

## Torres Strait: the region and its people

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The reef-strewn passage known as Torres Strait, between Cape York at the northeast tip of mainland Australia and the southwest coast of Papua New Guinea, is only a little over 150 kilometres wide but contains over 100 islands, islets, coral reefs and cays. From 80,000 to 10,000 years ago the Sahul Shelf formed a landbridge that linked the New Guinea mainland to the Australian mainland. During this time the twoland masses were joined across the Torres Strait and the Arafura Sea. This large continent was separated from the Sunda Shelf by the biogeographical divide known as Wallacea. The postglacial transgression is assumed to have breached the landbridge between 8500 and 6500 BP. If this transgression of the continental shelf by the sea were completed in two to three thousand years, then the present configuration of islands was reached by 4000–5000 BP. (Barham and Harris 1983:531, 536). Over time, the dominant feature of the climate of the region became the seasonal alternation between the 'wet', the time of the northwest monsoons (December–April), followed by the 'dry', the time of the southeast trade winds (May–November). It was within this physical environment that Torres Strait Islander culture was established.

In this introductory chapter, we give an overview of the Torres Strait region as a whole, while focusing more specifically on the islands and Islanders within the present-day political boundary of the Commonwealth of Australia. This essay briefly describes Torres Strait geography, prehistory and linguistic diversity, as well as outlining some of the historical and sociopolitical processes that have served to shape contemporary Torres Strait Islander culture.

### Geography

Geographically, the islands in the Torres Strait can be divided into four main groups: an eastern group of high volcanic islands; a central group of low sandy islands; a western group of high islands composed of volcanic and granitic rocks; and a northern group of low islands composed of mangrove muds and peats. This environmental diversity encouraged Islanders to practise a variety of subsistence lifestyles prior to sustained European contact in the mid-19th century.

Presently, there are seventeen inhabited islands and two communities located at the tip of Cape York:

**Eastern islands**

Mer	(Murray Island)
Erub	(Darnley Island)
Ugar	(Stephen or Stephens Island)

**Central islands**

Iama	(Yam or Turtle-backed Island)
Masig	(Yorke Island)
Warraber	(Sue Island)
Puruma (or Poruma)	(Coconut Island)

**Western islands**

Badu	(Mulgrave Island)
Moa	(Banks Island)
Mabuiag	(Jervis Island)
Waiben (or Wayben)	(Thursday Island)
Kiriri	(Hammond Island)
Nurupai (or Ngurupai)	(Horn Island)
Muralag	(Prince of Wales Island)

**Northern islands**

Saibai	(Saibai Island)
Boigu	(Talbot Island)
Dauan	(Mt. Cornwallis Island)

**Cape York communities**

Bamaga
Seisia

The eastern islands are composed of weathered, rich, brownish soil with steep well-vegetated slopes and exposed rock. Although the islands show signs of deforestation and soil erosion, they are fertile and picturesque tropical islands. The surrounding sea supports a variety of marine life on the wide coral reefs and, being close to the Great Barrier Reef, the waters contain many sharks and rays; even whales have been sighted from the hills. The lack of sea grass means that dugongs are scarce in these eastern waters although turtles are plentiful. Maizab Kaur (Bramble Cay), at the very northern tip of the Great Barrier Reef, is one of the most important nesting sites for turtles in the Torres Strait.

The central islands are low sandy cays formed by wave action over platform reefs. The vegetation is scrubby but large areas of coconuts have been planted on inhabited or frequently used islands; some have small patches of mangroves. Generally, these islands appear as typical coral cays surrounded by extensive fringing reefs containing a rich diversity of fish life. Iama is included in the central group but has geological characteristics of the western group.

The high western islands are characterised by steep hill slopes and poor soils with broad plains of clay silt which turn to 'bulldust' in the dry season. The sandy and acidic soils are covered with patches of scrub and forest. The islands are surrounded by mudflats, mangroves and freshwater swamps. The surrounding seas and fringing reefs support a variety of sea life, including dugong and turtle. Orman Reef complex (from Ngazi to Numar), northeast of Mabuiag, is one of the most important dugong hunting grounds in the region.

The northern islands of Saibai and Boigu were formed by the effluvia of rivers in Papua New Guinea and are the alluvial accumulation of organic, intertidal and mangrove muds on top of reef limestones and clay. These islands are fringed with mangroves and have broad interior swamps subject to seasonal drying and flooding. Formerly, parts of the higher internal lands were cultivated by the inhabitants using drained plots; water was obtained from wells. Fish and crabs are plentiful in the surrounding muddy seas, but dugong and turtles are not as numerous as in clearer southern waters. Dauan, a high rocky outcrop, geographically belongs to this group but is geologically part of the western group.

## Human prehistory

Prior to the formation of the present configuration of islands and coasts, the shallow seabed with its gentle incline to the west would have been marked by small rivers and swamps draining from the north and south. The meandering rivers and numerous swamps created would have provided satisfactory subsistence for human groups (Moore 1979:308). Flooding of the Sahul Shelf would have caused subsistence dwellers to move to the higher land or back up the river courses towards Papua New Guinea or the Australian mainland. Most certainly the evidence suggests that, prior to the breach, the Torres Strait region formed a plateau and watershed separating fluvial systems draining westward into the Arafura Sea basin and eastward to the Coral Sea basin (Barham and Harris 1983:543).

Hypothetical reconstructions of aspects of Torres Strait prehistory have been outlined by various researchers (see, for example, Barham and Harris 1983; Golson 1972b; Moore 1979; Singe 1993; Vanderwal 1973). Detailed archaeological investigations in the

northern and western islands were undertaken in the 1980s, but the archaeological evidence proved to be inconclusive (Harris et al 1985). Hypothesis regarding prehistoric events in the region that might have led to Torres Strait Islander occupation, as found at first European contact, have had to draw on the findings of other disciplines (Moore 1979:308). This situation has changed and recent archaeological research has dated human occupation to almost 3000 years ago (see Carter et al this volume). To date, however, no archaeological sites of proven Pleistocene age have been found within the Torres Strait but the distribution of sites in the Papua New Guinea highlands to the north, and around Laura on Cape York to the south, suggests that there should be evidence of human settlement on the Sahul Shelf now covered by the sea.

### **Linguistic diversity**

For a considerable time, it was argued that the Torres Strait was a linguistic barrier between Papua New Guinea and Australia. This assumption was based on late 19th century research (Ray and Haddon 1893; Ray 1907). However, the Torres Strait should be seen as a linguistic bridge, rather than a barrier, for linguistic influences crossed in both directions. Ray and Haddon (1893:494–96) stated that Meriam Mir (or Miriam language as it was then called) was spoken on the Murray Islands (Mer, Waier, and Dauar), on Darnley Island (Erub) and on Stephens Island (Ugar). Saibai language, the name then used for the language of the people of the western islands, was spoken on the numerous islands extending from Cape York to within a mile or two of the New Guinea mainland (Ray and Haddon 1893:464). Ray further stated that the ‘chief divisions of the tribe’ in the western islands were: Kauralaig (Muralag and Moa); Gumulaig (Badu and Mabuiag); Saibailaig (Saibai, Dauan and Boigu); and Kulkalaig (Nagi, Tudu and Masig). Ray and Haddon (1893:465) also noted that between these groups the language varied with both dialectal and pronunciation differences.

### **Meriam Mir**

Based on more recent research, it can be stated that Meriam Mir, structurally a typical Papuan language related to Bine, Gidra and Gizra languages from the Papuan coast to the north, belongs to the Papuan (non-Austronesian) language family (Wurm 1972:349). Gizra is the closest linguistic relative of Meriam Mir (Wurm 1972:348) although the simplified phonology of the Meriam language is the result of the strong influence of Southern Kiwai language, its closest geographical neighbour. This may also be due to the occupation of the southwest coast by the Kiwai-speaking people in the recent historical period, and the close association between these groups through trade, warfare and marriage.

Meriam Mir also shares a number of words with the languages and dialects of the western Islanders. These in turn are separate from the commonly shared words of Papuan and Australian origin. The spread southwards of the Papuan linguistic

influences may have been the result of Kiwai and Marind (Tugeri) raids which forced the speakers of Trans-Fly languages to seek refuge on the Torres Strait islands (Wurm 1972:364). Thus the Meriam Mir speakers may have left the mainland to settle in the eastern islands comparatively recently. In the course of time, two dialects of Meriam Mir developed; one in the Murray Islands (Mer, Dauar and Waier) and another in Erub and Ugar. These dialectal differences became less noticeable during the 20th century.

### **Kala Lagaw Ya**

Western islands language, now referred to as Kala Lagaw Ya, is the Indigenous language of the people of the western, northern and central islands. Kala Lagaw Ya belongs to the Pama-Nyungan group of Australian languages (Bani 1976:3). However, within different island groups dialect differences are apparent. The so-called Mabuiag dialect (Ray 1907:6–7), spoken by the Badbulgal and Gumulgal of Badu and Mabuiag and the Mabuygilgal of Mabuiag, as well as the Italgai and Muwalgal of Moa, is known as Kala Lagaw Ya. The dialect of the Boigu, Dauan and Saibai Islanders (the Boeygulgal, Daewanalgai and Saybaylgai), referred to as Saibai dialect by Ray and Haddon (1893), is now termed Kalaw Kawaw Ya. Dialect differences were noted in the language variations spoken by the central Islanders (the Kulkalgai) of Puruma, Iama, Warraber and Masig; Islanders refer to the central islands dialect as Kulkalgaw Ya. The dialect of the Kaurareg of Muralag and the other southwestern islands is referred to as Kawalgaw Ya.

The position of language on the northern islands of Boigu, Dauan and Saibai has not been as comprehensively studied as that on the western or eastern islands. Europeans as well as Islanders regarded the Mabuiag dialect of Kala Lagaw Ya as the ‘purest form’ of western islands language (Laade 1970:271). However, the Saibai people state that their dialect represents an older form. Saibai and Boigu were probably inhabited before the other western islands and, according to oral accounts, Mabuiag was settled by men who obtained women from Saibai and Boigu. Badu was then settled from Mabuiag, but at a later date. The central islands were occupied at the same time as Boigu and Saibai by people who used the islands on seasonal hunting and fishing expeditions. Laade (1970:272) suggested that the Mabuiag dialect was a combination of the older Saibai language and the language of the original Tudu settlers.

### **Torres Strait Kriol**

A variety of languages is now spoken across the Torres Strait (Muhlhausler 1979; Shnukal 1983a). Kala Lagaw Ya is still spoken on the main western islands. Meriam Mir is the language of the older inhabitants of some of the eastern islands, especially Mer. Torres Strait Kriol (Creole), or Broken, which developed from pidgin languages brought to the islands by Pacific Islanders from the 1850s onwards, has also become an important lingua franca in the islands.

Shnukal (1988), in her linguistic study of Broken, stated that Kriol is predominantly spoken by children at Bamaga on Cape York; Erub and Mer in the eastern islands; Masig, Puruma and Warraber in the central islands, and on Moa (St Pauls), Iama, Waiben and Kiriri in the western islands. The number of first language speakers of Kriol is probably about 2500–3000 but there are about 12,000–15,000 second language speakers throughout the islands and mainland Queensland (Shnukal 1988:3). Although negative concepts associated with the use of Kriol still exist, as it is sometimes seen as ‘Pidgin’ or substandard English, it is a common language form used in daily life and on some local and regional radio programs. It is also assuming a position as a cultural identifier among Islanders who are proud of their heritage and speak Kriol to indicate to others their unique cultural, social and linguistic associations. English is used as the main administrative language on Waiben and is the language of instruction in all schools in the Torres Strait islands.

### **Subsistence strategies**

The archaeologist and human geographer, David Harris, stated that subsistence systems varied along a gradient from north to south across the Torres Strait from the lowlands of Papua in the north to the western islands in the south:

In lowland Papua and the northern Torres Strait islands mixed systems existed which blended limited horticulture with foraging; whereas in the southern Torres Strait islands and the Cape York Peninsula subsistence was almost completely non-horticultural and a wide range of wild plant and animal resources were exploited. (Harris 1977:422)

A subsistence gradient also existed across the Torres Strait from east to west. This diversity of subsistence strategies across the Torres Strait should be understood in terms of the relationship between the location, size and population density of individual islands, and the relationship of one island community to another. The position, size and availability of natural resources on individual islands and between island groups were reflected in the patterns of community organisation and socioeconomic structures.

In the western islands of the Torres Strait, the generally perceived, non-horticultural, subsistence pattern of the western Islanders combined exploitation of bush plants with hunting and fishing. Prior to European contact, social groups were organised into mobile, generally semi-permanent, exogamous patrilines and bands. In the eastern islands, horticulture was practised, exploiting the rich soil of the fertile high islands. The eastern Islanders were organised into exogamous villages and hamlets divided into clan areas. In the northern low islands, a combination of horticulture and wild food procurement was practised by social groups organised into permanent established villages divided into clan wards (Beckett 1972a:320–5). The sandy cays and islets of the

central group were only semi-permanently inhabited by groups utilising large double-outrigger sailing canoes obtained from the Fly estuary in Papua New Guinea to the northeast.

Within this broad spectrum of subsistence strategies, regional and local specialisation occurred. Apart from its role in the subsistence economy, the exploitation of marine resources played an important part in social and ceremonial life. In order to exploit these marine resources the Islanders required a sophisticated marine technology including large outrigger canoes that could remain at sea for long periods and hold large sea animals such as dugongs and turtles.

Across the whole region, where Indigenous populations were supported in broad-scale subsistence systems with some regional resource specialisation, the impact of population pressure may have been the key to the development of more specialised subsistence patterns on individual islands, either through the exploitation of horticultural crops or the exploitation of marine resources. The adoption and development of horticulture, particularly in the eastern islands, may have been related to increases in population resulting from a more sedentary settlement pattern, the internal migration of people, or the emigration of people from mainland Papua New Guinea or Australia (Harris 1977:456).

In the western islands, the close network of inter-insular subsistence economies ensured the survival of the hunter-gatherer populations. Any migrant group attempting to impose itself upon the western island communities would have had to contend with long and well-established occupants existing only in semi-permanent habitations on some relatively large but scarcely populated islands. According to this hypothesis, the economic base of the western islands remained virtually non-horticultural while the language of the western Islanders remained structurally akin to the Paman languages of northern Australia. Within the complexity of regional subsistence patterns, a long-term balance of resources and populations could be maintained relative to island size, availability of natural resources and relative geographical position (Golson 1972b:384).

Prior to sustained European contact, Torres Strait Islander communities were small-scale acephalous societies, separated by water. Such societies were characterised by the creation of artificial interdependencies by means of ritual and exchange which drew groups into intermittent cooperation where otherwise only interrupted warfare and hostilities occurred. Throughout the region, there was a complex division of labour which induced people to refrain from producing certain goods and forced them to import them instead. Trade, warfare and marital exchange provided the occasions for interaction (Beckett 1972a:319–20). Torres Strait Islander communities were by no means isolated.

## Contact with Europeans

Although Luiz Baes de Torres passed in 1606 through the Strait that now bears his name, it was not until the turn of the 19th century, when the expansion and settlement of the Australian colonies began in earnest, that the inhabitants of the Torres Strait region began to attract significant attention from Europeans. Interest was generated more as a result of the difficulties of passage through the reef-strewn waters, and subsequent accounts of shipwreck and loss of life, rather than any real interest in the peoples and cultures of the Torres Strait. The later writings of sailors, traders, missionaries and government officials contain detailed scientific and ethnographic descriptions of Islander life and culture.

Edward Edwards in the *Pandora* sighted and named the Murray Islands (Mer, Dauar and Waier) in 1791 and made superficial note of the canoes of the eastern Islanders (Flinders 1814 I:xvi). William Bligh had previously passed through Torres Strait in 1789 after the mutiny on the *Bounty*. However, in 1792, in the *Providence*, he surveyed a wide course through the Strait, naming and charting Darnley Island (Erub) as well as other islands and reefs. He made detailed notes on his passage through the Strait and mentioned his contacts with the local peoples (Bligh 1976). Conflict occurred in 1793 at Erub when the crews of the *Hormuzzer* and the *Chesterfield*, under the command of Captains William Brampton and Matthew Alt, destroyed huts and canoes at Bikar, also known as Treacherous Bay (Flinders 1814 I:xxx–xxxvi). The destruction of sixteen canoes measuring between 15 and 20 metres in length must have been a severe economic blow to the people of Erub.

More detailed reports resulted from the early exploration voyages sent out by the newly established colonial government in New South Wales. In 1802, Matthew Flinders, in command of the *Investigator*, sailed through the Strait also noting descriptions of people and canoes (Flinders 1814 II:105–23). In 1836, the *Isabella* under the command of Captain Lewis was sent to search for the survivors of the shipwrecked *Charles Eaton* and the narrative of this voyage contains some useful ethnographic material (Brockett 1836). However, it was not until the intensive scientific and surveying voyages of the mid-19th century that any attempt by Europeans towards an understanding of the Torres Strait people was made.

The Torres Strait area, and the coasts of southern Papua New Guinea and northern Australia, were explored by parties from the *Fly* and *Bramble* during the 1842–46 voyages under Captain Blackwood. The narratives of these voyages, written by the naturalist J. Beete Jukes (1847), provided a wealth of evidence on the culture of the peoples of this region. Jukes was accompanied by the naturalist John MacGillivray and the artist Harden Melville, both of whom recorded details of their encounters with the local people (MacGillivray 1852; Melville 1848). MacGillivray made a second voyage to New Guinea, this time on the *Rattlesnake*, commanded by Captain Owen Stanley. Oswald Brierly was the artist on the 1848 *Rattlesnake* expedition; his journal and notes

on the rescue of Barbara Thompson, who had been shipwrecked at Cape York and subsequently taken to the islands of western Torres Strait, contain valuable ethnographic information which supplements early records (Moore 1979).

The journal of John Sweatman (Allen and Corris 1977), who served on the *Bramble* between 1845 and 1847, also adds to the available historical documentary evidence collected in the first half of the 19th century on the cultures of the peoples of northern Australia and the Torres Strait. The value of the material gathered during the survey voyages between 1837 and 1850 cannot be underestimated, for this was the beginning of a period of great social and economic change in the Torres Strait.

### **Establishment of the marine industries**

During the 1860s, the Torres Strait became a centre of commercial pearling and bêche-de-mer fishing. These activities further increased contact between the Indigenous peoples and Europeans. Within twenty years there were thriving fishing industries with fleets of schooners and luggers, shore stations and an introduced labour force of Pacific Islanders, Australian Aborigines and Europeans, as well as Torres Strait Islanders. Later, Filipinos, Malays and Japanese joined the marine industries labour force in Torres Strait. The employment of Pacific Islanders in the industries was outside the Queensland *Polynesian Labourers Act of 1868* and therefore subsequent political moves were made by the Queensland government to secure the region under its jurisdiction. (For comprehensive accounts of the marine industries and the influence of Pacific Islanders in Torres Strait, see Ganter 1994, Mullins 1995 and Shnukal 1992.)

The Queensland government promoted interest in the Torres Strait by establishing a settlement at Somerset, on Cape York, in 1864. The then Governor of Queensland, George Bowen, saw the settlement as a 'Second Singapore' and as a base for controlling the lawless activities of both the Islanders and white adventurers living beyond government control. The lofty goals were never achieved but the settlement at Somerset and, after 1877, at Thursday Island (Waiben) assisted in the extension of political and legal control over the Torres Strait.

As late as 1877, the islands of Mer, Erub, Ugar, Saibai, Dauan and Boigu were still outside Queensland control and remained under the jurisdiction of the Governor of Fiji and Western Pacific High Commission. Henry Marjoribanks Chester, Resident Magistrate on Waiben, and the Queensland Premier, John Douglas, actively continued to seek control over these eastern and northern islands in an attempt to regulate the bêche-de-mer and pearl-shelling industries and to control the general lawlessness in the Torres Strait.

Efforts towards annexation of all Torres Strait islands by Queensland were eventually achieved with the passing of the *Queensland Coast Islands Act 1879*. This Act formally recognised Queensland control over the northern and eastern islands. John Douglas

was appointed Special Commissioner of the British Protectorate of New Guinea in 1886 and he remained in this position until 1888 when he was succeeded by Sir William Macgregor, the first administrator of British New Guinea. Douglas, later appointed as Resident Magistrate at Waiben, continued his efforts towards revision of this boundary, for it had always been his belief that the islands of the Torres Strait belonged naturally to Papua New Guinea. His plans for revision were never realised.

## Missionisation

Samuel McFarlane and A.W. Murray from the London Missionary Society (LMS) brought Loyalty Islander missionaries to Erub in eastern Torres Strait in July 1871 (Murray and McFarlane 1871). Throughout its sphere of influence in the Torres Strait and Papua, the LMS employed various Pacific Islanders as pastors. As a result, other Melanesian cultures and Polynesian cultures were to have a profound impact on customary practices of the Torres Strait people in the second half of the 19th century. These influences can still be seen in music, dance and religious practices in the islands and in Islander communities on the Australian mainland.

Mission paternalism mirrored the economic and political paternalism of the white colonial administration (Beckett 1978:209). McFarlane wisely recognised the ability of the Islanders to make considered judgements about the value of the mission presence. Certainly, the missionaries acted as protection against the uncertain actions of European and Pacific Islander boat crews from pearling and *bêche-de-mer* stations (Beckett 1978:213). By the end of the 19th century most Islander communities were nominally Christian. The coming of the missions also assisted colonial administration. Illegal raiding on the Torres Strait islands and the southwest coast of Papua by men from pearl-shelling stations was reduced. Islander communities were re-formed around the nucleus of the church. New social structures were created within the puritanical shadow of the church. The church itself became the chief benefactor in gift-giving and ceremony (Beckett 1987:42).

The LMS was given a sphere of influence extending from East Cape near Milne Bay in Papua to the Torres Strait by the then Administrator of Papua, Sir William Macgregor (McFarlane 1888). Except for the establishment of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart Mission in 1884 at Waiben and, later, the establishing of other denominational churches at Waiben and an Anglican mission at Moa (St Pauls), the LMS maintained its influence in the Torres Strait region until the end of 1914 when it handed over its activities to the Church of England. The LMS had operated as a theocracy; all aspects of Islander life, including education, came under its rule. In 1915, the responsibility for school education passed to the Queensland government while the Church of England took responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the Islanders. This arrangement continued until the mid-1960s.

## The Cambridge Expedition of 1898

It was within a climate of religious, social and economic change that the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition came to Torres Strait. The expedition marked a watershed in the history of British anthropology (Urry 1984:98). The leader, Alfred Cort Haddon, was an evolutionist and his methodological approach to the study of ethnology reflected his earlier training in the biological sciences (Urry 1982:77). Haddon had undertaken zoological research in Torres Strait in 1888 and wrote an early, and important, paper on the ethnography of the western Islanders in 1890 (Haddon 1890). The 1898 expedition planned to undertake a holistic study of the Torres Strait Islanders and, for this purpose, Haddon recruited from amongst his colleagues a number of subject specialists. The members of the expedition included W.H.R. Rivers (psychology, physiology, social organisation), C.G. Seligman (ethnomedicine, social organisation, psychology), A. Wilkin (photography, technology, property), S.H. Ray (linguistics, sound recordings), C.S. Myers (psychology, physiology, ethnomusicology), and W. McDougall (psychology, physiology). Haddon's personal research interests included technology, religion, oral history and social organisation (Sillitoe 1976).

The long time intervals between the publication of the six volumes of the *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits* (Haddon 1901–1935) only served to emphasise the limitations of the methodological approach. The result was the most comprehensive, but structurally disorganised, compilation of Torres Strait Islander culture, history, music, language, economic relations and physical characteristics available for study. Volume 2 on physiology and psychology was published in 1901. This was followed in 1904 by volume 5 on sociology, magic and religion of the western Islanders. Volume 3 on linguistics was published in 1907, volume 6 on sociology, magic and religion of the eastern Islanders in 1908, and volume 4 on arts and crafts in 1912. These preceded the publication in 1935 of volume 1 on general ethnography. During the thirty-seven years between fieldwork and final publication, Haddon maintained regular correspondence with knowledgeable people in the Torres Strait region. As a result, volume 1 contains additional information otherwise not included in the earlier, more detailed, volumes. While the *Reports* remain invaluable sources of information for both researchers and Islanders themselves, the cumbersome, confusing compilation of information remains a hindrance to critical examination of the material. (For an Indigenous analysis of the *Reports*, see Nakata 1998.)

The expedition sought to record all aspects of Torres Strait Islander culture. It was not prompted by the functionalist principles that all aspects of society were interrelated and together maintain society's structure and cohesion. To Haddon and his colleagues, change was fundamentally destroying the 'traditional fabric' of Indigenous societies and, consequently, it was important for ethnographers to document these cultures before their inevitable decline (Sillitoe 1976:13, see also Urry 1982). It was, essentially,

salvage anthropology and, as such, focused on documenting Islander life in the pre-Christian period, rather than providing a detailed record of life and cultural practice in the 1890s.

### **The impact of foreign intrusion**

Cross-cultural contact, internally among Islanders, as well as externally between Papuans, Islanders and Aborigines, has always existed. While the full extent of earlier patterns of migration and inter-regional movements is not well known, elements of specific cross-cultural contacts are mentioned in oral histories, many of which have been documented (Laade 1971; Lawrence 1989a, 1994; Lawrie 1970). A key element in many of these histories is the importance of the sea. Understanding the position of Torres Strait Islanders as people of the sea is crucial to understanding Islander values, culture, law and society.

But with the permanent occupation of the southwest coast by Kiwai Papuans, the influx of Pacific Islanders and, later, Asian marine industry workers to the region — as well as the coming of Christian missionaries and colonial administrators — the social, economic, religious and political fabric of Torres Strait Islander life was changed. The dynamic customary economic system that closely linked island groups was eclipsed, but not destroyed, by cash-based commercial and economic initiatives. The Torres Strait, in its present form, is a comparatively minor economic subsystem of the regional cash economies of both northeast Australia and southwest Papua New Guinea.

Prior to foreign intrusion into the life and livelihood of the people, the Torres Strait Islanders maintained the fragile bonds between disparate, and often hostile, groups. These bonds were not rigid; they were subject to changing human relationships. Fragile ties were nurtured with much effort, and considerable expense went into their maintenance. European contact did not fully disrupt these relationships. European manufactured goods entered the customary exchange system as functional substitutes for Indigenous subsistence items.

Likewise, Island custom incorporated dances and ceremonies from Polynesian missionary and other Pacific Islander influences. Traditional songs and dances were maintained, often against mission and administrative wishes. The use of cool, clean pandanus mats in homes, the need for large wooden drums at dances, and dance costumes for the performance of old-style dances requiring decorations and headdresses of feather and shell, meant that some exchange ties continued to be maintained. Strong kinship ties within the Torres Strait islands could not easily be severed by colonial or discriminatory laws.

In the 20th century, Islander interaction and communication was disrupted by the Queensland government's imposition of the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the*

*Sale of Opium Act 1897* which, after 1904, was extended to include Torres Strait Islanders. From this time until the mid-1960s when subsequent repressive Acts were repealed, Islanders lived under the rigid control of a government-appointed Protector and lost many of their civil rights, including sovereignty over their own islands which were proclaimed Crown land. Many islands were declared 'Aboriginal Reserves' and Islanders were required to obtain permits to visit the mainland or to travel within the islands. The Protector took charge of the earnings of Torres Strait Islanders and his permission even needed to be sought for personal arrangements, such as marriage. The lifting of these restrictions coincided with the collapse of the marine industry in Torres Strait.

### **Torres Strait Islanders in the late 20th century**

When Islanders regained their freedom of movement, many settled in mainland Australia where they sought employment and a higher standard of education for their children. Some 27,000 Islanders now live outside the Torres Strait region. The total population of Torres Strait, including the two mainland communities of Seisia and Bamaga on Cape York, is about 8000, of whom 5600 are Islanders (TSRA [1994]:4).

In the mid-1980s, most of the island communities that were formerly island reserves came under the Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT) regulations of the Queensland government. The people of Mer refused to accept the DOGIT as they had lodged a claim with the High Court of Australia in 1982 when seeking restoration of the sovereignty of their island. It was to be ten years before a judgement was made in their favour (*Mabo and others v. State of Queensland [No.2], 1992 175 CLR1*). This landmark decision, recognising Islanders' legal rights to 'native' or 'traditional' title in land, led to the Commonwealth *Native Title Act 1993* which now provides a mechanism for consideration of Indigenous Australians' claims to native title. It also leads us towards a reshaping of national identity (Sharp 1996b:15). The anniversary of the *Mabo* case, as it became known, is celebrated annually by Torres Strait Islanders throughout Australia on 3 June. In addition to Mabo Day, important celebrations by Islanders include the Festival of the Coming of the Light (1 July), Church Days (patronal festivals) and other Christian festivals (such as Christmas Day and Easter), 'tombstone openings' (that mark the end of a period of mourning), and cultural and music festivals held in alternate years in Waiben.

The Torres Strait region today is administered by the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA), instituted in 1994 within the framework of the amended Commonwealth *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989*. The TSRA consists of elected representatives of Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people living in the Torres Strait region; it does not directly represent Islanders living on the mainland. The majority of TSRA members are island council chairpersons elected under the Queensland *Community Services (Torres Strait) Act 1984* (TSRA [1994]:5). Individual island councils

are co-ordinated by an Island Coordinating Council (ICC) with offices in Waiben, which remains the administrative centre of Torres Strait. Waiben itself, however, has its own Torres Shire Council. The current administrative arrangements in the Torres Strait are complex, involving a plethora of Commonwealth, state and local government agencies. One of the main goals of the TSRA is to secure Indigenous self-determination in the Torres Strait area (TSRA [1994]:13). A minority of Islanders seek autonomy and have made calls for independence. Nevertheless, the TSRA sees self-determination built on the existing administrative framework within the broader Australian political context as more viable.

There were many political changes in the Torres Strait region during the late 20th century. The declaration of independence of Papua New Guinea in 1975, and the consolidation of the Australian–PNG border and the ratification of the Torres Strait Treaty in 1985 (first noted bilaterally in 1978), have served politically and economically to separate Torres Strait Islanders from their close cousins to the north despite the liberal provisions on cross-border movements by ‘traditional inhabitants’ within the Torres Strait Protected Zone. Generally speaking, political barriers have effectively reduced the maintenance of close kinship ties with external groups in the islands and coastal region of southwest Papua.

In terms of resistance, protest and proactive challenges to discriminatory laws, Torres Strait Islanders have been politically assertive. The design and adoption of a nationally recognised Torres Strait Islander flag, the promotion of *Ailan Kastom* (Island Custom), a concern to protect the intellectual and cultural property rights of Islanders, and ensuring that Islanders and Aboriginal people living in the Torres Strait have the management and control of their environment and the use of its resources, provide inspiration and strength to forge a better life for future generations. Proactivity is also a feature of Islander attitudes towards involvement in social and religious affairs. Islanders themselves brought Pentecostal missionaries to Torres Strait, thus breaking the Anglican monopoly which had existed since 1915. The recent establishment of the Church of Torres Strait, formed by a group of former Anglican priests and laypersons, also demonstrates Torres Strait Islanders’ commitment to self-determination. Torres Strait Islanders continue to take a keen interest in, and involvement with, social issues, especially in the areas of health, community welfare and education.

In the national sphere, and despite being a minority group that in the past has often been marginalised by the wider Australian community, Torres Strait Islanders play a significant role. Their participation as artists, museum curators, railway workers, defence force personnel, educators, commercial fishers, public servants, church leaders, researchers and writers, and their involvement in women’s affairs, sports activities, business and economic issues, and social welfare as well as political and religious reform, enriches Australian community life as a whole.

Islander culture and identity remain strong. Despite the various outside influences that impacted upon Islanders, their languages, dances, songs, stories and spiritual beliefs remain integral to the maintenance of their cultural heritage. Contrary to Haddon's prediction that change would effectively destroy the underlying fabric of Islander identity, external pressures and internal conflicts have forged the will among Islanders to hold on to important values and customs. Family and kin relationships, and a deep sense of belonging to place, remain at the heart of Torres Strait Islander culture. Within the context of a wider vision for the Torres Strait and the future of its people, Getano Lui (Jnr) (TSRA [1994]:3) wrote:

There are many stakeholders who need to share [our] vision and to join with us to bring prosperity and a good quality of life to the Torres Strait.

We know the trade routes set by the wind, the tide and the currents. We are now opening a new trade route to the future.

We are embarking on that journey by taking control of our destiny.