

## ROTUMAN CULTURE AS REFLECTED IN ITS SAYINGS

Alan Howard  
Jan Rensel

There may be no better way to gain insight into a culture than to explore its sayings. Whether in the form of adages, aphorisms, axioms, catch-phrases, idioms, maxims, morals, rules, truisms, precepts, or proverbs, sayings pithily encode that which is most central to a people's worldview. True to form, the sayings in this volume provide a window into the heart of Rotuman culture. To begin with, the sayings make liberal metaphorical and metonymic use of places, geographical features, and historical events that are distinctively Rotuman. Likewise, they construct meaning out of the animals, plants, foods, and artefacts that are central to the Rotuman way of life, both as it was lived in the past and as it has changed. The picture one comes away with is not a neatly packaged, consistent one, but one filled with ambiguities and contradictions. But culture is like that. Rather than a uniform set of logically consistent beliefs shared by all participating members, culture is more aptly thought of as a pool of knowledge and beliefs from which participants draw. Within each pool are propositions—many of them contradictory—to explain and to justify all kinds of attitudes and behaviours. In American culture, for example, we are told in some contexts that "honesty is the best policy," and in others that "business is business," justifying a certain degree of dishonesty.

Sayings also reflect cultural process in their usage. Unlike cultural models that focus on distinctive events or practices that occur only occasionally, sayings are used on a daily basis, in the most

mundane circumstances. They help shape people's experience by giving it memorable expression, as well as reflecting a historically derived, widely shared point of view. In practice, therefore, sayings at once encapsulate the past, give meaning to the present, and mold the future.

In this essay we review the nature of Rotuman sayings, including the kinds of cultural materials out of which they are constructed; the values, attitudes, and beliefs they reflect; and the ways they help to create and reinforce the Rotuman cultural experience.

### The Raw Material of Metaphor and Metonymy<sup>1</sup>

Browsing through these sayings one is struck by the ways in which they make use of the physical environment of the island (including geographical features, plants and animals, cultural artefacts) to create meaning. They also make extensive use of such universals as human anatomy, the sun, rain, fire and the colour red.

On such a small island, it is not surprising that, of the geographical features, the sea figures most prominently. In addition to metaphoric references to the sea itself (139, 146, 264), one finds mention of beaches (384), blowholes (412), the reef (266), the tide (176, 275), and waves (237, 294). The

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<sup>1</sup> Metaphors are figures of speech in which the characteristics of one thing are attributed to another. For example, when we refer to a person as a "lion" we are attributing to the person the qualities we associate with lions, such as bravery or ferociousness. Metonyms are figures of speech in which a part stands for the whole. Examples are using "the crown" to refer to the institution of kingship, or on Rotuma, using 'umefe 'chiefly food table' to stand for chieftainship.

village of Losa (7, 8, 178, 266) plays a special metaphorical role because it is situated on the extreme western end of the island; it therefore stands for the setting sun, which has strong associations in Rotuman myth and cultural logic with political organization and the afterworld (see Howard 1985 for details).

Plants, particularly cultivated plants that are basic sources of food, such as taro (193, 251, 365), yams (9, 54, 466), 'apea 'giant taro' [*Alocasia macrorrhiza*] (142, 406, 420), and bananas (26, 211, 388, 471), comprise basic referents, as do breadfruit (469) and coconut trees (11, 13, 97, 212, 213, 214, 217, 233, 241, 370, 399). Coconut trees provide so many products—from food to thatch to cups—they naturally serve as a key symbol. Trees as a generic category (68, 296, 342, 468), and their products—firewood (344), husking sticks (385), logs (288, 467), poles (195, 417), posts (300), and wooden drums (343)—also have an important place in the sayings. Kava (119), pandanus (59), and turmeric (446), all plants of traditional cultural significance, are represented, along with imported, but nonetheless cognitively salient, tobacco leaves (60, 63, 144).

The animal kingdom provides an even richer source of metaphors. Most prominent are domestic animals and sea creatures, both important sources of food, although birds and wildlife are also used to some extent. Chickens (196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 332, 356, 395), cows (229, 324, 398), and pigs (136, 232, 403) are the main sources of meat on the island (along with tinned corned beef—which is not evident as a metaphoric referent!). The other domestic animals—cats (239, 243, 244, 405), dogs (115, 116, 117, 118), and horses (12, 19, 57, 256, 389)—are not eaten but are gleaned for their metaphoric value. In addition, the distinctive

behaviour of monkeys (152, 314, 432)—brought to the island by returning sailors in bygone days—did not escape Rotumans. Birds in general figure prominently in the sayings (14, 161, 190, 390, 408, 409, 429, 454), with doves (378, 379, 424, 425, 456), golden plovers [*jull*] (105, 219, 318), owls (175, 238, 259), the banded rail [*ve'a*] (97, 111, 171), and swamphen [*kaläe*] (112, 113, 250, 253, 466) singled out for special attention. Among wild animals, rodents (35, 401) are the most popular for metaphoric usage, though snakes (349, 426) receive mention and crickets and lizards both figure in one saying (98). The only anomaly is the elephant (418), which is known mainly through visits to zoos abroad and from stories; its heavy feet supply a reference point to scold children for stamping theirs. (The fact that the English term for advanced filarial conditions is "elephantiasis" may also play a role.)

Sea creatures contend with domestic animals as favourite sources of metaphor. While fish (24, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 99, 121, 155, 167, 186, 194, 282, 309, 392, 402, 458, 461) account for the majority of referents, crabs (40, 41, 100, 181, 289), octopus (65, 66, 67, 394), and shellfish (48, 177) are given multiple representation, while eels (322), lobsters (371), and turtles (391) each occur at least once.

Of the artefacts that play a role in the sayings, only canoes (311, 415), native baskets woven from coconut leaves (101, 339, 338, 335, 336), bottles (103, 104, 124), machines (315, 407), rope or string (49, 210, 352, 448), and steamships (143, 308, 413) are mentioned more than once. What is noticeable about the use of artefacts is that most of those selected are of foreign origin. Aside from bottles, machines, and steamships, imported objects mentioned in the sayings include: automobile headlights (404), axes (380), bombs (145), diapers

(460), frying pans (400), gramophones (187), guns (30), keys (126), pot handles (123), cigarettes (60, 63), and tobacco pipes (183, 242). Fine white mats [apei] (345), fans (271), food hooks (304), taro scrapers (25), and pillows (138) are the only indigenously manufactured items that play a part. However, houses (206, 274, 280, 300), whether manufactured of native or imported materials, serve as an important symbolic resource, with kitchens [kohea] (10, 129) singled out for mention. The traditional Rotuman earth oven [koua] (47, 137, 222, 246) is also a rich metaphorical fountainhead.

Among foods, cream (333), milk (279), and porridge (321) are imported items noted, while eggs (330) and pudding [fekei] (96) are indigenous to the culture.

As in all known cultures, Rotumans make ample use of the human body for constructing metaphors. Multiple references to buttocks (55, 122, 207, 267, 299), eyes (53, 202, 441, 444, 449), the heart (75, 76, 77, 78, 382, 437), mouths (185, 221, 225, 376), and particularly teeth (53, 61, 74, 79, 329, 337, 346, 347, 447) and stomachs (15, 160, 355, 452) attest to their importance in Rotuman cognition, while ears (369, 462), noses (234, 458), and wombs (297, 453) are also mentioned more than once. The back (438), bones (278), chest (173), feet (459), hands (273), intestines (450), lips (223), skin (470), toenails (465), and throat (127, 191, 295) receive recognition as well. Rotuman associations with faeces (4, 358, 364) and sweat (43, 133, 451) will be recognized by people around the globe.

Finally, the widely used if not universal symbols of fire (50, 93, 247, 248, 344, 467), smoke (83, 110, 248), rain (64, 70, 301, 302, 303, 307, 370, 401), and the colour red (21, 59, 143, 150, 360, 363, 371, 440, 445) play a significant part in the repertoire of Rotuman symbols.

From this array of symbolic riches, Rotumans are able to make pithy statements about all kinds of actions, events, circumstances, things, and people. We next explore the ways in which the sayings encode aspects of Rotuman history.

### History Rotuman Style

In contrast to western historical discourse, which is oriented towards providing readers or listeners with information they are presumed not to know, Rotumans characteristically embed historical allusions in cryptic forms within songs, chants and sayings. It is assumed that listeners already know about the events and persons referenced; only rarely is the historical knowledge embedded in these cultural forms made explicit. The historical allusions aim at directing a listener's attention to the relevance of prior events to a contemporary context.

Also in contrast to usual notions of western history, the people referred to in the sayings are generally not heroes, though in certain ways they may be extraordinary, and the events involved tend toward the mundane. The point is that certain individuals are remembered because their actions were prototypical in some sense, so they serve as suitable symbols for making social commentary.

One form of historical allusion derives from popular legends. The heroic figures of Alili (1), who initiated a rebellion against Tongan oppressors, and Kirkirsasa (21), who subdued a cannibalistic giant through humorous dancing, are prime examples, and major exceptions to the rule that heroes are not central in the sayings (though neither stands in the sayings for heroes as such). Other legendary figures referred to in the sayings are: Tinrau (9, 292), the legendary suitor prince of

Rotuman (and other Polynesian) legends, who is drawn on for commentary about marital fortunes; Raumairo (252), for a comment on the gender composition of groups; Nohu (37), regarding the necessity of controlling anger; Mai (156) and Mafi (178), whose stories prompt reflection on the consequences of wrongdoings. The pitfalls of land squabbles between relatives is the theme of the legend of the cat at Halafa (244), while the story of a pet shellfish who turned cannibalistic (48) provides a reference point for ingratitude. When there is friction between people who should work together, others may invoke the tale of two giants whose living bodies were used as beam and post in a house, resulting in a creaking joint (274). Finally, the legend of Aeatos (114) offers a basis for protesting about one's workload, while reference to a legendary chief's gift of land—the district of Itu'muta (134)—allows one to complain circuitously about the size of a gift one has been given.

The Christian Bible has also provided bounty for Rotuman sayings. The notion that one will ultimately pay for one's wrongdoings is central to Rotuman culture, and biblical allusions (283, 346) add to the array of sources Rotumans use to comment on this theme. The metaphoric use of the colour red (scarlet) (360, 440) to suggest sin and a flawed character has likewise been adopted. The notions that hard work is a means of redemption (133), and that one should examine oneself before criticizing others (288), also implicate biblical passages. Less moralistically, biblical references facilitate comments about poor communication (107) and delays in finishing projects (367).

Of the various historical personages named in the sayings, 19 are Rotuman and 11 are foreigners. Rotumans tend to be singled out because they exemplify certain shortcomings: Mapurou (123) is

memorialized because he was too inquisitive, Kuru (154) for smelling bad, Tolo (158) for feigning sickness, Manasa (186) because he did not provide adequately for his family, Rupea (258) because her reporting of events could not be trusted, 'Alena (348) for eating food she was supposed to feed her grandchild, Titapue (383) for his minimal knowledge of English, Fereti (460) for being too ambitious for his age, Tumpule for animal abuse (286) and drinking himself to death (331, 452), Kelepi because he was moody (153) and kicked out by women (205), Hi'i (69) for a promise to reform that no one believed, and Rifana (204) for listening to conversations while pretending to sleep. Somewhat more neutrally, Muato'a (206), the famed warrior, is recalled for his statement that although he had fought courageously in many battles, the only place he felt fear—of his wife's wrath—was in his sleeping quarters. Tu'a (108) and Ma'ikele (215) are prototypical victims, the former of unauthorized borrowings, the latter of ingratitude. Puragou (353), the *hān mane'āk sū* 'ceremonial female clown' who encouraged people to act silly if they wished, serves as justification for clowning at weddings. However, Mou (365), a chief from Peppei who grew taro of exceptional size, is unequivocally a model to be followed, and Remanto (254) is remembered for urging people to share their knowledge for the good of all.

Foreigners likewise serve mainly as negative examples: Hopo, the Australian Aborigine who shirked work (137) and exemplified small stature (151); Tomē (159), a Melanesian man who did not like to bathe; 'Ere (385), a Solomon Islander who excused his ineptness by blaming his tools; Bob and Tom (236), two Australian Aborigines, who continually criticized one another for characteristics they shared. As a class, unspecified renegade

sailors (16) are used to comment on deviations from Rotuman custom. Also singled out are Sormonē (276), a Solomon Islander whose foot was afflicted with elephantiasis; Ralifo (249), a Samoan whose pathetic cooking suggested the need for a wife; Fasu (150), who favoured red *sulu* 'wraparounds'; and an unidentified foreigner known as 'red trousers' (143) who is immortalized for missing the boat. Two white men, Frank (36) and Olsen (228), receive mention, Frank as an object of exploitation, and Olsen, a Norwegian married to a Rotuman woman, for his defence of his son's innocence.

More neutrally, foreigners are referred to by distinctive traits or behaviours: Fijians for their frizzy hair (166), New Zealand Maori for their facial tattoos (174), and Fiji Indians for washing their buttocks with water after defecating (28).

### Values

Like people everywhere, Rotumans employ sayings in the service of moral and ethical judgments, as well as to encode history. As such, the sayings provide powerful insights into Rotuman values. Among the most salient are: the importance of work and striving for success; the centrality of food production and consumption in social relations; the social values of community, generosity, modesty and honesty; the necessity for emotional control, particularly of anger; standards for appearance and personal hygiene; and adherence to Rotuman notions of custom and decorum.

### Work

Rotumans have earned respect as hard workers everywhere they go, and along with it a reputation for diligence and responsibility. They were valued as sailors by European sea captains precisely for

these traits.<sup>2</sup> On Rotuma, work mainly revolves around the production and preparation of food and pandanus mats. Men's work primarily involves preparing and tending gardens of taro, yams, bananas, and other crops; in addition, they cut and dry coconut meat for exportation as copra. Women's work traditionally centred on the making of mats and keeping the home and its surroundings well-groomed. Both men and women fish, tend domestic animals, prepare food and cook. Equal in importance to work within the domestic sphere is communal effort—work on behalf of the church and community. This generally involves efforts similar to those within the household, because feasting is a central part of most communal activities. Until recently at least, an individual's worth was judged primarily on the basis of his or her reputation as a worker and producer. A prestige economy based on the production and distribution of surplus food and produce of extraordinary size adds to the reputation of productive workers. Periodic competitions are held in which prizes are given for the largest, heaviest, and most impressive foodstuffs. Nowadays having a well-paying job provides an alternative path to social merit within the Rotuman community, but hard work is still valued and is central to an individual's reputation.

Perhaps the sayings that best sum up Rotuman attitudes are the biblically derived "*Kop la puma-han*" 'You have to sweat' (133), and "*Taṛiṛa ma mah 'on'ono*" 'One receives one's just deserts' (283)

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in 1832 John Eagleston, captain of the *Emerald*, wrote that Rotumans "make good ship men," and "for a trading vessel are preferable to any of the other natives I am acquainted with, they being more true & faithful & more to be depended on" (Eagleston 1832).

Both convey the message that success is a result of the work one puts into a project, and that only hard workers deserve success (see also 229). Correspondingly, money obtained without working for it is called "*monē maṭiti*" 'cold money' (203), to distinguish it from money earned through sweat (or received as a gift from a loved one).

Other sayings urge individuals to work hard to achieve their goals (10, 11, 68, 337, 367, 448, 465), and praise for hard work occurs in several forms (19, 122, 195, 293, 300, 315, 319, 408, 422, 437), as do criticisms for laziness, giving up easily, wasting time, or shirking work responsibilities (4, 14, 17, 71, 77, 106, 114, 158, 200, 211, 218, 421, 425, 435). Thus a particularly hard-working man is known as a "hardwood post" (300) indicating his reliability, or as having a "hairy heart" (437), suggesting that there is more to him than just a hairy chest. In contrast a shirker may be likened to a cock who fights intermittently (200), implying unreliability. Skill in producing food is acknowledged in such phrases as "*le' maf i'e*," 'someone with an eye for fish', (167) and "*le' hag tē iri*," 'a person who feeds something [his livestock] that multiplies' (165). The relative importance of manual work in Rotuman society is encoded in a saying that urges would-be scholars to 'read books but pull weeds' (58).

The value of working together to achieve success is implicit in the saying, "*Moā ta pulou ka 'uaf ta pulou*," 'the rooster is fat and so is the hen' (198). This is said not only of husbands and wives who prosper as a result of their joint efforts, but also in reference to events, the success of which is the product of contributions by guests as well as by hosts. Work is implicitly prescribed as an alternative to anger in one saying (37), suggesting that when people work hard, and work together, social

harmony will prevail, while the phrase "*Otom pumahana jī*" 'Our sweat runs down' (451) reminds the beneficiaries of communal work of their corresponding responsibilities.

### Food

Although work has become a value in its own right, central to most Rotumans' sense of self-worth, its importance derives historically from its role in producing and processing food. It would be difficult to exaggerate the concerns for food and eating in traditional Rotuman culture. The pre-Christian religion, reflected in Rotuman mythology, aimed at enhancing fertility: of the land, of edible sea creatures and land animals, and of human beings (see Howard 1985). Food abundance was virtually synonymous with prosperity and well-being. As the sayings in this volume suggest, food remains a central symbol in Rotuman culture.

The saying "*A'hāe se 'ou koheā ta*" 'Think of your kitchen' (10) perhaps sums it up best. As Mrs Inia interprets it, the saying suggests that 'no matter what else you are doing, make sure you provide food for your kitchen'. The saying equates success in providing food with one's worth as a human being. A number of sayings relate to giving food as gifts, sometimes implicating their size or extent (1, 42, 89, 251). That sharing of food symbolizes kinship in Rotuman society is neatly encoded in the simple expression '*omoe* 'dinner' (436), which is used to signify a gift of food to a visiting kinsman. Abundance of food at a feast is praised as 'a male thing' (285). Plenitude can also be praised by saying that its weight is so great it presses one's buttocks to the ground (55), or that it is so plentiful one is defeated in an attempt to eat it all (46). The sayings also dramatize the importance of food in negative ways. For example, three sayings (45,

137, 257) comment on the failure of individuals to provide adequately, and two sayings (272, 325) highlight the practice of refusing to share food as a way of dealing with people who behave inappropriately or with whom one is annoyed.

By Rotuman custom, a complete meal consists of *'i'ini* 'meat or fish' and *tēla'ā* 'root-crops'. Meals from which one or the other is missing, or present only in meagre quantities, provide a powerful set of symbols for social commentary. Thus a person who eats meat with few or no vegetables is seen as the prototype of selfishness (320), and depending on circumstances, a person who serves a meal with only a little *'i'ini* can be sharply criticized (323) or praised for sharing scarce resources (366).

A number of sayings allude to the longing for food, or for special foods (9, 116, 127, 184, 343). Thus a pregnant woman who hungers for a favourite snack, or a person who yearns for a meal with lots of meat, is said to have a 'craving throat' (127), and the stomach of a woman who appears to crave the food she is serving to others is likened to a 'beating drum' (343). Gluttony is also the target of several sayings. People are warned 'not to let their stomachs get too big' (355, 357), and that if they do eat too much they may end up 'smelling of excrement' (358).

### Generosity

Generosity is a key Rotuman virtue. To give generously is 'the way of angels' (317), and 'true love' (52) is inextricably tied to generosity. Mrs Inia provides the examples of God's giving his only son for humanity, or someone's giving to another a treasure of great value, such as a fine mat or a large sum of money. Indeed, the Rotuman word *hanisi*, which may be translated as 'love', refers not so much to an emotion as to kindness in action. It

implies the willingness to give as a tangible sign of one's commitment to a relationship. The ethics of generosity on Rotuma require those who have more to give to those who have less (273), but even those with little to give are reminded that 'no matter how small the fish, one can still suck the flesh off' (89)—that even a small gift has significance. Two of the sayings involve appeals to generosity, one by asking potential donors to a cause to 'turn the basket upside down' (101), to dig deep, the other by humbly pledging to 'eat faeces' in return for a request granted (364). Two other sayings are comments on stinginess (45, 134), but people are also warned that laudable as it is, even generosity can be wasted on someone who is unworthy (336).

Because generosity is expected, refusing a request may not be easy. Two sayings provide polite ways to refuse by humbling oneself and what one has to give (121, 218), although one can also turn someone down who begs 'day after day' (106), and show irritation at being asked, by telling them that '[even] America is closer' (375)—that even if they went beyond America in their quest they still wouldn't get what they wanted.

### Humility and Modesty

Humility and modesty are virtues firmly embedded in Rotuman social life. Children are mercilessly teased for showing off, and they learn they are much more likely to get their way by being humble than by being brash. Humble postures are ritualized in ceremonies and many mundane situations; humble language is formalized in requests, gift presentations, interactions with chiefs, and many other social contexts. One way to humble oneself when asking for something valuable is to offer to 'eat faeces' (364), but it is not only when making a request that humility is called for. When giving a

gift of food to a chief, one remarks that it 'will not fill the pot' (42), regardless of the amount, and when gifting a pig at a wedding one may refer to it as a 'taro leaf' (251) to diminish its significance. Referring to themselves as 'stones in an earth oven' (47), people can humbly express their willingness to serve a chief

Humility is also a proper way to respond to praise. When commended for working hard, an appropriate response would be to label it 'cat's work' (239), suggesting your efforts are as useless as a cat's watching a mouse hole all day without results. It's like saying that although you've been working hard it doesn't amount to much. When praised for something one has made or done (a mat, a cake, a dance performance) a humble response—that it is 'not real' (287) or merely a 'torn fan' (271)—is called for. Or one can simply ask others not to expect too much from you, protesting that, although you are old, you are so ignorant you 'eat hermit crabs' (181).

As one might expect, bragging is not appreciated in such a cultural environment, and it is criticized in a variety of ways (8, 110, 199, 344).

### Honesty and Sincerity

Although a number of Rotuman sayings address the virtues of honesty and sincerity, they notably do so in the negative. That is, rather than praising such traits for their moral righteousness, the sayings criticize those who deceive, which has the effect of locating these virtues more in interpersonal relations than within a person's interior self. Interestingly, animals provide an array of models for deception that Rotumans have picked up on metaphorically.

Three sayings refer to the octopus, the prototypical deceiver, who dispenses inky fluid to hide

itself (65), disguises itself as a rock (66), and disappears suddenly into holes in the coral (67). People who conceal poisonous feelings are likened to the stonefish (88), which lies concealed on sandy bottoms with only its poisonous stingers exposed. Owls, who deceive by pretending to sleep while waiting for prey, appear in two sayings (175, 259), and the flounder, also known to disguise itself by remaining inert, stands for a cunning boy who pretends to sleep while eyeing the girls (262). In contrast, a girl who pretends interest in one boy to conceal her real interest in another is labelled a 'cackling hen' (130), alluding to a hen's tactic of drawing predators away from its chicks. Two historical characters were known for their deceptive ways, Tolo (158), who feigned sickness to avoid work, and Rifana (204), who pretended to sleep while overhearing conversations.

A scathing comment directed at someone who is two-faced—who says nice things to your face but gossips about you behind your back—is that he or she is like a 'grave in the cemetery' (230), rotten on the inside, though gleaming white outside.

Seven sayings warn about the likelihood of deception being discovered one day, and/or about the shame such discovery will entail. 'One day the crab will bite' (289), it is said; your secret vices will cause big trouble and you will be found out. You may be doing something behind my back, but although your actions are 'not [like] a lobster that quickly turns red when cooked' (371), one day they will come to light. A girl who is having a secretive affair while denying it may find that a bulging stomach gives her away (15; see also 235, 339). When taken by surprise a deceiver's eyes are opened wide (444); thereafter, they are said to 'contract like a cat's eyes at noon' (441) to conceal the shame.

### Control of Emotions

Strong emotions—particularly potentially disruptive emotions like anger—are perceived as dangerous in small communities like Rotuma, and while it is recognized that they are sometimes aroused, controlling them is a civic responsibility. One is constantly on the alert for signs of anger, or incipient displeasure that might lead to anger. Depending on circumstances, people take steps either to alleviate the conditions or to avoid those who are perceived as angry or likely to become angry. In describing their own emotional responses to frustration and mistreatment, Rotumans almost never use the term *feke* 'angry', because *feke* implies being out of control, thus prone to violence. Instead, they describe their feelings as *kokono* 'disappointment' or 'sadness'. People also generally preface utterances that might conceivably give offense by saying, "se fek" 'don't be angry'.

Anger is portrayed in the sayings in a variety of ways, with animals again serving as negative models. A woman in a bad mood, looking for a fight, is like 'a hen wanting to attack' (464); a woman who spits at another in anger is 'like an angry cat' (405); an angry obese woman looking for her children is likened to an angry turtle (391); and an angry woman who mutters under her breath is 'a dove complaining' (426). Someone who is angry for no apparent reason is said to have 'eaten eel' (322), or to have 'an upset heart' (78). A 'rough sea' (264) is a metaphor for anger that threatens to disrupt a family's harmony, while 'emitting smoke' (83) is both a metonym for missing a boat and a metaphor for coming home angry. Nohu's anger (37) is a legendary allusion to emotions that ultimately are self-destructive. Several sayings provide commentary on people who are chronically angry or upset.

(72, 281, 310), and one is a criticism of people who take out their anger on scapegoats (245).

Second in number only to sayings about anger are those referring to fear and anxiety. Apprehensions are expressed more openly than anger on Rotuma, but the sayings that allude to them are only slightly less disparaging, with animals once more serving as negative metaphors. Thus someone who is spooked and flees in fear is said to run 'like a horse with its tail extended' (256), a child who runs from a confrontation is likened to 'a dog hiding its tail' (117), and a male suitor anxious about rejection is like 'a rooster who sees the trap' (197). Other sayings chide people who become greatly distressed over minor problems (97), who are afraid of their husbands (80) or of ghosts (362), or who are inhibited by fear (73). Nevertheless, some anxieties are associated with situations in which they are normal and appropriate: worry over sickness of child, or a daughter's safe return (33); concern about a voyage overseas (131); and apprehensions over a daughter's marriage to a widower (because an ancient Rotuman belief suggests she may become the 'second coconut' and die, like her husband's first wife) (212).

Other emotions drawing comment are temptation (27), envy (41), and shame (170, 327). Finally love, which also can be a volatile and disruptive emotion, is positively viewed as making the heart full to overflowing (75), although lovers should 'put on the brakes' and not allow their passions to carry them 'beyond the [traffic] stripes' (433). Lovesickness, as well as jealousy, it is said, are illnesses 'that cannot be cured' (340). People are also warned that 'when the heart is full the mouth will tell' (76), suggesting they keep their emotions well under control lest they offend others or make fools of themselves. Even happiness is suspect if it leads a person to act

foolishly, like a monkey (432) Those individuals, including children, who are able to maintain a calm disposition in the face of excitement or provocation, are said to be 'real angels' (341).

### Appearance and Hygiene

Rotumans are quite concerned about appearances: of the body, of the skin, of dress. They also value cleanliness and smelling good, bathing frequently and using sweet-smelling flowers, perfumes, powders, and oils to enhance bodily appeal.

Interestingly, plants are the primary metaphors for attractiveness, while various animals, birds, and fish provide the basis for unflattering representations. A beautiful woman or a handsome man is compared to a 'ripe pandanus fruit' (59) and a pair of attractive sisters are likened to the *tieri* 'gardenia' and *sarāfu* 'sweet-smelling fungus' in bloom (261). Unattractive people may be said to be ugly enough 'to frighten a swamphen' (250), or to look 'like a badly carved statue' (414).

People who are dirty are 'like pigs' (403; see also 232); 'like the ink of an octopus' (394); 'like a banded rail' (171); or like Tomē, a Melanesian man who didn't like to bathe (159) If they smell bad they are compared to owls (238); blackfish (392); or Kuru, an old man from Hapmak who didn't bathe (154) A smelly fart is euphemistically referred to as the foul odour of 'rotten teeth' (79).

As with other Polynesian peoples, the Rotuman ideal of beauty is for a person to be full-figured (an indication that they eat well and are presumably healthy and energetic), tall, and light-skinned. Thinness is associated with sickness and frailty, but obesity is also discouraged, especially if it interferes with productive work. People who are too thin are likened to 'a gutted garfish' (99), an 'iva'o bird (161, 429), the midrib of a coconut frond

(399), or a fruit-picking pole (417) A skinny girl with redeeming qualities is 'a bone to be broken' (278), suggesting that although she is as thin as a bone, there is rich marrow inside. Shortness of stature is the subject of two sayings (151, 347), which seem rather mild in contrast to references to sun-darkened skin; one which likens it to a frying pan (400), another to a black volcanic rock that a *juli* bird 'golden plover' might perch upon (219), and still another to a dark cloud that brings rain (70). Skin seriously blemished by sores conjures up images of ugly sea snakes (426) or taro scrapers (25), while freckled skin is associated with ripe bananas (388), a much less derogatory metaphor. In contrast, skin afflicted with *tāne*, a disease that produces whitish spots or patches on the skin (420), is so highly valued it is praised in song.

With regard to dress, Rotumans deplore ostentation and tend to criticize any attempt to stand out, which is seen as a form of showing off. On formal occasions, people are expected to dress nicely, in clean and perhaps ironed clothes, but not to draw undue attention to themselves. Thus an overdressed woman who attracts notice by wearing fancy clothes and jewelry 'hurts our eyes and makes them water' (449), and a woman who wears a pretty new dress is teased with the phrase 'eat beef' (324)—a euphemism for a wedding feast—suggesting she is trying hard to attract a man to marry her.

## Undesirable Behaviour and Bad Habits

### Breaches of Rotuman Custom

People who grow up on the island are expected to learn basic skills (depending on gender) in farming, fishing, husbanding animals, making baskets, weaving thatch, plaiting mats, and so on.

They are also expected to learn the basic principles of Rotuman etiquette and the proper rules of decorum for a range of different contexts. Foreigners who go to the island often break the rules out of ignorance, or act in ways not normally acceptable. For the most part they are excused, but Rotumans who breach the rules, or show their ignorance of custom, are severely criticized. Thus the label 'assistant' (16), referring to renegade sailors who assisted the chiefs during the 19th century, is an insult when used in reference to a Rotuman. More directly, a deviant individual may be described as 'smelling like a foreigner' (20). Older people in particular are expected to be knowledgeable and exhibit proper behaviour, and are singled out for criticism if they do not (179, 181). Two specific deviations are mentioned in the sayings: breaking the postpartum taboo on sexual intercourse (377), resulting in a sickly infant, and failing to light lanterns in one's house during the evenings (419), leaving it dark and uninviting.

### Drinking and Smoking

During the colonial period (1881-1970) beer, wine, and liquor were rather restricted on the island, but a French priest taught Rotumans to make orange wine, and returning sailors learned to make home brew from pineapples. Still, most Rotumans do not drink (the Methodist Church, to which the majority belong, forbids alcohol) and are rather critical of the rowdiness they attribute to drinking. A mature man who squanders his resources on alcohol, or repeatedly acts foolishly under its influence, is a prime target for ridicule. The unsteady gait of a drunken man (very few women drink) is compared to 'a bottle without a bottom' (104); he is said to 'walk like a clown' (397). Rowdy youths, who compose the majority of

drinkers, are said to 'break the bottle' (124) when on a binge, a metonym for their tendency to throw empty beer bottles about, shattering them. Smoking cigarettes is another 'bad habit' that receives commentary, with a chain smoker likened to 'a steamship leaving' (413), belching smoke from its stack. Heavy drinkers and smokers may claim to have reformed, but at the first sign of backsliding, people comment that, like pigs, they have 'returned to their muddy pool' to wallow (291).

### Gossip and Other Verbal Excesses

Part of proper Rotuman etiquette is knowing when to talk and when to hold one's tongue. On certain occasions, with certain people, it is quite appropriate to chatter away; but at other times, with strangers, elders, or persons of chiefly rank, one is expected to exercise restraint.

Malicious gossip is a form of verbal excess that is the bane of village life, a product of the infamous 'coconut wireless' (31). A person who traffics in rumours is likened to the *karere*, a creeper plant that climbs over other plants, ruining them (120), or, only slightly less disparagingly, is said to have 'a big mouth' (221). When one confronts a gossip, one might tell him or her that 'it's none of your business' (373), to 'mind your pipe' (242), or more directly to 'shut your mouth' (376).

Those who, while less than perfect themselves, criticize others (288), and those who mutter in anger (424) or publicize family problems by not keeping their voices down when quarrelling (264), are also subject to unflattering commentary in the sayings, as are people who speak in meetings when not entitled to do so (243). Bragging, too, is offensive to Rotumans because it directly conflicts with the value of humility; braggarts are targeted in three different sayings (8, 199, 220).

Children are supposed to know their place, which means not intruding on adult conversations; a child who does is a metaphorical flea (428)—a definite irritant. An overly inquisitive child is termed a 'broken handle' (123), a metonymic allusion to Mapuou, a man who asked many questions and had a saucepan with a broken handle, while a child who simply talks incessantly is known as a *nui pātāte* 'chatterbox' (224). Children who complain continuously are compared to 'empty coconut shells with holes facing the wind' (241), while a classroom of noisy children is said to be 'like a capsized canoe' (415), equating unrestrained talking in that context with the chaos that occurs when people are unceremoniously dumped into the sea.

While verbal restraint is called for in many contexts, Rotumans acknowledge that keeping silent is sometimes very difficult, especially when 'the heart is full' (75, 76).

#### Additional Breaches

Other social transgressions ridiculed in the sayings include: staring at other people (125, 381); sitting on a chair or railing while others are seated on mats on the floor or ground, thus symbolically elevating oneself (196, 314); acting jumpy and fidgety, unable to sit still (30, 164, 233, 276, 432); farting in public (79, 255); interacting indiscriminately with anyone passing by (115, 390); roaming around without purpose—being a gadabout (94, 95, 122, 135, 427), taking things without permission (85, 108); hypocrisy (173); ingratitude (48, 215); failing to fulfil promises (26); and sexual promiscuity (291).

### Character Assessments

Compared to Europeans and Americans, Rotumans focus more on actions in context and less on enduring personal traits, but on occasion they will characterize individuals in more global terms. Someone who is always sincere in his dealing with others, has an especially calm disposition, or is without guile, is referred to as 'an angel' (341, 416), while a man who is virile, strong, and fearless is known as 'a boar' (136). On the other hand, people with notoriously bad reputations are known as 'red ghosts' (360) or as being 'foolish without stripes' (440)—suggesting that they are all scarlet without any signs of white. The association of red/scarlet with sin and evil, and white with goodness, stems from the Christian Bible. A person who is no longer responsive to family or community, who knows no shame and is therefore unrestrained, is said to have 'thick skin' (470). Finally, notorious people are associated with one another in the sayings either by choice ('a horse looks for another horse', 57; 'twins are alike', 277) or by heredity ('sucker of a banana tree', 471; 'offspring of a shark', 472).

### Social Relationships

Many of the above sayings implicate social relationships in a general way. For example, references to deception and deceit are about how people should not treat one another. But certain relationships are given particular attention in the sayings and deserve special consideration. These include gender relations, particularly those involving courtship and marriage; relations between parents and children; relations between chiefs and commoners; and relations between people of a different age-status.

### Courtship and Marriage

Courtship on Rotuma has changed in recent years. Marriages are no longer arranged by parents without their children's consent, nor are male-female friendships subjected to the intense scrutiny that was once characteristic. Because public displays of affection were a prime target for teasing and banter in the past, and were seen as a form of showing off, they were scrupulously avoided. Even married couples took care not to express affection overtly, and often went separately to church or other community functions. For these reasons courtship in the past was generally a surreptitious affair. Today youths are freer to form romantic liaisons, and are less compelled to hide them. Flirtations are more open, though still subdued by western standards. Girls appear to be less under the direct control of their families and more personally responsible for themselves (see Howard 1970, 1998), but courtship is still a complex process that invites social commentary.

One change from the past is the degree of separation of the sexes. In earlier times boys and girls, particularly during their teen years, formed rather exclusive same-sex peer groups, whereas now they mix more freely and co-participate in various activities. Still, someone who acts like the opposite sex is cause for comment (23), as is the presence of a single male with a group of females (252); a girl who associates primarily with boys is said to be 'a fish unafraid of dry places' (90).

As in many other societies, Rotumans encourage young men to sow their wild oats while young women are expected to remain virgins till marriage. This double standard is neatly encoded in the saying 'men's milk' (279), which implies that sexual indulgence is fine for men but not for women. Young men who are trying to impress girls are

known as 'smoking leaves' (60), a holdover from the days when tobacco was new to Rotuma and only men smoked, but perhaps also suggestive of their passionate desires. The tendency of young men to overprotect the women in their communities is mildly ridiculed in the saying 'a village of *'uhlei* (sweet yams)' (54), which implies that young people within the village will end up having to marry each other, hinting at incest and inbreeding.

With regard to selecting a mate, a young man is advised that he is 'not going to eat [his wife's] eyes' (372), that he should find a person with practical skills and not just look for beauty. He is told to look for a capable person who will fit in well, and will look after their family properly; good looks alone will not satisfy. He is counselled not to be 'enticed by moving pictures (illusions) only to pass on to the afterworld' (27), a warning not to pursue untrustworthy girls, and is reminded that lovesickness (like jealousy) 'is an illness that cannot be cured' (340). The disadvantages of marrying a non-Rotuman are summarized in the comment that 'whispering in Rotuman is always the best' (208), a subtle reference to pillow talk, pointing out that communication is easier between people who speak the same language and share the same culture.

An ordinary young man who yearns to marry someone beyond his reach—a young woman of exceptional beauty or from a wealthy family—is 'shooting the moon' (32), implying his aim is too high, but an ugly man or woman who marries well is said to be 'wearing a watch' (168), symbolizing a dream come true. However, a youth who, after much effort at courting, comes up empty is chided for doing nothing more than going here and there 'compressing horse manure' on the road (12). But boys are expected to continue taking initiative, even after rejections, and, if one becomes too

embarrassed and awkward with girls, he is said to be acting 'like a crazy person' (393).

People who equivocate in their commitments to one another are likewise subject to ridicule; they are said to be like the weathercock [on the Catholic church] at Sumi (201), changing their allegiances as readily as the wind alters direction. A woman who turns down a proposal of marriage from a man, but later ends up marrying him, loses face; she is said to be 'acting like Matasina yet wanting to eat sweet yams' (9). This saying refers to a legendary figure who spurned all the men in her village who courted her, but ended up marrying the first one who approached her. On the other hand, a man who gets a woman pregnant, then leaves her to pursue others, but returns to marry her in the end is a 'dog returning to its own vomit' (118). A married man who has an affair, or an unmarried one involved with two women, is referred to as 'an animal with a double throat' (191). The phrase 'Oaf öföf 'unstable love' (431) is a more general comment on people who are too fickle to commit to one relationship.

Most people do settle down in stable, long-term relationships and use terms of endearment such as those represented in the sayings to refer to one another: *sau pene'isi* 'sweet-smelling flower' (265), 'my pen pal' (455), 'my dove' (456). In a more humorous vein, someone may refer to an attractive stranger as 'my chosen one' (434), suggesting he or she would be a good catch.

### Husband and Wife

Despite cultural constraints on public displays of affection, relationships between husbands and wives on Rotuma are generally close, both emotionally and practically. The gendered division of labour, described in the section on work, means

that both a mature male and mature female are needed for a household to function properly as a domestic unit. Normally these are husband and wife. Because women's work is as highly valued as men's, and women can inherit land in their own right, wives have relatively high status, though publicly men are regarded as heads of their households (*pure*). If a couple lives on the wife's land, as dictated by cultural preference, her status is further enhanced.

The degree of control wives actually exercise is the subject of several sayings. For example, the notion that 'women are unbreakable ropes' (49) acknowledges the pull that wives exercise over their husband's will. As Mrs Inia put it, "Generally in Rotuma, whatever the wife wants, the husband will do, even if he is the chief " When the wife of a well-regarded chief creates problems by meddling in village or district affairs, people say that 'the canoe is good but outrigger is bad' (311). Also indicative of a wife's power is the saying, based on a comment by the legendary warrior Muato'a, that the only place he felt fear was at the sleeping end of his house (206), where he had to face his wife. The phrase 'to rest on a tall coconut tree' (13) is a sympathetic comment about a man, who, after working hard in the bush all day, returns home only to be assigned arduous chores by his wife. The self-confidence women feel in their dealings with their husbands can be expressed in the assertion that 'the key is here with me' (126). Where one spouse completely dominates the marital relationship, Rotumans comment that the other is afraid (80)—an acknowledgment that fear plays a role in structuring the relationship.

Although in some marriages control of the relationship becomes skewed, in most there is a sharing of power commensurate with the contributions

each spouse is willing to make. When spouses cooperate and accommodate one another—when 'the axe head fits the handle' (380) and both 'the rooster is fat and the hen is fat' (198)—as Rotumans say, marriage is a state of bliss. In contrast, when spouses do not get along, 'the joint creaks' (274). It is common for spouses to side with one another in disputes with others, even with one's own relatives, a practice recognized in the observation that husband and wife share 'the same pillow' (138). In general, a spouse is equated with a bedsheet that keeps one warm at night (231), implying a comforting relationship.

Rotumans recognize the fragility of the marital relationship, and its contextual nature, in two sayings. One is based on the observation that 'when the dove's cord is untied and it is freed, it begins to sing' (378). This applies primarily to wives whose oppressive husbands are away, giving them a freedom they do not ordinarily enjoy. The other is the expression that 'love is fading' (51), an observation appropriate to the end of the mourning period following a spouse's death.

### Parents and Children

Children are regarded as extraordinarily precious on Rotuma, in part, perhaps, because high rates of infant and child mortality in years past made survival problematic. Children are generally indulged by parents and grandparents, and often by other kin as well. They are generally fed first and are given the best food, and are rarely punished with severity. A number of proverbs give expression to this love of children, or to a specific child (439, 446, 450, 453, 454). Other sayings advise parents not to threaten children frivolously (313) nor to punish them too often (470).

But children have to be socialized if they are to become proper adults, and many of the sayings in this collection are used by parents to correct undesirable behaviour. They can be used to admonish children for crying (97, 136, 185, 281, 359, 376, 406), for being dirty or smelly (154, 159, 232, 238, 403, 463), for being fidgety and restless (30, 104, 164, 233, 383, 422, 432), for ill-mannered eating (130, 191, 356, 357, 358), for disobedience (21, 135, 267, 369, 462), for intrusiveness (123, 157, 221, 224, 428), for stamping their feet (276, 389, 418), for roaming about (94, 122, 299), for bathing in the rain without permission (401), for having uncombed hair (395), for farting (255), for complaining too much (241), or for being overly dependent (282). An additional array can be used to chastise children more generally for misbehaving (46, 144, 226, 234, 247, 272, 329, 382, 423, 430).

### Chiefs and Commoners

Chiefs—who are customarily chosen from among the bilineal descendants of ancestors who held a title (*as togi*)—are central to social life on Rotuma. At ceremonies titled men have special rights and responsibilities not afforded untitled men. They eat from special tables (*'umefe*) symbolizing their special status and are honoured in kava ceremonies at which their titles are called out in rank order. In return they are 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.

In some respects the foundations of chiefly authority on Rotuma are less secure than in more stratified Polynesian societies like Tonga and Fiji; Rotuman chiefs have always been much closer to the people than to the gods. Their legitimacy relies more on populist support than supernatural sanc-

tions<sup>3</sup> While expected to show some degree of forcefulness (i.e., manifestations of *mana*), Rotuman chiefs are constrained by an ethic of reciprocity in which the people provide labour and material support, while chiefs ensure their people's welfare through displays of generosity.<sup>4</sup> Rotuman myths clearly portray chiefs who were too demanding—who took more than they gave—as the conceptual equivalent of cannibals (Howard 1986) The behaviour of Rotumans toward their chiefs over time is consistent with this mythical charter, continually demonstrating both passive and active resistance to chiefly excess.

But 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, welcomings, village and district fetes—would lose their significance, for it is the presence of chiefs that lends dignity and historical depth to such occasions.

The sayings reflect the high regard Rotumans have for the institution of chieftainship, regardless

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<sup>3</sup> See Marcus 1989 for a discussion of these two aspects of Polynesian chieftainship. For analyses of Rotuman chieftainship, and how it has changed historically, see Howard 1963, 1966, 1985, 1986, 1989, 1996, 1997

<sup>4</sup> For more on the importance of reciprocity in Rotuman social organization, see Rensel 1994.

of their attitudes toward particular title-holders. Thus a newly installed chief is referred to as a *sau pene'isi* 'sweet-smelling flower' (265), the same phrase used as a metaphor for one's sweetheart. In this instance, it is a metonym for a new chief, because, on the day of his installation, he wears a flower behind his right ear. During that day he is the special 'flower' of the *kainaga* 'family group' that installs him. To pick a coconut from a coconut tree (213) is a metonym for an installation ceremony; it refers to the piles of coconut husks that accumulate under coconut trees. The newly installed district chief is said to cover them up with fresh green leaves, a symbolic allusion to the expectation that he will solve the standing problems in the district, such as land disputes. However, if friction arises between the new chief and his people, the saying 'the joint creaks' (274) may be invoked. Once installed, chiefs are addressed honorifically as 'you red ones' (363), in reference to the red sashes once worn by the *sau* and *mua*, the two highest ranking officers in the traditional hierarchy. If a chief fails to live up to expectations, or fails to act authoritatively, people remark that 'his sash is not red' (445), implying that he lacks *mana* 'potency'.

Chiefs are honoured in various ways, two of which are encoded in the sayings. One is the custom of *tukuag* 'omoe' (298), wherein the men from each district take an annual gift of baskets of cooked food to their district chief. The chief blesses the food when he receives it, helping to ensure fruitfulness for the coming year. The other custom is for the men of a district to give the chief a massive ceremonial gift of taro corms, in quantities of 1,000, or multiples thereof, 'to swing on his food hook' (304). It is a way of symbolizing the prosperity of land and ensuring future blessings. Chiefs

are also honoured with a special language of respect, one phrase of which—'*O ma 'o kalog* 'Yes, sir' (430)—is used to warn children to mind their manners when interacting too casually with a chief. In general, people are advised not to become too familiar with chiefs, lest they act disrespectfully toward them (268).

That chiefs are not always easy to please is signalled by the saying 'to hunt banded rail with the chief' (111), the message being that there is no way to win; if you catch a banded rail the chief will be jealous, but if you don't catch it he will be angry.

### Age-Status Relations

Rotumans recognize definite stages in the life cycle, with patterns of behaviour appropriate to each stage. Prior to adulthood, three stages are labelled, corresponding to infancy, childhood, and youth. Nursing infants are called *lā' riri' susu* 'milk children'; *lā' riri'* (without the modifier *susu* 'milk') is applied to children past weaning until they finish school, or reach the age of about 16 if they remain in school. Those who have left school, or are past the age of 16, are referred to as *haharagi* 'youths'. Adults constitute an undifferentiated category (*mafua*), although elders—particularly those beyond their productive prime—are conceived as a somewhat special subcategory with somewhat different social expectations. The phrase 'the sun is going down' (6) is an indicator of this shift to senior status, implying that the vigour of youth is beginning to fade.

The sayings concerning age-status occur primarily in the form of criticisms for acting inappropriately to one's category. They can be divided into two sets, one critical of adults acting like youths, the other of children or youths acting like adults.

Older men who flirt with young girls are said to have the 'eyes of an owl' (175), or to be 'not that old' (180). An older man looking for a young wife 'wants to smoke a pipe' (183), pipes being introduced by Europeans in the 1800s and smoked only by younger men. Young women are advised 'not to believe the bearded one' (269), in reference to older men who attempt to entice them with beguiling stories. Old people who behave inappropriately, or who are simply ignorant of Rotuman custom, are 'old conch shells' (179), or 'eat hermit crabs' (181). Adults are warned that 'if you play with children and get a grain of sand in your eye, nobody can blow it out' (188), suggesting the need for patience when dealing with the immature. On a positive note, an elder who dances with consummate skill after a period of retirement is applauded and praised. 'The end of the log has been covered with ash' (467) people remark, implying that there's still life in the old man or woman, just as the embers inside the log still burn.

Children are told outright to 'play with your own age group' (189), although if they continue to spend all their time together as they approach adulthood they might be compared to a 'brood of chicks' (473), afraid to strike off on their own. Youngsters who hang around with adults and mimic their speech have 'smacking lips' (223); if they repeat conversations they overhear they are 'little pitchers' (157). A young boy who acts belligerently toward youths much older than himself is cryptically labelled 'a boy with yaws' (18), a reference to the virulent skin disease that afflicted virtually all Rotuman children prior to the availability of antibiotic drugs. Children were in fact encouraged to contract the disease while still young, presumably because it resulted in less scarring. The saying thus uses the disease as a metonym for

early childhood, the implication being that though the yaws on his buttocks have not yet healed, he wants to challenge bigger boys. Similarly, a child who tries to act like a grown-up may be told that 'the marks of your diapers are still showing' (460). On the other hand an older child—one approaching maturity—who plays with much younger children is 'like half the sky' (396) in comparison. He or she might also be compared to the *sia'leva* (409), a pigeon-like bird around which small birds tend to congregate.

### Destiny and Justice

Rotumans pay keen attention to changing fortunes, those of others as well as their own. Good fortune is an indicator that one has been morally sound and has not offended God or one's ancestors, or that whatever transgressions one has committed have been forgiven. Bad luck is a sign of previous wrongdoing by oneself or a close relative, incurring supernatural punishment. Several sayings provide commentary on people's good or bad luck, or draw attention to changing fortunes.

Three proverbs (109, 290, 294) caution people not to take good times for granted, that things can easily change. They are reminded, for example, of 'the calm at the entrance to Hatana' (294), a sacred offshore islet known for the sudden onset of large and dangerous waves that appear when taboos have been violated. The saying suggests that even though things may be going well, it is important to be careful and avoid doing anything disruptive. On the other side of the coin, people who are enduring hard times are reminded that though the rain is falling it will stop (303), and that hot days are followed by cool evenings (374). Other expressions

offer sympathy to those who are currently suffering (61, 62, 169).

A person who, through good luck, emerges safely from a disaster or extreme danger is said to have a 'warm back' (438), implying that an ancestral spirit—a guardian angel—is looking after him or her. Consistent with this concern for fate, Rotumans pay close attention to omens, as indicated in several sayings (128, 244, 284).

### Justice

The belief that people get their 'just deserts' (283) is very strong in Rotuman culture. When things go badly they are asked to reflect on past behaviours that might have provoked retribution from ancestral spirits (178). Other proverbs submit that people who do wrong 'get what they're looking for' (286), or end up 'smoking their own tobacco leaves' (63), implying they get what's coming to them for misbehaving. Rotumans have also borrowed the biblical 'a tooth for a tooth' (346) as a way of talking about justice. Children who disobey their parents are warned of the likely consequences in a proverb that alludes to the myth of Kirkirsasa (21), in which two naughty girls were chased by a cannibalistic monster. Similarly, wrongdoers who lie about their misdeeds and try to hide them are warned that eventually they will be found out (156, 263), that 'one day the crab will bite' (289). That one's misdeeds can jeopardize not only oneself, but one's descendants as well, is codified in two phrases: 'the coconut will fall to its own root' (214), and 'my behaviour hits my stomach' (452).

Central to Rotuman notions of justice are ancestral spirits who exact vengeance for transgressions, particularly when land is involved. 'The land has eyes and teeth' (53), they say, so one should be wary of making unjustified claims. When the loser

in a land dispute utters the phrase "*mar māūr ne mar al*" 'suffer dead or alive' (192) he or she invokes a curse, implicitly imploring the ancestors to right the situation by bringing ill-fortune to the winner and his or her descendants. Or both parties to a dispute might be reminded about the story of the cat at Halafa (244), suggesting that everyone might suffer and the land be left barren if the dispute is not settled peacefully

### Importance of Place

Like other Polynesians, Rotumans have a keen sense of place. People know the names of each plot of land in their district (if not the whole island) and often refer to the people who live on a given plot by the name of the land. Kinship is reckoned on the basis of shared rights in the same named house site (*fūag rī*) as much, if not more than, by detailed genealogy. Where people were born, where they have travelled, where they were married, and where they are to be buried is of common interest. A typical Rotuman greeting is to ask where someone on the road is going, or where they have come from.

The island, which is approximately 14 km long and 5 km wide at its widest part, has a distinct east-west orientation (see map on p. vi). East and west have strong symbolic significance, with the east associated with sunrise, birth, male vitality, and chieftainship, while the west is associated with sunset, death, female domesticity, and commoner status (see Howard 1985, 1986). Likewise, the seashore is associated with chieftainship while the interior of the island is common. The front door of a house—the door reserved for people of rank—is toward the sea, the back door faces inland. When people are asked where they are going, or where they have come from, they often answer simply that

they are 'going east' (147), 'going west' (148), 'going inland' (162), or 'going seaward' (146, 163).

Leaving the island and returning to it are couched in idioms of canoe travel, the only form of transportation available prior to European intervention. When leaving, one 'cuts through the waves' (237), while new arrivals are 'rinsed by rain' (302), an illusion to having the salt water of the sea washed from their bodies. New arrivals who talk or act too boldly are told that 'their feet are still wet' (459), reminding them that they should watch what they say because this is not their home territory. The same thing can be said metaphorically to those who go to live in their spouses' home villages. In a similar vein, those who boast or show off when away from home are told that 'the fighting cock stays in its own place' (199), the implication being that they may be important in their own villages, but there are others elsewhere as good or better than they are.

Youngsters going abroad are implored to try hard to succeed even though they will be far away (11), or by drawing attention to the reputation of the place from which they come (384). Those who stay away too long are warned that they might die abroad, forcing their spirits to come back to Rotuma as stinkbugs (141). Because people are so clearly associated with specific places, wandering aimlessly about from place to place, or moving one's home too often, is regarded as inappropriate and as grounds for criticism (427), the person being likened to 'a ghost without a grave' (361).

### In a Manner of Speaking

Words have extraordinary power in the logic of Rotuman culture. They have the potential to make things happen (313). Thus considerable *mana* is

attributed to a person whose predictions come true, while someone whose pronouncements fail to materialize, or whose promises are not kept, loses his or her credibility. The proverb 'speak and you have an obligation' (22) makes this point, while the saying 'the fire is started, the smoke is rising' (248) reinforces it. That careful consideration is required before talking about delicate topics is encoded in the advice, 'wait until we have slept' (270). Hearsay is ridiculed in the saying "Rupea said that 'the priest said that Firisiana said. ' (258), while a person renowned for fibbing is said to 'spar in our face' (82) when telling tall tales (not without admiration if the stories are skilfully told).

Several of the sayings provide commentary on habitual ways of talking: repetitiously (29), indistinctly (44), cleverly (223), or indiscriminately to anyone who passes by (390). A person who speaks flawed English may be teased with the proverb, "we will be ruined by 'yes, no'" (383), referring to a court translator whose limited English was thought to have created havoc during the colonial era.

People who do not speak up when they have something to say, or are too timid to defend themselves when insulted, are criticized (34) and urged to 'show their teeth' (74).

This collection of proverbs will give such people the raw material they need to make their point. It will also provide Rotumans abroad a glimpse into an important part of their cultural heritage, and will give students of language a valuable case study to explore.

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