

Torres Strait Islanders

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From: Brandle, Maximilian (ed.) Multicultural Queensland 2001: 100 years, 100 communities, A century of contributions, Brisbane, The State of Queensland (Department of Premier and Cabinet), 2001.

Introduction

Torres Strait Islanders are the second group of Indigenous Australians and a minority within a minority. Torres Strait, which lies between Cape York and Papua New Guinea, is legally part of Queensland. Its islands were annexed comparatively late: those within 60 nautical miles (97 kilometres) of the coast in 1872, the remainder in 1879. At annexation, the Islanders became British subjects and their islands became Crown lands. At Federation they became Australian citizens although until comparatively recently they were denied rights and benefits which their fellow Australians took for granted.

Torres Strait Islanders are not mainland Aboriginal people who inhabit the islands of Torres Strait. They are a separate people in origin, history and way of life. From the waters of the Strait, where the Coral and Arafura Seas meet in one of the most fragile and intricate waterways in the world, rise hundreds of islands, islets, cays, reefs and sandbanks. All these are traditionally named, owned and used. No two islands are identical, each being shaped by its unique landscape, stories and history. In the past many more islands were inhabited. Islanders live today in 18 permanent communities on 17 islands although they continue to visit their traditionally owned islands for fishing, gardening, food collecting, camping and picnicking.

The first European settlement was established at Somerset, Cape York, in 1863. It was removed to Port Kennedy on Waiben (Thursday Island) in 1877 and, since then, Thursday Island has been the administrative and commercial 'capital' of Torres Strait.

Permanently inhabited Torres Strait Islands

<i>TRADITIONAL NAME</i>	<i>ENGLISH NAME</i>
Badu	Mulgrave Island
Boigu	Talbot
Dauan	Mt Cornwallis Island
Erub	Darnley
Keriri	Hammond Island
Mabuiag	Jervis
Masig	Yorke Island
Mer	Murray
Moa*	Banks Island
Muralag	Prince of Wales Island

Ngarupai	Horn Island
Puruma	Coconut
Saibai	Saibai Island
Ugar	Stephens
Waiben	Thursday Island
Waraber	Sue Island
Yam	Turtle-Backed Island

*There are two communities on Moa — Kubin and St Paul's Community.

The majority of Torres Strait Islanders have always lived in Queensland although they now seek educational and career opportunities further afield. In 1966 over 97 per cent of Torres Strait Islanders were living in Queensland; in 1971 the percentage had fallen to about 78 per cent and in 1996, the most recent Commonwealth census, to 57 per cent. The 1996 census enumerated a total Torres Strait Islander population of 28 744 but this figure does not include those who claim dual Islander/Aboriginal identity. Torres Strait Islanders thus represent less than 10 per cent of the Indigenous Australian population, and they have been relatively neglected by government authorities, opinion makers, the media and academia. Islanders were the first Indigenous Australians, however, to be granted forms of local self-government and for over a century have generally managed their own communities. Their efforts helped overturn Australian laws regarding Indigenous land tenure, and they are presently on course to achieve regional autonomy.

Traditional Culture and Society

Oral tradition and reports and journals written by European seamen from the late eighteenth century have preserved knowledge about traditional, pre-contact Torres Strait Islander culture and society. The Islanders were fishermen, hunters and agriculturalists and, because they gardened and were fearless defenders of their territories, they were generally considered by nineteenth-century Europeans to be superior to mainland Aboriginal people. The respect that they were accorded explains the preferential administrative treatment accorded them by the Queensland colonial authorities.

Pre-contact Torres Strait Islanders were not a single homogeneous or unified group and until this century did not think of themselves as one people. Although they formed part of a broad culture area and were linked by warfare, trade and ceremonial exchange with the coastal peoples of New Guinea and Cape York, each group considered itself separate from its neighbours and maintained its cultural and linguistic differences.

Founding legends and ethnological research indicate that the eastern islands were settled by people from from the Fly River region of New Guinea, the western and central islands by southern coastal and river peoples. There are stories, too, that small groups of lighter-skinned Pacific Islanders were among the early settlers.

The islands of the Strait are usually classified as belonging to four major geomorphological divisions: eastern (the gardening islands, volcanic and with good soil); central (the fishing islands, mostly cays with poor sandy soil and little water); top western (the hunting islands, mud flats with abundant wildlife); lower western (rocky islands which are the remains of the former land bridge). Geomorphology and ethnology do not necessarily coincide. In terms of language and culture, the Islanders belonged to five distinct groups, based on their different places of origin, settlement in different ecological areas, different language and customs, and their long-standing associations with different peoples. Each nation had its own name: Saibailgal (Top Western Islanders), Maluilgal (Mid-Western Islanders), Kaurareg (Lower Western Islanders), Kulkalgal (Central Islanders) and Meriam Le (Eastern Islanders). The ties between the Islanders and the peoples of coastal Papua New Guinea have weakened since political separation but links are maintained by an officially recognised Protected Zone, which permits traditional travel and exchange.

Traditional life could be precarious, especially in the central sandy cays. There was little security from marauding enemies; rains or crops might fail; and some diseases, like yaws and possibly dengue fever, may have been endemic. The Torres Strait population was not numerous even on the more fertile gardening islands; in 1870 it was estimated at about 3800. It was kept at replacement level through the custom of couples not rearing more than two or three children.

Traditional Torres Strait was regulated by senior men and organised through totemic clan membership. It was based on kinship and reciprocal obligation.

Generations of cultural convergence meant that the Islanders shared many socio-cultural and technological traits with their neighbours from coastal New Guinea and northern Cape York. As in most Melanesian societies, there appears to have been no principle of hereditary chieftainship, although clan leadership was usually inherited through the father's line. Leaders arose to meet particular challenges. Women and men exercised power in separate, though complementary, domains, roughly corresponding to the private and public, respectively.

Population

The most recent (1996) census figure of 28 744 self-identified Torres Strait Islanders compares with an estimated Torres Strait population of 3500–3800 immediately prior to sustained European contact although those figures must be treated cautiously. European observers, who made only short visits to each island, could not know exactly whom they were counting and may have over-counted or under-counted on different islands. What is not contested, however, is that by the mid-1870's disease and depredation reduced numbers to perhaps as low as 1700. The population slowly returned to pre-contact figures just before the outbreak of World War II. It then began to grow fairly rapidly, with each subsequent post-war census showing further increase.

Population data are important for making public policy but official census-taking among Torres Strait Islanders has been flawed for several reasons. Chief among them is the effect of the legislative frameworks that determine the classification of peoples to be counted. Queensland's Protection Acts made no distinction between Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people: both were amalgamated for administrative convenience and control and 'Aboriginals' were not counted in Commonwealth censuses until the repeal of Section 127 of the Australian Constitution in 1967.

The Queensland *Torres Strait Islanders Act 1939* legally recognised Torres Strait Islanders as a separate people for the first time. In response to this legislation, the first post-war Commonwealth census of 1947 classified them, no matter what their ancestry, as 'Polynesian' and included them in the general Australian population together with the Pacific-born. In the 1954 and 1961 censuses the Islanders were classified as 'Pacific Islanders'. In the 1966 census, they were reclassified as 'Aboriginal' and excluded from official figures. The 1971 census included a specific 'Torres Strait Islander' category, allowing Islanders for the first time to claim Torres Strait Islander ethnicity.

Approximate Torres Strait Islander populations from 1913–1996

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Notes</i>
1913	2 368	First official census after establishment of first island reserves in 1912
1916	2 422	Queensland census of reserve inhabitants
1921	2 611	Queensland census of reserve inhabitants
1925	3 040	Queensland census of reserve inhabitants
1931	3 164	Queensland census of reserve inhabitants
1933	3 846	Commonwealth census of reserve inhabitants
1941	3 795	Queensland census of reserve inhabitants
1947	3 500	Estimate based on 1933 and 1954 Commonwealth censuses
1954	4 362	Commonwealth census; Islanders enumerated separately
1961	5 217	Commonwealth census; Islanders enumerated separately
1966	5 403	Commonwealth census
1971	9 663	Commonwealth census; 7 508 in Queensland
1976	14 407	Commonwealth census; 9 396 in Queensland
1981	23 875	Commonwealth census; 10 732 in Queensland
1986	20 440	Commonwealth census; 13 170 in Queensland
1991	26 721	Commonwealth census; 14 559 in Queensland
1996	28 744	Commonwealth census TSI only; 16 383 in Queensland

Early Contact History

In 1863 the first European settlement was established on Albany Island, just off Cape York, and moved to Somerset on the opposite mainland the following year. Bêche-de-mer fishermen (trepangers) began to enter the strait in a westward expansion of the Pacific trade and set up shore stations on some of the islands.

Within a decade, traditional Torres Strait Islander society was changed forever by three events. Commercial quantities of pearlshell were discovered in 1870; Christian missionaries and teachers arrived in 1871; and all the islands were legally annexed to the Colony of Queensland by 1879.

The pearl rush brought thousands of foreign seamen from all parts of the world, chiefly the Pacific islands, the Philippines and Europe. They were soon replaced by indentured labour from Indonesia, Singapore and Japan. The early divers and crewmen raided the neighbouring islands for food and women and cut down most of the trees for their curing fires and steam-powered vessels. These abuses gave Queensland the excuse it was looking for to annex the islands.

The first Christian missionary teachers were placed on Erub (Darnley Island) in 1871. Two years later they opened the first Torres Strait school there. The teachers were Pacific Islanders and belonged to the Calvinist evangelical London Missionary Society (LMS), which viewed Torres Strait as a 'stepping-stone' to evangelising New Guinea, their ultimate goal. The LMS was officially replaced by the Church of England, which opened up its Torres Strait Mission in 1915. Church of England services had been conducted on Thursday Island from the late 1870s, and Catholic and Presbyterian churches were built there in the mid-1880s but the majority of Islanders remained faithful adherents of the Church of England until the post-war rise of other Christian faiths.

Christianity impacted profoundly upon traditional religious and political structures, although Islanders today see it as a fulfilment of the traditional belief system rather than a complete break with the past, as they were previously encouraged to do. The date of the first Christian religious service in Torres Strait was 1 July 1871, and that date is celebrated each year in island and mainland Islander communities as the Torres Strait national day. It is called 'The Coming of the Light' and it symbolises the acceptance of 'civilisation', a new religion and new way of life.

Christianity brought both a new religion, which over time was to incorporate elements of traditional ritual and belief, and an end to the cycle of arbitrary and reciprocal killing for that most valuable of exchange items, human heads. Unique in Australian history, the daily work of conversion and cultural modelling was carried out by Pacific Islander pastors and teachers, not by Europeans. Legal annexation to Queensland in 1872 and 1879 brought

colonialism, alienation of land and increasing control by outsiders, but it also brought protection from the abuses of the trepangers and pearlers.

Emblematic of the new ways of life at first imposed and later embraced by the Islanders was a new language, Torres Strait Creole. Deriving from Pacific Pidgin English, the *lingua franca* (shared language) of the fisheries, it was creolised in the 1890s by the children of Erub, from where it spread to the Church of England Mission on Moa (Banks Island), established for Pacific Islanders and their Torres Strait families. From the mission it spread throughout the strait. Its success can be explained by its usefulness as a shared language, as historical events and shared experiences of work and government control brought Islanders together. Although the creole, currently called Ailan Tok, is superficially similar to English, it is actually closer linguistically to the two traditional Torres Strait languages. English was introduced by European teachers and priests, always a small minority in the islands. It is only since the 1990s that English has been widely spoken in Torres Strait, mainly by younger people educated on the mainland. In addition to Standard Australian English, there exists a regional variety of Australian English, Torres Strait English. This is spoken almost exclusively by Islanders in the strait and on the mainland. Unlike the creole, it is a dialect of English, although it contains some non-English grammatical constructions, words and expressions adapted from the three Torres Strait languages.

The 'Protection' Era to World War II

By the turn of the twentieth century, the inhabitants of smaller islands were beginning to abandon their homes to resettle on larger islands. As the present communities began to take their contemporary shape, the inhabitants of small islands were encouraged, sometimes forced, by government and church authorities to resettle in communities with modern infrastructure, schools, churches and stores. Water supply has been a constant problem, especially for the central cays, where over twenty semi-permanent central island settlements were reduced to the current four.

The Islanders were fortunate in having as their longest-serving Resident Magistrate the Hon. John Douglas, briefly Premier of Queensland, who began his tenure in Torres Strait in 1885. Being so remote from Brisbane, Douglas was able to exert his authority with a minimum of outside interference, as little disruption to the people as possible and with an eye to their best interests, as he saw them. A courteous and fair man, he was, for that time, extraordinarily tolerant of all ethnic groups.

Douglas admired the Islanders and firmly opposed their becoming subject to the Queensland *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Acts*, the first of which was passed in 1897. Their purpose was to bring the Aboriginal people of Queensland under government protection and control. A local Protector was appointed to Thursday Island in 1899, but he was engaged mainly in overseeing the employment of mainland Aboriginal people in the fisheries. In 1899 John Douglas instituted a system of island councils to replace the previous system of 'mamooses' (island leaders). Torres Strait

Islanders were responsible for conducting community affairs through their own councils, police and courts and empowered to deal with minor crimes through imprisonment or fines. A court house and a gaol were built in every community, along with a church, school and store. Douglas's death in 1904 provided the opportunity the State Government had been seeking, and the Islanders were placed 'under the dog Act', as they put it, and made increasingly subject to the Protector's oversight.

The first island 'reserves' were gazetted in 1912, the last in 1926. In time, superintendent-teachers were appointed to all the permanently settled islands to oversee the Islanders' daily activities. A curfew and pass system was instituted, whereby Islanders, who previously had ranged unhindered over their territories, now had to ask permission of the local superintendent to travel. The Islanders' wages were placed under the Protector's control and they had to ask permission to withdraw their own money. While the councils continued through the 'protection' era, control in practice was exercised largely by the superintendent-teachers, who were the Protector's agents.

Although the first European teacher was appointed to Mer (Murray) in 1892, it was not until the turn of the twentieth century that government primary schools were opened on the most populous islands and not until the 1920s that every community had its own school. These schools were administered by the Home Secretary's Department not the Department of Public Instruction. Islanders were provided with a rudimentary education but not expected or encouraged to further it. Boys were expected to go from primary school to the boats, women to domestic work.

In 1904 the former LMS missionary, Reverend Frederick Walker, had registered a private trading company, Pacific Industries Ltd (PIL), with headquarters on Badu (Mulgrave Island). It was set up to encourage Islanders to participate as boat owners, skippers and crews in the fisheries, which provided the region's economic base. PIL lent Islanders the purchase price to enable each island to buy a company (communally-owned) boat, charging 5 per cent interest and arranging the sale of marine produce and cultural artefacts in exchange. In 1930 the company was taken over by the Queensland Government and renamed Aboriginal Industries. In 1934 it became the Aboriginal Industries Board and established stores in the island communities. Now a semi-government corporation called the Islander Board of Industry and Service (IBIS), it has continued to manage most island stores to the present day.

The Islanders' resentment against the Protector and his agents, the local teacher-superintendents, came to a head in 1936 with the declaration of a strike by the company boat crews. Certain families and individuals had for years been favoured by the government's divide-and-rule policies and they opposed the strike, seeing no benefit for themselves. However, the strikers held firm and eventually the government capitulated.

All the island councillors gathered together formally for the first time in an historic meeting at Masig (Yorke Island) on 23 August 1937. They made a

series of demands on the Queensland Government, including improved services, an end to unpopular regulations and the transfer of power from superintendent-teachers to local councils. Many of the Islanders' demands were met and two years later, on 12 October 1939, the Queensland Government repealed its previous Protection legislation and passed the *Torres Strait Islanders Act*, for the first time legally recognising Islanders as a separate people. They would also be administered by a newly-created Department of Native Affairs, a sub-department of the Queensland Department of Health and Home Affairs.

Thursday Island and other northern pearling centres like Darwin and Broome can lay claim to being Australia's first multicultural communities. Although Thursday Island was originally intended to be purely a government station, blocks of land were soon auctioned for general settlement. The island, as the centre of the fisheries, attracted a multi-ethnic workforce. The divers were the elite, at first Europeans, but replaced in turn by Maori, Rotumans, Filipinos and Japanese; boat crews were mainland Aboriginal people, Solomon and Vanuatu Islanders and Malays; the merchants were Chinese and Sri Lankans. Europeans were always a minority of Thursday Island inhabitants: they were government or pearling company employees and their families, hotel keepers, or soldiers manning the local garrison built to repel Russian attack. In May 1893, a census of the island showed that, of a total population of 1441, 362 were European, the others being Filipinos, Aborigines, Japanese, Malays, Pacific Islanders, Chinese, Sri Lankans, Indonesians and 'other mixed races'. The descendants of immigrant seamen and local Torres Strait and Aboriginal women, who had made their homes on Thursday Island and were exempt from the Protection Acts, were usually referred to as 'Thursday Islanders'. Until recently, that term was used generically in Queensland to mean 'Torres Strait Islanders'. Ngarupai, Muralag and Keriri were also centres of non-European population and in 1929 Keriri (Hammond Island) became a Catholic mission for people of mainly Filipino heritage.

Pre-war Thursday Island, like most Queensland towns with large non-white populations, was racially segregated. The local schools, swimming baths, dance hall and open air movie theatre (with its two entrances and types of seating, one for whites and one for blacks) were all segregated and hotels were barred to 'Aboriginals'. Marriage, sexual relations and even friendships between blacks and whites were officially disapproved of. The Catholic school and orphanage on Thursday Island was not segregated but state schooling was, according to the racial classification of the period. The 'white' state school was attended by children of European, Japanese, or Chinese descent, the 'coloured' state school by children of other heritages. Vestiges of this pervasive segregation, and the culture and mentality it engendered, continued even into the early 1980s.

World War II

The Islanders had succeeded in gaining legal recognition as a separate people, but they had little time to celebrate their new freedoms. War was declared between Australia and Japan in December 1941 and Thursday

Island Japanese residents and their families, including the Australian-born, were rounded up and transported to mainland internment camps. Ngarupai (Horn Island) was bombed by the Japanese in 1942 and most of the European and Asian-descended population evacuated to the mainland. Over 800 Torres Strait Islanders, almost every able-bodied man from the outer islands, served in the defence forces in some capacity on Thursday and Horn Islands, their parents, wives and children being largely abandoned by the Australian authorities to fend for themselves on their home islands. The defence of Torres Strait and Dutch New Guinea, in which Islanders of the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion (TSLIB) played a significant part, was vitally important in ensuring that northern Australia was not invaded.

Despite the contribution of the Islanders, the Army bowed to pressure from the Queensland government, on advice from the Protector of Aboriginals, and paid most Torres Strait soldiers only one-third the European rate and no family allowance although they were entitled to full repatriation benefits. Nor were Islanders at first permitted to advance beyond the rank of Corporal. Encouraged by their successful strike in 1936 and by the encouragement of their European mates, they staged sit-down strikes in 1943 and 1944 to demand full pay and an end to discriminatory treatment. The Army finally acceded to their demands and raised their pay to two-thirds the rate for other soldiers but lowered repatriation benefits to two-thirds. The matter of redressing the inequalities in pay and benefits was taken up by Islander ex-soldiers after the war but it was not until 1983 that the Federal Government agreed to right the injustice of the underpayments. The first repayment was made in March 1984 and the final repayment three years later.

From Postwar to Present Day

World War II marked a turning point in Indigenous-European relations across northern Australia. For the first time Islanders and Aboriginal people worked alongside European Australians on relatively equal terms and were free from the demeaning restrictions of the Protection Acts. The early post-war years appeared to promise Indigenous people fulfilment of their aspirations for a better life. Torres Strait Islanders set up several cooperative societies to build better housing in island and Cape York communities, improve the local water supply and create employment opportunities in the fishing and minerals industries. Their cynicism about Queensland government policy returned when it became clear that the Department of Native Affairs had no intention of changing the fundamentals of island administration.

Eventually, however, a combination of external and internal events was to set the Islanders on a new historical course. A few related families had moved down to Bloomfield River and Mossman during and after World War I and later settled in Malay Town, Cairns. These were predominantly the Pitt, Sailor and Walters families, who appear in the paintings and sketches of Ray Croke, Roy Delgarno, Ian Fairweather and Donald Friend and feature in the writings of Jean Devanny and Kylie Tennant.

In 1947 the first small group of Torres Strait Islanders were officially permitted to travel to the mainland to work although they received under-award wages. Other Islanders followed, working as fishermen, cane cutters, railway fitters and agricultural labourers throughout country Queensland.

During this period of post-war decolonisation, the protection policies came under sustained attack in Australia and overseas. Federal and Queensland Indigenous policy became assimilationist at a time when the Islander population was rapidly increasing. There was now little point in the State government's confining the Islanders to reserves, even to provide cheap labour, since the cost of services would outweigh the financial benefits to the State.

The 1960s collapse of the Torres Strait marine industries brought further changes. In 1965 the discredited Queensland Department of Native Affairs was replaced by the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs (DAIA) under *The Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Act*. Almost all the restrictive clauses under the previous Act were removed including the right to travel to the mainland.

Local economic collapse compelled many men to emigrate to the mainland to support their families. In March 1970 a crude oil spill from the grounding of the supertanker *Oceanic Grandeur* affected nearby pearl-culture farms, forcing others out. Some went on contract to Kuri Bay, Western Australia, to work in the pearl culture farms, but most sought jobs across northern Australia during the minerals boom. Gangs of Torres Strait Islanders contributed to building the Queensland inland railways to Mount Isa and Weipa (as well as the Pilbara and Port Hedland regions of Western Australia). In time, recognising greater possibilities for employment and education for their children, they began to send for their families. Most families eventually settled in mining and coastal towns, generally preferring life by the water where they could boat and fish in surroundings which recalled their island homes. Like other Queenslanders, many young people are leaving small towns and moving to Brisbane, Cairns, Mackay, Rockhampton and Townsville, which have large Torres Strait Islander populations. The majority of diaspora Islanders still live in Queensland but increasingly they are moving elsewhere. Over the past years there has been a small reversal of emigration as facilities and services have improved in island communities, and older people retire to their traditional land and prepare their claims to Native title.

The Islanders were not permitted to vote in either State or Federal elections until 1962 (Federal) and 1964 (State). However, they became active in the various organisations which arose after World War II to support Indigenous rights and self-determination, such as the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC), the National Aboriginal Conference (NAC), the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) and the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), whose Islander members included Jacob Abednego, Duclie Reading Flower, Koiki Mabo, Ettie Pau, Fred Walters and Elia Ware.

The Papua New Guinea border dispute (1973–78) brought to prominence charismatic political leaders who opposed Federal government plans for altering the Papua New Guinea-Australia border. Among the most vocal were Getano Lui, Snr and George Mye. They argued, with support from the Bjelke-Petersen government, against the division of the Torres Strait Islanders into two groups, claiming with justification that they were now 'one people'. During the border dispute, Carlemo Wacando of Erub, grandson of bravery medal recipient Muara (Lifu) Wacando, together with James Akee, formed the Torres United Party in 1976 out of dissatisfaction with Queensland Government control of Torres Strait. It called publicly for the first time for a separate and independent 'Free Nation of Torres Strait', where the Islanders would control the Strait's resources and future and facilitate the return of the Islander diaspora. Wacando mounted a legal challenge to the State Government's annexation of his home island but this was rejected by the High Court of Australia in 1981, three years after the signing of the Treaty with Papua New Guinea. The party then disbanded. Its legal claim, although unsuccessful, was a precursor to the successful Mabo case, which began the following year (though it was not decided until 1992). It was also instrumental in helping Islanders articulate their views on the issue of their sovereignty.

Outstanding Individuals

The contributions made to Queensland by hundreds of Islander families and individuals is immeasurable. The outstanding women and men who helped build and manage their own as well as other Torres Strait, Cape York and northern Queensland communities are well-remembered but there is no room to list them all here.

In one of the most significant events of Torres Strait history, Dabad convinced his fellow Erub Islanders to accept the first Loyalty Islander missionary teachers in July 1871. Within a few days Nadai, leader of Dauan (Cornwallis Island), agreed to allow missionaries to settle there. Ari Buzari from Mer negotiated the removal of outsiders and their families from his island in 1885 to Erub, which resulted in the repopulation of that island. The warrior Kebisu's son, Maino, became a respected leader of his people and initiated their permanent settlement on Yam in 1892. Namai from Moa negotiated with the Namok and Ware families the use of his land at Wag: in 1905 they began the settlement which later became the Church of England Mission for Pacific Islanders, the forerunner of St Paul's Community. Strong island chairmen like Mimi Marou of Mer and Wees Nawia of Moa provided leadership and support for the maritime strike in 1936. Soon after World War II, Bamaga from Saibai arranged with the Queensland Government and traditional Cape York Aboriginal landowners for his people to resettle at Seisia and then Bamaga, the community named for him. These leaders and the events they directed and oversaw, which are, after all, Queensland historical events, are too little known even within Torres Strait itself.

Almost all Islanders belonged to the Church of England until after World War II. Since then, that church has been losing adherents to newer Christian churches, in particular to Pentecostal denominations and the Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). The Torres Strait Islander clergy and lay ministry of all faiths continue to fulfil the dual religious-political leadership, which in traditional society was held by senior men who mediated between the material and spiritual worlds.

Although the Torres Strait Islander soldiers who served on Thursday and Horn Islands in World War II were not permitted to advance far through the ranks, some, like Charles Mene from Mabuiag, were already enlisted as militiamen and serving in integrated units when war broke out. Mene went on to fight with the Second AIF in the Middle East, Borneo, Papua New Guinea, Korea and Malaysia. He served with the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces in Japan, was awarded the Military Medal and altogether served for 26 years in the army. Mene's cousin, Ted Loban from Thursday Island, served at Tobruk, Greece and Albania, where he lost an arm in the fighting. Joseph Guivarra from Erub also served at Tobruk. Other Islanders joined the United States Army's Small Ships Section: among them were Kemuel Abednego from St Paul's, Moa, who attained the rank of Lieutenant and Edgar Williams from Erub, who later served as an interpreter with the United States Marines. He was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant. Many other Islanders served the war effort as civilians.

One was Ali Drummond, who in 1999 received a Civilian Medal for his services to the Defence Force in Torres Strait and later Townsville. Among Torres Strait Islanders honoured by the Royal Humane Society for acts of bravery are Tipoti Nona, Francis Dorante, Peter Mallie, Barki Sailor and Muara (Lifu) Wacando.

Islander political leaders whose influence has spread beyond their own islands tend to be greatly skilled at oratory. A number of them, including Getano Lui, Snr, George Mye and Sam Passi, received Imperial honours. Since 1975 Orders of Australia and various other civic awards have been conferred for a wide range of community service.

Torres Strait Islanders have been politically active at the local, State and Federal level. Pedro Stephen from an Ugar (Stephens Island) family, who was appointed the first Indigenous Quarantine Officer in 1982, was subsequently elected the first Torres Strait Islander mayor of Torres Shire Council. Getano Lui was an endorsed candidate for the National Party in Queensland and Michael Benjamin (Ben) Nona was the first Islander nominated as a candidate for the Democratic Party in State Parliament. At the National level, Reverend Allan Mosby and Pedro Stephen have served on the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation; Belza Lowah and John Abednego are current members. Many Islander leaders have worked for years behind the scenes to enlist both State and Federal support. One such man was Ettie Pau, long-serving President of the Thursday Island Ex-Servicemen's Association, who fought for payment justice for the Islanders' war service.

Torres Strait Islander women traditionally chose to play private, though often influential, roles in determining local affairs. Aidabu, for example, is credited with bringing together the Kaurareg people and the people of Moa, through

her marriage with Namai; Ugarie, wife of Nona, was an adviser to her husband and other senior men at Badu. Women also played a major role in incorporating immigrants into communities. Self-effacing in public, women have in the past preferred the roles of wife and mother and to influence events behind the scenes. For this reason, their work at the local level has not drawn the attention it deserves.

Muara (Lifu) Wacando from Erub was the first Indigenous Australian woman to receive a Royal Humane Society medal for rescuing two men during the Mahina cyclone in March 1899. This was Australia's worst maritime disaster with over 300 deaths. Muara became the heroine of the disaster, swimming for almost seven hours through turbulent seas while supporting the men in the water. A number of Thursday Island women joined the Catholic religious order, Handmaids of the Lord, founded in Papua in 1918. Among them were Theodora Canuto AD, Laura Dorante AD, Mary Garnier AD, Marietta Garnier AD, Celestine Blanco AD, Claire Mairu AD, Julianna McBire AD, Edie Nicholls AD and Mary Patrice Sabatino AD. Young women were employed as school monitors from 1900 and then as teachers in their own right. Early school teachers include Patipat Repu and Mauare Eseli from Mabuiag and Bakoi Baud from Mer. Some, like Kitty Savage Ware from Erub, also taught in mainland Aboriginal communities. Women ran the Church of England Mothers' Union, which for many decades was the most important women's organisation in Torres Strait. The Mothers' Union gave those women the organisational skills and experience which they were to pass on to their daughters, many of whom are prominent in contemporary women's organisations. Abigail Bann, the great granddaughter of the feared warrior Kebisu and a very respected woman in Torres Strait, began a nursing course at Masig in 1942 and eventually managed the out-patients hostel on Thursday Island. In 1983 when a new hostel was opened, it was named in her honour. Ten years later the Jumula Dubbins Hostel was named for Jumula Ahmat Dubbins in recognition of her service to the community.

Nevertheless, Islander women encountered prejudice once they stepped out of their traditional roles. Ellie Loban Gaffney, the first qualified nursing sister, writes movingly in her autobiography about the discrimination she faced. Younger women have been more fortunate. Dulcie Reading Flower, granddaughter of Douglas Pitt, Jnr and born in Cairns, became a triple-certificated nurse and helped found the Redfern Medical Service. Grace Ware Fischer of St Paul's Community on Moa became the first elected chairwoman. Subsequently, Sanawai Lee Aragu (now deceased) and Margaret Dorante Mau were elected as chairwomen of Dauan. In 1995 Mary Bowie Eseli was ordained the first Anglican woman deacon at Injinoo. She was priested in 1998, thereby continuing the tradition of her grandfather, Reverend Francis Bowie.

Undoubtedly the most celebrated Torres Strait Islander, nationally and internationally, is Eddie Koiki Mabo, born on Mer, whose life and work have been celebrated in two documentary films, a written biography and hundreds of other books and articles. Mabo was exiled from his home island as a young man because he rebelled against council authority but went on to

create a new life on the mainland. Always courageous and politically aware, he co-founded the Black Community School in Townsville in 1973 and in 1982 he began his ultimately successful challenge to the principle of *terra nullius*, the legal fiction that Australia was unowned at the time of settlement. The islands of Torres Strait had passed to the Crown by the Acts of annexation but it was not until the legal challenge that most Islanders realised that, despite their continued occupation, they were not the legal owners of their islands. Mabo, together with three other senior Murray Islanders, Samuel Passi, Reverend David Passi (both descendants of Reverend Poey Passi) and James Rice, successfully challenged the Federal Government and achieved recognition of traditional Indigenous ownership of land.

Few Islanders living in Torres Strait before World War II had access to high school education. Today's Torres Strait Islanders have taken full advantage of the educational opportunities that were denied their parents and grandparents. This is encouraged by their leaders and families. Islanders are increasingly studying at tertiary institutions in Australia and overseas and gaining not only undergraduate and postgraduate degrees but also valuable skills to contribute to the management of local communities. The first Islander to gain a university degree was Mary Garnier from Puruma (Coconut Island), who became Sister Marietta AD and who graduated with a BSc from the University of Papua New Guinea in 1965. George Passi from Mer gained a Master's degree in Social Planning and Development from the University of Queensland in 1986 and Martin Nakata from Thursday Island was the first Torres Strait Islander to obtain a PhD (in Education) in 1997. He is currently Director of the Aboriginal Research Institute at the University of South Australia. Roy Whittaker of the Bourne family from Erub and St Paul's was the first Torres Strait Islander doctor; Catherine Anne Pirie (née Smith) of the William family from Ugar the first Torres Strait Islander solicitor.

Catherine Anne Pirie became the first Torres Strait Islander magistrate, taking up her position in Cairns at the end of September 2000. Her brother, Kevin Smith, also a lawyer, is the Chief Executive Officer of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Corporation (QEA) for Legal Services in Brisbane. Other lawyers are Gary and Murray Lui, descendants of Reverend Joseph Lui. Gary Lui was admitted to practise in Queensland in 1999 and in 2000 he was appointed Senior Case Manager in the Cairns office of the National Native Title Tribunal. His cousin, Murray Lui, qualified as a solicitor in NSW, Tom Mosby as a solicitor in Victoria.

New opportunities in media are also attracting Torres Strait Islanders. Indigenous Australians object to the generally negative portrayals of their peoples in mainstream media and are seeking to present a wide range of Indigenous voices. The Torres Strait Islander Media Association (TSIMA) was launched as regional radio station 4MW on Thursday Island in 1985, broadcasting in the three island languages and English. The radio station 4MW and the local paper, *Torres News*, employ Islander broadcasters and journalists. Islanders are also represented in mainland media organisations. Tiga Bayles, a descendant of the Erub George family, is General Manager of 4AAA, the Indigenous radio station in Brisbane. The most senior Indigenous

journalist at the Australian Broadcasting Commission is Francis Tapim, Jnr from a Mer family, whose work on radio news is broadcast on ABC Radio National, News Radio and Triple J. Also nationally known is the presenter and co-producer of ABC Radio National's weekly Indigenous art and culture program *Away!*, Nancia Guivarra, whose paternal grandparents came from Erub and Thursday Island. The National Indigenous Media Association of Australia (NIMAA) includes a number of up-and-coming Torres Strait Islander journalists and presenters. Among them are two women who were selected to join Indigenous media representatives from around the country to broadcast at the 2000 Olympics: Rhianna Patrick, whose paternal line is from Erub, and 4MW broadcaster Jenni Enosa from Saibai.

Islanders have been slow to publish their stories but Thomas Lowah and Ellie Loban Gaffney both wrote autobiographies in the late 1980s and others are in the pipeline. Anne Abednego Gela, Aidan Laza and Alick Tipoti have written and illustrated traditional stories for a wider public and the stories of Norah Mosby Saylor and Loiko Gela Baker are featured in a new collection of women's journeys towards reconciliation, *Women Reconcile*.

It is through their achievements as sportspeople and performers, however, that Torres Strait Islanders are probably best known in Queensland.

Douglas Pitt, Jnr, born on Mer and raised on Erub, was one of the first people to emigrate from Torres Strait to the mainland where he became famous for his heroic swims. Known as one of the best skin divers and later as the 'King of Malay Town' in Cairns, he was presented with a medal from the Queensland Government for three separate rescues of men from drowning: in 1899 during the Mahina cyclone when he swam 19 miles to safety with a nine-year-old boy on his shoulders; during the 1918 cyclone; and again in 1920. Pitt was the first person to swim from Magnetic Island to Townsville in 1921 but died in 1925 before his projected attempt on Britain's Dover Strait. Danny Morseu, born on Thursday Island and descended from a Mer family, began his celebrated basketball career with St Kilda in Melbourne and then moved to the Brisbane Bullets, Toowoomba Mountaineers and Brisbane Southern Districts Spartans. He had an international career, representing Australia 27 times at World Cup and Olympic Games matches. Rugby League has been the sport most associated with Torres Strait Islanders. Some have played professionally: Eric Pitt from Mossman played first-grade Rugby League with North Sydney as did Ted Mosby, the late Anglican Bishop of Torres Strait. Winger Wendell Sailor, a member of Queensland's premier Rugby League team, the Broncos, is descended from a large Erub family.

Three of Douglas Pitt's daughters, Dulcie, Sophie and Heather Pitt, the first Torres Strait Islanders to attend the Parramatta Primary School in Cairns, formed a singing group, the Harmony Sisters. They joined other entertainers including the Torres Strait Islander, Flo Savage Kennedy, and the American actor John Wayne, in the U.S. Service Office Show, touring North Queensland during the war years. Dulcie Pitt took the stage name Georgia Lee and became an international star, touring with Nat King Cole.

Robert Lewis (Bob) Maza, whose father came from Mer, and his daughter Rachel are actors whose stage and screen work is known to a national and international audience. Maza, who died in 2000, achieved success not only as an actor but also as a playwright and producer. He was awarded an AM for service to the development of Indigenous dramatic arts in 1993. Bangarra Aboriginal Dance Company has included Torres Strait Islanders among its members, one being the internationally known singer, dancer and actor, Christine Anu, whose mother comes from Saibai but who grew up on Mabuiag. Christine Anu released her successful debut album, *Stylin' Up*, in 1995 and her second, *Come My Way*, in 2000. She was the first Torres Strait Islander (and only the second Australian Indigenous) woman to be featured on the cover of *Vogue Australia* and sang at the closing ceremony of the Olympic Games in Sydney. Christine follows earlier singers like George Assang (Vic Sabrino) and Ken Assang, Fay Guivarra (Candy Devine), Dulcie Pitt (Georgia Lee) and Heather Pitt, Wilma and Heathermae Reading and Mick Thaiday. Better known today are the Mills Sisters (Cessa, Ina and Rita), from a well-known Nagi (Mt Ernest Island) family, and Henry (Seaman) Dan from Thursday Island, composer of the unofficial local anthem, *T.I. Blues*.

Works of art created by Torres Strait Islanders have been acquired for public and private collections in Australia and overseas, among them the National Gallery and the Queensland Museum and the Queensland Art Gallery. The best known Torres Strait Islander visual artist is probably Ken Thaiday, Snr from Erub, internationally celebrated for his beautifully crafted moveable headdresses. Ken Thaiday's work was featured in the visual arts component of the Adelaide Festival 2000. He is also a celebrated traditional dancer and choreographer who was chosen to perform before Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II during her visit that year.

Other visual artists include Destiny Deacon from Erub, James Eseli from Mabuiag, Ellen Jose, who is descended from Ngarupai and Mer, Victor McGrath from Thursday Island, Clinton Nain from Erub, Dennis Nona, from Badu, Brian Robinson from Thursday Island, Edrick Tabuai from Saibai and Alick Tipoti from Badu. The work of over 20 Torres Strait Islander visual artists is featured in a recent book, *Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art*. Alick Tipoti, who is also a dancer, won the prestigious Lin Onus Award in 1998. He and Rosella Namok, who is of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (St Paul's, Moa) descent, are the only two Indigenous artists whose work is included in *Fortitude: new art from Queensland*, an exhibition that features 10 of Queensland's most outstanding young artists.

In 1998 the first major exhibition devoted entirely to traditional and contemporary Torres Strait art, *Ilan Pasin: this is our way* opened at the Cairns Regional Gallery. It was curated by two Torres Strait Islanders, the conservator, Tom Mosby (now a lawyer), and the visual artist, Brian Robinson. *Ilan Pasin* went on to tour Queensland regional centres and was visited by almost 43 000 people when it was shown at the Queensland Art Gallery from April to June 2000

Contemporary Issues

Torres Strait Islanders, while recognising that they have become one people, are aware of traditional divisions, as well as the different needs and aspirations of the minority who live in the islands and the majority who have settled on the mainland. They identify a number of issues of major concern: health; land and sea rights; contemporary identity; education; autonomy and resource management.

Health

Average life expectancy for Islanders at the turn of the century compared favourably with European figures, but Europeans now live on average over fifteen years longer. Torres Strait is reported as having the highest rate of diabetes in Australia, with one-quarter of all adults affected. The incidence of other such diseases is also increasing, exacerbated by the adoption of a high-fat and sugary European diet and decreasing physical activity.

Land and Sea Rights

The first Native title determinations for Torres Strait (for Moa and Saibai) were made by the Federal Court in February 1999 after nearly two-and-a-half years of mediation. Special ceremonies accompanied the formal handover of title in March 2000 and, since then, further claims have been resolved with others pending. The original Mabo submission contained reference to sea rights as well as land rights, but they were omitted so as not to prejudice a successful outcome. Islanders, however, consider control over the surrounding seas and marine resources as crucial to their survival as a sea people, and 59 cases currently before the Native Title Tribunal involve some form of sea rights.

Identity

Both island and mainland residents wrestle with issues of pan-Islander identity. They recognise themselves as a single people while accepting the many differences that are a result of differing ecological, cultural and historical circumstances. What it means to be a Torres Strait Islander in contemporary Australian society, how much of traditional custom should be retained and how cultural tradition should be maintained have become pressing issues. This is so particularly among Islanders born and brought up in mainland towns and cities, who, like previous generations of English Australians, still call their family's island of origin 'home'.

Education

Lack of educational opportunity was one motive for emigration from the Strait. While parents sought the best possible education for their children, education was, until recently, restricted by expectation and opportunity. A secondary school and teachers' college for Islanders on Mabuiag provided basic training before and after the war for teachers and clerks but Islanders were not accepted into the Thursday Island High School for senior school subjects until 1964.

In 1985 the Department of Education (now Education Queensland) assumed full responsibility for the public education of the children of Torres Strait and,

within a few years, a new TAFE centre was built on Thursday Island to meet local education and industry training needs. Some educational difficulties arose from a failure to appreciate that, whereas English was the language of instruction, the students' home language was not English. Nor, despite the efforts of dedicated teachers, both Islander and European, was cultural awareness made an explicit part of teacher training until recently. Many Islander teachers have now gained degrees in education from James Cook University and have become teachers and principals in Torres Strait and mainland schools. New programs that recognise the importance of linguistic and cultural factors in learning are achieving far more success than previously.

Autonomy and Resource Management

All these issues are related to the Islanders' desire to control their own destinies, to assign their own priorities, make for themselves the significant decisions affecting their lives and implement the policies that will govern their future as a people. The seeds of that desire for political and economic autonomy reach back generations but it was not publicly articulated until the 1970s, when official government policies of self-determination began to replace assimilation. After years of behind-the-scenes negotiations, the movement was given its most significant impetus by the tabling of a report by the Federal House of Representatives Standing Committee (Lieberman Report) in August 1997, which accepted the principle of future autonomy for the region. The precise form of the emergent political entity was left open.

Islanders recognise that, if Torres Strait is to govern itself, it must develop economically viable industries to replace government assistance. Tourism is an obvious source, and Islanders have responded by starting new commercial enterprises or expanding existing ones to service the growing numbers of visitors from Australia and overseas. One successful tourism venture injected six million dollars in one year into the Seisia community, Cape York. The community's chairman is Joseph Elu, who is also Chairman of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commercial Development Corporation. Other potential sources of income are pilotage fees and pearl cultivation, and it has been proposed that ships passing through Torres Strait should pay a fee for the privilege. There are believed to be large deposits of minerals, oil and natural gas beneath the waters of the Strait. Some petroleum exploration was undertaken prior to 1971, when a moratorium was introduced pending the outcome of a Royal Commission into Exploration and Production Drilling in the Great Barrier Reef area. No petroleum resources were discovered but some eastern areas towards the Papuan Basin appeared promising. A natural gas pipeline is being planned to pass through the Strait and link Papua New Guinea with the Australian mainland. The project is, however, beset by numerous problems.

All the potential sources for further development, however, are located in a fragile, unpredictable and often dangerous marine environment. The tides in Torres Strait are perhaps the most complex in the world. Torres Strait is extremely vulnerable to ecological damage, while the population depends on unpolluted waters for sustenance and physical and spiritual wellbeing.

Despite assurances from the owners of the supertanker, which in 1970 spilled an estimated one million litres of crude oil into the Prince of Wales Channel, the oil presumably entered the food chain. The productivity of local pearl-culture farms plummeted and only two survived. Increased tourism, drilling for gas or oil, and passage through the Strait have the potential to provide profits, but Islanders will have the difficult task of balancing the benefits against possibly catastrophic costs.

Retention of Culture

Mainland Torres Strait Islanders share all these concerns and voice an additional one: the retention of their culture in an alien environment. Despite their fears, Islander culture remains vibrant and strong on the mainland, even in families of mixed Islander and Aboriginal or European origin. Children and adult dance troupes have been formed all over Australia to give public performances at cultural festivals and special events. A contingent of 100 Islander dancers from the Cairns area was featured in the Awakening segment of the Olympic Games opening ceremony in Sydney. Each year, local and visiting dancers perform at the Torres Strait Cultural Festival on Thursday Island, an event organised for many years by Ephraim Bani of Mabuia.

The island languages can be heard in all Queensland cities. Parents are concerned to transmit them to their children, many of whom do not speak English until they go to school. In northern Queensland small towns, Islander houses can be immediately distinguished from the street by the traditional medicinal and magic plants which surround them: the cassava, taro, sweet potato and bananas, and the clamshells placed near the entrance. People leave their shoes outside on the veranda as they would in the Strait and the floors are covered with woven mats. Christianity remains at the centre of contemporary Islander life: food is customarily blessed at meal times, people keep holy water in their homes, new houses and boats are blessed, people are buried and their tombstones unveiled with Christian ceremony. Churches with Islander members in their congregations add to their services an island drum accompaniment, island hymns in traditional languages and the distinctive part-singing of Torres Strait. Many parents still observe their son's first shave with a traditional feast.

Community Organisations

Pre-war Torres Strait Islanders were served by local chapters of mainstream secular and religious organisations, such as the Sea Scouts, Girl Guides and Mothers' Union. Post-war Islanders, like formerly-colonised people throughout the world, began to form their own cooperative societies and join newly established Australian Indigenous political organisations with branches in North Queensland.

Today, at the Federal level, the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs (OTSIA) is based in Canberra and managed by Benny Mills. However, the most

significant political and community organisations are based in Torres Strait. The Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA), currently headed by Terry Waia from Saibai, is a Commonwealth statutory body established in 1994 to provide services for the region, formulate and implement policy, protect cultural material and provide assistance for Islander economic initiatives. The Island Coordinating Council (ICC), headed by Henry Garnier from Keriri (Hammond Island), is an older organisation of island councillors, the regional local government agency. There is also a large women's organisation, Mura Kosker Sorority, founded in 1989, whose President is Kailang Ware Dorante, and several major health organisations. The political region has expanded since the war to encompass northern Cape York communities. The Northern Peninsula Area (NPA) reaches from north of the Jardine River to the Papua New Guinea border and includes not only the islands of Torres Strait but also the communities of Bamaga, Seisia, Injinoo (formerly Cowal Creek), Alau (formerly Umagico) and New Mapoon. These communities are inhabited by both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, who have increasingly intermarried.

Islanders who live on the mainland in locations with small Islander populations access services provided by local Aboriginal, as well as mainstream, organisations. In cities with large Islander populations, they have established their own community organisations to meet cultural, health, housing, educational and political aspirations.

Most of the mainland-based organisations are coordinated by the National Secretariat of Torres Strait Islander Organisations Ltd located in Townsville. Its chairperson is Francis Tapim, Snr (originally from Mer) and its Chief Executive Officer is Victor Jose. The Secretariat issues national policy statements, coordinates conferences, seminars and workshops and services 17 member organisations Australia-wide. Of these, 13 are in Queensland.

Such organisations may have a broad or narrow focus. Some provide for health or housing needs, others give general development assistance, yet others help sustain Torres Strait cultural activities. They play a political role in influencing policy, not only in Torres Strait, but also increasingly on the mainland at both State and Federal level. Among recent political successes were the formal separation of TSRA from ATSIC in 1994 and the acceptance in principle of Torres Strait autonomy by the Federal Government. An Autonomy Task Force has been established to advance that goal. It has advocated the establishment – by 2001 – of a centralised governing structure to be called the Torres Strait Regional Assembly, the ultimate goal being territorial status for the region.

Torres Strait Islanders' Economic Contribution

Among the most lucrative of Queensland's nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century industries were the pearlshell, bêche-de-mer and trochus fisheries of North Queensland centred on Thursday Island. All these depended on Torres Strait Islander labour. Both women and men worked alongside mainland Aboriginal, Papua New Guinean, Pacific Islander and

southeast Asian fishermen. Women, in fact, were the preferred swimming divers in the early fisheries. Before their decline, the bêche-de-mer, pearling and trochus industries provided a significant proportion of Queensland's export income. Several grazing leases were issued in Torres Strait in the early days and copra plantations provided a good income for some families.

For most of the twentieth century, the Islanders provided the majority of the local teachers, priests, police, nurses, midwives, storekeepers, council clerks and carpenters; they built and maintained most of the island infrastructure. Their labour helped construct the modern dams and airstrips. Yet, despite the Islanders' contribution to the fisheries, to the physical building and management of their communities and to the provision of essential services, few of them received much financial benefit. Only a tiny minority became entrepreneurs, cooperating closely with government officials, establishing family companies and copra plantations and employing kinfolk to skipper and crew their boats. Those who were employed by the Queensland Government to provide services received a rate of pay considerably lower than their non-indigenous colleagues. This 'community rate' also applied to Aboriginal people. Not only did the Islanders themselves have little to show for years of work, but their communities were also starved of needed infrastructure funds. They had little control over their economic development and were forced to depend almost entirely on government funding.

It was not until the 1980s that Islanders were paid award wages. The fight for economic justice in this instance was taken up before the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) by seven Palm Islanders and a decision against the government handed down in 1996. The government refused to accept it and took the case to the Federal Court. Eventually the two sides reached an agreement, but it was clear that other cases would follow, including hundreds of Torres Strait Islander fisheries workers. In 1999 the new Queensland Government agreed to make restitution to all Indigenous people who were paid under-award wages between 1975 (when the practice was outlawed under the *Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act*) and 1986 (when the Queensland Government complied with that Act). It is estimated that during this period the government made a saving of between seven and ten million dollars every year by not complying.

This case was a legal landmark for Indigenous Queenslanders. Not only did their government provide monetary compensation for illegal underpayment but also, for the first time, it admitted responsibility for discrimination under the Protection Acts. It was also the largest settlement (\$7000 compensation per employee) by any employer with respect to a discrimination matter and the longest running case for underpayment of wages in Australian industrial relations history.

No compensation was ever paid for the overfishing of the Islanders' marine territories. Only with the decline of the fishing industries did stocks recover. Fishing for crayfish, prawns, and deep sea fish today provides some men and their extended families with a good income but most of the profits are taken out of Torres Strait by European-owned fishing companies: some of these

trawl \$500 000 worth of prawns in one year. The Islanders see little benefit for them from the exploitation by outsiders of their local resources. Even worse, the operating methods and giant nets of the prawning trawlers damage the seabed, reduce fish stocks and destroy turtles and dugong, traditional food sources and totemic kin for the Islanders. They are caught in the nets and perish. Some Islanders have taken unilateral action to expel trawlers from their territories; others have collaborated with conservationists and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority in appealing to State and Federal Governments. The response in 2000 was to implement a structural adjustment scheme to reduce boat numbers and help ensure future sustainable resource management. For many, this did not go far enough and in March 2001 they organised a Maritime Summit to demand ownership, use and management of their traditional waters.

Conclusion

Migration and cultural adaptation are significant themes of Torres Strait Islander history, as is Torres Strait Islanders' openness to outside ideas and technologies. They have incorporated large numbers of outsiders into their communities and embraced the children born there as their own, thus creating new 'roads' or connections, which now link all Torres Strait families. Islanders' preparedness to embrace those aspects of change which accord with their traditional values has helped them to withstand the buffeting of the past 130 years and to transcend the brutality of their first colonial encounters. Their land and sea territories are now legally being returned to them. Without compromising their core cultural values, they have responded to their common experiences of paternalistic control by forging from five small nations a new pan-Islander identity as a united people. The Islanders were remarkably successful in absorbing Pacific Islander, Asian and European immigrants to create a tolerant multicultural society long before it became the norm in the rest of Australia. Torres Strait is a model of successful multiculturalism.

Contemporary Islanders are no longer who they were when their ancestors first settled in Torres Strait. They have retained much of their past but they have also jettisoned some aspects and subtly altered others. The symbols of their shared contemporary identity are to be found on the official Torres Strait Island flag. Designed by the late Bernard Namok, it was first flown in May 1992, barely a month before the High Court of Australia handed down the historic 'Mabo' decision recognising continuous Indigenous rights to land.

The flag has at top and bottom two green horizontal stripes, separated by a wider blue stripe bounded by two thin black lines. In the centre is a white *dhoeri/dari* (traditional headdress of white seabird feathers) encompassing a five-pointed white star. The upper and lower green borders represent the northern and southern mainlands. Blue represents the waters of the Strait, which separate the inhabitants from both mainlands and nourish them, both spiritually and physically. Black represents the people, their colour their defining characteristic in the eyes of Europeans and the basis for their separate and unequal treatment for so many generations. White represents

Christianity, which drew the formerly antagonistic peoples together. The *dhoeri/ dari* represents *ailan pasin* 'island custom', the second great unifier. The five-pointed star originally represented the five island groups and the sea voyages that sustained and linked them but today is usually interpreted as the five major political divisions, united in one administrative entity.

Thus, Torres Strait Islander culture retains its past strengths, while incorporating changes brought by historical events. A pragmatic and resilient maritime people, with a unique origin and history and relationship to modern Australia, Torres Strait Islanders have created their own syncretic culture that is distinctive, vital and enduring. When Islanders reflect upon their cultural heritage, they are often unaware of the many elements that have flowed into it and do not recognise their own genius as a people for choosing, adapting and elaborating new elements without compromising their generations-old core cultural values.

Big eso gaar for information from Mary Bowie Eseli, Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action (FAIRA), Jeremy Hodes, Jackie Huggins, Victor Jose, Peter Jull, Judy Christian Ketchell, Kemuel Kiwat, Belza Lowah, Gary Lui, Leah Lui, Margaret Merten, Rod Mitchell, Diane Moon, Reverend Allan Mosby, Ettie Pau, Thaiday Ruben, Nonie Sharp, Kevin Smith, Barbara Done Stephenson, Francis Tapim Junior, Lindsay Watson, James William.