

Spirits of the past

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IT was a momentous occasion. Ratu Sukuna had come to the island for the flag ceremony to mark Rotumas independence from Great Britain. The islanders welcomed the visitors and the formalities began.

All eyes fixed on Fijis sky-blue flag climbing steadily up the long white poles at Ahau, the islands unofficial capital. From the top, the flag fluttered about falling victim to the direction of the wind.

Then it happened. No one moved. No one uttered a word. No one did anything to stop what was happening. All eyes still transfixed on the flag. Only this time, the flag was no longer at its peak. It had been lowered to halfmast. But no one was at the flagpole to control its movement. No one lowered it. No one dared. To do so was a sign of something terrible.

The chiefs knew it, the people knew it but no one moved. Who had the guts to tell Ratu this was a bad omen? Seconds later, without being told, the matanivanua for Ratu Sukuna told him that before the sun set that day, he had to be on the boat back to Fiji or face certain death.

This was how it was back in the day, long before Christianity graced the coveted island of Rotuma. Spirits were held in high regard, worshipped and loved by the people who believed in the powers they possessed. This story and many more about the spirit world are tales passed down orally from an elder in the community.

Noatau sub-chief Gagaj Fonman Inoke opened up about this particular incident that had been misinterpreted and changed over the years when story-telling around the tanoa about the spirit world in Rotuma. Its something like Chinese whisper, a variation of the original story with some spicy bits to make it sound more interesting and catchy than the first talanoa.

This is the story that I was told. It wasn't Ratu Mara but Ratu Sukuna. When the flag had reached halfmast, everyone knew it was a bad omen - a sign of death. The matanivanua knew exactly what it meant. They knew the spirit world, he said while waiting for our tour to Sisilo in Noatau.

Even at the kava ceremony, something eerie had happened too. During this ceremonial event, the first bowl is normally given to Gagaj Maraf or the chief of Noatau because of his rank or position on the island.

This time, the chiefs allowed Ratu Sukuna to take the first bowl as a sign of respect. The kava mixing ceremony started and the first bowl was given to the lady to pass it to Ratu Sukuna.

She took it the bowl with kava in it and presented it to Ratu Sukuna - without realising the bowl was empty.

She went back and got the kava again but by the time the bowl reached him, it was empty - as if to say it wasn't meant for him. At that moment, the matanivanua stood up and told Ratu Sukuna that he had to leave even though the ceremony was still going on.

He excused himself saying he was sick and left. We later learnt of this story but that's how the island was ruled back then.

On Rotuma.net, a couple of notes from anthropologist Gordon Macgregor during his visit to the island in 1932 highlighted various spirit houses with oracles and their constant interaction with a higher being or spirits known as aitu in the local lingo.

Macgregor was a staff of Bishop Museum in Honolulu, Hawaii and spent six months on the island studying pre-European history and customs. Here are snippets from consultants or people who gave him information during his stay on the island.

In each village there is a spirit house where oracles were pronounced from the aitu. Men and women alike pronounced oracles. These were called toakaitu. They answered the cause of sicknesses, which occurred from curses. The house was just like any other but had a chamber in it for oracle telling, read his notes from consultant Kitione, a minister from Losa and a fisherman who Macgregor used as an interpreter.

Another consultant, Mereama shared old stories from Itutiu and Losa.

In Losa there was a house called Risusu, which was a suura, or the house in which the sau (king) stayed when he was in Losa. There was another house called Rihoi where the people of Losa prayed to Tagroa for rain or sun, or relief from storms and hurricanes.

There was a daughter born to Irava in Savlei, and the aitu said to name her Ufimalumalu, and that during her life there would be no more hurricanes in Rotuma. So far the prophecy has been true.

Says Marasial, described by Macgregor as another good informant from the family of Fonman who lived in Motusa and was the mafua (spokesman) for Itutiu in 1932.

Tagaroa and Garagsau were worshipped in a special spirit house, called a ri susu, or sewn house, in Losa. Here people prayed for plenty of food and fish. They prayed for an ia foa, which is the appearance of a tremendous school of fish which are numerous enough to supply the island for weeks.

These sudden and infrequent supplies of fish are attributed to the gods, and the chief who receives the first fruit from such a catch is considered the owner of the ia foa.

Macgregor described another consultant known as Varomua as a good informant from Malhaa and former chief.

The tuura (a being that hosted an atua) had a house called ri fak aitu to which he went with those who wished to hear from the gods. These seances were held in the ri fak aitu, but the tuura did not live there. This was at least so in Malhaha where there was one if not two spirit houses. The one for which Tavai gave three names was the one to which Ravak came and which was called by Varumua ri fak aitu.

In the Malhaha houses of tuura there was kept a war stick (ai peluga) wrapped in leaves, fak moro. This war club was hung in the house and when the leaves began to fall off, the tuura knew that war was imminent.

The accounts are endless and the stories plentiful. When sharing about the war days in Noatau, Gagaj Fonman made special mention of the divisions in the chiefly district. There was a place where the kinship came from, a place called Fekeioko, another side of the village where the warriors lived and a separate section for the ordinary folks. From Rupeti Manis home, we were shown a channel a stepping stone away that was used by approaching enemies during bloody days of battle for power. I could never have imagined this scenic view to be a bloody battlefield many years ago. We went past an abandoned house made from coral. Its walls were thicker than normal concrete homes says Fiji Museums field research officer Sepeti Matararaba.

The warriors lived in this area because it was closer to the passage. They would wait for the canoes and fight off the enemies, Gagaj Fonman said.

There's a foundation called Fuagesu - meaning to stand there and keep a lookout - where the warriors would inform the king of the arrival of enemies at first sight. The king would organise and tell them what to do before the battle begins.

There's another foundation called kamalele which describes a fighting style. It means when the fight is on, once a warrior has a chance to kill, they go for it. That's how the warriors fought.

In Macgregor's notes, he described Fuagesu as a place of atua in the bush behind Noatau. It was ruled by a female atua, Garisau - a surneaitu. They travelled about and took the souls of people to their place.

When our story-telling session had finished, Gagaj Fonman said Christianity had changed the way many lived their lives on the island. While he maintained some chiefs preferred the old way of life, the island had moved on and done away with spirits of the past.