



Photo 13.1 Gagaj Maraf Nataniela of Noa'tau greets Ratu Kamisese Mara, who visited Rotuma for the centennial celebration of Rotuma's cession to Great Britain, 1981. *Fiji Ministry of Information.*



Photo 13.2 Ratu Mara and Adi Lala Mara being carried ashore to attend the 150th anniversary of the Catholic mission in Rotuma, 1996. *Jan Rensel.*

13 Rotuma and Fiji

I think that for many of us who talk about Rotuman independence our main concern is that Rotuman identity and culture, changing as they are, be preserved forever. This simply cannot depend on the goodwill of another race. Control must be in the hands of Rotumans (legitimately representing the interests of ALL Rotumans regardless of where they live)...it's the Rotumans' lack of ultimate control over their identity and culture which is the worry.

Saumaru Foster, *Rotuma Web site*, 1998¹

As a result of political affiliation, there have been no barriers to movement between Rotuma and the rest of Fiji. Rotumans began migrating to Fiji for education and jobs soon after cession was formalized, and by 1936 nearly 10 percent of Rotumans lived there. At the end of the twentieth century the figure was closer to 75 percent. The flow has not been one-way or permanent, however. Individuals of both genders and all ages go back and forth frequently, staying with family members while schooling, getting help while seeking employment, participating in sports or church events, or helping out relatives in various ways while enjoying a holiday.²

Rotuma's special connection with Fiji has contributed to the island's prosperity in a number of ways: (1) by permitting in-country access to wider education and employment opportunities; (2) by supplying government support to the island's infrastructure and providing jobs on the island (approximately one hundred government employees in the 1990s); and especially (3) by allowing ease of interaction among Rotumans in Fiji and on the home island. On the one hand, ready access to in-country travel has facilitated an increasingly consumer-affluent lifestyle on the island; on the

other, it has facilitated the provisioning of Fiji Rotumans with important cultural resources like pandanus mats and favorite foodstuffs from home.

The opening of the airport on Rotuma in 1981 and the increased frequency of ships calling at the island have facilitated opportunities for travel back and forth, resulting in an intensification of interaction and a dramatic reduction in Rotuma's isolation. The resulting ease of travel affords people in both places opportunities to visit one another repeatedly and to experience variant lifestyles.³

The vast majority of Rotumans who migrated to Fiji settled in urban areas, with the highest concentrations in Suva/Lami/Nausori, Lautoka, Nadi, Tavua, Vatukoula, and Levuka. The 1996 Fiji census classified 89.9 percent of Rotumans in Fiji as urban-dwellers.⁴ On the whole, Rotumans in Fiji are a well-educated, productive population who have contributed significantly to the nation's economy. They are overrepresented in the professions and mid- to high-level managerial positions in both private industry and government. It appears that the same character traits that led nineteenth-century European ship captains to favor Rotumans as crewmen have facilitated Rotumans making a successful adaptation to the modern, global system, and taking an active role in Fiji's political economy.

Rotuma's political relationship to Fiji since Fiji gained independence from Great Britain has been solid, but not without controversy. Questions about Rotuma's status within an independent Fiji arose following the Fiji Constitutional Conference held in London during July and August 1965, and ensuing events, including the 1970 Constitutional Conference and the coups of 1987, generated considerable debate within the broader Rotuman community.

The Constitutional Conference of 1965 and Its Aftermath

No Rotumans were in attendance at the 1965 Constitutional Conference. The resulting interim constitution established communal rolls for Fijians and Indians, and a general roll for all other ethnic groups. For legislative purposes, Rotumans, and other Pacific Islanders were classified as Fijians, and for purposes of regional representation Rotuma was combined with the Lau group.

Opinion in the Rotuman community was divided over the acceptability of this arrangement. The Rotuman Association

in Fiji, led by Aisake William, a schoolteacher at Toorak Boys School, made a case for Rotumans having separate representation in the Legislative Council. This opinion was endorsed by Fred Gibson, who at the time was District Officer on Rotuma. They argued that Rotumans are not an immigrant race in Fiji like the Indians or other Pacific Islanders, and therefore deserved special consideration.

This opinion was sharply criticized in the *Pacific Review* by someone who identified her- or himself as "Rotuman Observer" (RO):

The question of separate representation for Rotuma and other Islanders has been quite rightly objected to by Mr. A. D. Patel during the Constitutional Conference in London in 1965. The reasons are too obvious to require further explanation. Fiji cannot afford to allow any further fragmentation of the present communal (voting) representation. Common roll is the present objective and the encouragement of communalism will be incompatible with the principle of common roll.⁵

RO went on to argue that the size of the island's population does not qualify it for separate representation, nor are there any compelling economic or political reasons to warrant it. RO asserted that Rotumans benefited disproportionately from their association with Fiji:

The island population is comparatively small and very few pay taxes. There are not many Rotumans in the urban centres who pay taxes since they are mostly small wage earners. All the same, the Rotumans enjoy without restriction all the modern amenities provided at the expense of the peoples of Fiji. The services provided by Government on the island are out of all proportion to the island population and the taxes paid by the people. No other island in the Fiji group enjoys such services and privileges.⁶

RO scoffed at those Rotumans who advocated a referendum be held on Rotuma to see if majority opinion favored independence from Fiji:

The economy of the island is based exclusively on the copra industry and any attempt to diversify the economy would make no difference at all to the overall island economy. Would those Rotumans who are advocating independence be able to provide employ-

ment for the people or extra land for the expansion of their coconut plantations?⁷

Rotuman Observer's caustic criticisms were responded to in *Pacific Review* by two members of the Rotuman Association. One, identified as "Rotuman Critic" (RC), expressed dismay over "the complete misinterpretation of what the Rotuman Association was fundamentally trying to achieve." RC distanced the views of the Rotuma Council and the Rotuman Association from any advocacy of independence:

The Rotuma Council and the Rotuman Association have never ever claimed "Independence" in any of their meetings. They have only expressed their loyalty to the Crown and their realization of the fact that Rotuma is part and parcel of the Colony of Fiji.⁸

RC also took Rotuman Observer to task for excluding the approximately 3,000 Rotumans in Fiji from consideration. "Are they not Rotumans to be included in the Rotuman population census?" he asked.

The second response was from "Speedy Recovery" (SR), an apparent, rather sarcastic, reference to RO's infirm state at the time. SR forcefully made the case for separate representation:

Does he [RO] believe that the fundamental rights of a minority race in a democratic society [should] be suppressed?...Most Rotumans consider we should have separate representation while the communal system lasts. Is not this reasonable? I have yet to see an Indian representing Europeans in Council and vice versa....As Rotuma is part and parcel of Fiji, are we to be regarded as indigenous Fijians (taukeis)? Will our Fijian brothers (taukeis) accept or regard us as an immigrant race? Are the Rotumans' interests protected in the Legislature?⁹

SR went on to dispute the allegation that Rotuma receives much more from Fiji than it contributes, arguing that the island's development plan was implemented with hardly any government aid, and that Rotuman contributions to Fiji had been substantial both in terms of financial support and services.

RO responded to the letters that defended the Rotuman Association's endorsement of separate representation with a vitriolic, personal attack, referring to RC as "an impulsive

lunatic, completely incapable of analysing and understanding a simple equation."¹⁰ The nasty tone of this reply suggests that feelings concerning the issue of separate representation ran very high within the Rotuman community in Fiji.

What, RO asked, was the Rotuman Association trying to achieve: "Is it communism, tribalism, nationalism, or racial segregation?" He asserted that further fragmentation of the existing communal representation would "serve only to perpetuate inexplicable racial fear, hatred and suspicion of one another."¹¹

Regarding the issue of including Rotumans in Fiji on a proposed Rotuman communal roll, RO wrote:

there is nothing more absurd than to suggest that all the Rotumans in Fiji should be included in the Rotuman Constituency for voting purposes. It naturally follows from the argument of the "Rotuman Critic" that all the Fijians in the urban areas should only vote in the constituencies in which their provinces are located.¹²

RO went on to argue that further fragmentation of the rolls would result in mediocre and unworthy members of the community being elected to the Legislative Council. "It will be a real pity if our affairs in Fiji are conducted on [a] racial basis and not on merit," RO argued. The minority groups would suffer the most because of their small numbers.¹³

Constitutional Conference of 1970

The allocation of Rotumans to the Fijian constituency remained in place until the Constitutional Conference of 1970, which was also held in London. In their initial representation to Lord Shepherd, British Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, who visited Fiji early in 1970 to prepare for the conference, the Rotuma Council sent a telegram pledging their support for the proposed change in dominion status provided that (1) a link to the Crown would always be maintained; (2) Rotuma would be given a separate constituency for election of a member to the lower house; (3) a chief would represent Rotuma in the upper house; and (4) safeguards would ensure that the Rotuman Lands Ordinance and the Rotuman Development Fund would be preserved, as in the current constitution.¹⁴

On 24 March, Gagaj Maraf Nataniela and Wilson Inia visited with Sir Robert Foster, the Governor of Fiji, to speak about the constitutional changes proposed for Fiji. According to Foster, "They spoke at length about their loyalty to the Queen and how well they had been treated since their Cession Day." Foster assured them that the proposals for the new constitution were such that the Queen would remain Queen of Fiji and Rotuma and that there was no question of altering this. Gagaj Maraf and Inia also reaffirmed the Rotumans' desire that the Rotuman Lands Ordinance and Rotuman Development Fund be preserved, and they were again given reassurance. Regarding the issue of representation in Parliament, they said that in the Upper House "they would wish this member [to be] appointed by the Rotuma Council and that he should be a person who lived in Rotuma," to which Foster offered no objection, although he suggested that it would be unwise to include the residence requirement in the written document because it might prove overly restrictive in the future. In response to their request that Rotuma have representation in Legislative Council, Foster explained his view that constituencies be more or less even in the number of votes, which would preclude Rotuma's having a representative of its own because of its limited population. Foster reported that he was "left with the clear impression that although they would very much like to have a member of their own in Legislative Council they did appreciate that this was probably not to be and that they would almost certainly have to be joined with others in a representation as indeed they are now."¹⁵

Inia and Gagaj Maraf attended the conference in London as observers. Although they advocated separate representation for Rotumans their voices were not heeded, and the previous arrangement was incorporated into the soon-to-be-independent Fiji's constitution. Rotuma was given representation by a senator (one of twenty-two), but no seat in the House of Representatives, which consisted of 12 members elected by voters on the Fijian Communal National Roll and 10 additional Fijian members elected by voters on the National Roll; 12 members elected by voters on the Indian Communal National Roll and 10 additional Indian members elected by voters on the National Roll; and 3 members elected by voters on the General Communal Roll with 5 additional members elected by voters on the National Roll. "General" was defined as "persons who are neither Fijian nor Indian as defined in the present Constitution."¹⁶

The Rotuman senator was to be nominated by the Rotuma Council, but Rotuman representation in the House of Representatives was destined to be in the hands of non-Rotumans because of the comparatively small size of the Rotuman population. Rotumans would be able to stand and vote in the Legislative Council elections as electors in the constituencies covered by the Eastern Division (which included the Lau Islands).

In an appeal to the Governor of Fiji, Sir Robert Foster, the Rotuman chiefs complained that Rotuman requests had been either refused or ignored at the Constitutional Conference. The chiefs asserted that "the majority of Rotumans had been distressed to learn that requests submitted by Chief Marāf and Mr Wilson Inia on behalf of the Council of Rotuma and the Rotuman people at the London conference had not been approved."¹⁷ The chiefs expressed the view that Rotuma should not be a colony of Fiji, but should be a federal part of the new nation consisting of Fiji and Rotuma. They specifically requested a provision in the Constitution for a seat in the House of Representatives allocated to an elected representative of Rotuma, and went on to add:

We believe it is absolutely necessary for these safeguards to be written into the new Constitution in order to protect and perpetuate our identity, our birthrights, customs and traditions, which are very dear to us and are very highly valued by the chiefs and the people of Rotuma.¹⁸

The petition was signed by Gagaj Marāf Tirio of Noa'tau, Gagaj Tavo Rupeni of Oinafa, Gagaj Aisea of Pepjei, Gagaj Osias of Juju, Gagaj Albert Vanike of Itu'ti'u, Gagaj Manav of Itu'muta, and Gagaj Vasea of Malhaha.

Their appeal fell on deaf ears, however, and the new nation of Fiji began its existence on 10 October 1970 with only a senate seat representing the interests of the Rotuman people.

Rotuman Responses to the Coups of 1987

On 14 May 1987, Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka led a successful coup overthrowing the government of Timoci Bavadra. Five days later, on 19 May, the Rotuma Council called an emergency session to discuss the position of Rotuma.

Members of the council resolved to pledge their support to the new government and to remain part of Fiji.

In a letter to the Rotuma Council dated 3 June 1987, Henry Gibson, a part-Rotuman resident of New Zealand, expressed his apprehension that the position of the people of Rotuma would deteriorate under the new arrangement. Gibson, the great-grandson of a Scottish man who lived on Rotuma during the mid-nineteenth century and a Rotuman woman of high rank from the district of Noa'tau, had been raised on Rotuma before emigrating to Fiji as a youth. He took up martial arts, including training in Japan, and attained the status of grand master, subsequently founding the Jyoishin Mon Tai Kiok Kuen Kung Fu Society, with numerous branches in the Pacific region, including Australia and New Zealand.

In 1981 Gibson returned to Rotuma for the centennial celebration of the island's cession to Great Britain. As part of the festivities he was invited by the Rotuma Council to give a martial arts demonstration, during which he broke cement blocks and timber with his hands and threw mock attackers into the sea. The demonstration earned him a significant following, and many joined classes that he offered. After a period of time on Rotuma, Gibson went home to New Zealand, where he said he had "an astral experience with the ancient ones," during which he was urged to assume the title of Lagfatmarō by an ancestor who held the title.¹⁹ Gibson returned to Rotuma and was formally given the title of Gagaj Sau Lagfatmarō on Christmas Eve, 1982, by members of his kin group. The title was associated with the Mōlmahao foundation in Kalvaka, Noa'tau district. In his view, the original Lagfatmarō was the first Rotuman *sau*, and as his successor Gibson claimed to be "King of Rotuma." In his correspondence with the Rotuma Council and others he signed his name as H. R. H. King Gagaj Sau Lagfatmarō. When asked what the H. R. H. stood for he replied, "H. R. H stands for 'His Royal Highness' and is used when referring to or addressing a King. It is a form of respectful address used in civilized countries throughout the world."²⁰

On 11 June 1987, Lagfatmarō met with the Rotuma Council and told them that he would not accept the council's decision to remain with Fiji; he left for New Zealand five days later.

At the July council meeting the members resolved to send representatives to attend the Great Council of Chiefs meeting in Fiji to express Rotuma's desire to remain part of Fiji, and

on 15 July the delegation, led by Council Chair Aisea Aitu, attended the Great Council and pledged their loyalty. Following the return of this delegation, meetings were held in each of Rotuma's seven districts to ascertain the views of the Rotuman people. According to the deposition of the District Officer, Viki Epeli, it was the overwhelming view of the majority of the Rotumans who attended these meetings that Rotuma should remain part of Fiji, even if Fiji were to become a republic. In late July the preference of the people and the chiefs of Rotuma to remain part of Fiji was communicated to Governor-General Ratu Sir Penaia Kanatabatu Ganilau.

On 25 September 1987, Rabuka led a second coup, overthrowing the interim bipartisan government. The Rotuma Council met four days later and again resolved that Rotuma would remain part of Fiji. On 10 October Rabuka declared Fiji a republic, effectively severing Fiji's formal ties with Great Britain. The Rotuma Council sent its resolution to remain with Fiji to the President of the new republic with a copy to the Prime Minister.

Soon after the September coup, Lagfatmarō declared Rotuma independent of Fiji and in October he wrote to Queen Elizabeth, with copies to the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand. Claiming racial harassment of Rotumans, Lagfatmarō invoked the United Nations charter on freedom from persecution on the basis of race, religion, or belief. He assailed the overthrow of the prior democratic government, the racially discriminatory policies of the Rabuka regime, and the position taken by the Rotuma Council, which reflected, in his opinion, their vested interest as chiefs and not the will of the people. Seventy-five percent of the people on Rotuma and many Rotumans in Fiji, he claimed, supported secession.²¹ In response to criticisms that he aspired to rule over Rotuma as a sovereign monarch, Lagfatmarō wrote in the *Fiji Times*:

My leadership concerns only my people of Molmahao, decided in 1982. We make our stand clear. For other Rotumans it is a matter of conscience or convenience, whichever is important to them, whatever course they decide to follow.²²

In a letter to the council admonishing them for their stand, Lagfatmarō argued that the resignation of the Queen's representative in Fiji placed Rotuma in the position of a

dependency of Great Britain as per the Deed of Cession of 1881, irrespective of the close ties Rotuma had had with Fiji over the past years. He claimed to have one thousand signatures supporting this position.

On 29 December 1987, the fifth anniversary of Gibson's taking the Lagfatmarō title, his supporters raised the British flag over the Mōlmahao Cultural Centre, which he had established in a thatched building in Kalvaka. The District Officer, Viki Epeli, outraged by this act of defiance and allegedly in a drunken state, went to the center and shot at the flag with a shotgun. The threat of violence resulted in a thirteen-man all-Rotuman military team being sent to Rotuma from Fiji, reportedly "to help control a sudden outbreak of extensive damage to food crop plantations by wild pigs," according to the Fiji Ministry of Information. Epeli was replaced as District Officer by Major Tiu Malo, who was called out of retirement from the Fiji Military Forces to head the team.

Lagfatmarō did not back down, however, and hired a well-known Suva lawyer of Tongan ethnicity, Tevita Fa, to draw up a constitution for an independent Rotuma. The proposed constitution associated Rotuma with New Zealand with the Queen of England as its head, thus allowing Rotumans free access to New Zealand. Under the arrangement, the Governor-General of New Zealand would also be the Governor-General of Rotuma; he would be represented on the island by a High Commissioner. A new house of chiefs would be created consisting of seven district chiefs, and a legislative assembly consisting of two elected members from each district would have an advisory role. A premier and a cabinet of not more than five would be appointed from the assembly members. There was also a provision for a high court, with a chief justice as its head, and a land court. This constitution was presumably modeled on the constitutions of the Cook Islands and Niue. It did not institutionalize any role for a *sau*, or "king."²³ New Zealand Prime Minister David Lange rejected Lagfatmarō's approach, saying that his government would not interfere in a dispute between Rotuma and Fiji.²⁴

Lagfatmarō's supporters met in Juju on 15 April 1988, and proceeded to select from among themselves seven individuals to represent the seven districts. They called themselves "cabinet ministers," although they also referred to themselves as the "new district chiefs." In a letter to Rabuka dated 27 April 1988, the self-appointed cabinet

asked for the right to use the grounds of the government station at Ahau for the Rotuma Day celebration on 13 May, the anniversary of Rotuma's cession to Great Britain:

Your Most Honourable,

We, the undersignees wish to inform You Sir, that as we are the only legal Cabinet in Rotuma representing the welfare and interest of Rotumans living here and abroad, that we shall be using the grounds at the Government Station at Ahau on May the 13th.

Preparations and repairs to be carried out require at least 2 weeks before in advance for the Celebrations, and request that you advise the District Officer, Rotuma to be aware of the situation.

Confrontations must be avoided for the safety of all concerned. It is understood that Rotuma is a Crown Colony now as we all believe and we are still recognised as British Subjects as before the Coup in Fiji.

Your response will be greatly appreciated.

Respectfully yours,

The letter was signed by Hiagi Apao, who identified himself as "Noatau District Chief"; Jioje Aisea, as "Oinafa District Chief"; Fereti Emose, as "Malhaha District Chief"; Mausio Managreve, as "Itutiu District Chief"; Uafta Versoni, as "Juju District Chief"; Iane Savea, as "Pepjei District Chief"; and Garagsau Mose, as "Itumuta District Chief." Afasio S. Mua is listed as Security Officer and Ian S. Croker as Secretary.

In the meantime, Tevita Fa accompanied Lagfatmarō to Tonga in a fruitless effort to solicit support from the Tongan government; while in Nuku'alofa, Lagfatmarō (described in a newspaper account as "a self-styled 'king' of one clan") declared that his followers would lower the Fiji flag and replace it with a Union Jack on Rotuma Day.²⁵

The Fiji government's response was less than sympathetic. It sent a gunboat to Rotuma with thirty soldiers "to investigate reports of alleged sedition on the island," and proceeded to arrest the seven new "chiefs" along with Afasio Mua, Ian Croker, and Vesasio Mua, an active supporter from Juju. Charges against two of the "chiefs," Mausio Managreve and Garagsau Mose, were dropped because of their advanced age.

On 16 May the Magistrate's Court, with Acting Chief Magistrate Apaitia Seru, who flew in from Fiji, sitting,

prepared to hear the case against the defendants. However, Tevita Fa, their lawyer, argued that the Fiji judiciary had no jurisdiction over Rotuma after Fiji was declared a republic. "After the second coup," Fa contended, "the constitution was abrogated, throwing overboard all the existing legislation including the Rotuma Act. It's on this issue that I stand here now and submit that you do not have any jurisdiction to sit and hear this case," he contended.²⁶ He added that the declaration of Fiji as a republic did not bind Rotuma because Rotuma was not mentioned in the declaration, which only made reference to indigenous Fijians. The only piece of legislation not affected by the coup, Fa asserted, was Rotuma's Deed of Cession to Great Britain. He said that the matter should be adjudicated by the High Court of Fiji.

The prosecutor, Isikeli Mataitoga, agreed that the question of jurisdiction should be determined by the High Court, although he argued that the Rotuma Act, which provided for a magistrate's court, remained in force. In his brief to the High Court he argued that the fact that the same laws that existed before the second coup had been preserved after a republic had been declared clearly indicated that the applicability of existing laws to Rotuma were never in doubt despite the political upheavals. Besides, he contended, there was overwhelming evidence that the chiefs and the people of Rotuma had expressed their desire to continue their historic association with Fiji. He also expressed the view that not to regard Rotuma as part of Fiji would have disastrous consequences for the people of Rotuma.

Seru ruled that the High Court should consider the jurisdiction issue, and after consultation with District Officer Tiu Malo and the chair of the Rotuma Council, Aisea Aitu, who both said that the eight defendants would constitute a security risk if allowed to go free, they were remanded in custody.

The mood on the island was rather tense at the time. While some thought the Mōlmahao group was a serious threat to the peace of the island, others were more sympathetic, or saw the whole affair as a tempest in a teapot. In fact there was a good deal of ambivalence regarding the issue of independence. Quite a few Rotumans thought it worth considering, but most were critical of the way the Mōlmahao group had gone about it. Not only did the vast majority reject the "new chiefs" on the grounds that they were not chosen according to custom, but several of the selectees would not even have been eligible in the districts

they were supposed to represent. In addition, according to Council Chair Aisea Aitu, Lagfatmarō's followers were disrupting district and village administration by boycotting community work. District Officer Tiu Malo accused them in one instance of interfering with a health inspection.²⁷ Although the chairman and spokesman for the "new chiefs," Hiagi Apao, said that the group's fight for independence was a peaceful struggle, many, including Aitu and Malo, feared that violence would erupt if the group's political activism were not restrained.

After hearing the arguments by Fa and Mataitoga, Chief Justice Sir Timoci Tuivaga ruled on 9 June 1988 that:

The de facto situation governing the present state of affairs in Fiji and Rotuma shows that all laws existing immediately before the 25th September in so far as they have not been revoked continue to be operative and valid.

Among these laws are the Interpretation Act (Cap. 7) and the Rotuma Act (Cap. 122).

Section 2(1) of the former Act defines "Fiji" as also including Rotuma while section 3(1) of the Rotuma Act states as follows:

"Except in so far as Rotuma has been expressly excluded from the provisions thereof, all Acts are hereby declared to apply to Rotuma."

The above provisions leave no doubt that the Penal Code as part of the laws of Fiji applies just as much to Rotumans living in Rotuma as it does to any other people living in Fiji.

That being so and having regard to the relevant provisions of the Rotuma Act, I am satisfied and would hold that the District Officer's Court in Rotuma is lawfully vested with the power, authority and jurisdiction to hear the case of all eight plaintiffs who are presently facing charges of sedition in Rotuma.

On a broader plane I also hold that for legal and other purposes Rotuma continues to be a part of the independent sovereign State of Fiji.²⁸

However, the Chief Justice left the door open for those seeking Rotuma's independence from Fiji:

I should imagine that if Rotuma should ever want to sever its historic and well established links with Fiji the least that would be expected of them following the

noble precedent set by their illustrious forebears would be to conduct full consultations with the government for the time being representing the independent sovereign State of Fiji.²⁹

After being sent to Suva and placed in custody for a short period, the eight defendants were let out on bail and allowed to return to Rotuma on the conditions that they report to the police station once a week and that they not take part in any meetings.³⁰ They arrived back on Rotuma on a government ship that brought a number of department heads to the island for hearings concerning the wants and needs of the people. Most Rotumans saw the visit as provoked by the dissension on the island and many credited the Mōlmahao dissidents with finally getting the government in Suva to pay some attention to Rotuma. The dissidents also gained some admiration for their determination and willingness to go to jail for their cause.

Hearings were held by Magistrate Seru on Rotuma in October 1988, with Tevita Fa acting as defense counsel, assisted by a lawyer from New Zealand, Christopher Harder, and Isikeli Mataitoga acting as prosecutor. The Rotuman chiefs were not represented by counsel, and according to reports Fa took advantage of the situation by attacking the chiefs' credibility and diverting attention away from the defendants. Seru declared a year's recess with the explicit hope that tempers would cool and that Rotumans would settle the matter among themselves. When that hope was not realized—the Mōlmahao faction remained defiant in attitude, although they violated no laws in the interim—the trial was reconvened in October 1989. From New Zealand, Lagfatmarō issued several pleas in the public media asking that he be guaranteed safe conduct to visit Fiji in order to attend the trial but was informed that he faced arrest if he returned.³¹

This time the chiefs were represented by counsel but that did not stop Fa from systematically intimidating them. The chiefs' testimonies were central to the prosecution's case, but since the proceedings were held in English (with high school principal Ieli Irava translating from Rotuman when required), the chiefs were at a disadvantage. The prosecutor, Babu Singh, had his witnesses present their evidence for sedition in straightforward accounts, but Fa's cross-examinations were often devastating. Nevertheless, the chief magistrate found the defendants guilty and fined them F\$30 each (which was F\$20 less than the fine for riding a motorbike on the island without a helmet); he also put them

on two years' probation. The conviction, combined with such mild punishment, seemed to satisfy both sides sufficiently to cool antagonisms and resulted in a return to a semblance of normality on the island over the next few years.

The sedition conviction was overturned by a higher court in 1991, after which Lagfatmarō again requested permission to return to Fiji and Rotuma. His request was granted initially, but following the counsel of Jioje Konrote, Gagaj Marāf Solomone, who was then chairman of the Rotuma Council and Rotuma's senator in the Fiji Legislature, wrote to Ratu Mara, the Acting President of Fiji, requesting that Lagfatmarō be declared a prohibited immigrant. The letter contained the following passages:

As Chairman of the Council and on behalf of the Chiefs and the people of Rotuma, may I humbly request that you reconsider Government's decision to allow this rebel (and someone whom we consider to be a non-Rotuman, but more importantly as an embarrassment and insult to the indigenous Rotumans) to return to Fiji and Rotuma.

We consider him as a threat to our normal protocol of chiefly customary laws and traditions by his self appointed title and claim to chiefly status (which we do not recognise nor acknowledge) within our society. In this regard we therefore conclude that his return would be detrimental to the maintenance of peace and stability on the island.

As a result of his disrespect, arrogance and blatant disregard to traditional values and behaviour, we would like to therefore declare him as a PROHIBITED IMMIGRANT under the appropriate Section of the Rotuma Act and the Laws of the Government of Fiji.

May I also take this opportunity to re-assure you of the Council, the Chiefs and the people of Rotuma's strong allegiance and support for the Government and the people of Fiji.³²

This letter was followed up by a more formal request, unanimously endorsed by the Rotuma Council, on 19 November 1992. As a result, the government reversed its earlier decision and Lagfatmarō was kept from visiting Rotuma again.

The 1990 and 1997 Fiji Constitutions

Following the 1987 coup, Rabuka repealed the 1970 constitution and set in motion a process resulting in a new constitution. Recognizing the possibility that an enhanced voice in the governmental structure might emerge, the chairman of the Rotuma Island Council wrote to the Governor-General of Fiji on 25 May 1987 requesting three seats in the House of Representatives for Rotuma—one communal seat for Rotumans in Rotuma, one communal seat for Rotumans living in mainland Fiji, and a national seat for all Rotumans in the country.

There was no official response to the letter, nor to a subsequent memorandum to the Prime Minister dated 18 February 1988 from the chairman of the Rotuma Council that reiterated the request, with the justification that Rotuma's inclusion in Fiji annexed "thousands upon thousands of square miles of exclusive economic zone the potential of which has yet to be properly gauged."³³

Jioje Konrote, son of former District Officer Konrote Marorue and a colonel in the Fiji Military Forces at the time, presented the following account of his involvement in these events:

I was recalled back to Fiji from the US Pacific Command in Hawai'i immediately after Rabuka led the military coup which usurped control of the country and toppled the Dr. Bavadra-led Indian-dominated Labour Government on 14th May 1987.

During the period of military rule, and in my capacity as Deputy Commander and Chief of Staff of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, I was very involved in the discussions and negotiations which took place both in Suva and Rotuma to ensure that the Rotuman people assumed their rightful place within the overall Fijian community and became represented in Parliament.

As Rabuka's emissary I was initially sent to Rotuma to explain to the chiefs and the people of Rotuma the reason for the military take-over, but more importantly to determine from the Rotuman people whether they would like to remain as part of Fiji or secede because of what had happened. Following a very emotional and somewhat sobering council meeting, I was asked to

convey the consensual views of the Council and the people of Rotuma as follows:

"The chiefs and the people of Rotuma understand and support the military in its actions and pledges its [*sic*] full support and wish to maintain the status quo and remain part of Fiji; and

"The chiefs of Rotuma and people expect to be represented in the Executive governing body of the new Government, whatever form it takes."

The Council had wanted a representative from each of the seven districts, but I had to intervene and advised them that it was more acceptable and justifiably appropriate that they consider requesting three seats only, as follows:

- 1 seat for Rotumans who reside on the island
- 1 seat for emigrant Rotumans in other parts of Fiji
- 1 common seat for all Rotumans

Before returning to Suva, I made every effort to accompany the chiefs to their various districts to explain to the people what had transpired at the Council meeting. There was overwhelming support from the community (except for Lagfatmarō's clan) as people realised that they will be represented in the new government.

The proposal by the Council that Rotuma be allocated three seats in the new Parliament was presented to a newly convened Constitutional Review Committee chaired by Paul Manueli, who, as a former Commander of the army, had been very much against the military intervention. I had strongly advised the chiefs to base their request for the three seats on sovereignty; however, following much argumentation amongst the members of the Constitutional Review Commission, Rotuma was only allocated one seat.³⁴

When the new constitution was instituted in 1990, it explicitly recognized Rotuman interests in Chapter III, which read as follows:

Protection and Enhancement of Fijian and Rotuman Interests

21. (1) Notwithstanding anything contained in Chapter II of this Constitution Parliament shall, with the object of promoting and safeguarding the economic, social,

educational, cultural, traditional and other interests of the Fijian and Rotuman people, enact laws for those objects and shall direct the Government to adopt any programme or activity for the attainment of the said objects and the Government shall duly comply with such directions.

(2) In carrying out any direction given under subsection (1) of this section, the Government through the Cabinet may

(a) give directions to any department of Government, Commission or authority for the reservation of such proportions as it may deem reasonable of scholarships, training privileges or other special facilities provided by Government;

(b) when any permit or licence for the operation of any trade or business is required by law, give such direction as may be required for the purpose of assisting Fijians and Rotumans to venture into business; and

(c) may give directions to any department of Government, Commission or authority for the purpose of the attainment of any of the objects specified under subsection (1) of this section; and the department or the Commission or the authority to which any direction under paragraph (a), (b) or (c) of this subsection is given shall comply with such directions.

(3) In the exercise of its functions under this section, the Cabinet shall act in consultation with the Bose Levu Vakaturaga, or the Council of Rotuma, as the circumstances may require.

Rotuma's seat in the House of Representatives was to be elected by a roll of registered Rotuman voters. Fijians were given 37 seats, Fiji Indians 27 seats, and 5 members from a roll of voters who were neither Fijians, Indians, nor Rotumans. One of 34 Senate seats was allocated to the Rotuman constituency. As before, the Rotuman senator was to be appointed by the President of Fiji on the advice of the Rotuma Island Council. The new Fiji Constitution was adopted in 1990 and Paul Manueli was sworn in as Rotuma's first Member of Parliament after the 1992 general elections.

The 1990 constitution guaranteed Fijian ethnic hegemony, making it virtually impossible for Fiji Indians to hold power.

As a result it was criticized as racist and Fiji was voted out of the British Commonwealth.

Yielding to pressure from Commonwealth countries, a Constitution Review Commission was formed in 1995 under the chairmanship of Sir Paul Reeves from New Zealand, assisted by commissioners Brij V. Lal and Tomasi R. Vakatora. The commission took submissions from a wide range of individuals and groups, including persons representing the views of the Mölmahao group and members of the Rotuma Council.

Submissions by the Mölmahao Group

One of the Mölmahao group's most extensive submissions was from Alifereti Arapio, a retired schoolteacher from Juju. He presented himself as president of the "Association for Independence and Democracy Sau-Kamata Rotuma Island," asserting that the association had 450 members. While arguing for independence, Arapio did not advocate severing Rotuma's links to Fiji, "for Fiji will always be an influence and a big brother," he wrote. He advocated a referendum, which he claimed would prove that the number of Rotumans favoring independence "is improving greatly." He confirmed that if the movement succeeded, "our Head of State will be Gagaj Sau Lagfatmaro II," and asserted that the Mölmahao group and their supporters comprised 75 percent of the population of Rotuma, although the document was affixed with only 48 signatures.³⁵

Another of Lagfatmarō's supporters, Sakimi Sai Riogi, a Rotuman residing in Australia, sent several submissions to the commission. He had been given the title of Gagaj Rafeok by the Mölmahao group and signed his submissions as "chief minister of the Mölmahao-Rotuma Cultural Organization." He invoked the United Nations declaration on granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples,³⁶ and claimed that the previous constitutions violated many UN human and democratic rights conventions that had been ratified by Fiji. In an attempt to provide Fiji with a justification to grant Rotuma sovereignty he characterized Rotuma as a burden on Fiji that would be relieved if it were allowed to stand on its own feet as an independent nation.³⁷ He also deplored the refusal of the Fiji government to grant Lagfatmarō safe passage to Rotuma and berated the Rotuman chiefs as stupid, uneducated, corrupt, lazy,

irresponsible, without mana, unworthy of their titles, and "not fit to look after the Rotuman people."³⁸

In response to assertions by some individuals that Rotumans should be considered *taukei*, a Fijian term for indigenous people, Gagaj Kausakmua, who signed his submission "Chief Minister and Clan Elder," wrote:

It is total madness for any Rotuman to be called Taukei Rotuman....We are not Taukei and if any title be given, we wish to be known as indigenous FAMOR or KAINAG ROTUMA. We again strongly objected to the 1970 and 1990 Constitution and view the Fiji Constitution as a legalised robbery of our identity and to be called Taukei is an element of colonial and dictatorial oppression of our rights and dignity as a race.³⁹

Lagfatmarō testified in person before the commission in Suva on 12 September 1995. His statement to the commissioners was as follows:

By virtue and authority bestowed upon me by the Royal Mulmahao Clan Elders, members and supporters on the island of Rotuma and abroad, based on ancient Rotuman traditions and cultural law, I stand before the Fiji Constitution Review Commission to present and justify the consensus wishes, desires and aspirations of the indigenous Rotuman people for the future of their island.

The people most strongly oppose and resent fervently any idea whatsoever, to include or cede the island of Rotuma to Fiji.

It is their belief that the Deed of Cession between Rotuma and Great Britain in the year 1881 is still a binding contract between our nations.

There has been no consensus agreement by the people of Rotuma to alter or refute the Deed of Cession since that date.

The people of Rotuma have looked with extreme concern at the histories of contact between colonial powers and the indigenous peoples of North America, Australia, Asia and other Pacific Islands. They see the broken promises, abuses of indigenous rights, culture, landownership, religious beliefs and the unique right to autonomy.

In most cases these unfortunate peoples have lost the right to be themselves in their own land. This violation of indigenous birthright and heritage is the

direct result of a dominant colonial culture or larger ethnic group sharing a constitution with the indigenous minority. The outcome is always the same—the needs of the dominant colonial culture are served whilst the indigenous culture is devalued and undermined. It must be remembered that Rotuma existed as a separate entity well before the great Fijian migration right down to British annexation.

Our island still stands separate in international waters, our language is still intact, our culture practiced, our way of life unique with the Pacific.

We are of Polynesian heritage. Our ways of organising land ownership differs greatly to those of Melanesian Fiji. This is an issue of extreme concern to all landowning Rotumans who wish to continue handing down land in the ways known and respected by their ancestors.

I would now like to stress two very important points strongly emphasized by Gagaj Rafeok and Gagaj Kausakmua at the Constitutional Review panel held in Rotuma on the 15th of July, 1995.

The "so called Rotuma Island Council" is not the legal authority over the island and people of Rotuma.

They, as chiefs know all too well that they are elected to their positions by their *mosega* (clans), to serve and present their wishes and best interests of the Rotuman people.

Also, they, as chiefs, cannot finalise or conclude any decisions regarding the island's future without first consulting the clan elders, *mosega*, and the people.

They, as chiefs, are aware that ancient Rotuman tradition and culture dictates that should any chief commit actions contrary to the wishes of the people, the result is instant termination of his right to bear a title.

To violate this ancient tabu is to commit an act of desecration upon the life core of Rotuman heritage.

The Rotuman Deed of Cession with Great Britain is a clear indication of the process of traditional Rotuman decision making according to our culture.

It is the only surviving document still honoured and respected today by the people of Rotuma.

Therefore, to conclude, I find that on grounds of our historic autonomy, our unique culture and traditions,

and sad experiences of other ethnic populations under colonial control, that the best path for our island's future lies in independence.

The islands of Tonga, Tuvalu, Niue, Cook Islands, Vanuatu, the Solomons, and Fiji itself, all have eventually gained autonomy.

We wish no less for ourselves in the immediate future.⁴⁰

Submission by the Chiefs and Council of Rotuma

On 18 September 1995, a group of Rotumans presented a submission to the commission on behalf of the chiefs and the Council of Rotuma. The group included Aisea Atalifo, Chairman of the Council; Fatiaki Misau; Gagaj Taksās of Itu'ti'u; and two Rotuman lawyers, Sosefo Inoke and Kafoa Muaror. Paul Manueli, the Rotuman representative to the lower house and a member of the cabinet, attended the hearing.

The submission included a review of documents germane to cession from which the submitters concluded that:

- (a) Rotuma was ceded as a separate and distinct island nation to Great Britain;
- (b) Notwithstanding that cession our forefathers wished our lands, seas and people to be absorbed into the Colony of Fiji;
- (c) The laws governing Fiji, where appropriate for the maintenance of peace and good order of our people, would apply to us.

They expressed the view that this special relationship with the Fijian people had endured the test of time, and the hope that it would continue and be further strengthened by the new constitution. Nevertheless, they left the door open for the possibility of Rotuma becoming independent sometime in the future.

Unless and until the present Rotuman Community in Fiji and Rotuma express an overwhelming view e. g. by referendum, that Rotuma should break away from Fiji, the wish to be part of Fiji must be honoured and we now affirm our fore-fathers wish.

In any event, such talk of independence is premature and unrealistic.

In the meantime, they expressed the view that the Rotuman community must strive for financial autonomy in terms of new and improved infrastructure on the island such as roads, water, hospital and other medical facilities, electricity, communication but to name a few.⁴¹

According to the submitters, whereas the 1970 Constitution failed to recognize the special position of the Rotumans, the 1990 Constitution went a long way toward putting things right. Still, they argued, more effective representation was required if the needs of the community were to be met. Specifically, they asked for two representatives in the lower house, two representatives in the upper house, and the creation of a special ministry for Rotuman Affairs. The notion was that the Rotuman community would be divided into two constituencies, one confined to the island of Rotuma, the other encompassing all Rotumans living elsewhere in Fiji. A special ministry for Rotuman Affairs was needed, the submission held, to "effectively cater for the full protection and promotion of the rights, interests and concerns of the Rotumans as an indigenous race." This did not have to be a full ministry, the submitters wrote, but could be part of Ministry of Home Affairs, Fijian Affairs, or some other ministry.

The submitters also requested that the Council of Rotuma be officially recognized by the constitution, and that all matters relating to Rotumans and Rotuma be decided if and only if approved by the council. In addition they asked that the constitution explicitly recognize Rotuman customary laws and traditions, and that Rotumans be given the explicit right to set up their own court system, as the Fijians had done. All matters pertaining to Rotumans living in Rotuma including land matters should be governed by the Rotuma Act, the Rotuma Lands Act, or other such acts that might be promulgated from time to time. Furthermore, they argued, any amendment or promulgation of such acts should require the approval of the Council of Rotuma.

In response to the assertions of the Mōlmahao group, Gagaj Marāf Solomone, the chief of Noa'tau and senator from Rotuma, stated that the Rotuma Council did not recognize the title of Lagfatmarō because the Mōlmahao group had failed to follow customary procedures in bestowing the name. He also asserted that the council was the only lawful body that could speak on behalf of the Rotuman people, and that

the Mölmahao group had only around one hundred people, being just one of many "clans" on the island.⁴²

The Constitution Amendment Act of 1997 resulted from the commission's hearings. As in the 1990 constitution, Rotumans were given only one seat in the House of Representatives, elected from a roll of voters registered as Rotumans. The request of the chiefs and council for two members, one representing Rotumans on the island, the other representing Rotumans elsewhere in Fiji, was denied. In the newly formed Senate, consisting of 32 members, the President of Fiji was to appoint a Rotuman senator on the advice of the Council of Rotuma. The document specifically required Parliament to make provision for the application of customary laws and for dispute resolution, and in doing so, to have regard for the customs, traditions, usages, values, and aspirations of the Fijian and Rotuman people.⁴³

Although the 1997 act did not allow for the creation of a special ministry of Rotuman Affairs, Marieta Rigamoto, the Rotuman elected to the House of Representatives in the first election held under the Act, in 1999, was given an influential position as assistant minister in the Prime Minister's office, where she was put in charge of the "Blueprint for Fijian and Rotuman Development and Village Improvement Scheme."

The Economics of Integration

The postcolonial Fiji government continued British public welfare policies and provided infrastructural and personnel support on Rotuma for health services, education, public works, and communication. The Rotuma Island Council received a government subvention that increased substantially, from F\$52,000 in 1984 to F\$160,000 in 1999.⁴⁴ In addition, the Fiji government contributed to the construction of district meeting halls and supported other self-help projects on Rotuma through annual grants; from 1989 to 1992 self-help grants amounted to F\$10,000 each year. Assistance for economic development, however, was comparatively minor.

Many Rotumans complained that Rotuma did not receive sufficient support from the central government, and like the Mölmahao group, expressed the view that it would be of greater advantage to affiliate with a more developed nation like New Zealand, Australia, or the United Kingdom. The desirability of unrestricted access to urban areas with all that they offer was apparent to most. If Rotumans had been

unable to migrate freely to Fiji during the twentieth century, overpopulation would have put a serious strain on the social fabric. When the population of the island exceeded 3,000 in the 1960s strains were already apparent, particularly with regard to land matters. Thus, even some of the strongest advocates of independence foresaw the need to affiliate with some country or other. However, no country other than Fiji expressed the slightest interest in granting Rotuma affiliation and, in an age of decolonization, it was rather unrealistic to expect them to do so. Indeed, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, the government of New Zealand explicitly rejected the possibility.



Photo 13.3 Ratu Mara and British High Commissioner T. R. Williams meet with members of the Rotuma Council at the inauguration of the council house in Ahau, 25 October 1971. *Fiji Ministry of Information.*

Nevertheless, some Rotumans advocating independence argued that the island would be viable economically if it were a port of entry and could export produce (for example, root crops) directly to Tuvalu, Kiribati, and elsewhere. One of the most thoughtful proponents of independence, Hiagi Apao, suggested Rotuma could lease its fishing rights from the 200-mile zone of ocean resources they would control, produce wine from the island's bounteous orange crop, and expand tourism, in addition to obtaining foreign aid. As a

model he pointed to Tuvalu, a country with a small population and limited resources.

Government officials responded to the accusation of neglect by pointing out that Rotuma received proportionately more assistance than most other parts of rural Fiji. Beyond direct assistance, they contended, all Rotumans in Fiji, including those on the home island, have benefited from Rotuma's affiliation with Fiji. The opportunities for unrestricted travel back and forth enabled Rotumans to seek advanced education and job opportunities that were not available on Rotuma.

Indeed, a case could be made that the ease with which information, cash, and goods flowed between Rotuman communities in Fiji and the home island resulted in a multilocal community that benefited all Rotumans by allowing them to choose among a variety of opportunities and income sources, resulting in a considerable degree of flexibility when responding to fluctuating circumstances within the global economy.

The pros and cons of Rotuman independence were discussed in 1998 on the Rotuman Forum, a section of the Rotuma Web site.⁴⁵ The discussion was initiated by a thoughtful contribution from Saumaru Foster, a Rotuman living in Sydney, Australia:

I have nothing but admiration and good will towards Fijians—and I include amongst them ethnic Indians and other minority groups. I believe that peace and friendship and justice amongst all the different peoples of Fiji should always be encouraged.

I therefore believe that it is precisely for these reasons that the question of Rotuman independence deserves to be seriously discussed—not the least because it is so intertwined with the notions of Rotuman culture and identity....

No one should oppose such a discussion either. Not the international community because it is a crucial point of the UN charter that independence for a group of people in such a situation should be supported. Not the Fijians because they have endured two coups in an attempt to assert their own indigenous identity and independence. And certainly not the Rotumans themselves who have lived unconquered by any other nation for centuries. (Of course, I am not implying here that conquest automatically confers on the conqueror the right to absorb the conquered.) In any case, it was

by a treaty that Rotuma was ceded to the British. Fiji had its own treaty.

To suggest that Rotuma should be independent is not a flippant flight of fancy. Anyone who knows world history will understand that more unlikely propositions have come to fruition. And I dare suggest that as the world shrinks with the increased internationalisation of its means of communication, the more likely and easier it will be for such a proposition to be actualised.

By independence for Rotuma, I'm not necessarily suggesting secession from Fiji. There are many types and levels of independence for a people and the nation state is not always the best option at a given time.

However, what I certainly mean by Rotuman independence is this: Rotumans, as a distinct indigenous group (within the Fijian nation), should have the ultimate say in matters which affect their culture—the law (especially those governing land and its ownership and use), the language and customs and the chiefly system.

I would suggest that, given the present Fijian constitution and the way Rotumans, as such, are represented or not at the supreme decision-making bodies of their public—Parliament, the Council of Chiefs and the Public Service—such independence is far from being the case!⁴⁶

Others were more skeptical, calling attention to Rotuma's limited resources and a global economy that subjects small societies to circumstances they cannot control. As one anonymous contributor put it:

Size and resources matter. Fiji's bigger and has more resources than Rotuma can dream about. If Fiji's going nowhere, goodness knows that an independent Rotuma will barely achieve! There aren't enough Rotumans on the island as it is, and who's to say that all Rotumans living away from Rotuma will remain committed to the good of their ancestral homeland 2, 3, etc. generations down the road from now. Where will the patriotism of peoples of even a little Rotuman blood lie?⁴⁷

Foster responded:

Rotuma is in the same position as Fiji—it's just that it's smaller. Fiji survives economically because of international agreements which protect it from total competition. Can you imagine Fiji (or any other small nation) surviving otherwise? So, in a similar manner, when Rotuma becomes independent it will survive under similar agreements—not handouts, not donations, not charity but agreements which ensure a fair exchange of resources be they fruit, vegetables or people (any nation's most valuable resource). Again, such a Rotuma would be no different from Fiji in principle. Fiji survives because other nations have agreed to treat her in a particular way—not because she has gold and sugar and tourism. Other nations can produce and deliver any of these commodities much more cheaply. Independence or autonomy is an issue which needs to be discussed rationally—not emotionally.⁴⁸

Although some Rotumans complained about neglect by the Government of Fiji, others pointed to all the contributions it had made to the island's infrastructure and economy, many of which were taken for granted. Lavenie Coy drew attention to these contributions and what their withdrawal would entail should Rotuma become independent:

Presently the Fiji Government pays for the following:

1. The cost of a number of Rotuma residents and the equipment to maintain the roads.
2. The cost of a number of Rotuma residents and the generators and pumps and fuel for them to provide and maintain the water system for the island.
3. The cost of maintaining the hospital and its doctor, dentist, nurses, and other staff, mostly residents of Rotuma, and for medical treatment and medicine for the residents. And if a resident becomes seriously ill or injured and needs more extensive care/treatment at Suva the government pays for the airfare or an emergency flight to transport them.
4. The cost of a generator and maintaining it to provide power for the hospital and the entire Ahau complex and Council offices and garage.
5. The cost of all the teachers, mostly highly qualified Rotumans trained by the Fiji Government, to provide a good education for the children and

maintaining the various school facilities, except for the Catholic school.

6. In addition, the Rotuma Council is provided school buses to get the children to/from school as well as funds for fuel and maintenance of them.

7. And they also provide funds for/pay the seven district chiefs and other Council staff/expenses so the Rotumans don't have to.

8. Also costs for maintaining the Post Office and telephone services as well as some smaller services such as an agricultural and fishing specialist to assist Rotumans with such.

This, in itself, is an enormous cost to the Fiji Government for which they ask for NOTHING in return except that Rotumans abide by the laws and good morality of Fiji; an "enormous" expense that is required for the benefit of the residents of Rotuma, BUT who can't afford to take over even 1/10 of such costs and more themselves.

And, in addition, the Fiji Government:

1. Has built an airport to handle air service from Fiji and maintains it (though a better job could be done) and radio facilities needed.

2. Subsidizes the service of a boat providing passenger and cargo service to the island monthly to assure that Rotuma has lower cost transportation for supplies to the island and other products on the return trip. The residents would be hard pressed just to provide this subsidy, let alone the other costs.

However, by declaring independence from Fiji you can be sure that:

1. The Fiji Government will withdraw ALL personnel from Rotuma that are on their payroll back to Fiji, or will cease paying those that don't want to transfer back to Fiji, as well as the equipment they provided.

2. They will cease to maintain the airport and radio facilities and will recall these personnel or cease paying those that don't want to transfer back.

3. And what about those in Rotuma receiving pensions or other financial assistance from Fiji? Will Fiji continue to provide these? I don't think so, further causing hardships for the older Rotumans.

4. They will discontinue providing medical services on the island and will no longer provide the emergency

medical flights or medical services in Fiji for the island's residents, so residents—your family members—will die instead of getting the more extensive treatment they need.

5. They will withdraw approval of air service between Fiji and Rotuma leaving Rotuma without such air service and contacts.

6. They will withdraw not only the subsidy but approval for the Fiji based operator of the boat to serve Rotuma leaving Rotuma with no shipping services for supplies to or copra and other products from the island.

7. And due to restrictions on importation of Agricultural Products from other Countries/Non-Fiji Islands Rotuma would lose their market for Copra, their only means of earning money.

And, you may ask, how about replacement of air and boat service from New Zealand or elsewhere?

1. The cost of the long flights would be prohibitive for Rotuma residents and even with an enlarged airport to accommodate the necessary aircraft for the longer trip the amount of traffic wouldn't support operation of an aircraft/air service.

2. And the same would apply to boat service as there would be NO subsidy and the longer trip would make shipping costs prohibitive.

Is this what you want for your family/relatives living in Rotuma, total isolation setting the progress of Rotuma back 100 years?⁴⁹

Still others, and they may well have constituted the majority of Rotumans, wanted to see Rotuma remain part of Fiji, but with a greater degree of autonomy and recognition. Sosefo Inoke was a spokesman for this position. In a posting on the Rotuman Forum he articulated his vision of what was needed:

That Rotuma is a sovereignty is not an issue. The 1881 Deed of Cession to Great Britain is testimony to that fact. Now that we have been associated with Fiji ever since, our standing and status in that union is the real issue. I challenge you to tell me what it is exactly. You will not find it in a document anywhere. Neither will you find it in unwritten conventions. At best I suggest all we have is a loose understanding as to what that relationship entails. A frightening situation. You may

well say that we have been in this situation for over 100 years and things have been going on pretty well. That may well be true but there has been no reason or occasion to put that relationship to the test.

We need more than the Rotuma Act giving the Rotuma Island Council of Chiefs the power to make laws for the order and good government of Rotuma.

I give you an example. Suppose that a rich mineral deposit is found just north of the serene Malhaha coastline. The Government says since you are part of Fiji we will take all of the income from mining that deposit as part of revenue for the whole country. Are we able to say, "Hold on, that is ours, we will decide how much we give to the country?" Can we turn to some document or convention or some law that will help us? I doubt that the Rotuma Act will help us.

Is this such an unrealistic scenario? How do we address this problem?

One thing that will help is to have a treaty signed between the Fiji Government and the representatives of Rotuma. That is the normal way nations set out their agreements and arrangements with each other. It is a different thing altogether from secession. Our leaders need to sit with the Government and put pen to paper as to what exactly the relationship was and what it will and should be. Having an arrangement based on unclear conventions and loose understandings is a recipe for misunderstanding and discontent. I go so far as to suggest that this is one of the reasons why we can ask as often as we like but we will not get the parliamentary representation we may deserve.

Do we need a treaty?

Well, having a written agreement, because that is what a treaty really is, will make everyone aware of all the rules of play. It may not have all of them but it will have all the important ones. Secondly, in the process of making those rules the parties will address their minds to the issues that are important to their relationship and may find ways of avoiding conflicts before they arise. They will also become aware of the contentious ones and may even find a workable compromise.

You may be able to achieve the same result by having an act of Parliament passed by the Fiji Parliament. The trouble with this is that like any act it

can be changed at any time at the whim of the Government. Sure, you can put all sorts of safeguards in the act but that will not fix it. All they do is make it more difficult to amend the act.

What should the treaty contain? First, it will acknowledge our sovereignty over our territory yet at the same time acknowledge that Rotuma is part of Fiji. It will set out the terms on which the Government and Rotuma will have access to that territory. The treaty will also set out the terms of our political relationship with Fiji: e.g., the number of seats in the lower house and the senate, the right to self government as and when we need it, possibly the setting up of a special ministry or department for Rotuma affairs. The right to set up our own court systems and dispute resolution processes will be acknowledged. Similarly, our financial relationship with Fiji, e.g., the right to impose taxes and fees on activities within our territory. I am sure you can think of a whole lot more things that should be in such a document.

I liken it to a partnership and the partnership agreement. You are together and yet at the same time separate. For the relationship to flourish you must acknowledge each other's rights and privileges and not allow one to be overborne by the other. Is it such an unreasonable expectation?

Inoke concluded:

I am not here talking about secession or independence in its widest sense. I am talking about establishing and maintaining an identity and the rights and privileges that come with it.

As a minority group we must guard against policies of assimilation and integration. One of the safeguards is the establishment of a treaty. If you accept that Rotuma is a sovereign nation then you will have no difficulty accepting the creation of a treaty and the notion of increased Lower House representation. You will also accept that it is a necessary document to have.

The longer we proceed without such a document the greater the risk of losing our identity. We will become assimilated and absorbed into the rest of the country. A minority group with an identity we will not be. Is this what we want?⁵⁰

Conclusion

At the close of the twentieth century there was a diversity of viewpoints among Rotumans with regard to Rotuma's relationship with Fiji, but one thing is clear—that the cultural tradition that places a premium on autonomy and self-determination remains a dominant part of the Rotuman heritage. Just as individuals have jealously guarded their autonomy within households, as have households within villages and villages within districts, Rotumans have expressed concern about preserving the autonomy of Rotuma Island, either within Fiji or as an independent nation. The Chief Justice left open the possibility for Rotuma to renegotiate its status vis-à-vis Fiji in his ruling on the legitimacy of the trial of the Mōlmahao rebels. Rotumans have discussed the issues involved with considerable vigor; it remains to be seen what form this thrust toward autonomy will take in the twenty-first century.



Photo 13.4 Unveiling a monument to Rotuman chiefs at Ahau government station during dedication of council house, 1971. *Fiji Ministry of Information.*



Photo 13.5 List of Rotuman chiefs on monument unveiled at dedication of council house, 1971. *Fiji Ministry of Information.*

Notes to Chapter 13

While most of the information in this chapter has not appeared in any of our previous publications, we have included material from two articles: "The Fiji Connection: Migrant Involvement in the Economy of Rotuma," which appeared in *Pacific Viewpoint* (Rensel 1993), and "Symbols of Power and the Politics of Impotence: The Mōlmahao Rebellion on Rotuma," published in *Pacific Studies* (Howard 1992).

We have striven here to give voice to the disparate views within the broader Rotuman community concerning Rotuma's relationship with Fiji, hence our reliance on magazines, newspapers, and contributions to the Rotuma Web site.

¹ <http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum3.html>

² See Kaurasi 1991.

³ Rensel 1993.

⁴ 1996 Census of Fiji, Bureau of Statistics.

⁵ *Pacific Review*, 22 October 1968, p. 1.

⁶ *Pacific Review*, 22 October 1968, p. 2.

⁷ *Pacific Review*, 22 October 1968, p. 2.

⁸ *Pacific Review*, 29 October 1968.

⁹ *Pacific Review*, 29 October 1968.

¹⁰ *Pacific Review*, 15 November 1968, p. 1.

¹¹ *Pacific Review*, 15 November 1968, p. 1.

¹² *Pacific Review*, 15 November 1968, p. 3.

¹³ *Pacific Review*, 15 November 1968, p. 4.

¹⁴ Representation for Lord Shepherd (No. 16), 3 February 1970; The National Archives, Ref.: FCO 32/593.

¹⁵ Sir Robert Foster, Discussion with Chief Maraf and Wilson Inia of Rotuma. Typed report, c. 24 March 1970; The National Archives, Ref: FCO 32/593.

¹⁶ Report of the *Fiji Constitutional Conference* 1970. However, "Fijian" was defined as including the descendents of parents from any island in Melanesia, Micronesia, or Polynesia, including Rotuma.

¹⁷ *Fiji Times*, 12 June 1970.

¹⁸ *Fiji Times*, 12 June 1970.

¹⁹ Personal communication, letter to Howard, 26 September 1988.

²⁰ Letter from Lagfatmarō (Henry Gibson) to "The Seven Chiefs," 30 December 1988. Copy in authors' files.

²¹ *Fiji Voice*, No. 3, December 1987.

²² *Fiji Times*, 24 December 1987.

²³ *Fiji Times*, 12 May 1988.

²⁴ *Fiji Times*, 14 May 1988.

²⁵ *Fiji Times*, 9 May 1988.

²⁶ *Fiji Times*, 17 May 1988.

²⁷ *Fiji Times*, 19 May 1988.

²⁸ *Fiji Times*, 10 June 1988.

²⁹ *Fiji Times*, 10 June 1988.

³⁰ *Fiji Times*, 13 June 1988.

³¹ *Fiji Times*, 28 November 1989.

³² Letter dated 11 April 1992. Copy in authors' files.

³³ Sosefo Inoke, "A Commentary on Parliamentary Representation and Rotuman Statehood," Rotuman Forum, Rotuma Web site (<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum9.html>).

³⁴ Personal communication, 4 March 2004. Konrote was eventually promoted to Major-General and Commander of the Fiji Military Forces. He subsequently served as an Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations and Force Commander of UN peacekeeping operations in Lebanon (UNIFIL), from September 1997 to December 1999, and was appointed Fiji's High Commissioner to Australia in 2002.

³⁵ Submission dated 5 September 1995.

³⁶ General Assembly Resolution 1541 (XV), 14 December 1960.

³⁷ Submission dated 3 July 1995.

³⁸ Submission dated 9 June 1995.

³⁹ Submission dated 1 June 1995.

⁴⁰ Constitution Review Commission, Verbatim Notes, Uncorrected Copy, Tuesday, 12 September 1995.

⁴¹ Submission dated 18 September 1995

⁴² *Fiji Times*, 15 June 1995.

⁴³ The Constitution Amendment Act of 1997, Article 186.

⁴⁴ Parliamentary Debates, 11 December 1984; Marieta Rigamoto, personal communication, October 2003.

⁴⁵ Rotuman Forum, Rotuma Web site (<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum3.html>).

⁴⁶ Rotuman Forum, Rotuma Web site, 26 January 1998. (<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum3.html>)

⁴⁷ Rotuman Forum, Rotuma Web site, 8 March 1998 (<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum3.html>).

⁴⁸ Rotuman Forum, Rotuma Web site, 15 March 1998 (<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum3.html>).

⁴⁹ Rotuman Forum, Rotuma Web site, 19 August 2000
(<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum20.html>).

⁵⁰ Rotuman Forum, Rotuma Web site, 5 April 2002
(<http://www.rotuma.net/os/Forum/Forum9.html>).