



**Photo 10.1** Unloading supplies brought by the *Yanawai*, anchored off the reef at Maka Bay, 1960. *Alan Howard*.



**Photo 10.2** Unloading cargo from Fiji at Oinafa wharf, 1988. *Alan Howard*.

## 10 Economic Transitions

The people here are all individuals in independent circumstances; they own cattle, horses, pigs, fowls, etc. and each family has real estate that may be called extensive, and which produces abundance of food of all description. They are wealthy in cocoanut groves, as evidence the quantity of copra yearly shipped; and they all go clothed at all times.

Letter from Resident Commissioner  
A. R. Mackay, 21 December 1887

### Beginnings of Commerce

Following European intrusion, early encounters between Rotumans and ships' crews focused primarily on trade. As mentioned in chapter 5, ships' captains were intent on replenishing their provisions, and Rotuma's reputation for abundance was the main attraction. Whalers obtained coconuts, root crops, fruit, pigs, and chickens, as well as lumber for repairing ships and "some very fine mats" in exchange for cloth, tobacco, whales' teeth, tortoise-shell, beads, muskets, and tools such as knives, axes, and fishhooks.<sup>1</sup> George Cheever, who was aboard the *Emerald* when it visited Rotuma in 1834, reported that tobacco "is worth almost its weight in gold at this place. Most everything you wish for, that the natives have, can be purchased with it. We bought about 1200 old coconuts here for 5 or 6 lbs of tobacco."<sup>2</sup> The following year the *Emerald* purchased "about 5000 old coconuts for the use of our livestock, for which we paid as usually in tobacco at the rate of about one lb of 300."<sup>3</sup>

Cheever described "the trade for the island" as follows: cloth (bleached, unbleached, or common print), tobacco (large head leaf being the most highly valued), thick-edge

pieces of turtle shell, hand axes, large knives with sheaths, small pocket knives, scissors, blue beads, powder (unspecified as to kind), and muskets. Regarding the latter, he reported that they were not much wanted because the islanders were already well supplied.<sup>4</sup>

Like other Polynesian peoples Europeans encountered, Rotumans were often accused of thievery when they came aboard ships. Lesson provided the following commentary:

The chief fault of the natives of Rotuma is thieving and there is no denying their great fondness for this vice so repugnant to our principles. Everything they can lay their hands on is fair game, and when caught in the act, they laughingly return the booty. It became necessary to resort to stern measures and to punish the guilty. Men were posted on deck to guard easily stolen objects. Whenever a thief was caught in the act, he was chased from the ship with a whip and made to restore what he had stolen. Although they knew very well that they were committing a punishable offense, the natives showed no sign of shame, and the punishment they received never inspired them to vengeance. Even his comrades, the receivers of his stolen goods, seemed unconcerned at his misfortune or laughed at his clumsiness and kept on stealing whenever an occasion presented itself. In spite of our precautions, it was impossible to supervise the crowd of savages who swarmed over the boat. Although we were able to retrieve some bundles of scrap-iron, in the end six were missing along with twelve or fifteen iron or copper belaying-pins. The frenzy of these child-men to possess whatever caught their lively imaginations was so great that we even saw them trying to untie the tackle and make off with a cannon. While one islander was stealing something the others distracted our attention. So adept were they at stealthily cleaning our pockets they could have taught a course in pick-pocketing in Paris or London!<sup>5</sup>

Attempts at appropriating European goods were not such a simple matter as it seemed to the ships' crews. Whereas Europeans were obsessed with rights over property (and passed laws to severely punish theft), Polynesians took a much more casual view of the matter (and thus, perhaps, the game-like quality to "theft" that Lesson described). The values of generosity and sharing in Polynesian cultures

placed much more emphasis on interpersonal relationships than on the material goods being exchanged or appropriated. Furthermore, it was common practice for Polynesians to appropriate a vessel and all its contents when it drifted ashore from elsewhere; in turn, the hosts were obliged to provide the voyagers with necessities that they themselves produced. Regardless, the problem was hardly unique to Rotuma and encounters were more often than not fraught with cultural misunderstandings and ambiguity.<sup>6</sup>

How much trade on the Rotuman side was controlled by chiefs is not clear, but evidence suggests that competition to control trade was intense between rivals. Thus Cheever reported that the chief they were trading with was "quite anxious to keep the other party [under a rival chief] from trading with shipping, the more effectually to prevent them from procuring arms."<sup>7</sup>

In any case, Rotumans learned to play the game of trading well enough to elicit complaints from Europeans about the high prices they charged for provisions. Thus Forbes observed in 1872 that basic foods were not nearly so cheap there as in the New Hebrides [Vanuatu] or the Admiralty Islands [in the Bismarck Archipelago]; he also said, "Of late years the wealth of the little community has largely increased, and the price of every kind of provisions has become so high that whalers have almost ceased to visit the island"<sup>8</sup> Rev. William Fletcher, writing in 1875, commented on the exorbitant prices charged by Rotumans in comparison with those charged by the natives of Sāmoa, Fiji, Tonga, and many other places.<sup>9</sup>

The island's wealth grew from two other sources. Rotuman men eagerly seized opportunities to sign on as crew for passing ships, earning both good wages and a reputation for competence and reliability.<sup>10</sup> Besides sailing, a considerable number of Rotumans worked in the pearl fisheries in the Torres Strait, not only diving but also managing the boats.<sup>11</sup> Going to sea became an expected part of the life cycle of young Rotuman men.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes chiefs were given trade goods such as cloth, rifles, and Jew's harps to allow their young men to emigrate.<sup>13</sup> The money and goods the men sent or brought back to their families were valued income sources.<sup>14</sup>

Rotumans also began a brisk trade in coconut oil, which gave way to copra in the 1870s. By the early 1880s there were five trading firms on Rotuma, exporting about 250 tons

of copra annually.<sup>15</sup> Both Catholic and Methodist missionaries encouraged their Rotuman converts to make contributions and to pay fines for breach of regulations in the form of coconut oil or copra, which they in turn would export.

### Changes in Land Tenure

The introduction of a cash economy completely altered the significance of land as a resource in Rotuma. Previously land was valued primarily for its food-producing capacity, and rights to land were invested in extended kin groups (*ho'aga*). A system of shifting agriculture was used, with the head of the *ho'aga* responsible for reapportioning the land from time to time to insure that a portion of it was kept in a fallow condition.

Coconut trees were for the use of the whole *ho'aga*, although Gardiner mentions lifetime use rights for those planted by a specific person beyond the needs of the *ho'aga*.<sup>16</sup> But as coconut products took on commercial value, the land on which they grew correspondingly increased in value, and since coconut trees are a long-term proposition, vested interests developed in specific blocks of land. If communalism had been strictly adhered to, the income from coconuts would have gone to the chief for redistribution, but no such pattern was established. Instead, each individual sold the products of the land on which he worked and kept the cash income to himself. Had the *ho'aga* been a more strictly defined kinship unit, such as a lineage or clan, the authority of the headman (*fa 'es ho'aga*) might have been sufficiently entrenched to perpetuate a system of communal tenure, but a pattern of strong authority was not characteristic. As a consequence, *ho'aga* landholdings tended to fragment under the pressure of individual interests.

The activities of the missionaries also resulted in deep-seated changes. They treated land parcels as though specific individuals enjoyed exclusive rights in them. By the time the missionaries established themselves, changes in land rights were already taking place, but their selective interpretation of Rotuman custom, based on the needs of the mission, accelerated the process. One of the missionaries' first tasks was to acquire land for church sites, and to do this the faithful were induced to make gifts to the mission. This was often done without the consent of family members who shared rights in the land, and many disputes arose as a

result. Gifts of communal land to missions, and the building of churches on such property, played a significant role in the generation of antagonisms between the Catholics and Methodists.



**Photo 10.3** The Catholic church at Sumi. *Marist Archives, Rome.*

Gardiner, in summarizing the changes that had taken place in the system of land tenure, cited some of the effects of missionization:

Since the introduction of missionaries...much land has been seized by the chiefs, who, as a rule, in each district were its missionaries, as fines for the fornications of individuals. A certain amount of coconut oil was then given by the chiefs to the Wesleyan Mission, apparently in payment for their support. The mission in the name of which it was done, though generally without the knowledge of the white teachers, was so powerful that the *hoag* had no redress. The mission and chiefs obtained this power as the result of many wars waged against the adherents of the old religion; the confiscation of all the lands of the vanquished was proposed by the mission, but resisted by all the chiefs. Much land left to and bought by the Roman Catholic Mission is similarly situated; the

individuals had no right to dispose of it without the consent of the whole *hoag*.<sup>17</sup>

By the time cession took place, after which further sales or gifts of land by Rotumans to non-Rotumans were prohibited, the two missions combined had acquired an estimated 132 acres of land.<sup>18</sup>

The growth of the commercial economy and the effects of missionization, along with a significant depopulation (see chapter 11), resulted in a major disruption of the precontact system of land tenure. Whereas the *ho'aga* had previously been based primarily on kinship, it was transformed into a territorially based social unit, with kinship of only marginal concern. As a result land rights came to be dissociated from residence in a *ho'aga*, and the land itself was divided up among surviving members, each becoming steward (*pure*) over the area in which he (or she) planted and worked.

We surmise that this change in land tenure principles did not take place as a consciously executed plan, but rather as a gradual process involving a growth of vested interests in specific blocks of land, and a loss of authority on the part of the *fa'es ho'aga*. The validity of our supposition rests on the assumption that authority and property rights in precontact Rotuma were linked to the system of kinship relations, rather than to an overarching legal or political system. The evidence strongly suggests that this was indeed the case.

Another basic change concerned the rules by which land rights were transmitted. Under the *ho'aga* system, land had been inalienable, but as *ho'aga* headmen lost control of the land, those who were exercising stewardship over specific tracts assumed the right to dispose of them according to their own wishes. Individual *pure* began to treat land as private property, dividing it up and selling it, making gifts of it, and willing it to whomever they wanted. As a result, *ho'aga* lands were fragmented into smaller, separate blocks.

Despite the shift toward individuated landholdings, the relationship between kinship and land rights was by no means eliminated. What happened is that land became a form of negotiable property, and since custom closely prescribed the rights of kin in one another's property, the operating principles were simply extended to include rights over land and products from the land. The transmission of land rights thus came to be dominated by two sets of principles, one based on the *pure's* right to dispose of property in accordance with his or her own wishes, the second based on the rights of kin in one another's property.

Thus, rights in land shifted from being vested in the *ho'aga* to being vested in individual landholders, with all the descendants of a landholder having rights in the land. The complications and ambiguities that these changes introduced over time led to a dramatic increase in the number of disputes over land.

### Taxation

Shortly after cession the colonial administration introduced a system of taxation to finance the costs of governing Rotuma. Each district was assessed a certain amount of copra, to be paid annually, based on its size. The original assessment, amounting to 56 tons, was distributed as follows:

Noa'tau	10 tons
Oinafa	12 tons
Itu'ti'u	12 tons
Malhaha	5 tons
Juju	7 tons
Pepjei	5 tons
Itu'muta	5 tons

Copra was sold by the government and the total receipts were the taxes for the year. In 1884 the Governor of Fiji determined that the tax would be a land tax and should be paid by persons according to the land that they possessed. Soon afterward, a figure of £500 per annum was fixed as the amount due. It was still paid in copra, but quantities varied each year according to the prevailing price, which was attained by tender prior to announcing the assessments. The amount assessed each district was determined by the original ratio.

The 56 ton ratio continued until 1902 when Resident Commissioner John Hill informed the council that he considered the existing ratio to be inequitable. He readjusted it as follows (in tons):

Noa'tau	10.0
Oinafa	10.0
Itu'ti'u	11.0
Malhaha	4.5
Juju	6.5
Pepjei	4.5
Itu'muta	5.5



Although Hill considered this adjustment temporary, the chiefs offered no objections and the ratio was used until June 1920. However, the way in which the system was administered introduced significant discrepancies. For example, if in one year it took 60 tons of copra to attain £500 and in the next year it took 53 tons because the price of copra had risen, each district received the same absolute reduction, without regard for ratio.

In July 1922, Resident Commissioner Hugh Macdonald informed the council that lacking offers in copra for that year he would receive the taxes in cash. The total remained at £500, but it was reapportioned as follows:

Noa'tau	£109
Oinafa	127
Itu'ti'u	145
Malhaha	20
Juju	59
Pepjei	20
Itu'muta	20

With a population averaging 2,200 through the 1920s, the annual tax per capita would have been between 4 and 5 shillings if it had been equally distributed, but it was not. Macdonald's formula departed from the previous ones, with the three larger districts paying considerably more than the smaller districts. This ratio continued until 1925 when the subchiefs of Itu'ti'u lodged a complaint with Resident Commissioner William Carew. Carew agreed that the burden of taxation was unfair and reverted to the original 56 ton ratio, with the exception that, because he considered Itu'ti'u larger than Oinafa, he raised Itu'ti'u's assessment to 13 tons and lowered Oinafa's to 11 tons (or units, as taxes were now paid in cash). On this basis each district was required to pay the following amounts:

Noa'tau	£89.12.0
Oinafa	98.00.0
Itu'ti'u	115.18.0
Malhaha	44.16.0
Juju	62.02.0
Pepjei	44.16.0
Itu'muta	44.16.0

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£500.00.0

Whenever the general Rotuma assessment was reduced by the Legislative Council in Fiji, each district was to receive a proportionate reduction. In the 1930s, because of the precipitous drop in copra prices resulting from the worldwide depression, annual taxes were reduced to between £220 and £289. The Rotumans were, however, cash poor during this period, and many were unable to pay taxes or license fees. Beginning in 1933, Rotumans were legally obliged to work twelve days a year on island roads or pay a commutation fee of 10 shillings. Whereas in 1936 they were all paying the road duty commutation, from 1938 to 1940 many Rotumans elected to work on the roads instead.<sup>19</sup>

In 1936 school attendance for children ages 6–14 was made mandatory. The Fiji Education Department covered salaries for school headmasters and some teachers, but a local fund was set up to cover costs of assistant teachers, materials, equipment, building repairs, and so on. During the second half of 1940 many people could no longer pay their school fees in cash because the firms had stopped paying cash for copra and had instituted a barter system. The money paid by those who could afford it was set aside for school maintenance; other parents were allowed to pay teachers in products such as yams, taro, and chickens, to the value of their fees.<sup>20</sup>

Despite some complaints, Carew's land tax formula remained in force until 1942 when District Officer A. E. Cornish negotiated a reassessment with the chiefs in council. The problem all along was that the land areas of the districts had never been surveyed, so it was all a matter of guesswork. Cornish asked the chiefs which district was smallest, and all agreed that it was Itu'muta. He then had them estimate how much larger each other district was in comparison, which resulted in an agreement that Itu'ti'u was 4 times its size, Oinafa 3 times, Noa'tau 2.75 times, Malhaha 2.5 times, Juju 2 times, and Pepjei 1.5 times. Based on this, Cornish proposed using a division of fifty units, resulting in the following distribution ratio and, given a total assessment of £252, the following payments:

<u>District</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Payments</u>
Noa'tau <sup>21</sup>	8.0	£40.06.05
Oinafa	9.0	45.07.02
Itu'ti'u	12.0	60.09.02
Malhaha	7.5	37.16.00
Juju	6.0	30.04.10
Pepjei	4.5	22.13.08
Itu'muta	3.0	15.02.05

Following World War II, with the worldwide economic recovery copra prices rebounded temporarily and land taxes were again raised to £500. The chiefs were still charged with collecting assessments within their respective districts. In addition, a road duty commutation was assessed at a level of around £250 in 1950, but this tax proved highly unpopular and was often in arrears. As a result, District Officer H. S. Evans recommended that the road tax be abolished and that the land tax be raised to £1,000:

Such a change would get rid of the Road Tax which was a never-ending exasperation to all of them, and would bring their total taxation to a sum more fair and reasonable in comparison with all other people in the Colony—though still at a very low level in relation to the very high copra payments they received.<sup>22</sup>

Evans's recommended increase was accepted, but even this was considered low by William Eason, who followed Evans as District Officer. He argued that the land tax for 1953 should be between £5,000 and £10,000, which, he contended, would only amount to six pence to a shilling per basket. At current prices, for every £10 a man earned for copra, he would only be paying two shillings (1 percent) in taxes.<sup>23</sup>

Faced with the possibility of increased taxes over which they would have no control, the Rotuma Council opted for a plan proposed by District Commissioner Southern J. W. Sykes. During a meeting of the council over which he presided, Sykes suggested that Rotumans follow the example of the Fijians by establishing a Rotuman Development Fund based on a £10 cess per ton of copra produced. He made it clear that the government would not appropriate the money, but that it would simply act as a bank. The council would have complete control of the funds and would determine how they were to be used. The council members responded

enthusiastically. They said that they had for a long time wished to collect funds for such things as overseas scholarships and improvements to the water supply, but had never been able to work out a satisfactory and efficient means of doing so.<sup>24</sup>

The project proved enormously successful. By 1960 the Rotuman Development Fund had accumulated £145,537 in capital and was funding a wide variety of projects, including contributions toward teachers' salaries, the purchase and maintenance of school buses, the salary of a junior clerk, scholarships for higher education, support of a craft center, and sundry lesser projects. A substantial sum was also allocated for an ill-fated land survey.<sup>25</sup>

Following a visit by Acting Governor of Fiji P. D. Macdonald in December 1963, a development team led by Ratu Kamasese Mara, who was then Commissioner Eastern, was sent to Rotuma

To formulate, in consultation with the Council of Rotuma, an economic development plan to develop the island, and in particular, its natural resources, to the best advantage over the years 1964–68 inclusive.<sup>26</sup>

The meeting resulted in a set of eleven recommendations covering the development of a proper water supply, ways to improve the road and agricultural practices, and the possibility of building an airstrip. Among other projects, the plan resulted in the construction and maintenance of some fifteen miles of feeder roads into and through the interior, paid for by the Rotuma Development Fund.<sup>27</sup>

### Copra Production

After the island was closed as a port of entry following cession, copra had to be shipped through Fiji. Until 1904 the trade was carried between Rotuma and Fiji on sailing ships, but in 1905 a steamer service was initiated.<sup>28</sup> Various firms handled copra and sold imported foods and other goods on Rotuma, the most long-lived being Morris Hedstrom and Burns Philp.

Rotuma's copra production fluctuated dramatically over the years in response to several contingencies: environmental and economic conditions on Rotuma, demand for copra on the world market, and local prices offered by the firms handling copra sales. Hurricanes in 1939, 1948, and 1972

resulted in marked drops in production. The Rotuma District Officer's annual report of 1943 blamed an outbreak of coconut bud rot for low yield in that year, and the 1968 report cited aging trees for falling production. Local infrastructural factors also affected copra sales. The availability of motorized transport allowed increased output in 1924, while insufficient drying and storage facilities, combined with inadequate shipping, forced Rotumans to limit production in the 1940s and the late 1960s.

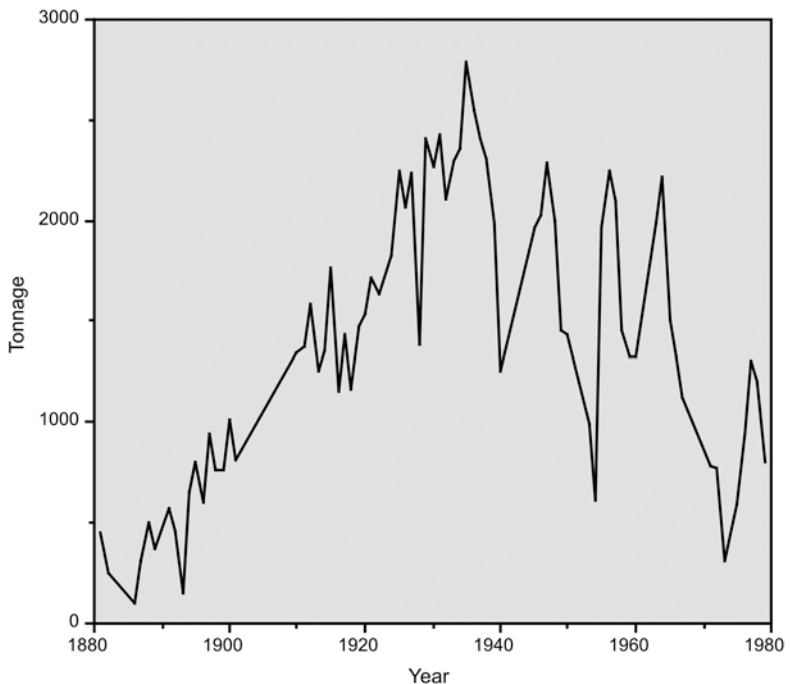


**Photo 10.4** Devastation to coconut trees following Hurricane Bebe, 1972.  
*Richard Mehus.*

Copra prices also had an impact on the amount of copra Rotumans cut, although the direction of impact was not always consistent. For instance, in 1935 Rotumans produced a record amount of copra when the price was low. More often, however, they responded to low prices by turning to food gardening, or to raising pigs, which "always command a large money price on the island."<sup>29</sup> When demand for copra increased, as it did during World War II, Rotumans "dropped everything and cut copra," so much so that the Rotuma Council decided to limit the number of days people could make copra in order to ensure they also worked in their gardens (see graph 10.1).<sup>30</sup>

Although world demand set the overall price for copra, local prices paid on Rotuma reflected additional costs in bagging and shipping it to ports in Fiji such as Suva or Levuka. This discrepancy in price was an issue of much

concern to Rotumans, who were also upset about price fluctuations, and suspected the firms of treating them unfairly. In 1926 Rotumans boycotted the firms for about six months, buying nothing and selling no copra.<sup>31</sup> Resident Commissioner Hugh Macdonald explained to the chiefs the mechanics of the copra trade, including the extra costs of shipping to Fiji, but relations between Rotumans and the firms became congenial again only after prices improved on the world market.<sup>32</sup>



**Graph 10.1** Estimated copra exports in tons, 1881–1979. Source: Rotuma District Office, *Outward Letters: Annual Reports*.

Another source of contention was the wages paid to men who worked for the firms, drying and bagging copra and loading vessels. When copra prices rose, Rotumans could earn more by cutting copra than by working for the firms, who then were hard pressed to find laborers. Sometimes Rotumans even hired Fijians or other Rotumans to cut their copra.<sup>33</sup> As explained in the next section, in order to pay higher wages and maintain their profits, the firms cut the

rate paid for copra and charged higher prices for store goods.<sup>34</sup>

### Income and Standard of Living

Little longitudinal information on income other than copra revenues has been recorded on Rotuma. Even using available information on copra income, assessing the financial prosperity of the island over time is a complicated process. Records are fragmentary, reported in different terms by successive colonial officials (for example, copra income before or after taxes, value of copra shipped, or copra produced). In addition, currency values fluctuated,<sup>35</sup> as well as local prices for consumer goods. Per capita estimates give the impression that all households participated in copra production, and that households with many dependents produced proportionately more, which is not necessarily the case. However, it is possible to obtain a general sense of income levels in various periods from colonial records. We have attempted to contextualize income estimates for each period with examples of contemporaneous monetary needs and uses.



**Photo 10.5** Amai Sakimi cutting copra, 1960. Amai was awarded an MBE for his service on cable ships in 1998. *Alan Howard.*

In the first two decades of colonial rule the Resident Commissioners estimated annual per capita income by dividing copra revenues by population. From 1881 to 1899,

yearly income per person ranged from a low of 6 shillings (in 1887) to a high of £2/5 (in 1894), averaging a little over a pound and a half. Resident Commissioner Mackay reported that incomes were supplemented by remittances.<sup>36</sup> Since taxes were not paid in cash until the 1920s, Rotumans only needed money for licenses if they had dogs, guns, or bicycles.<sup>37</sup> People also used what money they had to buy clothing, tools, and luxury foods. In 1888, for instance, Resident Commissioner Mackay noted that the island's financial prosperity was reflected in the large amount of store goods purchased around Christmas time.<sup>38</sup>

Following the practice of early colonial administrators, we obtained estimates of annual per capita income for later periods by dividing copra income by population.<sup>39</sup> Per capita copra earnings generally increased in the decade 1910–1919, fluctuating from around £6 to a high of £11, with an average of £8/12. Yearly income peaked at over £20 per person in 1920, then averaged £10/12 over the next seven years.

Few figures are available for copra revenues in the 1930s, but income slumped with the worldwide economic depression. In 1938 the estimated annual per capita income from copra was about £3, dropping to £2 in 1939 and just under £1 in both 1940 and 1941. Rotumans adapted by intensifying subsistence activities and all but ceased buying imported goods and food items. Reflecting on the abundance of locally produced food, Resident Commissioner Cornish suggested that Rotumans were better off in 1938 than they had been in 1921 when they had more money but spent it all on imports:

Although the price of copra was low, no real hardship occurred unless the shortage of money in a land of plenty can be termed a hardship. Rotuma is one of the lands which prove the adage that money does not necessarily bring happiness. Here, money frequently only brings to the people such luxuries as might very well be done without.<sup>40</sup>

In Cornish's 1940 annual report he continued to praise the island's nonmonetary fortunes, including a description of a huge feast which, other than his contribution of a small case of tinned meat, consisted totally of native products: beef, pork, turtle, fowl, duck, yams, taro, bananas, breadfruit, watermelons, pineapples, and various native puddings.



Monetary income picked up sharply during World War II. Estimated annual copra earnings rose in 1942 to about £7 per capita, and over the next ten years soared to an average of £18. Also in 1942, a platoon of 28 Rotumans was drafted to the artillery of the Fiji Defence Force (see photo 9.6). In addition 173 men, representing about 31 percent of the men from each district, were recruited as laborers. They were given quarters, rationing, and wages, plus free transportation to and from Fiji. These men were employed in Fiji until May 1943, at which time others volunteered to take their places.<sup>41</sup>

It was around this time that the commercial firms found it difficult to get enough men to work for them drying and bagging copra. The manpower shortage caused by the war was exacerbated by the fact that while the firms were offering 4 shillings/day, Rotumans were paying each other up to 10 shillings/day to cut copra, and around 7 shillings/day for assistance in such activities as planting yams.<sup>42</sup> The firms resorted to reducing the price they paid for copra in order to raise the wage they paid copra workers to 6 shillings/day. The chiefs tried, with difficulty, to convince their people to pay one another less, but the people resisted; by 1952 some Rotumans were giving £1 plus food to those who cut their copra. It was also during this period that the Rotuma Council moved to set fixed prices for cattle and other animals in order to prevent their people from charging each other exorbitant prices.

Rotumans wanted to support the British in the war. In February 1940 they held a special Red Cross fund-raiser on the island but only managed to raise a little over £37. They made no further collections that year because they lacked cash, but did send Rotuman mats to the Red Cross Carnival in Suva, where they were sold for high prices.<sup>43</sup> In 1942 the Rotuma Council discussed how they might contribute to the Fiji Fighter Fund, since by this time they "had money to spare."<sup>44</sup> At the District Officer's suggestion they set up a voluntary program of deductions from copra earnings. The going price for green copra was 1 shilling for 19 pounds; the people unanimously agreed to accept 1 shilling for 20 pounds, with the balance donated to the Fighter Fund.

After three months, the Colonial Secretary sent a telegram to the Rotuma Council, thanking them for their generous support but suggesting that only 25 percent of the monies collected in this way be given to the Fighter Fund. He suggested that the balance be put into a savings bank to

form a fund for infant welfare or other community purposes after the war. While the money was deposited in a savings bank, he explained, it was remitted to the United Kingdom and was thus helping the war effort. The Council agreed to this arrangement, and the Rotuma Provincial Fund was established.<sup>45</sup>

In 1951, District Commissioner Southern J. W. Sykes met with the Rotuma Council and reported that in that year approximately £90,000 would be paid for copra purchased from Rotumans; given a population of fewer than 3,000, the average income per person was over £30. The minutes of the meeting included his reflections:

Evidence of the wave of prosperity that [is] sweeping the island [is] provided by the large number of new bicycles, radios, and expensive store goods purchased by the people and also by the fact that three cinemas [are] able to exist and presumably make a profit. [I understand] that a fourth cinema [is] to be opened early next year and also an ice cream factory.<sup>46</sup>

In 1960 Howard estimated household income to range between US\$250–500, which would convert to approximately £100–200 per household or £14/8 to £29/16 per person.<sup>47</sup> Although the subsistence economy was still flourishing, Howard noted that by this time many European products had become necessities rather than luxuries. Tools, building materials, cloth, and kerosene for lanterns and cookstoves were considered essentials. Tea, biscuits, butter, salt, and sugar were used on a daily basis; corned beef was important for special meals and feasts. A wedding might be postponed if copra prices were too low, because people needed money and the things money could buy in order to put on a proper ceremony. If Rotuma were cut off from access to imported supplies for an extended period, Howard suggested, people would suffer as much as they would in rural communities in Europe or the United States.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, Rotumans continued to pay taxes, licenses, and fees, and to make donations to churches and other community purposes.

### The Cooperative Movement

Over the years Rotumans made a number of attempts to gain control over the copra trade and shipping. Acting Resident

Commissioner A. E. Cornish recorded some of this history in a 1934 letter to the Colonial Secretary in Suva:

(1) They bought a schooner, the "UJIA," and carried their copra in their own vessel to Fiji. This vessel was later wrecked at Rotuma, uninsured.<sup>49</sup>

(2) They invited the Fiji Planters Cooperative Association to open branches at Rotuma. In this case they gave all labour for the loading of vessels, bagging of copra etc., free. Upon the withdrawal of this concern from the Island, many of them lost sums of money up to £40 for copra owing to them.

(3) They later subscribed a sum of about £1120 for the initial payment for a schooner which was to cost £5000. This was for the purpose of carrying their copra to Sydney and to return with goods. The sum was later dealt with in the Rotuma Shipping Fund.

(4) They invited A. M. Brodziak Ltd. to trade in Rotuma and supported that firm with free labour etc. as in the case of (2). In this case they also signed contracts for the supply of quantities of copra over a period of one year....The contracts were broken to an extreme by A. M. Brodziak three months after signing but the signees still sold their copra to Brodziak Ltd. for the remainder of the year at £1 per ton less than other traders offered simply because they had "signed."

(5) They invited the owner of the "LEI VITI" to make periodic trips to Rotuma for the purpose of bringing their copra to Suva for sale. In this case although they were definitely receiving, after all expenses were paid, at least £1 per ton less than they could have got at Rotuma with no trouble to themselves, they persisted with this scheme for about 18 months.

(6) They commenced, in a small way, in 1933 a Cooperative Association, called the Rotuma Cooperative Association. This concern is supposed to be registered in Suva...they sold shares and opened a store. The store is now closed and the shareholders are wondering where is their money.<sup>50</sup>

In 1947 the colonial administration of Fiji passed an ordinance establishing the position of Registrar of Cooperative Societies for the Colony and encouraging the formation of local cooperatives.<sup>51</sup> In response, several groups on Rotuma started cooperatives in order to combat the firms' control of business on the island. Eventually five groups,

classified as "canteens," emerged in Oinafa village, Lopta, Malhaha, Itu'muta, and Noa'tau. With no prior experience in managing a business, little capital to work with, and antagonism from the firms, it was difficult going. Only the fierce determination of members kept the fledgling groups from a quick demise.

Circumstances improved briefly when a new manager, a Mr. Roe, took over at Burns Philp. He agreed to assist the co-ops and even offered them material support, thereby gaining their confidence. However, the Burns Philp branch shopkeepers, themselves Rotuman, saw the co-ops as a threat to their well-being and maintained their enmity, resorting to threats and rebukes and rejecting overtures for cooperation. In 1951 Roe was replaced by Mr. Stock, who was far more antagonistic to the co-ops; indeed, he openly declared that he would put them out of business altogether. He refused to supply the co-ops with any goods whatsoever, or to do business with any known co-op members. As a result, the co-ops transferred their business to a Chinese shop on the island owned by Gock Chim Young. Antagonisms came to a head when a cargo shipment arrived for the co-ops and was off-loaded at Motusa, the main anchorage at the time. The task was to transport the goods to the individual co-ops, the most distant being in Noa'tau, some fifteen kilometers away. To accomplish this they needed a truck. In the past the firms had freely rented a vehicle out, but not this time. Stock decided to withhold even that business courtesy. Faced with seeing their perishable goods rot in the hot sun, the co-op members and their supporters carried sacks of flour and sugar, cases of corned beef and other tinned foods, and rolled forty-four-gallon drums of fuel over the rough road. So contrary to Rotuman notions of decency was the firms' denial of transportation, and so heroic were the efforts of the co-op members, that the incident galvanized support for the co-ops in a way that had previously been missing. The incident became a rallying cry whenever difficulties arose, like "Remember Pearl Harbor" was to Americans after it was bombed by the Japanese at the beginning of World War II.

An examiner from the copra board visited Rotuma in 1952 and issued a report criticizing the co-ops for producing inferior copra. He accused the members of ignorance and having no experience in running a business, and commented that he expected them to operate at a heavy loss and

eventually to fail. The co-op members were disappointed and disheartened but did not give up.

In 1953 Wilson Inia, a Rotuman who had been teaching school in Fiji, came to Rotuma on furlough with his wife, Elizabeth, and was persuaded to stay and start a high school on the island. In the interim he was appointed headmaster of one of the primary schools. Inia immediately took an interest in the fledgling cooperative movement and advised the groups to seek government aid. He wrote to the registrar of cooperatives and asked for assistance. In response, the registrar sent Inspector Butadroka to teach basic business skills and advise the groups on a variety of matters relating to cooperative management. At the time of his arrival, nine local groups were operating as cooperatives, and within a matter of weeks five more were formed, raising the total to fourteen. Butadroka organized a class in bookkeeping, and Inia joined him to co-teach it. Each co-op sent three representatives, although a number of other people, members and non-members alike, elected to attend. The class turned out to be so large that it had to be divided into two groups. One class was taken by Butadroka, the other by Inia.

During this period Inia and Butadroka held meetings all over the island in order to educate the populace and to discuss with them the nature of cooperatives. They considered a variety of possible ways to strengthen the movement and devised a structure somewhat at variance with the usual scheme favored by the Department of Cooperatives. The new plan called for establishing an association of the local co-ops, to be called the Rotuma Cooperative Association (RCA), so that a more solid capital base could be formed. A union would also allow for better coordination in importing goods and exporting copra. A portion of each co-op's shares was to be invested in the association, with the remainder left on hand to meet local needs. A central committee was set up comprising a chairman, an adviser (Wilson Inia), a manager, two representatives from each group, and an internal auditor. Central facilities were constructed in Noa'tau, at the opposite end of the island from where the commercial firms' main branches were located.

The scheme was supported by the Rotuman District Officer at the time, Fred Ieli. He helped Inia organize RCA and used his influence and office for the union's benefit. But the firms did not give up easily. They still had the advantage of a much stronger capital base, and they controlled both shipping to the island and internal transportation, owning

the only trucks for transporting copra and supplies. Until 1955, when RCA became fully operational, the co-ops still had to sell their copra and order their goods through the firms. The firms also operated the punts and launches required for loading and unloading cargo from ships, which had to anchor offshore, since there were no docks. This added shipping and handling charges to already high freight charges, thus lowering copra income and raising the price of imported commodities.

The early years of RCA's development were very difficult and required great sacrifices. For the first several years, co-op members worked without pay in order to keep their businesses afloat. Despite these hardships the movement endured and gained momentum. In 1956 five of the local co-ops, with a total of 140 members and £8,865 subscribed capital, met the criteria for registration, making them eligible for government assistance. By 1958 two more qualified, totaling 239 members and £13,160 in subscribed capital, in addition to RCA's £10,169; and by 1960 a total of thirteen societies boasted 513 shareholders (involving 84 percent of the households on the island) and £25,051 in subscribed capital, plus RCA's £20,632.



**Photo 10.6** Wilson Inia. *Family album.*

In 1958 Inia was awarded a scholarship, sponsored by the British Council, to study the operation of cooperatives in England and Scotland. On the way back he stopped in India and Sri Lanka to look at how cooperatives were run in those countries. He was away from Fiji for six months and came

back with some very definite ideas. What he saw convinced him that careful accounting, and regular audits, were the keys to success. If money could not be accounted for accurately, it would disappear and the groups would bleed to death. Without proper accounting, he believed, trust would dissolve and the whole basis for cooperation would fall by the wayside. He also determined that maintaining a substantial capital base was vital for the success of cooperatives, and that a strong central committee was needed to supervise and check on the work performed by cooperative members.

To implement these ideas he recommended maintaining a high profit margin on sales in order to insure a stable capital base, then giving dividends at the end of the year based on overall profitability. Workers would also be paid from year-end profits. This meant charging higher prices for goods than the firms did. The registrar of cooperatives viewed these innovations as a violation of the spirit of cooperation, and he accused RCA of operating like a company, subject to taxation. He advocated decentralized decision making, investing accumulated capital in equipment such as hot-air dryers in order to improve the quality of copra, paying workers direct salaries, lowering prices, and eliminating the profit/dividend method of distributing benefits. The Rotumans, however, under Inia's leadership, refused to budge. As a result, RCA found itself in a constant struggle with the Division of Cooperatives.

Nevertheless, the Rotuma Cooperative Association continued to gain strength under Inia's guidance, and eventually turned the tables on the firms. Co-op members were forbidden to transact with the firms, and the consequent fall in business led Morris Hedstrom and Burns Philp to close up shop on Rotuma before the end of 1968, leaving RCA with a total monopoly over commerce on the island. Whereas the history of the cooperative movement in the rest of Fiji was dismal, with failures the rule, RCA was a resounding success. In 1969 RCA's subscribed capital rose to £97,834, and it handled a copra turnover worth more than £280,000.

The development of RCA was not without strains. Rotuma's long history of interdistrict rivalry, compounded by the division between Catholics and Methodists, was a challenging impediment. In the 1950s and 1960s antagonism between the Catholics, who predominated in the districts of Juju and Pepjei and adjacent sections of Noa'tau and Itu'ti'u, and the Methodists, who occupied the rest of the island, was

still intense and sometimes bitter. Neither would participate in the events and ceremonies of the other. Furthermore, people were extremely reluctant to sacrifice local autonomy, so getting co-op groups based in villages to yield control to a centralized association took some doing.

More than any other activity or series of actions, the development of RCA is indicative of the Rotumans' passionate desire to control their own destiny. The fact is they made great sacrifices in order to support the organization, often against their immediate self-interest. RCA managed to bridge the gaps between districts and between Catholics and Methodists. By the end of the colonial era it had nearly complete control of Rotuma's commerce.





**Photo 10.7** Rotuma Cooperative Association headquarters in Noa'tau, 1971. *Fiji Ministry of Information.*



**Photo 10.8** Itu'muta Cooperative store, 1960. *Alan Howard.*

## Notes to Chapter 10

Rotuma's economic history is dealt with extensively in Rensel's doctoral dissertation, "For Love or Money? Interhousehold Exchange and the Economy of Rotuma" (1994). The sections of this chapter that describe the development of commerce during the early postcontact period, and the vicissitudes of the copra trade, are adapted from the parts of her thesis concerned with these topics. Changes in land tenure were the subject of Howard's doctoral dissertation (1962), from which two publications derived: "Land, Activity Systems and Decision-Making Models in Rotuma," published in *Ethnology* (Howard 1963a), and "Land Tenure and Social Change in Rotuma," which appeared in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (Howard 1964). The section on land tenure in this chapter represents a synthesis of these writings. The history of the cooperative movement on Rotuma during the colonial period derives from two publications by Howard, both focusing on the leadership of Wilson Inia: *Hef Ràn Ta (The Morning Star): A Biography of Wislon Inia* (Howard 1994), and "Money, Sovereignty and Moral Authority on Rotuma," in *Leadership and Change in the Western Pacific*, edited by Karen Watson-Gegeo and Richard Feinberg (Howard 1996a).

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Dillon 1829, 94; Bennett 1831, 475; Jarman 1832; and Lesson 1838–1839, 424.

<sup>2</sup> Cheever 1834.

<sup>3</sup> Cheever 1835.

<sup>4</sup> Cheever 1835.

<sup>5</sup> Lesson 1838, 430–431; see also Dillon 1829, 98; Bennett 1831, 201; and Cheever 1835.

<sup>6</sup> The issues that lay beneath European accusations of thievery are discussed by Borofsky and Howard 1989, 250–260.

<sup>7</sup> Cheever 1835.

<sup>8</sup> Forbes 1875, 226.

<sup>9</sup> Methodist Missionary Letters from Rotuma, 24 May 1875.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Boddam-Whetham 1876, 272.

<sup>11</sup> Outward Letters, 24 November 1884; Allardyce 1885–1886, 132.

<sup>12</sup> See Howard 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Forbes 1875, 247.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Outward Letters, 10 January 1887.

<sup>15</sup> Allardyce 1885–1886, 137.

<sup>16</sup> Gardiner 1898, 485.

<sup>17</sup> Gardiner 1898, 485.

<sup>18</sup> Records of Land Titles Commission, Rotuma, 1882–1883: Preliminary Inventory No. 2, Fiji National Archives, Suva. Given an estimate of 1,510 hectares of soils "with slight or moderate physical limitations for cropping" (Laffan et al. 1982), 132 acres amounts to about 3.5 percent of such arable land.

<sup>19</sup> Outward Letters, 30 January 1937, 23 February 1938, 30 January 1940, 5 February 1941.

<sup>20</sup> Outward Letters, 5 February 1941.

<sup>21</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 5 February 1942. Although the total (16.75 x 3) came to 50.25, Cornish rounded off to 50 by reducing Noa'tau's assessment from 8.25 to 8.0.

<sup>22</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 13 April 1950.

<sup>23</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 15 May 1952.

<sup>24</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 14 December 1951.

<sup>25</sup> The British colonial government proposed to survey boundaries and register landownership on Rotuma as a means of reducing what they considered an excessive number of land disputes. Insofar as they considered the Rotuman bilineal system of land tenure (allowing inheritance through both mother's and father's lines) to be a cause of the problem, they decided to simplify matters by instituting a system of exclusively patrilineal inheritance, based on the Fijian model. The people on Rotuma reacted with considerable dismay and refused to cooperate with the land commissioner assigned to implement the policy, so the survey was cancelled. As of this writing, the land on Rotuma has still not been surveyed or registered.

<sup>26</sup> Rotuma District Office, Memorandum from the Colonial Secretary, 11 February 1964 (No. F.9/8).

<sup>27</sup> Rotuma District Office, File RA/10.

<sup>28</sup> Outward Letters, 27 July 1911.

<sup>29</sup> Outward Letters, 10 January 1887.

<sup>30</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 5 March 1942.

<sup>31</sup> Outward Letters, 29 January 1936.

<sup>32</sup> See Minutes of the Rotuma Council from 1914–1921.

<sup>33</sup> Outward Letters, 5 January 1921; Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 8 October 1942 and 14 March 1952; Sykes 1948.

<sup>34</sup> Outward Letters, 1 July 1924; Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 7 January 1943.

<sup>35</sup> Currency in Rotuma was British pounds until Fijian independence in 1970; thereafter it has been Fiji dollars (F\$). In 1989 a Fiji dollar was worth about US\$0.67.

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<sup>36</sup> Outward Letters, 10 January 1887.

<sup>37</sup> Stores and vehicles were also licensed, but until the 1980s most of these were owned by either the commercial firms or cooperatives.

<sup>38</sup> Outward Letters, 2 January 1889.

<sup>39</sup> For years in which population figures are not available, we estimated population based on intermediate values between years when censuses were reported.

<sup>40</sup> Outward Letters, 30 January 1939.

<sup>41</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 2 July 1942, and 6 May 1943.

<sup>42</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 8 October 1942.

<sup>43</sup> Outward Letters, 5 February 1941.

<sup>44</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 7 May 1942.

<sup>45</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 13 August 1942.

<sup>46</sup> Minutes of the Rotuma Council, 14 December 1951. To our knowledge no ice cream factory was ever opened on Rotuma.

<sup>47</sup> The average was 6.9 persons per household (Howard 1991, 241), yielding an average annual per capita income of between US\$36–72. We used a conversion figure of US\$2.50 to the pound for an estimated £14/8–£29/16 per person.

<sup>48</sup> Howard 1970, 18.

<sup>49</sup> The wreck occurred in 1903 according to Eason 1951, 113.

<sup>50</sup> Outward Letters, 16 November 1934.

<sup>51</sup> No. 11 of 1947.