



Ritual Status and Power Politics in Modern Rotuma

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LIKE THEIR COUNTERPARTS in other Pacific societies documented in this volume, chiefs on Rotuma—an isolated Polynesian island in the Republic of Fiji—are in a difficult position. Caught between a lingering traditionalism and the demands of developing the island's standard of living to the satisfaction of its inhabitants, they find themselves subject to relentless criticism. Debates over the roles of Rotuman chiefs do not conform to a simple dichotomy of tradition versus modernity, however. While in the context of "modernization" chiefs are icons of a distinctive Rotuman cultural tradition and identity (and are universally honored for the roles they play in dignifying ceremonial occasions), they are also men uniquely embedded in localized histories that motivate their actions and inform interpretations and evaluations of their behavior. The result is often a confounding of local intrigue and the politics of development, as the case study we present illustrates.

The situation of Rotuman chiefs is further complicated by the ambiguity of their position within a postcolonial, post-coup context in which Fijian chiefs have assumed a central political role as defenders of indigenous rights (see Chapter 6). Whereas the roles of Fijian chiefs have increasingly been defined and consolidated at the national level, discussion of Rotuman chiefs' roles has been muted, more a matter of gossip than of formal discussion. The responsibilities and prerogatives of Rotuman chiefs have therefore been evolving in the form of contested responses to ad hoc circumstances rather than through purposeful debate. These circumstances have weakened the political foundations of chiefly authority on Rotuma and rendered chiefs vulnerable to angry critiques.

In some respects the foundations of chiefly authority on Rotuma have always been problematic. Unlike chiefs in the more stratified Polynesian societies (e.g., Hawai'i, Tonga, Tahiti, Fiji), Rotuman chiefs were much closer to the people than to the gods. Their legitimacy relied more on populist support than on supernatural sanctions.¹ Though expected to show some degree of forcefulness (i.e., manifestations of *mana*, "potency"), Rotuman chiefs were constrained by an ethic of reciprocity in which the people provided labor and material support, while chiefs ensured their people's welfare through displays of generosity.² Rotuman myths clearly portray chiefs who were too demanding—who took more than they gave—as the conceptual equivalent of cannibals (Howard 1986). The behavior of Rotumans toward their chiefs over time is consistent with this mythical character, continually demonstrating both passive and active resistance to chiefly excess.

In this chapter we examine the historical circumstances that have led to the dilemmas confronting modern chiefs on Rotuma, and provide a case study that illustrates the complexities of the contemporary situation. The case study focuses on a series of events over the past few years in which the chief of one district became embroiled in a web of political and economic intrigue spanning local and national levels, leading to an attempt to depose him and install another chief.

Historical Overview

Rotuma is located 465 kilometers north of the northernmost island in the Fiji group, and only slightly closer to Futuna, its nearest neighbor. A fertile volcanic island of 43 square kilometers, Rotuma is surrounded by a fringing coral reef of varying width and productivity. Local food production supports basic subsistence: Rotumans cultivate a range of starchy staple crops, fruits, and vegetables, and raise pigs, chickens, goats, and cows in addition to the fish, shellfish, and seaweed they obtain from the surrounding waters. For more than a century the island's primary export has been copra; periodic efforts to develop other products have been plagued with problems of storage, shipping, marketing, and management. Wage opportunities on the island have increased over time but remain limited, and remittances from migrant relatives in cash and kind are important to upgrading living conditions and raising aspirations.

Although culturally and linguistically distinct from Fiji, Rotuma was incorporated into the British Colony of Fiji following cession to Great Britain in 1881. At the time the Rotuman chiefs agreed to the move, apparently anticipating advantages from being cast into the same category

as Fijian chiefs, whom they saw as exercising considerably more authority than themselves. Thus, shortly after cession, Commissioner Charles Mitchell reported in a letter to the governor of Fiji: "As far as I can judge it appears to me that the chiefs found their control over the people slipping from their hands and imagined that if Great Britain took over the island it would reverse this and place them in the position that Fijian chiefs occupy to their people" (dispatch dated Oct. 12, 1881; Outward Letters). However, the position of Rotuman chiefs vis-à-vis their people and the colonial government was quite different from that of their Fijian counterparts, leading to a different power structure.

Rotuman and Fijian Chiefs: A Comparative View

It will be useful at this point to compare the powers of a Rotuman district chief with those of a Fijian *yavusa* chief, for it was on their understanding of the latter's status that British administrators based their expectations of the former. In its idealized (colonial) form, Fijian social structure was conceived as a series of three agnatic descent groups. In order of inclusiveness these were known as *yavusa*, *mataqali*, and *itokatoka*. The *mataqali* that composed a *yavusa* were ranked according to the seniority of founding ancestors, presumed to be related as siblings. The *mataqali* founded by the eldest son provided the *yavusa* chiefs (Geddes 1959). Within this organization, *yavusa* chiefs held authority over each *yavusa* member by virtue of real or fictive kinship seniority over them.

In contrast, chiefs on Rotuma are customarily chosen from among the bilineal descendants of ancestors who held a title (*as togi*).³ Rotuma is divided into seven districts, each with a *gagaj 'es itu'u*, "district chief," as its leader.⁴ Districts are subdivided into *ho'aga*,⁵ clusters of households composing cooperating work groups under the direction of a *fa 'es ho'aga*, "hamlet or village chief," who is responsible for organizing labor on ceremonial occasions and when district work needs to be done. Though district headmen⁶ are always titled, *fa 'es ho'aga* may or may not be. On the other hand, some men take titles without assuming a leadership position. This suggests a conceptual separation between pragmatic leadership and the ceremonial roles of chiefs.

At ceremonies, titled men have special rights and responsibilities not afforded untitled men. They eat from special tables (*'umefe*) symbolizing their status. They are honored in kava ceremonies at which their titles are called out in rank order. Titled men are also expected to give speeches on behalf of their kinsmen, and to be more generous than other men when presentations of food and valuables are required.

Titles "belong" to the descendants of previous title holders, who form a cognatic descent group (*kainaga*) known by the house-site (*fuag ri*) name associated with relevant ancestors. When formal custom is adhered to, the choice of successor to a title is made at a meeting of the *kainaga*. In most districts three or four *kainaga* claim rights to a title eligible for district chief. Collectively these are referred to as *mosega*, "a bed," with the implication that the claimants are descendant from the same original source. Eligible *kainaga* are thus related to each other as putative siblings. Ideally, district chiefs should be chosen successively from each branch of the *mosega* in turn, but in practice the process is highly politicized. The second-ranking title in each district is that of *faufisi*, whose holder serves as the district chief's "right hand." He customarily acts as head of the district when the *gagaj 'es itu'u* is away. Lesser titles are bestowed on those occupying other special roles, such as head fisherman and messenger.

One ordinarily holds a title until death, but if someone is particularly remiss in his role or otherwise earns the enmity of his *kainaga*, he may be pressured to give up the title. Whether *kainaga* have a right to take back titles once given is currently a matter of debate.

Superficially viewed, the roles of Fijian *yavusa* chiefs and Rotuman district chiefs were very similar prior to colonization. Like his Rotuman counterpart, a *yavusa* chief organized activities in his district, was an arbitrator of disputes, and was ceremonially honored through precedence in kava ceremonies. Both received first fruits from their subjects. But there were also significant differences. For example, *yavusa* chiefs were ritual leaders by virtue of direct descent from deified founding ancestors, and their political power was backed by supernatural sanctions of a more direct nature than those relied on by Rotuman chiefs. And since Fijian chiefs were chosen by primogeniture, drastically limiting potential successors to a title, they were treated with deference from birth. From childhood on they were trained to superordination while their peers were socialized to subordination. On Rotuma, in contrast, with any link to an ancestral chief conferring eligibility, no one was apt to receive the privileges normally afforded a Fijian chief's elder sons. The individual selected by his kin to become chief was unlikely to have enjoyed any special recognition before that time.

These differences resulted in chieftainship of quite different characters in the two cultures. Ideologically, chiefs in both societies held comparable authority, but Fijian chiefs generally exercised a social psychological dominance over their subjects, whereas Rotuman chiefs did not. Put into cultural terms, in Fiji the powers of office were conceived as embodied in the proper individual; in Rotuma they were invested in the title rather than the man.

The Colonial Era

Fijian social organization was well suited for indirect rule, and the British made the most of it. The chiefs, by virtue of their dominance, provided ready-made channels for administration. They simply added to their indigenous roles the rights and duties allocated to them by the colonial administration, and these were generally accepted by the people without much hesitation. The perceived success of this strategy (in other colonies as well as in Fiji) initially encouraged duplication of the design in Rotuma, but without appreciation of differences in the nature of chieftainship. The intentions of the colonial administration were made clear from the outset following the Rotuman chiefs' offer of cession. In a speech in October 1879, the acting governor of Fiji, William Des Voeux, announced, "It will be the same in Rotuma [as in Fiji] should the Queen consent to take you under the shelter of her throne. Thus through you [the Rotuman chiefs] we shall govern the people of the land, to you we shall look for aid in guiding and controlling them."⁷

That there was going to be some difficulty implementing this administrative scheme was quickly recognized by Hugh Romilly, who was sent as deputy commissioner to Rotuma in 1880 with the news of Queen Victoria's acceptance of the cession petition. In an address to the Rotuma Council of Chiefs, Romilly expressed his concern for the lack of deference shown the chiefs by their people:

The Council of Chiefs will remain the same. I promise to be guided as far as possible by your experience and advise. I have observed however with pain that some of your chiefs are not treated with proper obedience and respect by your young men. In some instances you have found it difficult to get even small things done by them without grumbling on their part. If I am to introduce English law here I can only do it through the chiefs and it is absolutely essential that you should insist on the strictest obedience from the people you have under you. I do not know on whose side the fault is but I am perfectly certain you can command respect and obedience if you choose to do so. Without it you can give no assistance to me in carrying out the law. . . .

There will be a law made . . . to punish disobedience but it would be infinitely better if you could govern your peoples without having to bring them to me for punishment.⁸

Although encouraged by Romilly's pledge of support, the chiefs soon found themselves in an untenable position. The limits of their prerogatives came to the fore when, immediately upon cession, 103 Rotumans submitted a petition for re-cession of their island from Great Britain. The petition noted that the chiefs had ceded the island "without consulting them, the landholders of the country" (Outward Letters, Oct. 12, 1881). Deputy

Commissioner Mitchell concurred that the offer of cession had been made without the people's consent. "This the chiefs had no right to do," he noted, "as the landholders here occupy a very independent position, the relations between chiefs and landholders being very different from what they are in Fiji" (*ibid.*). By the time the colonial government responded to (and refused) the petition several months later, the petitioners had changed their minds (*Outward Letters*, Oct. 20, 1882). But the position of Rotuman chiefs remained problematic.

Subsequent commissioners expected the chiefs to act authoritatively but refused to enhance their actual power, while the Rotuman people ridiculed their abortive attempts at dictatorship. The chiefs evidently assumed that they would be granted arbitrary powers that could be used to their own advantage, but the commissioners were only willing to back them to the point of enforcing English law and established Rotuman custom. For their part, the people did not express resentment over the imposition of most English-derived laws, nor did they openly dispute the authority of English commissioners. According to one of the early commissioners: "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."⁹

Although most of the chiefs resigned themselves to the situation, one did not. Albert, chief of *Itu'ti'u*, continued to press for official support, only to be continually rebuked. Finally, after an incident in which he incited his district to disobey the commissioner's orders, he was publicly censured by the Council of Chiefs (see Howard 1966 for details). Albert's humiliation made it clear to all that the chiefs' political power under colonial rule was in fact negligible. Officially the chiefs were made advisors to the resident commissioner (and after an administrative reorganization in the 1930s, the district officer); unofficially, they were relegated to the role of intermediaries between the commissioner and the people in their districts. They were often 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.

Although its ceremonial significance continued to provide some incentive for Rotuman men to aspire to chieftainship, this was more than offset by contradictory role demands. As a consequence, competition for chiefly roles waned, and the traditional rules governing succession, flexible as they were, gave way to a lax toleration allowing almost any adult male to fill a vacancy. 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.¹⁰

Furthermore, the commissioners 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 the passing of a Rotuman Regulation penalizing the chiefs for omissions of duty, and their people for disregard to their orders on district matters.

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

The Rotumans as a whole, are practically devoid of Race and Tradition, consequently a chief could never acquire the standing of a Fijian Roko, but he could at least be constituted as a sort of Super-Buli, to be feared and obeyed by his people.¹¹

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. *Gagaj 'es itu'u* did not have the kind of authority they associated with chiefdoms such as that in 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 a chief would be elected for a period of three years in the first instance, after which the members of the *kainaga* who had elected him would vote for a new chief, or reelect the old one if they considered him satisfactory, provided he had proved satisfactory to the government. The first chief appointed under this rule failed to get reelected by his people and subsequently complained to the government on the grounds that the new procedures violated Rotuman custom. By this time Cornish had died, and following an investigation the traditional custom was reinstated (Sykes 1948).

A few years later, J. W. Sykes, sent to Rotuma to investigate administration of the island, among other matters, proposed abolishing the Council of Chiefs and replacing it with an elected council (*ibid.*). Sykes's recommendation was not implemented, in large measure because it was opposed by H. S. Evans, the district officer 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 se-

crer ballot, in addition to the chiefs.¹² 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. This situation prevailed until Fiji obtained independence in 1970.

Repercussions of Political Changes in Fiji

Following independence, it did not take long for a crisis to develop concerning the powers of chiefs versus those of district officers. Under the colonial administration, the district officer had been *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. 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 immediate success. The prime minister himself came to the island and personally ordered the district officer's removal, replacing him with an experienced clerk.¹³

This action completely reversed previous responses to Rotumans' requests that district officers (or district commissioners before them) be disciplined or removed. It signaled the beginning of an entirely different relationship between the district officer and the Council of Rotuma. 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 advisor 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. The council, charged with overseeing local affairs, receives a government subvention that has increased substantially in recent years, from \$F52,000 in 1984 to nearly \$F135,000 in 1992, as well as annual self-help grants that amounted to \$F10,000 each year from 1989 to 1992.¹⁴ As a result, the attractiveness of the role of district chief has increased considerably, and competition for vacancies has intensified (Howard 1989).

The military coups of 1987 required Rotumans to reconsider their relationship with Fiji. Especially distressing for many was Fiji's withdrawal from the British Commonwealth, since it was to Great Britain and not to Fiji that the Rotuman chiefs had initially ceded the island. Led by a charismatic part-Rotuman karate master who lives in New Zealand, a number

of dissidents refused to recognize Fiji's continued political sovereignty over Rotuma. In defiance of the chiefs, who had decided that Rotuma should remain with Fiji, the dissidents selected a new set of representatives (one per district) from among themselves, and declared Rotuma independent. Initially these representatives were called "chiefs," but later, when defending themselves against criticism, they denied intending to replace the traditional chiefs and instead declared themselves "ministers" in "the only legal Cabinet in Rotuma representing the welfare and interest of Rotumans living here and abroad."¹⁵ The movement tapped an undercurrent of Rotuman concern over levels of support from the Fiji government. The government regularly provides infrastructure and support personnel on Rotuma for health services, education, public works, communications, etc., perpetuating the priority given to public welfare by the colonial powers. But many island residents have repeatedly expressed feelings of frustration over perceived neglect, citing, for instance, irregular shipping and poorly maintained roads, as well as a lack of attention to economic development.

In this instance, however, the dissident leaders were ultimately charged with sedition, tried in court and found guilty, but assessed only small fines and put on probation. After reviewing their claims, the chief magistrate issued a decision affirming Fiji's sovereignty over Rotuma, based on his assessment of historical data.¹⁶

The dissent expressed by the independence movement appears to have drawn as much from discontent with the chiefs as from skepticism over Fiji's willingness and ability to meet the aspirations of the Rotuman people. The dissidents charged the chiefs with corruption, with serving their own self-interests, and (echoing their ancestors of 100 years earlier) with failing to consult their people in deciding the island's fate. These complaints were neither new nor restricted to the dissidents; they were simply levied in a more politically charged, and expanded, arena.

The post-coup political rhetoric in Fiji may well have exacerbated the situation by rendering the place of Rotumans in the republic even more problematic. The reconceptualization of *tauvei* (Fijian) "people of the land,"¹⁷ the expanded role given Fijian chiefs, the redistribution of seats in a reconstituted Parliament, all have raised questions concerning Rotuma's (and Rotumans') position vis-à-vis Fiji and the role of Rotuman chiefs within the emerging structure. The Constitutional Review Committee, in grappling with these very issues, has kept them in the limelight, stimulating public expressions of opinion that might otherwise have remained private. It should be pointed out that the functioning of the Rotuman Council has not directly been affected by the coups, and the governance of Rotuma has not materially changed despite structural changes at the national level.

Rotuma's relationship with Fiji has affected the authority of Rotuman chiefs indirectly, however, through the access to educational and occupational opportunities it allows Rotuman migrants.¹⁸

Outmigration and Chiefly Authority

After an initial decline following contact, the Rotuman population experienced explosive growth beginning in the 1920s, increasing from a total of 2,235 Rotumans in 1926 to 8,652 in 1986. But the number of Rotumans residing on Rotuma in 1986 was nearly the same as it had been fifty years earlier (2,554 compared to 2,543), with migration draining off the net population increase. Fiji census reports over the past several decades document a dramatic shift in the distribution of Rotumans, with an ever-increasing proportion recorded away from their home island. According to the 1986 census, 70 percent of Rotumans lived elsewhere in Fiji, with 46 percent concentrated in the Suva area (Howard and Rensel 1994).

No one currently presumes that chiefs from the home island can exercise authority over Rotumans in Fiji. The chiefs formally abrogated that possibility in 1946, by refusing a request from the migrant Rotumans to appoint someone to be their "headman." The Fiji Rotumans expressed the view that someone appointed by the Council of Chiefs would be more respected, but the chiefs suggested that the migrants choose their own leader (Minutes of the Rotuma Council, Oct. 10, 1946).

At home, chiefly authority has been undermined by the fact that emigrant Rotumans have, on the whole, been extraordinarily successful in Fiji. They are considerably overrepresented in the upper echelons of business enterprises and governmental agencies. Many emigrants have accumulated real power by virtue of their positions and networks among Fiji's cosmopolitan elite. A good many take an active interest in developments on Rotuma, and may offer assistance in helping to see plans formulated by the Rotuma Council materialize. However, the chiefs see threats to their political control in these overtures, and regard them with ambivalence. They know they need assistance to get support for their projects, but they want Rotumans in Fiji to pay obeisance to them. They anticipate quick compliance with their demands, and expect preferential treatment when they come with requests. They welcome initiatives by Fiji-based Rotumans but demand control of implementation.

Emigration has also affected symbols of status. In days past, a chief's home was the main indicator of his rank. It was the biggest and best in his district, and was built and maintained by communal labor. The chief's house served as a receiving center for visiting dignitaries and was an im-

portant symbol of the district's prosperity and organizational ability. In recent years, however, modern-style houses requiring significant capital investment are being built by persons without titles. Motorbikes and automobiles are also accessible to anyone with the money to pay for them. Chiefs can only participate in this competition for prestige items if they have ready access to cash, and most do not. A significant proportion of the money for these commodities comes from abroad, in the form of remittances from emigrants. In addition, some Rotumans who are employed on the island can afford to invest in prestigious housing and transportation by drawing on their wages or bank loans.¹⁹ But the chiefs are paid only a small stipend for their council duties. Hence they are strongly tempted to use public funds to pay for personal privileges or to support a more elegant lifestyle. In a number of instances serious charges have been made concerning mismanagement of public funds by individual chiefs within their home districts, and collectively as a council. The loss of a chiefly monopoly over status markers following in the wake of commercialization, education, and emigration is a widespread phenomenon and poses similar dilemmas throughout the Pacific and beyond.

We now present an account of recent events, centered in the district of Oinafa, that illustrates the ways local and national levels interrelate to shape the dynamics of modern Rotuman chieftainship.²⁰

The Leadership Crisis in Oinafa

When Howard visited Rotuma in 1959-60, the chief of Oinafa was a man with the title Tokaniua. Although in his declining years at that time (he was 81), Tokaniua was still highly respected. People described him as kind and caring, and he performed his duties with a quiet dignity that reflected the moral authority he held. All three villages in the district—Lopta, Oinafa, and Paptea—were united in their support of Tokaniua. There was little evidence of any factional dispute threatening the political harmony of the district.

Shortly after Howard left Rotuma at the end of 1960, the aging Tokaniua turned over the reins of chieftainship to a younger man in his district with the title Kausiriaf. Though the new chief never gained the level of respect enjoyed by Tokaniua, he managed to carry out the responsibilities of his position with general support from the Oinafa people until the mid-1970s, when he was accused of embezzling funds from the Rotuma Co-operative Association and the Methodist Church. By then, however, the role of chief had changed dramatically as a result of the termination of Britain's colonial rule. The Council of Rotuma was now empowered as a

policy-making body; thus, for the first time since cession, the chiefs were in a position to exercise real political authority. The empowerment of the council also gave chiefs a central role in overseeing Rotuma's modest but steadily increasing budget allocation from the Fiji government.

Business on the island was controlled throughout the colonial era by two firms: Morris Hedstrom and Burns Philp. Following World War II, however, the Rotuma Cooperative Association (RCA) was founded, and after several years of struggle it took firm root. By 1968 it was strong enough to force the firms out of business, thus gaining a monopoly on the island's commerce.

Kausiriaf was an active member of the RCA and was appointed an internal auditor. His son-in-law, Tarterani, kept the RCA shop in Oinafa village. When the shop experienced a serious shortfall in the mid-1970s, Kausiriaf allegedly doctored the books to disguise the deficit, which amounted to several thousand Fiji dollars. When this was discovered, he allegedly embezzled money from the Methodist Church to pay back the RCA. Eventually Kausiriaf and Tarterani obtained funds from relatives in Fiji to restore what had been taken, but both were dismissed from their positions. Kausiriaf then went to the RCA's central committee to apologize formally. His *faksoro*, "apology," was given in high ceremonial fashion, involving a sacrificial pig, kava, and fine white mats. He went *hen rau'ifi*, "with leaves around his neck," symbolically offering his life to atone for his offense. This is a rare event in Rotuma, and is usually reserved for instances in which a life has been taken or blood spilled. For a chief to come *hen rau'ifi* and ask forgiveness is of great consequence in the context of Rotuman culture. It is virtually inconceivable for the offended party to refuse acceptance of an apology so presented.

But Wilson Inia, the guiding light for the RCA's success,²¹ refused to accept the chief's apology. He argued that *hen rau'ifi* was a custom relevant to interpersonal offenses, as when one party injured another, but that it did not apply to business matters, where money was involved. He said that embezzlement cannot be undone that way.²² When Kausiriaf's father, who holds the title Sakmen, heard about Inia's refusal to accept the apology, he was outraged. He sent a letter to the RCA demanding that the Oinafa RCA copra shed and shop, which were on his land, be removed immediately.

Soon afterwards, in 1977, a brother of Kausiriaf, holding the subchiefly title Toa'niu in the district of Juju, went to Suva to seek financial support to begin a rival cooperative society. The new co-op was to be named Raho, in honor of the legendary founding ancestor of Rotuma Island. For help in securing a loan, Toa'niu approached a third brother, Atfoa, who held a high position in the Fiji government. Atfoa greatly admired all that Wilson

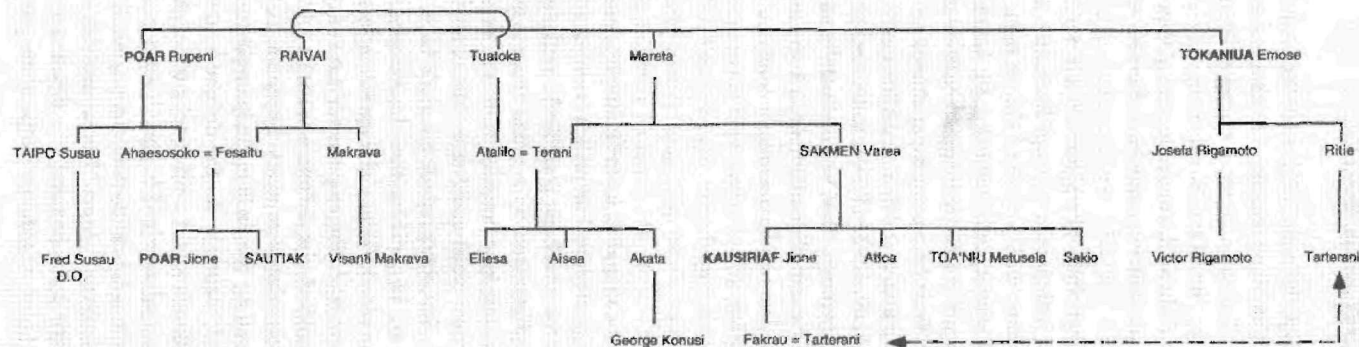
Inia had done for Rotuma, and agreed to help his brother only with reservations. He said he favored healthy competition but was concerned about the motives of the founders. He urged them to forget their personal grudges and to work for the best interests of the Rotuman people. He obtained a loan and installed Toa'niu as Raho's manager. Atfoa attempted to monitor Raho from Suva, but could not control the everyday operations of the fledgling company.

Kausiriat, his father, and his brothers (the Varea family, see figure) had counted on other malcontents joining their group, but they were disappointed. People on the island were well aware of the new cooperative's beginnings in Kausiriat's predicament, and even though he did not take an active hand in founding Raho, this hardly inspired confidence. Amidst accusations of mismanagement, Raho played only a minor role in the island's economy until it was reorganized in the late 1980s (see below).

Kausiriat's esteem within Oinafa suffered additional setbacks as a result of disputes over land and suspicions that he continually diverted district funds for his own personal benefit. For example, it was rumored that he had used USAID funds granted to the district for communal projects to build a costly addition to his house.

The Generator Dispute

When we arrived for fieldwork in 1988, hard feelings prevailed in the district. Within Oinafa village a dispute had arisen over a formula for paying electricity bills. A generator had been purchased with funds raised by the Oinafa Club in Fiji, supplemented by a grant from a government self-help program. Since meters were not installed at house sites, the issue of how fuel and maintenance costs were to be distributed among households became a focus of debate. Two factions developed. One, supported by Kausiriat, advocated a flat rate be paid by each household, regardless of use. The other, led by a man named Eliesa, advocated payment according to the number of light fixtures and power points. At a village meeting during which the issue was discussed, the debate became heated, and angry words were exchanged. Kausiriat was away from the island at the time, and the meeting was chaired by the *faufisi*, the second-ranking chief in the district, who holds the title Sautiak. As the debate heated up, Sautiak allegedly accused Eliesa, who also held a title at the time, of not carrying his weight in village affairs and insulted his title. As a result, Eliesa renounced his title and, along with one of his supporters, isolated himself from village affairs for more than two years. Eliesa and his supporters disconnected their houses from the reticulated village electrical system and bought their own generators. They steadfastly refused to participate in



Key: Names in Capital Letters indicate titles.
Names in Bold Capital Letters indicate Oinafa
district chiefs.

Note: This is a simplified genealogy insofar
as many of the individuals are related to one
another in multiple ways. We have diagrammed
here only the most direct relationships.

Abridged Oinafa Genealogy

village events and kept to themselves, despite numerous attempts by friends, relatives, and neighbors to institute social repairs.

The Matter of Tourism

Around the time the flap over the generator was taking place, a more pervasive issue emerged, adding fuel to the fire. Up to the present, no tourist facilities exist on Rotuma. A few visitors come from time to time, but they must arrange accommodations with families. However, in 1986, Kausiriaf's brother, Atfoa, arranged to have the Australian tourist ship *Fairstar* stop at Rotuma. The plan was to have the ship disgorge its approximately 1,000 passengers for a day on the beach at Oinafa (one of the most picturesque on the island) where they could swim, sunbathe, be entertained by groups performing traditional dances, and buy Rotuman handicrafts. Rotuma was to be made a regular stop in the *Fairstar's* South Pacific itinerary.

The plan to have such a large tourist vessel visit the island on a regular basis stirred a spirited debate within the Rotuman community, both on Rotuma and amongst Rotumans in Fiji. Those opposed, led by the Methodist clergy, argued that Rotuman morals would be threatened by tourists who could be expected to dress immodestly, drink and perhaps introduce illegal drugs, and seduce young women. They also felt that Rotumans would become greedy and money-grasping given this opportunity. Those supporting the idea pointed to economic benefits and argued that this form of tourism was preferable to hotel development.

The Rotuman Council debated the proposal and the chiefs, including Kausiriaf, voted against it. Despite the fact that his brother had formulated the plan, Kausiriaf spoke vigorously against it at district meetings and persuaded most of his people to oppose it. We were told that he was called to Fiji by his father, Sakmen, who admonished Kausiriaf for not supporting his brother Atfoa's plan. Allegedly Sakmen threatened Kausiriaf with eviction from the family homestead if he failed to comply. As a result, Kausiriaf returned to Rotuma and announced that he had changed his mind. He defied the council's ban on the *Fairstar's* visit, thus angering the people of the two other villages in his district, Lopta and Paptea. Shortly thereafter, when a water pipeline was being laid in the district, the men from Lopta reportedly refused to work on the project beyond their village limits, citing the tourism issue as their reason for not cooperating.

The *Fairstar* visited Rotuma in 1986 without incident. Its \$F4,000 docking fee went to Kausiriaf, with the understanding that he would pay expenses (including compensating the groups who entertained), with the remainder to be distributed among family groups (including his own) holding beachfront property. An estimated \$F6,000 was earned in addi-

tion, through the sale of food and souvenirs. This money went directly to the sellers, who were invited from the general island populace to sell their wares. For the most part the *Fairstar's* initial visit was considered a success, especially by those who benefited directly, but when we visited the island in 1987 feelings were still tender. Although we observed no direct expressions of open antagonism, Eliesa and some of his supporters remained aloof during communal activities.

The Healing Process

Over the following two years we witnessed a healing of the rifts within the district. In 1988 Eliesa formed a group, the Board for Enterprise Development, whose aim was to seek funds for entrepreneurial ventures on the island. He invited some of his key supporters and some men who had remained neutral to join the board. Meetings, which we were invited to attend, were held in his home. After a few meetings, when it looked like the project might succeed, several members of the group persuaded him that there would be advantages to having Kausiriaf as a member. Eliesa took the initiative and, without directly apologizing, told Kausiriaf he was prepared to forget the past. He invited the chief to the next meeting. On the urging of his wife and some neutral mediators, Kausiriaf agreed to attend.

Eliesa's invitation provided a basis for reconciliation and reintegrating discontents back into village life. He attended more and more village functions and began to assume increasing responsibility. Even the relationship between Eliesa and Sautiak, who had publicly insulted him, was healed to the point that they were seen sitting together, engaged in conversation.

The hard feelings that had erupted over the tourism issue also eased during the next year. Reconciliation took place in the form of a large-scale wedding between Sautiak's son and a young woman from Lopta. Significantly, the guardian of the bride had been one of the most outspoken critics of tourism, while Sautiak had been an active supporter. During the wedding, both sides gave a number of emotional speeches acknowledging past conflicts while glorifying the cooperation that had produced such a grand event.

Toward the end of 1989, district solidarity reached a zenith with the celebration of the 150th anniversary of Methodist missionization on Rotuma. Since Oinafa was the location of the first missionary landing, it was the center of celebration. In anticipation of a large number of visitors from Fiji and overseas, much effort went into planting vast quantities of food, sprucing up the villages, and making other preparations. Kausiriaf was in charge of these efforts and at this point enjoyed more general support than he had in years.

The Politics of Business

The stated goal of the Board for Enterprise Development was to acquire funds from abroad through grants and loans that would be allocated to worthwhile enterprises on the island. Among the projects discussed were cattle farming, a piggery, a garage for servicing and repairing motor vehicles, a handicraft industry, and a mat-weaving machine. More grandiose plans—for a set of fuel tanks near the beach that would be filled via a pipeline to visiting tankers, for a supermarket, and for an insurance brokerage—also were discussed.

The board was composed entirely of men from Oinafa village, although the potential benefits of including men with business experience from other districts were acknowledged. However, Kausiriaf argued against this on the grounds that it would make things more complicated, and his opinion was decisive. Eliesa had also sought the support of Oinafa expatriates in Fiji, most notably Josefa Rigamoto, Victor Rigamoto, Visanti Makrava, and George Konusi.

Josefa Rigamoto is the son of Tokaniua, the popular chief of Oinafa who preceded Kausiriaf. He had been the first Rotuman appointed district officer on Rotuma, shortly after serving with distinction in the Solomon Islands during World War II. Josefa enjoyed a long, distinguished career as a civil servant in the colonial and postcolonial administrations, retiring from the Fiji Land Board at age 80 in 1986. He is known to be well connected in Fiji and to have a thorough knowledge of bureaucratic procedures. Although untitled, the "Old Man" enjoys tremendous respect from Fijians, who honor him in chiefly fashion.²³

Victor Rigamoto is Josefa's son. A graduate from an English university in the field of social work, he had risen rapidly in the Fiji governmental hierarchy, and held a position in the prime minister's office. Although young, he was thought of as someone who had a good deal of influence and could help see projects through the government maze. In 1989 Victor had been sent to Rotuma by the prime minister to help resolve a dispute over chiefly entitlement in the district of Itu'muta. Dissenters in the district had petitioned the prime minister to have their chief, Manav, removed from office. Kausiriaf and a number of other titled men rallied to Manav's defense. They expressed serious concern about allowing decisions concerning chieftainship to be decided by officials in Fiji. They were also concerned about the very possibility of deposing a chief, which they claimed was contrary to Rotuman custom. Titles are given for life, they argued, and cannot be taken away against the title holder's will; likewise, they contended, a chief cannot be deposed against his will. Other knowledge-

able Rotumans, however, disputed this view, arguing that titles and chiefly positions belong to the *mosega* and can be recalled by the kin group. Victor attempted to mediate between Manav's supporters and the dissenters, but neither side would back down. Finally, during a return visit, he, in conjunction with the district officer, Fred Susau, persuaded Manav to agree to a vote of the whole district, and by a two-to-one margin Manav was voted out of office. While most of the district was jubilant, many Rotumans were disturbed by the precedent. They expressed concern that if a chief could be deposed simply because people did not like him, then the very foundations of chiefly authority would be undermined (for more details, see Howard 1990:283-85).

Following the coups in 1987, Visanti Makrava had been appointed general manager of the National Bank of Fiji (NBF). His family home was in Oinafa village, and he was seen as controlling vast resources that could be tapped by the Board for Enterprise Development. George Konusi worked as loan officer for the Fiji Development Bank.

A Note on Kinship Relations

All of the key individuals referred to—Kausiriaf, Toa'niu, Sakmen, Atfoa, Eliesa, Sautiak, Josefa and Victor Rigamoto, Visanti Makrava, George Konusi, and Fred Susau—are part of a closely knit kinship network (see figure), besides having roots in Oinafa village. At the senior level, Josefa Rigamoto and Sakmen are related as first cousins (FaSiSo/MoBrSo). Their sons, Victor Rigamoto on the one hand, Kausiriaf, Toa'niu, and Atfoa on the other, are second cousins. Eliesa is second cousin to both sides of the younger generation through his mother. Sautiak is also related to Eliesa, Victor, and Sakmen's sons as second cousins through his mother. Fred Susau is first cousin to Sautiak, second cousin to Kausiriaf, Eliesa, and Victor. Visanti is first cousin to Sautiak, second cousin to Eliesa, and related affinally to Kausiriaf. George Konusi is Eliesa's sister's son. All of these men claim membership in the *mosega* that has the right to choose Oinafa's district chief. It should be noted, however, that none of the Fiji residents held titles (nor did the district officer), nor did they aspire to them, despite their prominence.

The Business of Politics

In October 1989 Visanti Makrava (the general manager of NBF) visited Rotuma and met with the Board for Enterprise Development. He suggested that the group move cautiously, concentrating on copra and fuel, rather than trying to do everything at once. He further proposed that the board should register as a holding company in Fiji, rather than as a co-

operative. He pledged to help with financing and to play an active role in overseeing the venture. At the same time, Visanti suggested to the people involved in the Raho Cooperative that Raho be reorganized as a holding company. Eliesa assumed that his group, the Rotuma Enterprise Development Holding Company, would replace or take over Raho.

As pointed out above, the Raho Cooperative had suffered from serious problems, and under Toa'niu's management had not flourished. At one point Eliesa had been asked to join Raho, but did so only on the condition that he be made treasurer. Later he told us that he quit in frustration over Toa'niu's persistent misuse of funds. Toa'niu allegedly dipped into the cooperative's coffers to finance trips to Suva and to defray "campaign expenses" in his bid to be selected chairman of the Rotuma Council. Although only a subchief in his district (Juju), Toa'niu was a member of the council by virtue of his position as the district's elected representative. We were told by independent sources that Toa'niu gave monetary gifts to the chiefly members of the council in hopes of persuading them to choose him as chairman. He succeeded in his efforts. Meanwhile, however, Raho was suffering.

Raho's shops were closed, debts were mounting, and only the copra operations were still in business when Atfoa, who was seriously ill (he has since died), asked Visanti for help. Atfoa reportedly stipulated that neither of his brothers should be involved in Raho's management. In June 1989, Visanti arranged for loans from NBF to Sautiak and Aisea Atalifo, Eliesa's brother, who was Oinafa district representative to the Rotuma Council. These loans were for the purchase of two trucks, which Sautiak and Aisea used to transport copra for Raho. Aisea took over Raho's bookkeeping and managed the one Raho office in Oinafa. Under Visanti's supervision, Raho began paying back its debts from the copra receipts.

When we left Rotuma at the end of 1989, Eliesa's hopes were high that his project would succeed. He had formulated plans for requesting money from international agencies and had visions of several major projects, from fuel tanks to a service station to (ironically) tourist facilities. All that was needed was some \$F200,000 to set things in motion. He anticipated that his nephew at the Fiji Development Bank would be able to help him get the loan for the fuel tanks to start the service station.

By the time we returned to Rotuma six months later, the entire scheme had collapsed. Eliesa related to us his tale of woe. He said that all the paperwork had been done and the company was registered. The only remaining step was for Visanti Makrava and Victor Rigamoto, as members of the board of directors, to sign the papers so that a loan could be obtained from the Fiji Development Bank. Eliesa said that he went with Josefa Rigamoto to Visanti's office, but that Visanti was reluctant to sign, so they decided to leave the papers with him. Later in the day, according to

Eliesa, Victor called and said that he and Visanti had decided not to sign, that they didn't want to be members of the board. When Eliesa asked why, Victor offered no explanation other than they didn't want to be on the board. Furthermore, Victor told him that they would have to reregister the company with a different set of directors (excluding him and Visanti).

Eliesa decided in disgust to give up on the whole venture. He expressed irritation over the fact that Visanti had offered encouragement from the very beginning, and had told them (the Oinafa residents on the board) to take advantage of his tenure as manager of the National Bank of Fiji. At home in Oinafa he openly criticized Visanti and Victor for failing to aid the Rotuman people.

The story we heard from the other side is revealing, however. It illustrates the gap in understanding between island residents and Rotumans occupying responsible positions in Fiji. Apparently the reason for Visanti and Victor's reluctance to sign as board members was over the matter of collateral. Eliesa had persuaded Josefa Rigamoto to put up his life savings as collateral for the proposed \$F200,000 loan. Additionally, Visanti and Victor would have been liable, as board members, for unpaid debts. Given the history of past ventures on Rotuma, their reluctance to take on such a responsibility, and their desire to protect the "Old Man's" assets, were understandable. They reported that they had expressed their reservations to Eliesa earlier, not at the last minute. Visanti and Victor both related a whole series of previous occasions on which they had generously assisted Eliesa, and expressed disappointment at his ingratitude at this juncture.

Toa'niu was now chairman of the Rotuma Council. He was angry with his brother Arfoa for turning Raho over to Visanti, and since the district officer, Fred Susau, had assisted Visanti in various ways to revive Raho, he was angry with the district officer as well. This made it difficult for the council and the district officer to cooperate.

Toa'niu allegedly used his position as chairman of the Rotuma Council to get back at Visanti by instigating, over the district officer's objection, a \$F100 per month rent for the space the NBF bank was using at the government station. Only after Visanti threatened to close down the Rotuma branch did Toa'niu and the council back off.

The Schoolbus Incident

One of the Rotuma Council's main priorities following Toa'niu's assumption of the chair in 1990 was to obtain two new buses. At the time the only buses on the island were two dilapidated vehicles that were continually breaking down, forcing children to walk considerable distances to

school. Toa'niu convinced the council to let him go to Suva to negotiate a loan for the buses. When he arrived in Suva he telephoned Victor Rigamoto and asked his assistance. Victor obliged by contacting a colleague in Rural Development and arranged an appointment for Toa'niu, but explained that it would be inappropriate to accompany him. Victor also explained that since Toa'niu's request for a loan did not come from the council it could not be acted upon. Toa'niu was incensed that Victor would not take his word that the entire council was behind him. Victor responded that the loan request would have to go through official channels, and that a formal request from the council was required.

Toa'niu apparently took offense at this; instead of showing appreciation for Victor's efforts on his behalf, he later claimed to have been snubbed. Thereafter when the two met on social occasions Toa'niu turned a cold shoulder. Toa'niu also expressed irritation with Visanti and George Konusi, whom he accused of failing to show proper courtesies due the chairman of the Rotuma Council when he went to see them about the loan.

Toa'niu sent word back to Rotuma that he needed the rest of the council members' signatures immediately, so the district officer called an emergency meeting of the council and explained the problems of taking out a loan for the buses. Toa'niu was committed to buying one large bus (a sixty-six-passenger vehicle) in addition to a normal-sized vehicle. The district officer took the opportunity to outline an alternative, which was to buy outright a smaller bus using money from the Rotuman Development Fund. The larger bus proposed by Toa'niu would require a substantial loan and would end up costing nearly three times as much, including interest. The council members agreed with the district officer's proposal, but Toa'niu telephoned Kausiraf and had him reconvene the council on a day when the district officer was unable to attend. Kausiraf relayed a message from Toa'niu that he was confident he could obtain a grant to cover the loans. Based on his unwritten, secondhand assurance, the council again reversed itself.

The district officer, however, refused to sign the loan request and reported his opinion to his supervisor. He received a reply from Victor Rigamoto indicating that he had done his duty as district officer in advising the council not to go for the option they chose, but that he should not prevent them from pursuing it. The district officer then signed the request.

Things remained relatively quiet following Toa'niu's return until an article appeared in the *Fiji Times* on June 29, 1990. The article read:

The Rotuman Council of Chiefs has submitted a petition to the Prime Minister asking for the removal of two senior government officers for what they described as interference.

The chiefs have also expressed concern over the manner in which the two government officers, the Chief Assistant Secretary to the Prime Minister, Victor Rigamoto, and the District Officer on Rotuma, Fred Susau, settled a dispute which saw Gagaj Manav being deposed as the paramount chief of Itu'muta.

Mr. Rigamoto and Mr. Susau were the government representatives in the talks to settle the dispute.

According to a source, the two advised the Itu'muta district to meet to try to settle the dispute themselves.

The district clans then decided, after a meeting, to ask the chief to step down.

The Rotuman chiefs say, however, in their petition that Mr. Rigamoto and Mr. Susau had taken "the matter into their own hands" by motivating the people of the district to depose Gagaj Manav who had already been formally installed as paramount chief of Itu'muta.

"Because of this undesired ruling, we are of the opinion that the government is violating our sacred vows, and as it has been done to Gagaj Manav now, perhaps the same could apply to us later, if the District Officer Rotuma and Mr. Rigamoto so wish," the petition said.

As a result of a meeting of the seven chiefs on Rotuma, a number of resolutions were adopted.

Among other things, the chiefs expressed their sadness and concern over the removal of Gagaj Manav from his chiefly status.

The chiefs resolved that both Mr. Susau and Mr. Rigamoto should be removed from their posts.

The meeting also passed a resolution that the Rotuma Council be given the right to nominate the person to represent Rotuman interests in either the Prime Minister's office or in the office of the Minister for Fijian Affairs.

The chiefs also resolved that the Rotuma Council of Chiefs be granted more autonomy on Rotuman affairs.

The chiefs said that they were "shocked" at the lack of help and courtesy received from the Chief General Manager of the National Bank of Fiji, Mr. Visanti Makrava, and a Fiji Development Bank officer, George Konusi.

This came about when the chairman of the council, Gagaj Toa'niu, was unsuccessful in making an appointment with Mr. Makrava and received similar treatment from Mr. Konusi.

"We are very much disturbed and disappointed with the discourteous treatment Gagaj Toa'niu received from the men while in Suva."

The council was negotiating a possible loan to buy two school buses for Rotuma.

The petition was signed by five chief of the Oinafa, Itu'ti'u, Malhaha, Juju, and Iru'muta districts.

The assistant chief of Noa'tau also signed.

Publication of the petition caused a considerable stir on Rotuma. Most people from outside Oinafa saw it as an internal squabble; the real issue, they said, had to do with the running of Raho. The district officer agreed. He showed us a copy of the original petition with the signature page,

which was appended. The petition was written on Rotuma Council stationery but it proclaimed three resolutions of a (nonexistent) body referred to as the Council of Rotuma's Seven Chiefs. Some of the signatories denied knowing what they were signing, and claimed to have been duped. They said Toa'niu told the chiefs to sign a signature page that was needed to get a loan for the buses, but that they did not see the petition to which it was later attached. The chiefs of Malhaha and Itu'muta subsequently sent a letter to the prime minister disclaiming their involvement in the petition (*Fiji Times* [July 18, 1990]).

The Coup

In Oinafa, publication of the petition's contents generated a good deal of resentment. Sautiak and Aisea Atalifo, who had effectively taken over the management of Raho on Visanti's behalf, called a meeting of the chiefly *mosega* on July 4, 1990. They asked for an explanation from Kausiriaf, and demanded a formal apology. After all, they argued, the people he was attacking were from his district and were close kinsmen. *Mosega* members openly expressed their discontent, "saying that their opinions should have been sought on the matter of the petition because they were the ones who shouldered the burdens for the district's activities" (*Fiji Times* [July 18, 1990]). Kausiriaf told the assembled kin group that it was none of their business and walked out of the meeting. In his absence, a lively discussion took place among the sixteen people present. Eliesa argued that this was a tempest in a teapot and that people should calm down and forget about it. Aisea and Sautiak persisted, however, and called for a vote to oust Kausiriaf from office and install a new chief. Nine people voted for the motion, seven voted against it.

The district officer and Victor Rigamoto, both of whom are members of the *mosega*, were not present and decided not to interfere as long as Rotuman custom was followed. They took the stance that the position of district chief belongs to the *mosega*, which has the right to bestow it and to take it away. The district officer did, however, criticize Kausiriaf for signing the petition using his title since that implied he was acting on behalf of the *mosega*, which had given the title to him, and therefore he was wrong in not consulting them. He could have signed his personal name, Jione Varea, if he was just acting on his own behalf. The district officer also commented on the irony of Toa'niu's calling on the chiefs (as distinct from a meeting of the Rotuma Council) to send the petition, since Toa'niu himself was not a district chief and properly had no authority over them.

Those who argued in support of Kausiriaf claimed that once a chief is

installed he can only be removed from office if he commits a legal offense and is sent to jail; otherwise he is chief for life unless he voluntarily resigns. They also argued that only a small portion of the whole *mosega* was present when Kausirif was ousted, and that the total *mosega* membership (including those abroad) should have been consulted. This argument was countered by claims that only *mosega* members resident in Oinafa had a stake in the position of chief and that they alone should decide.²⁴

On July 14 Kausirif flew to Fiji to consult with his brothers, Atfoa and Sakio, and to hire a lawyer to contest his ouster.²⁵ Sakio was Permanent Secretary for Health in Fiji, but to this point had not been involved in business or politics on Rotuma. It should be pointed out that prior to this incident the Varea brothers were often openly antagonistic to one another. Indeed, Kausirif had reputedly led an earlier attempt to depose Toa'niu as chairman of the Rotuma Council; and as reported above, Atfoa had turned over the management of Raho to Visanti on condition that neither Toa'niu nor Kausirif be involved in its management. At the command of their father, Sakmen, however, the Vareas closed ranks and were united in their opposition to the dissident faction. They hired a lawyer to plead their case with the high court.

The man the *mosega* chose to replace Kausirif as chief was Jione Fesaitu, Sautiak's brother (see figure). He had spent most of his adult life in Fiji, where he was an agricultural officer. He had recently retired to a farm of his own, but Sautiak and Visanti persuaded him to take a title and assume the position of district chief in Oinafa.

Jione came to Rotuma by plane on the same day Kausirif left and was installed as chief four days later, on July 18. The ceremony was attended by the majority of subchiefs from Oinafa district, and Jione was officially given the name Poar, a title held by his grandfather, who had been district chief of Oinafa and an elder brother of Tokaniua (see figure). The chief of Malhaha district officially installed Poar and the ceremony was blessed by a local Methodist catechist.

On the following day, at a meeting of the Rotuma Council called by Toa'niu, Eliesa (whom Kausirif had appointed to fill in for him in his absence) described the situation in Oinafa as extremely serious, and urged the council not to recognize Poar as chief of Oinafa. He argued that there had been outside interference (presumably from Victor Rigamoto and Visanti Makrava) and that since the entire *mosega* was not present there was no legitimacy to Poar's title. The charges were answered by his brother Aisea, Oinafa's elected representative to the council and, along with Sautiak, one of the main perpetrators of the coup. Aisea denied outside intervention or influence, and reaffirmed that Kausirif was ousted because he was disrespectful to the *mosega*. If he had apologized instead of walking out of the meeting, the *mosega* would not have taken action against him.

Other members of the council (e.g., Gagaj Maraf, the district chief of Noa'tau) regarded the problem as an internal squabble within Oinafa and urged that the council not get involved in neighborhood brawls. No action was taken. Toa'niu himself, though castigating the dissidents, admitted that the animosities were caused by disputes involving the Raho Co-op.

These events split Oinafa village, and the entire district, into two hostile factions. Only a few families supported Kausiraf, but they were militant in their actions. Led by Eliesa and Kausiraf's son-in-law, Tarterani (Tokaniua's grandson; see figure), they went around the island mobilizing support. They warned that the coup leaders would suffer grave consequences, that they would be jailed. On the other side, people began openly to amplify gossip referring to Kausiraf's corruption and meanness, listing instance after instance of his diversion of funds for his own use, his refusal to pay legitimate debts, his greed, and so forth. Typical was the story one woman told about the time her sister, one of the poorest people in Oinafa—a widow with no income, living with her daughter and son-in-law—had set her net in the bay near Kausiraf's house to catch fish. When she went in the morning to check the net, there were no fish. But on the way back she ran into a neighbor, who told her that he had seen Kausiraf go out in the middle of the night and take fish from her net. Information that had been suppressed in the interest of community harmony suddenly was brought to light in the form of malicious gossip.

The large majority of people in Oinafa supported Poar, although some sat on the fence, awaiting an outcome of the dispute. An indication of the relative levels of support for the two men is reflected in a *Fiji Times* article that appeared on September 26, 1990.

Two hundred and twenty people of Oinafa District in Rotuma have signed a petition objecting against Gagaj Kausiraf being their district chief.

The district consists of three villages, Paptea, Lopta, and Oinafa, with more than 60 families residing in Oinafa District.

Of the 295 people living in the district, 63 [21 percent] are supporting Gagaj Kausiraf, 220 [75 percent] the newly installed Gagaj Poar, and 12 [4 percent] are neutral.

The petition states: "We, the undersigned who live in Oinafa District, unanimously and whole-heartedly wish to voice our objection against Kausiraf.

"We don't want Kausiraf to be our district chief anymore.

"Therefore, we and our families have signed below to witness that we'll never again serve under Kausiraf but we'll serve and live under our new leader, Gagaj Poar," says the petition.

The use of the news media to fight this case has put a new twist on political disputing in Rotuma. It is apparent that the chiefs who signed the original petition did not expect it to be made public. That it was publicized in the newspaper they saw as a deliberate leak meant to embarrass them. A sub-

sequent story in the *Fiji Times* published on the day of Poar's installation, under the headline "Rotuma Clan Ousts Chief Over Petition," also was presumed by Kausiriat and his supporters to be politically motivated. On July 24, 1990, six days after the article on his being ousted, Kausiriat took out a paid advertisement in the *Fiji Times*.

Gagaj Kausiriat Is Still the District Chief of Oinafa District

The report in your paper of 18/7/90 that "Rotuma clan ousts chief over petition" is sheer nonsense! The chiefly ceremony purported to have been carried out on Wednesday, 18/7/90 to install a new Chief was a complete farce.

The members of the Chiefly clan and the people of the district refused to attend the ceremony. My "MATANIVANUA" refused the invitation simply because I am still the District Chief of Oinafa. The TALATALA also refused to conduct the church service. The affair was confined mainly to family members of the two brothers [Sautiak and Emorama] (FESAITU) and Aisea Atalifo who confessed himself to another member of the chiefly clan that morning that he had realized that what was being prepared to be done was wrong and that, it was going to be an absolute farce. The ceremony could not be performed according to Rotuman chiefly custom.

The petition to the Prime Minister was made by the chiefs of Rotuma after the Chairman of the Council of Rotuma reported to them that there appeared that there was some kind of collusion by certain Rotumans in official positions to refuse to see him to discuss as to how best he could obtain financial assistance to buy two new buses to replace the two old buses on the island.

The arrogance and discourtesy shown by these Rotumans was most insulting to him as Chairman and also a high Chief of Rotuma, hence the petition. The Chairman had to turn to Mr. Paul Manuelli who willingly gave the assistance he was seeking on behalf of the chiefs and the people on the island. From the information, I have so far gathered, I now believe to the best of my knowledge that the petition was leaked to the Press from the office of the Prime Minister.

The installation and/or dismissal of a District Chief is a very serious matter and, this is governed in Section 18 of the Rotuma Act, Cap. 122. District chiefs shall continue to the elected [sic] in accordance with Rotuman custom as heretofore. The Minister (the Prime Minister himself has replaced the Governor after independence in 1970) may in his discretion by notice in the Gazette remove from office any District Chief.

Who actually wrote this somewhat confusing ad was a matter of speculation on Rotuma. Since Kausiriat speaks only a smattering of English it was assumed that one of his brothers drafted the document, but in any case it was seen as extremely provocative. Whereas traditional Rotuman dispute-resolution strategies involve denial of hurtful things said, the fact that Kausiriat's accusations appeared in black and white was said to be permanent and unforgivable (it remains to be seen whether this will in fact be the case).

After a period of legal maneuvering the case was finally heard by the Fiji High Court on August 20, 1990. Justice Byrne ruled in Kausiriat's favor. He interpreted the phrasing in the Rotuma Act of 1927 that dealt with the removal of chiefs as meaning there were no customary means of deposing an office holder.²⁶ Kausiriat returned to Rotuma in triumph, but his victory was hollow since the majority of people in his district steadfastly refused to acknowledge him as their chief.

The Aftermath

Emboldened by their legal success, Kausiriat and Toa'niu decided to take up the case of Manav again, threatening to bring it to the High Court as well. Toa'niu invited Manav to attend a meeting of the Rotuma Council in September 1990, saying he was still chief, rather than Osias, his replacement. This created quite a stir. The people in Itu'muta questioned Toa'niu's authority over their district and agitated to have Toa'niu replaced as chairman. When the council reconvened the next month, Osias demanded that Manav leave the meeting, and proposed a vote of no confidence in Toa'niu. Kausiriat and Toa'niu apologized and Osias accepted their apology. Sensing a defeat, Toa'niu begged to be allowed to stay on as chairman until the next election, at the end of the year (when he was replaced by Maraf, the chief of Noa'tau).

Since the end of 1990, relationships in Oinafa have settled into a pattern of semi-stable avoidance between supporters of Kausiriat and those of Poar. The latter, for his part, did nothing to protest Kausiriat's right to sit on the Rotuma Council or to receive chiefly honors at ceremonies. He chose instead the role of a populist leader and has earned the trust of his followers,²⁷ who voluntarily built him an elegant Rotuman-style house and donated labor to prepare his yam plantation. The donation of labor is a tribute Rotumans paid to chiefs in an earlier era, but Kausiriat had been denied the privilege because of the distrust he generated. By way of contrast, in 1989 Kausiriat had to bring in a group of men from Itu'muta to help him with a yam garden. He paid them with kava.

Even within the village of Oinafa, where daily avoidance requires strenuous effort, the two factions conduct their affairs separately. Their refusal to cooperate with one another has cost them dearly in several ways, including financially. For example, the *Fairstar* was scheduled to visit Rotuma in March 1991 (arranged by Visanti) and again in June of that year (arranged by Arfoa). The first time Kausiriat and his supporters wrote to the shipping company and complained, resulting in the cancellation of the visit; the second time Poar's group did the same. Poar said he

suggested that the two groups get together and share the landing fees, but Kausiriaf refused. As a result the shipping company declared a moratorium on visits to Rotuma. The loss to the island's economy has been estimated at \$F20,000 per visit.

So What's a Chief?!

The above narrative illustrates many of the dilemmas that confront modern Rotuman chieftainship. To begin with, it is clear that issues of chiefly authority cannot be disentangled from contemporary commerce. The key issue underlying the Oinafa dispute has deep roots in the struggle to control the Raho Cooperative. It has been exacerbated by problems related to the distribution of benefits from tourism, and suspicion of Kausiriaf's management of public funds.

Modern chiefs are jealous of their right to control district resources (and collectively, the island's resources), but they lack the skills to manage them efficiently. Under pressure to maintain their dignity through displays of generosity and occupation of impressive homes,²⁸ they are motivated to use a portion of funds under their control for personal use. This results in a loss of confidence and undermines the moral basis of their authority.²⁹

The narrative also highlights problems of relationship between chiefs and educated Rotumans in Fiji who are in a position to assist Rotuma's development. People on the island, and particularly the chiefs, are determined to retain control of their destiny. The chiefs know they need the assistance of their educated kin, but expect unquestioned acquiescence to their wishes and formal courtesies in contexts where they are inappropriate. They are resentful when Rotuman businessmen and government officials do not quickly respond to their wants.

Complicating relations between chiefs and successful Rotumans in Fiji is that few of the latter have taken titles. From the chiefs' perspective, this suggests their own superior status, and generates an expectation of deference, if not obeisance. From the standpoint of Rotumans enmeshed in modern commercial establishments and government bureaucracies, Rotuman titles and chiefly positions are irrelevant off the island. In some cases they look upon the political infighting on Rotuma with bemusement. This was brought home to us during a conversation with Josefa Rigamoto following the Oinafa dispute. Arguably the most respected Rotuman alive, Josefa asked why his nephew Tarterani had so ferociously turned against his own relatives in his zealous support of Kausiriaf. We related a rumor that had been circulating, that Kausiriaf had promised Tarterani he would retire soon and appoint him as acting chief. This was the way Kausiriaf had become chief and presumably would keep the po-

sition in the immediate family (Tarterani is married to Kausiraf's daughter, who is considered exceptionally ambitious). Upon hearing this explanation the old man threw up his hands, and with an expression bordering on disbelief exclaimed, "So what's a chief?!"

Whereas chiefs in many Pacific societies form a rallying point around which conservative cultural sentiment is mobilized in opposition to outside influences (a point made by Firth in 1969 and by numerous scholars since), the situation on Rotuma is much more ambiguous. On the one hand, chiefs represent a valued continuity with the past. The titles they assume were held by ancestors whose legacies encode the very essence of Rotuman history. Quite apart from the men who occupy them, titles represent the heart and soul of Rotuman culture. When Rotumans talk about past glories, about the supernaturally charged powers of their legendary ancestors, they almost invariably refer to former chiefs. By representing these titled ancestors in name, modern chiefs encode the dignity of tradition in the roles they play, whether or not their actions conform to expectations. Without chiefs, ceremonies of all kinds—births, marriages, welcomes, village and district fetes—would lose their significance, for it is the presence of chiefs that lends dignity and historical depth to such occasions. Virtually all formal ritual at ceremonies involves chiefs; without them nearly everything that is distinctly Rotuman would disappear.

For some Rotumans, chieftainship is central to their sense of selfhood. They consider themselves special because of their chiefly affiliations, either as descendants of prior chiefs, as close kinsmen of contemporary title holders, or as title holders themselves. For these individuals, chieftainship is hardly trivial. They see titles as embodying the Rotuman notion of ideal personhood, and feel themselves elevated as a result.

On the other hand, the chiefs are seen by many individuals as instruments of Fijian hegemony over Rotuma, as accepting Fijian dominance for what it gains them personally. The dissident Rotumans—those who favor independence and emphasize Rotuma's cultural uniqueness—focus their criticism on the chiefs. Central to most criticisms is the chiefs' alleged failure to consult the people they represent. But the issue of representation itself has become increasingly ambiguous as a result of the dispersion of the Rotuman community. In some respects—especially as symbolic embodiments of Rotuman tradition—chiefs represent all Rotumans, regardless of where they live. In other respects—as policymakers for the island of Rotuma—they represent all the people who live there. In still other ways, they represent the more limited interests of the people in their home district. And in an even more restricted sense, they represent their own kin group's interests within a district. It is therefore no longer quite so clear who should consult with whom, when.³⁰

Furthermore, although they symbolically represent tradition, today's

chiefs are not recognized as particularly learned in Rotuman custom, and despite occasional expressions of nostalgia for "the good old days" under colonial domination or before, the majority of Rotumans are more concerned with improving their standard of living and gaining increased autonomy over their lives than with glorifying the past. Many progressive Rotumans see the current chiefs, in their political and economic roles, as impediments to these goals.

Despite their criticisms of particular title holders, the *idea* of chieftainship is something few Rotumans on the island are prepared to abandon. While they freely complain about chiefs, singly and collectively, most people remain committed to the institution as a whole. A common suggestion is that chiefs be removed from positions of public administration, that the Council of Rotuma be reconstituted to exclude chiefs. That way, it is argued, the chiefs could concentrate on Rotuman custom and would be freed from involvement in secular politics and economic management. Such matters should be in the hands of Rotumans who have been educated and trained to deal with them, the argument goes. When chiefs take on such responsibilities, especially if they are inept, their moral authority is undermined, subverting the dignity of Rotuman custom.

Thus, while their symbolic ties to the past remain firmly embedded in Rotuman culture, the practical aspects of chiefly roles have become increasingly complicated and problematic. Whereas during the colonial era, chiefs were intermediaries between a resident commissioner or district officer and the people in their districts, today they are confronted with the much more difficult task of maneuvering between the central government in Suva and the people of Rotuma as a collectivity. Whether they like it or not, they are held responsible for fulfilling the material as well as the political aspirations of the Rotuman people—a task that requires skills beyond their current reach.

Understanding the dynamics of modern chieftainship on Rotuma, as elsewhere, requires an appreciation of the multilevel embeddedness of chiefly roles. As the inheritors of traditional titles, Rotuman chiefs are engaged in intra- and interfamilial politics with local histories of intrigue and contestation, sometimes going back for generations. They are also engaged in interdistrict competition with one another for prestige and dominance. Many aspects of the Oinafa case illustrate these complexities. As policymakers and administrators of development funds, along with elected representatives and the district officer, Rotuman chiefs are involved in the politics of business as well as the business of politics. In these roles they must engage institutions, such as banks and government bureaucracies at a national level, with or without the support of their more educated, Fiji-based, kin. Some, like Kausiriaf, have begun to use national-

level institutions, like the press and the courts, to support their claims to legitimacy at home. Others have attempted to use their chiefly status to exploit opportunities in Fiji and abroad.

As the Rotuman case illustrates, the roles of traditional chiefs and modern administrators are often thoroughly interlaced, with the pressures and politics in the local arena influencing actions and interpretations of actions in the national arena, and vice versa. Only by coming to grips with the historically based interplay between these levels of social action will we come to appreciate the true significance of modern chiefs in the Pacific Islands.