

# THE RESURGENCE OF RIVALRY: POLITICS IN POST-COLONIAL ROTUMA

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When Irving Goldman published his first paper on status rivalry and cultural evolution in Polynesia,<sup>1</sup> it met with harsh criticism.<sup>2</sup> The notion that a constant factor--status rivalry--could explain differential evolution was regarded as untenable, and the significance of chiefly contentiousness for the development of Polynesian societies was all but dismissed. With the publication of *Ancient Polynesian Society*,<sup>3</sup> however, Goldman demonstrated even to skeptics the centrality of status considerations, and status rivalry in particular, for understanding the nature of Polynesian social systems. Whether one accepts his argument for evolutionary sequences or not, the masterly analysis he crafted made clear that by focusing on the *dynamics* of status, we gain insights that are absolutely crucial. Indeed, most recent work on reconstructing traditional Polynesian polities, including the provocative analyses of Marshall Sahlins<sup>4</sup>--once a rival within the evolutionist framework<sup>5</sup>--builds upon Goldman's analysis.<sup>6</sup>

But the fruitfulness of focusing on status rivalry goes beyond reconstructionist projects. Nor is it limited to hierarchical societies like Hawaii, Tonga and Samoa. As Borofsky's recent work on Pukapuka has demonstrated,<sup>7</sup> by examining the dynamics of status rivalry on an atoll, one can gain an appreciation for the ways in which knowledge is constructed in the course of everyday life. It is now clear that one cannot hope to understand the cultural logic of Polynesian societies, without attention to this fundamental driving principle.

The subject of this essay is the changes that have taken place in the political system of Rotuma from the pre-colonial period (prior to 1881), through the period of British colonial hegemony

(1881-1970), to the post-colonial period (1970 to the present). The essay will attempt to demonstrate that the intense status rivalry that characterized the traditional political system, and was muted by the colonial administration, has asserted itself with renewed vigor during the post-colonial period. The essay concludes by addressing the question of whether this resurgence of rivalry is based upon the same principles that drove the traditional system.

## Pre-Colonial Rotuma

The island of Rotuma is located approximately three hundred miles north of Fiji, on the western fringe of Polynesia. Linguistic evidence suggests that Rotuman belongs to a subgrouping (Central Pacific) that includes Fijian and the Polynesian languages, and that within this group there is a special relationship between Rotuman and the languages of western Fiji.<sup>8</sup> However, the vocabulary shows a considerable degree of borrowing from Polynesian languages,<sup>9</sup> and Rotuman cultural patterns fall well within the range of those characteristics of Western Polynesia.

According to legend, Rotuma was originally divided into five districts--Ituti'u, Faguta, Oinafa, Noa-tau and Malhaha--each relatively autonomous and headed by a *gagaj 'es itu'u*, "district chief." On two occasions, however, additional divisions took place, and at the time of discovery by Europeans, there were seven districts. Legend holds that a portion of the largest district, Ituti'u, was given as a gift to a sub-chief from Oinafa, thus creating the district of Itumuta.<sup>10</sup> A second story (see below), describes a war in which the district of Faguta was defeated by Oinafa, resulting in a division of the former district into two: Juju and Pepjei.

The powers exercised by *gagaj 'es itu'u* within their districts were well circumscribed by

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cultural norms. Each chief met regularly in council with sub-chiefs in his district and effective decision-making required consensus. He could order communal work, but if the sub-chiefs and people within his district were indifferent to the project, they could sabotage it by passive resistance. *Gagaj 'es Itu'u* were entitled to first fruits, and regularly received portions of food from feasts and fish from communal fish drives, but under usual conditions these were not consequential. Abuses of authority no doubt occurred, but the members of a district could have a chief deposed if he became overly demanding. This was done through the members of the chief's descent group, who had the right to take away the family name, and hence authority, and allocate it to another.<sup>11</sup>

At any given time the districts were ranked in status, the particular order being influenced in part by the size and power of each district and in part by the results of the last war. In ceremonial kava drinking, the rule was that the highest ranking chief be served first, then the others, in order, to the lowest ranking chief. If one chief wanted to challenge another, he could do so by altering the order of service, when a feast was held in his district, particularly if he advanced his own serving over a rival. Perhaps more than anything else, the ordering of kava drinking symbolized the relative prestige of chiefs and the districts they represented. It therefore constituted an ideal forum for issuing challenges which, because of their public nature, had to be met. There were also three political positions that were pan-Rotuman in scope: the *fakpure*, *sau* and *mua*. The *fakpure* was referred to primarily in two capacities in the early literature: as convener and presiding officer of the council of chiefs, and as the person responsible for appointing the *sau* and ensuring that he was cared for properly. He was *gagaj 'es Itu'u* of one of the districts, presumably the one who headed an alliance and was victorious in the last war. The *sau*'s basic role was to take part in the ritual cycle, oriented towards insuring prosperity, as an object of veneration. The role of *mua* received less commentary in the early literature than that of *fakpure* and *sau*, but most of what was written refers to the *mua*'s activities in the ritual cycle. Fr.

Trouillet, a French priest writing c. 1873, wrote that the *sau* appeared to be an appendage of the *fakpure*, while the *mua* appeared to be more associated with spiritual power.<sup>12</sup>

Most early accounts focus on the office of *sau*, which generally was translated into English as "king." The *sau* provided, in the words of Reverend William Fletcher, the first Methodist missionary, "a common but loose bond of union" between the chiefs. In describing the role of the *sau* shortly before the office was terminated as an institution, Fletcher wrote:

. . . he holds the highest social place, drinking kava before the chiefs yet he gains his dignity as some expense. The poor fellow has to eat, and drink kava, many times during the twenty-four hours, by night as well as by day. He presides at certain dances, regularly held, when as at his drinking kava, the old *atua*, or gods are invoked. These *atua* appear as old chiefs, whose history is not as well known as their names. With all this there is the most profuse daubing with tumeric. Food is continually taken to the *Sau* from all parts of the island.<sup>13</sup>

A curious aspect of this position is that it was held by district representatives in rotation, for restricted periods of time. Rotuman chieftainship at this level has been compared with that of Mangala and Easter Island, two other Polynesian societies for which rotating chieftainship has been documented.<sup>14</sup> The evidence suggests appointments were for a period of six months, coincident with the ritual cycle, although if the island were prosperous, terms might be extended for several years.<sup>15</sup>

Both the legends and early historical data reveal a political system that was dynamic. According to legend, inter-district rivalry was intense and warfare was a common occurrence, although it does not seem to have reached the level of brutality that marked warfare in several other Polynesian societies. The legends suggest that wars were often triggered by challenges to the *fakpure*, either directly or indirectly, through insulting or offending the *sau*. Numerous instances are provided in the texts collected by Fr. Trouillet.

For example, the legends record that the second *sau*, Murlrakl,

was not very liked by his brothers, who killed him out of jealousy, and he was replaced by Aferakl . . . [who] was hardly nominated, when Kaurfonua [the *fakpure*] was overcome with ambition and ordered to have Aferakl killed; he gave him the honors of a sepulcher at Sisilo, a small hillock of Noatau, which would from then on serve as a cemetery for the Sau who died of natural causes; then he named himself as Sau and left his chieftainship to Sakoak . . .<sup>16</sup>

Later in the texts there are multiple references to challenges and rebellions:

It was during the reign of Tulpurotu [the ninth *fakpure*] and of Sokman [the 21st Sau, who was then at the district of Olnafa], that the district of Faguta paid allegiance to Mou, who was chief during the reign of Mora, his relative [grandparent]. One day Mora wanted to overthrow Sokman in order to replace him, but Muaror [the *mua*, who was from Olnafa and Faguta] defended the Sau who came to wage war on Mora, who was vanquished. Sokman and Muaror then divided the district [of Faguta]. Jutsu was given to Saultu, *Mua* Muaror's sister, and Pepsel was left with Mou under the reign of Mora . . .

During Tokanlua's [the tenth *fakpure*'s] time, Suakmasa established his seat at Itumuta. Itutiu and Olnafa waged war on Suakmasa, who was killed; then Tokanlua established his son Fakraufon to replace him. Fakraufon (24th Sau) was replaced by Vakaora (25th Sau). Vakaora established his seat at Olnafa, which by then had acquired great importance. Shortly after that, Rotuma joined forces under Tultafaga to wage war on Vakaora. Olnafa was conquered and Tultafaga was recognized as *fakpure* and as Sau, which was very extraordinary . . . Tultafaga established his double seat at Saukama. During his reign, a whale was stranded at Itumuta and was brought to the Sau, who divided it throughout Rotuma. Shortly after that, Malhaha wanted to install a Sau; Pepsel and Jutsu waged war on it [Malhaha] and were vanquished. Tultafaga was then replaced by Tua as *fakpure* and by Kava Tulnava as Sau . . . Under the chieftainship of Tua, several Sau of no importance succeeded each other [until the reign of]<sup>17</sup>

Fatafesi [the 33rd Sau, during which] Riamkau installed Formautlu as Sau, in order to overthrow Fatafesi; the war took place in Rolfou. Four districts were vanquished; Malhaha, Olnafa and Noatau were the victors. One hundred dead remained on the battle field. Fatafesi fled, Fonmon was installed to succeed him . . . by Konao [the thirteenth *fakpure*] . . . Fonmon was at Malhaha when a craft arrived containing large pigs brought from foreign lands. Soon Formautlu of Itutlu and Itamuta came to fetch Fonmon at Malhaha, which did not approve of his departure and installed Tulmanava to oppose him; the war took place at Tuakol in Toflag; Malhaha was vanquished and Fonmon was confirmed in his position; he then established himself at Lau in Mareirau, a place which had never been inhabited by the Sau. Garagsau and Konao were not very pleased with that and elected another Sau to oppose him; that was Vuna Tamoa . . . The people of Itutlu did not approve of the conduct of Garagsau and Konao; they revolted and killed them both. Faktaufon then brought Sau Vuna to Pepsel, where he soon abandoned him and went to name another one, Fatafesi, at Saulei . . . Riamkau waged war on Fatafesi, was victorious and established Varomua [as 37th Sau]. On that same day, Tua Solvol of Malhaha, in order to overthrow Varomua, installed another Sau, called Manava . . . Tua was victorious and was named [the 14th] *fakpure* . . . Manava came to Itumuta; then Riamkau established Solvol as Sau at Soprogasi, then in Malhaha . . . Solvol left the seat and named Riamkau to replace him . . . It was during his reign that a European vessel arrived, several sailors of which escaped in a craft carrying different things, which the natives pillaged when it landed.<sup>18</sup>

Working backward from reign periods based on the six-month ritual cycle, Trouillet sets the date of the European ship's arrival as 1820, which coincides with the documented arrival of the whaling vessel *Rochester*, from which two officers and six of the crew deserted.<sup>19</sup>

Following the initial arrival of missionaries, in 1839<sup>20</sup>, inter-district rivalry took on a new form. The Wesleyans (Methodists) established themselves first, in the northern districts of Noa'tau, Olnafa and Malhaha. Initially, the work of the mission was conducted by Samoan and

Tongan converts, who were deposited on the island by passing missionary vessels. In 1864 the first English missionary, Reverend William Fletcher, took up residence on Rotuma and vigorously pursued the task of consolidating the gains of his predecessors. While successful in the northern districts, the southern districts of Juju and Pepjei resisted Wesleyan efforts to convert them, but they accepted Catholicism following the arrival of French priests in 1868. This mirrored the previous political alignment, with the chief of Noa'tau (Marafu) heading one side and the chief of Juju (Riamkau) heading the other. Needless to say, the English missionaries and French priests did little to mitigate the rivalry.

The office of *sau* was finally abandoned following a war between the unconverted and Methodist segments of Ituti'u, in 1870, in which the former were conquered. Tensions between the Catholics and Methodists continued to mount until they culminated in the war of 1878, the last battle to take place on the island. The precipitating cause was a dispute concerning precedence in the ceremonial serving of kava.

The events are chronicled by J. S. Gardiner, who states that the war of 1878:

... arose through the intrigues of Albert [chief of Ituti'u], who wished at the council meetings of the chiefs to get his name called for kava before that of Tavo, the chief of Oinafa. Riemkou [chief of Juju] was supporting him, as he was jealous of Marafu [chief of Noa'tau], who was both chief of his district and *fakpure*, or head chief, of the island. Albert then, in a meeting at Oinafa, brought up his own matter and that of Marafu's two offices; Marafu replied through his brother Hauseu, who was his spokesman, or *hoasog*, that, as far as the chieftainship of his district was concerned, it was no business of theirs, and that, as he was entitled to receive the kava first, it was his business to see that it was called to all in the proper order. Riemkou did not attend the next meeting of the council and, as he refused to pay a fine, it was considered equivalent to a declaration of war. A white missionary then, called Moore, seems to have gone to Albert, and also into Oinafa and Malhaha, practically preaching a war against the Roman Catholics. As a result, Riemkou brought a *fakso*

[peace offering] to Marafu, who accepted it; and to settle the matter, Riemkou let himself be baptised a Wesleyan. The Wesleyans, who had begun to gather, were dispersed, and Riemkou at once turned Roman Catholic again. Marafu, who at that time was called Hauseu,<sup>21</sup> informed me that then there was no question of war, and that the affair was considered settled, until the missionary came and practically began to preach a war of extermination against the Roman Catholics. Accordingly, the Roman Catholics gathered in Faguta [Juju + Pepjei] from the whole island, and prepared for resistance, digging out the interior of their houses for rifle pits. The result was never for a moment doubtful. One the first day, twenty-two men were killed, and the Roman Catholics driven on to a small isthmus, where they were blockaded for two months. At last, Riemkou was killed, and all submitted.<sup>22</sup>

As a result of the discontent following the war, and the threat of the French priests to promote the annexation of Rotuma to France, the chiefs decided to petition Great Britain to establish rule over the island. The petition was accepted and on May 13, 1881, the British flag was hoisted in an open space adjacent to chief Albert's home in Motusa. The chiefs were then lectured on their duties, which accompany the privileges bestowed on British subjects by the governor of Fiji, who presided over the ceremonies. As a matter of convenience, the British decided to administer Rotuma as part of Fiji (which had been annexed seven years earlier).

## The Colonial Period

The overall impact of acculturation on chiefly powers prior to British administration is difficult to estimate, particularly since some processes operated to increase their authority, while others exerted pressures in the opposite direction. Thus, the rise of the commercial economy initially enhanced the status of chiefs, for they acted as intermediaries between their people and ships' captains, receiving a portion of the intake; but commercialization also contributed to individual control of land,<sup>23</sup> with the subsequent decrease in chiefly authority that inevitably accompanies an

increase in economic autonomy by subordinates. Likewise, while the missionaries worked through the chiefs and strengthened their hands in some non-traditional ways, they also undermined chiefly authority by institutionalizing a new religious order over which the chiefs had little control.<sup>24</sup>

The colonial administration, having successfully instituted a system of indirect rule in Fiji, proposed to do the same in Rotuma. They failed to take into consideration the differences in chiefly systems, however. In Fiji, where patrilineal primogeniture reinforced a hierarchical system of chiefly authority, obedience was institutionalized. In Rotuma, with its bilateral kinship emphasis, the contenders for a title were often numerous, with any ancestral link to a previous chief making a man eligible. The number of male children who might eventually succeed to chieftainship was therefore likely to be extensive, and no one was apt to receive the special privileges normally given a Fijian chief's elder sons. As a result, respect for chiefly authority was far more conditional in Rotuma.

The Rotuman chiefs had apparently hoped to be granted privileges commensurate with those enjoyed by their Fijian counterparts,<sup>25</sup> but the new administration resisted on the grounds of Rotuman custom. The resident commissioners expected the chiefs to act authoritatively, but did not permit them to enhance their actual power. The people did not object to the imposition of English law, nor did they express jealousy over the authority of a resident commissioner. They were willing to go along with European laws and officials, as a price for reaping the material benefits they foresaw, but they had nothing to gain by increasing the power of the chiefs. A letter from one of the first resident commissioners to the governor of Fiji, shortly after Cession, reports: "I have repeatedly heard the people say we do not wish our chiefs to be placed in authority over us. We will obey the regulations made by the government but not the rules made by the chiefs."<sup>26</sup>

Most of the chiefs accepted the situation, but Albert, the chief of Ituti'u, who figured so prominently in the pre-Cession conflict, did not

give up so easily. He continued to press for official support, only to be continually rebuked. Finally, in 1888, an incident led to his suspension. It resulted from a request by Resident Commissioner Mackay that copra be delivered in sacks instead of coconut leaf baskets. The people were generally annoyed with this demand that they alter their habits and Albert, apparently sensing an opportunity to gather popular support for a confrontation with the commissioner, incited his people to refuse cooperation. Mackay publicly censured Albert, after which the disgruntled chief wrote a letter to the governor, complaining about the severity of Mackay's rule and requesting his removal. The governor did not take Albert's charges seriously and sent a copy of the letter to Mackay, who read it at a meeting of the council of chiefs, obtaining strong censure of Albert's conduct from the assembled chiefs.<sup>27</sup>

This final humiliation made it clear to all that the political power of the chiefs was in fact negligible, a realization that had consequences for the nature of the office in subsequent years. The ceremonial significance of chieftainship provided some incentive for aspirations to the role, with honor being paid at feasts, but this had to be balanced against contradictory role demands. Politically, chiefs were little more than messengers between the resident commissioner and the people in the districts. They were criticized by their constituents for making unpopular demands on behalf of the commissioner and by the latter for failing to gain the compliance of their subjects.

As a consequence of these conditions, the competition for chiefly roles waned and the traditional rules for governing succession, flexible as they were, gave way to a lax toleration, allowing almost any adult male to fill a vacancy. Also contributing to the devaluation of chieftainship was the active part most commissioners played in choosing "the right man for the job." It became commonplace for the people in a district to nominate several candidates and permit the commissioner to make the final selection.<sup>28</sup> Not only did the commissioners participate actively in choosing chiefs, they showed little hesitation in deposing men who failed to meet their

expectations. Exasperation with the state of Rotuman chieftainship reached a climax during the 1930s, when William Carew was district commissioner. He wrote to the colonial secretary:

I would suggest for His Excellency's consideration for passing of a Rotuman Regulation penalizing the chiefs for omissions of duty, and their people for disregard of orders on district matters.

It is also suggested that each future chief should be installed with a considerable show of Government ceremony and he be supplied with a Badge of Office whereby all then should know and respect him.

The Rotumans as a whole, are practically devoid of Race and Tradition, consequently a chief could never acquire the standing of a Fijian Roko, but he could at least be constituted as a sort of Super-Buli, to be feared and obeyed by his people.<sup>29</sup>

Carew's suggestions did not receive the support of his superiors and were not acted upon.

The problem for the resident commissioners, it seems, was that they saw Rotuman political institutions as neither fish nor fowl. The *gagaj* 'es *itu'u* did not have the kind of authority they associated with chiefdoms such as Fiji, but the system also lacked elements crucial to their understanding of democracy. They were determined to resolve the issue one way or the other. Whereas some, like Carew, opted to reinforce the status of chiefs (without, of course, giving up any real power themselves), others, like A. E. Cornish, instituted moves toward democratic representation on the council. In 1939, with the approval of the governor of Fiji, Cornish introduced a reform whereby chiefs were elected for a period of three years in the first instance, after which the members of the *kainaga*, "family," who had elected him would hold a ballot to elect a new chief, or re-elect the old one if they considered that he had been satisfactory, and provided he had proved satisfactory to the government. The first chief to be appointed under this procedure failed to get re-elected by his people at the end of his three-year term. He complained to the government against his dismissal on grounds that the new procedures were not in accordance with Rotuman custom,

under which a chief was chosen for life. By this time Cornish had died, and following an investigation, the traditional custom was re-instated.<sup>30</sup>

A few years later, J. W. Sykes, who was sent to Rotuma for the purposes of investigating the administration of the island, among other matters, proposed that the council of chiefs be abolished and replaced by an elected council.<sup>31</sup> Sykes' recommendation was not implemented, in large measure because it was opposed by H. S. Evans, the district officer<sup>32</sup> appointed to Rotuma the year after the report was issued.

However, in 1958 a compromise was reached and the council was reconstituted to include one representative from each district, elected by secret ballot, in addition to the chiefs.<sup>33</sup> Its name was changed from the Rotuma Council of Chiefs to the Council of Rotuma. Its role, to advise the district officer and communicate his rulings to the people in the districts, remained the same.

When I began fieldwork on Rotuma in 1960, there was little evidence of the status rivalry that had characterized the pre-colonial polity. The district officer was clearly in charge.<sup>34</sup> For the most part, he issued orders the chiefs were held responsible for implementing. If the people in their districts disagreed, they would respond with passive resistance and the chiefs were powerless to force compliance. Although they received ceremonial homage at feasts, the chiefs were without political power.

Economically, the advantages of chieftainship were unimpressive. Chiefs were no longer given first fruits, although at Christmas time they were presented with a monetary donation of a few shillings per man.<sup>35</sup> They received nominal stipends from the government. Some titles had relatively large land blocks attached, giving increased access to copra. Chiefs were sometimes given gifts of food, and they could command labor on occasions. But the drain on their resources were generally equal to any gain they might experience. On any occasion involving the district as a social entity, they were expected to donate much more than others, and they often found the number of relatives requesting assistance grew

considerably after they took office. Overtly, their standard of living was indistinguishable from others in the district. One could not tell a chief's house by its appearance, nor a chief by his clothing or adornment. Others, particularly those with salaried government jobs, were far wealthier. It is no wonder, then, that men of ambition chose to leave the island in pursuit of work or education, rather than to seek chiefly office.

During 1960, a new chief was selected in my district. He was a young man, 32 years old, and following his election,<sup>36</sup> he voiced his apprehensions in an interview:

Now I am chief and it is the first time in my life I feel really bad. Being a chief is very difficult and I am very unhappy. From the night that I found out I was the new chief, for about four days I could not think properly or remember what I was doing – just like I had no brain. One day, I went to the bush to weed my garden and I left my knife stuck in a tree. I didn't feel like working, so I just prepared my food and when I finished, I couldn't remember where my knife was.

Now I've been chief for three weeks and I still have trouble thinking and I worry a lot. It would be better to live like I did before than to be chief. If you're a good chief, the people will all like you, but if you are a bad chief, they will hate you. I'm worried about whether I'll be a good chief or not. A worried life is no good.<sup>37</sup>

## Post-Colonial Rotuma

I did not return to Rotuma until 1987, when my wife and I stopped for a two-week visit, during a sabbatical leave. It was such a positive experience that we decided to resume research there and returned for three months in 1988. We plan to go back as often as possible.

There had been many changes in the interim since 1960. Among the most important: an airstrip had been built and the island was serviced weekly by flights from Fiji;<sup>38</sup> a wharf had been built at Oinafa, greatly facilitating the offloading of goods and equipment;<sup>39</sup> most of the native-style houses had been replaced by cement structures, following the devastation by hurricane Bebe, which struck in 1973. There were also significant demographic

changes. In 1960, approximately 3,000 people were resident on the island, while another 1,500 Rotumans were living in Fiji. In 1987, there were an estimated 2,588 people on the island and some 8,652 in Fiji.<sup>40</sup> Today, most of the young adults leave Rotuma to get an education and find work, leaving a population skewed toward the upper and lower ends of the age pyramid.

Economic changes were also noticeable. In 1960 a fledgling Rotuma Cooperative Association (RCA) was struggling for survival against two established firms, Morris Hedstron and Burns Philp, which had dominated the copra and retail trades for more than a half-century. The RCA's efforts at boycotting the firms were successful, forcing them out of business by the early 1970s. This left the RCA with a near monopoly over the island's import-export business, and retail trade.<sup>41</sup> Another significant change concerned sources of income. In 1960, Rotuma was almost totally dependent upon copra exports for cash income. This is reflected in the RCA records, which shows income from copra exceeding retail sales by 20 percent for that year. By 1980, retail sales were more than double copra income, and in 1986, they were more than triple.<sup>42</sup> An increased number of salaried government positions on the island accounts for some of the alternative income, but perhaps more important are remittances being sent from wage-earning relatives in Fiji and abroad. This increase in cash income is only part of the story, however. A household survey we conducted in the district of Oinafa revealed that a substantial number of motor vehicles, major appliances and materials for home improvement had been purchased by off-island relatives and sent to Rotuma. Thus, while per capital income may be quite low by world indices, the standard of living on Rotuma is rather high, compared with most third world rural populations.

Of particular relevance for the topic of this paper are the political changes that followed in the wake of Fiji's independence. Fiji was granted independence from Great Britain in 1970, and Rotuma became an integral part of the newly-formed state. One of the first issues to be faced was the role of the district officer, in relation to the

Rotuma council. Under the colonial administration, he had been the *Gagaj Pure* -- the boss. His authority had come from the governor, whom he represented, and ultimately from the British Crown. With independence, the basis of his authority became ambiguous. A confrontation was not long in coming. The district officer at the time of independence was an educated Rotuman, who had his own ideas about how Rotuma should be governed. According to informants, he intruded into the process of chiefly selection on several occasions, and simply picked the person he favored, without regard to the customary rules of succession. When the chiefs complained to the newly formed government about his high-handedness, they met with almost immediate success. The prime minister himself came to the island and personally ordered the district officer's removal, replacing him with an experienced clerk.<sup>43</sup>

This action was a complete reversal of previous responses to requests that district officers (or district commissioners before them) be disciplined or removed. It signaled the beginning of an entirely different relationship between district officer and council. Whereas previously the council had been merely an advisory body, it was now empowered as a genuine legislative organization. The district officer was relegated to the role of adviser and administrative assistant to the council. This meant that council members, chiefs and district representatives alike, were finally in a position to exercise real power for the first time since Cession. As a result, the attractiveness of the role of district chief increased immeasurably, and competition for vacancies intensified.

One manifestation of this enhanced competition for chiefly positions is a heightened concern for genealogies. In 1960, genealogies were of importance to Rotumans primarily for validating claims to land. There was little overt concern for their significance as bases for making claims to chiefly entitlement. In 1987, the focus had shifted. A significant number of people now keep written genealogical records, where the emphasis seems to be on tracing ancestry to previous title

holders, rather than to more immediate ancestors, whose land holdings might be tapped.<sup>44</sup>

In recent years, two instances of chiefly succession exemplify the political maneuvering that now exists. The first case followed the death of Maraf, chief of Noa'tau, in 1982. The story told to us was that the chief in charge of holding a meeting to determine Maraf's successor, the *faufisi*,<sup>45</sup> told the chief of Oinafa, whose family has ties to the title, not to come to the meeting. He said that only eligible people from Noa'tau would attend, but in fact some people from Malhaha and Ituti'u went. At the meeting, a schoolteacher from Malhaha, who had actively campaigned for the position, was chosen. Incensed at being excluded, some of the Oinafa residents with ties to the title urged their district chief to hold a meeting of their own. He did, and they determined to make their own choice. The group met several times but could not agree on a candidate. Finally, one woman, whose father had held the Maraf title some years before, said she would go to Fiji to ask her son to take the position. He was a college-educated computer specialist, working for a government agency. His name was Charlie Yee<sup>46</sup> and his father was Chinese. He agreed to give up his high-paying job to take the title (which pays a mere \$35 Fijian per month). The Oinafa faction thereupon selected him and upon his arrival in Rotuma, held a formal installation ceremony, presenting him with the title. Tempers flared, and the policeman brother of the schoolteacher who had been installed in Noa'tau, radioed Fiji to send police because "there will be a fight." Nine policemen were sent to Rotuma and "camped" at the government station in Ituti'u. The commissioner eastern (under whose jurisdiction Rotuma falls), and two prominent Rotumans who had been district officers, flew to Rotuma to help solve the problem. They apparently made a point of saying they did not come to choose the chief but to help find a resolution. They met with each faction separately, then called a joint meeting, at which the chief of Oinafa finally asked Charlie Yee to give up the title in the interests of harmony.

The second case involved succession to the chieftainship of Ituti'u. In this district, there are



several titles that are eligible to take the chieftainship, but they are supposed to do so in rotation. The *mosega* (literally bed, but denoting the descendants of a titleholder), holding rights to one title held a meeting and chose one of their members. Before he had been installed, however, a man who claimed to belong to the eligible group (but whose claim was disputed by others, including many people not directly involved), went around the island inviting his relatives to a meeting to select a new chief. Despite their skepticism, a number of them came to the meeting, which was held at a government station. The district officer was also in attendance. At the meeting, the claimant opened the meeting by getting up and nominating himself. A chief from Noa'tau seconded the nomination and the man was elected by the group in attendance. Ultimately, the district officer upheld the election, despite its deviation from traditional protocol, and the man became Itutl'u's *Gaga/ 'es Itu'u*.

Rivalry has also intensified between districts in their competition for honor and resources. In 1960, inter-district rivalry was largely confined to sporting events<sup>47</sup> and the annual Cession Day agricultural competition. People from each district also were concerned with putting on exceptional feasts<sup>48</sup> and with the quality of their dance performances. In 1987, the rivalry between districts was more pervasive and had taken on new forms. For example, the annual budgetary allowance provided by the Fiji Administration includes funds for district meeting halls. But the funds are quite limited and each district must take its turn. The first hall was built in Motusa and it was the largest on the island, at the time. The next one was built in Oinafa; it was conspicuously larger. The one planned for Noa'tau is larger still.

This concern for impressive structures harks back to the pre-colonial period, when powerful chiefs conscripted labor to build high foundations and large houses. Indeed, several popular legends refer to uprisings triggered by the excessive demands of chiefs in this regard. But during the colonial period, the importance of structures for prestige paled within the districts. No one could hope to surpass the splendor (modest as it was by

international standards) of the district officer's house. Following independence, however, things changed. While the district officer's house was allowed to fall into a state of disrepair, a new, rather elegant, house was built with government funds in Noa'tau for visiting VIPs. It was promptly taken over by the chief of the district, who argued that it was only proper for him to host visiting dignitaries, since he was the highest ranking chief.

Elegant housing is not confined to chiefs. As a result of access to remittances, a number of individuals have built elaborate homes, and two-story structures have begun to appear. In addition, a few comparatively wealthy retirees from illustrious careers in Fiji have returned recently and are building homes on Rotuma, some designed by professional architects. Interestingly, whereas in 1960 the mark of a family's success was their productivity vis-à-vis food, in 1987 it had shifted to the quality of their housing. As one of our most reliable informants put it, there is a Rotuman saying: "when the house is good, you know the occupants are good. And it is the same with villages" (and, by implication, districts). It is not surprising, therefore, that whenever a new structure is at issue, there is a spirited competition for locating it in one's district. The Methodist deaconess's home, a proposed Bible college, a new business enterprise, all provoke strong expressions of district loyalty and pride.

This resurgence of inter-district rivalry has raised anew the issue of district ranking and the formal privileges associated with it. In the pre-colonial period, it will be recalled, district ranking depended upon the outcome of the last war. As a result of Cession, however, and the termination of warfare, the rank order was frozen as of 1879. There is no evidence that this order was ever disputed during the colonial period, and it is likely the resident commissioners and district officers would not have permitted a serious challenge to occur. They were interested in political stability and maintaining their view of tradition. Their writings suggest they considered the ceremonial rank order of districts to be a central feature of Rotuman tradition.

When the Rotuma council was finally empowered as a policy and decision-making body, it therefore seemed natural for Maraf, the chief of Noa'tau, to be chairman and, indeed, he was elected to the post by the council members. But in 1981, the council voted for the district representative from Juju to become chairman. This caused a great deal of controversy. Maraf complained bitterly and gained a good deal of support. A number of ministers in the Methodist Church preached against the change, citing it as an example of "the tail wagging the head" -- of the system as being turned upside down. Both sides gathered signatures and sent petitions to Fiji, but the government let the change stand -- refusing to interfere. Since that time, the chairmanship has changed hands several times and the immediate issue has faded away.<sup>49</sup>

In the last few years, the political issue of greatest concern has been a challenge to the authority of all the chiefs, and to the council itself. The challenge was initiated by a part-Rotuman by the name of Henry Gibson. He was born and raised in Rotuma, but emigrated to Fiji and eventually to New Zealand, where he became a successful karate entrepreneur. He owns a number of karate studios throughout the Pacific. Some years ago, Gibson had a vision in which the ghosts of four former *sau* visited him and urged him to restore the Molmahau foundation -- the alleged house site of Lagfatmaro, one of the *sau* who visited him. According to Gibson (but not any documentary source), Lagfatmaro, a genealogical ancestor, was the first *sau* of Rotuma.

Following his first visit to Rotuma, people who attended his *mamasa*, "welcoming ceremony," reported his being able to make (his necklace of) cowry shells, and skulls, move. On this visit, he purportedly taught some of his relatives to perform the kava ceremony "in the proper Rotuman fashion." On his second visit, his followers performed a *ki* ceremony for him when he got off the plane. A *ki* traditionally occurred when high ranking chiefs arrived by sea; they were carried from boat to land and placed upon a pile of white mats, accompanied by chants; it also took place

when a high chief was taken to be buried. They then performed a *mamasa* ceremony and anointed him with oil.

When the chief of Malhaha, where the airport is located, heard about the *ki*, he announced at the Rotuma council that he would forbid it in the future. But the manager of the airport, a follower of Gibson's, claimed he had jurisdiction over the airport, so on Gibson's next visit the ceremony was again performed. When the first tourist boat (the *Fairstar*) came to Rotuma, in November 1986, Henry Gibson came to the beach at Oinafa, where the tourists disembarked, all dressed in white. He sat on a white mat, attended by two New Zealand *pakeha* (Caucasian) women, and two of his Rotuman followers. Everywhere he went, his followers brought a white mat for him to sit on. The chiefs, as might be expected, became increasingly annoyed by these actions.

The climax of Gibson's defiance came after the second coup in Fiji on September 25, 1987. The leader of the coup, Colonel Rabuka, declared Fiji a republic, no longer tied to the British Commonwealth. In response, Henry Gibson, then in New Zealand, publicly declared Rotuma independent and appealed (futilely) to Queen Elizabeth for support. His argument was that Rotuma had ceded itself to Great Britain, not to Fiji, and that only the queen could abrogate the agreement. The chiefs of Rotuma, however, voted to remain with Fiji, whereupon Gibson declared their authority void. He instructed his followers to form a new council and they did, selecting seven new "chiefs."<sup>50</sup> The response by the authorities was immediate. They sent a gunboat and army squad to Rotuma to quell the "rebellion." The dissidents were placed under arrest and charged with sedition. As of this writing, their fate remains undetermined, as their trial has been delayed several times.

Opinions on Rotuma concerning this challenge to chiefly authority is divided, with many people expressing ambivalence. There is sympathy for the cause of Rotuman independence even among many of Gibson's critics. Many people feel the chiefs do a poor job of governing Rotuma and advocate change. Others see the

chiefs as vital to the maintenance of Rotuman custom and are harshly critical of Gibson and his followers. A main effect of these events has been to give an additional boost to status rivalry on the island.

## Conclusion

When he wrote about status rivalry as the driving force behind the development of hierarchical Polynesian societies, Goldman was referring to pre-contact conditions. The logic of his argument was essentially that the overwhelming concern for social worth based on the concept of *mana* inevitably led chiefs to challenge one another. He specifically considered utilitarian interests as subordinate to the concern for honor<sup>51</sup> and indeed made a good case for his viewpoint. The question I wish to raise here is whether the resurgence of rivalry in contemporary Rotuma derives from such dynamics or whether it must be explained in different terms. In other words, is the status rivalry that marks Rotuma today the same phenomenon as that which marked the pre-colonial system, or is it different?

One could make a case for continuity. Despite the changes Rotuman society has undergone in the past 150 years, the chiefly system remains essentially intact. As in the traditional system, the chiefs are still held responsible for the prosperity of the island and are targets of dissatisfaction if people's expectations go unmet. There is still a premium placed on ceremonial precedence. And allegiance to one's home district remains strong.

But to ignore the changes would be folly. To begin with, the entire ideological superstructure that fueled traditional rivalries has all but disappeared. The key to the traditional system was the logic of *mana*, which derived from the Polynesian deities. *Mana* was signalled by the outcomes of a chief's challenges to other chiefs, by success in warfare, and the fruitfulness of the land.<sup>52</sup> Successful challenges and abundance indicated the favor of the gods; failure and scarcity indicated disfavor. For a chief to be highly regarded -- to be seen as a person of *mana* -- required successful challenges. Status rivalry was

thus an inevitable result. The substitution of Christianity for the traditional religious ideology has undermined this dynamic. If anything, Christianity tends to mute rivalry by emphasizing humility and the equal worth of individual souls.

Even more important is the change in economic infrastructure. Prior to European contact, the economic system of Rotuma was relatively closed to the outside world. Although evidence exists for the importation of some prestigious trade goods from other islands, the possibilities for accumulating wealth were extremely limited. Fine mats, shells and whale's teeth ornaments, carved eating bowls and a few other special artifacts were the only prestige goods. Their importance rested entirely on their symbolic value. Chiefs could command labor for the production of food, to be consumed at feasts, as a means of enhancing their prestige (but everyone generally partook of the bounty). Perhaps closest to contemporary circumstances was the prestige value of an impressive chiefly dwelling.

The introduction of a commercial economy has changed the relationship between goods, power and prestige. The only prestige good that remains in circulation from the traditional repertoire is fine mats, over which chiefs have no special control. The traditional symbols of prestige have thus all but disappeared (or like the kava ceremony, are confined to specific contexts). The new symbols of status are motor vehicles, household appliances and, most of all, elaborate housing. They are available to anyone who has the money to afford them. Like everyone else, chiefs need money if they are to secure these symbols of status.

Chiefs no longer enjoy the prerogative of conscripting labor to build their personal dwellings, but even if they did, the cost of building materials still requires large sums of money. Houses built of "native" materials (e.g., thatching), will no longer do.<sup>53</sup> In order to successfully compete for prestige goods, therefore, contemporary Rotumans must attain a position which commands the disposition of money and other resources. Some are fortunate enough to have well-paying

jobs. Others have relatives abroad who supply them with remittances and valued commodities. But chieftainship now provides an additional channel for the acquisition of money and goods. Although the resources commanded by the Council of Rotuma are still rather limited, they are enticing enough to warrant intense rivalry among competitors for chiefly titles, especially among those who have no other options. Thus, whereas in the traditional system prestige was prerequisite to the power to command resources, in the contemporary system, control over resources is a means of gaining prestige.

This is not to say that the intrinsic prestige of chiefly titles has been eliminated. The fact that the

present Maraf gave up a well-paid position as school teacher, and that his rival, Charlie Yee, was prepared to give up a lucrative position as a computer programmer to take the title, testifies to the opposite. But as the influence of the commercial economics on Rotuma's sociopolitical system continues to increase, one might expect Rotumans to compete vigorously for positions of leadership, whether titles accompany them or not. In his 1970 book, Goldman convincingly demonstrated that in ancient Polynesian societies status rivalry led to warfare of a particularly brutal kind in the pursuit of honor. It remains to be seen what consequences will follow from the transformed kind of rivalry that is emerging in post-colonial Polynesian societies, like Rotuma.

#### NOTES

1. Irving Goldman, "Status Rivalry and Cultural Evolution in Polynesia," *American Anthropologist* (1955), Vol. 57, pp. 680-697.
2. For example, see Harry B. Hawthorne and Cyril S. Belshaw, "Cultural Evolution or Cultural Change: The Case of Polynesia," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (1957), Vol. 66, pp. 18-35.
3. Irving Goldman, *Ancient Polynesian Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
4. Marshall Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, Association for the Study of Anthropology in Oceania, Special Publication No. 1, 1981); *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
5. Marshall Sahlins, *Social Stratification in Polynesia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, The American Ethnological Society, Monograph 29, 1958).
6. See, for example, the various chapters in Alan Howard and Robert Borofsky, eds., *Developments in Polynesian Ethnology*, (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, in press).
7. Robert Borofsky, *Making History: Pukapukan and Anthropological Constructions of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
8. Andrew Pawley, "New Evidence on the Position of Rotuma," (Working Paper No. 56, Department of Anthropology, University of Auckland, N. Z., 1979).
9. Bruce Biggs, "Direct and Indirect Inheritance in Rotuman," *Lingua* (1965), Vol. 14, pp. 383-415; Andrew Pawley, "On the Position of Rotuman in the Austronesian Language Family," Unpublished ms (1962).
10. C. Maxwell Churchward, "Rotuman legends," *Oceania* (1937), Vol. 8, pp. 355-357.
11. For an early account of the traditional chiefly role see J. Stanley Gardiner, "The Natives of Rotuma," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (1898), Vol. 27, pp. 429-430.
12. *Sumi Mission Station*, manuscript, "Histoire de Rotuma," (n.d.). In a previous paper based on an analysis of Rotuman myths, I arrived at the conclusion that the *sau* and *mau* represent complementary aspects of Rotuman chieftainship, with the former signifying the principle of vitality and the latter the principle of domesticity; see Alan Howard, "History of Myth and Polynesian Chieftainship: The Case of Rotuman Kings," in Antony Hooper and Judith Huntsman, eds., *Transformation of Polynesian Culture* (Auckland: Polynesian Society, 1985), p. 63.

13. Letter dated 26 January 1865, in *The Wesleyan Missionary Notices*, No. 34 (January 1866).
14. Robert W. Williamson, *The Social and Political Systems of Central Polynesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3 volumes, 1924).
15. Howard, *op cit.* (1985).
16. *Sumi Mission Station*, *op cit.*
17. Trouillet dates Fatafe'i's reign as lasting from 1802-1806, after the first recorded contact by Europeans, which occurred in 1791, when Captain Edward Edwards in H. M. S. *Pandora* sighted the island.
18. *Sumi Mission Station*, *op cit.*
19. René Lesson, *Voyage Autour du Monde . . . sur la Coquille* (Paris: Pourrat Freres, 1839), pp. 415-416.
20. The first missionary vessel to stop at Rotuma was the *Duff* in 1797, but they left no personnel. It was not until November 12, 1839 that the Reverend John Williams, on his ill-fated voyage to Erromanga in the *New Hebrides*, left the first Polynesian missionaries. 1989 is the 150th anniversary of the event, which is being celebrated with a massive commemorative festival on Rotuma.
21. Chiefly names in Rotuma are titles, assumed when taking office. In some districts, there are several different titles that a newly anointed chief can assume, but the chief of Noatau always takes the title of Marafu. Gardiner was referring here to an informant during his visit in 1896, the current Marafu, not to the chief of Noatau at the time of the events.
22. For a more detailed account of events leading up to the war, and the culpability of the missionaries in provoking it, see W. J. E. Eason, *A Short History of Rotuma* (Suva: Government Press, 1951).
23. See Alan Howard, "Rotuma as a Hinterland Community," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (1964), Vol. 70, pp. 272-299, for an account of this process.
24. Alan Howard, "The Rotuman District Chief: A Study in Changing Patterns of Authority," *Journal of Pacific History* (1966), Vol. 1, pp. 63-78.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
26. Dispatch from C. Mitchell to Governor of Fiji, 12 October 1881, *Outward Letters of Rotuma District Office* (Suva, Fiji: Central Archives of Fiji and W.P.H.C.).
27. *Minutes of the Rotuma Council of Chiefs*, 10 August 1888, 11 October 1888, 14 January 1889 (Suva, Fiji: Central Archives of Fiji and W.P.H.C.).
28. For examples, see *Minutes of the Rotuma Council of Chiefs*, 1 September 1910, and dispatch from A. E. Cornish to Colonial Secretary, 30 January 1939, *Outward Letters of Rotuma District Office*.
29. Dispatch from W. Carew to Colonial Secretary, 5 February 1931, *Outward Letters of Rotuma District Office*.
30. *Sykes Report to the Colonial Secretary*. (Suva, Fiji: Central Archives, 3 July 1948).
31. *Ibid.*
32. Following a reorganization of administration in the Colony of Fiji in the 1930s, the appointed official in charge of Rotuma was known as the District Officer. Previously, each district sent a representative, but the latter was chosen by the chief and acted more or less as his assistant.
33. The first Rotuman District Officer, Josefa Rigamoto, was appointed in 1945. Since then, most, but not all, district officers have been Rotuman.
34. Each district made its own rules in this regard. In the district in which I had taken residence, the rule was for each man or youth out of school to give about five shillings, and for sub-chiefs to give 10 shillings. The offering was made without ceremony.
35. The election was conducted in a thoroughly democratic fashion, with all men in the district participating. Nominations were taken by the acting district officer, himself a Rotuman, who urged that traditional considerations be put aside and the best man chosen. A secret ballot was held but, in fact, the man chosen belonged to an eligible kin group.
36. Alan Howard, "Conservatism and Non-Traditional Leadership in Rotuma," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (1963), Vol. 72, p. 69.
37. In 1987, Fiji Air scheduled two flights per week, but when we returned this had been pared back to only once per week. Apparently the airline was losing money because of the light passenger load. Comparatively, airfares cost considerably more than boat passages, so most Rotumans prefer to wait for a boat (which also allows them to take unlimited baggage, including gifts for kin and friends).
38. Previously, ships had to anchor outside the reef and goods were brought ashore by launch and punt.

40. Bureau of Statistics, Fiji.
41. There are a few small privately-owned businesses on the island, including a tailor shop owned by an Indian merchant and a bakery owned and operated by a Rotuman family. A rival cooperative society was also started by a group of Rotumans, but it has foundered and has not seriously challenged the dominance of the RCA over island commerce.
42. The copra price fluctuates considerably from year to year and was at a low level in 1986. However, the steady increase in store sales can be taken as an indication that alternative sources of income have been rising independently of copra income.
43. As pointed out earlier, the Rotuman chiefs who ceded Rotuma to Great Britain expected to be granted the same prerogatives as Fijian chiefs, only to be thwarted by the colonial administration. The post-independence government, however, is based in Fijian chieftainship and appears to support chiefly privilege in Rotuma, based on the Fijian model.
44. This is only an impression and has not yet been validated by empirical evidence. Land issues certainly remain a focal concern. However, the context of talking about genealogies clearly had shifted to their significance for chiefly succession.
45. *Faufisi* is the office of the second ranking chief in each district. The *faufisi* is known as the "right hand" of the *gagaj 'es itu'u*. He is in charge if the *gagaj 'es itu'u* is absent from the district and when the latter dies.
46. He also had a Rotuman name, *Jale* (pronounced *tchaley*) *Fakrauhanisi*, and although he spent most of his life in Fiji, he was described as a fluent speaker of Rotuman.
47. These included cricket, soccer, rugby, table tennis, track and field, netball and field hockey, as well as the traditional sports of *tika* "spear throwing" and *hula* "wrestling."
48. One of the more dramatic ways competition was expressed in providing food was the custom of *kiu*. The term *kiu*, "ten thousand," refers to the presentation to a *gagaj 'es itu'u* of 10,000 taro plants by the men of a district. These are often accompanied by huge quantities of other foods as well. A round of *kiu* seems to have taken place during the late colonial periods, in which each successive event was more extravagant than the last, as each district sought to outdo the others. The produce from these events are distributed by the honored chief to the other district chiefs. He is thus doubly honored, as a privileged recipient and as a generous donor. In 1960, the men from one isolated village provided a *kiu* for the chief of *Ituti'u*. The fact that only seventeen men were able to produce such an excess was a matter of considerable pride and awe.
49. Interestingly, the same issue arose among Rotumans in Fiji, who are also organized along district lines. The Noatau faction insisted it was their prerogative to chair meetings, while others resisted. However, a confrontation was avoided there since the man with the most prestige, *Josefa Rigamoto* -- a hero of World War II and the first Rotuman district officer -- is from *Oinafa* but has strong family ties to *Noatau*. He is therefore claimed by both districts.
50. There has been some ambiguity over the titles of the newly formed council. At first, the term "chief" was used, but following a clash with the authorities in Fiji, the dissidents claimed they did not intend to replace the existing chiefs, and referred to the new appointees as "ministers."
51. Goldman, *op cit.*, p. 511.
52. Bradd Shore, "Mana and Tapu," in Howard and Borofsky, *op cit.*
53. As a result of Hurricane Bebe, native-style houses are now seen as vulnerable and impermanent, the very antithesis of chiefly virtue.