

UNPUBLISHED ARTICLE

THE ARTS OF ROTUMA

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At the time of first recorded European contact, in 1791, Rotuma had a range of well-developed art forms, including tattooing, the making of shell ornaments, bark cloth and fine mat manufacture, oratory, clowning, and singing and dancing. By the end of the 19th century some of these aspects of expressive culture had completely disappeared, while others were drastically altered.

Tattooing

Captain Edward Edwards of H.M.S. *Pandora*, which came upon Rotuma on August 8th, 1791, wrote that the Rotumans were “tattooed in a different manner from the natives of the other islands we had visited, having the figure of a fish, birds and a variety of other things marked upon their arms” (Thompson 1915:64-66). George Hamilton, who was also aboard the *Pandora*, wrote that “They wore necklaces, bracelets, and girdles of white shells. Their bodies were curiously marked with the figures of men, dogs, fishes, and birds, upon every part of them; so that every man was a moving landscape. These marks were all raised, and done, I suppose, by pinching up the skin” (Thompson 1915:138-139).

According to Lesson, a naturalist who visited Rotuma in 1824 aboard the *Coquille*:

Their most outstanding and characteristic ornamentation is tattooing, which they call *cache*. The body, from the lower chest to just above the knee, is completely covered with a regular tattoo strongly reminiscent of the thigh-pieces of the knights of old. A broad strip behind the thigh prevents the bands of tattooing from completely encircling the leg. The stomach and loins are covered with curving scalloped lines whose blackness contrasts agreeably with the natural color of the untouched skin. The chest and arms receive another kind of design. Where the former is notable for the black mass it forms on the skin, the latter is distinguished by the delicacy of its designs: the fragile shapes of flying fish, flowers and other graceful objects. Some natives had rows of black dots on their legs, while others displayed raised scars on the shoulders of the type common among the African negro race as among its scattered branches in the Pacific. Tattooing seems so natural to primitive man that it seems to clothe his nakedness and provide him with a durable raiment of charm and grace [Lesson, 1838-9 #93:426-427; translated from the French by Ella Wiswell].

Gardiner, who visited the island in 1896, described the patterns in more detail; he also included illustrations. He reported that the men were always tattooed with a pair of drawers reaching from the waist to just below the knee. The design, called *fuol*¹ in Rotuman, was based on parallelograms composed of straight lines. Typical designs on men’s shoulders included the *perero*, representing a strong-smelling flower commonly given to one’s sweetheart; the *moiera*, a common bush; stars, circles, crosses and other geometrical designs. Women’s tattoos were confined to the arms and consisted of circles enclosing designs (Gardiner 1898:414-415).

Gordon Macgregor, an American anthropologist who visited Rotuma in 1932, includes in his field notes drawings very similar to those of Gardiner. He reports that the patterns “are irregular and said to be made out of the operators’ minds.” According to one of Macgregor’s informants, women formerly tattooed their entire arms and hands, and some their jaws. A line was also drawn around the ankle. He remarks that ankle and hand tattoos were most in evidence at the time.

Tattooing was done by specialists (*majau*), using a dye made from candlenut, which was burnt into a charcoal-like state. The tattooing comb was made of fish vertebrae or tortoise shell. The *majau* marked a design on the skin, then used the comb to tap in the lines. According to one of Macgregor’s informants, when a chief was being tattooed a complementary tattoo must be made on someone else. Since the chief is being wounded and spilling blood, someone else must also be hurt in payment for the chief’s suffering.² Another informant told him that men who were tattooed were considered properly dressed and might appear without a sulu modestly. This same man told Macgregor that only women who had their arms and hands tattooed could make kava, and that an untattooed man could not make *fekei* ‘pudding’ (Macgregor n.d.).³

The custom of tattooing was prohibited by the European missionaries, and when the first author first visited Rotuma, in 1960, none of the old people were tattooed. Nowadays, a number of young men are tattooed, especially those who have spent some time as sailors, but there are no practitioners of the art on Rotuma.

Shell Ornaments

Ornaments of various types were apparently quite popular among the early Rotumans, and some were used to designate rank. Lesson’s observations are again worthy of quotation:

“The principal ornament of those who came on board who seemed to enjoy a certain rank was a large pearl-oyster shell on the breast called a *tifa*. Apparently, there are no oysters around their shores, so they try to obtain them from whomever they can, offering one of their fine straw wearings for five or six shells of this testacean. Some wore porcelain ovules called *poure* [in Fiji, *tabua*]; some wore a white braid on their breasts called *toui* while others wound long strings of shells around their bodies. None of these paltry decorations, however, seemed designed as a mark of rank or authority. Around the necks of some young people, I noticed necklaces made of balls of ivory. This ornament, usually worn by women, is so highly prized by the islanders, that they zealously collect the teeth of the cachalot [sperm whale], an excellent trading article for whalers. They prefer them to fabrics, even to metal axes, even though they can only turn them into ornaments. Perhaps they attach some superstitious importance to them. When I came on deck carrying a large cachalot’s tooth, the only one I had, I was surrounded in a twinkling by an enormous number of islanders shouting with astonishment and admiration. They offered me my choice of anything they had, and when I exchanged it with one of them for a couple of fine mats, they showed great satisfaction and quickly confided their new treasure to an old man in a canoe alongside the ship. To the whalers, they give large quantities of bananas, taro and coconuts for each tooth. This is because they consider the whale to be the queen of the sea (according to what M. de Blosseville was told). They also believed that the ships are armed in order to take the teeth from the whales and to extract their oil to anoint people; they were most astonished to learn that the oil is only used for lamps (Lesson 1838-9:422-424).

Dillon, who arrived in 1827, reported that whales' teeth, tortoise-shells, glass beads, cutlery, and small axes were the most desired trade items. "With the whales' teeth and tortoise-shells they ornament their clubs, spears, &c., and make neck and ear-ornaments of bits of turtle shell, which among them are valued as gold is with us" (Dillon 1829, p. 94), and Bennett, who visited the island three years later, confirms Rotuman partiality to beads and whales' teeth (Bennett 1831, p. 475).

Gardiner, summarizing the available information at the turn of the century, comments that necklets of whales' teeth were only allowed to be worn by chiefs. He reports that they were generally buried with their possessor, as one of his most valued possessions. Beads of whales' teeth were called *lei*, while necklaces are *tifui*. Hence, according to Gardiner, these necklaces were termed *tifui lei*. They were, he claims, "the money of the old days" (Gardiner 1898:412).

As for the pearl shell breastplates, *tiaf hapa* 'half an oyster shell', Gardiner affirms they were only worn by chiefs. He writes that they were only shaped by taking off the horny layer and smoothing it down, so that the shell retained its original shape. "The convex side was rubbed down till the outer coats were quite removed and the nacre was reached, and this side was hung outwards" (Gardiner 1898:413).

Macgregor includes in his field notes a drawing of three shells strung into a necklace with 1/8" braided sennit. A typed note states that, "The half shell of mother of pearl made into necklace for the kings of Rotuma who wore them around their neck. Found in the tombs" (Macgregor n.d.).⁴ Macgregor also recorded ornaments called *muleli*, made from two projecting pieces from the tail end of a turtle shell. They were worn around the neck or wrists on a string.

Today Rotumans do not especially value such adornments. Women sometimes wear store-bought beads, and on special occasions both men and women wear *tēfui* made from sweet-smelling plants. Whales' teeth, still so highly prized in Fiji, are no longer the valuable objects they were in the past. They are not ceremonially transacted between Rotumans, nor do they play any special role in Rotuman rituals. Some Rotumans have whales' teeth (*tabua*) in their possession, given by Fijians for special favors or service, but their symbolic significance for most Rotumans is otherwise minimal.

Bark Cloth and Fine Mats

Early commentators report that Rotumans manufactured a kind of bark cloth (*uha*), but they give little details of the designs. Lesson (1838-9:424) reported that the Rotumans made a fabric out of breadfruit and mulberry bark similar to that of the Sandwich and Society Islands, which they dyed a deep reddish-brown. However, he claims to have seen little of it used as clothing. Bennett (1831:477) also mentions barkcloth, reporting that it was stained various colors procured from native plants.

The most detail concerning bark cloth comes from the field notes of Gordon Macgregor, who visited Rotuma in 1932. According to one of his informants, the juice of the *sa'a* tree was used for painting the cloth a dark reddish color; according to another the paint was a mixture of turmeric and juice squeezed from the bark of the one kind of tree (*favrau*) and the root of another (*ura*). Designs were painted on by hand, rather than stenciled.

Bark cloth never seems to have been a main fabric for clothing,⁵ and its ceremonial significance seems to have been much more limited than it was (and still is) in Tonga.⁶ Macgregor's informants reported to him that the finished bark cloth was used as mosquito netting which was hung over a center pole and hung like a pup

tent, the ends being closed with additional pieces of cloth. Reportedly the fabric was very thin (Macgregor n.d.) By this time bark cloth manufacture had not been practiced for many years, and the mulberry trees from which most of the bark derived were extinct.

Lesson described the Rotumans' usual clothing as "made from the fairest and finest weavings." He added that, "The weavings they wrap themselves in are beautiful, superior to any made by the Tahitians . . . They are scalloped at their edges and sometimes died yellow or daubed with other colors" (Lesson 1838-9:423-424). The high quality of Rotuman fine mats is attested to by Forbes, another early visitor:

A Rotumah mat is valued in other islands much as an Indian Shawl is valued in Europe.

Compared to Rotumah mats, the finest Batique mats from Fiji are coarse and ugly; while the mats of Samoa and Tonga do not deserve to be mentioned in the same breath. A good Rotumah mat will take many years to make, and will cost at least five pounds of our money. To an Englishman's eye, there is nothing in them of such surpassing excellence (Forbes 1875:227).

Bennett reported that four kinds of mats were manufactured on the island in 1830, one kind of ordinary mat (*'epa*) and three grades of fine white mats (*'apei*). The lowest grade of fine mat, *'apei sala*, was made from *sa'aga*, a species of pandanus. Finer than this was the *'apei niau*, which was woven from hibiscus bark. Finer still, and most highly valued according to Bennett, was the *arnea*, made from the bark of the paper mulberry tree.

A type of *'apei sala* was reportedly worn by warriors when going to battle. According to Bennett:

The war mats are of the same texture as the *Apé Sala*, but of smaller size; four of these are worn together, fastened round the waist, when going to meet their enemies; they placed each over the other, and so arranged so as to display two deep vandykes decorated with red feathers on the edge of each, except the upper one, which has two oblong strips ornamented in a similar manner (Bennett 1831:476-477).⁷

Bennett commented that the manufacture of mats was such a tedious process that it took six months or more to complete one (Bennett 1831:477).

Gardiner describes the manufacture of two types of plaited material used for common dress, *taktakoi* 'wrap around' for men and *arumea* (*arnea*) for women, both of which he claims are made from the fibres of the hibiscus.⁸ Other dresses were worn only on special occasions and by particular chiefs. At weddings, burials and feasts fine mats of large size were proper dress (Gardiner 1898:411-412).

One type of fine mat, the *tofua*, was made from pandanus leaves (*sa'aga*) and was worn by chiefs and the *sau* (Gardiner 1898:412, Macgregor n.d.). Chiefs also wore a girdle of woven *sa'aga* over their wrap arounds. Macgregor describes *titi* as wide bands with a long fringe, their total length being rather short, not nearly down to the knees.

In summary, Gardiner describes the dress of the *sau* and his officers as follows:

The dress of the *sou* consisted of a fine mat, over which the *malhida* [chiefly girdle] was worn. This dress was made of the leaves of the *saaga* (Pandanus sp.?), split up, and plaited together like sinnet at the top, and hanging down loose. They were stained for the most part red, but some might be left white. Black was sometimes introduced by means of the bark of the *si*, a species of banana, which on drying turns a dull black. Another dress, pertaining to some of the officers, was the *olōli*; it appears

to have been really a sort of apron, made of a fine mat, and hung down in front. It was almost completely covered with the red feathers of the *arumea* (*Myzomela chermesina*, Gray); its use was restricted to particular feasts. Round the neck might be a necklace of beads of whale's teeth, the *tifui lei*, and on each wrist the *mulei*, described to me as a round piece of turtle bone. I dug one up when I opened the graves of the *mua*; it is certainly not bone, but resembles somewhat the horny and prismatic layers of the outer part of a pearl shell. It is about 2 inches in diameter, and has a large hole in the center [illustration included]. On the breast was the pearl shell, *tiaf hapa*, but the really distinctive part was the *malhida*, which it was taboo for any one else to wear. The *muleli* was only worn by the *mua* as well as the *sou*, but the other ornaments were more generally used (Gardiner 1898:462).

Fine mats were, and remain, of central significance for Rotuman ceremonies. They are the primary items of exchange at weddings, first birthdays, welcoming ceremonies, funerals and headstone unveilings. Today, however, only one type remains, the *apei sala*, made from *sa'aga* leaves. Whereas in the distant past they were decorated with bird feathers, they are now decorated with wool. But they retain both their value as a form of wealth and their ritual significance.

Mat-making used to be the main occupation of adult women, and still was in 1960. As more and more young people emigrated to Fiji, however, the craft is being passed on to a much smaller proportion of the younger generation. However, fine mats continue to be necessary for proper Rotuman ceremonies, so, if anything, they have increased in value.⁹ Since very little mat-making is done by Rotumans resident in Fiji, those on the island must now supply their relatives there as well. The situation is therefore one of increased demand and decreased supply. Women jealously guard their supply of fine mats, and even their husbands are often kept in the dark as to how many they possess.

The ritual significance of mats remains prominent despite the fact that its religious underpinnings have long since been subverted. Traditionally white mats were consecrated by the sacrifice of a pig prior to their manufacture. They therefore symbolized life, and since pigs were sacrificial substitutes for humans, human life. Today white mats are rarely consecrated in this way, but they retain symbolic potency.¹⁰ *Apei* lend enormous weight to any form of request or apology. It is very difficult indeed to turn down an appeal backed up with a white mat.¹¹

Fine white mats are also used as seats (*päega*) and covers in ritual contexts. The bride and groom at a wedding, honored guests at a *mamasa* 'welcoming ceremony', anyone on whom special status is being conferred, sit upon an *apei* during the performance of ceremonies. Symbolically this elevates them (in the past, to a god-like status). *Apei* are also used to cover gifts of food on special occasions and as canopies to protect special people or items (such as a wedding cake).

Of all the traditional art forms, fine white mats retain the strongest symbolic significance on Rotuma. How long this will remain the case is problematic, however, given drastically reduced interest in their manufacture by the younger generation. The production of *apei* therefore cannot be considered a vigorous source of artistic expression at the moment, especially in contrast with dancing, the main kind of performing art.

In 1960 a number of women were producing woven baskets of high quality, a skill that was apparently introduced as a possible source of income. Today, however, few such items are being produced, and there seems to be little interest in reviving the craft.

One can identify four traditional forms of performance in Rotuma: oratory and chanting, dancing and singing, clowning and *kava* ceremonies. Since Henry Gibson introduced into Rotuma a new kind of performance, karate exhibitions, and has proposed a new form for the *kava* ceremony, it is of some relevance to our analysis to consider briefly the nature of these traditional performances.

Oratory and Chanting

Little has been written on Rotuman oratory, in part, perhaps, because it is not the highly developed art it is in many other Polynesian societies. Nevertheless, oratorical skills are valued by Rotumans, and there is some evidence to suggest they always have been. In the past, the telling of legends was one form of oratory. When chiefs wished to be entertained they would prepare a feast and invite a storyteller to perform (Macgregor n.d.), and according to some of my informants, elders would get together in order to share their knowledge of genealogies and local history, some of which was preserved in chant form. Today there are few people who claim to have such knowledge and are willing to share it, but those who do are often the focal point of admirers who provide an eager audience.

A better preserved form of oratory concerns speeches made on various occasions, mostly to thank those who have donated labor, food and other goods on ceremonial occasions. Chiefs of all rank are expected to make speeches in such circumstances, but oratory is not confined to chiefs. Church and government officials also are expected to address audiences on various occasions, and guests who have been honored, regardless of sex or rank, usually offer thanks in a formal, or quasi-formal, way. Chiefs also make speeches in order to inspire their subjects to work hard, to donate food or money to a cause, or to promote community harmony.

Two other arenas for speech-making are community meetings and the Methodist Church. At village or district meetings, individuals often express their views in an eloquent, sometimes passionate, manner. The object is to be persuasive without being abrasive, to convince without alienating. Some of the most admired speakers never raise their voices. Soft-spoken speech signifies humility to Rotumans, which is a valued trait in chiefs and commoners alike.

The Methodist Church provides a number of roles requiring oratory, including ministers, catechists and lay preachers. While there are only a few ministers on the island at any given time, most village have a catechist and there are a large number of lay preachers, including a number of women. For the most part, preaching is based more on Western models than on traditional Rotuman oratory, which contains repetitive formulas. Preachers often start off softly and build to crescendos. Some are prone to making vigorous gestures to punctuate their speeches, a style that contrasts with traditional Rotuman oratory in which gestures and facial expressions are of little significance. Regardless of context, however, effective speakers are admired in Rotuma, and oratory is a vital part of the contemporary culture.

Kaurasi (1977) identifies three types of Rotuman chants: those sung before wrestling matches or before a war, which aimed at inspiring one's own combatants and intimidating one's competitors or enemy; those sung when receiving a chief or at the funeral of a chief; and those sung at dances. He notes that composers (*purotu*) usually pass on their skills within families, each family having its own specialty (Kaurasi 1977:144).

According to Kaurasi, the form of chants sung when receiving a chief (who has come by sea) and at a paramount chief's funeral vary only in their endings. In both cases chanting takes place while the dignitaries are being carried, in the first instance from the sea to the shore, in the second instance from his home to the

grave. The former chant ends with *lok turua — Hi!* signifying life, the latter ends with *lok pakura — Hi!* signifying death. As we shall see, a version of the latter was performed by Henry Gibson's followers when he visited the island.

Dancing and Singing

Kaurasi divides dance songs into four groups: (1) those depicting social functions in which two parties entertain one another; (2) those indicating events which led to wars; (3) those referring to the loss of a friend or relative; and (4) those referring to overseas trips and safe returns.

Some early descriptions of Rotuman dance were unflattering. For example, Lesson wrote:

Hearing the natives sing did not give us a very high opinion of their style of singing. They favor the psalmodic tone of other islanders though sometimes adopting a livelier measure while some of them dance in accompaniment to the voice. Their dance is nothing more than a pantomime of strange, irregular movements, a far cry from the precision of the New Zealanders (Lesson 1838-9:425-426).

But Bennett, who was more kindly disposed, found the dances “peculiarly interesting” (Bennett 1831:479). He describes the contrast between the bold actions of the men and the slow, regular and graceful movements of the women. He also witnessed a war-dance and mock combat, which, he wrote, was intended to demonstrate the Rotuman mode of warfare.

The best contemporary account of Rotuman dance is by Vilsoni [Tausie] Hereniko (1977). He describes two types of Rotuman dancing, the *tautoga* and *mak Rarotonga*. The *tautoga* is performed by men and women together. The dancers are arranged in rows, with each row consisting of men on the right side, women on the left. Musical accompaniment is provided by a group of elders who beat out the rhythm on a pile of mats. They also act as lead singers to the dancers, who join in when ready.

Tautoga today are composed of three sub-sets of dances, performed in sequence. First are the *sua* ‘songs composed for a purpose and with a message’. In the past, according to Hereniko, a *tautoga* would have included three *sua*, although today it is commonly limited to only one. Each *sua* consists of four verses sung over and over again. Repetition and chanting are communication aids, according to Hereniko, that help to instill the message in the song. Typically *sua* will allude to the history of the occasion, to the location or to a specific family, or at a wedding, to the couple. They are often couched in metaphor (for example, likening a wedding couple to heavenly bodies).

After the *sua* comes the *tiap hi*, which is characterized by a rhythmic droning sung by the men in a guttural voice, and/or by the women in a higher voice. Either the men or the women may sing a song against the other side's drone. There is a marked contrast in this dance between the movements of the women (confined to subtle movements of their hands) and the movements of men (vigorous jumping about). As Hereniko points out, this reflects Rotuman social organization, in which men are granted much more freedom to roam about. If words are sung they may reference myths and legends, and might include a moral.

Whereas Rotumans regard the *sua* and *tiap hi* as authentic dances, derivative from their own cultural heritage, they consider the third component of the *tautoga*, *tiap furau*, to be of alien origin. Indeed the very name means ‘foreign dance-song’. The *tiap furau* is a much livelier dance than those preceding it. Whereas the *sua* and *tiap hi* are solemn and disciplined, the mood changes markedly with the *tiap furau*. The dancers

become jovial, light-hearted, and may even begin to clown. Movements are more free and expansive, and even the women exercise little restraint, swinging their hips in a fashion reminiscent of the Hawaiian hula (or the modern twist). The songs that accompany a *tiap furau* are generally in exaggerated praise of the chiefs and the community hosting the occasion.

The second form of dancing referred to by Hereniko is the *mak Rarotonga*. In the late 1940s a travelling group of dancers from Rarotonga visited Rotuma and made a strong impression. Rotumans adopted the basic motions (which has much in common with Tahitian dancing, with rapid hip and knee movement) and tunes (brisk), while composing songs in Rotuman. With time, new tunes were borrowed from other Pacific islands, so today there is a distinct Rotuman version of Rarotongan dancing. Whereas the *tautoga* is performed on formal occasions, performances of *mak Rarotonga* are informal.¹² They occur at parties of all kinds, including weddings (though *tautoga* may also be performed), but are especially associated with the Christmas holidays, when groups of young men and women travel from village to village to sing and dance. *Mak Rarotonga* is ordinarily a dance for couples, although on occasion a single person will get up and perform, often in a clowning manner.

Of all the Rotuman art forms, composing songs for special occasions, and choreographing *tautoga* dances, has survived with the most vigor. Prior to a special event, the group chosen to perform meets regularly for rehearsals, and a good deal of pride is involved. On grand occasions several groups may perform in a competitive context, with prizes being awarded to the winners. Good composers are admired. According to Hereniko:

A good *purotu* is judged on the aptness of his choice of words, which should ‘cut deep into the heart of the listener,’ on the actions chosen to portray his poetry, and the melody. It is also very important that his allusions be suitable for the occasion and the individuals being honoured (Hereniko [Tausie]), 1977: 152:132].

Clowning

Visitors to Rotuma have often remarked that the people there seem more solemn than elsewhere in Polynesia. In particular, Rotumans are shy with strangers, and passing through a village one is likely to meet with expressionless faces unless one knows the people. On most public occasions Rotumans guard against breeches of protocol, or appearing foolish, and so often appear somber. For the most part, relaxed humor is confined to intimate peers who enjoy a joking relationship with one another. There are circumstances, however, in which clowning is encouraged and appreciated. Typically clowning takes place during dance performances, and seems to serve the dual purpose of relieving the dancers of the audience’s scrutiny (and thereby helping them to relax) and introducing a lighter tone to the proceedings. Most often chiefs, elders of either sex, or other persons of high rank initiate the behavior. This lends even more hilarity and relaxation to the situation, since it is ordinarily chiefs and elders who are the guardians of proper decorum.

There are two traditional settings in which clowning takes on a more theatrical nature. Both involve women in the key roles of clowns. The first instance is associated with the commissioning of fine white mats by a district chief. The custom, called *sa’a*, has not been practiced for many years, but is remembered by some of my older informants. When the women who had been working on a commissioned mat had just about completed it, they selected one of their members to be a *hàn mane’āk* ‘woman who plays,’¹³ who was given

complete license throughout the whole island. She could enter stores and take out what she wanted and charge it to whomever she wished. She had license to demand a free ride. She could order about and even strike anyone, including chiefs, with immunity. Her license was virtually absolute within the limits of decency. The *hàn mane'ák* reportedly carried a stick, wore flowers on her head and colored her face with charcoal or was masked. Many of the *hàn mane'ák*'s antics are aimed at inciting hilarity. For example, they might force a man to dance or sing for prolonged periods, much to everyone's amusement (field notes 1960).

The second instance of traditional clowning takes place at weddings, where a woman is appointed by the bride's side to play the role of *hàn mane'ák sū* 'woman who plays at the wedding.'¹⁴ Like her counterpart described above, the *hàn mane'ák sū* is granted license to act in an outrageous manner. She can boss everyone about, make fools of chiefs and dignitaries, and strike people with her stick if they show reluctance to comply with her demands. Perhaps the most important part of her responsibility, however, is to make people laugh, and to alleviate the tension that might exist between the bride's and the groom's parties. She may dress in a bizarre costume, make funny faces, dance in a suggestive manner, crack jokes at others' or her own expense, and generally play the role of clown (for a more complete description of this institution see Hereniko, in press).

Most contemporary weddings of large size still employ a *hàn mane'ák sū*, but not all women who play this role are comfortable with the license inherent in it. While some are game enough to play the role to the hilt, others are reluctant to offend chiefs, or even ordinary associates, with whom they must get along with when the wedding is over. The latter women play the role in a low key manner. They approach others politely, ask instead of demand, and are cautious in their joking. They are pale shadows of women from an earlier era whose exploits have become legendary.

The Kava Ceremony

As in other Polynesian societies, important ceremonies require the presentation, preparation and serving of *kava* to chiefs and dignitaries. Some early visitors to the island comment on the effects of excessive *kava* drinking (Lucatt 1851:168), suggesting that it was drunk socially as well during the pre-missionary, pre-colonial period, but when I first visited the island in 1960 it was consumed only ceremonially. This has changed in the interim, however, and now almost every village has a *kava* klatch that meets for several hours per day.

The basics of the traditional *kava* ceremony in Rotuma are well described by Gardiner (1898:424-425) and Macgregor (n.d.), from whose accounts the following composite description draws.

At feasts chiefs take their place in the "front"¹⁵ of the ceremonial site, with the highest ranking chief in the middle. Behind him is his *mafua* 'spokesman', who conducts the ceremony. The *kava* roots are brought to the site at the head of the men's procession bearing food. The roots of the *kava* are placed to point toward the chiefs, the leave away. The presentation is acknowledged by the *mafua*, who calls out "*Kava*." The man who is tending the *kava* then breaks off a small branch from the root and stabs it into the root, and shouts "*Manu*!"¹⁶ The *mafua* then recites a *fakpej*, a chant-like recitation.¹⁷ If more than one bundle of *kava* roots are being presented this may be repeated, with additional *fakpej* being chanted.

After this the *mafua* calls the names of the chiefs to whom a piece of *kava* root is to be presented. The man tending the *kava* cuts off one piece of the root for each chief. A final piece is cut off and given to the women to be washed and chewed. After it is sufficiently chewed, the *mafua* calls out for the woman who will

mix it to wash her hands. The chewed *kava* is then put into a *tanoa* ‘*kava* bowl’ with water and is mixed with a *vehnau* ‘strips of cloth from the bark of the hau tree.’ The *kava* maker strains the brew through the cloth, then passes it back to an attendant who wrings it out, while a second attendant pours water over the *kava* maker’s hands. When the *kava* maker is finished the preparation she calls out, “*Kavaite*” ‘The *kava* is ready.’

The *mafua* then calls out *mārie*, *mārie*, *mārie!* which draws attention to the proceedings, much in the manner that “hear, hear!” does in English speaking settings. The *kava* maker then lays down the *vehnau* and claps her hands, twice with her hands cupped, then a loud clap with her palms flat. The *mafua* again calls *mārie*, *mārie*, *mārie!*

The second attendant then brings an *ipu* ‘coconut shell cup’ to the *kava* bowl, and the *kava* maker lifts the *vehnau* and drains *kava* into it. The attendant then says, “*Kava tāria*” ‘The *kava* is ready.’

The *mafua* then calls out “*Taukavitē se Maraf* [or the name of the highest ranking person present] ‘Take the *kava* to Maraf.’ The attendant bears the *kava* to the person whose name has been called out and stooping low, hands it to him. She then returns to the bowl and when the cup is refilled calls out again, “*Kava tāria*.” The process is repeated until all the chiefs and dignitaries are served.

Kava presentations remain a central part of any ceremony performed in contemporary Rotuma, but they lack the formality and sense of drama that accompanies performances in Fiji and Samoa. Today, of course, the *kava* is no longer chewed, but is pounded with an iron pestle. Rotumans today conduct the ceremony in an almost casual manner. Elders constantly offer advice to the various participants, who should be served when is discussed, and procedures are continually negotiated. Few people seem to be certain about protocol. Furthermore, many people who serve as *mafua* no longer know any of the traditional *fakpej* and make them up as they go along. In some of the recent presentations I observed the *mafua* made the *fakpej* into a series of humorous utterances, turning it into a joke, but no one seemed to mind. There are few contemporary Rotumans, and no one in a position of power, who seems to be overly concerned about the authenticity of such performances.¹⁸

Summary of the State of the Arts in Rotuma

It should be apparent from this review that at the time of European contact Rotuman culture had a rich tradition of artistic forms with which to symbolize and express social and political themes. Tattooing symbolized Rotuman identity as a unique population of human beings, and differentiated men (as more thoroughly tattooed, and hence more culturally refined) from women. Shell ornaments and clothes of fine woven fabrics distinguished chiefs from commoners, while the *kava* ceremony both solemnized chieftainship and dramatized relative rank. Oratory, chants, singing and dancing were vehicles for expressing ideas in metaphoric forms, and for communicating both opposition and gratitude. The institution of clowning provided a vehicle for temporarily mocking, if not overturning, the established order.

Missionization and colonialization resulted in the demise of some of these artistic forms and the transformation of others. Tattooing and tapa making disappeared before the turn of the twentieth century. The traditional emblems of chieftainship, notably shell ornaments and girdles of fine mats likewise fell into disuse. In 1960 there was no way to tell a chief from a commoner by what they wore, and there is none today. Fine mats remain important items of formal exchange, but there are fewer women capable of producing them now.

Rather than three grades of fine mats, as described by Bennett, only the lesser grade persists. Furthermore, the larger sizes, once standard, are no longer made.

Oratory remains an important skill for chiefs, and has taken on new significance in church and political settings. Storytelling however, especially in the form of telling legends, no longer flourishes. Likewise, with the exception of songs sung during *tautoga* performances, chanting is now uncommon. Clowning remains a significant form of theater,¹⁹ but it appears to be losing its power to mock the social order. The custom of *sa'a*, in which makers of fine mats are granted license for a day, has disappeared, and clowns at weddings now express reluctance to perform their roles with authority for fear of offending others (Vilsoni Hereniko, personal communication). Clowning now has its most vigorous expression at dances, where persons of rank may mock themselves, but are rarely the targets of mocking by others. Of all the traditional art forms discussed above, singing and dancing retain the most vitality. Contemporary Rotumans pour a great deal of creativity into composing songs and choreographing dances, and audience appreciation is invariably evident.

The *kava* ceremony retains its significance, and is a central part of any celebration, but it has lost much of its solemnity and specificity of form. This change appears to be the consequence of several factors, including a loss of knowledge, the secularization of chieftainship, and the blurring of rank and authority.

NOTES

¹ Gardiner reports that the *fuol* is also the name of a bivalve shell from which the pattern was supposedly taken.

² According to Rev. Wm. Allen, "The process was an exceedingly painful one, some even dying through it. Only a little was done at a time, just as much as the person seemed able to bear. Tattooing only commenced when they were youngmen, and no one was considered a man and competent to marry until he had been tatoored" [Allen, 1895 #5].

³ Edward Lucatt, who visited Rotuma in 1841, was sufficiently fascinated by Rotuman tattooing to have some done on himself. His account is informative:

The natives of Rotumah do not tattoo their faces, but their bodies, particularly from the waist to the knees, are ornamented with various designs, some of them very elegant; and when I first saw them at a distance, I thought they had got on close-fitting drawers. Their arms are covered with fantastic devices, and being desirous of witnessing the operation I induced a native to tattoo a small figure on one of mine. Very few are skilled at the art of tattooing, and I was surprised at the number of instruments used by the operator: they are made of small pieces of tortoise-shell of different widths neatly secured to handles, and resemble miniature garden hoes, with fine serrated teeth cut in the edges of the blades, sharp as needles. Having rubbed down the nut of a peculiar tree that had been burnt to charcoal, the operator mixed with it the juice of a herb, and water to render it sufficiently fluid. Without first tracing the design, he dipped the teeth of the instrument into the mixture, and placing it on my arm tapped it gently with a light piece of wood so as just to draw the blood, and he kept changing the instrument from very broad to very narrow, as the nature of the figure he intended to produce, required. The operation is painful, at least I found it so, and should think it must be very severe to those who submit their whole bodies to the puncturing process; but it is the "fashion of Rotumah," and the fear of being ridiculed by their companions overcomes every other dread [Lucatt, 1851 #94:178-179].

⁴ Macgregor also includes a drawing in his notes labeled "Sceptre du roi, Rotuma," on a card headed "Sau's Spear. Rotuma. Mus. Mission, Rome." He indicates that it is 40" total length with a 16" handle, and is made of stained ironwood.

⁵ One of Macgregor's informants told him that bark cloth was often worn around the head to keep the hair up, as well as for lavalavas [Macgregor, n.d. #147].

⁶ We are only aware of one prescribed use of bark cloth for ceremonial purposes, although there were undoubtedly others. Before a wedding, the bride is presented with a small purse, called '*atfara*, which in traditional times contained a small container of oil, some tumeric and a piece of bark cloth. The oil was for lubrication on the wedding night, the tumeric was used to prevent infection, and the bark cloth was to wipe up with. For some years now it has been customary for the '*atfara* to be filled with money by friends of the bride.

⁷ Warriors also wore feathered bonnets, called *miolmilo*, which Gardiner described as "a wooden or bamboo framework covered with tappa and ornamented with the long tail feathers of the boatswain bird [Gardiner, 1898 #8:471]. According to one of Macgregor's informants, once one of these hats was donned it could never be removed while the state of war existed. A man could not even doff it to the *sau*. He must wear it until killed in battle. Because these hats were worn in war, and signified fighting, it was taboo for any one to wear such a headdress in peacetime. Wearing such a headcover through a village was an insult for which a man could be killed [Macgregor, n.d. #147].

⁸ This may in fact have been the case during Gardiner's visit, since the *arnea* (paper mulberry) tree was apparently already rare, if not extinct, by the time of his visit. If that were the case, the women's type of dress cloth, though made from hibiscus bark, might still have been called by its original name.

⁹ The cost of buying a Rotuman fine mat has correspondingly increased significantly. In 1960 an *apei te hapa* (half-size mat) cost from US\$7.50 to US\$10; today these same mats sell for US\$70 or more. Of course a number of factors have contributed to this inflation.

¹⁰ According to Hocart [, n.d. #148], women who were asked by a chief to make an *apei* were granted special license to act outrageously, as if they were possessed by a spirit who was beyond the rules of normal decorum. See section on clowning below.

¹¹ In this respect a gift of an *apei* is comparable to the Fijian presentation of a *tabua* 'whale's tooth', an equivalence explicitly recognized by Rotumans.

¹² In Fiji, however, performances of *mak Rarotonga* are highly organized and 'professionalized,' giving them a much more formal character than in Rotuma [Hereniko [Tausie], 1977 #152:137].

¹³ Alternatively, *hàn mane'āk* can be translated as 'to spoil,' hence *hàn mane'āk* could be glossed as 'woman who spoils.'

¹⁴ Technically the appointment is made by the chief of the bride's district. It is he who authorizes the *hàn mane'āk sū* to exercise license at the event.

¹⁵ In Rotuma the "front" side is generally the side toward the sea, but under certain circumstances it may be on the east, or sunrise side.

¹⁶ The word *manu'* (*manu'u*) has no known denotative meaning other than as an exclamation during the *kava* ceremony.

¹⁷ The content of the *fakpej* are described by Gardiner as telling a "story of the old times or whale fishing" [, 1898 #8:424]. Macgregor includes the texts of some *fakpej* in his field notes. They are stories about how *kava* came to Rotuma, which may have been the dominant theme of the chants in traditional times. The language of many *fakpej* is archaic, however, and not understood by contemporary Rotumans, often not even by the reciter.

¹⁸ When I visited Rotuma in 1960 the District Officer, Fred Ieli, a Rotuman, was a stickler for authenticity. He had a reputation for getting very upset when rituals were done “incorrectly,” or in a causal manner. But no one in authority since has presumed to have his certain knowledge of Rotuman custom and a desire to enforce it.

¹⁹ In recent years a new form of theater has emerged within the Methodist Youth Groups. At fund-raising gatherings they perform skits, mostly dramatizing Biblical events. End of the year school ceremonies also sometimes include skits which may or may not have religious significanc

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