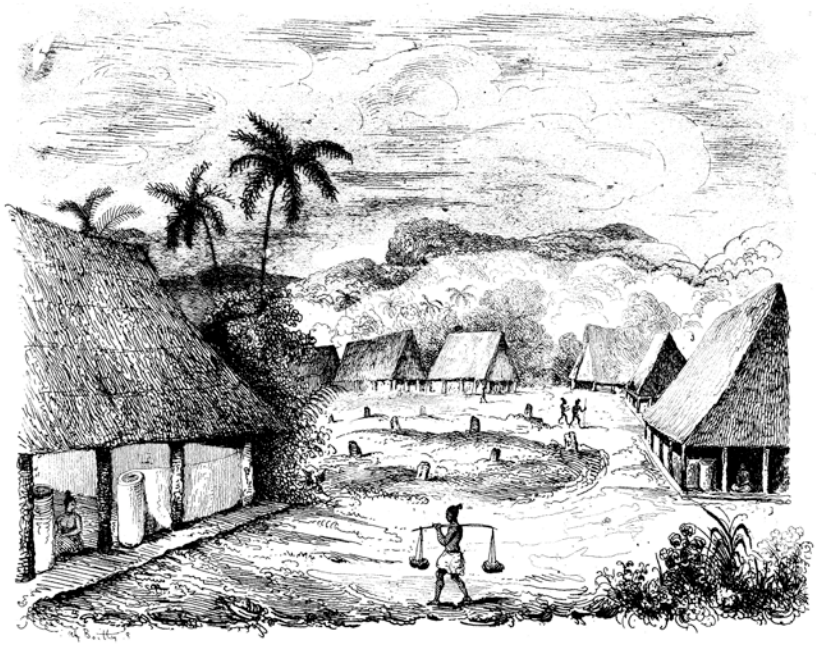


Figure 3.1 *Village à Rotuma (Village in Rotuma). Duperrey 1826.*

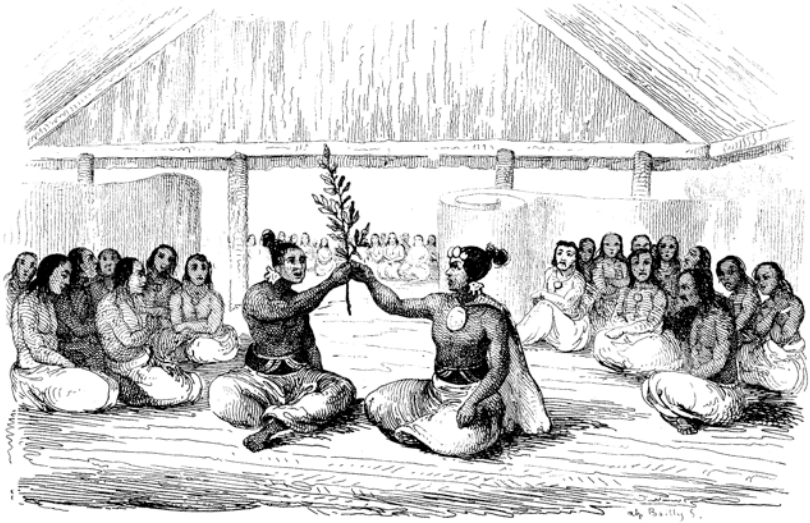


Figure 3.2 *Transmission du Pouvoir à Rotuma (Transmission of Power in Rotuma). Duperrey 1826.*

3 The Social Order

> Raho and Tokaniua came from Samoa (Sa'moa in Rotuman) to plant Rotuma. They brought two baskets of sand to Rotuma, and landed at Malhaha. Raho stayed at Vại, and Tokaniua stayed at Farema. Raho then put a *fapui* (sign) at Malhaha to claim that Rotuma should be his. The sign of his claim was a green coconut frond, not yet withered. However, Tokaniua played a trick on Raho. He brought a coconut frond that was completely dry, and put his sign in front of the sign of Raho, and he said to Raho that his sign was the earlier one. Tokaniua said to Raho that they should both go with Fikimarä'e, a man of Vại, to look at their signs. They saw that the sign of Tokaniua was an old dry coconut frond but the sign of Raho was a green one. Raho was angry with Tokaniua and went and stayed on Hatana, and Fikimarä'e was angry with Tokaniua and chased Tokaniua away to Oinafa.
>
> So this is the reason why Tokaniua claimed Rotuma to be his land because he tricked Raho, and he drank the first bowl of *kava* because he tricked Raho, and Raho no longer drank the first bowl because of this trick.
>
> Gagaj Tokaniua of Oinafa, quoted by Aubrey Parke in *Seksek 'E Hatana,* 2001

Oral Traditions

Fr. Joseph Trouillet provides the most comprehensive account of Rotuma's legendary history. His narrative focuses on three categories of chiefly positions: the "grand chief *vakại*" *(fakpure),* the *mua,* and the *sau.* All three were positions of significance for the entire island, which was

divided into autonomous districts headed by district chiefs, or *gagaj ‘es itu‘u.*[1]

In Trouillet's account the island progressively differentiated through time until there were seven districts, as there are today. The *vakại* is described by Trouillet as the chief of the dominant district, as determined by success in the episodic wars that permeate the oral history. He was therefore perceived as a conquering warrior, whose authority was justified by the support of supernatural beings, his success in warfare being testimony to his mana. According to Trouillet, the privileges and responsibilities of the *vakại* included the right to bring together all the other district chiefs in council in order to make peace between them; the right to bestow the status of *sau* on various individuals; and the responsibility of seeing to it that the *sau* was cared for properly.

The *sau* was an object of veneration. While in office he was treated as a demigod and was fed prodigious amounts of food and kava. He was also presented with large quantities of produce at feasts held during the six-month ceremonial cycle.

The third position, that of *mua,* Trouillet described as less feared than the *sau* but more sacred. The *mua*'s role also centered on the ritual cycle, which was specifically oriented toward bringing prosperity to the island by tapping the power of supernatural beings *(‘ạitu, ‘atua).* There are several parallels in the symbolism associated with the *sau* and *mua;* indeed, Trouillet described a historical sequence in which the position of *mua* was initially established by Raho, the founding ancestor, and then superseded several generations later when the position of *sau* was established following a rebellion against the eighth *mua.* The positions of *sau* and *mua* thus appear to symbolize complementary aspects of sacred chieftainship, with the *mua* representing that component of authority that derives from the principle of first occupancy, traced back to Raho, and the *sau* representing that component of authority derived from conquest and usurpation. The counterpart of Raho, the founder of Rotuma, is Tokaniua (alternatively Tokainiua), the warrior chief who arrives from overseas (Fiji or Tonga, depending on the version) and successfully challenges Raho's claim to preeminence. Thus, in the stories:

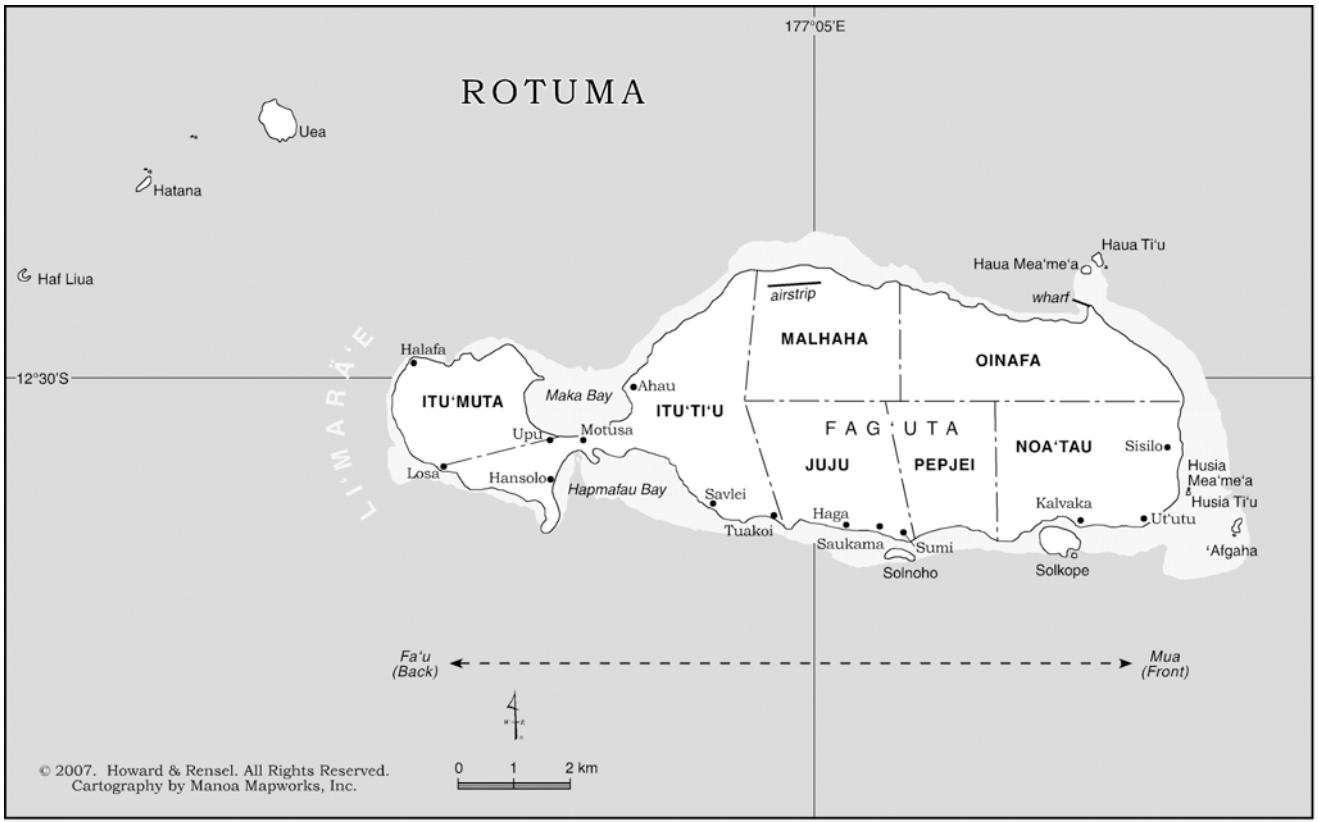
Raho is to Tokaniua as mua is to sau

Raho and Tokaniua symbolize a series of systemic oppositions that pervade Rotuman legends: land and sea, earth and sky, inland and coast. Of central importance here is that as a collectivity, the common people are associated with the land (as indigenous planters of the soil), while chiefs are associated with the sea/sky, the presumed sources of supernatural potency that sanctify their authority. Parallel oppositions are encoded into the geography of place names on the island. The fundamental division is between the east or sunrise side of the island, and the west or sunset side. East is associated with chieftainship, and particularly with conquering chiefs who come from outside Rotuma and thus are conceptualized as strangers to the land.[2]

The main source of mana for "foreign" chiefs emanates from "Tonga," to the east, while the indigenous people gain their potency from the spirits of their ancestors *(ʻatua),* whose abode is in Liʻmaräʻe (ʻOroi), located by Rotumans under the sea off the west end of the island (see map, p. 62).

Within Rotuma the geographical code is based on a division of the island into three segments along an east-west axis, and a north-south division. That portion of the island to the west of the isthmus is called Fạʻu (literally, "back") and is strongly associated with the indigenous people. This contrasts with the remainder of the island, which is termed Mua (literally, "front"). (The west end of the island is also referred to as *sio* [down] the east end as *seʻe* [up].) The eastern segment is further divided into an end and middle section. The end section includes Oinafa and Noaʻtau, which, being at the extreme eastern part of the island, are most closely associated with stranger-chiefs. The midsection includes Malhaha, Fagʻuta, and the portion of Ituʻtiʻu east of the isthmus. In the accounts, contrasts between the extremities of the island (e.g., between Oinafa/Noaʻtau and Fạʻu) imply a strong opposition between chiefs and commoners; contrasts between either end and the midsection are somewhat weaker.

Another opposition is between north and south, north being associated with chieftainship, south with common status. This opposition is dramatized in some versions of the founding legend. In these accounts Raho "plants" Rotuma by pouring earth from two separate baskets. The first pouring is from a ceremonial presentation basket at Malhaha on the north side of the island where Raho established his chiefly home *(nohoag gagaja);* the second pouring is from a common


ROTUMA
177°05'E
12°30'S
Uea
Hatana
Haf Liua
Haua Ti'u
Haua Mea'me'a
airstrip
wharf
MALHAHA
OINAFA
Halafa
ITU'MUTA
Maka Bay
Ahau
ITU'TI'U
Upu
Motusa
FAGUTA
JUJU
PEPJEI
NOA'TAU
Sisilo
Losa
Hansolo
Hapmafau Bay
Savlei
Haga
Tuakoi
Saukama
Sumi
Kalvaka
Ut'utu
Husia Mea'me'a
Husia Ti'u
'Afgaha
Solnoho
Solkope
LI'MARÄ'E
Fa'u (Back)
Mua (Front)
© 2007. Howard & Rensel. All Rights Reserved.
Cartography by Manoa Mapworks, Inc.
0 1 2 km

basket tipped out in Pepjei on the south side of the island where Raho's seat of government *(nohoag pure)* was established.[3] Whereas east is used to signify externally derived chieftainship, north is a marker for indigenously derived chiefs. The north-south distinction is only used in reference to the middle part of the island, exclusive of Fạ'u to the west, Oinafa and Noa'tau to the east. Again, exclusion of the extreme east and west ends implies a weaker form of opposition.

Taken as a whole, Rotuman legends are quite clear with regard to the basic constitution of authority. It requires a combination of chiefly mana derived from external spirits, including high gods, who dwell either overseas to the east or in the heavens, and indigenous powers derived from the people's ancestral spirits, who dwell in a netherworld to the west of the island. But to be effective, and legitimate, potency must be tempered by domestication. Collectively the stories reveal the pitfalls of either extreme: Those chiefs whose ambitions are unconstrained by concern for the populace bring hardship and misfortune. Their vitality is misdirected. But no matter how compassionate a chief may be, if he lacks divinely derived vitality (mana), he is unlikely to bring prosperity to his people. Thus, domestication without potency is also a formula for disaster.

A proper chief is one whose mana is potent but sufficiently domesticated to be directed toward the welfare of the entire population under his dominion. He eases rather than exacerbates burdens on his subjects. He is entitled to first fruits and a reasonable portion of the produce of the land, but he cannot demand too much. The core of the issue lies in the requirement that a chief demonstrate his mana, which encourages the exercise of power in the form of demands. To be able to make strong demands and back them up is to display potency, but it also intensifies the tension between chiefs and their subjects. Chiefs who go too far are the conceptual equivalents of cannibals—they ravage their people by consuming their crops and labor.[4]

Pan-Rotuman Social Organization

Most early written accounts focus on the office of *sau,* which generally was translated into English as "king." A curious aspect of this position is that representatives from different districts held it in rotation, for restricted periods. Rotuman chieftainship at this level has been compared with that of

Mangaia and Easter Island, two other Polynesian societies for which rotating chieftainship has been documented.[5]

While the origins of the institution are obscure, archaeologist Thegn Ladefoged argued for a materialistic explanation based on the differential quality of agricultural land in the eastern districts (Noa'tau and Oinafa) and the rest of the island. The rocky soil in the eastern districts, he maintained, would have made it considerably more difficult to produce food crops, and might have stimulated interdistrict aggression. Oral traditions, he suggested, indicate that the districts with lower productive potentials generally participated in more intergroup aggression than the districts with higher productive potentials. This might have led to political integration in the form of the *sau* if the disparity between land productivity was great enough to stimulate intergroup aggression, but not so large as to support vastly disparate population densities. Using a list of *sau* collected by Macgregor in 1932, which includes the districts from which they came, Ladefoged showed that a disproportionate number of the early *sau* (up to 1822) came from the eastern districts. The advantages of political integration were generally beneficial, he argued, including providing insurance against periodic natural disasters that affected some parts of the island more than others. Summarizing his position, Ladefoged wrote:

> People living throughout Rotuma would have benefitted from the social buffering that political integration provided against natural disasters. Furthermore, political integration might have allowed some of the commoners to reduce the marginal costs associated with their subsistence activities. Perhaps more important, however, were the advantages that political integration conferred upon a select group of people, the eastern pan-polity rulers. Although political integration provided some benefits to all members of society it was the eastern pan-Rotuman chiefs who seemed to have benefitted the most. The chiefs and commoners from other districts benefitted, but not to the same extent as the residents from the eastern districts. The integration of Rotuma into a single polity was maintained because the environmental constraints were such that the costs of complying for the lesser chiefs and commoners throughout the island were minimal and there were potential long-term benefits. The benefits for the

eastern pan-polity elite were significant and they sought to promote political integration.[6]

Ladefoged labeled the period up to 1822 the "prehistoric-protohistoric period." From 1822 until the termination of the institution in 1873, however, the distribution of districts from which *sau* came was much more varied. According to Ladefoged's thesis the early *sau* were conquerors who exercised secular authority over the island's affairs. He cited a passage from Hocart's 1913 fieldnotes reporting that the position of *fakpure* did not exist prior to the 1840 war at Saukama, Juju,[7] to bolster his argument that until that time the *sau* were the supreme secular authorities.

By the time Europeans began reporting on Rotuman society, however, the position of *sau* had evolved into a primarily ritual role. Early European observers agreed about several aspects of the *sau*'s office, including, for example, that the *sau* was appointed by the *fakpure* and ideally was chosen from different districts in turn. They also agreed that the *sau* exercised no secular power and that his main tasks were to eat rather gluttonously on a daily basis, drink kava, and take part in the six-month ritual cycle. Observers disagreed on several important points, however. For example, it is unclear who was eligible to be selected as *sau.* Lesson reported that Rotuma was divided into twenty-four districts, each governed by a chief who succeeded to the office in order of seniority.[8] There is nothing known that corresponds to these units, since there are only seven *itu'u* (districts) and considerably more *ho'aga,* the next smallest unit over which a chief presides.

Nevertheless, there does seem to be agreement among those who did comment that eligibility was limited to individuals of chiefly rank.[9] Whether a person was actually supposed to hold a title in order to be eligible is nowhere stated. The length of the *sau*'s reign is also unclear. Gardiner states that although the term of office was for six months (one Rotuman ritual cycle), an incumbent *sau* could continue in office as long as he could accumulate the great masses of food that were required to support him.[10] Since he did not provide food by working, this may mean either that he was allowed to remain in office as long as the island prospered, or that his reign was extended only so long as the people in his home district were prepared to bear the burden of providing the surplus food needed to maintain feasting at an appropriate level. Lesson mentioned twenty months as the duration of office, which has no correspondence with the

Rotuman ritual cycle, but may reflect his informant's estimate of an average reign.[11] Allen, a Methodist missionary who served in Rotuma during the late nineteenth century, reported that the *sau* was generally "elected" for short periods of six to twelve months,[12] while one of Hocart's informants indicated that two cycles was usual,[13] and Dillon was told:

> it sometimes happens that the president does not wish to resign his post at the expiration of six months; when rather than quarrel, they allow him to exceed the time appointed by law: but should he persist in a further maintenance of his power, the other chiefs league together, and compel him by force of arms to retire.[14]

A further puzzle concerns the rules of residence for *sau.* Allen reported that the district whose turn it was to select a *sau* would go to a neighboring district, choose someone, and bring him to their own district to live,[15] and in one narrative recorded by Titifanua, the storyteller stated that if it was one district's turn to provide the *sau,* it would be another's turn to look after him.[16] Indeed, Trouillet's oral history records numerous movements of the *sau* from one district to another, although no regularities appear. Perhaps all that can be said definitively is that Rotumans characterized sauship in terms of interdistrict residence, possibly as a way of emphasizing that the role was pan-Rotuman in scope.

The *mua* also seems to have been a rotational position. Allardyce reported that the districts had the honor of *mua* "in a kind of turn," and that he was appointed by the *fakpure* for an indefinite period, though it was customary to resign after about a year.[17]

Interpreting Rotuman Oral History

How are these early accounts to be interpreted? Just what do they reveal to us about the constitution of Rotuman social organization? And what else might we learn about Rotuman chieftainship by analyzing the texts of oral narratives?

In answer to the first question, it is quite clear that the descriptions were obtained verbally by Europeans from Rotuman consultants, most likely in response to specific questions, rather than from direct observation. None of the accounts describes actual political or ritual events that were witnessed by the writer. At most, then, the descriptions appear to be based on statements concerning conceptions of

these roles rather than on observations of political enactment. If Rotuman oral narratives were primarily a means of recording history in the sense of providing an "accurate" chronological account of events, we might be inclined to treat them as characteristic of actual practice. But our reading of them leads us to believe that they served a different purpose rather, that they were intended to reflect relationships and principles that persisted over time. In essence, then, Rotuman historical and legendary accounts merge with one another, both being powerfully patterned by an underlying system of cultural logic. This is not to say Rotumans were incapable of reporting events accurately; they did so all the time. However, the statements recorded by early observers were not of specific events but of verbal descriptions of usual practice. It is precisely here that the power of the symbolic codes is most in evidence. In one important respect, this simplifies our task, for we can dismiss the problem of interpreting traditional political *practice* on the grounds that we have virtually no usable evidence. All of the data, however, including the legendary texts, are relevant for interpreting Rotuman *conceptions* of chieftainship and political structure.

For these reasons we must treat the conclusions of scholars such as Robert Williamson with skepticism. He accepted Gardiner's speculation that originally the offices of the *sau,* which he translated as "sacred ruler," and *fakpure,* translated as "secular ruler," were united, but that in time they became distinct.[18] Concerning the rotation of *sau,* Williamson offered the following speculative scenario:

> The sacred king and his family, the trunk family of the group, would probably continue to occupy the ancestral demesne [estate], and there would be a number of families of chiefs, branches of the original royal family, each occupying its own area. The office and over-riding jurisdiction, so far as retained, of the sacred king, would remain with the trunk family, in which the original godship and sanctity would be believed to be specially immanent, and each chief would be subject to that over-riding authority, such as it was, and to the authority of the secular king, retaining, however, some local jurisdiction over his own area. As time went on, the growth and development of the group would continue; the branch families of the chiefs would increase in numbers; and a powerful aristocracy would be evolved. There would be among them a competition

> for power and predominance, which would show itself in intrigue and inter-family fighting within the group; matrimonial connections between families, and inter-family military alliances would affect the powers of the respective families; and the tendency would be for them to group themselves into mutually hostile combined parties who would contend with each other for secular dominance, success first falling to one and then to the other. Thus would come into being the division of the people into two great camps—the conquerors and the conquered, the strong and the weak—as described by writers.
>
> The position and authority of the sacred king himself might readily be affected, and perhaps undermined, by developments of this character. Thus, whilst in some islands, as in Mangaia, he continued to retain immense power, in others as in Tonga, his power, and even his sacred duties as a high priest, died out altogether, or nearly so; whilst in Rotuma his office became a matter of periodic election from one or other of the families of the island, its hereditary character being lost, and indeed the evidence suggests that he was subject at any time to deprivation of office and replacement as the result of conflicts among his subjects.[19]

Noble as such an attempt might be to account for the constitution of Rotuman society, we must recognize that there is virtually no evidence, beyond its inherent plausibility, to support such a conclusion. The answer to the second question is therefore that we know very little about either the historical sequence leading to the political system as described or about the conduct of politics in traditional Rotuma. What we do have is some information about categories of actors and their associations with one another and with types of activities. But this is a reasonable start if we are to set our goal as comprehending the cultural logic of the traditional Rotuman political system.

A close examination of Rotuman oral history reveals a conceptual paradigm that appears to lie at the heart of Rotuman political thought. Of fundamental concern is the issue of prosperity—the prosperity of the island as manifest in human fertility and the productivity of the land. The central symbol is food; its abundance is indicative of a proper political order, its scarcity indicative of political malaise. The ultimate source of prosperity is the spirit world, but it is the

primary responsibility of chiefs to act as intermediaries with the gods who dwell there (some of whom are presumed to be their ancestors) and to influence them to act benignly. Conceptually the distinction between gods and chiefs is somewhat blurred, and chiefs, upon their death, are transformed into powerful spirits. The mythical prototypes of chiefs, Raho and Tokaniua, are best described as demigods, with characteristics of both men and spirits. This conceptualization sets up the central paradox of the narratives—that chiefs are at once like people and like gods. They come from the people but are different from them.

The paradox is expressed in the legends through explorations of themes involving differentiation and reintegration. Rotuma is differentiated from Sāmoa, the land is differentiated from the sea, and people are differentiated from chiefs; then, in various ways, reintegration takes place and constraints are placed on the oppositions involved. Mediating categories such as islets and trees come to predominate over oppositions between sea and land, sky and earth. As part of this reintegration, the opposition between the people (represented by Raho) and the chiefs (represented by Tokaniua) is muted and constrained. The relationship between people and chiefs is finally construed as one of complementarity, with the people producing food (and other goods and services) for the benefit of chiefs, who intercede with the gods, who in turn make the land productive. However, this conception renders the nature of chieftainship problematic, for where is the source from which legitimate chiefly authority derives? Is it from the gods, whose association with the chiefs provides them with supernatural potency (mana), or is it from the people, who have elevated the chiefs and supported them with the products of their labor? Both, of course, are sources of legitimacy, but the degree of emphasis on one or the other has important implications. The problem is common to all Polynesian societies, and resolutions differ. Some of them, particularly highly stratified societies like Fiji, Tonga, Hawai'i, and Tahiti, emphasize the affiliation of chiefs and gods. The association is strengthened through lengthy genealogies tracing descent directly to ancestral deities, and the differentiation of chiefs from the people is clearly and sharply drawn. In those societies oral histories seem to reflect a preoccupation with chiefly rivalry, and in practice chiefs vied with one another for ascendance and used their genealogies to legitimate their affiliation with the gods. In

Rotuma the situation was different. While there is undeniable rivalry between chiefs reflected in the narratives (the contest between Raho and Tokaniua being a case in point), a more salient theme concerns relations between chiefs and the people. The relative lack of differentiation between them accentuates the underlying ambiguity, and the resultant tension is expressed through numerous tales of insurrection and rebellion. The basic message appears to be that chiefs are expected to use their godly powers for the benefit of the people, and that if they do not—if they turn mean and selfish at the expense of the people—then rebellion is not only justified, it is likely to be supported by the gods.

The legends also help to clarify the positions of *mua* and *sau* in Rotuman political thought. Both embodied representations of the Rotuman political system: the *mua* represented its original form, prior to the development of chieftainship, and represented commoners after chieftainship arose, whereas the *sau* represented chieftainship alone. Together, the *mua* and *sau* represented the complementary principles of domestication and vitality that together are the essence of legitimate chieftainship.

While the legends encode the fundamental logic of Rotuman political thought, and thus provide a necessary background for interpreting political institutions, such narratives do not provide sufficient information for explaining their specific historical manifestations. To complete the picture we must examine political pragmatics.

It will be recalled that at the time when Europeans arrived, Rotuma was divided into seven districts headed by *gagaj 'es itu'u* (district chiefs) and that the *fakpure,* who presumably appointed the *sau* and *mua,* was the head of one of these districts. Within districts, certain kin groups, who could trace their ancestry to a commonly accepted chiefly source, were known as *mosega* (literally, "bed," implying from the same ancestral progenitor). *Mosega* were generally composed of several *kạinaga* (kin groups) that were supposed to rotate the privilege of choosing a successor to district chieftainship. If the man appointed to the position proved unsatisfactory for one reason or another, he could be deposed by members of his *mosega,* who had the right to take away the title (and the authority) and allocate it to another.

In contrast with more stratified societies in which all major chiefs traced their ancestry directly to deified ancestors, Rotuman district chiefs drew their authority more

directly from the people in their locality, and since the districts were autonomous political units, this posed a problem with regard to the relationship of the island as a whole to the gods. The problem was one of mana, for only truly powerful chiefs could exert influence on the gods, who were perceived to be capricious and willful. There was therefore a strong cultural preference for a dominant chief who could demonstrate great potency. Since success in warfare was clear evidence of mana, a chief whose district was on the winning side of a battle was a candidate for paramountcy. All available evidence suggests that wars in Rotuma generally involved shifting alliances between two sets of districts, and that the head of the victorious alliance would assume a position of paramountcy, becoming *fakpure.*

This still left a problem, however. Since the *fakpure* was chief of one district among seven, and since he was engaged in secular politics, he was not a very suitable figure for symbolizing the unity of Rotuma. The position of *sau* was a solution. The *sau* occupied a sacred post, divorced from secular politics. He could personify the total society, and represent it (along with the *mua,* who for these purposes was alter ego to the *sau*) to the gods. His suitability, measured by the net prosperity of the people (bounty minus labor and tribute), was a direct reflection of the suitability of the *fakpure,* whose secular power kept the *sau* in office. The solution was elegant, but it still left some practical problems associated with the selection of candidates and the burden of supporting the *sau* in an appropriate manner. In the system of ranked lineages that characterized the great Polynesian chiefdoms, selection did not pose the same kind of problem, since rank was relatively unambiguous and primogeniture provided a definite rationale for choice. As a corollary, persons of lesser rank were obligated to provide support for their superiors by the extension of kinship rules. In Rotuma, however, where locality outweighed kinship as a political principle, ranking was far more problematic. Thus, there were multiple contenders for saushiip, making succession a recurrent issue of potential dispute. Warfare was one mechanism for resolving such status ambiguities; rotation, as Williamson pointed out, was another. Rotation appears as an early solution in Rotuman oral history, but never to the exclusion of warfare. Indeed, Trouillet's narrative relates repetitive challenges to *fakpure* and *sau,* suggesting that rotation between districts did not settle the issues involved.

A key issue seems to have been the appropriate length of a *sau*'s reign. Rotation ingeniously involved selecting a person from one district and setting up his residence in another, thus symbolizing both qualities—indigenous and foreign—that combine to constitute paramount chieftainship. It seems from the narratives, however, that the people of the host district bore the brunt of responsibility for supplying the gluttonous needs of the *sau,* and for them the balance of benefits versus costs may have quickly shifted. Resentment of such burdensome demands is a prominent theme throughout the oral history of the island. There is evidence to suggest that over time the term of office for *sau* shortened, and by the time the institution was terminated in 1873 *sau* were serving for minimal periods. From Trouillet's documentation of sauship during historic times (1797–1870), three periods can be distinguished (table 3.1).

Table 3.1
Average Reign of *Sau*

Period	Years	Rotuman Cycles
1797–1820	2.5	5.0
1820–1850	1.0	2.0
1850–1870	0.6	1.2

One might hypothesize that this decline resulted from the depopulation that was the result of diseases and other misfortunes brought by Europeans. This may have led Rotumans to question the efficacy of individuals who occupied the office of *sau.* It may well have been, as James Frazer pointed out many years ago in *The Golden Bough,*[20] that as the public image of a chief approached impotence, the need to replace him increased. Rotumans seem to have used the institutionalized mechanism already available to them—installing a series of new *sau*—in an attempt to revitalize a declining office.

The Rotuman Version of Polynesian Chieftainship

Ultimately it appears that the main problem confronting Rotumans in conceptualizing their political system arose from a set of paradoxes associated with chieftainship: that chiefs are gods, but are human; that they are of the people,

but are different from them; that they represent the unity of the society, but have personal interests within it. Although these paradoxes appear as oppositions within Rotuman legends, we believe they represent an underlying set of ideas common to all Polynesian systems: that human beings are more or less godlike along a continuum, with chiefs toward the divine end of the spectrum. Paradoxical dilemmas emerge in relation to specific instances (the legends provide, in this view, a way to talk about such instances).

Two principles were involved: rank and distance. Rank was conceived primarily in genealogical terms, traced through first-born children of first-born parents to founding ancestors, and, ideally, back to the gods of creation. In smaller, less-stratified Polynesian societies, remembered genealogies tended to be shorter, as in Rotuma.

The principle of distance had both physical and social aspects. Physically, removal of a person from normal social situations served to make him more remote; socially, distancing was achieved through ritual prohibitions and other means of differentiating the person's behavior from normal patterns. At the extreme, and particularly in mythical accounts, such persons reversed social norms (e.g., committed incest, ate human flesh), thus emulating the behavior of gods. Distancing involved the principle of *mystification,* rendering the person more like the gods than like fellow humans.

At the apex of rank and distance were the high gods of Polynesian mythology; at the base were slaves, persons utterly without rank or sanctity. Local secular chiefs enjoyed some rank but were only slightly distanced; local gods held somewhat higher rank and a moderate degree of distancing; while high chiefs were in the upper ranges of both dimensions, at least in the more stratified societies. However, positions were not fixed, but were relative—a chief may have been godlike to a commoner, but just another man to a person of comparable status, while a commoner may have been perceived as godlike by his children. In addition, the Polynesian concept of mana involved a notion of inherent instability since it was manifested in action.[21] Hence all statuses vis-à-vis one another were continuously waxing or waning.

This underlying Polynesian cultural logic unfolded differently in different societies, depending on historical circumstances. In archipelagoes containing large islands and substantial populations, where chiefly lines were particularly

powerful, these principles were carried to their logical extremes. Genealogies were traced back to creator gods, and high chiefs were distanced from commoners both physically and socially to the point where their mystification approximated that of high gods. As a class they were so far removed from the realm of the people that their significant relationships were confined to each other and to the gods. Oral traditions from these societies reflect this situation.

In contrast, Rotuma was a small isolated island with a medium-sized population. Practical considerations favored local autonomy and set limits on the degree to which chiefs could be distinguished from other people. Distancing was difficult both physically, because of the small size of the island, and socially, because the population was too small to facilitate a distinct breeding population of chiefs, keeping kinship distance within boundaries. As a result, Rotuman chiefs were not in a strong position to be either elevated in rank or mystified to a level approximating gods. Conceptually they were much closer to the people than to gods.

District Organization

According to legend, Rotuma was originally divided into five districts—Itu'ti'u, Fag'uta, Oinafa, Noa'tau, and Malhaha—each governed by a head chief *(gagaj 'es itu'u).* On two occasions, further divisions took place: Legend holds that a portion of the largest district, Itu'ti'u, was given as a gift by the chief to a subchief from Oinafa, thus creating the district of Itu'muta.[22] A second story describes a war in which the district of Fag'uta was defeated by Oinafa, resulting in a division of the former district into two: Juju and Pepjei.[23] By the time of European intrusion there were seven districts.

At any given time the districts were ranked in status, the particular order being influenced in part by the size and manpower of each district and in part by the results of the last war. The rank order was reflected in priority of ceremonial kava drinking, and breaches of this priority were cause for interdistrict strife. The chiefs met periodically to discuss matters of common interest, one of their main concerns being the overall prosperity of the island. Of paramount significance for this goal was the selection of a suitable person to fill the office of *sau,* whose role it was to ensure the prosperity of the island through the performance of proper ritual.

Districts were divided into territorially distinct kinship communities known as *ho'aga,* each of which was headed by a titled male. These titles were ranked, and indications are that district chiefs were chosen exclusively from the *ho'aga* owning the highest-ranking titles within each district. Titled men from other *ho'aga* acted as subchiefs. They exercised primary authority over their own units, including the allocation of land.

Figure 3.3 A Rotuman chief sketched by A. T. Agate, engraved by R. H. Pease. *Wilkes 1844.*

Choosing the successor to a title was the right of the group of individuals who could trace their ancestry to the *ho'aga* that owned the name. Any adult male in the group was eligible to succeed to the position, with kinship seniority heavily weighted as a criterion for selection, but consideration was also given to personal character and other practical considerations.[24]

The role of the *gagaj 'es itu'u* was described by Gardiner:

> The power of the *gagaja* in his district was not arbitrary; he was assisted by a council of the possessors of the *hoag* names, which might reverse any action of his. Conflicts between the chief and his Council were rare so long as his decisions were in accordance with, and he did not infringe, the Rotuman customs. He was called upon to decide disputes about land between *hoag,* or within a *hoag,* if its *pure*

> [subchief] could not settle it; disputes between individuals of different *hoag* were referred to him. He could call out the district for fish-driving, war, or any work in which all were interested, and had the power of fining any individuals who did not come. If the walls or paths of his district were in disrepair, he ordered out all the *hoag,* interested, to do the work; he had further to keep a watch to see that a proper number of cocoanut trees were planted, and that all the *papoi* land was cultivated. Any one receiving the *hoag* name had to be recognized by him on their election before they could take it. As a set-off to these, he received to some extent first fruits and a present of food from each of the parties to any suit, which might have been held before him in his district.[25]

One can only roughly estimate the number of *ho'aga* that existed prior to the arrival of Europeans. A comprehensive list of *ho'aga* names collected by Dr. H. S. Evans in 1950 included 105 such names, many of which were no longer in use at the time. It is likely that some *ho'aga* came into existence through the expansion of certain kin groups while others died out, so a figure of a hundred active *ho'aga* units at any given time seems reasonable. If one assumes the island's population to have been between 3,000 and 4,000 at the time of European intrusion, *ho'aga* would have averaged between thirty and forty members each.[26]

Ceremonially, the prestige of the various *ho'aga* titles was recognized in the precedence of kava drinking on ceremonial occasions and in the seating arrangement during district meetings. Practically, the order coincided with degree of authority and a division of labor. The second-ranking *fa 'es ho'aga* (*ho'aga* subchief) in each district was the *faufisi.* He acted as a lieutenant to the district chief and was known as the chief's "right hand." The *faufisi* was in charge of all ceremonial affairs involving the district as a unit, including the management of kava ceremonies. He was also the war leader in times of interdistrict strife. In addition, the *faufisi* generally was in charge of one portion of the district, holding direct authority over several lower-ranking *fa 'es ho'aga.* The third-ranking *fa 'es ho'aga* was known as the chief's "left hand." He was usually in charge of the remainder of the district but had no specific role in district affairs comparable to that of the *faufisi.* In the larger districts, authority was sometimes subdivided even further, with intermediate-

ranking chiefs exercising decision-making authority over two or more low-ranking ones.

One *fa 'es ho'aga* in each district was generally designated as *tautei*, the fishing expedition leader (discussed in chapter 2). Another was ordinarily in charge of the district *kohea* (kitchen), with his job being to organize food preparation during district feasts. Each of these positions was hereditary, remaining within the same kin group (or *ho'aga*) unless a crisis dictated a change. For example, cowardice on the part of a *faufisi* or ineptitude by a *tautei* might lead the district chief, with popular support behind him, to award the role to the holder of another title.

Authority and Autonomy

Although the paramount chiefs from each district met in an islandwide council, each of Rotuma's seven districts has operated more or less independently from precolonial times to the present. According to Captain J. G. Goodenough, who visited the island in 1874:

> The island is in seven districts....These divisions come down from old times, and they have always been independent. No one is higher than another, but they speak of Maraf [of Noa'tau] as being the highest, while I should think that Albert of Ituten [Itu'ti'u] is really the one of most influence. He seems to have most people....They told me that they have a meeting of chiefs occasionally, which they call Fon [*fono,* that is, food eaten by chiefs after drinking kava] and another name; and that before attending this meeting they speak each to their own people and ascertain their wants.[27]

In anticipation of cession to Great Britain, the district chiefs recorded a memorandum of agreement explicitly affirming their essential autonomy vis-à-vis each other:

> The Chiefs recognize Marafu as the head chief of the island, but he has no authority to make agreements in their name, without their consent. Each chief rules in his own district, and all agree to keep peace with each other, until the answer of the Queen of England [regarding the petition for cession] arrives. Marafu may call meetings of the chiefs, but they are not obliged to attend. Those who wish may go, but no law can be

> passed unless all chiefs are present. This arrangement holds good for one year. Wednesday July 16, 1879 (Sgd) G. Bower, Lt. Commdg., H.M.S. *Conflict.*[28]

The degree to which people disregarded the authority of chiefs in pursuit of their own self-interests was obvious to British administrators from the beginning of colonial rule. In a letter written in 1880, Deputy Commissioner Hugh Romilly expressed his apprehensions:

> In my opinion the great difficulty to be contended with here is the want of obedience and respect paid by the young men to their chiefs. The chiefs are chiefs only in name and though anxious for power are afraid to enforce any commands of their own or indeed to give any commands at all to their people.[29]

In this letter Romilly attempted to account for this lack of authority in a number of ways. He blamed the missions for eroding chiefly powers and castigated the Rotuman lay teachers of the Wesleyan Mission in particular for refusing to obey their chiefs. He cited the propensity of young men to go away to sea and to live in foreign places, returning with new ideas that undermined old customs. But the nature of Rotuman chieftainship, and the autonomy associated with it, clearly goes much deeper. As Romilly himself noted:

> They say they are all chiefs and indeed it is difficult to discover who are the common people if any such exist. They can all trace their ancestors back many generations, many of them, my interpreter for instance, for some 300 years. As the population was never very large every man's ancestors have at some period or another married into a noble family and he is in consequence noble himself.[30]

Ho'aga leaders were chiefs in their own right and did not always cooperate with the district chief.[31] Colonial officials also remarked on the independent behavior of individuals and *ho'aga* in relation to their chiefs. In the words of Resident Commissioner William Carew:

> [An] outstanding feature in Rotuman life is the complete absence amongst the people of any sense of respect for their chiefs. They listen to their Chief if his words suit them, but if otherwise, they turn deaf ears to him. This attitude permeates through every stratum of Rotuman life. If the Petty Chiefs [titled *ho'aga*

> leaders] do not agree with their Chiefs, they abstain from carrying his will to the people, and again if the people do not care for what their Petty Chiefs say they are similarly heedless to their orders.[32]

It seems clear from these accounts that the power of chiefs within districts and that of subchiefs within their *ho'aga* was well controlled by cultural rules. Abuses of authority no doubt occurred, but members of a district or *ho'aga* could have a chief deposed if he got too far out of line, provided the kin group that owned the title agreed.[33]

Photo 3.1 A Rotuman chief. © *Fiji Museum.*

A further indication of how relationships between chiefs and people were enacted historically can be found in the letters and diaries of Catholic and Wesleyan missionaries, who first arrived on Rotuma in the late 1830s. Although the missionaries usually tried to work through the chiefs to spread the Christian message, it is telling to note that they often won over the people before their leaders came around. This created difficulties when the missionaries forbade the new converts to contribute to or participate in feasts for unconverted chiefs or for the *sau*. Backed by the new spiritual authorities, people successfully resisted chiefly demands.[34]

Following cession to Great Britain, Resident Commissioners (and later, District Officers) continued to complain about the independent attitudes of Rotumans, and what they perceived to be a lack of leadership on the part of the chiefs.[35]

The ability of chiefs to force compliance was limited by the fact that most households were economically self-sufficient and though they clearly benefitted from cooperating with other households, it was rarely a necessity to do so. Thus, following a dispute with a *hoʻaga* headman, a household might withhold their labor, or even break away and join another *hoʻaga,* where they would be welcomed for the additional labor they could provide for communal projects.

Even within households *(kaunohoga)* autonomy tempered authority. The household head *(pure)* was responsible for organizing activities of the group but he, too, had little power to force compliance. The fact was that individuals had options if the *pure* (whether he or she was a parent, sibling, aunt, or uncle) got too oppressive. Household members could usually find other relatives willing to take them in, especially if they were able to contribute to the household in some way.

Clearly, autonomy pervaded Rotuman culture from top to bottom. It was a value that was instilled in children from infancy—it is a Rotuman maxim that one cannot force children to do anything they do not want to do. And it is a theme that has patterned Rotuman history from time immemorial until the present day.

Notes to Chapter 3

This chapter draws on information previously published in several journal articles and books, including Alan Howard's *Learning to Be Rotuman* (1971). Chieftainship is a main topic in "Conservatism and Non-Traditional Leadership in Rotuma" (Howard 1963b), "The Rotuman District Chief: A Study in Changing Patterns of Authority" (Howard 1966a), "History, Myth and Polynesian Chieftainship: The Case of Rotuman Kings" (Howard 1979), "Cannibal Chiefs and the Charter for Rebellion in Rotuman Myth" (Howard 1986), "Money, Sovereignty and Moral Authority on Rotuma" (Howard 1996), and "Ritual Status and Power Politics in Modern Rotuma) (Howard and Rensel 1997).

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[1] The word *vakại (uakai),* as a verb, translates as "to be on the look-out, to watch or look out for, to look into the distance (for or at something)" (Churchward 1940, 344). Hence the reference is to the chief, who is responsible for looking after the welfare of the island as a whole. The word *fakpure is* composed of the prefix *fak-,* "pertaining to" and *pure,* "to decide," "rule," "control," "judge," and hence as a noun it implies "decision maker" or "governing authority" (Churchward 1940, 190, 291). The word *sau,* which is cognate with the Tongan *hau,* is translated simply as "king" by Churchward (1940, 307), but a clue to its core proto-Polynesian meaning is the Rennellese usage "abundance of gifts from the gods" (Elbert 1975, 251). The word *mua* means "to be or go in front or before or first—either in place or in time or in order of merit, etc." (Churchward 1940, 268). *Gagaj 'es itu'u* translates as "person of rank or merit in possession of a district" (Churchward 1940, 209). It is unfortunate that we have only the undifferentiated English word "chief" to refer to all of these positions.

[2] In Rotuman oral traditions, true chiefs are external and non-indigenous—they are strangers to the land. This does not necessarily mean that they are actually of foreign origin, only that the assumption of chieftainship involves symbolic entrance into the society from outside (see Sahlins 1981). Thus Raho, as the founder of the island, is an anomaly, being both an outsider and indigenous, while indigenous Rotumans who assume chieftainship are in a similar position. Variations on these themes feature in many Rotuman legends (see Howard 1985).

[3] See Titifanua and Churchward 1995, 7. In Trouillet's version of the story, Rotuma was first formed so that its foundation ran from north to south, but was ordered rotated so that it would lay from east to west (see map, p. 62). A clockwise rotation would shift north to east, south to west, thus suggesting their equivalence.

[4] See Howard 1986 for a fuller account of cannibal themes in Rotuman narratives.

[5] Williamson 1924.

[6] Ladefoged 1993, 270.

[7] Ladefoged 1993, 153–154.

[8] Lesson 1838, 432.

[9] Even the criterion of chiefly rank was called into question by one of Hocart's informants, who referred to a time when there was only one eligible person in Rotuma, the legendary Fonmon. He was supposed to have impregnated ambitious women from around the island, making their offspring eligible. The informant added, however, that sometimes an individual was appointed as a result of hard work (Hocart 1913, 4573–4575). Several narratives also suggest that a person might conceivably be appointed *sau* for achievements.

[10] Gardiner 1898, 461.

[11] Lesson 1838, 432.

[12] Allen 1895.

[13] Hocart 1913, 4576.

[14] Dillon 1829, 95.

[15] Allen 1895.

[16] Titifanua and Churchward 1995, 34.

[17] Allardyce 1885–1886, 142.

[18] Gardiner 1898, 460.

[19] Williamson 1924, 427–428.

[20] Frazer 1890.

[21] See Firth 1940.

[22] Titifanua and Churchward 1995, 33–35.

[23] Trouillet 1868.

[24] For a more extensive account of succession, see Howard 1964, 26–52.

[25] Gardiner 1898, 430.

[26] Early population estimates range from 5,000 (Tromelin 1829) to 2,000–3,000 (Lucatt 1851). A review of the current ecological situation and an evaluation of the various estimates suggests a figure between 3,000 and 4,000 (see chapter 11).

[27] Goodenough 1876.

[28] Eason 1951, 62.

[29] Outward Letters, 25 September 1880.

[30] Outward Letters, 25 September 1880.

[31] Gardiner 1898, 430.

[32] Outward Letters, 26 February 1931.

[33] Gardiner 1898, 429.

[34] Methodist Church of Australasia, Wesleyan Missionary Notices No. 34 (January 1866); No. 5 Vol. II (April 1868); No. 13 Vol. III (April 1870).

[35] See, for example, Outward Letters, Annual Reports of 1928, 1930, 1931, 1937, and 1939.