorable, if it is deemed to be sincere. For Manav to formally apologize at this juncture (more than five months after the insult) would be seen as crass political manipulation, a cynical attempt to retain his position.

In fact, Manav and the few families that still supported him prepared a *koua* a few weeks later, in mid-September. They informed Ti'u's supporters that they would bring the offering to the community hall. I was told that not only did none of Ti'u's group arrive to receive the *faksoro*,<sup>17</sup> but that the owners of the hall refused to let Manav use it for that purpose and sent him home. He took the offering back to his own home, where he and his few supporters ate it themselves. The whole affair seemed rather haphazard, which further impaired its credibility as an apology. The district officer was not informed until just before it was to take place, and a representative from the prime minister's office who had come to mediate the case was not told at all.

The man who had been sent by the prime minister to mediate the dispute was a prominent Rotuman from Fiji. He was instructed to encourage the

disputants to reach their own solution so a judgment would not have to be imposed. He met with the dissidents and with Manav separately. It was suggested that Manav call a meeting of the members of his mosega and return the title to them. This would allow Manav to step down gracefully. In that case the mosega would then go to the district officer, formally yielding the position of district chief, and the district officer would instruct the kainaga next in line to choose a new chief. The district officer told me at this point that the prime minister preferred to keep the matter a Rotuman affair but was prepared to take action if it was not soon resolved.

Nothing happened until early November when the appointed arbiter returned to Rotuma. He held another series of meetings with the concerned parties and finally persuaded Manav to agree to abide by a vote of the whole district. A meeting was called, and those attending voted for Manav to step down by a margin of two-to-one. Ti'u arrived back in Rotuma a few days later and filled in as acting chief during the celebration of the 150th anniversary of Christianity in Rotuma. His obvious pleasure with the turn of events was counterbalanced by the sadness, if not distress, of many other Rotumans. The concern of these people had nothing to do with Manav's fate as an individual but was for the implications his being deposed had for Rotuman chieftainship. They worried that if a chief could be put out of office simply because people did not like him, then the very foundations of chiefly authority would be undermined.<sup>18</sup>

There was a curious aftermath to the resolution of this dispute. Approximately a week later the eligible mosega met and chose a new chief. He happened to be the son of Fagmanuia, the subchief Manav had appointed to stand in for him in Ti'u's stead. I learned that the installation was to take place on Friday, November 24th, so went early in the morning to ask if I could attend. I was told that the ceremony would not take place that day, that the elders had met the previous evening and decided to postpone it. When I asked why, I received one of those vague "don't know" answers that alerts an ethnographer that something interesting is going on. I later discovered that the leaders were concerned that Manav still held his title, even though he had stepped down as chief. They were evidently afraid it might cause bad luck for the new chief and for the district to have two men with paramount titles alive at the same time. The district officer finally persuaded them that this was not a problem and cited a precedent in which the chief of another district, who had been forced out of office for committing adultery, retained his title without ill effects. The installation of Fagmanuia's son took place a few days later, presided over by a triumphant Ti'u, acting in the role of faufisi.

## SUMMARY

Rotuma is a good example of a society that is disputatious but nonviolent. Socialization involves little physical punishment, and aggressive models are essentially absent. However, even children's autonomy is respected, and they learn to assert themselves in defense of their own interests. As a result, people



stand up for their rights; while gentle in comportment, they are not necessarily docile in disposition. Disputes are therefore endemic in Rotuma. What is remarkable is that they so rarely escalate to violent encounters.

One mechanism that acts to contain disputes is a widespread belief in immanent justice. This belief—that wrongdoers will get their just desserts in the form of ill-fortune—restrains individuals from making claims they know to be spurious. It helps keep people from being overly aggressive in their pursuit of self-interest.

A second mechanism for dealing with conflict is avoidance. Unlike many other island peoples who have institutionalized procedures for getting disputants to discuss their grievances in controlled circumstances (Watson-Gegeo and White 1990), Rotumans avoid such confrontations. They therefore rely less on *resolving* disputes than on *containing* them. Avoidance is a workable strategy because of the degree of economic self-sufficiency and mobility enjoyed by most Rotumans. It allows time for tempers to cool, for hurts to be forgotten, and for vulnerability to be minimized. Relationships are sometimes, but not always, renewed under more favorable circumstances. Avoidance has costs, however, in the form of diminished possibilities for social and economic support.

A third mechanism for managing disputes is mediation, which is institutionalized in the form of chiefly and church-related roles. Ideally, mediators are trusted elders who have an important stake in maintaining harmony between adversaries and are free of parochial interests. Their job is to soothe ruffled feathers and to promote compromise in the interest of community solidarity. Chiefs are also arbitrators. They have the right to make judgments in disputes that cannot be otherwise settled by the antagonists. If a disputant is sufficiently dissatisfied with a chief's judgment, he can appeal to the district officer or other government officials. The most passionate disputes are over land and chiefly prerogatives—essentially long-term issues. Therefore, current setbacks may be reversed when new chiefs or government officials are in place. This encourages patience, as does the belief in immanent justice.

Perhaps the most effective mechanism available to Rotumans is the custom of *fakso*. By construing apologies as honorable, persons who have offended others can gain compensatory status for admission of wrongdoing. That acceptance of such apologies, given under proper circumstances, is virtually mandatory makes them especially effective as strategies for ending disputes.

Finally, one must not lose sight of the important role played by the Fiji government as final arbitrator in Rotuman disputes. While sending gunboats to quell political protests may be somewhat overzealous, the point was not entirely lost on Rotumans. They were made acutely aware that what happens on Rotuma is watched abroad and that they will pay a price if matters get out of hand. When Henry Gibson's followers eventually were brought to trial for sedition (on Rotuma) before Fiji's chief magistrate, even the chiefs were made to feel the power of the law to intimidate. They were shown no more respect by the lawyers and magistrate than were the defendants. Therefore, the process of the trial itself conveyed the most powerful message—that even the

*threat* of violence on Rotuma puts everyone's dignity at risk. The magistrate, upon finding the defendants guilty of sedition, wisely imposed an extremely light sentence. He fined them F\$30 each (F\$20 less than the fine for riding a motorcycle without a helmet) and placed them on two years' probation. Many observers thought this was too light and would have liked to have seen them sent to jail. The defendants vowed to keep up their struggle for Rotuma's independence, but talk of violence had passed. When we left the island at the end of 1989, it appeared that the mechanisms for managing disputes were as effective as ever, despite all the economic, social, and cultural changes that have affected Rotuma over the past thirty years.

## EPILOGUE

The situation seven months later upon our return in 1990 for two months of additional fieldwork has raised doubts, however. A new set of disputes had erupted which fed off previous grievances and threatened to undermine the very foundations of traditional dispute management strategies.

The first clue we had that things were amiss was that the village generator that had been the source of the second dispute was once again not running on a regular basis, because, we were told, there was no money to pay for fuel. It only operated when individuals or groups provided fuel for a special occasion. We discovered that the villagers were refusing to contribute because they suspected the district chief, Kausiriaf, of misappropriating funds from a recent visit of the *Fairstar* that had been set aside to pay for fuel. Relations between the chief, along with a few of his supporters, and the rest of the village were clearly strained.

Tensions within the district exploded a few weeks after our arrival. The specific event that triggered the dispute was the publication in the *Fiji Times* of an article describing a petition to the prime minister, signed by five district chiefs and one subchief, demanding the ouster of the district officer and the government arbiter who had mediated the Itumuta chieftainship dispute (the Manav case) the year before. The petition also included complaints about the treatment given the chairman of the Rotuma Council by two Rotuman bank officials in Fiji when he went to seek a loan for new buses. All of the men accused in the petition were from the district in which the dispute erupted. Furthermore, they were closely related to members of the chiefly mosega and to the chief himself.

Members of the mosega were extremely disturbed by the newspaper report and called a meeting to demand an explanation and apology from Kausiriaf, who not only signed the petition but had taken it around to other chiefs to obtain their signatures. Instead of apologizing, however, Kausiriaf told the mosega members that it was none of their business and walked out. In response, those present voted to strip Kausiriaf, who had been in office for over twenty years, of his title and to select a new chief. They followed through

with this course of action and a few weeks later installed as new chief a man who has lived in Fiji for most of his adult life. As a result, the district factionalized between supporters of the old and new chiefs.

Kausiriat went to Fiji to consult his kin there. He hired a lawyer and brought suit against those mosega members who called for his ouster. He also placed an announcement in the *Fiji Times* claiming he was still chief and harshly denouncing his opponents by name. His opponents felt that by taking this course, he had forsaken any possibility of reconciliation. When he subsequently went to some of the most respected elders in Fiji who are members of the mosega, allegedly to faksoro for the trouble he was causing, he was told it was too late to apologize.

This case highlights several recent trends that bode ill for conflict management on the island. First of all, it is apparent that the institution of chieftainship is under strain and that confidence in the chiefs has significantly eroded over the past few years. In large part this is a consequence of the fact that although chiefs dominate the main policy-making and fiscal management body on the island, the Rotuma Council, they are with one exception uneducated and untrained for the job. They are perceived by the large majority of the population to be ineffective and concerned with lining their own pockets rather than with the welfare of the island.<sup>19</sup> Chiefs are correspondingly seen as untrustworthy mediators, both because their wisdom is in doubt and because they are suspected of having their own interests, rather than the interests of their people, at heart.

The shift to a money economy has also put pressure on the custom of faksoro. Traditionally, a faksoro was sufficient to compensate for any offense, including offenses that cost the victims money or property. A number of years ago, Kausiriat was caught embezzling funds from the Rotuma Co-operative Society and from the Methodist church. By law he should have been prosecuted, but his formal faksoro was accepted by the members of both organizations. Today people are less and less willing to accept apologies for offenses that cost them money, in part because much more money is at stake today than in the past. They are more willing to refuse to accept apologies, to say "It's too late to make amends." When the obligatory nature of accepting apologies erodes, faksoro will lose its power as a control mechanism, since the personal and social risks to the supplicant will increase accordingly.

Another trend which appears ominous is the increased use of printed matter to bolster one's position in a dispute. Kausiriat's placement of an announcement in the *Fiji Times* stating his case and attacking his opponents lent an air of permanence to the dispute that is absent when disagreements are oral. One can deny that something was said, claim to have been misunderstood, or conspire to forget words spoken in anger. But a written, public record, is another matter.<sup>20</sup> Whether relationships can survive such a strategy is doubtful.

Finally, Rotumans appear to be more and more inclined to hire lawyers and rely on the courts to settle their disputes. By doing so, they circumvent the

very mechanisms that have been most effective in containing conflicts in the past.

Given these strains in the system, I would not be surprised to see more frequent expressions of overt anger, as well as more aggressive behavior in pursuit of self-interest. Whether Rotumans can remain nonviolent in the face of these trends is problematic.

## NOTES

1. The research on which this paper is based was supported by the National Institute of Mental Health, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the University of Hawaii Office of Research Administration, and the University of Hawaii Program on Conflict Resolution (UHPCR). An earlier version of this paper with the same title was circulated as Working Paper 1990-1 by UHPCR. The 1990 field session was supported by a Matsuda Scholarship from the University of Hawaii. My wife, Jan Rensel, has done ethnographic research on Rotuma as a Fulbright scholar and was a co-worker in collecting data used in this essay. Her encouragement and critical comments have been invaluable. Vilsoni Hereniko, Jack Bilmes, and Neal Milner read an earlier draft of this paper and made valuable suggestions, many of which have been incorporated into the current version. Finally, I am extremely grateful to all the Rotumans who showed such infinite patience with my questions and intrusions. To them I say, "*Nod'ia ma hanisi.*"

2. That nonviolence is not a postmissionary phenomenon is attested to by the remarks of visitors in the first half of the nineteenth century, prior to missionization. Many comment on the gentle disposition of the Rotumans (see, for examples, Mariner [cited in Gardiner 1898:404] and Lesson [1838-39:430]).

3. Fiji is administratively divided into four sections based on the compass. Although Rotuma lies to the north of Fiji, it was included in the eastern division, along with the Lau Islands, by the British during colonial times. Apparently, Rotuma's remoteness made it more comparable to the Lau Islands than to the islands of northern Fiji proper.

4. As a result of the collapse of the Land Commission in 1959, lands in Rotuma have gone unsurveyed and unregistered until the present day. There is now talk of establishing a new Land Commission that would be charged with formalizing customary principles of ownership and succession, as well as surveying present boundaries.

5. Rotuma became part of the Colony of Fiji by historical accident. In 1879, following a skirmish between Wesleyans, ministered to by an English missionary, and Catholics, ministered to by a French priest, the chiefs of Rotuma petitioned Great Britain for cession. In 1881 cession formally took place, and the Crown decided to administer the island from Fiji for convenience. Gibson argued that Rotuma had been ceded to Great Britain, not to Fiji, and that only the Crown could negate that association.

6. This makes chieftainship in Rotuma a somewhat different phenomenon than in societies such as Fiji, where chiefs have real power over their subjects. In Rotuma chiefs are honored on special occasions, when they are "in role," but most of the time they are "out of role" and are treated respectfully but without reverence. In turn, chiefs, like parents, respect their subjects' autonomy. They are generally unable to force people to do things against their will (for more information on the nature of chieftainship in Rotuma, see Howard 1963a, 1966).

7. Custom requires a person coming to faksoro to display humility and to beg forgiveness. A common expression used in such entreaties is *Ase ma 'on te se 'a'a*, "I beg of you to eat what you would never eat [implying feces]." This is an acknowledgement that forgiveness may not be easy.

8. The names of some persons used in these case studies are fictitious, and details have been left out to protect their anonymity. But I have otherwise attempted to remain as faithful to the information available to me as possible.

9. Sometimes a single incident is sufficient to convince a wrongdoer to faksoro. I was recently told of an instance in which a woman was accidentally struck in the eye by a *tika* dart (used in a game of throwing for distance) and blinded while in her house weaving mats. Her husband had recently extended their house so that it encroached on the land of an absent neighbor, who invoked a curse of immanent justice. The family went to apologize formally soon afterwards.

10. Fijian currency was devalued after the coup in 1987. Prior to devaluation, a Fiji dollar was worth approximately \$0.95 in United States currency; following devaluation it dropped to approximately \$0.67 U.S.

11. The Rotuman population in Fiji is organized into clubs based on home districts in Rotuma. These clubs occasionally raise funds to support specific projects in their home districts.

12. Interestingly, at no time was the question of differential economic benefits derived from tourism brought to the fore. It seems obvious to me that most of the resistance to tourism was from people who did not anticipate receiving any economic benefits, while the people from this village, and especially certain landowners, were clearly going to benefit. The rhetoric of resistance was almost entirely in terms of moral corruption. In fact, as it became clear that people from all over the island could benefit economically by providing souvenirs and services, resistance substantially diminished (despite some of the same outrageous behavior on the part of tourists that had been predicted by critics).

13. John Williams stopped at Rotuma on November 12, 1839, on his ill-fated voyage to Erromanga. He left two Samoan missionaries to carry out the work of converting the Rotumans to Christianity.

14. Technically it is the prerogative of the ranking member of a *kainaga*, in this case the district chief, to make the final decision concerning such an appointment. However, custom requires a discussion by the assembled members of the group prior to such a decision. In this instance no such discussion took place.

15. There is an ongoing debate in Rotuma with regard to the respective rights of the district chief and the *faufisi*. Some people argue that proper Rotuman custom requires the chief to appoint the *faufisi* to replace him in his absence; others claim that it is the chief's prerogative to appoint whomever he likes. Still others assert that different districts have different customs in this matter. During my 1989 field session, a highly respected subchief, who now resides in Fiji and is considered an expert on Rotuman custom, paid a visit to Rotuma in order to instruct the chiefs about what is proper. He held that in all districts it is the *faufisi's* right to be chosen.

16. I was unable to attend any of these meetings in person so had to rely on reports of those who were present. There were, of course, differing accounts, and it was not always clear what had actually transpired. I tried to compensate by talking to as many people as possible. The account given here is composite in nature; it represents my best judgment of what constitutes credible information.

17. Taking a faksoro offering to a public place, rather than directly to the aggrieved party's home, is itself unusual; but in this case Ti'u was away in Fiji, and there was no other single person to whom Manav could apologize. As an attempt to placate the entire body of dissidents, it failed miserably. One might speculate that by going away, Ti'u made it nearly impossible for a satisfactory faksoro to be made. Indeed, it may have been part of Ti'u's strategy to oust Manav. If so, it suggests that avoidance can be used as a tactic to win disputes.

18. Although many of these people insisted that the deposing of a district chief was unprecedented, Rotuman legends are full of stories about unpopular chiefs being put out of office, and even killed, by disgruntled subjects (see Howard 1986). There is also ample evidence that colonial administrators replaced chiefs they considered unsuitable, sometimes at the urging of dissident subjects. Nevertheless, in the current political context, where the leadership of the chiefs has been seriously questioned by many, the issue of chiefly authority is especially volatile. For this reason the events described above are of special concern to those who wish to preserve the chiefly system.

19. Chiefs, in fact, are under some pressure to appropriate resources for their own benefit, since they are paid very little and generally have few resources of their own other than land. Thus persons with government jobs and those who receive substantial remittances from relatives abroad are much better endowed financially and are able to afford better houses, motor vehicles, etc. Such valued possessions enhance people's status, making them competitive with chiefs. Chiefs are therefore tempted to appropriate resources that allow them various kinds of status displays.

20. Two of the chiefs who signed the petition to the prime minister subsequently claimed not to have known what they were signing and sent a letter of regret to the prime minister renouncing the document. This parallels traditional strategies of denying oral statements, but it has costs. Many Rotumans commented sardonically that this reveals something about the caliber of chiefs, that they sign documents without even reading them. Others regarded the disclaimer as a strategic attempt to avoid mounting resentment.

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