

**SYMBOLS OF POWER AND THE POLITICS OF IMPOTENCE:
THE MÖLMAHAO REBELLION ON ROTUMA**

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- AH: Why is the American flag flying over Mölmahao?
AM: It's not the American flag, it's the United Nations flag.
AH: But the United Nations flag is different; it's blue and white and has an outline of the world on it.
AM: No, this is really the flag of the United Nations; it only looks like the American flag.
AH: Where did you get it from?
AM: From New Zealand.
AH: From Lagfatmaro?
AM: Yes.

Shortly after the second military coup in Fiji, in September 1987, a part-Rotuman man in New Zealand by the name of Henry Gibson announced to the newspapers that he had declared the island of Rotuma independent of Fiji. According to media accounts, Gibson said he was "king" of Rotuma and claimed a popular following on the island. His argument was that Rotuma had been ceded to Great Britain separately from Fiji, and that when Fiji became a republic and left the Commonwealth, it had lost the right to govern Rotuma. He petitioned the queen of England for recognition of Rotuma's status as an independent state that would remain within the Commonwealth. His plea went unheeded, but his followers on Rotuma created a new islandwide council intended to replace the Council of Rotuma (composed of chiefs and dis-

trict representatives). As a result, they were arrested and charged with sedition.

Gibson claims to have had a dream visitation from the first three *sau* (kings) of Rotuma and a *sauhāni* (queen). He says they urged him to return to Rotuma to clean up the Mölmahao “foundation” in the district of Noatau, which was presumably the place from which their titles came. The Mölmahao foundation is one of many named housesites (*fuag ri*) on Rotuma that have been unoccupied for many years.¹ The visitants also told him to take the title “Lagfatmarō” (unconquerable victor). This title belonged to the first *sau*, Gibson alleges, and thus entitled him, Gibson, to become *sau*.²

Three flags now fly atop poles in front of the Mölmahao foundation. One is the Union Jack. It symbolizes the commitment of Gibson’s followers to the Deed of Cession, by which Rotuma’s chiefs ceded the island to Great Britain in 1881. It also embodies the hope that the queen will recognize the plight of Rotuma and support the move toward independence from Fiji. The second flag was designed by Henry Gibson. It is the Mölmahao flag. It consists of a gold circle on a purple background; radiating out of the circle are gold stars and gold stripes (Figure 1). In a letter responding to my inquiry, Gibson wrote that “the meaning of the flag which flies at ‘MOLMAHAO’ is the sacred ‘FA’APUI’ of KING GAGAJ SAU LAGFATMA also performed in the KAVA CEREMONY” (pers. com., 26 Sept. 1988; Gibson’s emphasis). It is thus his personal symbol.³ The third flag is Old Glory, mistaken by the Mölmahao group for a symbol of the United Nations. To them it signifies the hope that the United Nations will support their leader’s declaration of independence (Gibson sent a letter to the general secretary of the United Nations presenting his case for Rotuma’s autonomy). To me it signifies that most of the symbols that Gibson has imposed on his followers are empty of cognitive significance for Rotumans. They are therefore weak symbols for mobilizing sentiment.

Flags are not the only type of political symbolism used by Gibson. He has continually stressed the need to revive Rotuman culture in the form of artifactual and performative restorations. For him, it appears, traditional forms of art and craft hold the key to tapping the spiritual powers of the ancestors, and thus to enhancing Rotuma’s political potency. Most modern Rotumans do not share this view. As a result, Gibson can be seen as overestimating the effectiveness of traditional arts and crafts as political symbols. In addition, he has imposed new forms that signify potency to him but that have no roots in Rotuman culture whatsoever.

In this article I focus on the the array of artifacts, performances, and

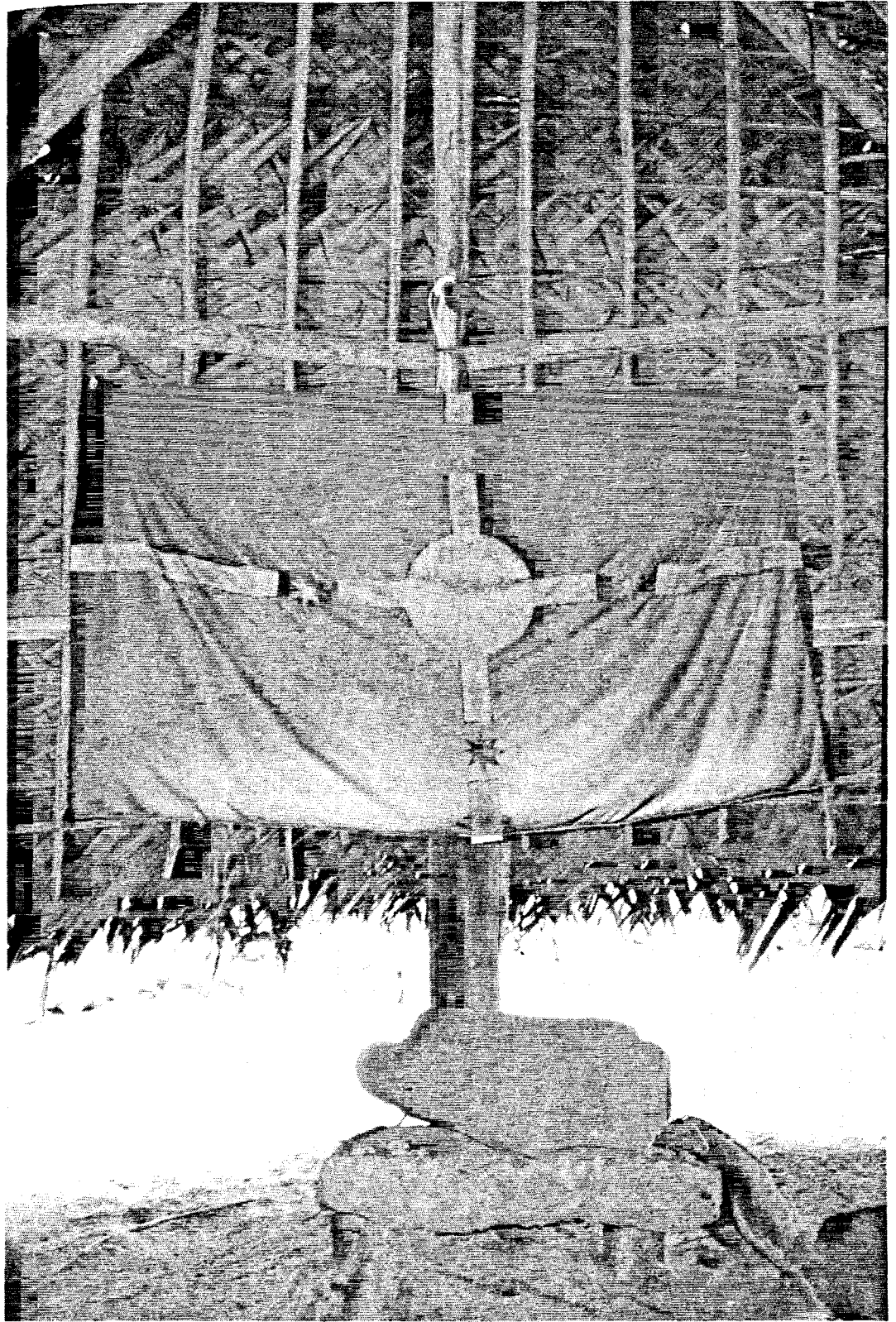


FIGURE 1. The Molmahoo flag and stone *kava* bowl.

symbols that have been used to represent the Mōlmahao movement. To provide a framework for assessing Gibson's use of art forms and to set the stage for analysis, I begin by providing a brief historical overview of the relationship between art, rank, and politics on the island of Rotuma.

Art, Rank, and Politics on Rotuma

At the time of the first recorded European contact, in 1791, Rotuma had a range of well-developed art forms, including tattooing, the making of shell ornaments, the manufacture of fine mats, oratory, chanting, and singing and dancing. By the end of the nineteenth century, some of these forms of expressive culture had completely disappeared and others were drastically altered. Tattooing, for example, described as prevalent by most early observers,⁴ was prohibited by European missionaries who arrived in the mid-nineteenth century. When I first visited Rotuma, in 1960, none of the old people were tattooed. Nowadays a number of young men are tattooed, especially those who have spent some time as sailors, but there are no practitioners of the art on Rotuma, and the tattoos have little symbolic significance.

The manufacture of shell and whale-tooth ornaments, used to designate rank in the precolonial era, also ended before the turn of the twentieth century. Traditionally, chiefs wore necklets of whales' teeth, which were generally buried with them as one of their most valued possessions (Gardiner 1898:412). Chiefs also wore pearl-shell breastplates, shaped by removing the horny layer and smoothing so the shell retained its original shape. MacGregor, who visited Rotuma in 1932, includes in his field notes a drawing of three shells strung into a necklace with braided sennit. A typed note referring to the drawing states (MacGregor n.d.): "The half shell of mother of pearl made into necklace for the kings of Rotuma who wore them around their neck. Found in the tombs."⁵

Today there are no special ornaments that designate chiefly rank.⁶ Nor can contemporary chiefs be identified by special articles of clothing as was the case in the past. Lesson, who visited the island in 1824, described the Rotumans' usual clothing as "made from the fairest and finest weavings." He added that "the weavings they wrap themselves in are beautiful, superior to any made by the Tahitians" (Lesson 1838-1839:423-424). One type of fine mat, the *tofua*, was made from pandanus leaves (*sa'aga*) and was worn by chiefs and the *sau* (Cardiner 1898:412; MacGregor n.d.). Chiefs also wore a girdle of woven *sa'aga* over their wraparounds.

Gardiner describes the dress of the *sau* and his officers as follows:

The dress of the *sou* consisted of a fine mat, over which the *malhida* [chiefly girdle] was worn. This dress was made of the leaves of the *saaga* (*Pandanus* sp.?), split up, and plaited together like sinnet at the top, and hanging down loose. They were stained for the most part red, but some might be left white. Black was sometimes introduced by means of the bark of the *si*, a species of banana, which on drying turns a dull black. Another dress, pertaining to some of the officers, was the *ololi*; it appears to have been really a sort of apron, made of a fine mat, and hung down in front. It was almost completely covered with the red feathers of the *arumea* (*Myzomela chermesina*, Gray); its use was restricted to particular feasts. Round the neck might be a necklace of beads of whale's teeth, the *tifui lei*, and on each wrist the *muleli*, described to me as a round piece of turtle bone. I dug one up when I opened the graves of the *mua*; it is certainly not bone, but resembles somewhat the horny and prismatic layers of the outer part of a pearl shell. It is about 2 inches in diameter, and has a large hole in the center. . . . On the breast was the pearl shell, *tiaf hapa*, but the really distinctive part was the *malhida*, which it was taboo for any one else to wear. The *muleli* was only worn by the *mua* as well as the *sou*, but the other ornaments were more generally used.⁷ (1898:462)

Rotuman women still make fine mats (*apei*), which are important articles of exchange on ceremonial occasions. Chiefs (or rather their wives) are required to bring *apei* to weddings, funerals, and other special events, and their prestige is affected by the number and quality of mats they are able to provide.

The ritual significance of mats remains prominent even though their religious underpinnings have long since been subverted. Traditionally, white mats were consecrated by the sacrifice of a pig prior to their manufacture. They therefore symbolized life and, since pigs were sacrificial substitutes for humans, human life. Today, white mats are rarely consecrated in this way, but they retain symbolic potency.⁸ *Apei* lend enormous weight to any form of request or apology. It is very difficult indeed to turn down an appeal backed up with a white mat.⁹

Fine white mats are also used as seats (*päega*) and covers in ritual contexts. The bride and groom at a wedding, honored guests at a

mamasa (welcoming ceremony), or any others on whom special status is being conferred sit on an *apei* during ceremonies. Symbolically, this elevates them to a status equivalent to that of chiefs. *Apei* are also used to cover gifts of food on special occasions and as canopies to sanctify special people or items (such as a wedding cake).

Of all the traditional forms of artifactual production, fine white mats retain the strongest symbolic significance on Rotuma. How long this will remain the case is problematic, however, given drastically reduced interest in their manufacture by the younger generation.

In contrast to artifactual production, the performing arts have retained more vigor, although loss and transformation are evident here as well. One can identify four traditional forms of performance in Rotuma: oratory and chanting, dancing and singing, clowning, and *kava* ceremonies. Since Henry Gibson introduced into Rotuma a new kind of performance, karate exhibitions, and has proposed a new form for the *kava* ceremony, it is of some relevance to our analysis to consider briefly the nature of these traditional performances.

Little has been written on Rotuman oratory, in part, perhaps, because oratory is not the highly developed art it is in many other Polynesian societies. Nevertheless, oratorical skills are valued by Rotumans, and there is some evidence to suggest they always have been. In the past, the telling of legends was one form of oratory. When chiefs wished to be entertained, they would prepare a feast and invite a storyteller to perform (MacGregor n.d.). According to some of my informants, elders would get together to share their knowledge of genealogies and local history, some of which was preserved in chant form. Today few people who claim to have such knowledge are willing to share it, but those who do may become a focal point for admirers, who provide an eager audience.

A better-preserved form of oratory concerns speeches, mostly to thank those who have donated labor, food, and other goods on ceremonial occasions. Chiefs of all ranks are expected to make speeches in such circumstances, but oratory is not confined to chiefs. Church and government officials also address audiences on various occasions, and guests who have been honored, regardless of sex or rank, usually offer thanks in a formal or quasi-formal way. Chiefs also make speeches to inspire their subjects to work hard, to donate to a cause, or to promote community harmony.

Two other arenas for speechmaking are community meetings and the Methodist church. At village or district meetings, individuals often express their views in an eloquent, sometimes passionate manner. The

object is to be persuasive without being abrasive, to convince without alienating. Some of the most admired speakers never raise their voices. To Rotumans soft-spoken speech signifies humility, which is a valued trait in chiefs and commoners alike.

The Methodist church provides a number of roles requiring oratory, including ministers, catechists, and lay preachers. Although there are only a few ministers on the island at any given time, each of the fourteen churches has a catechist and a large number of lay preachers, including some women. Lay preachers rotate assignments between the churches and so are often in the position of visiting dignitaries. For the most part, preaching is based more on Western models than on traditional Rotuman oratory, which contains repetitive formulas. Preachers often start off softly and build to crescendos. Some are prone to making vigorous gestures to punctuate their speeches, a style that contrasts with traditional Rotuman oratory, in which gestures and facial expressions are of little significance. Regardless of context, however, effective speakers are admired in Rotuma, and oratory is a vital part of the contemporary culture.

Chanting likewise has retained vitality, although mostly in the form of songs sung during traditional dances (*tautoga*). Kaurasi divides dance songs into four groups: (1) those depicting social functions in which two parties entertain one another; (2) those indicating events that led to wars; (3) those referring to the loss of a friend or relative; and (4) those referring to overseas trips and safe returns. He also identifies two other types of Rotuman chants: those sung before wrestling matches or before a war, which aimed at inspiring one's own combatants and intimidating one's competitors or enemy; and those sung when receiving a chief or at the funeral of a chief (Kaurasi 1991:144). Neither of these latter forms of chanting are common now, but they are performed on occasion.

Of all the Rotuman art forms, composing songs for special occasions and choreographing *tautoga* dances have survived with the most vigor. Prior to a special event, the group chosen to perform meets regularly for rehearsals, and a good deal of pride is involved. On grand occasions several groups may perform in a competitive context, with prizes being awarded to the winners. Good composers are especially admired. According to Hereniko: "A good *purotu* [composer] is judged on the aptness of his choice of words, which should 'cut deep into the heart of the listener', on the actions chosen to portray his poetry, and the melody. It is also very important that his allusions be suitable for the occasion and the individuals being honoured" (1977: 132). In addition to the preparation of songs for *tautoga*, lyrics are composed for modern instru-

ments such as guitars. They are sung at special events such as *höt'ak hafu* (ceremonial unveiling of a gravestone), in which case they honor the memory of the deceased and his or her close relations. Churches provide still another arena for musical creativity, with hymn-singing competitions occurring frequently. Several individuals on the island are well known for their abilities as hymn writers. Thus singing and dancing are among the most powerful media for communicating messages and mobilizing sentiment in contemporary Rotuma.

Finally, mention should be made of the *kava* ceremony, which can be considered a form of dramatic performance. As in other Polynesian societies, important ceremonies on Rotuma require the presentation, preparation, and serving of *kava* to chiefs and dignitaries. The basics of the traditional *kava* ceremony in Rotuma are well described by Gardiner (1898:424-425) and MacGregor (n.d.), from whose accounts the following composite description draws.

At feasts chiefs take their place in the "front" of the ceremonial site,¹⁰ with the highest-ranking chief in the middle. Behind him is his *mafua* (spokesman), who conducts the ceremony. The *kava* roots are brought to the site at the head of a procession of men bearing food. The *kava* is placed so that the roots point toward the chiefs, the leaves away: The presentation is acknowledged by the *mafua*, who calls out, "Kava." The man who is tending the *kava* then breaks off a small branch from the root, stabs the root with it, and shouts, "Manu'!"¹¹ The *mafua* then recites a *fakpej*, a chantlike recitation.¹² If more than one bundle of roots are being presented, this ceremony may be repeated, with additional *fakpei* being chanted.

After the *fakpej*, the *mafua* calls the names of the chiefs to whom a piece of *kava* root is to be presented. The man tending the *kava* cuts off one piece of root for each chief. A final piece is cut off and given to the women to be washed and chewed. After sufficient chewing, the *mafua* calls out for the woman who will mix it to wash her hands. The chewed *kava* is then put into a *tanoa* (*kava* bowl) with water and is mixed with a *vehnau* (strips of cloth from the bark of the hau tree). The *kava* maker strains the brew through the cloth, then passes it back to an attendant, who wrings it out while a second attendant pours water over the *kava* maker's hands. When the *kava* maker is finished with the preparation, she calls out, "Kavaite" (The *kava* is ready).

The *mafua* then calls out "*marie', marie', marie'!*" which draws attention to the proceedings, much in the manner that "hear, hear!" does in English-speaking settings. The *kava* maker then lays down the *vehnau* and claps twice with her hands cupped, then once loudly with her palms flat. The *mafua* again calls "*marie', marie', marie'!*"

The second attendant brings an *ipu* (coconut shell cup) to the bowl, and the *kava* maker lifts the *vehnau* and drains *kava* into it. The attendant then says, “*Kava taria*” (The *kava* is ready).

The *mafua* then calls out, “*Taukavite se Maraf* [or the name of the highest-ranking person present]” (Take the *kava* to Maraf). The attendant bears the *kava* to the person whose name has been called out and, stooping low, hands it to him. She then returns to the bowl and, when the cup is refilled, calls out again, “*Kava taria*.” The process is repeated until all the chiefs and dignitaries are served in order of rank.

Kava presentations remain a central part of any ceremony performed in contemporary Rotuma, but they lack formality and the sense of drama that accompanies performances in Fiji and Samoa. Rotumans today conduct the ceremony in an almost casual manner. And *kava* is no longer chewed but is pounded with an iron pestle. Elders constantly offer advice to the various participants. They discuss who should be served when and continually negotiate procedures. Few people seem to be certain about protocol. Furthermore, many who serve as *mafua* no longer know any of the traditional *fakpej* and make them up as they go along. In some of the recent presentations I observed, the *mafua* made the *fakpej* into a series of humorous utterances, turning it into a joke; no one seemed to mind. Few contemporary Rotumans, and no one in a position of power, seem to be concerned about the authenticity of such performances.¹³

The art forms presented here represent the array of options open to someone who would use metaphors or symbols to mobilize political sentiment among Rotumans. Against this background I now turn to examine the actions of Henry Gibson in his attempt to assume a leadership role vis-à-vis Rotuma’s independence from Fiji.

The Mölmahao Movement

Henry Gibson is the great-grandson of a Scotsman who resided on Rotuma during the mid-nineteenth century and a Rotuman woman of high rank from the chiefly district of Noatau. Raised on Rotuma, he emigrated to Fiji as a teenager. He took up martial arts, trained in Japan, and attained the status of grand master. He founded the Jyoishin Mon Tai Kiok Kuen Kung Fu Society, which has numerous branches in the Pacific region, including Australia and New Zealand, where he now resides.

In 1981 Gibson returned to Rotuma for the centennial celebration of the island’s cession to Great Britain. The centennial was a grand affair, marked by the opening of an airstrip, feasting, and numerous cultural

performances. Gibson was invited by the Council of Rotuma to give a martial arts demonstration, and he obliged. It must have been a memorable event, for people can still describe in detail how he broke cement blocks and timber with his hands, and how he threw mock attackers into the sea. The demonstration earned him a good deal of admiration among the Rotuman people, and many joined the classes that he offered.

While his reputation grew with his kinsmen and some devoted followers, it began to sour with many others. They complained about his irreverence toward Christianity and his womanizing, which they claim created friction in the community and provoked marital breakups. They also found the regimen he required of his students, including long periods of time in the bush, overly arduous.

After a time on Rotuma, Gibson returned to New Zealand and, according to a letter he wrote to me, had "an astral experience with the ancient ones." He described it as follows; I present his notations, punctuation, and spelling in order to give the full flavor of the text:

about 1. A.M. in the morning, a very tall man came to me. He was of light complexion and very muscular, I felt a very strong vibration emanating from his presence. . . . I sense that he was a very spiritual and noble individual. One who has mastery over the - "elements".

He introduced himself as - "GAGAJ UR-JEKE". That he was there to inform and to instruct me of the lost history of - "HANUA-MA-FU'ETA" known as . . . "ROTU - MA-MA" pronounced to-day as - ROTUMA. He took me to ROTUMA, and showed many very interesting things. Most important was the sacred foundation--"MOL-MA-HAO." (to ascend and bow) Situated at the east end of the island known then as - "MAF-NE-HANU'ETA" (EYE OF THE LAND) white sand stretched from the present shore-line, to almost the base of the foot-hills the mountains were treeless very few coconut trees. I would estimate the population to approximately-500-1,000 there were no districts, all the dwellings were in-land and I was informed that because of the unusual unrest of the sea, volcanic rocks were used as foundation.

"MOL-MA-HAO" foundation was one of its kind. It stood majestically like a pyramid especially designed to preserve certain records, to with-stand time and as a monument to bear witness for-ever. I was asked to enter the house by a lady who

spoke from with-in when I entered, there were only three people in-side. A lady and two men. "GAGAJ UR-JEKE" remained outside talking to three other men whose bodies were covered with -TATTOO a design and pattern assimilating the carveings on the eight posts and the intricate binding of coconut sinet on the rafters supporting the huge beam at the very top of the house.¹⁴ The lady introduced herself as - "SAU HANI" and asked me to sit in the centre and to offer and to serve the - "KING" his "KAVA". The man who sat facing SAU HANI, said his name was - "GAGAJ KAU-SAK-MUA". When I served the kings KAVA, the king held the KAVA bowl for about 5 mins. and said - "ITS BEEN A VERY LONG TIME, SINCE I DRANK KAVA. I want you to have my KAVA BOWL and to - UNTIE MY FA'APUI and when it is done, I GACAJ SAU LAGFATMARO will LIVE. ALL THAT IS HAPPENING NOW WHICH DID NOT HAPPEN IN MY TIME, I WILL SEE TO IT."

"SAU HANI" showed me how to mix the KAVA and its true meaning, the symbolic meaning of the offering of the - "FOUR" KAVA BOWLS in the "UMEF" KAVA before the KAVA is served. The - "KAVA NE ROTUMA " is dedicated to the "AITU MAN-MAN TA", the memory of - "HANUA-MA-FUETA" and the existence of . . . "HANUA-HA-TA". The true meaning of the KAVA CEREMONY in ROTUMA is "ROTU-MA-MA."

It is clear from this text that Gibson is fascinated by Rotuman words and is engaged in a quest for meaning through their interpretation. What he writes as "HANUA-MA FU'ETA" would ordinarily be written as *hanua mafue ta* (the ancient land, or possibly, land of the ancestors). Broken down into its component parts, KAU-SAK-MUA (ordinarily written *Kausakmua*) might be translated as "to support, to display vigor, first or in front" or "one who supports the leader." However, in this context it might stand for *kava* (pronounced *kao* when followed by a modifier), "to strain or sieve first or in front" or "one who prepares *kava* for the leader." The *kava* of Rotuma, he writes, is dedicated to the "AITU MAN-MAN TA" (*'aitu manman ta*), or "efficacious god," the memory of "the ancient land," and the existence of HANUA-HA-TA (probably *hanua ha' ta*), "the sacred land."

In another part of the letter, he explains the meanings of the names LAGFATMARO and ROTU-MA-MA:

Interpretation and meaning of the name "GAGAJ SAU LAGFATMARO " is - "CHIEF KING OF THE PREVAILING WIND".

This name was given to honour the principle Forces which destroyed - "HANUA-MA-FUETA" the ancient "Continent" or "Land of Our Forefathers" . . . "THE LAND OF THE-BEGINNING". The destruction of - "HANUA-MA-FUETA" gave cause for the ancestors who survived to revere the ancient land of our Forefathers as - "HANUA-HA'A". (The sacred Land of our ancestors. "Land of the departed SOUL'S".) The birth realm of the - "PURE 'AG-HIFU-MAF-NE-LAG-HEKE" - ("SEVEN KINGDOMS" and the . . . "EYE OF THE FOUR WIND'S." The ancestors who survived and found this piece of land remaining performed a ceremony - a "FAPUI" - A BINDING OF SACREDNESS". This was to mark the - "(ARAG) - (VAKA)" the catastrophe that had befallen "HANUA-MA-FUETA" and the sad memories of the many lives lost.

This sacred or "FAPUI" land was named by the "APEI-AITU" (High Priests)¹⁵ as - "ROTU- (MA) -MA" (devotion and faith) Pronounced - ROTUMA. A ruler was selected to voice the administration of law, religion, science, arts, culture, tradition etc. etc. on this small and sacred place. The title given to the first King and Ruler was - "GAGAJ SAU LAGFATMARO".

"GAGAJ SAU LAGFATMARO "is the great grandson of 'APEI AITU" ——"GAGAJ RAMAG-FON." The names of the other priests and elders "GAGAJ APIAG-FON". "GAGAJ OTIAG-FON". "GAGAJ URJEKE". "GAGAJ TEOK". ——— "GAGAJ RAFE'OK". "VOI-MO-MOK".

None of the names Gibson mentions, including Lagfatmaro, appear in myths or legends reported by previous generations of European visitors who collected oral histories. They may still be a genuine part of Rotuma's oral history, but that they are unknown to all others I have talked to suggests that they are esoteric to a small group at best. I should point out here that most Rotumans have little knowledge of traditional myths, nor are they versed in Rotuman history. There are few people alive, therefore, who are prepared to dispute Gibson's claims, which were given support by an elder kinsman who had taken the title Kausakmua.¹⁶ Kausakmua purportedly traced Gibson's genealogy back to the original Lagfatmaro.¹⁷ Gibson has rightfully pointed out that most Rotumans can only trace their ancestry back three or four generations (*Fiji Times*, 7 Jan. 1983:24), so Kausakmua's genealogy has gone essentially unchallenged.

Gibson returned to Rotuma and was formally given the title of Gagaj Sau Lagfatmaro on Christmas Eve 1982 by members of his kin group. According to the *Fiji Times* account, Gibson's "clan" honored him with

an “ageless” lei made of rare cowrie shells, which they placed on his shoulders.¹⁸ The newspaper also reported that Gibson would be returning to New Zealand and then traveling to visit his studio in Sydney, leaving Kausakmua to run things for him on Rotuma and keep him informed.

The following day, another article appeared, stating that “Martial Arts grandmaster Professor Henry Gibson has rebuilt the Mulmahao in Rotuma intending to turn it into a museum” (*Fiji Times*, 8 Jan. 1983:30). “Mulmahao,” the article states, is the ancient site of a chiefly house consisting of eight posts with two very low doors facing east and west. It goes on to report that Gibson’s clan is using the housesite for meetings and that they are collecting artifacts from around the island. The article quotes Gibson as saying that the museum is for tourists who might visit the island as a result of the new airport. He also is reported to have said: “People have to go back to tradition and cultural values in order to get their identity. Otherwise there will be none.”

In fact, structures were built on two sites on Rotuma by Gibson and his followers. One site, a tall mound, is presumed to be the original house foundation of Lagfatmaro. A small thatched hut has been built on it. The museum, referred to in the news item cited above, is perhaps a kilometer away, on land belonging to Gibson’s family. The museum is a thatched building open on all sides, but with a low entranceway, forcing a visitor to bend down upon entering.¹⁹ It is adjacent to Gibson’s home.

A few months later, another article appeared in the *Fiji Times*. It was titled “Call for Rotuman Antiques” and read as follows:

Rotumans are seeking the return of their traditional artefacts from Fiji and other countries.

The Rotuma Island Council, presided by Mr. T. M. Varea, has authorized Gagaj Sau Lagfatmaro, commonly known as Professor Henry Gibson, to ask for the return of the artefacts. Professor Gibson said people had dug up ancient items in Rotuma despite the disapproval of the islanders.

He said a former District Officer at Rotuma, Mr. Aubry Parke, had reported that he had dug out an ancient yaqona bowl. Mr. Parke, who now lives in Brisbane, said that the bowl was at the Fiji Museum.

Professor Gibson said he had written to the Director of the Fiji Museum, Mr. Fergus Clunie, seeking the return of the artefacts and that he had also visited him.

Professor Gibson said bones taken from Rotuma should be

returned to the island as everyone would like their ancestors to be buried in one place.

He said that with the artefacts, "Maybe Rotuma could have a museum one day."

All Rotuman artefacts in the museum were recorded, he said, except the yaqona bowl. And Mr. Clunie doubted that the artefacts could be returned to Rotuma.

Professor Gibson said he would send the letter from the Council with a covering note to other museums in the world which have Rotuman artefacts.

He said he hoped the artefacts were returned soon and that the Rotuman people would co-operate in helping them restore their culture and dignity.

He said other people would not know the value of the items except if they treasured it.

Professor Gibson is a high chief of Rotuma.

(Fiji Times, 30 May 1983:10)

This article signaled a dispute that arose between Gibson and the then director of the Fiji Museum, Fergus Clunie, over the disposition of Rotuman artifacts. Clunie refused to recognize Gibson's legitimacy as a spokesman for Rotumans and objected to his untutored fossicking into archaeological sites. He threatened to take legal action to have artifacts retrieved from unauthorized digs confiscated and taken to the Fiji Museum.

In response to a November article in the *Times* questioning his legitimacy, Gibson replied that the revival of his title had brought a renewed interest in family links and Rotuman cultural awareness. In a letter to the editor he repeated his request that the stone kava bowl taken from Rotuma by Aubry Parke be returned (*Fiji Times*, 12 Dec. 1983:6). The bowl, he stated, is of religious and ceremonial significance to the "Clan Molmahao." He also complained about being referred to in the previous article as a martial arts "exponent":

An exponent is simply one who practices or demonstrates martial arts for the record. I am a Grand Master Renshi Sihan (Professor) qualified in the philosophy of the art and not merely the physical aspects as practised by an "exponent."

One of the essential aspects of the martial arts philosophy emphasises truth to one's self and one's principles and respect for all human life.

This aspect of the truth and humanity is embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Articles, 2, 12, 18, 26 and 27--United Nations Charter 1984.

It applies to us, the Rotuman people of Fiji, in our request to regain our Umef Kava [*kava* bowl] and our right to establish a cultural centre in our home Island of Rotuma. To this end I will persevere until we are treated with dignity and our tanoa [*kava* bowl] is returned.

In 1983 the district chief of Noatau died, leaving the title of Maraf, the highest-ranking name on the island, vacant. Throughout recorded history, the head chief of Noatau has held the Maraf title.²⁰ Under somewhat clouded circumstances,²¹ a school teacher from another district was selected by the kin group holding rights to the title (*mosega*) and was installed as the new Maraf. Gibson objected on the grounds that the newly installed chief was from another district,²² and he demanded that the Lagfatmaro title be recognized as "parallel" to that of Maraf and that he be installed as chief (*Fiji Times*, 10 Jan. 1985:3). An interesting debate followed, in which detractors asserted that the title of Lagfatmaro was not recognized in Rotuma, and the Mölmahao group argued that Maraf was not a Rotuman title but a variant of Ma'afu, the name of a Tongan who conquered Rotuma, presumably in the seventeenth century.²³ Gibson is quoted as saying, "The revival of the title Gagaj Sau Lagfatmaro is an attempt on my part to revive the true culture, tradition and identity of the people of Rotuma," and "The existence of politics in the election of chiefs in Rotuman [sic] is destroying our culture" (*Fiji Times*, 16 Jan. 1985:8).

Gibson was unable, however, to elicit support from the Rotuman community at large, and his ambitions went unrealized. In fact, his claims vis-à-vis the Lagfatmaro title are paradoxical. According to all historical accounts, the office of *sau* was rotated between districts, for restricted periods of time. *Sau* were appointed by the *fakpure*, the highest-ranking district chief at any given time. The term of a *sau* was six months--one ritual cycle--although some officeholders were reappointed for several terms. In the early historical period, from 1797 until 1870 when the institution was abandoned as a result of pressure from Christian missionaries, sixty-six different individuals are reported as having held the *sau* title (Sumi Mission Station n.d.). The *sau's* role was to take part in the ritual cycle, oriented toward ensuring prosperity, as an object of veneration. As a figurehead, he represented the entire polity against parochial interests (see Howard 1985 for an extended discus-

sion of Rotuman kingship). Gibson, responding to angry protestations that he was inappropriately claiming to be "king of Rotuma," insisted that he was only claiming to be king of the Mölmahao clan, which, he asserted, includes the seven districts by virtue of its primal origin. Thus he is claiming to be *sau*, a nonhereditary position, on the basis of genealogical descent. He also officially claims to be *sau* of only one kin group; yet the very essence of the *sau*'s role was the representation of the entire polity.

Toward the end of 1985, the dispute concerning rights over cultural artifacts between Gibson and his followers, on the one hand, and Fergus Clunie of the Fiji Museum, on the other, reached a climax. The specific item at issue was the cowrie shell necklace that had been bestowed on Gibson at his installation in 1982. The necklace was allegedly unearthed from a grave at the Mölmahao foundation and, according to Gibson, belonged to the original Lagfatmarō.²⁴ This "heirloom" had come to be seen by Gibson's supporters as having supernatural powers. They claim it has oracular powers, that it answers questions by moving if the answer is "yes" and staying still if the answer is "no."

On 30 November, Clunie arrived in Rotuma with a warrant signed by Fiji's chief magistrate to take the shells to the Fiji Museum for "safe keeping." Gibson's followers protested the action and refused to give up the necklace. Clunie enlisted the help of the police on the island, but they were turned away by the Mölmahao group. As a result, the chief magistrate, the director of public prosecutions, a government prosecutor, and a contingent of police went to Rotuma by chartered airplane on 4 December. Gibson was charged under Fiji's Archaeological and Paleolithic Interests Act with systematically digging up the graves of his ancestors to remove traditional artifacts and putting them in his museum in Noatau. Gibson's lawyer arrived on the same flight (*Fiji Times*, 4 Dec. 1985:1).

On the eve of the court trial, Gibson is quoted as saying: "No one is going to take away the necklace. It is going to draw blood if someone tries. . . . Irrespective of what happens in the court, the necklace is not going." He continued: "The clan which bestowed this on me will not allow anybody to remove it from the island. Their heirloom is the heart and soul of the clan and is the symbol of their king" (*Fiji Times Sunday Magazine*, 15 Dec. 1985:7). As a result of the trial, Gibson was acquitted on the count of illegal excavation but was convicted on a second count of illegally keeping artifacts of historical and archaeological interest, namely, the cowrie necklace. However, the magistrate did not make

a ruling on the disposition of the necklace, so the shells were left in the care of the Mōlmahao group.

The *Fiji Times* reporter who attended the trial expressed relief at the outcome, inferring that bloodshed would be avoided as a result of the ruling (or rather, nonruling). He wrote:

There is more to the Molmahau Clan and Gagaj Sau Lagfatmaro's culture and tradition consciousness than meets the eye.

The cowrie shells are more than just a symbol of the king. They are also the physical embodiment of what the clan terms the "supreme being".

Gagaj Sau Lagfatmaro's idea of cultural preservation and revival is not only picking up the loose pieces and putting them back together, but to trace their history and origin.

He renounced his Christian upbringing the day his name was converted from Henry Gibson and now worships the "supreme being" through his elaborate morning and evening "yaqona" rituals.

These rituals have attracted adverse comments and he has suffered silently from accusations of "voodooism, witchcraft, paganism, devil worshipper . . ." from his own people--the Rotumans.

The rituals include two kava sessions. The first one is a sole devotion by the king. Close aides are invited to a second. The second session includes the blowing of the conch shell.

"This is the practice of our ancestors," he said. "It does not mean that I do not respect the religion of other people, but at the same time I must also expect them to respect ours."

It is this deep commitment, to Rotuman culture acknowledged by the Chief Magistrate while passing judgement, and an unwaivering stand for recognition and respect for which they are prepared to fight. (*Fiji Times Sunday Magazine*, 15 Dec. 1985:7)

The article is accompanied by a picture of Gibson wearing the necklace at the Mōlmahao foundation shrine, with a picture of Gibson wearing the necklace in the background--that picture is the sole decoration in the shrine.

As part of his judgment, the chief magistrate directed Gibson to make every effort to catalogue all artifacts in his possession and supply infor-

mation about them to the Fiji Museum. He thereby implicitly gave official sanction to the activities of the Mōlmahao Cultural Centre and Museum. During the trial, testimony from the chairman of the Council of Rotuma also confirmed that Gibson had been given authority by the council to collect historical artifacts and preserve them.

The Rotuman Cultural Centre and Museum

Just outside the thatched building that serves as the cultural center is a sign in Rotuman and English. The English version reads:

CULTURAL CENTRE AND MUSEUM OF
MÖLMAHAO NOA'IA-E-TAU ROTU-MA-MA
DEDICATED TO THE PRESERVATION OF
ROTUMAN CULTURE AND TRADITION
GAGAJ SAU LAGFATMARO
11 JANUARY 1984

Immediately under this sign is another one:

PRIVATE PROPERTY
TRESPASSERS
WILL BE
PROSECUTED

The contradiction between the museum as guardian of Rotuman culture and its being private property evidently escaped Gibson and his followers. There are no comparable signs anywhere else on the island.

A rather indistinct logo painted on a round plaque is attached to two red beams, which are fastened to the tops of two poles, forming a gate (resembling a Japanese torii) to the building (Figure 2). When I asked what the plaque represented, I was given a vague answer--that it might be a shark "or something." In response to my query, Henry Gibson offered the following explanation in his letter:

The logo that appears on the sign at the Cultural-Centre also shows - "THE SEVEN HEADED SERPENT" coiled around the "SHARE." (THE SUPREME PRINCIPLE OF LIFE - "AITU ' MAN-MAN" the source of all forces, and supreme controller of all - "ACTIVE FORCE'S")

The logo also speak of - "WHAT TIME, HOUR, HOW and WHEN - TO OFFER THE KAVA OF - ROTU(MA) MA." To follow the true mean-



FIGURE 2. **Entrance to the Mölmahao Cultural Centre and Museum.**

ing of the - "LOGO" requires (a) LOVE. (b) SINCERITY. (c) PATIENCE. (d) COURAGE.

This logo is on all of his correspondence and in the center of his personal seal.

My wife and I obtained permission from the center's caretaker to visit the Cultural Centre in 1987. He, with an aide, took us inside, showed us the exhibit, described the nature of its operations and tried, as best he could, to explain the symbolic significance of key items.

Just inside the gate is a small thatched building, open at one end, with a bar that is designed to serve drinks to anticipated tourists. It is not otherwise open for business. Next to this building is a larger one, also of thatch, which houses the collection. It is open on all sides, with a roof that comes to within two or three feet of the ground. We were told that the Rotuman name of the building is Hual Hofuena (Rising of the Moon). The building has an east-west orientation with the front facing east.

Visitors are required to remove their shoes before entering the ceremonial and display area. The entranceway is low, and one has to bend down to enter. Inside are shelves with a variety of stone and shell artifacts (adzes, necklaces, and ornaments), most of obviously recent manu-

facture, and a few skulls. Hanging from the walls are examples of Rotuman basketware, and from the roof a *kokona* (food container).²⁵

In the center of the hut is a stone artifact shaped like a *tanoa* that reportedly was found upside down in the sea at a location indicated by Gibson after a dream. Allegedly the men who accompanied Gibson in the canoe could not lift it, but he dived in and had no trouble raising it. It is a rather crude artifact with what may be handles on the sides, but without clear indications of human workmanship.

There is also a stone *tanou* at the east end of the hut sitting on top of two large stones (see Figure 1). This was described as a *kava* bowl that belonged to Fonmanu, brother of Lagfatmarō. He has a legendary reputation for inseminating Rotuman women who came to him from the various districts in order to have children of "royal" blood. The legend of Fonmanu is the basis for the unorthodox spelling of Noatau on the center's sign--Noa'ia-e-Tau. In his letter to me, Gibson related the tale in the following terms:

The paramount chiefly clans of the present seven districts in ROTUMA ("es ne ITU'U") OBTAINED THEIR ROYALTY FROM "FAR SAU" (requesting Royalty) from "MOLMAHAO" via "GAGAJ SAU FONMON." On his death bed - GAGAJ SAU LAGFATMARO sent his' younger brother - GAGAJ FONMON from MOLMAHAO to - "FIKEOKO" erea to protect and administrate for his young children. GAGAJ FONMON was to come under his two elder brothers - GAGAJ KAUSAKMUA and GAGAJ MATAER. Unfortunately GAGAJ FONMON did not comply with his elder brother's wishes and overruled his two older brothers and took affairs into his own hands. Isolated tribes throughout ROTUMA now came to him and presented their daughters begging for a link to royalty through him. This is how "NOA-IA-E-TAU" (NOATAU) started - "THANK YOU FOR YOUR LOVE AND COMPASSION" the tribe elders would chant and with various gifts and offerings they would request pardon to be excused to return home and care for their newly expected - "GAGAJ ES NE SAU" (the starting of districts and "ES NE ITU'U").

The Rotuman word 'ese can mean either "to have" or "to possess," on the one hand, or "offspring" (as a noun), "beget," or "bear" (as a verb), on the other. Ordinarily, district chiefs in Rotuma are referred to as *gagaj 'es itu'u*, which would translate as "chief [who] has a district," Gibson, however, is using 'ese in the second sense and thus comes up

with “chief [who is] offspring of *sau*” and “begetting of districts.” This usage corresponds to his notion that all the chiefs originally stem from Mölmahao and that the seven districts are derivative from this initial dispersal of the *sau*’s (Fonmanu’s) seed. If this view were accepted, of course, the *sau* of Mölmahao would be senior to all the chiefs and hence paramount chief of the whole island.

Above Fonmanu’s *tanoa* was the Mölmahao flag. According to the caretaker, the flag signifies the four directions. In each direction four of the stripes touch the center, which signifies the world; four additional stripes go beyond to the extremities and do not touch the world. Further discussion suggested that the number eight is sacred in this scheme (there are eight stripes in all);²⁶ according to the caretaker, Gibson says there are seven districts and one *sau*. (When I revisited the center in 1988, a plaque with a yin-yang emblem would rest just below Fonmanu’s *tanoa*, and a Union Jack would hang alongside the Mölmahao flag.)

We were told that, when he is at the Cultural Centre, Gibson sits on a fine white mat (*apei*) across the central stone *tanoa* from the *kava* server, who uses a wooden *tanoa* to serve the *kava*.

To the right of the entrance is a phallic-shaped stone that the caretaker said was the “messenger stone.” Through this medium Lagfatmaro hears everything that goes on in the hut, we were told. He also comes “in spirit” to *kava* servings and, said the caretaker, at night when he comes his shadow is visible as he walks to take his seat. He does not come alone but with seven other ancient *sau*.

In serving the *kava*, the caretaker poured it (in the bowl) for each of the eight *sau*. The ceremony began by the caretaker putting the pounded *kava* into a cheesecloth bag without water; he then chanted, calling the spirits and specifically calling for Lagfatmaro to come. He then put eight *bilo* (coconut cups) of water into the wooden *tanoa* in front of him while his assistant blew a conch shell eight times. The caretaker then poured the *kava* in the bowl once in each direction. With each serving of *kava*, he and his assistant clapped rhythmically. The first seven times they clapped with palms crossed, the final time with fingers out, hands parallel. This is how Lagfatmaro taught them to perform the ceremony, they said.

We were told that Lagfatmaro had written to museums around the world and acquired a set of photographs of Rotuman artifacts, but that in a recent storm they had gotten all wet and were ruined. Indeed the structure does not offer much protection to, the artifacts contained within it. On a table near the entrance is a guest book, which has also

been water-damaged. It contains a statement of welcome, written in pen and ink, It reads as follows (ellipses in original):

Thank you for your patience. ("It is my privilege to be able to present to you the past making of Rotuman history in the form made possible for the Rotuman and . . . you the VISITOR to glimpse.

Throughout the history of mankind the need and determination for survival and the presence of changes has brought about an awareness of reality ". . . the essence of life." This realization has been the cause of which this cultural centre was built. Sufficient evidence of past world history instigated the determination of . . . wills, sacrifice, endurance and love, to house the missing links of Rotuma's past.

Please share with me the exquisite delight in finding the many [unintelligible word] for . . . ancestral bones, artifacts and adzes scattered throughout the island, to be sheltered after performing an ancient ceremony according to the Rotuman tradition and culture . . . for the suspended spirit and ancestral thought suspension. Since my first visit to Rotuma in 1962 I [two unintelligible words] to my horror and disappointment the . . . uncare ancient burial dissolving from once a fine work of art to . . . a heap of total ruin. Share with me the exquisite delight in being the one to present to survival and undertake a mission . . . for the . . . young and . . . for the old generation, for the . . . visitor to, view and hold precious the identity, culture, tradition and religion of Rotu-ma-ma. The name Rotuma means . . . Rotu "devotion" ma "faith" . . . devotion and faith. The attempt to extend the royal Mölmahao Cultural Centre is part of the proposed plan for which a donation of any nature to which the project will be greatly honored and appreciated. I trust that your visit to the Cultural Centre was not a disappointment . . . Indeed like other neighboring islands of the Pacific region, the arrival of Christianity together with whaling ships passing in our waters was . . . responsible for the change of attitude and abduction of many Rotuman artifacts to different parts. An attempt has been made to request the return of Rotuman artifacts back to Rotuma from various world museums by his Royal Highness King Gagaj Sau Lagfatmaro II, of the Royal Mölmahao clan. The response to this request has been tremendously encouraging. Most strengthening confrontation

with the laws of the Fiji Government resulted when the attempt to revive Rotuman culture and tradition was undertaken by the Royal Mölmahao clan elders . . . “truth is forever formless, forever pure. A principle of the highest order in life.”

signed: **Lagfatmarō**

Adulation and the Quest for Power: Visits to Rotuma

Stories abound about Gibson’s behavior and the way his followers treat him when he visits Rotuma, I was told that when he arrives (by plane), his followers chant a *ki*, a ceremony traditionally appropriate when a high chief arrives by sea or dies and is carried to the grave (see the section above on traditional arts). According to some accounts, he was carried from the plane to a fine white mat, as a chief would be carried from an arriving boat to the shore, but others deny this.²⁷ Once seated on the white mat, they perform a *mamasa* (welcoming) ceremony, anointing him with oil.²⁸ I was told that his followers carry around an *apei* for Gibson to sit on wherever he goes. Apparently, the chief of the district in which the airport is located issued an order forbidding these ceremonies to be performed there, but the airport manager, a Gibson sympathizer, said he has jurisdiction over the airport and has given permission for their continuance.

When the tourist ship *Fairstar* first visited Rotuma in 1986, some informants allege that Gibson was seated on a white mat, apart from the chiefs, dressed all in white.²⁹ He was fanned by two white women from New Zealand, who accompanied him to Rotuma on that visit,³⁰ and attended to by some of his local followers. Some people complained that Gibson’s followers ignored the chiefs and carried out a *kava* ceremony of their own, blowing the conch shell and serving him first.

People also relate stories about Gibson’s attempts to communicate with the pre-Christian spirits thought to have inhabited Rotuma and to absorb their power. On one occasion he is said to have gone out to an offshore rock and remained there, fasting, for three or four days, presumably soaking up the *mana* of the island. Allegedly, he has also held sessions on shore, in the company of others, in which he has attempted to communicate with the spirits and have them do his bidding. Rotumans refer to this practice as *re atua* (doing spirits) and liken it to “devil worship,” a practice that offends their Christian sensibilities.

According to some accounts, Gibson took his followers out into the bush for several days at a time. Just before, they would emerge, he would take them to a cemetery and, as a final exercise in strength and

concentration, would have them lift a gravestone, while he would remove skulls and artifacts.

One of the reasons Gibson is so popular among his followers, I was told, is that he is a good storyteller. He allegedly tells a story about being in India amongst the Gurkhas. He says that Gurkhas control enormous spiritual power; that a man can talk to his knife, then throw it, and it will kill the person it is supposed to kill, even if that person is not present.

Such accounts of Gibson's behavior focus on his apparent obsession with potency, which most Rotumans see as being connected to his role as a karate master. Other stories, perpetuated by his followers, present evidence of his powers. He is able, they say, to make the cowrie shell necklace move by will and to make a *kava* bowl appear. One woman allegedly uses Gibson's picture as a central artifact in her healing ritual. Nonfollowers are skeptical, however, and some are outraged at what they see as blatantly anti-Christian actions and beliefs. No one, however, has accused him of attempting to force his beliefs on others, and most of his followers are still members of Christian denominations.

After the Coup: The Secessionist Movement

Following the first Fiji coup, in May 1987, an emergency session of the Council of Rotuma was called to discuss Rotuma's position. Members of the council resolved to pledge their support and remain part of Fiji. In early June, Gibson sent a letter to the council expressing his fears that the position of the Rotumans would deteriorate as a result of the coup, and on 11 June he addressed the council in person. He said that he would not abide by the council's ruling to remain with Fiji. He returned to New Zealand a few days later. In July, contrary to Gibson's pleas, the council sent representatives to attend the Great Council of Chiefs meeting to express Rotuma's desire to remain part of Fiji.

According to a deposition from the district officer, following the return of this delegation, meetings were held in each of Rotuma's seven districts to ascertain the views of the people. He asserted that "it was the overwhelming view of the majority of the Rotumans who attended these meetings, that Rotuma should remain part of Fiji even if Fiji were to become a Republic" (*Fiji Times*, 10 June 1988:41). In late July the desire of the people and the chiefs of Rotuma to remain part of Fiji was communicated to Governor-General Ganilau.

Following the second coup and the declaration of Fiji as a republic outside the British Commonwealth, in September 1987, the Council of

Rotuma again met and resolved that Rotuma would remain part of Fiji. The resolution was sent to the president of the new republic with a copy to the prime minister.

In October, from his home in New Zealand, Gibson declared Rotuma independent and wrote to Queen Elizabeth for recognition. He also sent an appeal to the secretary general of the United Nations. The letters were sent on stationery with his seal and large letters atop each page reading “GAGAJ SAU LAGFATMARO, KING OF THE ROYAL MOLMAHAO CLAN, ROTUMA.”

In December 1987, on the anniversary of Gibson’s installation as **Lagfatmarō**, his followers raised the British flag over the Mōlmahao Cultural Centre. Incensed by this act of defiance, the district officer, a young Rotuman man, apparently went to the center and fired several shots at the flag. A few days later, a thirteen-man all-Rotuman military team was sent to Rotuma “to help control a sudden outbreak of extensive damage to food crop plantations by wild pigs,” according to the Fiji Ministry of Information. The district officer was replaced by a retired military officer, also a Rotuman, who was charged with bringing the situation under control.

In April 1988 a number of Gibson’s followers met and, with his blessings, selected a new set of leaders, one per district, who they asserted held authority in Rotuma. They sent a letter to the coup leader, Colonel Rabuka, to that effect.³¹ Shortly thereafter a Fiji police squad was sent to Rotuma to investigate reports of “alleged sedition” on the island. As a result, eight men were charged with sedition and sent to Suva for a brief incarceration before being returned to Rotuma.

In May a special sitting was held of the magistrate’s court on Rotuma to hear charges. The defending lawyer, Tevita Fa, argued that the court did not have jurisdiction over the case since it had not been conclusively established that Rotuma was in fact part of the Republic of Fiji. The essence of Fa’s argument was that in 1881 the Rotuman chiefs had ceded the island to Great Britain, not to Fiji, and that, when the Fiji Constitution was abrogated, all other laws, except the Deed of Cession, were rescinded; thus, with the Constitution and the Rotuma Act gone, the magistrate’s court did not have any powers to hear the case (*Fiji Times*, 9 June 1988:8). The argument was sent to the High Court in Fiji, where the chief justice ruled that “Rotuma became part of Fiji by the most solemn act of faith and trust on the part of the Chiefs and the people” (*Fiji Times*, 10 June 1988:41), and that the magistrate’s court did indeed have jurisdiction.

The case was heard in October 1988 but was recessed for a year until

October 1989, with the explicit hope that tempers would cool and that Rotumans would settle the matter among themselves. When that hope was not realized--the Mölmahao faction remained defiant in attitude, although they violated no laws in the interim--the trial was concluded and the defendants were found guilty of sedition. They were fined F\$30 (F\$20 less than the fine for riding a motorbike on the island without a helmet) and put on two years' probation. From New Zealand Gibson issued several pleas in the public media asking that he be guaranteed safe conduct to visit Fiji in order to attend the trial but was ultimately informed that he faced arrest if he returned (*Fiji Times*, 28 Nov. 1989:2). The sedition conviction was overturned by a higher court in 1991.

Conclusion

The question I wish to address in this conclusion is whether Henry Gibson might have had a realistic opportunity to mobilize Rotuman sentiment in support of his causes and failed. Is it possible, for example, that if he had behaved differently and used artistic resources more effectively, he could have rallied a majority of Rotumans to back a move toward independence? Could he have used the Cultural Centre as a springboard for crystalizing a sense of Rotuman identity that would become a political force?

It must be pointed out that Gibson enjoyed a great deal of goodwill and admiration from the people of Rotuma following his karate demonstration in 1981. Furthermore, his reputation as a well-intended, amiable individual has not been seriously tarnished by his subsequent actions. Many people on the island say that what he wants to do is not bad--they express at least passive agreement with his goals--but they admonish him for going about it in the wrong way. Others exonerate Gibson but blame his more zealous followers for going too far.

There is, in fact, a good deal of sympathy among Rotumans for the idea of a Rotuma independent of Fiji. Many individuals criticize the Fiji government for neglecting the island; they do not feel they have been well served since Fiji gained independence in 1970. Some yearn for a return to colonial status, with New Zealand administering the island (or more accurately, providing economic largesse).³² Remaining a part of the Commonwealth is important for a number of history-minded islanders who trace their ancestry back to the chiefs who ceded Rotuma to Great Britain last century. Many others I talked to were fence-sitting on the issue of independence, waiting to see what happened before tak-

ing a stand. At the very least, most Rotumans were prepared to consider the possibility of an independent Rotuma, or one that had a good deal more autonomy than at present. Yet Gibson has not been able to tap these sympathetic attitudes and mobilize them for political action.

Another factor that should have given Gibson leverage is that many Rotumans are dissatisfied with the chiefs and the ineffectiveness of the Council of Rotuma. Those who favor development complain that the chiefs talk a lot but get little done; they frequently refer to the alleged mismanagement of funds. Those who are concerned with preserving Rotuman heritage complain that the chiefs are not well versed in traditional customs and are neglecting their responsibilities for preserving traditions. Nearly everyone complains that the chiefs do not communicate effectively with the people. Many, if not most, Rotumans feel that there is a vacuum with regard to effective leadership. They are poised to accept someone who would take charge and get things done--someone who would get the roads fixed properly, repair the crumbling school buildings, and regularize transportation to and from the island. But Henry Gibson, even as Gagaj Sau Lagfatmaro, has not convinced them that he is the man to do it, despite his assurances that he would raise their standard of living.

If, instead of emphasizing symbols associated with his karate training, mostly derived from Eastern philosophy, Gibson had put more emphasis on items of Rotuman origin, would the people have responded differently? Perhaps, but one is hard-pressed to think of any symbols that would have special significance for the majority of Rotumans. Most of the traditional art forms have lost their cultural significance. Few people were impressed by the Cultural Centre. The artifacts contained within it--the shells, skulls, *kava* bowls, stone adzes, and baskets--hold no special symbolic significance. The Mölmahao flag, the logo of the hydra and shark, and the yin-yang plaque are all meaningless, even to his close followers, except insofar as they are identified with Gibson himself. Perhaps Gibson might have made better use of oratory or the medium of traditional dancing and singing to convey his messages. But it seems he failed more because of the manner in which he used symbolic and artistic forms than because of their appropriateness or inappropriateness.

Table 1 compares Gibson's use of art and symbols with the traditional forms described in the first section of this article and summarizes ways in which he adapted traditional arts and crafts to serve his own ends.

Most of the cultural artifacts used by Gibson and many of his actions can be construed as an attempt to enhance his own *mana*, or potency.

TABLE 1. Gibson's Use of Art and Symbols Compared with Traditional Rotuman Forms

Form	Traditional Usage	Gibson's Usage
Tattooing	exposed, probably as a symbol of humanity	hidden beneath a long-sleeved shirt
Ornaments	whales' teeth, pearl-shell breastplates and necklaces to designate rank	necklace of cowrie shells as symbol of <i>sau</i> and possessing supernatural power
Dress	wraps and girdles of fine mats worn by men of rank	white pants and shirt
Fine mats	used as ceremonial exchange items and as seats to symbolically elevate persons being honored	used as a seat for his own symbolic elevation
Oratory Chanting	storytelling, speechmaking before wars or wrestling matches, when chief is being carried from sea to shore or being buried	storytelling when Gibson arrives by plane
Singing and dancing	on special occasions, lyrics composed to depict events and honor individuals or places	no significant use of song or dance
<i>Kava</i> ceremony	public ceremony to honor chiefs and acknowledge rank ordering	private ceremony for Gibson to communicate with spirits
Flags	no known use prior to cession	used to communicate political messages
Logos and plaques	no known use	esoteric logo of shark and seven-headed hydra; yin-yang plaque on display in cultural center
Poetry	significant component of oral performances of chants and songs	written form, apparently dissociated from public performances
Tools and artifacts	pragmatic use only	used as symbols of Rotuma's past
Skulls	no known use	used to signify potency through connection with ancestors
Martial arts	no known forms other than war dances	karate demonstrations to demonstrate potency

His excursions to offshore islets and to cemeteries, his propitiation of pre-Christian spirits, his unearthing of skulls and grave goods, his revision of the *kava* ceremony, his construction of the shrine at Mōlmahao and, not least, his assumption of the title Lagfatmaro all are oriented toward enhancing his own spiritual potency. To his followers, those already committed, such actions are evidence of quasi-godly status. But for most Rotumans they are anathema. Rather than mobilizing sentiment vis-à-vis the issues of Rotuman tradition, identity, and political autonomy, he made himself and his status the focal issue. Instead of playing the role of a true *sau*, someone who represents the whole polity selflessly, he ended up in the role of a parochial combatant. He thus lost whatever opportunity he might have had to become a stranger-king (Sahlins 1981b).

There are two fundamental aspects to chieftainship in Rotuma and in Polynesia generally: a kingly aspect and a populist aspect (Marcus 1989). The kingly side is based on divine sanction, on powers that flow from the spirits. From this standpoint a chief is a sacred being. Sanctity and the *mana* that goes with it are indexed by genealogical rank and successful ventures. The populist side is based on a conception of chiefs as exemplary persons and is indexed by proper social decorum. It generally includes notions of humility as well as social responsibility. In Rotuma, as I have pointed out elsewhere, the populist aspect of chieftainship dominates political conceptions (Howard 1985, 1986). But Gibson has chosen to ignore the populist aspects of chieftainship in favor of a quest for divine potency. Insofar as this has been the case he has been out of tune with Rotuman culture.

In his letter to me, Gibson included a poem he wrote that may well summarize his quest and his dissociation from the populist side of Rotuman politics:³³

On top the MOLMAHAO foundation I sat and drank my KAVA,
descending upon me - "THE MAN MAN NE A'VA" [the spirit of
time past]

A beautiful moonlight night a visit from - "HANUA HA'A"
[sacred land]
a procession of "NOBLES" with their - "UMEF KAVA" [*kava*
bowls].

Sat on the - "A-PEI-FISI" [fine white mat] and drank our "KAVA"
reawakening to us - "MAN MAN NE A'VA" [the spirit of time past]

Lying on the - "A-PEI-FISI" [fine white mat] and listening to
 "FE'AG NE TEMAN FUA" [the words of the elders],
 clearly explaining to me - "ROAG ROAG NE O'UA HA-NUA" [the
 story of our island].

"ROTU(MA) HANISI" TAFU NE - "A'VA" ---
 [faith and love; the light of the past]

"KO'ROA PU(MU)A, NE O'US HA-NUA"
 [most precious gift, from our island].

Above the Mölmahao foundation, where Gibson, as Lagfatmaro, would drink *kava* with his spiritual ancestors and receive their precious gifts, the American flag now flies. No one on Rotuma seems to know why--or much cares.

NOTES

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1. On Rotuma, house-sites (*fuag ri*) are named and serve as a reference point for kin groups (*kainaga*). Anyone who can trace their ancestry to an individual with rights in a given *fuag ri* has a legitimate claim to membership in the *kainaga* associated with it. Even when no structures are present, *fuag ri* are referred to in English as "foundations" and their names identify cognatic descent groups.

2. The name Lagfatmaro does not appear on any of the lists of *sau* collected by European visitors to the island in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. The only place I have seen the name is in a list of *mua* provided by Henry Gibson's great-grandmother Akanisi (the mother of his father's father) to A. M. Hocart in 1913. The *mua*, like the *sau*, was a central figure in the pre-Christian ritual cycle but was not regarded as a "king" (see Howard 1986). Akanisi specifically told Hocart that a *mua* cannot become *sau* (Hocart n.d.:4703, 4771). I refer to Gibson by his given name in this article for consistency and convenience, not to express a view regarding the legitimacy of his title. That is for Rotumans to decide.

3. Whether Gibson purposefully uses *fa'apui*, a nonword, instead of *fapui* (a symbol that marks a place or object as forbidden to others) is an interesting question. As we shall see below, he seeks meaning by dissecting Rotuman words. The word *fa'a* by itself can mean

“to break off,” and hence metaphorically “to secede or rebel.” Perhaps he was inventing a new compound or committing a Freudian slip. With respect to the relationship between the flag and the *kava* ceremony prescribed by Gibson, see below.

4. Captain Edward Edwards of HMS *Pandora*, which came upon Rotuma on 8 August 1791, wrote that the Rotumans were “tattooed in a different manner from the natives of the other islands we had visited, having the figure of a fish, birds and a variety of other things marked upon their arms” (Thompson 1915:64-66). George Hamilton, who was also aboard the *Pandora*, wrote that “their bodies were curiously marked with the figures of men, dogs, fishes, and birds, upon every part of them; so that every man was a moving landscape” (ibid.: 138-139).

5. MacGregor also includes in his notes a drawing labeled “sceptre du roi, Rotuma,” on a card headed “Sau’s Spear. Rotuma. Mus. Mission, Rome.” He indicates that it is forty inches in total length with a sixteen-inch handle and is made of stained ironwood.

6. Whales’ teeth, still highly prized in Fiji, are not the valuable objects they were in the past. They are not ceremonially transacted between Rotumans, nor do they play any special role in Rotuman rituals. Some Rotumans have in their possession whales’ teeth (*tabua*), given by Fijians for special favors or service, but their symbolic significance for most Rotumans is minimal.

7. The *mua* was, like the *sau*, a ritual leader. In some accounts he is referred to as a “high priest.” For more details of Rotuma’s traditional political/ritual system, see Howard 1985.

8. According to Hocart (n.d.), women who were asked by a chief to make an *apei* were granted special license to act outrageously, as if they were possessed by a spirit who was beyond the *rules* of normal decorum.

9. In this respect, a gift of an *apei* is comparable to the Fijian presentation of a *tabua* (whale’s tooth), an equivalence explicitly recognized by Rotumans.

10. In Rotuma the “front” side is generally the side toward the sea, but under certain circumstances it may be on the east, or sunrise, side.

11. The word *manu’* (*manu’u*) has no known denotative meaning other than as an exclamation during the *kava* ceremony.

12. The content of the *fakpej* is described by Gardiner as telling a “story of the old times or whale fishing” (1898:424). MacGregor includes the texts of some *fakpej* in his field notes. They are stories about how *kava* came to Rotuma, which may have been the dominant theme of the chants in traditional times. The language of some *fakpej* is archaic, however, and not well understood by contemporary Rotumans, sometimes not even by the reciter.

13. When I visited Rotuma in 1960, the district officer, Fred Ieli, a Rotuman, was a stickler for authenticity. He had a reputation for getting upset when rituals were done “incorrectly” or in a casual manner. But no one in authority since has presumed to have his knowledge of Rotuman custom and desire to enforce it.

14. According to one of the most knowledgeable informants on Rotuma, sennit bindings were an art form in earlier times. Each place had its own unique way of tying sennit, which served as a signature of artisans from that area. I was told of one instance in which a man destroyed the binding of another because his area’s style had been copied without permission.

15. According to MacGregor's informants in 1932, *ape'aitu* were individuals to whom offerings were given when people wanted to know what the gods had to say. They therefore played the role of oracles (MacGregor n.d.).

16. The legitimacy of this title was disputed by one of the district chiefs during a sedition trial of some of the Mölmahao rebels, apparently because it was not properly bestowed in customary fashion. The man had previously held the title of Tivakaifag from the district of Juju but had a falling out with the chief there. He then took the title Kausakmua from the district of Noatau, but it was not sanctioned by the district chief there. Most Rotumans hold that subchief titles, if they are to be legitimate, must have the approval of the head chief in whose district they are located.

17. The genealogy was put on audio tape by Kausakmua and sent to the Council of Rotuma in order to validate Gibson's claim to the title. I have transcribed the tape and find some major breaks in continuity over the generations. Gibson sets the time of the original **Lagfatmarō** as twenty-five hundred years ago; as recited by Kausakmua fewer than twenty generations are accounted for. If one generously assigns thirty years per generation, under six hundred years are accounted for.

18. Rotumans generally use the English term "clan" as a translation of *kainaga*. It is an unfortunate translation, since it implies a corporate group of discrete membership. Rotumans reckon kinship bilaterally, and *kainaga* are best thought of as kindreds or cognatic descent groups, depending on context (Howard 1963).

19. Gibson seems to place considerable significance on the posture in which one enters the buildings he has constructed. The very name Mölmahao translates as "to climb up and bend down." Descriptions of traditional Rotuman houses often reported that low doorways, forcing a visitor to stoop over when entering, were characteristic. Some commentators have interpreted this feature as a form of hurricane resistance, since the entire roof usually came down low. Another possibility is that having a low entranceway forces a visitor to pay homage by assuming a deferential position. I assume the significance attributed by Gibson is based on the latter interpretation.

20. There was only one exception. During the time I was on Rotuma in 1960, the district chief of Noatau held the title of Fakraufon.

21. See Howard 1990 for an account of the dispute surrounding the selection of a successor.

22. There is nothing unusual about titles being given to persons whose residence is elsewhere; the main criterion for eligibility is simply that one can trace one's genealogy back to an ancestor who had lived on the foundation with which the title was associated.

23. The latter claim is based on a Rotuman legend concerning the conquest of Rotuma by Ma'afu (see Churchward 1937:255-260).

24. According to one informant, some of Gibson's followers, in response to his vision, dug up the Mölmahao gravesite and found eight women buried about twelve feet down; two feet below that was a man buried in a sitting position, with a cowrie shell necklace around his neck. It was Rotuman custom, according to this informant, to bury *sau* with eight women attendants. There is no evidence in the literature to corroborate this claim, nor is there any evidence to suggest that cowrie necklaces were worn by *sau*. Many Rotumans

expressed doubts to me about the antiquity of the necklace. They said that the sennit cord that strings the cowries together looks new and suspect the necklace to be a modern artifact. The antiquity of the necklace is less important for the purposes of this article than the skepticism it reflects regarding the symbolic significance of the artifact to most Rotumans.

25. *Kokona* were designed to keep rats away from food. A round wooden shelf was delicately balanced above a net container so that, when a rat stepped on it, the shelf tipped, dropping the rodent to the floor. One of my informants commented derogatorily that the *kokona* had been made with nails rather than the traditional sennit.

26. See Gibson's account of his vision above; he specifically reports that the house in which he encountered the spirits had eight posts. It has been pointed out to me by Vili Hereniko that the significance of the number eight may stem from the fact that Rotumans recognize eight *sides* to their *kainaga*, corresponding to each of their great-grandparents.

27. In this section I am reporting what various informants have said took place. I am less interested here in what occurred than I am in what people believe occurred and their perceptions of events.

28. By custom individuals are ordinarily given a *mamasa* only on their first return visit to the island. The word *mamasa*, in ordinary usage, means "dry" or "to dry." The notion behind the ceremony is that the person has been wet (and beyond culture) at sea and is made dry (and domesticated) on return to land. In traditional times the ceremony was performed when people returned from a sea voyage or a major fishing expedition (Churchward 1940:258).

29. According to most reports, Gibson always dresses in white on Rotuma and always wears long-sleeved shirts. His entire upper body is tattooed, I was told, but he assiduously keeps covered up while in public. As one of my informants pointed out, his way of dressing is distinctly European rather than Rotuman and visually contradicts his verbal commitment to restore the traditional culture. The contrast, for example, with the current district officer, who dresses in a tailored lavalava with a sennit belt, is dramatic. The latter dress communicates to Rotumans a respectfulness that joins the wearer to the community. Gibson's attire distinguishes him from the community.

30. Gibson is married to a white New Zealand woman, but she does not accompany him on his visits to Rotuma. He apparently has a cult following in New Zealand, based on his role as a karate grand master. According to two informants who have visited his home in Auckland, his followers there (mostly white New Zealanders) treat him with extraordinary deference. He reportedly has little to do with the Rotuman community in Auckland.

31. There is some confusion over the status of these newly selected leaders. In the press they were called "new chiefs," but when confronted the dissidents insisted that rather than replacing the old chiefs, they were "ministers" of a newly formed cabinet (that would presumably govern Rotuma following independence).

32. New Zealand earned a special place in Rotuman eyes as a result of massive relief efforts following Hurricane Bebe in 1973. By building an extraordinary number of hurricane-proof houses in a very brief period, the New Zealand military took on legendary status (see Rensel 1991). They later provided aid and labor for installing toilet facilities.

33. The poem was typed in a combination of English and Rotuman, with Rotuman words capitalized. My translation of the Rotuman appears in brackets. As with all poetry, it is difficult to give a precise translation since some of the language is metaphoric and lends itself to alternate interpretations. The fact that Gibson writes Rotuman in an unorthodox manner further complicates the task. I have checked my interpretation with Rotuman colleagues and they agree that the translation presented captures the basic spirit of the poem.