

Information Awareness – Torres Strait Islands

Torres Strait

The people of the Torres Strait are of Melanesian origin with their own distinct identity, history and cultural traditions. The Melanesians populated the western part of the Pacific. [Fiji, New Caledonia, New Guinea, Solomon, Vanuatu]. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century the rhythm of Islanders' lives, their meaning systems, world view, and social processes were relatively autonomous.

There are more than 100 islands in the Torres Strait, which stretches over a total area of 35 000 square kilometres. Of these, 17 are inhabited [15 on island communities and 2 on the Northern Peninsula Area Cape York [Bamaga est.1945, Seisia est.1948].

Indigenous Australia

There are two traditional people of Australia; The Aboriginal People and Torres Strait Islanders.

Geographic diversity

The high, granite western islands (e.g. Hammond, Thursday Island, Badu, Mabuiag, Yam and Gebar) are remnants of the land bridge that separated Australia and Papua New Guinea; the central islands of Warraber, Poruma, Aurid, Masig and Tudu are small, low lying sand cays surrounded by coral reefs; eastern islands such as Murray, Dauar, Waier, Ugar and Darnley are remains of Pleistocene volcanoes and the north-western islands of Boigu and Saibai were formed by the deposit of silt from the confluence of four Papua New Guinean rivers.

Pre contact

There is no one name traditionally for the islands of the Torres Straits. However there were and are still recognised traditional boundaries defined by language and kinship groups; these are also recognised in the governance areas today. Trade existed between New Guinea – west to Wassa Kussa north to Fly River estuaries and Northern Australia what is present day Northern Peninsula Area [NPA]. Trading routes were according to kinship groups. The items traded were dugong/turtle meat, bamboo, canoe hulls, cowrie shells, drums, garden crops, masks, pearl shells, stone headed clubs, bows and arrows. Inter-marriage was practised between clans and arrangements was done by the clans with a bride price negotiating the exchange. This was done to maintain the clan lines.

Language

There consisted 200 -250 languages spoken on first contact throughout Australia. 20 remain strong, others are non existence on the decline or endangered of being lost.

Predicts tribal & language boundary

There are two traditional languages of the Torres Strait Islands, *Miriam Mir* and *Kalau Lagau Ya*.

Miriam Mir is the language of the Eastern Islands of Mer (Murray), Erub (Darnley), Waier, Dauar and Ugar (Stephen). *Kalau Lagau Ya* has four distinct dialects derived from this language which are:

- Kalau Kawau Ya - the dialect of the top Western Islands group of Saibai, Dauan (Mt Cornwallis) and Boigu including Bamaga and Seisia.
- Kalau Lagau Ya - the dialect of the Central Western Islands of Mabuiag (Jervis) and Badu (Mulgrave). This dialect is also known as Gumulgau Ya.

- Kulkalgau Ya - the dialect of the Central Islands of Aurid (Aureed), Damut (Dalrymple), lama (Yam or Turtle-Backed), Masig (Yorke), Mauar (Rennel), Naghir (Mt Earnest), Poruma (Coconut) and Warraber (Sue).
- Kawalgau Ya - the dialect of the South Western Islands of Muralag (Prince of Wales), Nurupai (Horn), Giralag (Friday), Waiben (Thursday Island), Keriri (Hammond), Maurura (Wednesday), Moa (Banks). It is also known as Kaurareg.
- Creole
Creole is a language that developed from pidgin English of the southwest Pacific and spread around the Torres Strait Islands during the twentieth century. It has its own distinctive sound system, grammar, vocabulary, usage and meaning. Creole became a language by about 1910, among the St Paul's mission children. There are several factors encouraging its adoption; its convenience in helping speakers of the Western, Central & Eastern languages communicate with each other, the workforce of the islands, pearling and bech-de-mer industries and employment of Pacific Islanders as mission teachers.

Shnukal, A. (c1988). *Broken: an introduction to the creole language of Torres Strait*. Canberra: Australian National University. (J 427 shn).

Contact history

The Torres Strait Islands were first discovered in 1606 by Luis Baes de Torres a Spaniard. In 1770 James Cook lays claim of Australia for Britain and erects the flag on Possession Island. Contact with Europeans and Islanders were put on a more permanent footing through Beche-de-mer fishing and pearl shelling which began in 1860's. The establishment of both these industries was accompanied by forced labour, violence and abductions. The Islanders were annexed to Queensland by an Act of Parliament in 1879. The islander life were affected by the marine industries, missionary era, various Acts and Legislation, WWII.

Population

The 2006 Census count identified Torres Strait Islanders numbered 51 720 [represents the-total Indigenous Population of 517,200. Of this 6% identified TSI and 4% identified as having both-TSI and Aboriginal]. 80% of the population live outside of the Torres Strait, mostly residing in mainland Australia of which the majority live in Queensland. It was estimated that by June 2006 that the total indigenous population would reach 500,000. The Indigenous growth rate of 2% compared to 1.18% of total national population. [ABS Stats]

Torres Strait Flag

The dhari [head-dress] representing the unity of all Torres Strait Islanders [colour white is for peace]. The five pointer star represents our regions, Eastern Is, Western Is, Central Is, Port Kennedy [Thursday Is group] and Northern Peninsula Area Cape York. The Torres Strait Flag was designed by Bernerd Namok of St Pauls' Moa Island. Colours [green/blue/black] represent the sea, land, sky and people. The Torres Strait Islanders' flag was recognised under Federal legislation, as was the Aboriginal flag, in July 1995.

Cultural Values

The family is highly regarded. Islander society is based on the Kozan System or Ailan Pasin – in promoting sharing of knowledge, culture and goodwill. Within the islander community clan and kinship play an important role in social, political and religious life. The roles and responsibilities within the clans are defined. Responsibilities are shared, and they are also defined by men's and women's role. In times of cultural significant events or rituals these responsibilities are obligatory and taken on by the designated person/s. E.g. Initiation of boys/girls, traditional hunting, gardening, naming of a child, funeral - tombstone unveiling, performing arts [storytelling/ dance/ choreography/song composition], carving, weaving to name a few. Every clan has its owns identity i.e. Totem, patriarchal lines, songs, dances, stories, cosmology and spiritual beliefs etc. The clan stories were gathered and recorded by the late Margaret Lawrie in the published books, *Myths and legends of Torres Strait /* collected and translated by Margaret Lawrie and *Tales from Torres Strait /* collected and translated by Margaret Lawrie.

Contemporary Issues [examples]

- Cultural Maintenance
- Governance
- Health
- Housing
- Illegal Fishing
- Global Warming
- Education
- Employment
- Fishing Rights [Sea Rights]
- Native Title

Pronunciation

Dhari = da-ree

Protocols & Etiquette

Adha gar tidi: cultural sensitivity in the Western Torres Strait by Rod and Judy Kennedy, with the people of the west.

Mina mir lo ailan mun: proper communication with the Torres Strait Islander people by Queensland.

Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. <http://jolopac.slq.qld.gov.au/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?SC=Author&SEQ=20060309144539&PID=1109&SA=Queensland.++Office+of+Aboriginal+and+Torres+Strait+Islander+Affairs> <http://www.datsip.qld.gov.au/pdf/minamir.pdf>

Torres Strait Fact sheets

Contact the Indigenous Resource Officers, Heritage Collections, State Library of Queensland.
[O:\ILS\Marketing and Communication\Fact Sheets]

Books

Eseli's Notebook / Anna Shnukal, Rod Mitchell, Yuriko Nagata.

Mina mir lo ailan mun: proper communication with the Torres Strait Islander people / DATSIP

Adha gar tidi: cultural sensitivity in the Western Torres Strait / Rod and Jody Kennedy

Woven histories, dancing lives : Torres Strait islander identity, culture and history / edited by Richard Davis.

Reality of a dark history : from contact and conflict to cultural recognition / Val Donovan

http://jolopac.slq.qld.gov.au/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?v1=1&ti=1.1&Search_Arg=reality+of+a+dark&Search_Code=TKEY&PID=2046&CNT=10&SEQ=20060309145621&SID=1 *Navigating boundaries : the Asian diaspora in Torres Strait* / editors Anna Shnukal, Guy Ramsay and Yuriko Nagata.

The Torres Strait : people and history / John Singe

Stars of Tagai : the Torres Strait Islanders / Nonie Sharp

Wings across the sea / John J.E. Done ; comp. by Barbara Stevenson

Black diggers: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War / Hall Robert Anthony

Broken: an introduction to the creole language of Torres Strait / Anna Shnukal

Mixed relations / Regiona Ganter

Websites

<http://www.tsra.gov.au>

<http://www.maq.org.au/profdev/cal2000/ilan.htm>

<http://taqaisc.eq.edu.au/wcmss/>

http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/torres_strait/

<http://www.torres.qld.gov.au/>

<http://www.abc.net.au/nature/island/ep4/default.htm>

<http://www.atsip.qld.gov.au/everybods-business/protocols-torres-strait-islander/>

<http://www.ozhorizons.com.au/hotels/qld/cairns/poruma-island-resort>

Torres Strait Bibliography

<http://www.uq.edu.au/ATSIS/index.html?page=41660&pid=0>

State Library of Queensland

Heritage Collection

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Picture Queensland

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