

3. Music of the Torres Strait¹

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Torres Strait Islanders are of Melanesian descent and are closely related to adjacent Papua. Their culture in general can be classified as Melanesian. Because of geography and isolation, there exist some slight variations between communities.

In the Torres Strait itself, there are over one hundred small islands scattered across two hundred miles of sea. Only twenty are inhabited. Politically, Torres Strait is divided into three groups: Eastern, Central and Western. Linguistically Torres Strait is divided into two groups. The language spoken in the Eastern Islands is called Meriam Mir. The language of the Western Islands is known as Kala Lagaw Ya. Meriam Mir, in structure, is related to Melanesian languages and Kala Lagaw Ya is related to Aboriginal languages of northern Arnhem Land. Despite these differences, the general influence of Papua has been dominant over that of Aboriginal Australia (Beckett 1960).

Torres Strait remained free of European influence until the middle of last century when *bêche-de-mer* was first exploited on a small scale; then pearl shell was discovered in vast quantities in 1868. From then on Europeans established a permanent presence in the islands, setting off radical changes in the Indigenous way of life.

After arriving in the Torres Strait, missionaries set about erasing all memories of the past (Haddon 1901–35). The Islanders did not give up their traditional culture easily, but instead developed an amalgamation of Anglo-Australian and Pacific Island culture, while retaining traditional music and dances in their original form. Some of the culture did survive and was kept alive, as Jeremy Beckett discovered in 1960. Songs that were recorded by Haddon in 1898 were still alive in 1960. These songs were released in 1972 by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (Beckett 1972).³ On side one, *Murray Island*, are examples of some of the songs which survived the pressures and threats of the early missionaries. These songs are sacred, as they are associated with the Malo-Bomai Cult of Mer (Murray Island). Songs from Saibai are also recorded in their original form. I am of the opinion that these



Eddie Mabo

songs were composed for the Ahdi Buya cult of that island, as the dances are sacred.

Since the intervention of the missionaries, who set about erasing all memories of the past, Torres Strait Islanders developed an amalgamation of foreign cultures. The songs and dances of the South Sea Island people are called Taibobo. These dances were taught to every Islander. This move was actually an attempt to disallow the Islanders from practising their own songs and dances. The Islanders learnt that Taibobo was also categorised into two sections, the first being Tag-tag and second was Tugifo. These dances are not labelled according to the sound of music but according to the dance action. It is the duty of the choreographer to decide the composition of the new work. Torres Strait Islanders willingly accepted the foreign songs and dances, and in a short time Islanders were composing Taibobo in their own language. The original Taibobo of the South Sea Islanders [Rotumans] was not discordant; chanting of Taibobo is different to that of other chants. The men would divide themselves into two groups. During chanting, group one would consist of men with lighter voices; men with deep voices were in the second group. During chanting, each group would chant simultaneously. One of the groups would chant in a high pitched voice, the other in low pitch, and would continue rotating the role. This would continue for a while until someone called for a stop. The usual instruments used in support of these chants are rolled mats, drums, and bamboo clapsticks. The rolled mat is unusual but the sound is effective when beaten with clapsticks.

Contemporary Island dance songs (Segur Kab Wed) is another section of our music. The history of Segur Kab dates back to 1900–10 when the first of the Segur Kab songs were composed. It so happened that it provided a sound for what was to follow.

In July 1920, a group of pearling luggers sought shelter from heavy wind and seas and sailed into the anchorage at Mabuig Island. On board these luggers were some of the best dancers from islands such as Badu, Moa, Yam, and Murray. During the two weeks that followed, the men became involved in a dance workshop. This activity was successful. It developed a new dance which incorporated the traditional Kab-Kar and the recently introduced Taibobo into one single dance, now known as Segur Kab. *Play song* became part of that dance. The title for both the dance and song became Segur Kaba Wed meaning 'play dance and song'. This dance is now widely known in North Queensland and Papua.

Original dance movements of the play dance mimed movements of animals, people doing different activities, games and weather. On Thursday Island, a dance was performed depicting a football game and another about tennis. Movements of these dances were extremely accurate.

The usual instruments are used as accompaniments. These include the drum and clapsticks. The guitar has been used in recent times but not often. The coming of Christianity to the Torres Strait in 1871 also brought in another form of strange music. These songs were part of the Christian religious cult and were to be sung only on Sunday. European missionaries allowed their Samoan partners to teach the hymns to the Islanders while they went about translating the Bible into the local language. By the end of 1872, hymns and choruses were sung each day and Sunday was strictly observed (Peel 1947). A copy of the Samoan type hymn is recorded on tape in the James Cook University Library. Immediately after Christianity gained a firm foothold in the Islanders' lives, Samoan songs were translated into the local language and English choruses were temporarily banned, until the Anglican Church assumed control of the island churches in 1915.

These missionaries were strict in forbidding foreign songs in their churches unless the singers were speakers of that language. Dance music on the other hand was allowed to be sung and rehearsed in a foreign language. The old hymns in Torres Strait language, together with new hymns, are still sung in churches in the Torres Strait and in urban centres like Townsville and Cairns. The voice production when singing hymns differs from that of other songs but still church songs, as well as dance songs, are usually enjoyable to Torres Strait Islanders, who take great pride in all forms of their music.

Churches in the Torres Strait employed no musical instruments except traditional island drums, which are usually played by male members of the

choir. Since the migration to the mainland, Torres Strait Islanders have been embarking on the establishment of their own churches. Their reason for this movement is that they wish to conduct their own type of services in their own language and sing their own songs.

Torres Strait Island music developed in the 1950s when different types of songs were composed by men like the late Solkos Tabo, Weser Whaleboat, Sonny Kaddy, and George Passi. These songs were similar to African–American songs and eventually replaced European music in the dance halls at Thursday Island and other islands with large populations. These songs later became known as *Kole Kabem Wed* which means ‘song for European-style dances’.

Very quickly the new type of songs gained popularity, and soon on each island composers were competing against each other. The popularity of these new songs enabled them to gain acceptance in Papua and also in Queensland’s Aboriginal reserves. Today, these songs are claimed to be Aboriginal but they are in fact Torres Strait songs. Language provides definite clues to this.

Music features in everyday activities of the Islanders’ lives. Certain songs and dances are associated with major rituals and must be sung in a special way. There are songs for all sorts of games, such as ball games, string games, skipping, jogging and boating. Finally there are songs to accompany sacred and secular dances, which have developed in a highly competitive manner. Young men, particularly, sought to excel using spells to make the feet of their rivals heavy and to draw all eyes upon themselves. The best dancer gladdened the hearts of his kinfolk and turned the heads of females (Beckett 1960).

Torres Strait, like the rest of Oceania, was traditionally poor in musical instruments. On all occasions, music was provided by human voices accompanied by drums which were locally made or imported from Papua. Additional percussion was made by a rattle (*gor*) made from a matchbox full of beans. Jews harps, pan pipes, and notched flutes were the principal wind instruments. They were played by small groups or individuals but never on special occasions. Pan pipes are used to play tunes in the bush where the sound should be heard with the echoes of the bush setting. Flutes are approximately 18 inches [43.2 cm] in length and 3/4 inch [2 cm] in diameter. A node is left at the bottom end of the shaft which is pierced by several holes about an inch apart. The top end is open and there is a small ‘v’ shaped notch. The performer blows across the notch, covering and uncovering the holes in the shaft with his fingers (Beckett 1972). The mastery of the use of such instruments was a source of pride to the musicians, and the skills were only taught to their direct descendants. Today these instruments are rarely used because so-called ‘civilisation’, the unwelcome leper from the west, has laid its contaminated hands on these instruments and replaced them with guitars, mouth organs, and cassette radios.

Notes

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2. Noel Loos gives special thanks to Bonita Mabo and the Mabo family for their assistance in the preparation of this chapter.
3. Now known as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

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