

2004. In *Keeping the Peace*, edited by Graham Kemp and Douglas P. Fry. New York: Routledge.

4 Restraint and Ritual Apology: The Rotumans of the South Pacific

ALAN HOWARD

Halfway around the world from the Hopi, the Rotuman people have a society whose maintenance of peace can be seen to have many features in common with the Hopi. Alan Howard discusses four components to their *cultural technology* of peace: patterns of socialization, social provisions for mediation, culturally sanctioned beliefs that promise immanent justice for wrongdoing, and the role of the “custom of *faksoro*”—a ritual of apology. In reading about *faksoro*, one cannot help being reminded of occasions when victims in other societies, even after having suffered some horrific atrocity, argue they want a public apology more than just some form of retribution or litigation. Howard reveals too that this is not a society in isolation; it faces the political and economic forces imposed from without. It is of interest to note how Rotumans deal with these influences and maintain peacefulness.

—GK

The island of Rotuma is located some 500 km north of Fiji in the South Pacific. Although politically part of the Republic of Fiji, the Rotuman people resemble their Samoan and Tongan cousins to the east, both physically and culturally, more than their Fijian countrymates. Rotumans are remarkable for their gentleness—physical violence is a rarity on the island—yet disputes are not infrequent and in rhetoric, at least, can be quite bitter. This chapter

focuses on the cultural mechanisms Rotumans employ in constraining physical violence and containing, if not always resolving, disagreements.

The Extent of Violence

During my initial fieldwork, I copied the birth, death, marriage, and divorce registers from 1903 to 1960. In that period, three murders and nine suicides were recorded as cause of death on Rotuma. This was for a population that averaged about 2,600 over the 57-year period, yielding rates per 100,000 equivalent to 2.02 for murders and 6.07 for suicides. I also recorded 2,216 marriages and 200 divorces for these years; 13 of the divorces were entirely or partially on grounds of cruelty by the husband (no instances of cruelty were claimed by a male petitioner). In one additional case, cruelty was mentioned in the testimony, although the grounds were desertion and adultery. The most prevalent grounds were adultery (68.5 percent), followed by desertion (25.5 percent). Cruelty accounted for just 6.0 percent of the total. In each of these instances, claims of cruelty referred to physical abuse.

In the cumulative three years or so that I have lived among Rotumans (1959–1961, plus nine visits of varying duration since 1987), I have witnessed only two instances of physical assault. Both cases involved young, unmarried men; in one case, the man who initiated the fight was drunk. I witnessed several other instances in which a fight between youths who had been drinking appeared imminent but was stopped through intercessions by others present. While drunkenness among the young men is not uncommon, my field notes from 1960 are instructive:

People continually apologize to me for their own behavior, or the behavior of other Rotumans, when they are drunk, although Rotumans, when drunk, are as inoffensive as a drunk person can be. They generally get very happy and playful. They may at times use obscene language, but rarely in an abusive way. . . . People refer to this form of behavior as being very bad [but] by our standards this "bad" behavior is just the kind that generally is the goal of a successful party. (Rotuma field notes 1/19/1960)

I have also seen tempers flare during athletic competitions between spirited youths, and although they sometimes involved a lot of pushing and shoving, they rarely resulted in physical assault. On occasion, gossip included reports of physical violence, almost always with a strong degree of disapproval attached. In general, the overwhelming impression I have formed is that Rotumans manage anger well, both personally and socially. That their nonviolent disposition is not a post-missionary 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 example, Mariner, cited in Gardiner 1898:404; and Lesson 1838–39:430.)

This is not to say that Rotuma has always been a peaceful island. Oral histories recount tales of warfare between districts, usually in the context of rival chiefs competing for dominance. In historical times (prior to cession to Great Britain in 1881), at least three skirmishes took place between groups that had aligned along religious lines (French Catholic, English Wesleyan, and pagan; see Howard and Kjellgren 1994). The evidence, however, suggests that the encounters were not particularly bloody, with only a few people killed on each side. Indeed, the mode of warfare was largely ritualistic, with one side accepting defeat when their leader was killed or seriously wounded. In acknowledgment of their relatively peaceful disposition, Rotuman soldiers who served with Fiji's military forces in the Solomon Islands during World War II were assigned to a medical unit as stretcher-bearers.

An Overview of Disputes

Ironically, 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 by a colonial administration (British) that was trying to pick up the pieces of an ill-fated land commission. The colonial government, in consultation with a few Rotumans resident 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 a confused situation, an ordinance was passed (Fiji Ordinance No. 13 of 1959), changing the system of land tenure from bilineal to patrilineal inheritance. In their rationale, the authors of the ordinance pointed to a large number of unresolved disputes and the difficulty of arbitrating them when individuals were able to make claims to so many parcels through so many routes. The ordinance authorized a commission to be sent to Rotuma to register owners of land and to survey land holdings. 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.

There are several reasons why disputes over land were particularly intense at that time. For one thing, the population of the island had surpassed 3,000 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 these 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 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 considerations, it is no wonder that disputes over land became passionate.

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.

I did not return to Rotuma until 1987, when my wife and I visited for two weeks during a sabbatical leave. Many things had changed. A wharf had been built in the late 1970s, and an airstrip was inaugurated in 1981 as part of the centennial anniversary of cession. These made the island much more accessible than it had been previously. Hurricane Bebe had destroyed most of the Rotuman-style thatched houses in 1973, and they were mostly replaced by concrete and corrugated-iron structures. An underground freshwater source had been tapped, and most houses now had running water; many had flush toilets. There had been significant social and economic changes as well, but 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.

As my wife and I prepared to return to 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 headline 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 pronounced Rotuma independent and petitioned the English Crown (to whom Rotuma had originally been

ceded) for recognition. A karate expert with some charisma, Gibson had 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. Tempers flared, and there was talk of violence. In response, a gunboat was sent to the island from Fiji with a contingent of armed soldiers to quell the "rebellion." My friends in Hawaii feared for my safety and assumed I would cancel the 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 of Great Britain. 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; they had neither policy-making nor legislative authority.

For the most part, the chiefs and representatives served as conduits for communication between the district officer and the people in the districts. They relayed the district officer's orders and were responsible for seeing to it that the orders were carried out. Then they reported back to him, often explaining why his orders were not followed. Rotumans learned to cope with this system by becoming masters of passive resistance—the chiefs agreed to anything the district officer wanted in order to avoid offending him, but the people generally ignored unpopular demands on their time or resources. During the colonial period, Rotuma was therefore a rather apolitical society. Most individuals were extremely cautious about expressing their opinions, especially if they contradicted the district officer's. Being a chief, or a representative, held very few privileges aside from ceremonial ones, and often put incumbents in awkward positions in relation to 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, I have been struck by the degree to which Rotuma has become politicized. The roles of the Rotuma Council and the district officer have been reversed; the district officer is now 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 increased markedly and has become the focus of disputes. Relieved of the burden of a supreme decision maker with extraordinary status, people are no longer reluctant to voice their opinions in public. Passive resistance has been replaced by vigorous and sometimes quite bitter debate.

Although disputes involving land still occur, they have receded into the background. The passion is still there, but the occasions for disputing have diminished, primarily as the result of two factors. For one, despite a 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 land resources. Furthermore, a substantial portion of the population now either earns money from wages or receives remittances on a regular basis from relatives overseas. Income from copra accounts for a minor portion of the money obtained by contemporary Rotumans; correspondingly, the economic value of land has been greatly reduced.

Control Factors

A number of factors keep disputes from escalating into violent confrontations, including: a pattern of socialization that minimizes aggressive dispositions; a set of culturally sanctioned beliefs that promise immanent justice for wrongdoing; the social provision for mediation when impasses occur; and perhaps most importantly, the custom of *fakoso*—a ritual of apology that under most circumstances must be accepted by the aggrieved party. In addition to these customary beliefs and practices are sanctions imposed by the political-legal system of the nation 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 (see fig. 4.1). Gardiner made such an observation during his visit to Rotuma in 1896:

Their kindness and attention to all children is extraordinary. Nothing is too good for them or too much trouble to do. Castigation is unknown; their sole method of correction is by laughing and making fun of them. (Gardiner 1898:408)

My observations more than six decades later were the same. Whereas all Polynesian peoples are noted for indulging infants, in Rotuma older children are honored as well. They are generally fed first, before adults, and are given the choice foods. In Methodist churches, children sit in special pews in



Figure 4.1. A father and daughter on Rotuma. Photograph by Alan Howard.

front, as do the chiefs and dignitaries. While parents, when exasperated, will physically punish their children, the blows are almost always restrained—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. Among themselves, children are discouraged from fighting with each other, and a child who acts the role of 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*” (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 such as doctors, chiefs, and ministers. 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 shy with strangers, are overtly respectful

of authority figures, and are 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 child-rearing pattern produces. One is constantly on the alert for signs of anger or incipient displeasure that might lead to anger. Depending on circumstances, people take steps either to alleviate the conditions or to avoid those whom they perceive as angry or as 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 with the term *kokono* (disappointed or sad). 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 often becomes 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 socially and emotionally, 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 aea/irisa*" (It's up to you/them), when people are asked about expected behavior, contributions, and so on.

The principle of autonomy operates throughout the social structure. Not only do individuals exercise autonomy within their households and communities, but villages are also autonomous in relation to 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 the 1973 hurricane, 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 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. 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 immanent 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 his or her just deserts 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 an aggrieved party often calls for them. Curses of immanent justice are generally made without overt rancor by the party who has been forced to yield, in the form of public statements like, "The land has eyes and teeth," or, "We shall see who is right."

The most powerful curses are from the lips of chiefs, who were traditionally perceived as intermediaries with the spirit world. When a chief calls for immanent justice, it is usually because an unknown person within his district has committed a serious offense and refuses to confess and put things right. Almost all Rotumans are aware of some classic cases. For example, Chief Fer's son 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, and killed 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 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. A party may lose initially, but if his position is truly justified, he will at least be vindicated. In numerous instances, the victors in a dispute have apologized and abandoned their claim after a period of horrendous ill fortune. Thus, hovering over any dispute or potential dispute are supernatural sanctions that can compensate for secular

social impotence. There is more 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 is guided by polite etiquette. Aside from serving the purposes of social decorum, such behavior insulates individuals emotionally and 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 child-rearing 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. Most Rotuman families are self-sufficient, at least with regard to subsistence, so economic costs 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 and Arbitration: The Role of Problem Solvers

One of the most important functions of a chief is to act as mediator between disputants within his domain. For lesser issues, confined to a couple of households within the same *ho'aga* (a 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 a move might be welcomed).

In more extensive disputes, those involving land matters and families from more than one ho'aga, district chiefs are mediators, and, if the parties cannot come to an agreement, the chiefs have the authority to arbitrate. A district chief's reputation is based to a significant degree on the success of his mediations and the perceived fairness of his arbitrations. If he is seen as favoring his own parochial interests in disputes, the district is likely to factionalize, diminishing his authority; 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 the hope of a more favorable decision by parties who felt shortchanged on prior occasions. 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 families as well as between them. A deaconess is also assigned to 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.

In recent years, Rotumans who have distinguished themselves in government service in Fiji have made special trips to the island for the express purpose of resolving long-lasting disputes, often with considerable success. They generally address disputes that arise in their home district where they have insider status but are not party to the disagreements.

In addition to chiefs, church personnel, and distinguished visitors from Fiji, any respected elder related to the disputants may intercede. Mediators 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 living elders as they are to spiritual ancestors.

Faksoro: Apologies with Weights Attached

Possibly 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 entreaties that are more formal. At the other extreme is the symbolic offer of one's life to atone for a grave injury or insult. At least five gradations can be distinguished:

1. A verbal apology in private following an accidental occurrence in which one individual was in the wrong. In general, it seems that for most Rotumans, the inconveniences caused by such an occurrence are of less significance than the expectation of an apology. An apparently sincere apology following an accident usually offsets damages. For example, if someone accidentally injures another or damages property, monetary or material compensation is generally 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 there is so little room for vehicles to maneuver. On one occasion, the driver of a truck, rather than yielding to permit another driver to pass, forced his way through, scraping some paint off the other fellow's new, previously unblemished, truck. When the victim called the offending driver's attention to the damage, the latter simply protested, "I couldn't help it." It so happened that a policeman on duty witnessed the incident and suggested to the victim that he file a complaint. When telling the story, the victim said he would not have done so if an apology had been offered, but since none had been forthcoming he decided to pursue the matter. 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. In fact, the compensation was more symbolic than real because the paint was not the right type or color for the car.
2. A verbal apology made in public. This lends greater weight to an apology, since it constitutes a public admission of culpability. Typically, such an apology is 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 demean another's character. Such offenses threaten community solidarity, and mediators are likely to pressure the offender to *faksoro*. If the insults are not too grave, a public apology is usually sufficient to restore relationships to normal.
3. A formal presentation of a *koua* (pig cooked whole in an earth oven; see fig. 4.2). 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 Titifanua and Churchward 1995:116–23). In such a circumstance, a *koua* is brought to the aggrieved party's



Figure 4.2. Young men take a break while preparing food from an earth oven. Photograph by Alan Howard.

home and formally presented, with appropriate speeches admitting culpability and begging forgiveness. To lend weight to such an occasion, a chief or other respected elder might be asked to make the apology on the offender's behalf.

4. A formal presentation of a fine white mat (*apei*) and kava plant in addition to a koua. Fine white mats and kava plants are of central significance in Rotuman ceremonies (see Inia 2001). As elsewhere in Polynesia, fine white mats are a traditional form of wealth. They are mandatory prestations at weddings, funerals, and other ceremonial events, and they lend great weight to any ritual presentation. Kava, a drink made from the pounded root of the *Piper mythicicum* plant, is consumed ceremonially on special occasions. In the past, only chiefs took part, 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 is therefore comparable to a blood sacrifice. Likewise, a white mat is symbolically comparable to a life, insofar as the making of a koua must precede the manufacture of an *apei*. Thus, kava plants

and white mats contribute much customary weight to a faksoro presentation, even more so if a chief or respected elder makes the presentation on behalf of the offender.

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

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

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. 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, 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 others. A system of fines was imposed and a small jail constructed to incarcerate 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 conduct a hearing and make his own judgment. Since commissioners usually held the post for only a few years, if a disputant was dissatisfied with the judgment of one man, he could wait until another took office and try again. This was particularly the case with long-standing disputes over land (Howard 1963, 1964).

This situation prevailed until 1970, when Fiji gained independence. At that point, the Rotuma Council pledged their loyalty to the new nation and its laws. The governance of Rotuma continued to be in the hands of the Rotuma 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 directly intervene in disputes than before. To compensate, individual Rotumans can now take their grievances directly to government agencies in Fiji if they are dissatisfied with judgments rendered on Rotuma.

Summary

Rotuma is a good example of a society that is disputatious but nonviolent. Socialization is low-key with regard to physical punishment, and aggressive models are few. Individual autonomy is respected, and even children 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 deserts 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 institutionalized mediation. Ideally, mediators are trusted elders who have an important stake in maintaining harmony between adversaries and who are free of parochial interests. It is their job to soothe ruffled feathers and to promote compromise in the interest of community solidarity. Chiefs are expected to be arbitrators as well as mediators. They have the right to make judgments in disputes that cannot be settled by the antagonists. If a disputant is sufficiently dissatisfied with a chief's judgment, he can appeal to the district officer, or to other government officials. The fact that the most passionate disputes are over land and chiefly prerogatives—essentially long-term issues—means that 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 *faksoro*. By construing apologies as honorable, persons who have offended others can gain compensatory status for admission of wrongdoing. The fact 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 government of Fiji 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 the dissidents 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 dissidents. 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, on finding the defendants guilty of sedition, wisely imposed an extremely light sentence. He fined them 30 Fijian dollars each (20 dollars 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 like to have seen them sent to jail. The dissidents thought otherwise and vowed to keep up their struggle for Rotuma's independence. But talk of violence had passed, and calm prevailed.

Study Questions

1. List the diverse mechanisms that Rotumans use to handle disputes without violence.
2. What is *faksoro*? How important is *faksoro* in maintaining the peace in

Rotuma? Are apologies also important in your society? How are they similar to and different from the Rotuman faksoro?

3. What is immanent justice? How do beliefs in immanent justice prevent violence?
4. What aspects of Rotuman cultural ideas, values, and institutions for maintaining peace seem to be most affected by social changes? To what extent, if at all, are social changes undermining the ability of Rotuma to remain a peaceful society?