

## Rotuma: Interpreting a Wedding

Alan Howard and Jan Rensel

[Published in *Portraits of Culture: Ethnographic Originals*, edited by Melvin Ember, Carol Ember and David Levinson. Prentice Hall, 1994]

In most societies there are one or two activities that express, in highly condensed ways, what life is all about for its members. In Bali it is the cockfight, [1] among the Australian Aborigines the corroboree, in Brazil there is carnival. One might make a case for the Superbowl in the United States. On Rotuma, a small isolated island in the South Pacific, weddings express, in practice and symbolically, the deepest values of the culture. In the bringing together of a young man and young woman, in the work that goes into preparing the wedding feast, in the participation of chiefs both as paragons of virtue and targets of humor, in the displays of food and fine white mats, and in the sequence of ceremonial rites performed, Rotumans communicate to one another what they care about most: kinship and community, fertility of the people and land, the political balance between chiefs and commoners, and perpetuation of Rotuman custom. After providing a brief description of Rotuma and its people, we narrate an account of a wedding in which we participated. We then interpret key features of the wedding, showing how they express, in various ways, core Rotuman values.

### THE ISLAND AND ITS PEOPLE

Rotuma is situated approximately 300 miles north of Fiji, on the western fringe of Polynesia. The island is volcanic in origin, forming a land area of about 17 square miles, with the highest craters rising to heights of 800 feet above sea level. From the air Rotuma appears a dark green jewel, framed by a white garland of breaking surf, in the midst of the vast blue ocean. On closer inspection one sees a far greater array of colors and hues; the dark green of coconut trees that cover much of the island are complemented by the softer tints of breadfruit trees, banana plants, taro and yam gardens. The white sand beaches on parts of the coast are offset by black lava rocks from ancient eruptions. Tropical flowers and vines add even more variation to a kaleidoscopic landscape of living things. The island is nearly as beautiful up close as it is from afar, and one can understand why some early visitors confused it with paradise. But after one experiences the sometimes overpowering heat and humidity--Rotuma is only 12 degrees from the equator and has an average 140 inches of rain per year--and the ubiquitous flies and mosquitoes, illusions of paradise are likely to evaporate.

The island is divided into two parts joined by an isthmus of sand, forming a configuration about eight miles long and at its widest three miles across, with its lengthwise axis running due east and west. A packed sand road, reinforced in places with concrete strips, circles the perimeter of the eastern segment of the island and extends to coastal plains west of the isthmus. Villages and hamlets are scattered along the road, with occasional stretches of bushland in between. The interior of the island is heavily cultivated with gardens of taro, yams, cassava, bananas, pineapples, watermelons and other food crops. A few people plant vanilla, cocoa or kava as commercial crops as well. Fruit trees abound: mango, papaya, orange. Rotuman oranges--wonderfully sweet and juicy--are justifiably famous in that part of the Pacific. Cattle and goats are tethered to coconut trees adjacent to plantations, and pigs are kept in stone walled enclosures.

Linguists have long debated the place of the Rotuman language in the Austronesian family. Although sharing a significant portion of vocabulary with Tongan and Samoan, Rotuman has some unique characteristics that set it apart from others in the vicinity. The current view is that an earlier form of the language was closely related to ancestral languages in western Fiji, [2] but that invasions from Tonga and Samoa resulted in a good deal of borrowing and innovation. The product is a language that is unintelligible to speakers of other Pacific tongues.

Politically Rotuma has been governed as part of Fiji for over one hundred years. When the paramount chiefs of Rotuma's seven districts ceded the island to Great Britain in 1881, for administrative convenience the British decided to incorporate it into the Crown Colony of Fiji, some 300 miles away. When Fiji was granted independence in 1970, the Rotuman people decided to remain a part of Fiji. They also decided to stay with Fiji, though not without controversy, following two military coups in 1987.

The total number of Rotumans enumerated in the 1986 census of Fiji was 8652, of whom only 2588 were resident on the home island. The remainder live mostly in Fiji's urban centers where they are conspicuously successful in professions, government service and private industry. Travel back and forth between Fiji and Rotuma is facilitated by weekly flights and cargo vessels that take passengers. A substantial number of Rotumans have also migrated to Australia and New Zealand, and they, too, make return visits on occasion. In addition to keeping in touch by mail and radio-telephone, relatives in Fiji and abroad host visitors from Rotuma and send remittances, household appliances and other manufactured goods back home to enhance their kinsmen's standard of living. [3] For their part, those remaining on Rotuma frequently send gifts of produce, prepared foods and Rotuman handicrafts to their relatives living away.

Culturally, Rotuma clearly falls within the Polynesian orbit. Titled chiefs are important to the social and political life of the island, and Rotuman values and custom show strong resemblances to other cultures of western Polynesia (especially Tonga, Samoa, Futuna and Uvea). At the heart of the kinship system is the concept of **kainaga**, which in its broadest sense refers to all one's "blood" relations, that is, anyone who is descended from a common ancestor. In its restricted usage, **kainaga** refers to common rights in a specific named house-site. Rotumans say that each person ideally belongs to eight **kainaga**, corresponding to their great-grandparents' homes. At life-crisis ceremonies such as first birthdays, weddings and funerals, relevant house-sites are gathering places where members congregate to prepare food and materials for the event. They then go as a group to make their presentations.

Also important for life-crisis events is the institution of name giving. Prior to the birth of a child, someone with a special relationship to one or both parents requests that the baby be named after him or her. Name givers may or may not be close relatives, but when accepted a special bond is formed between them and the newborn child. Name givers are expected to bestow special gifts on birthdays, Christmas and other occasions, and to champion the causes of their namesakes. At weddings they play a special role, as we shall see.

## PRELUDE TO A WEDDING

As recently as 1960, when Alan first began research on Rotuma, marriages were often arranged by parents without their children's direct involvement. Sometimes bride and groom met for the first time on their wedding day. Arrangements for such a marriage were formal and complex. They began with representatives of the young man seeking approval from the young woman's parents for the match. If her parents agreed, a more formal delegation was formed to

approach the chief of the woman's district. In Rotuman, this event is called **süf hani**. The gravity of the proposal would be enhanced by each side's asking titled men, perhaps even their district chief, to represent them. To emphasize the seriousness of the request the young man's representatives would bring a gift of a whole pig cooked in an earthen oven and a small **kava** plant. [**Kava** is a plant of the pepper family, the roots of which are used to make a drink with mild narcotic properties; it is an essential part of Rotuman ceremonies at which chiefs and dignitaries are honored.]

In turn, the young woman's kinsmen would feed the young man's representatives. The pros and cons of the prospective match would be discussed, and if agreed upon, preparations would begin for the next stage, **fai ran ta**, a ceremony at which the wedding date was set.

The following field notes, obtained by Alan from a participant in an arranged marriage in 1960, provides a sense of what these negotiations were like. The groom, Aisea, was a school teacher from the district of Malhaha; the bride, Ieli, was the grand-daughter of Tokaniua, the paramount chief of Oinafa district. Aisea met Ieli during the Christmas "play" season [4] and decided he wanted to marry her. He went to Tokaniua and told him of his intentions. [5] Tokaniua was reluctant because of Aisea's reputation for drinking, but said he would accept if Aisea would change his ways. Aisea promised that he would.

When he left Oinafa, Aisea went back to his home in Malhaha and early the next morning told his father the news. Immediately Aisea's father went to the Chief of Malhaha [also named Aisea; we will refer to him as Chief Aisea] and informed him. This was necessary because Ieli, being a district chief's grand-daughter, should be asked for by someone of chiefly rank. Chief Aisea decided on the best time to go **süf hani** to ask formally for Ieli's hand.

### ***Süf hani: Asking for a Young Woman's Hand in Marriage***

All the sub-chiefs in Malhaha were called on to join the delegation. The only person of rank to stay behind was Aisea's brother, who remained to supervise the preparation of food for the delegation, who would have to be fed upon their return. In addition to Chief Aisea and five sub-chiefs, Aisea's namesake and one other untitled man joined the delegation; the latter was selected by Chief Aisea to carry the **kava** plant.

In keeping with Rotuman custom, the delegation left early in the morning. The district messenger from Malhaha had been sent earlier to Oinafa to inform Chief Tokaniua of the date and time of the delegation's arrival. [Each district has a formal position of messenger responsible for communicating the paramount chief's desires and intentions vis-a-vis other districts.] When the **süf hani** delegation reached Oinafa they were greeted at the chief's house by Tokaniua himself. This was a sign of acceptance. If Tokaniua had not been there to offer them greetings, this would have been a bad sign--a note of disapproval. Even if a marriage does not directly involve the chief's family, if the bride and groom are from different districts, proper custom requires the chief of the young woman's district to receive the **süf hani** delegation, provided the union is agreeable to her family.

After the delegation was greeted by Tokaniua they were asked into the house and sat down. Already seated and waiting were Ieli's namesake and members of her **kainaga**. Tokaniua opened the meeting by welcoming the delegation and thanking them for coming. Then, the oldest member of the groom's delegation, a man in his eighties by the name of Hanfakaga, began to talk, and came straight to the point. He took the initiative because he was related to Tokaniua and therefore less restrained by barriers of respect. Hanfakaga talked very humbly about Aisea. His job was made more difficult by Aisea's reputation for drinking, but in any case humility is called

for by custom.

The interaction between the two groups was essentially democratic, with each person speaking in turn. Generally the young man's delegation "talks down" his desirability as a husband and apologizes for his faults, while it is up to the young woman's side, provided they are disposed toward acceptance, to emphasize his good points. Eventually, after each person on both sides had their say, Tokaniua gave an official acceptance on Ieli's behalf. If necessary--if a verdict is in doubt--the young woman's representatives may go into private conference in order to reach a decision, but the final answer can only be properly given by the chief. During all this time Ieli was not present, nor did she have any official say in the scheduling or form of the wedding.

Tokaniua then advised the Malhaha delegation to tell Aisea to come to Oinafa on the following day so that he could talk to him and Ieli together, to advise them and instruct Aisea when to go to the government station to post their marital bans (usually the day after such a meeting). He also gave the delegation a date for their next meeting, the *fai ran ta*, when the wedding date would be arranged. The date for the *fai ran ta* is discussed along with the other business of *süf hani*, but the final decision is made by the young woman's side and announced by the chief. After concluding their official business, tea and biscuits were served to all who were present, following which the Malhaha delegation returned home to inform Aisea and the rest of his *kainaga* of the good news.

### *Fai ran ta: Appointing the Day*

The same people who went on the *süf hani* formed Aisea's delegation for the *fai ran ta* expedition. One of the members provided the following account:

When we left Malhaha we had to take a *kava* plant. A special person, Kaitu'u, chosen by Chief Aisea, took the *kava*. [He was the same man appointed to take the *kava* for the *süf hani*.] Arriving at Oinafa at 7 in the morning, we were welcomed at the chief's house by Chief Tokaniua and Ritia, Ieli's mother [daughter of Tokaniua]. When we entered the house, some of Ieli's *kainaga* were already there waiting. We shook hands with them and sat down on some *apei* [fine white mats] that had been spread out for us. The first thing they did was serve us with a coconut each. We had to wait until Chief Aisea began to drink and then we each could drink. That is the Rotuman way.

After we finished drinking, Tokaniua gave the first speech. He's the one to date the wedding. He gave the date for the wedding as February 20th, 1960. He asked us what we thought about it. Chief Aisea gave a speech and said that anything that Tokaniua and his *kainaga* think best is all right with us.

It didn't matter that we came early. We had to wait for all Ieli's *kainaga* to come before the meeting took place. Tokaniua gave his speech announcing the date before the "meeting" took place, that is, before all the *kainaga* had arrived. He should really have waited until all the *kainaga* were assembled before giving his speech. After they all arrived, Tokaniua told them he had already informed Aisea's contingent of the date set for the wedding. We had nothing further to say, simply to thank Tokaniua and Ieli's *kainaga*. Chief Aisea gave that speech. Then they thanked us. First Tokaniua gave a speech of thanks for Ieli's side and next Fakraufon, the Chief of Noatau, who is one of Ieli's relatives. They told us everything was all right.

After that they prepared breakfast. First the higher ranking chiefs from both sides ate breakfast together; the lesser ranking chiefs ate at a second sitting with other members of Ieli's *kainaga*. Right after breakfast we shook hands with all the members of the Ieli's party and left.

Ieli was not present at the meeting. We left at 10 a.m. When we arrived back at Malhaha (10:30), Aisea's father welcomed us and we entered the house and sat down on the regular floor mats. They prepared a breakfast for us--coffee, cocoa, bread, biscuits, butter and jam--the same things we had in Oinafa. When we were eating Chief Aisea gave a speech telling Aisea's father and his family the date of the wedding. Only Aisea's family (including Aisea) were there. Aisea's father then gave a speech of thanks. After breakfast we left.

Soon after the date of the wedding had been set each side would hold a meeting to decide who would be responsible for providing the various items such as pigs, fine white mats, mosquito netting and bedding for the couple's bed, the bridal purse, and other paraphernalia required at a proper wedding. Usually relatives and friends would volunteer, but the man and woman designated to take charge of the preparations might assign specific tasks.

### MAIKA AND SUSIE'S WEDDING

Although in many respects life on Rotuma has not changed radically since 1960, some things have. [6] For one, arranged marriages of the type described above have all but disappeared. More open courtship is tolerated and youths are given more freedom in choosing their spouses. They also play a more active role in planning their weddings. Nevertheless, the form of weddings has not changed significantly, and Rotuman rituals are still performed in conjunction with church and civil ceremonies.

The wedding we shall describe took place in the village of Lopta, district of Oinafa (see map), on July 21, 1989. The groom, Maika, was from nearby Oinafa village. He was a policeman in the Fiji constabulary, assigned to duty at the government station on Rotuma. The bride, Susie, whose parental home is in Lopta, was employed at the Rotuman branch of the National Bank of Fiji, also situated at the government station. Maika was 26 years old and had been previously married and divorced. Susie was 24 and had never been married.

#### *Fao Te: The Day Before*

The day prior to a wedding is set aside for preparations. A number of house-sites on the groom's side and bride's side are designated gathering places where kinsmen, friends and neighbors bring their donations of food, mats and other materials central to the wedding. Each grouping is referred to as a **sal hapa**, a 'part' of the bride or groom's **kainaga**. Although theoretically there should be eight **sal hapa** on each side, in practice convenience and social relationships often changes this. Almost all Rotumans are related to one another, some in multiple ways, so people can usually choose among several **sal hapa**. The choices they make are an indication of social solidarity, of who is getting along with whom at the moment.

Since we were living in the groom's village we participated in one of his side's seven **sal hapa**. In fact six of the seven **sal hapa** were located in our village, the other was from the neighboring district of Noatau. Food and mats at each **sal hapa** location had been accumulating for several days previously. On this day, they would be taken to the groom's home, or to be more precise, the groom's father's home. The groom's father, Sautiak, is a greatly respected sub-chief, second in rank only to the paramount chief of the district.

From early in the morning we watched as pickup trucks full of food--taro, yams, squealing pigs and noisy chickens--headed for Sautiak's place. At around 9 a.m. our **sal hapa** organized and made its way across the village to the gathering throng. The women carried mats in procession; those carrying fine white mats headed the line, those with common mats followed. In deference

to our curiosity over everything taking place, Jan was asked to head the parade and was given a quick lesson in etiquette concerning the proper way to carry a fine mat. Some excerpts from her diary give the flavor of the occasion.

When we got there we went in the front door and into the sitting room. Two or three women were in there--I recognized Manava sitting in the doorway. [Manava played the role of designated elder and announced each white mat brought indoors.] We all put our mats down and sat around and said a few words. Then Vera and another woman took the mats into the bedroom and the rest of us went out to the verandah where they were serving bread and tea... I was trying to find Alan with the camera because another group was arriving with mats, followed by men with taro (carrying it in bunches with stalks & leaves upright). Marieta was calling out nonsense like "Here we come," and afterwards she explained that she'd done it to liven things up--"what is this, a wedding or a funeral..."

I decided to ask Harieta how she was related (which **sal hapa**) and found out that more people can come than just **sal hapa**--Sautiak made an open invitation to everyone... People were clustered in groups from Sautiak's house toward the beach, on mats, under trees, playing checkers and cards, talking, eating. The young men were singeing the hair off two pigs and then gutting them, preparing them for the next earthen oven. The smoke smelled awful.

Much of the day was spent preparing food for the wedding feast. A large number of pigs and several cows were slaughtered and cooked in earthen ovens, fashioned by digging large holes in the sandy soil, placing kindling wood inside, covering them with lava rocks and lighting a fire. When the coals are red hot, whole pigs (gutted and cleaned), sections of beef, chickens and tubers of various kinds were wrapped in leaves and placed inside. The contents were then covered with leaves, burlap bags and finally with earth. This is how the ceremonial food is prepared; it is allowed to cook from a few hours to overnight, depending on its size.

Preparing ceremonial food is the work of young men, and they were busy throughout the day. The young women spent much of their time setting out lighter food for the people who had gathered--tinned corned beef and tinned fish, tea and biscuits. Cooked taro and yams were also served by the women. The work, and festivities, lasted into the night.

## THE WEDDING DAY

Let us return to Jan's journal, amplified by our field notes, for an account of the wedding day:

We woke early, dressed in our wedding clothes, ate breakfast at 6:30 and Tarterani drove us to Lopta at 7 a.m. People had already gathered, the band was playing and the female clown was at work. [At large, proper, Rotuman weddings the bride's side designates a woman to act as hostess and clown; she is formally in charge of the wedding, and is given a great deal of license to joke, mock, tease and generally raise havoc. Her antics are a major source of amusement for everyone in attendance.] She was taunting people, especially the chiefs, and making them dance. She soon seized on Alan and me since we were going back and forth taking pictures. She snagged me and gestured for me to sit down on her chair. I did but then patted my lap for her to sit down. But she gestured for me to get up, and she sat down and I sat on her lap and then swung around and put my arms around her neck and laid my head on her chest. She got up, holding me, then sat down and I got up and left. A little later she ordered Alan to come to her and he ran to her with his arms open and sat/sprawled on her lap so they both nearly fell over. She pretty much left us alone after that but blew us kisses and announced that she wanted to take Alan home with her.

Semesi [a cousin of Susie's, at whose house the wedding feast was held] came up to us, saying he felt a little sick. He asked Alan to videotape the events of the day with his, Semesi's, camera. So I got charge of the still camera and photographed the clown and others dancing as we waited for the groom's side to arrive. (They were held up by a contingent from Faguta who were supposed to come to Oinafa for breakfast at 5 a.m. but didn't arrive till seven. We saw them as we left Oinafa. They had mats with matching yarn decorations--hot pink.) I sat with Nina on the steps to the house, behind the **päega** [ceremonial seat made from a pile of common mats topped with a fine white mat and a colorful piece of cloth] where Susie was sitting. Nina advised some men who were hanging a white mat above the **päega** as protection against bugs dropping. But I spent most of the day running from side to side taking pictures.

[In Rotuman custom, the bride initially takes her place on a **päega** provided by her relatives. Then, prior to the formal arrival of the groom's procession, his side brings mats to form another **päega** on top of hers, but a fine mat provided by the bride's side is always placed on top of the pile.]

We saw the groom's side assembling down the hill and walked down to greet them. After talking with various people for a while we went back up to the house to await their formal arrival. They finally came up the hill at about 9:30, led by Maika (who because he is from a chiefly family did not need an 'a su to represent/precede him). [At a proper wedding, the groom's procession must be led by someone from a high ranking family; usually the district chief selects a close female relative to be 'a su.] Maika and his best man wore their Royal Fiji Police uniforms.

Qwenda, the district chief's unmarried 19 year old granddaughter, led the women bearing mats. There were so many mats brought by the groom's side that there weren't enough women to carry them. I saw three or four men helping out. Then came the men with baskets of cooked food, pigs and cow, and finally the kava and sugar cane. All the food was set down across the road from the ri hapa, a temporary shelter built for the occasion to shield the day's dignitaries from sun and rain. (The only problem was that there was so much food it extended into the road, and every now and then a car or the bus had to get through!) A portion of the food they brought was already cooked and ready to serve; another portion was uncooked. The pile of uncooked taro, leaves and all, was covered with mats after it was laid out, along with a live, tied-up pig. The whole thing was topped by a fine white mat. [This food represents the groom's own garden, even though all the produce may have been donated by his relatives.]

When the groom's party got close they stopped, and assumed a crouching position. A spokesperson for the group then called out the traditional greeting, which was responded to by a spokesperson from the bride's side. Maika then moved forward and took his place beside Susie. This was followed by speeches of greeting. A couple of other women from the groom's party unfolded rolls of cloth and hung them around the perimeter of the shelter. As soon as Maika sat down, members of his party came to congratulate the couple one by one. Each would kneel or crouch in front of the **päega** to shake Maika's hand and kiss the bride's cheek, sometimes pressing an envelope into his hands or tucking a five or ten dollar note into her clothing.

As soon as things settled down Fakrau brought a change of clothes [**osi**] and presented them on behalf of the groom's side to Susie, who quickly and unobtrusively changed on the spot. [7] (Later on, before going to church, Susie went inside the house to change to her wedding gown and veil.) After this, Fakrau draped and tied traditional Rotuman garlands (**tefui**) around Susie's and Maika's necks, then doused them with perfume. Concurrently, several young women from the groom's side moved about on their knees, dousing the chiefs, and others under the shelter,

with perfume or sprinkling them with sweet-smelling powder (Johnson's Baby Powder is a favorite). After Fakrau had finished, a woman from the bride's side presented Maika and Susie with garlands and perfumed them.

As the time for the [Methodist] church service approached, Susie's uncle, Mekatoa, apologized that the church would be too small for everyone to attend the service. About 11 a.m. Sautiak's flatbed truck drove up to take the chiefs to the church. Alan and I realized that we should go too, since we were the designated photographers, and scurried to get on. Unfortunately it had rained a bit and although they put a mat down (the clown had called for the mat and had added in English, "Please," to the amusement of the crowd), it still puddled. Both Chief Maraf's wife Feagai and I got our dresses wet and dirty.

At the church we were asked to sit up with the chiefs from the groom's side, but in front of them (in deference to our roles as photographers). Our pews were on the right hand side of the church facing across to another set of pews where the chiefs from the bride's side sat. While we waited for the bride to arrive some of the congregation sang. Maika and his best man sat waiting. When Susie came in (veiled) everyone rose.

There were prayers, the service, vows, exchange of rings, a brief kiss and speeches by the various chiefs. Some of them talked about Susie and Maika's life histories. I nearly fell asleep during Reverend Erone's sermon because it was so hot--I'd forgotten to bring a fan. At the end of the service, Alan climbed out the window so he could videotape the couple coming out of the church. I followed the couple and the District Officer, whom I bumped as we got out and missed getting a shot of the wedding party before they dissolved into a reception line. We rode back to the house, this time in the front of a truck. Tokaniua [8] brought the couple back to the house in his car, which was decorated with leaves, flowers and ribbons.

Both sides presented mats to make a new **päega** in front of the one on which the couple already sat. Then the couple moved forward and sat on the new **päega** and soon afterwards they had the hair snipping ceremony. Susie's namesake came with a pair of scissors trimmed with colorful ribbons and passed them over her head. Maika did not participate in this ceremony, in which his namesake would have passed scissors over his head. Nor did he participate fully in the following ceremony, called **fau**, in which the bride and groom are wrapped in white mats. [This ceremony is performed only at big weddings, and only when the bride is young and virginal. Only fine white mats are used to wrap the bride, and the groom if he participates.]

Susie was wrapped in 3 or 4 large fine mats. Then groups of young men carried both of them (Susie and Maika), with much joking and laughter, from the bride's side to the groom's side of the shelter. Maika's white mat was simply tied with a sash and carried over, along with Susie's **'at fara**, which was tied with a blue ribbon. [The **'at fara** is a small woven purse made specially for the bride. Although people now put money in it, in olden times it held a small container of coconut oil, a supply of turmeric powder and a piece of soft native cloth to hang at the end of the bridal bed. We were told that the oil was for lubrication, the turmeric for medicine/antiseptic, and the cloth to clean up with following intercourse. Elisapeti Inia, a knowledgeable elder, told us that **'at fara** translates as "to beg soul", and explained that the man begs for the woman's soul and she gives it to him in intercourse. The **'at fara** is carried by a representative of the highest ranking person from the groom's side, in this case the district chief's grand-daughter, Qwenda. After the **fau** ceremony, Qwenda carried the **'at fara** back to the central **päega**, preceding the couple and carrying it over her head for all to see.

Soon after this each side brought out the fine white mats for display--about 13 from each side, not counting the ones used for the **päega** and for the mat-wrapping ceremony. Then the



**kava** ceremony was held and dinner was served to the honored guests, including us. We sat next to Kafoa, the catechist, and were served by Fanifau. It was very hot and I thought longingly of Fiji Beer and ate only two bites of beef, a little taro, half a banana and two globs of Rotuman pudding (made by baking a pounded starchy root, such as taro, yam or banana, mixed with coconut cream and sugar). When we finally got home in the early evening we were so tired we could barely talk.

For most people the highlight of the wedding day is the feast, which begins with the ceremonial presentation of food and **kava**. When all the contributions of food (in coconut leave baskets) and **kava** roots are assembled in front of the shelter, the men squat down and a spokesman announces quantities of pigs, cows, chickens and baskets of taro, yams, etc. It is customary to greatly exaggerate the numbers involved, perhaps to enhance the prestige of the occasion.

After this announcement, food is distributed according to ceremonial protocol. Chiefs on Rotuma eat off low tables called **'umefe** (at feasts, everyone including chiefs sit cross-legged on the ground to eat). In times past there were carved wooden bowls unique to each chief. **'Umefe** were symbolic of the chief's title. Even today, taking a chiefly title is referred to as "turning the **'umefe** up," and relinquishing a title as "turning the **'umefe** down." At contemporary feasts, although low wooden tables have taken the place of these traditional food bowls, the tables are initially placed upside down. Only when food is about to be served are they turned upright. The designated elder calls out the names of persons in rank order, and the young men bring baskets of food to each table in turn. The first presentation of food is to the **a'su**, and includes the best selections. The newlyweds are served next, then the chiefs. Visiting dignitaries are fit into the order depending on their status; a high ranking church official is likely to be served before the chiefs, a lesser dignitary after them. Each table has a young woman in attendance. She lays a covering of banana leaves on the table, takes the food out of the basket, unwraps it, cuts or breaks it up into manageable chunks, and arranges them on the table. If something is missing, or if more food is needed, she calls to the young men who are distributing the food and they do their best to accommodate her.

Once the food has been distributed the **kava** ceremony begins. Each bundle of **kava** roots has a spokesman who recites a short ceremonial speech relating heroic deeds, often in obscure language not understood by the audience. Once this part of the ritual is concluded, **kava** bowls are brought forward, attended by three young women each. One mixes the (previously pulverized) **kava** with water and strains it through a clean cloth, the second assists by pouring fresh water and filling cups, and the third acts as cup bearer. When the **kava** is ready a designated elder announces the persons to whom each cup of **kava** is to be served. The order of serving reflects relative rank and is crucial; mistakes are likely to be deemed intentional insults by those who are passed over and in times past were grounds for war.

Following a Christian prayer said by a minister or priest, the meal starts when the **a'su** begin to eat. The attendants fan the tables with woven pandanus fans to keep the pesky flies off the food. Everyone eats with their hands, although knives are usually provided to cut up larger chunks of meat or starchy roots. Commoners eat away from the shelter, wherever a level patch of ground can be used. A "table" is prepared by laying down rows of banana leaves, upon which the food is set by the young men, but there are no attendants and all must fan the flies for themselves. During the meal speeches are made by chiefs from both the bride and groom's side, thanking everyone for their work and co-operation, and reminding the newlyweds of all the labor that has been expended on their behalf. It is a way of impressing upon them the seriousness of

the commitment they have made to one another.

The feast concludes the formal rituals, but people may stay on for some time afterwards. Entertainment is always provided. In the past, the people from one village, or even a whole district, would be asked well in advance to prepare traditional Rotuman group dances. The songs accompanying such dances were composed for the occasion; they centered on the bride and groom, their families and praised the location of the wedding and associated chiefs and dignitaries. The dance group would bring some fine white mats to the wedding and would be given some in return, as a show of appreciation. [9] Nowadays it is more common to invite one of several local bands to play instead. Bands usually consist of 4 or 5 men, playing guitars and electronic keyboards with amplifiers. They, too, may compose songs to honor the occasion, but for the most part they play modern Polynesian-style music with Rotuman, English or Fijian lyrics. Dancing to the music--in a kind of adapted disco style--is one of two main forms of entertainment throughout the day.

The other main form of entertainment is provided by the female clown. On the wedding day she generally dresses in flashy clothes and carries a stick, with which she mock threatens people, taps them to dance or do various chores. In her role as clown she is permitted to act in an outrageous fashion, such as ordering chiefs to dance, kneel and otherwise humiliate themselves--actions that invert the usual social order. In turn, people tease her, and taunt her with insults that she quickly returns.

On the day of Susie's and Maika's wedding, the clown was especially active. Her name was (perhaps fittingly, perhaps ironically) Kava, and she had been chosen, according to custom, by Susie's parents. Among the observations we made of interaction between Kava and the crowd on the wedding day were the following:

(1) Kava danced almost every dance throughout the day, mostly in a humorous fashion, involving exaggerated motions, often having sexual overtones (though nothing explicit). She sometimes danced on her own, sometimes grabbed one of the chiefs or other dignitaries and danced in a silly way with them.

(2) People in the crowd teased Kava about being dirty and black (neither of which was really the case). One of our friends commented after Alan's encounter with her, which involved a fair amount of physical contact, that it would require bathing in hot water that night to wash off the dirt; he jokingly promised to bring some Detol (disinfectant);

(3) At one point a man handed Kava the jaw bone of a pig. Apparently this was in reference to a standing joke between him and Kava. The story is that he had some time previously suggested to Kava that she get false teeth to replace her front ones, which had been extracted. Kava's response at the time was, "Are you going to give them to me?" to which the man responded, "Yes." Apparently this developed into a standing joke, so that when the two met Kava would ask if he had the false teeth and he would answer, "No," or "Not yet." When he handed Kava the pig jaw at the wedding he apparently said, "Here's your teeth." She laughed and played with putting the jawbone up to her mouth, pretending to open and close it like false teeth, much to the crowd's amusement.

(4) The wedding site was transected by the road, which was Kava's main "stage." She created several amusing incidents with passing traffic. When a bus came by she stopped it imperially and bellied up to it, as if it had hit her, and recoiled as though injured. She bantered with the driver for a few moments, then let him go on.

(5) Dr. Panapasa [Chief Medical Officer on the island] at one point drove up in the Medical Department's vehicle and pulled right up to Kava. He then got out of the car and grabbed her

arm, pulling her to the passenger's side and pretended to push her in. He joked that he would take her to the hospital, or to a pig sty. She resisted and adopted a mock begging mode, falling to her knees and pleading not to be taken away. Dr. Panapasa relented and finally got into the car and backed away.

### *The Day After*

By custom, a married couple initially establishes residence with the bride's family, although practical considerations may dictate otherwise (in this case Maika and Susie took a cottage at the Government Station where both of them worked). In order to affirm their commitment to the groom's family, however, a day or two after the wedding the couple go ceremonially to his parents' home, along with a contingent of her relatives and friends. Formerly this took place the day after the marriage was consummated; a piece of white bark with the bride's hymenal blood was featured as proof that she was a virgin.

At the groom's home the couple are fed and entertained, and another marital bed is prepared for them. They generally stay for a few days before returning to the bride's family home. In this instance, Maika and Susie came to Sautiak's home in Oinafa on the day after the wedding. Jan's diary captures the mood of the gathering.

At about 5 p.m. we walked over to Sautiak's and were invited to sit under the canopy they had strung up in front of the house. The band was playing and people were dancing. After one dance, people (Vai, Mekatoa) started asking me to dance, and I asked Maika and Reverend Erone--it was fun. At 6 they announced dinner and we all shifted around; Susie and Maika and their **pāega** were moved forward, her relations on the left, his (including us) on the right. Her relatives and the couple, being treated as the honored guests, were served on **'umefe**; the rest of us just ate on banana leaves. We were served taro, pork, tinned corned beef, Rotuman pudding, and sugar cane. Tokaniua's wife cut me some nice pieces of pork off a big hunk they gave us and I actually found it quite tasty and still hot. I ate quite a bit (for me, especially compared to yesterday) and caught the eyes of a number of women, including Fanifau, looking on approvingly. Then we wanted to wash our hands so went in the side door to the kitchen. Inside, Torike told us to go have a look at the bridal bed made of mats--lovely with a ribboned mosquito net above. She pointed to a pile of mats in the living room, including five fine white mats which, she said, were not used in the wedding presentations.

We came out and sat down again. The non-chiefs from the bride's side were eating on banana leaves out on the grass; after they finished the groom's side was fed. Maika's close relatives were served last, and his parents told us later that they did not eat at all. Throughout the feasting people were making speeches, praising the couple, acknowledging the abundance of good will, and thanking all those who contributed. Alan made a speech praising both sides for creating such a grand event, and for contributing to the perpetuation of Rotuma custom.

The band started to play again and the dancing resumed. I danced with Tokaniua, Dr. Panapasa, Reverend Erone and some little boys! They started asking me after I saw [3 year old] Isimeli dancing with a group of small children. I went over and asked him to dance with me, making the gracious gesture I'd seen others making before the bride and groom--bowing and holding hands out, with palms up. He took me quite seriously and we danced. Alan said Maika and Susie loved it. After that the children surged up for each song to ask people to dance; the little girls asked the little boys, and the little boys asked me, Susie, and Qwenda. Sometimes the whole group of children surged toward the couple and seemed to be inviting them en masse.

The adult dancing continued without incident, although there seemed to be a competition

between the sides with regard to who could be more outrageous. The Lopta people, including Farpapau [a school teacher], Mekatoa [Susie's uncle] and Kava [who was still playing the clown, although here in an unofficial capacity] would dance in silly or provocative ways, and Sautiak [Maika's father], Kaurasi and Vera [Maika's aunts] responded in kind. Farpapau was crawling between men's legs and rolling on the ground (carefully clutching her sarong). Mekatoa got me on a chain dance and was clutching me tightly from behind, making faces and lifting me up.

There was lots of play around the couple's **päega**--people taking the bride or groom's places pretending to be the ones who had just gotten married (and by implication would occupy the bridal bed that night). It ended up with Alan and Kava rolling on the floor behind the **päega**. She had her legs wrapped around him from behind, and when he tried to get away she would let him get part way up, then draw him back down. People roared with laughter at the suggestive display, and someone came up and threw a mat over them, as if to afford them privacy. Someone else brought over an empty plastic bucket, which also set Kava off. She put it on her head like a hat. Then a woman came over and took it from Kava; she motioned as if the bucket were full of water and doused Alan and Kava with it, as if to cool their uncontrollable ardor.

After that, Tokaniua came over to make sure we understood it was all in fun. Of course we did. We danced until our feet and knees hurt [much of the dancing is in the Rarotongan fashion, requiring bent knees]. It was wonderful--all together, old and young, dancing and sweating together. The band had some trouble with static in their amplifier/speakers but it didn't matter. Sometimes people even danced without music. They kept saying, "too bad tomorrow is Sunday" [when such activity is prohibited on the Methodist side of the island]. After dinner Mekatoa said that the Lopta people would stay for 3-4 dances only. About an hour and a half later he said they would stay for only 2-3 more, but we went on until nearly midnight [when the Sunday taboo on partying begins]. When Alan and I left people thanked us profusely for participating so actively. At home we showered, took Nuprin for our aching knees, and fell into bed.

Susie and Maika stayed for two days at Maika's home, then were ceremonially returned to Susie's home in Lopta. Again a ritual presentation of pigs and mats was required. That day Jan's diary includes the following entry.

Tarterani dropped us off in Lopta and left, later bringing Qwenda and some of the Malhaha High School kids. We waited till everyone assembled, then proceeded up the hill with mats (I carried one) and the ceremonial food. We deposited the mats in front of Susie and Maika and later someone cleared them away (there was one fine white mat, 5 or 6 Fijian syle ordinary mats + 5 or 6 large Rotuman ordinary mats.

The band was playing in between speeches, although there was sometimes a long time between songs and the dancing didn't get off the ground. One of the speeches was about both sides winning through the wedding. That was a nice ending to the mock competition that characterized much of the dancing.

The clown was still active and at one point danced with an Indian man who feigned pregnancy, making all sorts of lewd gestures; at another she was the pregnant one; and later she dressed in jeans, black tee shirt and black plastic sleeveless raincoat with a baseball cap and swimming goggles. She also wore a belt of Fijian one dollar bills.

A group of men from the groom's side also made a valiant and sustained effort to get things moving--and the young men, who according to Joe [Qwenda's brother] had been drinking beer and rum, eventually showed up and joined in. The clown played with them, then jokingly told the bride's side that she liked the groom's side better.

Like everyone else, Alan and I were tired and it was hot so eventually we just sat. When

dinner was to be served, Alan was gestured by one of the men to go sit with the chiefs and honored guests. I just kept sitting with the women. Just before serving began Vamarasi took my hand and led me up to sit next to Alan. Then as the food was being set out, Reverend Erone told Alan to take Maika's place on the **päega**. Alan asked, "Why me?" and Erone said, "Because all the young boys are too scared." He said it was Rotuman custom for someone to relieve the bride or groom if they get too tired. Then he told me to go too. Maika seemed quite ready to be relieved of the spotlight, but Susie just shifted to one side. At first I was embarrassed to be sitting so high, especially when I realized the best food had been put in front of us. At one point a little girl, a niece of Susie's? came and asked for some pork from her. The piece in front of her had been pretty well picked over whereas the one in front of me (originally served to her) was barely touched. I picked it up and put it in front of Susie. I just knew that etiquette wouldn't allow anyone to take it away from us even though we were "usurpers." The old lady who sat behind us kept fanning us as the honor of the **päega** required and I heard her say something to Alan about me having a good head and knowing how to behave properly **fak Rotuma** [according to Rotuman custom]. That was gratifying.

We talked with Susie a little bit and found she's going to work tomorrow. Then we left immediately after eating as it was all breaking up and a group were taking the couple to their home in Ahau.

## INTERPRETATION

Before we begin to examine the events described above for their cultural meanings there is one point we would like to make: there is no such thing as a "typical" wedding, in Rotuma or elsewhere. To describe an event as "typical" is to decontextualize it, to treat it as if it were unconnected to other events. In fact all such events are embedded in particular histories that color them and give specific meanings to their unfolding. In the case of Susie and Maika's wedding a number of historical factors were involved. To begin with, the wedding was the culmination of a healing process between Lopta and Oinafa villages following some serious disputes. At the heart of the disputes was disagreement over visits by tourist ships, which discharged visitors on the beach at Oinafa. [10] The people of Lopta disapproved of the tourist incursions, which disproportionately benefitted residents from Oinafa village, and withdrew their cooperation from district activities. Maika's father, Sautiak, was one of the main advocates (and beneficiaries) of tourist visits; Susie's uncle, Mekatoa, led the Lopta resistance. Hard feelings prevailed for more than two years, so there were profound tensions in the air prior to the wedding. However, it was clear that everyone welcomed the opportunity for a reconciliation--in fact opposition to tourist visits had toned down quite a bit following the initial furor. Speeches at the wedding focused heavily on the importance of co-operation and on laying old grievances aside. At one point during the proceedings Mekatoa, who was in the position of host, declared the formal rules of protocol, which act to keep the bride's and groom's parties separated from one another, inoperative, since "we are all one family." As confirmation, the feast was served without the usual formalities.

Other factors contributing to the specific form of this wedding were Maika's status and the particular site at which it was held. As a member of a chiefly **kainaga**, Maika's parents chose not to have him represented by an **'a su** selected by the district chief. This was a matter of choice, and constituted a political statement of sorts by his immediate family. The fact that Maika had been married before also was relevant, since it rendered two of the rituals irrelevant: the symbolic

haircutting, and the wrapping in mats. These rituals are reserved for individuals who are in transition between unmarried youth to married adult, and since Maika had already been through them once before they were inappropriate for him.

The choice of Semesi's house as location for the wedding also affected events. Had his house been nearer the church, for example, vehicles would not have been needed to transport people back and forth, and the fact that the road transected the site affected arrangements in several ways. In fact choices must be made in connection with any wedding, giving each one its unique flavor.

### *A Note on the Process of Interpretation*

As should be evident by now, Rotuman weddings, like ceremonies everywhere, are rich in symbolism. Interpreting the meaning of these symbols is no easy task, and is fraught with pitfalls. One can, of course, ask people involved what the various symbols mean, and receive some perfectly reasonable answers. For example, Rotumans will readily tell you that the importance of the 'a su is to elevate the event to a chiefly plane, taking it out of the realm of the ordinary. But ritual symbolism is largely unconscious, or at least unarticulated; it is therefore left to the ethnographer to make sense of it. Doing so requires a great deal of cultural knowledge: a familiarity with history, myths, language and patterns of behavior. The task is made more difficult by the fact that key cultural symbols are polysemic; that is, they condense meanings from many different aspects of experience. They are also multivocal, suggesting different things to different people. Thus the cross, for Christians, stands for a wide variety of beliefs, values and institutions. It condenses an enormous array of historical and cultural meaning.

Another complication is the fact that rituals originating in one historical context are often perpetuated into another, changing the meaning of some symbols and robbing others of their initial significance. On Rotuma, most of the non-Christian wedding rituals had their origins in rites associated with ancestral spirits and Polynesian gods. Conversion to Christianity has certainly altered their significance in many important respects. Nevertheless, we believe that they remain meaningful, and that their current meanings resonate with their pre-Christian precursors. To put this differently, we believe that some of the most important values in pre-Christian Rotuman society remain vibrant today, and that holdover symbols and rites still signify those values, although their specific associations may differ. For these reasons we shall not try to interpret the wedding described above ritual by ritual, symbol by symbol. Rather, we shall proceed by articulating core values, then show how various aspects of the wedding reflect them. Fortunately in this instance we have an extraordinary resource to draw upon--the work of Vilsoni Hereniko, a Rotuman playwright-scholar who has recently completed a study of the role of the female clown at Rotuman weddings. [11] In the course of his analysis, Hereniko offers compelling explanations for much of the symbolism we witnessed; we make liberal use of his insights in our analysis.

### *Value 1: Kinship and Community*

As in most Pacific societies, Rotuma is organized primarily on the basis of kinship relations. In any village most people are related to each other, sometimes in multiple ways. Chiefs are chosen on the basis of their kin connections to ancestral titleholders. Kinship considerations therefore serve to organize interhousehold co-operation, productive labor, and political activity. Reaffirming kin connections through exchanges of food and labor is central to being

considered a person of good character. The fisherman coming back from an expedition is likely to share his catch with his neighbors/kinsmen; the woman who makes banana jam sends jars to selected households. If someone needs their house repaired, or help preparing for a family event, they can generally count on their village mates for assistance. When times are good and relationships strong people look for things to do for one another; they use any excuse to hold an event that will bring people together, no matter how much work is involved.

Weddings are prime events for celebrating kinship relations and community co-operation. A wedding the size of Maika and Susie's, involving around 500 people, requires a great deal of effort and interaction. The men must spend much time in their gardens producing and harvesting taro, yams, and if in season, pineapples and watermelon. In preparation for the wedding they gather pigs, and perhaps a cow or two, to be slaughtered and cooked in earthen ovens. The women plait mats, which is also labor intensive. To make an *apei* takes a skilled woman a month or so of steady work. All of this effort, and the products that result from it, are donated to the wedding. The total value of donations adds up to thousands of dollars (a fine white mat has a sale value of up to 400 Fijian dollars, or about US\$268; a pig from 25 to 100 Fijian dollars depending on size; a cow around 400 Fijian dollars). Thus the formal presentations of food and mats at a wedding are announcements to the whole community of the work that has been done on behalf of the bride and groom. It is as if each unfolding of a mat, each basket of food presented, symbolizes the willingness of the presenters to labor on behalf of those being honored. The speeches at a wedding focus on thanking all those who contributed, and impressing on the bride and groom the magnitude of effort expended on their behalf. The implication, of course, is that the couple are beholden to a great many people and owe it to them to make their marriage successful and fruitful.

Much of the time prior to the wedding is spent working with kin and neighbors on the preparations. The choice of with whom to work affirms certain relationships and possibly slight others. Which *sal hapa* one chooses to join--people usually have a number of *kainaga* with whom they could affiliate--is a statement about one's sense of closeness to various relatives. Working together, and especially sharing food at meals, signifies the very essence of kinship for Rotumans. It is by sharing in the preparation of the wedding, and participating together in the wedding feast, in fact, that symbolizes the new relationship between the families of bride and groom--as much as the marriage itself.

The central role of namesakes in the wedding can also be seen as a way of impressing upon everyone that there is more involved in a marriage than simply joining two individuals, or two families. In a very important respect namesakes represent broader kin rights and responsibilities--the fact that parents are not the only ones with a central stake in the fate of individuals. By acting as surrogate parents in this context namesakes thus render the occasion communal rather than familial in orientation.

The institutionalization of the female clown can be understood in this light as well. She is technically in charge of the wedding, given that authority by the leading chief from the bride's side. The event is thus taken out of parental or familial control and transformed into one put on by the chiefs and wider community. As mistress of ceremonies she is responsible for facilitating interaction between the two sides, and for creating a jocular environment where everyone can enjoy themselves. By serving as a focus of attention, she relieves the bride and groom of the intensive scrutiny they might otherwise receive, and involves a greater segment of the community in the activities of the day.

## *Value 2: Fertility of People and Land*

The dominant theme in pre-Christian Rotuman religious rituals, and in supporting myths [12] was securing from the gods and ancestral spirits abundance here on earth. Rites focused on insuring fertility of the land and perpetuating the **kainaga** through the fertility of its people. The major religious figure in early Rotuma was the **sau**, an office occupied for periods ranging from six months (one ritual cycle) to several years. Men were chosen as **sau** by the leading chief on the island to represent the well-being of Rotuma. When not participating in specific rites the **sau** did little but sit and eat. Districts took turns hosting him, and each was obliged to feed him to satiation. It seems that the **sau** was seen as a temporary incarnation of the gods. To feed him was to feed the gods, in return for which they were expected to bring prosperity.

Ceremonial feasts were dedicated to the gods, and involved sacrifices to them. Sacrifice is a way of feeding gods, of infusing them with life. The ultimate sacrifice, of course, is a human life. There is no evidence that Rotumans ever engaged in human sacrifice, but their myths make it clear that pigs are a substitute for human beings. (Reversing this equation, pre-Christian Fijians referred to humans eaten at cannibal feasts as "long pig.") It is not fortuitous, therefore, that pigs must be cooked whole for a ceremonial feast, for they would lose their essential quality as sacrificial animals if cut into pieces prior to cooking. In contrast to pigs, cows, which were introduced by Europeans, are not considered sacrificial animals and are butchered prior to cooking.

The formal presentations of food prior to the feast can be better understood in the light of this cultural concern for abundance. The food is assembled, drawing public attention to its volume, and the ritual calling out of exaggerated quantities is a way of further increasing the magnitude of the display. It is a way of demonstrating to the community the beneficence of the gods (or contemporarily, the Christian God). The food display is followed by the **kava** ceremony, which in ancient Rotuma was a ritual form of communion, aimed at obtaining divine blessings. **Kava** was conceived as originating in the realm of the supernatural, and hence as a drink of the gods. The chanted recitation prior to its being served traditionally tells the story of its arrival in Rotuma. That the words of the chant are not understood by most people serves to further mystify kava, enhancing its ritual potency. [13] Finally, just prior to eating, Christian prayers are offered in thanks for the food to be eaten.

This central Rotuman concern for productivity of the land is matched by a concern for human fertility. It is through the production of children that families prosper. Barrenness is regarded as one of the worst misfortunes that can afflict a Rotuman couple; it is considered a sign of divine disfavor. In pre-contact Rotuma childbirth was dangerous for both mother and child, and with the coming of Europeans, introduced childhood diseases like measles and whooping cough took a terrible toll. This put an even greater premium on having children (and keeping them alive).

Many aspects of a wedding allude to the fact that the couple form a new breeding unit; one that can potentially contribute descendants to each of the **kainaga** represented (since they are all formed around ascendants of either the bride or groom). In many respects the bride and groom are treated like gods on their wedding day, perhaps because they are making a transition from a state of presumed barrenness to a state of presumed fecundity. Through marriage they are socially recognized as having the "god-given" capacity to create life. They are seated upon a fine white mat, itself a sacred symbol, and the shelter under which they sit, along with the chiefs, is marked off as sacred by the rolls of cloth hung up by the groom's party following their arrival. (In earlier days fine mats were used.) Tiu Malo, a Rotuman who has written about marriage on



the island, states that:

This 'screening' of the **ri hapa** [shelter] symbolically creates a sacred atmosphere. The simple shed is now a temple, a holy place for the marriage rituals. Hence the **mafua** [spokesman] refers to entering the **su'ura** (king's house, that is a sacred or taboo place).

Several of the rituals symbolize the change in status of the bride and groom. The public change of clothes is one instance. The fact that the bride and groom are both given clothes by the other side underscores the claim each side has over the couple's potential offspring. Clothes are perhaps the pre-eminent symbol of cultural conformity. To publicly don the clothes someone else has given you is to symbolize your acceptance of a new role, and in this instance, a new set of relationships.

Another instance is the hair snipping ceremony, in which the groom's namesake symbolically cuts the bride's hair and vice-versa. In ancient times youths grew a long lock of hair until they were married, so the ceremony was conducted in earnest. Cutting the hair signified a shift in status from that of youth, with minimal responsibilities to the community, to that of an adult. It also signified community recognition of the couple's reproductive capabilities. Today, since youths do not grow a long lock, cutting is only symbolic, but the implication is the same.

The ritual that most dramatically symbolizes the couple's new status as breeders is the **fau** ceremony, in which bride and groom are each wrapped in fine mats and bound with cloth. They are then carried from the bride's side of the shelter to the groom's side, where the cloth binding is removed and they are unwrapped. There is much evidence to suggest that the act of wrapping the couple symbolizes the binding of spiritual powers in the service of fertility. The carrying of the couple from the bride's side to the groom's side dramatizes the legitimate claims the groom's family has (in addition to the bride's family) to the offspring of the union.

It should now be clear why Maika did not actively participate in these rituals. Having been married before, he had already made the ritual transformation from youth to adult. His reproductive capabilities had already been ritually bound; all that was necessary now was to transfer his virility to the service of his new wife and her family. This was sufficiently symbolized in other ways (for example, the wedding vows in church).

Fine white mats (**apei**) are key symbols in many of the wedding rituals. They are carried by the highest ranking women and formally unfolded for all to see. The bride and groom's seat (**päega**) is topped with an **apei**, and an **apei** is placed above them as "protection." The uncooked food brought by the groom's side is covered with mats topped by an **apei**. The bride and groom are wrapped in **apei** during the **fau** ceremony. Furthermore, **apei** are given in gratitude to chiefs and other participants, such as the female clown, who contribute to the success of an affair. The bride and groom's parents exchange mats, as do their namesakes. Ultimately, most of the **apei** presented at a wedding are redistributed among the main participants.

To understand the meaning of ritual transactions it is necessary to have a good sense of the importance of **apei** in Rotuman culture. One thing is clear--that **apei** are the most important traditional valuable. **Apei** are central to every ceremonial transaction, and are even used to influence political events. A request backed by the gift of an **apei** is nearly impossible to refuse, and an **apei** assures a plea for forgiveness will be accepted no matter how grievous the offence. Why should this be so?

Vilsoni Hereniko has argued persuasively that traditionally **apei** were conceived by Rotumans as "woven gods." He cites several lines of evidence to support his assertion: that in a popular Rotuman myth malicious spirits are domesticated by capturing them in woven nets; that in earlier times women who were commissioned by a chief to make **apei** were granted license to

act outrageously, like unrestrained spirits, until the task was completed; that an *apei* must be consecrated with a sacrificial pig (thereby transferring the life force of the pig into the mat). To give an *apei* is therefore equivalent in Rotuman cultural logic to a gift of life. Since the gift of life ultimately comes from the gods, an *apei* is comparable to a god, and has divine associations. [14]

The importance of *apei* at weddings becomes clear in the light of Hereniko's analysis. They represent the binding of life forces, derived from the gods, in the service of human reproduction.

The clown's paraphernalia and behavior also underscore the importance of fertility and reproduction. The stick she wields is more than a useful prop for pointing and threatening people. It also reminds spectators of the digging stick that men use to plant taro and cassava in their gardens, and hence to the production of food. However its primary referent, according to Hereniko, is the male phallus and its procreative function in human propagation. [15] In addition, the clown's sexual banter and lascivious innuendoes draw attention to the theme of reproduction.

### *Value 3: Political Balance between Chiefs and Commoners*

The role of chiefs in Rotuman weddings is central. Chiefs elevate the status of events in which they participate; they lend dignity to any proceedings. By representing the bride's and groom's parties they transform a family occasion into an affair of state, implicating all whom they represent. But they do more than this, for in pre-Christian Rotuma chiefs were conceived as sacred beings--as conduits to the gods. Although the ultimate source of prosperity was thought to reside with the gods (including distinguished ancestors), it was the responsibility of chiefs to act as intermediaries, to influence them to act benignly. Conceptually the distinction between gods and chiefs was somewhat blurred, in fact, since chiefs were thought to be transformed into gods following their death. The presence of chiefs at a wedding therefore sanctifies the event, increasing the likelihood that the couple will be blessed with good fortune.

Since this is the case, the behavior of the female clown is something of a puzzle, for she is granted license to badger the chiefs, to order them around, to make them the butt of jokes. How can this be reconciled with the notion of chiefs as sacred beings?

To paraphrase Hereniko's compelling explanation: Rotuman weddings, like plays in the western world, provide safe arenas in which forces potentially threatening to the well-being of society's members can be acted out, diffused, displaced, or resolved. Clowning, in the frame of a wedding, is an act of communication from the bottom up, from females to males, from the bride's kin to the groom's kin, and from commoners to chiefs.

The female clown at a Rotuman wedding communicates through inversion. Values of humility, respect and restraint--cornerstones of Rotuman society essential for the maintenance of social harmony--are inverted and replaced by their antithesis in her antics. Paradoxically, the clown's violation of Rotuman values reinforces them at the same time. For example, by dethroning the chiefs, she draws attention to the importance of their normal role. For Rotuman society to function harmoniously, submission to authority is necessary. The clown temporarily displaces the chiefs and assumes their power in a parodied form. If everyone in the community can submit to a clown, then submission to chiefs should be second-nature.

Furthermore, in a society where the chiefs are men, the public portrayal of authority in female hands invites laughter, particularly when the exercise of chiefly power is displayed in its extreme form. As the clown is female but behaves as male, both male and female attributes are indirectly communicated. The conjunction in one individual of male aggressiveness and a presumed female lack of control results in chaos. The destructive and chaotic world portrayed by

the female clown is the antithesis of harmony, testimony to the impracticability of a world in which folly reigns. The model that the clown holds up for scrutiny is therefore to be rejected. Through inversion, the clown affirms the complementary but different natures of chiefs and commoners, of males and females.

There is another message in the clown's outrageous behavior. The wedding frame is an opportunity for chiefs to be made aware of what it is like to be ordered about. The clown holds up a mirror to the chiefs, showing them how they will appear if they get too pompous. Her actions graphically remind them that although they may have divine sanctification for their positions, they are still mere mortals who depend on their fellow beings for their privileged status. A Rotuman wedding is therefore an arena in which chiefs learn the importance of humility. [16]

### *Perpetuation of Rotuman Custom*

Legally one can get married on Rotuma simply by getting a license at the Government Station and by having the district officer, or a justice of the peace, perform a civil ceremony. In fact many couples do so, or have a simple ceremony at home performed by their priest or minister. By doing so they avoid large expenses and increased obligations. Therefore full-scale weddings, like Susie and Maika's, play a special role in perpetuating Rotuman culture and are valued accordingly.

As in most Polynesian societies many key features of the traditional culture were suppressed or abandoned following European intrusion. Methodist and Catholic missionaries attacked customs associated with the ancestral religion; government officials undermined the traditional roles played by chiefs; imported goods replaced those of indigenous manufacture. The world was turned upside down, and like colonized people everywhere, Rotumans faced a future which could have stripped them of their unique traditions. But despite pressures to desist--missionaries and colonial officials often chastized Rotumans for "wasting" so much food and money on "useless" ceremonies--the people on this small isolated island have persisted in adhering to those customs they see as central to Rotuman identity. Even the most cosmopolitan Rotumans recognize the value of an *apei*, the importance of a pig cooked whole in an earthen oven, the significance of the *kava* ceremony. They may criticize individual chiefs, but they support the institution of chieftainship. They value these customs regardless of personal beliefs because they have come to symbolize their unique cultural heritage.

In a full-scale Rotuman wedding feast, all of these key Rotuman cultural symbols are highlighted. When Susie and Maika got married, therefore, they not only celebrated their union. By adhering to custom, they celebrated Rotuman culture as well. They provided a setting for the entire community to affirm everything that is essential to their identity as a people.

## NOTES

[1] Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *Daedalus*, 101 (1972): 1-37.

[2] Andrew Pawley, "New Evidence on the Position of Rotuman," Working Papers in Linguistics, No. 56, Department of Anthropology, University of Auckland, New Zealand, August 1979.

[3] For an account of Rotuman migration and its consequences for life on the island see Alan Howard and Jan Rensel, "Rotuma in the 1990s: From Hinterland to Neighbourhood," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (in press).

[4] For about six weeks during the holiday season Rotumans stop nearly all serious work and engage in a variety of leisure activities. In the past, and even today, it was a prime time for courtship.

[5] If he were following Rotuman custom strictly, he would have asked an elder to speak to the chief on his behalf.]

[6] For a general overview of changes see Alan Howard, "Reflections on Change in Rotuma, 1959-1989," In Anselmo Fatiaki et. al., *Rotuma: Hanua Pumue (Precious Land)* (Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1991), pp. 227-254.

[7] Both sides present the couple with new clothes at this point as well as later on in the ceremony. Formerly, weddings took place over many more days, and these gifts of new clothes would be donned each morning and afternoon. Today, the couple changes less frequently; in this case, Maika wore his policeman's uniform throughout the day's activities.

[8] This is not the Tokaniua who had been Oinafa district chief in 1960 but a prominent sub-chief who later succeeded to the title.

[9] Tiu Malo, "Rotuman Marriage," In Anselmo Fatiaki et. al., *Rotuma: Hanua Pumue (Precious Land)* (Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1991), p. 72.

[10] See Alan Howard, "Dispute Management in Rotuma," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 46 (1990).

[11] Vilsoni Hereniko, *Woven Gods: Female Clowns and Power in Rotuma* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, in press).

[12] For interpretations of Rotuman myths along these lines, see Alan Howard, "History, Myth and Polynesian Chieftainship: The Case of Rotuman Kings," in Antony Hooper and Judith Huntsman, eds., *Transformations of Polynesian Culture* (Auckland: Polynesian Society, 1985), pp. 39-77 and Alan Howard, "Cannibal Chiefs and the Charter for Rebellion in Rotuman Myth," *Pacific Studies*, 10 (1986):1-27.

[13] Today most people do not know the traditional chants, and often substitute stories or recitations of their own. Even so, they remain largely unintelligible, either because they are mumbled or because nonsense syllables are included. It appears that intelligibility would undermine the association of chanting with the mystified world of gods and spirits.

[14] Vilsoni Hereniko, *Woven Gods: Female Clowns and Power in Rotuma* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, in press).

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

Fatiaki, Anselmo et. al., *Rotuma: Hanua Pumue (Precious Land)* (Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1991). A collection of essays, mostly by Rotumans, on various aspects of their society and culture. Includes an essay by Tiu Malo on Rotuman marriage.

Gardiner, J. Stanley, "The Natives of Rotuma," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 27 (1898): 396-435, 457-524. A comprehensive account of Rotuman society in the 19th century.

Hereniko, Vilsoni, *Woven Gods: Female Clowns and Power in Rotuma* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, in press). A masterful analysis by a Rotuman playwright, combining the intuitions of a cultural insider with the theoretical insights of a sophisticated scholar.

Howard, Alan, *Learning to Be Rotuman* (New York: Columbia University Teachers College Press, 1970). An account of Rotuman child-rearing practices and character development in the context of culture change. Includes an account of formal schooling on Rotuma and how it contrasts with indigenous socialization.

Howard, Alan, "History, Myth and Polynesian Chieftainship: The Case of Rotuman Kings," in Antony Hooper and Judith Huntsman, eds., *Transformations of Polynesian Culture* (Auckland: Polynesian Society, 1985), pp. 39-77. A symbolic analysis of Rotuman myths focusing on the sacred role of chiefs, fertility, and the relationship between humans and gods.