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HS Melville / A canoe on the beach at Erub (Darnley) Island, eastern Torres Strait, 1840s, plate XIX of *Sketches in Australia and the Adjacent Islands, Selected from a Number Taken During the Surveying Voyage of HMS 'Fly' and 'Bramble' Under the Command of Capt. FP Blackwood, RN, During the Years 1842-46*, Dickinson and Co, London, nd (c.1849).

## TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS: THE 9000-YEAR HISTORY OF A MARITIME PEOPLE

Ian J McNiven

Torres Strait Islanders are a maritime people comprising numerous communities and sea territories. It was into this marine realm that missionaries from the London Missionary Society (LMS) ventured on 1 July 1871. Appreciating the special challenges of tropical island life, the LMS used their own western Pacific Christian converts, who were also sea people, to join Torres Strait Islander communities and spread the Gospel. But who were these islanders, living across an archipelago that stretched 150 kilometres between Melanesian New Guinea to the north and mainland Aboriginal Australia to the south? From accounts of earlier voyagers, the LMS knew Torres Strait Islanders were a force to be reckoned with. While the LMS preached biblical accounts of the history of man, Torres Strait Islanders already had their own history and legendary stories of creation and accomplishment. Today, this rich oral history is complemented by archaeological evidence of major developments in Torres Strait Islander society, from 9000 years ago and in the history of the past 140 years of colonial occupation, including struggles for autonomy and self-determination. The following text charts this story.

Torres Strait Islander society at the time of LMS contact provides a starting point from which we can understand both older and more recent historical developments. Four major groups of Torres Strait Islanders are recognised – Eastern (Meriam), Central (Kulkulgal), Western (Maluilgal) and Top Western (Guda Maluilgal). Kaurareg Aboriginal people are the traditional owners of south-west Torres Strait, adjacent to Cape York. Each group comprises a number of residential island communities and their surrounding territorial waters. Western and Eastern Islanders live on rocky islands, while the Top Western peoples live mostly on low-lying, muddy islands and Central Islanders inhabit sandy cays. Early Torres

Strait Islander communities were linked, as they are today, by complex trade networks and intermarriage that also involved the adjacent Australian and New Guinean mainlands.<sup>1</sup> These maritime links were facilitated by huge, double-outrigger sailing canoes, the dugout hulls of which were imported from New Guinea. Yet, not all interactions were peaceful, and there are numerous legendary stories recounting headhunting raids (skulls have an important ceremonial role in traditional society) by warriors armed with stone-headed clubs and bows and arrows.<sup>2</sup>

Torres Strait Islander subsistence was based on the bountiful supply of foods available from the sea, a focus emphasised by a lack of terrestrial animals to hunt. Turtles and dugongs – key sources of protein – were obtained by men thrusting harpoons (*wap*) from canoes and reef platforms. Inshore reef fishing (mostly using spears and scoop nets) and gleaning for shellfish was undertaken mainly by women, children and older folk at low tide. More than 450 species of marine animals were eaten.<sup>3</sup>

In the past, most Torres Strait Islander communities were horticultural like their New Guinean neighbours. Employing swidden (slash-and-burn) agriculture and sometimes constructing raised garden beds, the Islanders grew bananas, yams, sweet potato, sugar cane, taro and tobacco.<sup>4</sup> Collecting wild plant foods was more important among the Kaurareg, a people who had much in common with Aboriginal hunter-gatherers of nearby mainland Australia.<sup>5</sup> Food was brought back to share with other community members in villages and was cooked in ground ovens. Intensive gardening is no longer practised by most Islander communities and, today, garden produce tends to supplement diets as most vegetable foods are purchased from local stores.





A village on Erub (Darnley) Island, eastern Torres Strait, 1840s, plate XVII of HS Melville's *Sketches in Australia and the Adjacent Islands*, nd (c.1849).



Group of people tending to a ground oven, Mer, 1898 / Photograph: Anthony Wilkin, Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits / Reproduced by permission of Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, N.23178.ACH2

Opposite  
Warup (Drum)  
Wood, shell and cassowary feathers  
Erub (Darnley Island), Torres Strait  
E126 / Collected by PGH  
Guilletmot, from Erub, 1911-12



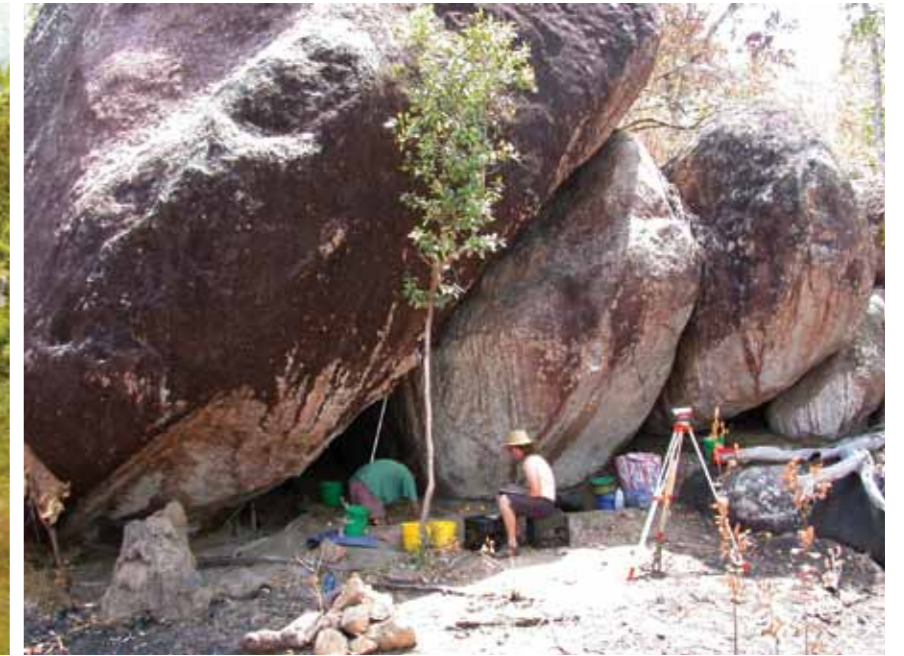
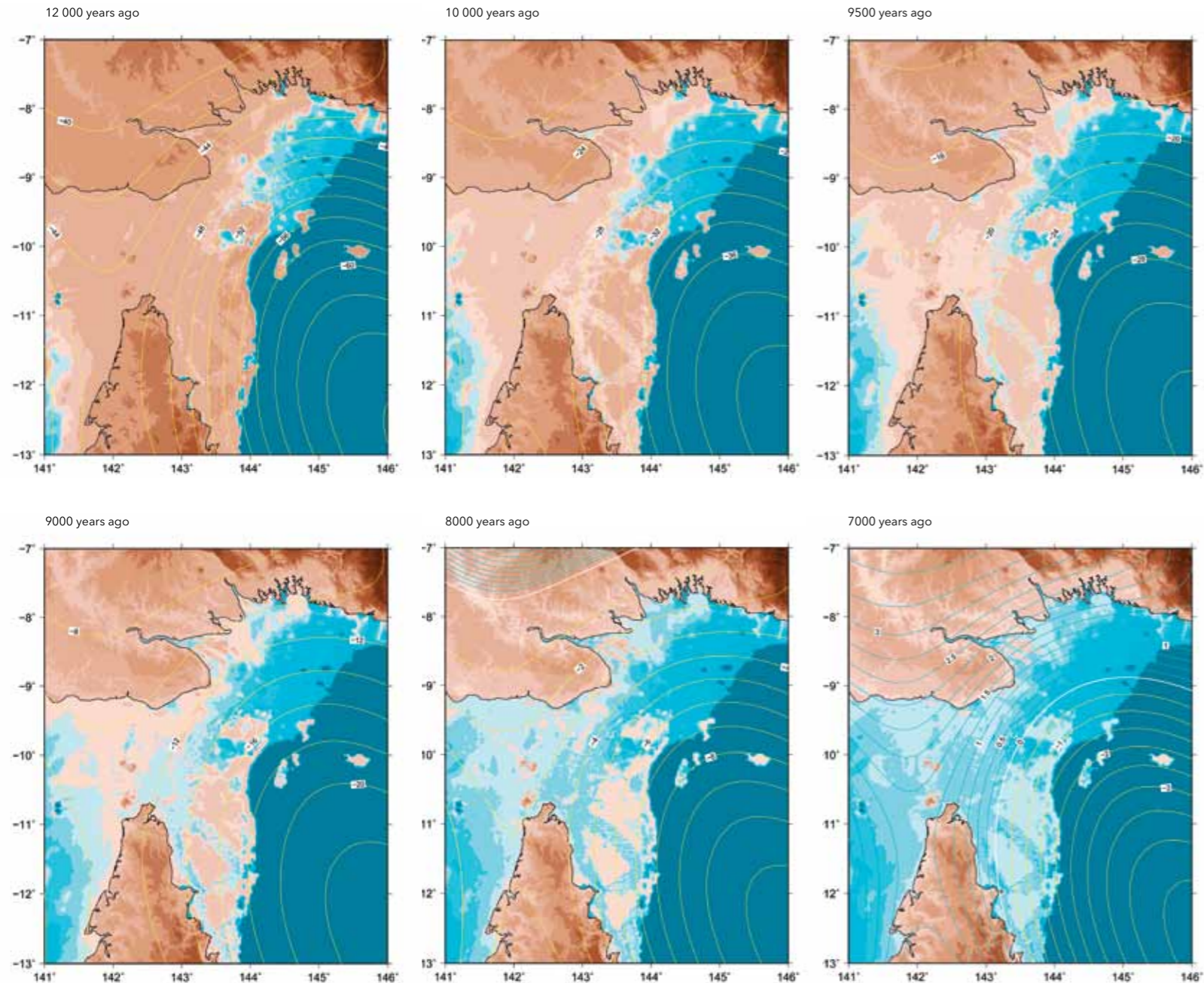
As the Islanders are a maritime people, the sea also pervades religious, spiritual, mythological, and ceremonial aspects of Torres Strait Islander society.<sup>6</sup> The centrality of the sea in ceremonial life is expressed materially in elaborate dance paraphernalia, including shark-mouthed drums and spectacular turtle-shell headdresses in the shape of crocodiles, fish and sharks. This maritime identity is also expressed through a range of animal totems – the dugong (*dhangal*), sea turtle (*waru*), shovel-nosed shark (*kaigas*) and shark (*baidam*), for example.

To understand the emergence of Torres Strait Islander society, we must look back to the end of the last Ice Age, around 10 000 years ago. Before this time, the region we know as the Torres Strait was a low plain, the Torres Plain, studded by a series of low hills that formed a land bridge connecting the Australian and New Guinean mainlands. Around 21 000 years ago, the earth began to warm and the global ice sheets melted to varying degrees. As a result, sea levels rose some 120 metres and the Ice Age coastline that once fringed the edge of the Continental Shelf began moving rapidly inland. Since the Torres Strait is shallow – less than 30-50 metres in the east and 10-15 metres in the west – it took some time for rising seas to reach the elevated Torres Plain. Geological evidence shows this happened around 9000 years ago. The initial breakthrough of the sea probably occurred north of Cape York, but the formation of the Torres Strait as we know it today occurred over several thousand years. Sea-rolled pumice buried

on Badu Island indicates that the sea arrived 8000 years ago and further evidence of its encroachment comes from ancient fragments of mangroves buried on Mua.<sup>7</sup> The rising waters finally isolated the rocky hills, now islands, about 7000 to 8000 years ago.<sup>8</sup> Fossil corals dating from this period indicate reefs began growing soon after the arrival of the sea, but many sand cays of the central Strait were formed only within the past 3000 years.<sup>9</sup>

From the Western islands, such as Badu, we can see the earliest evidence of people in the Torres Strait. Archaeological excavation of the 'Badu 15' rock shelter in 2002 revealed small stone tools and charcoal from fires that have been radiocarbon dated to 9000 years ago.<sup>10</sup> The formation of the Strait and the arrival of people at about the same time is unlikely to be coincidental and suggests that, without the sea and its marine foods, the region was unsuited to human occupation. The earliest known direct evidence for the use of marine foods comes from Mabuyag. In 2006, excavations there recovered deeply buried stone tools, remarkably well-preserved fish and turtle bones, and charcoal from fireplaces, which have been radiocarbon dated to 6000 to 7000 years ago.<sup>11</sup> To what degree these early peoples of the Torres Strait were permanent residents, or nomadic visitors from the Australian mainland, is unknown. However, by 4000 years ago, the people of the western Strait were permanent island dwellers. Pollen core records taken from swamps on Badu and Mua show that humans managed the landscape with





Two men wearing dance costume: One holds a traditional drum (warup) with feather decorations, and the other wears the turtle-shell crocodile mask of western Torres Strait tradition, Mer (Murray) Island, Torres Strait, 1907 / Photograph: Alan McCulloch / © Courtesy: The Archives of the Australian Museum

Archaeological excavations by Monash University at the 'Badu 15' rock shelter in 2002 / Courtesy: Ian McNiven

Opposite Sea level reconstructions for Torres Strait between 12 000 and 7000 (calibrated) years ago. Brown shaded areas = land, blue shaded areas = water. Contours show change in sea level relative to today / Courtesy: Kurt Lambeck, Australian National University

fire, while the earliest known evidence for dugong hunting and shell fishing (from a campsite on the islet of Berberass, near Badu) also dates from this time.<sup>12</sup> Bones from land animals have not been found so it is clear that, from the beginning, Torres Strait Islanders were marine specialists, as they remain today.<sup>13</sup>

Between 2500 and 3000 years ago the pace of cultural change increased dramatically across the Torres Strait. Around 2800 years ago the first evidence of people in the eastern Strait appears with shellfish remains in buried villages on Mer (Murray) Island.<sup>14</sup> By 2500 years ago, these early eastern Islanders were using finely made, red-slipped pottery, small shards of which were excavated on Dauar, near Mer, in 1998. Similar pottery of a similar age was subsequently excavated in 2002 from Mask Cave on the islet of Pulu, near Mabuyag in the western Strait.<sup>15</sup> Analysis of the clays used to make the pottery suggests both local manufacture (Pulu pottery) and importation from New Guinea (Dauar pottery). The Pulu and Dauar pottery is unique because it represents the first evidence for pottery use by Torres Strait Islanders and is Australia's first known pottery tradition. This pottery is related to older pottery traditions in Papua New Guinea and most likely indicates a migration of coastal Papuan peoples to the Torres Strait around 2500 to 3000 years ago.

The echoes of their ancient Papuan ancestry can be heard today when Torres Strait Islanders speak. As the immigrants moved into the unoccupied eastern Strait they maintained a relatively pure Papuan language, which is now known as Meriam Mir. In contrast, the Western islands were already settled and the migrating Papuans integrated with local peoples,

resulting in the creation of a number of mixed Aboriginal-Papuan dialects known as the Western-Central language.<sup>16</sup> The recent origin of most Central islands strongly suggests that the development of local Kulkulgal communities, and their role in mediating relationships between Eastern and Western island groups, similarly dates to the past 3000 years.

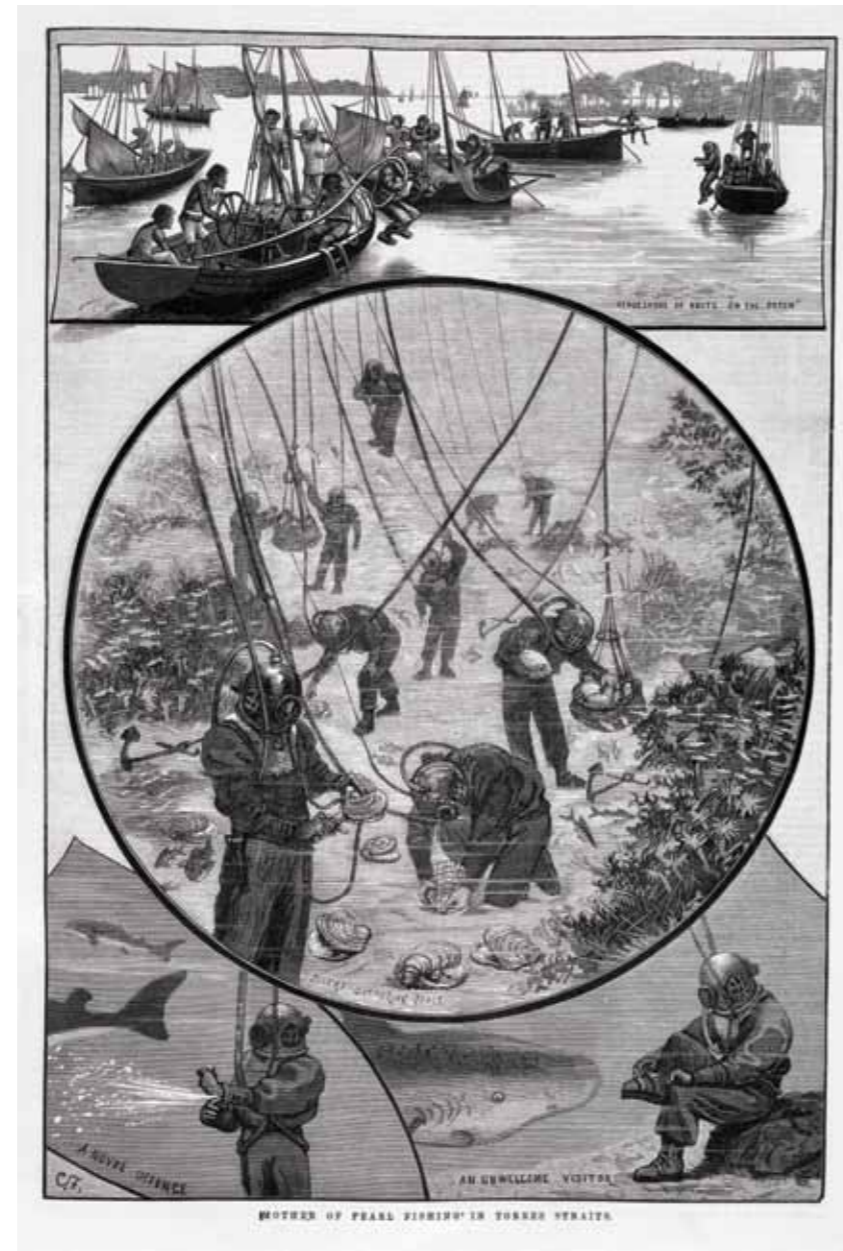
Another period of major cultural change took place between 1500 and 400 years ago, when many of the shoreline villages encountered by the LMS were first established. If you could go back in time and enter these villages, you would see houses, ground ovens, pathways, ritual shrines and parked canoes (up to 21 metres in length, Torres Strait Islander canoes were the largest Indigenous watercraft in Australia). Today, the remains of generations of earlier village activity, including huge midden deposits of shells, animal bones (turtle, fish and dugong) and cooking stones, lie buried just beneath the surface. An important factor behind the establishment of these villages was population increase, which led to strategic positioning of large settlements in different places along the coastlines. Such positioning enabled better surveillance of newly established territorial seas, which developed as a result of heightened political differences and tensions between island communities.<sup>17</sup> These settlement changes also generated new ceremonial and ritual sites, such as stone arrangements and rock art sites. Stone arrangements, in the form of lines and circles, were established along the shore and on hilltops, while most rock art sites are hidden away on the curving side of granite boulders on surfaces, protected from the rain. A wide range of rock art paintings has been recorded, revealing not only representations



of a maritime culture, such as canoes, turtles and dugongs, but also stylistic influences from New Guinea to the north and mainland Aboriginal Australia to the south.<sup>18</sup> Between 400 and 500 years ago, ceremonial and ritual activity intensified dramatically on the islands with the creation of shrines of arranged *bu* (trumpet) shells and large mounds of dugong bones.<sup>19</sup> In some cases, the dugong bone mounds contain skull fragments from thousands of harpooned animals and these were associated with complex hunting rituals.<sup>20</sup> In the western Strait, these shrines often formed part of large ceremonial clan sites known as *kod*, the best known being on the sacred islet of Pulu.<sup>21</sup> The formation of *kod* sites was part of the development of new clan systems around 400 to 500 years ago, which have continued into the present.

Within the past 400 years, understandings of Torres Strait history and culture have been based more on oral histories and recorded observations.<sup>22</sup> In 1606, Luis Vaez de Torres, commander of the Spanish ship *San Pedro*, became the first known European to sail through the Strait that now bears his name. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Torres Strait Islanders increasingly came into contact with European mariners keen to stop off to restock their ships with water and food supplies. But passage through the maze of reefs and Islander territorial waters was often perilous. A mutual misunderstanding of cultural protocols, coupled with European arrogance and the Islanders' headhunting, killing people cast ashore from wrecks (*sarup*) and defending their land and sea resources, often resulted in deaths on both sides during these early encounters.<sup>23</sup> In 1792, Captain Bligh's expedition 'killed or wounded' three Erub Islanders in a canoe after misinterpreting a peace offering and opening fire with muskets.<sup>24</sup> The following year, and possibly in revenge, an officer and four seamen from the merchant vessel *Shah Hormuzear* and the London whaler *Chesterfield* were murdered and ritually dismembered during a visit to Erub. In 1834, at least 17 castaways from the wreck of the *Charles Eaton* were ritually decapitated – many of their skulls were incorporated into a ceremonial turtle-shell mask, kept in a special building on Aureed in the Central islands.<sup>25</sup> Between the labyrinth of coral reefs and flotillas of armed warriors, the Torres Strait was, for European mariners, perhaps the most dangerous stretch of sea in the world.

As the nineteenth century progressed, relationships between the Islanders and Europeans became more peaceful and this allowed the development of a mutually productive two-way trade. In return for food, water and items such as turtle shell (which sailors sold in Asian and European markets), the Islanders received coveted metal objects such as steel axes and hoop iron, and desirable items including bottles and red cloth. Significantly,



A platoon of the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion, Horn Island, Torres Strait, 1945 / Courtesy: Australian War Memorial

Opposite S Calvert, an article in a supplement to the *Illustrated Australian News* on pearl shelling in the Torres Strait, 8 November 1884 / Collection: State Library of Victoria, Melbourne

diseases such as smallpox, which decimated many mainland Aboriginal groups following early contact with Europeans, failed to have a similar impact on the more remote island communities of the Torres Strait.<sup>26</sup> By the mid nineteenth century, relationships between Islanders and European mariners were amicable, but inaccurate maps with sketchy details on the locations of reefs and islands maintained the region's reputation as a dangerous shipping channel. With increasing traffic through the Strait from the developing Australian colonies, action was needed. Thus, by the 1840s, the British Admiralty sent two expeditions to survey and map the treacherous waters – HMS *Fly* in 1844–45 and HMS *Rattlesnake* in 1848–49<sup>27</sup> – knowing they would receive assistance and support from numerous Islander communities.

In the 1860s, commercial fishermen began moving from the western Pacific into the Torres Strait. Among these was Captain William Banner who established a station on Tudu, where *bêche-de-mer*, also known as trepang and sea cucumber, were processed (cleaned, boiled, smoked and dried) for use in Asian cuisine and traditional medicine.<sup>28</sup> In 1870, Banner's operation turned to pearl shell and so began the famous Torres Strait pearling industry and the region's entry into the global economy. The pearling industry evolved rapidly from free-diving to the use of luggers and brass diving helmets and employed many Torres Strait Islanders, immigrant South Sea Islanders and Asians across the Strait, especially around Waiben (Thursday Island).<sup>29</sup> Working conditions were dangerous and the divers often died from the bends or entanglement in coral while walking along the seabed. Wage payments were also problematic in the hands of unscrupulous operators. To gain greater control of the industry, which operated mostly in international waters, the Queensland Colonial Government extended its powers across Torres Strait during the 1870s, establishing a settlement on Thursday Island in 1877, and the Crown annexed the region to Queensland in two stages – in 1872 and 1879 – to bring it under British sovereignty and law.<sup>30</sup> With Australian Federation in 1901, sovereignty then passed to the Commonwealth Government. At its peak, in 1904, the pearl shell industry engaged 378 boats and employed 2509 men. Trochus shell also began to be commercially exploited from 1912. After a hiatus during World War Two, the industry picked up again in the 1950s, but the introduction of plastic buttons

brought pearl shelling to a close in the 1960s. As a result, many Islanders moved to the Australian mainland to work, particularly in the backbreaking jobs of cutting sugar cane and constructing railway lines. Today, of the more than 30 000 people who identify as solely Torres Strait Islanders, only around 7000 live in the Torres Strait.

'Missionisation' was another external force that profoundly transformed Torres Strait Islander society during the late nineteenth century. When the London Missionary Society arrived in the Torres Strait in 1871, it hoped to establish a base in the islands and, within a couple years, many communities had built churches and houses for the missionaries. The LMS was highly successful in converting Torres Strait Islanders to Christianity and their arrival is still celebrated every year as the Coming of the Light festival. Part of the appeal of the LMS was its stand against ruthless pearl-shelling operators. It established Papuan Industries Ltd (PIL) on Badu in 1904 as a means by which local Islanders could both build and operate their own luggers (known as 'Company boats', as opposed to 'Master boats' owned by Europeans). However, 'missionisation', coupled with the pearling industry, led to the suppression of many old cultural practices. A desire to record and 'salvage' information on traditional cultural practices was a key motivational force behind the famous 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits, directed by Alfred Cort (AC) Haddon. The six volumes of reports produced by the expedition remain key ethnographic texts on the region.<sup>31</sup> The expedition's collection of more than 1000 objects, housed mostly in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, is the world's largest ethnographic collection of Torres Strait material culture and is visited regularly by Islanders.<sup>32</sup>

In 1904, Torres Strait Islanders came under the control of *The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* and, in 1912, all inhabited islands were declared reserves. Under the Act, the Queensland State Government exercised authoritarian and paternalistic control over the lives of Islanders.<sup>33</sup> This was followed by the withdrawal of the LMS in 1915, having handed control to the Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria. After the State Government took over Papuan Industries Ltd in 1930 and changed its name to Aboriginal Industries, issues of control (especially over access to wages and use of 'Company' boats) and autonomy led to dissatisfaction among the Islanders and eventually culminated in a seven-month, pan-Strait strike in 1936. Around 400 Islanders refused to work on the 'Company' pearling boats and the government was forced to make some concessions.<sup>34</sup> After the *Torres Strait Islanders Act* was passed in 1939, individual island reserves become locally governed entities with elected local councillors, albeit under the control of







Contemporary Torres Strait Island dancers wearing the distinctive dhari headdresses / Image courtesy: National Library of Australia, Canberra

the newly established Office of the Director of Native Affairs. In addition, Aboriginal Industries became the Island Industries Board. In 1984, this evolved into the Islanders Board of Industry and Service (better known as IBIS) and continues to operate grocery stores across the Strait.<sup>35</sup>

The entry of the Japanese into World War Two in 1941 plunged the western Pacific region into an active war zone that included the Torres Strait. More than 800 Torres Strait Islander men voluntarily joined what became the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion, the only Indigenous battalion in the history of the Australian Army. Thirty-six men died while on active service but, remarkably, it was not until the 1980s that soldiers finally received full back pay for their war service to the nation.<sup>36</sup>

Protecting lands and seas in the Torres Strait ensures, among other things, the continuation of cultural practices central to Islander identity, making protection a powerful entity in Torres Strait societies. On 3 June 1992, Eddie Koiki Mabo was successful in the landmark case *Mabo vs Queensland (No. 2)*, in which the High Court of Australia overturned the legal fiction of terra nullius, which had rendered Mer as a 'land belonging to no one' at the time of colonial annexation.<sup>37</sup> The following year, the Australian Government introduced the historic *Native Title Act* of 1993, and over the next 15 years all Torres Strait Island communities gradually had their native title rights recognised by the Australian legal system. In

2010, the Federal Court of Australia also decided in favour of Torres Strait Islanders, recognising native rights in their seas. Other aspects of protection include biosecurity, through active participation in customs and quarantine regulation; the management of marine ecosystems and associated sustainable subsistence practices, particularly dugong and turtle hunting; and recording and protecting cultural heritage sites.<sup>38</sup> Many of these initiatives operate through the Thursday Island-based Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA), which also supports a range of cultural activities such as sport, dancing, singing and art, and through individual island councils and organisations.

Today, internationally recognised Torres Strait Islander artists such as Dennis Nona and Alick Tipoti are extending the region's rich maritime heritage and culture to households and galleries across the globe. Prints and sculptural works document, in myriad ways, the connections between Torres Strait Islanders and the sea – connections guided by ancestors.<sup>39</sup> This ancestral presence also finds expression in music, in song and, perhaps most evidently, in its iconic dancing, which embodies maritime knowledge and history. Music and dance usually accompany a major celebratory event, at which a feast of seafood might be presented: on these special occasions, art, culture and history combine, honouring the ancestral past and acknowledging the ongoing, vital and intimate relationship between Torres Strait Islanders and their marine realm.

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