When Irving Goldman published his first paper on status rivalry and cultural evolution in Polynesia, it met with harsh criticism. The notion that a constant factor—status rivalry—could explain differential evolution was regarded as untenable, and the significance of chiefly contentiousness for the development of Polynesian societies was all but dismissed. With the publication of Ancient Polynesian Society, however, Goldman demonstrated even to skeptics the centrality of status considerations, and status rivalry in particular, for understanding the nature of Polynesian social systems. Whether one accepts his argument for evolutionary sequences or not, the masterly analysis he crafted made clear that by focusing on the dynamics of status, we gain insights that are absolutely crucial. Indeed, most recent work on reconstructing traditional Polynesian polities, including the provocative analyses of Marshall Sahlins—once a rival within the evolutionist framework—builds upon Goldman's analysis.

But the fruitfulness of focusing on status rivalry goes beyond reconstructionist projects. Nor is it limited to hierarchical societies like Hawaii, Tonga and Samoa. As Borofsky's recent work on Pukapuka has demonstrated, by examining the dynamics of status rivalry on an atoll, one can gain an appreciation for the ways in which knowledge is constructed in the course of everyday life. It is now clear that one cannot hope to understand the cultural logic of Polynesian societies, without attention to this fundamental driving principle.

The subject of this essay is the changes that have taken place in the political system of Rotuma from the pre-colonial period (prior to 1881), through the period of British colonial hegemony (1881-1970), to the post-colonial period (1970 to the present). The essay will attempt to demonstrate that the intense status rivalry that characterized the traditional political system, and was muted by the colonial administration, has asserted itself with renewed vigor during the post-colonial period. The essay concludes by addressing the question of whether this resurgence of rivalry is based upon the same principles that drove the traditional system.

Pre-Colonial Rotuma

The island of Rotuma is located approximately three hundred miles north of Fiji, on the western fringe of Polynesia. Linguistic evidence suggests that Rotuman belongs to a subgrouping (Central Pacific) that includes Fijian and the Polynesian languages, and that within this group there is a special relationship between Rotuman and the languages of western Fiji. However, the vocabulary shows a considerable degree of borrowing from Polynesian languages, and Rotuman cultural patterns fall well within the range of those characteristics of Western Polynesia.

According to legend, Rotuma was originally divided into five districts—Itutu, Faguta, Oinafa, Noa-tau and Malhaha—each relatively autonomous and headed by a gagaj 'es itu'u, "district chief." On two occasions, however, additional divisions took place, and at the time of discovery by Europeans, there were seven districts. Legend holds that a portion of the largest district, Itutu, was given as a gift to a sub-chief from Oinafa, thus creating the district of Itumuta. A second story (see below), describes a war in which the district of Faguta was defeated by Oinafa, resulting in a division of the former district into two: Juju and Pepjel.

The powers exercised by gagaj 'es itu'u within their districts were well circumscribed by...
cultural norms. Each chief met regularly in council with sub-chiefs in his district and effective decision-making required consensus. He could order communal work, but if the sub-chiefs and people within his district were indifferent to the project, they could sabotage it by passive resistance. Gagaj 'es itu'u were entitled to first fruits, and regularly received portions of food from feasts and fish from communal fish drives, but under usual conditions these were not consequential. Abuses of authority no doubt occurred, but the members of a district could have a chief deposed if he became overly demanding. This was done through the members of the chief's descent group, who had the right to take away the family name, and hence authority, and allocate it to another.

At any given time the districts were ranked in status, the particular order being influenced in part by the size and power of each district and in part by the results of the last war. In ceremonial kava drinking, the rule was that the highest ranking chief be served first, then the others, in order, to the lowest ranking chief. If one chief wanted to challenge another, he could do so by altering the order of service, when a feast was held in his district, particularly if he advanced his own serving over a rival. Perhaps more than anything else, the ordering of kava drinking symbolized the relative prestige of chiefs and the districts they represented. It therefore constituted an ideal forum for issuing challenges which, because of their public nature, had to be met. There were also three political positions that were pan-Rotuman in scope: the fakpure, sau and mua. The fakpure was referred to primarily in two capacities in the early literature: as convener and presiding officer of the council of chiefs, and as the person responsible for appointing the sau and ensuring that he was cared for properly. He was gagaj 'es itu'u of one of the districts, presumably the one who headed an alliance and was victorious in the last war. The sau's basic role was to take part in the ritual cycle, oriented towards insuring prosperity, as an object of veneration. The role of mua received less commentary in the early literature than that of fakpure and sau, but most of what was written refers to the mua's activities in the ritual cycle. Fr. Trouillet, a French priest writing c. 1873, wrote that the sau appeared to be an appendage of the fakpure, while the mua appeared to be more associated with spiritual power.

Most early accounts focus on the office of sau, which generally was translated into English as "king." The sau provided, in the words of Reverend William Fletcher, the first Methodist missionary, "a common but loose bond of union" between the chiefs. In describing the role of the sau shortly before the office was terminated as an institution, Fletcher wrote:

... he holds the highest social place, drinking kava before the chiefs yet he gains his dignity as some expense. The poor fellow has to eat, and drink kava, many times during the twenty-four hours, by night as well as by day. He presides at certain dances, regularly held, when as at his drinking kava, the old atua, or gods are invoked. These atua appear as old chiefs, whose history is not as well known as their names. With all this there is the most profuse daubing with tumeric. Food is continually taken to the Sau from all parts of the island.

A curious aspect of this position is that it was held by district representatives in rotation, for restricted periods of time. Rotuman chieftainship at this level has been compared with that of Mangaia and Easter Island, two other Polynesian societies for which rotating chieftainship has been documented. The evidence suggests appointments were for a period of six months, coincident with the ritual cycle, although if the island were prosperous, terms might be extended for several years.

Both the legends and early historical data reveal a political system that was dynamic. According to legend, inter-district rivalry was intense and warfare was a common occurrence, although it does not seem to have reached the level of brutality that marked warfare in several other Polynesian societies. The legends suggest that wars were often triggered by challenges to the fakpure, either directly or indirectly, through insulting or offending the sau. Numerous instances are provided in the texts collected by Fr. Trouillet.