

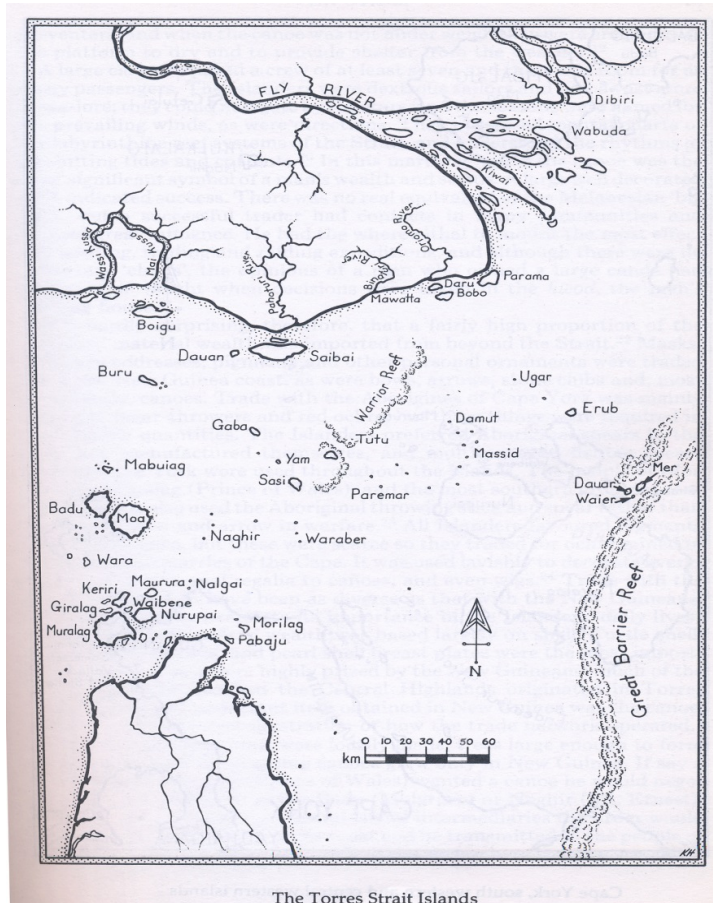


Information Sheet 14: Australian South Sea Islanders in Torres Strait

The Torres Strait Islanders are one of Australia's indigenous peoples. Since the 1860s they have been host to many different migrants, both long and short term. Thursday (Waiben) Island became famous as a cross-roads of cultures when Indians, Chinese, Malays, Filipinos and Pacific Islanders were all involved in pearl-diving in the Strait. Pacific Islanders, or South Sea Islanders, were one of the major immigrant communities.

The population of the Torres Strait Islands before sustained contact with foreigners was no more than 5,000. Most Torres Strait islands had populations below 500; only two of the twenty major islands were big enough to support large populations, and they were relatively infertile. The Islanders depended on canoes which linked all islands into successful groups. The Top Western Islands, Boigu (Talbot), Dauan (Mt Cornwallis) and Saibai were one group. They shifted village sites with the seasons, were mound-and-ditch cultivators, as well as drawing their livelihood from the sea. Another group was 60 km to the south, Mabuiag (Jarvis), Badu (Mulgrave); Moa (Banks), and Muralug (Prince of Wales); although the channel between Badu and Moa is small, the cultural gap between these islands was larger and these south-west islands shared more characteristics with the peoples of Cape York. Their territory is large but the number of inhabitants was small: 200 to 250 on Moa, and 50 to 100 on Muralug. Their primary focus was on the sea and they regularly shifted village sites. All the western Islanders from Saibai to Muralug spoke variations of Kala Lagaw Ya, an Australian language.

The eastern side of the Strait spoke a Papuan language, Meriam Mir. Erub (Darnley), Ugar (Stephen) and Mer (Murray) are old volcanic cores surrounded by reefs and at the top of the Great Barrier Reef. They were densely populated and had permanent beach villages with extensive gardens. The neighbouring sea is deep and rich in marine foods. The remaining three groups are Massid (Yorke), Aurid (Aureed), Damut (Dalrymple), Muar (Rennel), Paremar (Coconut); Tutu (Warrior), Yam (Turtle-backed), Giaka (Dungeness) and Gaba (Two Brothers); and Naghir (Mt Ernest), and Waraber (Sue). Now often called the central Islands, they are the newest and least fertile islands. They traded widely with the coast of New Guinea and Cape York. By the end of the nineteenth century the overall population of the Torres Strait Islands had been reduced through introduced disease to around 3,000 to 2,000. The official estimates are 2,000 in the 1910s (excluding St Paul's Anglican Mission on Moa and Thursday Island), 3,000 in 1922, 5,000 in 1948, 7,259 in 1960 and 16,533 in 1976, all well in excess of anthropologist Jeremy Beckett's estimates.¹



Source: Steve Mullins, *Torres Strait: A History of Colonial Occupation and Culture Contact*, Rockhampton: Central Queensland University Press, 1995, p. 13.

Torres Strait is a maritime thoroughfare and market place facilitating the flow of commodities, through the islands in the Strait, south down Cape York, and onto the New Guinea mainland west to Frederik Hendrick Island and east to the delta of the Fly River. The Strait contains more than 100 islands and islets as well as a multitude of coral cays, reefs and mud banks. The success of the inhabitants of the Strait depended on their relationship with their neighbours on the mainlands north and south, and there is evidence of regular contact for raiding and trading. The peoples of the New Guinea mainland opposite Torres Strait, from the Fly delta to the Mai Kussa River near Boigu, share its reefs and waters with the Islanders and have extensive kinship and cultural links, similar to those connecting people from southern Torres Strait to the Aborigines of Cape York. Two large changes occurred in the 1860s and 1870s: the formation of Queensland with its territorial limits focussed on the connection with Cape York which caused a de-emphasis of the links with New Guinea; and South Sea (Pacific) Islanders arrived on board *bêche-de-mer*, pearl-shelling and missionary vessels. Before the early twentieth century when Merauke was established by the Dutch in south-central New Guinea, the Marind-Anim (also known as the Tugeri) quite regularly marauded east as far as the Fly River. Their territory ran from the coast near Frederick Hendrik Island 400 km to the west, to beyond Merauke with outposts further east as far as the Moorhead River on the New Guinea coast and inland to Lake Murray. Jan van Baal suggests that the motives for the raids were primarily part of rituals, not warfare and not part of exchange networks. Their big canoes raided far afield, the distance lessening the chance of retaliation.

The people of New Guinea's Trans-Flu are not easily separable from those of northern Torres Strait. Inhabiting a vast lowland region east to the Fly River estuary, cut by sluggish muddy rivers, villagers relied for sustenance on swidden agriculture, sago making, fishing, gathering bush foods and hunting. In the final decades of the nineteenth century they were being squeezed by aggressive raids from the Marind-Anim and the Kiwaians to the east. In the 1870s, Boigu was raided by hundreds of fighting men from the Marind-Anim, and in 1880, the whole population of Boigu took refuge on Dauan (Cornwalis) Island after an attack from the mainland. Raids by war canoes from New Guinea into the northern islands of the Strait continued to be common during the 1880s and had depopulated the northern islands to a large extent.

Queensland's northern outpost of Government, Somerset on Cape York, began operating in 1864, replaced in 1877 by Thursday Island in the Strait. The Strait was within first New South Wales' and then Queensland's sphere of influence (as a three mile limit) long before Queensland's colonial boundary was extended in 1872 and 1879 eventually to include the whole of Torres Strait. The several major European explorations of the Strait in the first half of the nineteenth century all emanated from New South Wales, or were British naval expeditions. Missionaries were among the first colonists on Cape York and in Torres Strait: the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel at Somerset (1867-1868) and the London Missionary Society based at Somerset, and Mer (Murray) Island (1871-1914). Traders working out of Sydney, Singapore and Hong Kong searching for tortoiseshell were already making voyages as far as Torres Strait in the 1840s and 1850s. As sandalwood reserves were cut out and maritime resources were depleted around the New Hebrides and New Caledonia in the late 1850s, traders began planning to move to the Queensland coast.

Nearly sixty Pacific Islanders were on board William Paddon's *Julia Percy* when the ship arrived at Lizard Islands from Dillon's Bay, Erromanga late in 1860, to establish a *bêche-de-mer* station.² These men came from Maré, Lifu in the Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia, Tanna, Erronanga, Eromanga, Aneitym in the New Hebrides, and Solomon Islands.³ By 1870 there were about seven vessels in Torres Strait employing about 150 South Sea Islanders, the majority males. They were employed at beach camps on the north-eastern and central islands. Commonly there were European overseers but more experienced Polynesians were also used to oversee labour. South Sea Islanders were also skippers on the luggers which roamed about the Strait in search of new *bêche-de-mer* grounds and fresh fruit and vegetable to supplement trade store rations. By about 1872 there were around 500 of these 'foreign' Islanders working in Torres Strait, mainly from the Loyalty Islands, the southern New Hebrides., and perhaps a very few Solomon Islanders.⁴ Very few of the South Sea Islanders in the Strait were introduced through trickery. Most were legally recruited in Sydney or a Queensland port and many were professional seamen, particularly the Loyalty Islanders. In the 1870s there were labour strikes among South Sea Islanders in Torres Strait. Mullins reports on a strike in 1872 and that in 1877 at the Thursday Island bench there were 125 cases of infringements of labour agreements under the *Merchant Seaman's Act*, also an indication that they were not bound by the 1868 *Polynesian Labourers Act* which controlled immigrant Islanders on the mainland.⁵ In 1872 when Queensland extended its border north to 100 km from the coast of Cape York, the government refused to issue licences under the 1868 Act for work in Torres Strait, although by 1875 this was relaxed and time-expired agricultural labourers with a maritime background began to be engaged. In 1876 seventy-five Solomon Islanders were engaged on licences issued in New South Wales, although Queensland ensured that this never happened again. Over decades, the main South Sea Islanders employed in the Strait were mission-educated experienced men, not the 'new chums' on the sugar plantations on the

mainland. In the 1870s, South Sea Islander crew earned £3 a month on pearl luggers, but South Sea Islander skippers and 'hard hat' divers could earn up to £300 in a season. These men were living on most of the inhabited central and north-east islands.⁶ As the century continued some South Sea Islanders began to work their own family luggers.⁷

Close behind came the staff of the London Missionary Society, gathered from Pacific Islands where evangelism was already advanced. These were also from the Loyalty Islands but included some from Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands and Rotuma.⁸ Most of the mission staff arrived married, but over time some local matches were made. The LMS teachers relied on the Loyalty Island links to bind them to the pearling elite. The 1875 measles epidemic which spread throughout the eastern Pacific also affected Torres Strait. It was interpreted as a supernatural sign and led to large scale conversions.

These South Sea Islanders precipitated change in the Strait and often became cultural middlemen between Torres Strait Islanders and Europeans. They introduced young Torres Strait Islander men to work in the maritime industries and although conditions on the boats were harsh, Torres Strait Islanders took to the life quickly, of their own choice. Steve Mullins describes how over three years, 1871 to 1873, almost the entire adult male population of Mabuiag worked in the fishery. Another change was to central villages near missionary settlements, rather than in the scattered beach hamlets that had previously been the style in the north-east. Houses became more substantial in Loyalty Island style. Anna Shnukal's analysis of Torres Strait Creole (Broken) suggests that the dominant external influence in Torres Strait between 1870 and 1940 was not European but South Sea Islander, and that at an early stage their presence began to alter the traditional languages, partly because they found it difficult to pronounce some words and substituted their own.⁹ Beckett explained how the descendants of this first generation of South Sea Islanders developed into an elite in Torres Strait, which he described as a 'skipper class'.¹⁰

In 1901, South Sea Islanders in Torres Strait faced the same deportation order as those on the mainland. One category of exemption that emerged was those who had lived in Australia for more than twenty years. For those resident in Torres Strait, a reserve was established on Moa Island in 1904 which later became St Pauls Anglican Mission.¹¹ In 1914 the LMS left Torres Strait, having long regarded the area as a backwater of its operations in the Australian Territory of Papua. The Anglican Church accepted the charge. The Anglican colony on Moa continued. The South Sea Islanders fell outside the *Aboriginal Protection Act* until 1934 when an amendment widened the terms of the Act to include Torres Strait residents of South Sea Island origin and others known locally as 'Thursday Island half-castes'.¹²

As John Singe concludes, "many of those on Erub, Mer, Masih [Massid] and Mabuiag were actually South Sea Islanders or their descendants. In 1850 the population of only three of these islands, Saibai, Erub and Mer, would have exceeded this total. Thus it can be seen by what a slim thread Torres Strait Islanders escaped total extension."¹³ Nonie Sharp concludes that on Erub (Darnley) there was a dwindling indigenous population which "became subsidiary to immigrant South Sea Islanders as early as the 1870s... In 1885 all the South Sea Islanders at Mer were expelled and resettled at Darnley Island."¹⁴

Shift to the Mainland

Since the 1940s Torres Strait Islanders have shifted to the mainland in large numbers, living in the same Queensland towns as South Sea Islanders who had worked in the sugar industry. They also worked in outback Queensland and Western Australia on the railways. During the decades since then

a large amount of intermarriage has taken place, probably the most famous case of all being that of Edward Koiki Mabo (1936-1992) to Bonita Neehow of Aboriginal and South Sea Islander descent, from the Gardens at Halifax near Ingham. They raised ten children. (The 1992 'Mabo Case' in the High Court established customary ownership of indigenous land in Australia.¹⁵) Establishing the extent of the interlinking between Australian South Sea Islanders and Torres Strait Islanders is difficult as most people from Torres Strait choose to identify as Torres Strait Islanders, regardless of their complex ancestry. In 2011 the Australia Bureau of Statistics identified 38,134 Australians as of Torres Strait descent, 24,386 of them in Queensland.¹⁶ The spread of Torres Strait Islanders with South Sea Islander ancestry is likely to be even in the Strait and on the mainland.

Conclusion

The dominant culture in the Strait is that of the original Torres Strait Islanders. The inescapable conclusion is most Torres Strait Islanders are related to South Sea Islanders through marriage links. Not much of the South Sea descent is directly from the sugar fields of Queensland, as it also involved crews engaged in Sydney and the Polynesian descendants of the mission teachers. However, the connections are well established. Estimating exact numbers and proportions is difficult and all that is intended here is to point out the depth and complexity of the relationship.

**Prepared by Professor Clive Moore, University of Queensland: c.moore@uq.edu.au; 0419676123
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Sincerely,



Yours sincerely,

President Australian South Sea Islanders (Interim National Body)

P.O. Box 117, Pyrmont

SYDNEY NSW 2009

email: assi.pj@gmail.com

mobile: 0416 300 946

<http://www.facebook.com/groups/assipj/>