Photo 2.1 Men with prize yams at agricultural competition, ca. 1920s. *Marist Archives, Rome.*

Photo 2.2 Calling out food contributions at a feast, 1960. *Alan Howard.*

2 A Land of Plenty

> The wind being favorable, we made the little island of Rotuma....Being very fertile, it is also very populous. All the productions of the most favored South Sea islands abound here. The day following our arrival, the natives, who seem to be a harmless people, came off in their canoes, in swarms, bringing every variety of fancy and useful article, which their little country afforded. Among the former, were sea-shells, spears, war-clubs, and, perhaps I should include, very fine mats, together with cocoa wood, for canes. The latter, included hogs, oranges, limes, lemons, pine-apples, mangroves, yams, with sweet potatoes, and pumpkins. Of money, they knew not the use.
>
> William Jackman, *The Australian Captive,* 1853

At the time Europeans arrived, Rotuma was a flourishing society. Blessed with a generally benign climate, plentiful rainfall, fertile soil, and a productive fringing reef, the island normally provided its inhabitants with food in abundance. However, periodic droughts and tropical storms that destroyed crops rendered the island subject to occasional famines; hence, the production, distribution, and preparation of food was of central, almost obsessive, concern to the Rotuman people. As the next chapter shows, this concern for food was at the heart of the Rotuman social order. In this chapter, however, we focus on the practicalities of daily living in the days at the time of European intervention.

Subsistence

None of the early accounts provide detailed information about Rotuman agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, or gathering. Lesson reported trading a few small fishhooks for

coconuts, taro, yams, sugarcane, and breadfruit, but he wrote that the Rotumans brought only a dozen chickens aboard and that no pigs were seen. His inquiries yielded information to the effect that, despite the meager number of chickens brought on board at that time, poultry thrived on Rotuma, but that no more than a dozen pigs were to be found on the whole island.

> They told us that a terrible drought had destroyed all their fruit trees so that the natives, deprived of their usual food, had been forced to kill most of their pigs. Even this measure had failed to prevent a famine which caused more than a hundred islanders to die of starvation. Ever since then pigs have not flourished on the island.[1]

Three years later, when Dillon visited the island, it was still recovering from the famine, which, he was told, followed a "dreadful tempest" that had occurred some eight to ten years earlier (i.e., between 1817 and 1819). The Rotumans told him that all the pigs on the island had been killed and eaten, but that whalers had supplied a fresh stock of swine. Dillon estimated that there might have been about a hundred pigs at the time of his visit, "but so careful are the natives of them, that no inducement can prevail upon them to part with one."[2]

Agricultural Practices

Taken as a whole, the early accounts agree that the most important agricultural products were yams, taro, and breadfruit. Gardiner provided the first substantial description of Rotuman subsistence activities. We quote extensively from his account, and build on it with our own field data and supplementary sources. According to Gardiner:

> The chief vegetables cultivated for food are the *papule,* or taro (*Colocasia antiquo,* Schott), *papoi* (*Cyrtosperma edulis,* Schott), *ouhi,* or yam (*Dioscorea ulata,* Linn.), and *pere,* or banana. Taro and bananas are usually planted on the steep hill-sides after the earth has been thoroughly dug up with flattened sticks or English spades; the tops of the taro and the shoots of the banana serve for planting. The Rotuman variety of taro does exceedingly well in such positions, growing very large, and is never planted in swamps. A kind, the *apia,*

is common on wastelands and near the houses, but is not good for food. Of bananas seven kinds are known, but there are only practically two, the one for cooking and the other for eating raw. To ripen they are buried in the sand. The *papoi* is grown in swamps of brackish water and seldom dug except after a hurricane, when food is scarce. For yams the bush is roughly cleared. Rocky land is chosen, and its little existing earth is scraped together with the hands into heaps, in the top of which the yam is planted. After these were dug the land used formerly to be burnt off, the fallen timber by that time being thoroughly dry, and *kava* (*Macropiper methysticum,* Miq.) planted; now it is more frequently tobacco, pineapples, or sugar-cane. Planted, but in no way cultivated, are the breadfruit (*Artocarpus incisa,* Linn.) and the *niu,* or cocoanut, for food, *uta,* or *sago* (*Sagus vitiensis,* Wendl.), for thatch, and the *saaga (Pandanus sp.?),* for making mats. The food plants growing wild include the *ifi,* or Tahitian chestnut *(Inocarpus edulis), fava,* or *dawa* of Fiji (*Pometia pinnata,* Forst.), *mena,* or turmeric (*Curcuma longa,* Linn.), *mara,* or arrowroot *(Tacca pinnatifida?), asa,* or pawpaw, and the *hosoa (Pandanus odoratissimus).* There is further the *hifo,* or *dilo,* of Fiji (*Calophyllium inophyllium,* Linn.), the oil from the seeds of which is regularly extracted. Of the above the taro, yam, and banana are the staple articles of food, and in such an equitable climate as that of Rotuma can be obtained at any season of the year. Arrowroot can be dug whenever it is desired. The breadfruit is season *[sic]* during October, November, and December, and cocoanuts can be obtained at any season in any condition of ripeness.[3]

Rotumans followed a pattern of shifting agriculture, with plots being kept under cultivation for a few years, generally without any rotation of crops, and then permitted to lie fallow. While it was recognized that land that had not been used for a long period of time was more fertile and gave a better yield, greater weight was often given to considerations such as distance to the homestead and nearness to the plots of one's companions.[4]

The usual method of planting taro was for an area of bush to be cleared of heavy growth, with loose stones being removed and placed in piles. If another person had planted an adjacent plot, the stones were often used to form a low

wall marking the boundary. Trees on the land were generally not cut down, but their branches were trimmed so as not to shade the garden. Holes were made in the earth with a heavy digging stick by pounding it into the ground and twisting it in a rotary motion. This was done until the desired depth was reached, when the taro tops were inserted and covered. Plants were spaced approximately two feet apart. After an entire plot had been planted the earth was covered with leaves and twigs from the previously removed scrub in order to protect the soil from baking and to help it retain moisture. Plots were weeded periodically until ready for harvesting. Taro grows very well in Rotuma and attains enormous size. Not only the corms, but also the leaves of some varieties were used as food, most often as *'ikou,* a dish consisting of taro leaves cooked with coconut cream.

'Apea (Alocasia macrorrhiza) was commonly planted on rocky or poor land and was given little attention after planting. The tubers are generally larger than other types of taro, but they were not considered as good eating and also required special processing to remove the irritating oxalate crystals. *Papại,* which was grown in swampy areas, was referred to as "the Rotuman bank." Tough enough to resist hurricanes, it had the additional advantage of being able to remain in the ground in an edible state for a period of years. Hence it was an important hedge against famine in times when other foods were not available. Yams were apparently of only secondary importance to Rotumans and were not as carefully cultivated. The vines were simply permitted to grow over rocks and the cut-away bush, with no special supports generally being provided. Weeding was minimal, and only large bushes and interfering plants were removed. Nevertheless, the fertility of the soil permitted yams satisfactory—and in some instances prodigious—growth, even under these conditions.

Banana and plantain trees were generally planted on the same plots as taro, or as supplementary to yam patches in rocky areas. Bananas were cut while the fruit was green, and the bunches were hung in cooking houses to ripen. If a large quantity of ripe bananas was needed for a feast, Rotumans prepared them by a special process *(fakmamosa),* which involved burying them in a pit for four or five days. The pit was lined with banana leaves, and dried coconut husks were set to smoldering and placed inside. The contents were then covered with leaves and finally with earth, to be uncovered on the day of the feast.[5]

Like other Pacific Islanders, Rotumans used the products of the coconut palm in a wide variety of ways. The sweet, cool liquid inside the green nut was the mainstay of the drinking supply, insuring that no one went thirsty, even in times of drought. The soft meat of the young nut was regularly eaten, usually after being scooped out with the fingers once the liquid has been spent, and the meat of mature nuts was used to feed pigs and chickens. Coconut cream, made from the meat of ripened coconuts, was an ingredient in a wide variety of dishes, including *fekei,* a pudding made by mixing coconut cream with breadfruit, taro, manioc, yams, bananas, and other starches, then baking the mixture in an earth oven *(koua).* Coconuts that were nearly ripe, but still somewhat tender, were used to make *tähroro,* a fermented sauce; it was prepared by replacing the liquid with salt water, plugging the nut, and allowing it to stand on a rack in the sun for a week or two.

From the grated meat of the mature nut, oil was extracted to use (sometimes mixed with turmeric) as a body lotion. The gratings were placed in a wooden bowl, covered with leaves, and allowed to stand in the sun. Because of its presumed medicinal qualities, the oil was used as a salve for sores and to anoint the sick.

In addition to these uses of the coconut itself, other coconut products enhanced the subsistence economy. The dried husks were a main source of fuel; coconut fronds were used for making baskets, and their central spines were used for making brooms; the wood of the tree trunk was used in constructing buildings.

Tapioca was introduced to Rotuma at an unknown date and is not mentioned in any of the early accounts, but it became popular because its cultivation was less labor intensive and yielded comparatively quick returns. Rotumans regarded its taste as inferior to taro and yams, however.

Agriculture was primarily a masculine occupation, and almost every man was first and foremost a cultivator. The whole operation of preparing, planting, weeding, and harvesting a garden was done by men, although on occasion a woman might assist her husband with any of these tasks, or a widow might plant a garden of her own.

Animal Husbandry

Pigs were kept in enclosures formed by stone walls three or four feet high to keep them from entering gardens. They were fed daily with coconut meat, surplus fruit, and scraps from the family table. As suggested by Dillon's account, the pig population probably fluctuated, possibly dropping to extinction following severe hurricanes, then rising to substantial numbers after being replenished from elsewhere. Pigs were not part of the everyday diet but were of great significance for ceremonial feasting. Thus, they did supply a significant portion of animal protein at times, and under optimal conditions played an important role in stabilizing the Rotuman diet. Chickens were generally kept on plantations in low, specially built structures fashioned of sticks and thatch. According to Gardiner, Rotumans blew conch shells to call their chickens and seldom ate their eggs.[6]

Feral pigs were caught by digging a trench and covering it with rotten sticks and earth; loose chickens were trapped with a bent stick to which a sennit noose was tied. It is not entirely clear whether dogs were present prior to contact. Gardiner suggested that they were probably introduced not long before his visit in the 1890s, and he reported that people told him they did not eat dogs.[7]

Of the wild fauna on the main island and surrounding islets, seabirds were the only ones that entered into the diet in any significant way. Hạf Liua in particular is mentioned by early visitors as a place where Rotumans went to forage for eggs and to catch birds.[8]

Exploitation of Marine Resources

Like other coastal dwelling Pacific Islanders, Rotumans made extensive use of marine resources. The waters surrounding the island teemed with fish, and the techniques for catching them were varied. Lesson simply reported that the islanders used huge nets, more than forty feet long, which suggests that they were skilled fishermen,[9] but it was left for Gardiner to describe the basic equipment and techniques for exploiting marine resources. He wrote that Rotuman fishhooks were generally crude, and that most of the fishing took place on the extensive fringing reef rather than in the deep sea.[10]

Fishermen used a variety of nets fashioned from sennit to catch fish, including hand nets *(vao ti),* used for catching lobsters on the reef at night or flying fish attracted by a

torch on a canoe; specially designed nets to catch turtles *(vao hoi)* and mullet *(vao seu);* throwing nets *(vao kiri)* for use at high tide when the fish on the reef came close to shore; and large nets *(vao hapa)* made for fish drives, which often involved entire districts trapping fish in reef passages. Gardiner described fish drives in the district of Noa'tau during his visit:

> The net is put down at quarter-ebb and firmly fixed under the direction of an elected chief of the fishermen; at half-ebb the Noatau people come up and range themselves along the lines of stones, and continue these to the shore and reef with canoes or in the water. When this is done a signal is given, and the Oinafa people form a line right across from the shore to the reef close to their village and commence to drive down. As they come up the ends of the net will be carried round and closed in. It will now be about an hour before low tide. Lot after lot of fish will be driven into the pocket, and removed into the canoes. Any fish speared or caught outside the net is the property of the one who catches it, while the rest are equitably distributed....In one drive we obtained, with about 200 people, 648 large fish of different kinds in the net, and estimated weight at rather over 1 1/2 tons. They were laid out on the ground in tens and then again in groups of ten of these, each ten of about the same size....The fish caught in these hauls are all cooked together, and a feast is held; subsequently the net will be lent to any part of the district which desires to use it, or to any other district for the half of the fish it catches.[11]

To catch small fish in shallow water, women made heaps of stones and coral into which they placed coconut scrapings mixed with cuttlefish ink as lure. Periodically they trapped the fish in baskets or nets. Fish poisons, such as that made from the leaves and stems of the *fuha* creeper (*Derris* spp.) or from the fruit of the *hufu* tree *(Baringtonia)* were also used to stun fish and bring them to the surface for easy capture.[12]

The rules governing authority over fishing expeditions were quite explicit. Districts and villages generally appointed a *tautei,* or expert fisherman, whose job it was to organize communal fishing expeditions at the request of the district or village chief he served. Often, but not always, *tautei* were themselves minor chiefs. The position was more or less hereditary within specific families known for their skill; not

only were skills generally taught to apprentices within the family, but success also required mana (potency), which was thought to be transmitted from ancestors through the family lineage. The success of fishing expeditions was thus believed to be only partially a result of the knowledge and skill of the *tautei;* more important were the spiritual powers granted him by ancestral spirits *(ʻatua)* and his capacity to organize and command other members of the community.

It was the responsibility of the *tautei* to divide up a catch as prescribed by custom. A special share was set aside for the chiefs, and additional shares were sometimes allocated for a particular cause such as a village feast. These special shares, the best of the catch as determined by the *tautei,* were called *tui rere.* Any turtles or sharks that were caught belonged to the district chief, and anyone who ate them without his permission was expected to get sick and probably die if they did not apologize to *(faksoro)* him. After the special shares were parceled out, the remainder of the catch was divided equally among the participants in the expedition. Before a major communal effort the chief sometimes called a moratorium on fishing for a week or so in order to increase the likelihood of a larger catch during the drive.

When only a small group of friends or relatives went fishing, the one who initiated the expedition was said to be "the owner of the net," entitling that person to make basic decisions and to divide the catch, unless a titled person or a *tautei* was also participating.

Food and its Preparation

Rotumans have traditionally divided food into two basic categories, *tēlaʻā* and *ʻiʻini* (see table 2.1). *Tēlaʻā* refers to starchy vegetables such as *ʻaʻana* (taro), *ʻuhi* (yams), *pạri* (bananas), *ʻulu* (breadfruit), *kumara* (sweet potato), *tapiko* (manioc), and *papại (Cyrtosperma).* These have long been the staples of the Rotuman diet, the basic foods on which island life has depended. Thus the meaning of the term *tēlaʻā* is extended in much the same way that the term for rice is extended in rice-dependent economies, so that at its most inclusive level it translates as "food." A distinction is made between the staples listed above, which are categorized as *tēlaʻā ne pear ta* (food of the earth) and *hue ne ʻại* (fruit of the trees). *Hue ne ʻại* includes indigenous fruits such as *ʻifi (Inocarpus edulis), vī (Spondias dulcis),* and *fava (Pometia pinnata),* as well as ripe, uncooked, bananas.

Table 2.1
Tela'a [Rotuman Food Categories]

Tela'a [starchy vegetables]		Embellishments
Tela'a ne pear ta [food from the earth]	*Hue ne 'ai* [fruit from trees]	
'a'ana [taro] *'uhi* [yams] *pari* [bananas] *'ulu* [breadfruit] *kumara* [sweet potato] *tapiko* [manioc] *papai* [Cyrtosperma]	*'ifi* [Inocarpus edulis] *vi* [[Spondias dulcis] *fava* [Pom etia pinnata]	*fekei* [native pudding] *tahroro* [fermented coconut cream] *lolo* [coconut cream] *niu varvari* [coconut flesh] *lumu* [seaweed] *kalofi* [eggs] *fo'u* [sugar cane] *po'oi* [fruit and coconut dish] *koua puha* [ritual pudding]

'I'ini [supplements to *tela'a*]					
Tiko [flesh]					*'Ikou*
Manman la hap hake [land creatures]	*Manman 'es lavlavi* [feathered creatures]	[sea creatures]			
		Te vatvata [crabs]	*Tela'a ma'on pilo* [shellfish]	*I'a* [fish]	
puaka [pigs]	*moa* [chickens] *manman ferfere* [birds]			*i'a* [fish] *pa'u* [eels] *he'e* [octopus and cuttlefish] *te jiji* [sea slugs] *hoi* [turtles] sea mammals	[cooked taro leaves]

The primary referents of *ʻiʻini* are meat and fish, but in its broadest sense the term includes a range of foods that may be translated as "supplements" to *tēlaʻā*. This includes not only *tiko* (flesh), but also *ʻikou* (cooked taro leaves) and several other prepared foods. The major division within *tiko* is between land and flying creatures *(mạnmạnu)* on the one hand and sea creatures on the other.

Among the sea creatures are *tē vatvata* (crabs), *tēlaʻā maʻon pilo* (shellfish) and *iʻa*—primarily fish, but including all edible seafoods with the exception of crabs and shellfish, for example, *pạʻu* (eels), *heʻe* (octopus and cuttlefish), *tē jiji* (sea slugs, literally, "creeping things"), *hoi* (turtles), and a variety of sea mammals.

Mạnmạnu are differentiated into *mạnmạn lā hap häke* (four-legged animals), including *puaka* (pigs); and *mạnmạn ʻes lalạvi* (feathered creatures), including *moa* (chickens) and *mạnmạn ferfere* (flying birds).

ʻIkou refers to taro leaves cooked in coconut cream, but the term can be applied to most cooked vegetables.

Also regarded as a kind of *ʻiʻini* are a number of relishes, condiments, and sauces, including *tähroro* (fermented coconut cream), *lolo* (a coconut cream sauce for meat and fish), *lumu* (seaweed, usually prepared with coconut cream), *kalofi* (eggs), and *poʻoi* (a fruit and grated coconut dish, usually made with *vī*).

Finally there are foods that fit into neither the category of *tēlaʻā* nor that of *ʻiʻini*. They include *foʻu* (sugarcane), *niu vạrvạri* (the soft flesh of young coconuts), and *fekei* (native pudding), several edible varieties of pandanus fruit, and *koua puha*, a pudding made from the sweet tuberous root of the dracaena *(jī ne peje)*. *Koua puha* had special ritual significance and could only be prepared under specific conditions.[13]

INTRODUCED FOODS

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, various new foods were introduced into Rotuma, mostly by European visitors. These included such fruits and vegetables as *mori* (orange), *esu* (papaya), *kuava* (guava), *magkō* (mango), *ponapa* (pineapple), *merene* (watermelon), *tomata* (tomato), and *kiukama* (cucumber). New sources of animal protein included *kunei* (goats), *kau* (cattle), *tạku* (ducks), and tinned meats and fish *(ʻiʻin ne poata)* such as *poat kau* (corned beef) and *sämäne* (salmon).

A whole new category of items, labeled *tēla'ā ne 'iom tī* (food taken with tea), includes a range of introduced foods that are normally eaten for breakfast but also on other occasions when light meals or snacks are called for. Included are such items as *faraoa funu* (bread), *peskete* (biscuits), *susu* (milk), *suka* (sugar), *pata* (butter), *jisi* (cheese), *jema* (jam), *pareje* (porridge), and *raisi* (rice), as well as *kofe* (coffee), *koko* (cocoa), and *tī* (tea).

Food Preparation

The traditional modes of preparing and consuming food in the domestic setting were extensively described by Gardiner:

> The men of the household, when they come down from the plantations, usually carry a couple of baskets of food or bunches of bananas over one shoulder on a stick. Between them they will have everything requisite, even down to the ripe cocoanuts to feed the pigs. Green cocoanuts for drinking purposes will have been all husked on a pointed stake, the *esoa,* and tied up in pairs, a small piece of the husk being left over the soft eye, so that they shall not go bad. At once the men set to work to make the fire and cook the food, an operation never performed for them by the women, who, however, serve the food to the men, when it is cooked, and then retire to their own meal. Fire was formerly produced by simply rubbing a piece of hard wood up and down in a groove in soft wood; the operation was termed *sia.* It would then be nursed and fanned into flame on a dry cocoanut husk. It was the business of the women always to keep a fire in, and in Noatau at least, I was informed by Marafu, fire could always be obtained from the *atua,* or spirit, house.
>
> In each house the chief man has usually a table, the *umefe ataga,* a very slightly concave board, about 2 feet long by 1 foot broad, with four legs 3–4 inches high; it is carved out of a solid piece of wood. In addition to the above, a ridge, often notched and perhaps an inch high, is left down the middle of the under-surface, and on the same side, between two of the legs along the length of the table, a round piece about 3 inches long is left, with a hole in the centre, through which a piece of sinnet is strung, for hanging it up when not in use. On this a banana leaf is placed; the rest of the men simply have their leaves on the

ground. All sit with their legs crossed in front of them, with their knees touching the ground. The food is brought in in baskets by the women; the chief has a basket to himself, from which no one else is helped, while the rest eat several from the same basket and off the same leaf. The women place the food from the baskets in front of the men, and for the chief further peel the vegetables with their fingers and nails. It was formerly only a woman with the *niglolo* [type of tattoo] that would be entitled to do this. At the end of the meal they hand each man a green cocoanut, the only beverage drunk after the meal has begun, having with a piece of stick opened it by making a hole in the soft eye and having provided a cork, usually a piece of the husk, to prevent it from spilling. This done, the food left is gathered into baskets, and the women retire to another house for their own meal. Essential to the house is the *kokona,* which consists, as it were, of the four sides of a box, about 4 inches deep and 2–3 feet square, with the bottom removed and replaced by netting; this is then suspended from the beams of the house, but the four pieces of sennit from its four corners have generally first to pass through the middle of a flat board, the use of which is to prevent the small native rats from running down the sennit and getting at the food. Its origin...is legendary, and it is said to have come with the *moa,* or fowl.

Cooking is usually carried on in an especial house, the *kohea,* open at the ends and sides, low, and roughly put together. The only method is that of steaming in the native oven. A hole is made in the ground in the centre of the house and lined with stones; on the top of these a great fire of sticks is made. Everything being ready and the stones sufficiently hot, the fire is raked out, and a few green leaves are thrown on the stones. Then the food is placed on top and covered over with green leaves and finally with about 3 inches of earth. Most vegetables are put in exactly as they are, but pigs, fowls, and big fish are ripped open, cleaned, stuffed with cocoanut leaves, and placed in tightly fitting baskets of the same leaves to prevent them from burning. The liver is carefully wrapped up separately, as it is esteemed the greatest delicacy.

The green cocoanuts, after the milk has been drunk, are filled with salt water, and their holes stopped up

with conical corks, made of the leaves of the *saaga* twisted up; they are then placed in the sun on small platforms for some days. A certain amount of fermentation takes place, and the soft kernel rots a little, so that a buttery mass, the *dahrolo,* is obtained; it is much used as a seasoning for puddings of different sorts and for cooking fish. No salt is ever collected, but this doubtless acts as a substitute; almost daily some vegetables are cooked with it. Scraped cocoanut is another seasoning, the scraping being done on the *foa.* To make one of these a bough of a tree is selected with a branch going off at an angle of about 60°; the bough is then scraped flat, 18 inches being left below the branch and 3 above. To the branch, cut off about 9 inches long, is firmly lashed underneath a suitable piece of shell (now iron), with the concavity upwards. The cocoanut is broken in half in its shell, and the kernel of each separate half scraped on this, the worker sitting crosswise on the flattened branch. One I saw still in use has a flat piece of pearl shell, with the edges notched. I have seen also a notched pearl-shell cocoanut scraper for use in the hand. Hollowed-out wooden bowls, *umefe,* are used for making the puddings in; they have no ornamentation, and have every conceivable simple form. All puddings are termed *fekei,* but the term, if not qualified, would be taken as applying to one made of breadfruit, and the juice expressed out of scraped cocoanut; another favourite form is made of beaten arrowroot and cocoanut. Small fish are usually cooked with the *dahrolo,* when the dish is called *te lulu;* fowl, young taro leaves, and *dahrolo* are termed *iko.* All these are simply wrapped in the leaves of the banana or *papoi,* and after being tied up placed in the oven with the other food. Sometimes in them the juice of the sugar-cane is substituted for that of the cocoanut.[14]

Traditionally the pattern was to eat one major meal a day, cooked in an earth oven, or *koua* (photo 2.3). As Gardiner pointed out, this type of cooking was strictly a male task. A proper meal included both *tēlaʻā* (starchy vegetables) and *ʻiʻini* (fish, meat, and/or *ʻikou*). To have *tēlaʻā* without *ʻiʻini* was an indication of poverty; *ʻiʻini* without *tēlaʻā* was simply inconceivable. Ordinarily enough food was prepared for the evening meal to assure sufficient leftovers for the following day to sustain household members until another *koua* was

prepared. Only during the evening meal did the family follow the orderly plan of eating described by Gardiner. After awakening in the morning, each member of the family might take a portion of the leftovers, either to be eaten on the spot or taken along for later consumption amidst the chores of the day. The men, for example, sometimes brought food with them to their plantations, particularly if they did not expect to return home until later in the day. As European influence increased, and as many of the men gained experience serving on ships, a breakfast based on tea became the norm, including such items as biscuits, butter, jam, bread, cheese, porridge, and the like. Each member of the household took this meal, ordinarily prepared by women, shortly after they arose, and before they began their main chores.

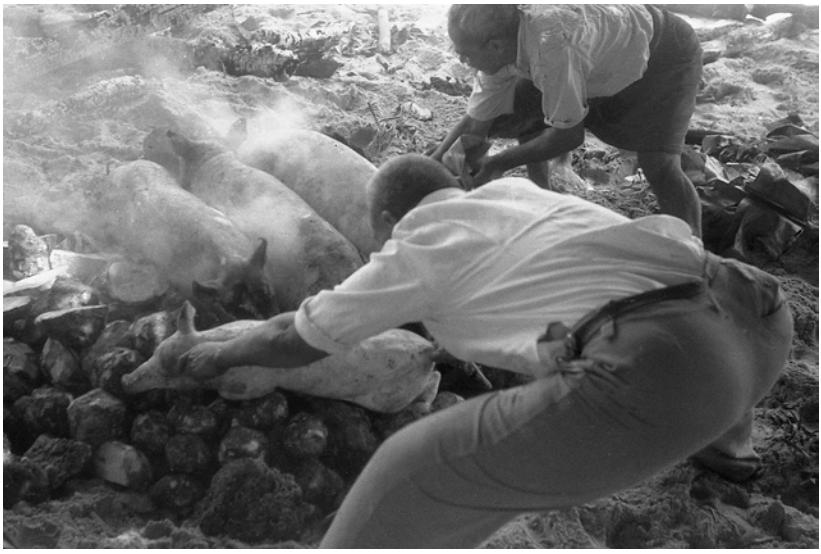

Photo 2.3 Men preparing a *koua,* 1960. *Alan Howard.*

While the production of food for domestic consumption formed the basis of the traditional Rotuman economy, it was augmented by the requirements of a ceremonial system involving elaborate feasting and redistribution of subsistence commodities through the offices of chiefs. This necessitated periodic food surpluses well beyond subsistence needs and was thus a stimulus to production. By providing such a stimulus the ceremonial system generated an insurance margin under normal conditions that increased the likelihood of survival following hurricanes, droughts, and other disasters that from time to time threatened subsistence.

Environmental Concerns

The evidence suggests that despite a dense population and heavy cultivation, prior to European intrusion Rotumans did little to degrade the environment. In part this may have been because of the inherent fertility of the island, in part because of an ethic of conservation supported by a belief in local spirits *('atua).* Henry Eagleston related the following incident during his visit to Rotuma in 1832, illustrating attitudes toward cutting down trees:

> I again visited the shore for the purpose of cutting down three or four beautiful iron wood trees for hand spikes that stood near one of their burying grounds. Could I buy them and obtain Taminah's [Taimanav's] permission to do so, informing him of my wants he very readily consented to my taking all wished for, and fearing there might be an outside squall, sent his son Taminah, a fine boy of about fourteen summers, with me that in case the squall exploded to say it was by his father's permission I was cutting them down. Arriving at the trees many natives were present, mostly young women who watching our movements became as quiet as a clock, but on first swing of two axes they took to their legs and running some distance from us, came to a stand. At the same time an old woman, a priestess, came out of the spirit house and in a wild and excited manner, pleaded hard to save her trees, but Taminah informing her of his father's action in the matter, she immediately hastened to the spirit house, where she set some four or five girls to chewing Cava and making a bowl of grog for the great spirit; meantime the squall increased and she boxed round as if in the centre of a whirlwind and putting herself into all laughable forms possible, while those outside quietly stood looking at us as if they expected to see some great sight and spirit punishment fall upon our heads for despoiling their sacred grounds of their pretty trees. On inquiry we learned that the spirit of departed friends lived in those trees and our cutting them down would bring spiritual vengeance against us and our days to an end. My wants satisfied, we left the old woman still on the squall, with the Cava in place on a bench for the great spirit, but would be cared for by the sly walking spirits that were hovering around.[15]

Chiefs had the power to taboo specific trees or their produce, providing a threat of supernatural sanction to violators, although in this specific case Chief Taminah apparently gave his approval to allow the trees to be cut.

Rev. William Allen reported that prior to the population decrease that followed European contact, the demand for wood for houses and firewood was so intense that no person was allowed to cut down a tree without planting another in its place.[16] Apparently such practices were sufficient to sustain a reasonable ecological balance until well after Europeans arrived, despite the fact that the primary forest had been cleared from approximately 95 percent of the land and replaced by coconut trees, supplemented by a few small areas of secondary forest growth.[17]

Building Materials and Styles

An idea of housing styles on Rotuma from the early 1800s can be gleaned from the accounts of some of the first European visitors. Houses were constructed of poles and logs, with thatched sago palm roofs and plaited sago or coconut palm walls. Most dwellings were described as small, enclosing a space perhaps 15 to 20 feet wide, but chiefs' houses were noted as being larger, for instance 40 by 16 feet[18] and 25 feet high.[19] These early written accounts describe Rotuman houses as rounded at the ends (photo 2.4), but according to Elizabeth Inia, a retired Rotuman schoolteacher and recognized authority on Rotuman custom, the rounding was due to Samoan or Tongan influence; the ends of Rotuman houses were originally flat.

Low doors, which admitted little wind as a protection against hurricanes, required people to enter on hands and knees. Floors were composed of earth, dry grass, and pebbles or small pieces of coral, covered with rough mats of plaited coconut leaves *(farao);* sometimes with a pandanus mat *('epa)* overlay.

Cooking and eating took place outside or in a separate outbuilding *(kohea),* also made of poles and thatch. Other buildings of the same materials but of varying sizes and with or without walls were built for meeting houses.

Rotumans customarily built their dwelling houses on a foundation, or *fūag rī,* of raised earth surrounded by stone walls.[20] Most reports indicate that foundations were from 2 to 4 feet high, but descriptions range from 1 foot[21] to 6 feet high.[22] Foundations up to 12 feet high, presumed to have

been used for chiefly dwellings, were discovered inland by Gardiner.[23] Some writers suggested these raised house sites were useful in keeping the floors dry during periods of heavy rains.[24] For Rotumans, however, *fūag rī* were and are significant in notions of kinship. *Fūag rī* are also reference points for eligibility to stewardship of associated *kạinaga* garden lands, and some foundations carry with them chiefly titles.

Photo 2.4 Traditional Rotuman house. Note raised-earth foundation with stone walls. © *Fiji Museum.*

Young unmarried men ordinarily slept away from their parents and siblings. It was considered improper for them to sleep inside the house, in close proximity to their sisters. Groups of young men often built their own thatched sleeping houses, sometimes on high poles *(rī sipạkit,* photo 2.5).

Home Furnishings and Housekeeping

Early visitors to Rotuma reported but little in the way of house furnishings: "mats, carved bare wood pillows, a few clubs, spears and drinking vessels of coconut shells."[25] Lesson mentioned low tables for eating.[26] Coconut shells strung on sennit for carrying water could be hung up in the house,[27] and "in the centre of the house is generally slung a little koop net on which are deposited their provisions etc."[28] A more elaborate description of a storage device is given by

W. L. Allardyce, who was Acting Resident Commissioner in 1881:

> There is scarcely a house which does not possess, suspended from the ridgepole, a kind of large four-sided swinging basket, called kokona, which serves as a larder and cupboard, and general receptacle for things which are intended to be out of the way of the children and rats. To guard against the latter a piece of circular wood, a foot or more in diameter, is obtained, and a hole bored in the centre, through which the main string of the kokona passes. Underneath this piece of wood, when a suitable height, a knot is made, not large enough to pass through the hole in the wood, which is thus kept stationary. However, the slightest weight on any part of it, at once gives the wood a sudden tilt downwards, and the rat is dropped on to the floor, clear of the kokona, and alongside of the cat.[29]

Photo 2.5 Young men's sleeping house. © *Fiji Museum.*

Settlement Pattern

As a consequence of European contact, Rotuma experienced significant depopulation (see chapter 11), along with a shift

in residence pattern. Although by the last quarter of the nineteenth century the entire population was situated along the shore, earlier accounts indicate that people had been dispersed inland as well. Dillon, for instance, described the scene in 1827:

> Shortly after daybreak we set all plain sail and stood in for the land, which had a beautiful verdant appearance, with plantations and houses from the seaside to the summit of the highest hills. Close to the beach several large houses were strewed, at short distances, among the cocoa-nut and bread-fruit trees.[30]

The actual degree of inland settlement prior to European intrusion remains to be determined by archaeological investigation, although Aubrey Parke has verified the existence of inland house sites *(fūag rī)* and cemeteries *(tamura).*[31]

Through the years observers have speculated about the social significance of inland versus coastal habitation on Rotuma, with some expressing the opinion that the two locations were populated by distinct "tribes." The basic theory was that the inland people were the descendents of an original population that was defeated by invaders and forced into the interior, where they lived in subjugation to their coastal conquerors. Litton Forbes offered the following version in 1875:

> Deep in the recesses of that forest there still lived two families, the sole survivors of an inland tribe that once formed the chief population of the island. The present inhabitants of Rotumah live entirely on a small strip of alluvial land lying between the central volcano and the sea. But there was a time when such was not the case. The interior of the country was at some period inhabited by tribes between whom and the coast natives there had existed one long feud. This had at length resulted in a permanent separation between the two sections of the population, namely, between the dwellers inland and the dwellers on the coast. This separation produced in time divergences in language and modes of thought, so that the dialect of one tribe became unintelligible to the other. The sole representatives of the inland inhabitants of former days were the two families whom we were now visiting. Their numbers were too few to justify any general conclusions regarding the race they belonged to. They seemed,

> however, decidedly inferior to the coast natives of the present day in physique and intelligence. It occurred to me that these people might be a remnant of an earlier migration to the island, and that on arrival of the present inhabitants they had been driven to seek shelter in the mountains and forests, much as the Britons sought shelter in the fastnesses of Wales on the approach of the English. A study of their language would have tended to throw some light on this point, but in their present moribund condition it is not likely that any inquiry could be made conclusive. There can, however, be no doubt that at one time Rotumah supported a much larger population than at present. Tradition leads us to believe as much, while an examination of the island proves it. In all directions through the forest there are traces of large clearing. Flat stones arranged in a peculiar manner mark the sites of ancient houses and temples. Stone fences and walls, now meaningless, served at one time to divide the lands of one family from those of another. These remains point to some great changes having taken place in the population of the island.[32]

Later, Gardiner also speculated about this division and elaborated the presumed relationship between inland and coastal populations:

> Even in such a small island there was at all times a marked line of distinction between the coast and the hill people. The latter lived in certain towns and villages along the inner slopes of the hills, and cultivated exclusively in the great central valley. As a rule, they possessed no land or rights outside this valley, nor had they any claim on the shore waters, i.e., the broad boat channel, four to five feet deep at low tide, between the reef and the shore. They were to some extent under the rule of the coast people, and were only allowed to come down to the coast at certain times. The outer reef, however, was considered as a common property by both peoples, but the right to cross waters of the boat channel had to be paid for, generally in a basket of taro or yams every year, i.e., six months [a Rotuman ritual cycle]. Between the two peoples as such no wars were waged, nor do the hill people seem to have taken much part in the different wars between the coast districts....All giants, strong men, etc., are

> represented in legends as coming from the hills, and the hill people generally are stated to have been in stature bigger than the coast people. Graves, dug up on Sol Hof and near the old sites of Rahiga and Lugula, were only one to three feet deep. The bones were too much broken and decayed to be brought home, but from their appearance might well have given rise to the latter statement. Above Rahiga they seem to have been buried in a sitting posture, but a diligent search gave no implements or weapons. I am inclined to believe that most of the inhabitants of this inland division to the east of the isthmus were really tenants of the coast people. There were undoubtedly a few *hoag* [local groups; see chapter 3] among them, but the number of family names among their descendents is very small. Possibly they were the original inhabitants of the island, conquered by some subsequent migration and recruited from the over-crowded *hoag* of their conquerors. First-fruits were rigidly exacted by the chiefs of their districts, and the coast people seem to have had rights of planting on any of their land, not occupied, without any recognition of ownership. They have always been looked upon as a dying people, and the number of their descendents is in no way proportional to their known population of fifty years ago.[33]

It is interesting to note in Gardiner's version the fusion of the idea of hill tribes with another Rotuman legendary conception: that at one time the island was inhabited by a race of giants. Thus, while Forbes in his earlier account had described the few remaining hill people as being of "inferior physique," by the time Gardiner visited he was led to believe they had been of extraordinary stature. William Eason, who was District Officer on Rotuma in the early 1950s, also cited evidence in support of the belief that a race of exceptionally large men once occupied the island. According to Eason's account, bones were uncovered at various locations that were of exceptional size, but none of the finds was ever satisfactorily substantiated.[34]

The notion of two distinct populations—one composed of original inhabitants of the island, and the other of an invading group who had conquered them and forced them to seek refuge inland—appears to stem from two basic conceptions, one Rotuman, the other European. It seems clear that, at least in part, both Forbes's and Gardiner's

accounts reflected Rotuman oral history. Thus Fr. Trouillet, in his version of the encounter between Raho and Tokaniua, recorded about 1873, described the following scene:

> Tokaniua accosts Rao [Raho], saying to him: "This country, to whom does it belong?"
>
> "It is my country," answers Rao.
>
> "But where are your subjects?" says Tokaniua.
>
> "They are in the interior," responds Rao.
>
> "No," says Tokaniua to Rao, "this country belongs to me."
>
> "But," says Rao in his turn, "where are your subjects?" "They are on the seashore," replies Tokaniua. "Let's go see," says Rao, and together they go around Rotuma. Rao notices that indeed the country is inhabited and upon their return to Oinafa the quarrel becomes livelier.[35]

As a result of his conflict with Tokaniua, Raho reputedly went into exile on the islet of Hatana. The interesting point is that the inland-coastal distinction corresponds to two distinct populations, and that the inland population is associated with the losing, exiled chief, while the coastal population is associated with the winning chief.

In Trouillet's version of this legend, Tokaniua derives from Fiji and Raho from Sāmoa, so their followers were presumably linguistically, culturally, and physically different from one another.[36]

The notion of separate inland and coastal tribes, with the latter regarded as conquerors, was by no means limited to Rotumans: It was a common European speculation about many Oceanic islands and probably reflects the "wave theory" of Polynesian migration dominant in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Not seriously considered was the possibility that whatever differences existed between inland and coastal people could have arisen from the varying specializations required to meet somewhat different ecological challenges. It is also probable that both Forbes and Gardiner gave too much weight to Rotumans' statements concerning differences between various groups on the island. Even today, Rotumans often describe the people from adjacent districts with stereotypes appropriate to an alien group, despite the fact that residential and marital histories show the populations to be thoroughly intermixed. Thus it

may well be that when early visitors asked about differences between inland and coastal people, they were led astray by microregional stereotypes, and perhaps by playful exaggeration.

The story of an ancestral race of giants likewise invites sociological interpretation. Rotumans still enjoy telling about the prodigious feats of their ancestors and bemoan the deterioration of their stock since earlier times. People cite as evidence the enormous stones seen in old graveyards—some stones weighing several tons—which had to be moved considerable distances to reach their present locations. They insist that no mechanical devices were employed but that *'atua* (ancestral spirits) may have ridden atop the stones to lighten the load. What we must recognize is that for Rotumans, as for other Polynesians, self-worth is a matter of genealogical inheritance, and that the potency of one's ancestors has direct implications for one's social significance.[37] To derive one's heritage from powerful (gigantic) ancestors is to assert one's value as a social being; to derive heritage from powerless ancestors is to be socially insignificant. This theme is central to interpreting Rotuman history.

The great concern for ancestors is also reflected in the attention Rotumans give to cemeteries, a fact remarked on by many early commentators. The social significance of the deceased was symbolized in the elaboration of gravestones. Thus Lucatt wrote:

> Every village possesses a play-house and its own peculiar burial-ground; the latter is constructed at the foot of a hill, by building a stone wall, four or five feet high, and filling in the back of it with sand, till a level is formed against the rising ground to the height of the wall and inclination of the land. The bodies are only deposited just beneath the sand; and after they have lain there three, six, nine, or twelve months, a rough, unhewn stone is placed upon the top of them, the size of the stone being regulated by the importance of the party when living. The stone over some of the chiefs cannot weigh less than seven or eight tons, and the grave-yards have the appearance of Druidical remains. The placing of these covering stones is the signal for a feast provided by the friends and relations of the deceased; the more massive the block, the greater is the number of hands required to raise it. Thus do they furnish lasting memorials of the rank and wealth once held by those who repose beneath them.[38]

The importance of graves, and the ranking system they symbolized, brings us to a consideration of the relationship between supernatural spirits and the foundations of chieftainship, the topics of the next chapter.

Photo 2.6 *Tamura* (cemetery) in Maftoa, Itu'muta, 1940. *H. S. Evans.*

Photo 2.7 Young boys atop ancestral tomb, 1913. *A. M. Hocart. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.*

Notes to Chapter 2

The section on housing in this chapter derives from a chapter by Jan Rensel entitled "From Thatch to Cement: Social Implications of Housing Change on Rotuma" (Rensel 1997), published in *Home in the Islands: Housing and Social Change in the Pacific,* edited by Jan Rensel and Margaret Rodman.

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[1] Lesson 1838, 425; translated from the French by Ella Wiswell.

[2] Dillon 1829, 94.

[3] Gardiner 1898a, 420.

[4] The data on which this and subsequent paragraphs are based come from Howard's 1960 field notes. We use the past tense with the understanding that reference is to that year, but we believe the patterns described are ancient; they also continue to some extent today.

[5] Inia 2001, 142–143.

[6] Gardiner 1898a, 421.

[7] Gardiner 1898a, 421.

[8] Boddam-Whetham 1876, 270–271; Lucatt 1851, 182.

[9] Lesson 1838, 428.

[10] Gardiner 1898a, 425.

[11] Gardiner 1898a, 427.

[12] Boddam-Whetham 1876, 268.

[13] Inia 2001, 145–150.

[14] Gardiner 1898a, 421–423.

[15] Eagleston1832, 401–402.

[16] Allen 1895.

[17] St. John 1954, 165.

[18] Haley 1948, 259.

[19] Lesson 1838–1839, 433.

[20] Osborn 1834–1835; Cheever 1834–1835; Lucatt 1851, 167.

[21] Allardyce 1885–1886, 134.

[22] Allen 1895.

[23] Gardiner1898, 433.

[24] Osborn 1834–1835; Lucatt 1851, 167; Boddam-Whetham 1876, 266.

[25] Osborn 1834–1835.

[26] Lesson 1838–1839, 434.

[27] Eagleston 1832.

[28] Cheever 1835.

[29] Allardyce 1885–1886, 134.

[30] Dillon 1829, 91.

[31] Parke 1964.

[32] Forbes 1875, 230–232.

[33] Gardiner 1898a, 481–483.

[34] Eason 1951, 3.

[35] Trouillet 1868.

[36] Trouillet 1868.

[37] Goldman 1970.

[38] Lucatt 1851, 166.