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My Island Home:  
A study of identity across different  
generations of Torres Strait Islanders living  
outside the Torres Strait

Thesis submitted by  
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in June 2009

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the School of Indigenous Australian  
Studies

James Cook University

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## **Statement of Contribution of Others Including Financial and Editorial Help**

Financial support has been provided by Australian Research Council (fieldwork), Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (Malaytown Digital History Project), School of Indigenous Australian Studies (JCU) (administrative support and conference attendance) and Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (incorporating the School of Indigenous Australian Studies JCU) (conference attendance).

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# Abstract

This thesis is a study of identity across different generations of Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait (also referred to as 'Mainlanders'). The research aims, firstly, to examine the representation of identity across different generations of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait; secondly, to analyse critical aspects of this identity; and, thirdly, to explore new ways of representing 'Mainland Islander' identity in contemporary society.

Since the end of World War Two, the Torres Strait Islander diaspora, located on the mainland of Australia, has continued to grow to the extent that it now represents just over 85 percent (40,367 people) of the total Torres Strait Islander population (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2007). The period immediately following World War Two marked the beginning of mass internal migration of Torres Strait Islanders to the Australian mainland. There are many different pathways and passages that Islanders followed in the journey from the Torres Strait to the mainland. Many Islanders, including my family, made the journey voluntarily as they looked for work and other life opportunities. Some Islanders were forcibly removed from their islands; the journey made under duress with circumstances that paralleled the oppressive conditions they experienced in the Torres Strait. Other Islanders arrived on the mainland because of environmental or historical circumstances, such as the evacuations required during the flooding of Saibai Island in the 1930s and later during World War Two.

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of both Cultural Studies and Indigenous Studies, this qualitative study focuses on the narratives of twenty-three participant Storytellers representing first, second and third generation Torres Strait Islanders (mainly) living outside the Torres Strait. The research sites included the mainland Islander communities of Cairns, Townsville, Mackay, Brisbane and Canberra as well as Badu and Erub Islands in the Torres Strait.

A review of current government legislation and policies pertaining to Islanders living outside the Torres Strait reveals a form of identity politics that sees 'Mainlanders' positioned in binary oppositions and deficit cultural discourses. In contrast, this research articulates a story of 'Mainlander' relatedness, a multilayered and complex process of identification across generations of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. This story of 'Mainlander' relatedness represents a composite counter-narrative to claims of cultural and political dissolution and displacement for a population (increasingly) born and raised outside the Torres Strait. It is articulated through a strong sense of place identity, relating and connecting across generations, the shared experiences and memories of belonging to an *Island Home*. The relational aspect of place identity, in turn, informs our knowledge of who we are, our connections with ourselves, each other and our position in the world. This research presents key insights into the way Islanders negotiate and contest the contemporary 'Mainlander' experience in the everyday through utilisation of multimedia, the arts and technology in the creation of systems of representation, cultural expression and interconnectivity between individuals and the collective.



New political approaches must be open to ‘Mainlander’ representations of identity that are grounded in the connection to Island Homes but, at the same time, shaped, influenced and negotiated within the context of our experiences, history and connection to the mainland. We ‘Mainlanders’ are equally responsible for reviewing our own institutional systems and practices, critiquing the way we are positioned by others and ourselves in political and social discourses, and understanding how we might articulate the spaces from which we speak of our lived realities and experiences as *Ailan Pipel* (Islander People).

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# Chapter 1

## The Many Faces of Torres Strait Islander Identity

### 1.1 Introduction

I begin this thesis with the Story of my sister's children, my nephew and niece.

My nephew, now aged 24 years, and my niece, now aged 22 years, grew up in Cairns in North Queensland with a Christian Torres Strait Islander mother, also born and raised in Cairns, and a Muslim Indian father, born and raised in Singapore. With such a background, their sense of cultural identity was, and still is, orchestrated in a rich tapestry of interwoven cultural experiences including custom, religion, language, music and cuisine to name but a few.

Growing up in Cairns, my nephew and niece lived Torres Strait Islander culture as practiced, interpreted and passed down from generation to generation. Since childhood, they made numerous trips to Singapore for family and cultural events and have been immersed in a multitude of Indian traditions, also as practiced, interpreted and passed down from one generation to the next. Their understanding of Islander-Christian ways, customs, practices, traditions and protocols is paralleled by their understanding of their Indian-Islamic heritage. My niece expresses herself as a young Islander woman through various pieces of artwork she has created. She also *salaams* (a traditional greeting) her Indian grandparents on occasions such as reuniting after a long

absence. My nephew currently works in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program area in the Australian Public Service in Canberra and performs with a Bollywood dance group in his spare time.

My nephew and niece have grown up in very different households from that of their Torres Strait Islander mother and maternal grandparents, just as the first generation of 'Mainland Islanders' did compared with their previous generation. Born into a globalised world of advanced technology, political savvy and socio-economic opportunity, they have travelled and/or lived overseas, achieved, or near completed, tertiary education and speak multiple languages. To their mother's people, they are Islanders (footnoted with an Indian-Singaporean father); to their father's people, they are Indian (footnoted with an Islander-Australian mother) (see Figure 1.1).

Like many Torres Strait Islanders of their generation, they carry within themselves the sense of responsibility, expectation and allegiance of a dynamic world of interchangeable and co-existent cultural identities. With the passage of time each of their predecessor generations has added another element of complexity to this phenomenon of Torres Strait Islander cultural identity through inter-island travel/resettlement, movement outside the Torres Strait and inter-marriage. It is challenging to the outsider who fails to keep pace with these complexities but, generally, not so for younger Islander people like my nephew and niece who look to family members, elders and historical family legacies to shape and inform who they are as Island people.



My nephew, aged approximately 8 years, during NAIDOC Day celebrations (Cairns, 1992) is dressed in an Islander calico and hand-made lei. He is about to perform a dance set with other Islander boys in front of his school.



My niece, aged approximately 6 years, wearing traditional Islander dance wear and about to perform with other Islander girls at the NAIDOC Day school celebrations (Cairns, 1992).



My nephew, aged approximately 9 years, on the occasion of his father's brother's wedding (Singapore, 1993) dressed in traditional Islamic attire and, as part of the groom's entourage, he also wears an Indian wedding garland. He is about to take his place alongside the groom and other male members of the family at the mosque ceremony.



My niece, aged approximately 7 years, on the occasion of her father's brother's wedding (Singapore, 1993) wears Islamic traditional attire for an Indian girl of her age and is about to join the women members of her father's family at the mosque wedding ceremony.

### ***Figure 1.1 Faces of Torres Strait Islander Identity<sup>1</sup>***

Around the 1920s, their maternal great Grandmother, Felecia Pitt, journeyed with her family from the Torres Strait Island of Erub to the mainland of Australia, settling near the Bloomfield River and later in the fringe dwelling shantytown of Malaytown in Cairns. They were fortunate to be born in her lifetime and, although she passed away when they were aged 4 and 2 respectively, she remains their earliest

<sup>1</sup> My nephew and niece growing up in multicultural environments and contexts.

memory of what it means to belong to an Islander family. From their great-Grandmother's passage to the mainland, a voyage fraught with hardship and difficulty, of a hopeful future or imminent shipwreck, our story as 'Mainland Torres Strait Islanders' begins.

## **1.2 The Research Focus**

This thesis is a study of identity across different generations of Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait (also referred to as 'Mainlanders'). The research aims, firstly, to examine the representation of identity across different generations of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait; secondly, to analyse critical aspects of this identity; and thirdly, to explore new ways of representing 'Mainland Islander' identity in contemporary society.

## **1.3 Background to the Study**

Since the end of World War Two, the Torres Strait Islander diaspora, located on the mainland of Australia, has continued to grow to the extent that it now represents just over 85 percent (40,367 people) of the total Torres Strait Islander population (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2007) with the majority of Islanders now living in North Queensland (see Appendices A & B). Inspired by the promise of better opportunities for employment and education, Islanders have moved away from their ancestral home islands with a view to establishing new communities on the mainland. There are many different pathways and passages that Islanders followed in the journey from the Torres Strait to the mainland. Many Islanders made the journey voluntarily as they looked for work and other life opportunities on the mainland. Some Islanders were forcibly removed from their islands, the journey made under duress with circumstances



that paralleled the oppressive conditions they experienced in the Torres Strait. Other Islanders arrived on the mainland because of environmental or historical circumstances, such as evacuations required during the flooding of Saibai Island in the 1930s and later during World War Two.

Prior to World War Two, restrictive government legislation enacted during the colonial period had prevented the free movement of Islanders, whether it was for travel between islands in the Torres Strait or movement between the region and the mainland (Shnukal, 2001). World War Two meant new opportunities for Islander men enlisted in the defence forces to travel and work alongside fellow white soldiers. Islander women, similarly, took on extra functions and duties at this time and assumed greater decision making roles in the process (Osborne, 1997). The Islander soldiers' strike for equal pay, in 1943, evidenced a renewed sense of collective resistance to colonial control over their lives and their livelihood (Nakata, 2004a). While Islander social structures were beginning to change in response to external events, so too were their economic circumstances.

By the mid 1950s, the pearl-shell and trochus markets that had sustained the economic growth in the Torres Strait in the previous decades were in the final stages of collapse (Arthur, 2004; Beckett, 1987). With limited opportunities for employment, Islander men were gradually permitted by the authorities to travel from the Torres Strait to the Australian mainland to participate in the burgeoning labour market which initially focussed on the sugarcane, railways and marine industries (Cromwell, 1983). For most of the Islanders working on the mainland there were minimal, if no, controls over their movement and their earnings. The possibilities for new and better lives to be made on

the mainland encouraged many Islanders to think about a more permanent settlement for themselves and their families. That first wave of movement of Islanders set in train the passage of travel that sees the majority of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait (Shnukal & Ramsay, 2004).

#### **1.4 Defining the ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islander’**

The ambiguity surrounding who constitutes a ‘Mainlander’ draws attention to the way this group has been categorised and accounted for in both policy making and the literature. There is no definition of ‘Mainland Islanders’ to be found in relevant legislation or related policy documents. The Australian Bureau of Statistics, for the purposes of census collection, similarly, does not specify a category for ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islanders’. Even the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs, a body set up at the time under the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) to monitor ‘Mainland Islander’ policy issues, did not articulate who constituted their primary client group:

The Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs has a monitoring and reporting role in relation to programs and policies affecting Torres Strait Islanders. While the office is required to *pay particular attention to the needs of Torres Strait Islanders who live on the Australian mainland*, its practical operation has made it a focus for all Torres Strait Islander Issues. (Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board (TSIAB), 1996, p. 16, my emphasis)

Similarly, the former Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board, one of the key representative bodies for ‘Mainland Islanders’, did not specify or define its constituent group:

The function of the Advisory Board is to provide advice to the Minister, and the Commission for the purpose of furthering social, economic and cultural advancement of Torres Strait Islanders ... *While the Act does not say so, the orientation of the TSIAB is towards Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland.* This is reinforced by the constitution of the Board, comprising a Chairperson appointed by the Minister being the Commissioner for the Torres Strait and six other members drawn from New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria, and Tasmania, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory. (TSIAB, 1996, p. 16, my emphasis)

The lack of shared understanding or agreement about who constitutes a ‘Mainlander’ has contributed to derision about, and confusion over, how Islanders living outside the Torres Strait should be addressed in political and social spheres. Islanders who live in the Torres Strait are referred to as ‘Islanders’ but Islanders living outside the Torres Strait carry the additional tag of the ‘other’ as ‘Mainlanders’ or ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islanders’. The placement of the Mainland title as the primary descriptor represents a form of hybridity that paradoxically reproduces a contingent essentialism of identity positions. Bhatia (2002) refers to ‘in-between’ identities, claiming that hyphenated labels, such as Indian-Americans or Chinese-Canadians, represent not only dislocation and displacement but a “violent shuttling of migrant identity between two incompatible worlds” (p. 55). In this case, the ‘hyphen’,

metaphorically placed between the 'Mainland' and 'Torres Strait Islander' represents a 'between two cultures' assumption evident in the binary oppositions of the Torres Strait and the mainland. The power constructs derived from these binary discourses often shift attention away from the context, meaning and practice of cultural identities positioned outside the Torres Strait.

It is acknowledged that Islander people living outside the Torres Strait refer to themselves as 'Mainlanders' (I attended the *National Mainland Torres Strait Islanders Conference* on the Gold Coast in November 2003). The terms 'Mainlander' and 'Mainland Torres Strait Islander', however, are unfortunately laden with a negative political and social history (discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis). If Islanders living outside the Torres Strait are ever to claim a space as being something more than the 'Other Islanders' then it is timely to re-think the modes of creation, and the maintenance of, social and spatial divisions that characterise the relationship between 'Mainlanders' and Islanders in the Torres Strait. It is for this reason that this thesis uses Islanders living outside the Torres Strait (used interchangeably with Islanders living on the mainland) as the preferred terminology with 'Mainlander' and 'Mainland Torres Strait Islanders' denoted in inverted commas. The interviewees who participated in this research study were free to describe themselves individually and collectively using whatever terminology they wished and this is reflected in their quotes in Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis.

## **1.5 My Position in the Research**

Identity has a history. (Woodward, 2002, p. 1)

As far back as I can remember, our paternal Grandmother (Felecia Watkin, nee Pitt) would always remind us to ‘know what road you come from’. The road she referred to had its origins in a black, charismatic and adventurous seafarer from Jamaica named Douglas Pitt who, through either fate or design, sailed half way around the world to arrive on the shores of the eastern islands of the Torres Strait (see Figure 1.2) where he met and married my great-great Grandmother Sophie. They would live and have children on Mer before moving across the way to Erub. My Grandmother, after whom I was named, was born on Erub two generations later, spending her formative years growing up on the island with her brothers and sister. The entrepreneurial legacy of Douglas Pitt Senior was imparted to his sons and grandsons who would eventually leave the Torres Strait, along with their sisters, in search of opportunities to operate their fishing luggers on the mainland, namely Bloomfield in the Cape York Peninsula during the 1920s and 1930s. My Father was born in Bloomfield around this time. Prompted by the need for increased employment and educational opportunities, my Grandmother relocated with my Father and his younger brother to Malaytown in Cairns close to the time of the outbreak of World War Two.

My Mother’s side of the family represents the cultural pluralism that characterises the Torres Strait and its contact with the outside world. Emanating from a community of Malay fishermen and pearl divers from the turn of the last century, my Mother’s family lived and worked on Mabuiag Island before relocating to Badu some time later. My Grandmother, Leah Ahmat, met and married my Grandfather, Philimeno Canuto, an Islander of Filipino and Chinese heritage, on Thursday Island. Driven by the opportunity for better paid work on the mainland, Philimeno and Leah moved to Darwin before my Grandmother and the children were forced to evacuate during the

World War Two bombing of the city. They ended up in Cairns and, after several years of forced separation during the war, were reunited. They raised a family of eight daughters and four sons (my Mother being the fourth eldest). My Mother and Father met as young adults mixing in the same circles of the Torres Strait Islander community in Cairns. They married in 1958 and had four children, of whom I am the second youngest.

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*Figure 1.2 Map of Torres Strait<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Retrieved 3 February 2009 from [http://www.worldstatesmen.org/Australian\\_States.html](http://www.worldstatesmen.org/Australian_States.html)

Although an abridged version of my family history, and how I came to be, is presented here, the version of events, as told by my Grandmother, was far more complex and creative, complete with embellishments, disclosures and omissions within the narrative of the ‘road we came from’. The Stories of our origins, conveyed in the traditions of oral Storytelling, were saturated with the intricacies and explanations of our connections to other individuals and families within our community. Reflecting on this process now, it is apparent that the Stories of our origin and interconnection with others served to provide the context within which discourses of culture, ceremony and tradition were enabled. My Grandmother was not only mapping out a course of identification for us as young Islanders, she was, in the process, providing the meaning of these Stories and events. Childhood recollections of my father husking and scraping coconuts in our backyard and my mother squeezing the coconut milk to make *sop sop* somehow made sense because it facilitated a link to our ancestral past. In this way, the Stories of our past helped to create a present day narrative of my identity. Anthias (2002) notes how, ‘identity’ emerges through the narratives of people’s Stories about themselves, their lives and their experiences, “[t]he narrative is also both a story about who and what we identify with (a story about identification) and is also a story about our practices and the practices of others” (p. 498).

As a Torres Strait Islander woman born and raised in Cairns on the mainland of Australia, I am placed very firmly within the concerns of this research rather than sitting somewhere outside it. As Davies (1999) notes “all researchers are to some degree connected to, a part of, the object of their research” (p. 3). Emerging public debates over Torres Strait autonomy and independence, native title and political voice exposed the micro and macro dimensions of language and communication and, in the

process, demonstrated how wider discourses of power were enacted within social relations of identity, culture and community. Schulz (1998) argues that differential access to resources influences the extent to which individual actors are able to create chosen identities, the extent to which identities are imposed or challenged and the meanings associated with those identities. The concept of identity became central to my inquiry, then, into the ways cultural and discursive descriptions of ‘Mainland Islanders’ pertained to notions of sameness and difference, the personal and the social, the ideal and the political (Barker, 2004).

While I readily found examples of how ‘identity’ was used in our everyday language, I was challenged to find how identity manifested itself in our everyday lives. My own lived experience, as demonstrated by the following anecdote, underscores the social and cultural challenges faced by Torres Strait Islanders (particularly those living outside the Torres Strait) in negotiating the personal ebb and flow of our everyday lives.

It is the year 2000 and I am entering my ninth year as a senior policy officer in the Queensland public service in Brisbane. I am running late for a meeting that is a couple of blocks away from my building. I grab my bag and run down the hallway towards the lift. The doors open. In the lift was a man I had seen on many previous occasions. He is white, slightly balding with strawberry blonde hair and much shorter than me, always in corporate attire, might be mid-forties. He works in the same building and we often catch the lift together, exchanging pleasantries about the weather, the traffic, the Broncos’ game on the weekend. I join him in the lift and smile. The button for the ground floor is already pressed. The lift starts to descend. Here is what happens next:



Man: Hello.

Me: Hello.

Man: You know I've always wanted to ask you where you are from.

Me: Me?

Man: Yes, where are you from?

Me: I'm from the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor.

Man: No where you are from originally?

Me: I'm originally from Cairns.

Man: No, no, I mean where is your family from?

Me: My family is from Cairns too.

Man: No, I mean what is your cultural background, I can't pick it.

Me: I'm Torres Strait Islander.

Man: Are you sure? You don't look like a Torres Strait Islander!

Me: Yes, I'm sure. You need to get out more.

*Ding!* The lift jolts to a stop and the doors open. I start to walk ahead of him.

He rushes to catch up.

Man: You know I wouldn't have picked you for a Torres Strait Islander, I would have said you were Indian.

Me: Gotta go. See you later.

I thought to myself, I'm never speaking to this idiot again. And I never did.

Such encounters serve as a constant reminder that identity is never just a matter of self-perception or representation, but rather a contested site within which others may seek to question, deliberate and even argue your claims to that same identity.

## **1.6 Historical Context of Torres Strait Islander Identity**

There have been previous examinations of Torres Strait Islander identity including the description and analysis of custom and culture (Beckett, 1987; Davis, 2004), contact and cultural creolisation (Shnukal, 1995; Shnukal & Ramsay, 2004), political resistance and collectivism (Kehoe-Forutan, 2004; Nakata, 2004a; Sharp, 1980a, 1980b, 1993; Shnukal 2004) and dimensions of Self and construction of the Other (Fuery, 2000). The historical and social construction of Torres Strait Islander identity has reflected, in part, government policies and responses to Torres Strait Islander (and Aboriginal) people at various points in time. Nagar (1997) cautions that identity theory needs to be geographically and historically contextualised, allowing the range of social multiplicities we consider as researchers to expand and alter according to the places and time periods we study. In situations of historical oppression, one group or the other seeks not only to redefine or reassert its identity, but to change, reform or overthrow the system of institutional and ideological power that maintains the identity (Stokes, 1997). My focus on identity, therefore, represents an emerging trend for Indigenous people to engage in the debate on the politics of identity and to critique the assumptions underpinning notions of self and social identity (Bourke, 1998; Nakata, 2007; Schulz, 1998; Smith, 1999).

The question of identity, together with the understanding, the conceptualisation and the representation of identity is omnipresent in Indigenous Australian social discourse (Dudgeon, Garvey & Pickett, 2000). However, the position of Indigenous people within identity discourse has been largely confined to debates over who is being defined and by whom (Ariss, 1988; Borsboom & Hulsker, 2000; Bourke, 1998; Gardiner-Gaden, 2003). Within the same literature, however, the degree to which

Indigenous identity politics is tied to oppression theory and characterised by essentialism does not appear to have been fully explored. Such essentialism reflects a search for identity premised on the idea that there is such a ‘thing’ to be found, a timeless core of the self that we all possess (Barker, 2000). In particular, the struggle to redefine Indigenous identity and, by association, Torres Strait Islander identity has gravitated the relevant discourse towards a more essentialist view of identity politics, as Indigenous people themselves seek ways to validate and authenticate self-claims of cultural affiliation (Dudgeon, 1999).

As Torres Strait Islanders, we talk of identity as being at the core of who we are, an almost tangible concept that can be proudly displayed for the world to see:

The exhibition *Ilan Pasin*, like other landmark Torres Strait Islander initiatives, *shows the strength of Torres Strait culture and identity* within the Australian and global community. (Mosby & Robinson, 1998, p. 13, my emphasis)

We emphasise the strength of our identity under conditions of change and flux and the movement of people to the mainland:

Torres Strait Islanders *retain a strong identity with their home island*, even if living on the mainland. (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HRSCATSIA), 1997a, p. 9, my emphasis)

We also speak of identity and culture as something that can be lost, particularly by our young people:

Young people are *losing their culture*. We need to involve young people more in Torres Strait Islander community activities, to teach them more about our culture, and to involve them more with elders. (TSIAB, 1996, p. 21, my emphasis)

Although identity is often expressed in terms of loss and cultural shortcomings it can similarly be expressed as a marker of empowerment and self-expression, particularly when one can speak of identity with some authority:

Irrespective of what happens, irrespective of whether I return to the Torres Strait or not...I know who I am. *I know my identity, I know my culture*. (Jose, 1998, p. 144, my emphasis)

## **1.7 The Political Context of Mainland Torres Strait Islander Identity**

The question of identity for ‘Mainland Islanders’ has surfaced in both formal and informal processes of consultation and subsequent policy making and legislation. In 1997, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HRSCATSIA), on behalf of the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, published the findings of their inquiry titled *Torres Strait Islanders: A New Deal - A Report on Greater Autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders*. The inquiry focussed on Torres Strait Islanders’ calls for greater autonomy for the region including increased control over their own lives. Included in the inquiry’s terms

of reference was what impact greater autonomy would have on Islanders living outside the Torres Strait (HRSCATSIA, 1997a). In the foreword to the report, three interesting issues relating to identity are raised. The first issue deals with perceptions of ‘real’ or more ‘traditional’ Torres Strait Islanders:

Another vital issue in the inquiry was the growth of a diverse population in the region. Torres Strait Islanders comprise the vast majority of the population of the smaller islands, but the concentration of Australians with European, Malay, Indian, Japanese and other backgrounds on Thursday and Horn Islands means that *traditional Torres Strait Islanders* comprise only 75% of the total population of the region. (HRSCATSIA, 1997a, p. x, my emphasis)

This comment, made by the report’s authors, exposes a clear dilemma for the committee in terms of dealing with the question of cultural plurality in the Torres Strait. The issue of cultural plurality represents the intergenerational blending, merging and reinvention of Torres Strait Islander cultural identities (Shnukal & Ramsay, 2004) and appears, at least in the committee’s view, to be incongruent with the notion of a traditional Torres Strait Islander identity. Such essentialism lends itself to exclusionary practices that seek to define, regulate and control representations of authenticity and antiquity (Russell, 2001). In this way, the construction of the traditional Torres Strait Islander, the repository of what is known and understood to be true about Islander culture, traditions and way of life confirms the more hegemonic forms of ‘Islanderness’ that adhere to universal conventions of completeness, tradition and essence. The inherent danger with the committee’s view on this point is that it misrepresents how Torres Strait Islanders, particularly of mixed cultural backgrounds like myself, may

express and further articulate our identities within social discourses of Torres Strait Islander culture, customs and way of life. Ironically, the ‘native’ or more ‘traditional’ Islanders experienced extreme forms of discrimination under colonial rule and were considered by the authorities to be significantly inferior to white people and their ‘mixed race’ Islander counterparts (Shnukal, 2001; Shnukal & Ramsay, 2004).

On the issue of identity for Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait, the HRSCATSIA report made the second interesting point:

A further important factor which the Committee had to face was that any solution regarding greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders in the region might have the effect of disadvantaging those on the mainland. *Many ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islanders’ own land on the island and regard themselves as having their roots in the straits, even though they may be second generation ‘Mainlanders’.* Solutions had to be sought which would protect the unique identity of these ‘Mainlanders’. (HRSCATSIA, 1997a, p. x, my emphasis)

In this statement, the HRSCATSIA makes note of traditional land ownership, confirming that even second generation ‘Mainlanders’ have land ownership of their ancestral home islands. Issues to do with land ownership and custodianship emphasise how place identity is intrinsic to Islanders’ sense of ancestral roots and cultural heritage. This sense of place identity is neither diminished nor devalued with the passage of time or movement away from ancestral home islands. The affiliation and connection ‘Mainland Islanders’ have with their ancestral home islands was demonstrated in the High Court native title case of *Mabo and Others v. the State of Queensland, 1992*.

Although based on the mainland, Eddie Koiki Mabo was able to demonstrate that the inherent birth right to his family's land and the cultural connection to his ancestral home island of Mer had not diminished despite his long term residence outside the Torres Strait. The High Court found in favour of the litigants on 3 June 1992, destroying the legal doctrine of *terra nullius* by which Australia was colonised (Loos, 2005). The Story of Eddie Koiki Mabo, the leading plaintiff of the claim, is used throughout this thesis to demonstrate how Islanders living outside the Torres Strait maintained connections to their ancestral home islands; the ongoing practice of Torres Strait Islander traditions and cultural practice on the mainland; and the establishment of new Islander communities on the mainland.

Although the HRSCATSIA report preceded the landmark Torres Strait Native Title Determinations in 2004, it nevertheless highlighted the legitimacy of 'Mainland Islanders' affiliations to their ancestral home islands (whether they had ever lived there or not). Section 253 of the *Native Title Act 1993* (Commonwealth), defines a Torres Strait Islander as a "descendant of an indigenous inhabitant of the Torres Strait Islands". No distinction is made between Islanders who live in the Torres Strait and those Islanders who live on the mainland or elsewhere. In practice, establishing native title rights is not quite that simple for Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. Notwithstanding the realities, Native Title Determinations in the Torres Strait and beyond confirmed that kinship relationships were the focus for identifying native title holders. Justice Cooper's orders recognising the native title rights of *Erubam Le* (people of Erub) exemplify the approach taken. These orders, constituting a determination by the Federal Court of the existence of Native Title, included the following description of the Native Title claim group:

### **SCHEDULE 3**

#### **NATIVE TITLE HOLDERS**

The Erubam Le People, being:

(a) the members of the Manai, Anson, George, Reuben, Thaiday, Gela, Nelson, Koko, Sailor, Pilot, Dorante, Gutchen, Sebasio, China, Murray, *Lui*, Pau, Sagiba, Idagi, Doolah, Benjamin, Athow, Cook, Ware, Salam, Cowley, Mye, Kiwat, *Pitt*, Sam, Ghee, Solomon, Kabay, Jacobs, Tamwoy, Wacando, Oroki, Ismael, Cedar, Santo, Whaleboat, John, Kabiare, Kanak, Sabatino, Ketchell, Bourne, Susan, Pensio, Anson, Baker, Steven, Alick, Nain, Oui, Sweeney (Morseau), Abednego, Savage, Guivarra, Charlie, Bedford, Kingey, Sipi families who are descended cognatically from one or more of the following people: Amani, Odi (I), Saimo, Narmalai, Nazir Mesepa, Meo, Deri, Ape, Odi (II), Demag, Rebes, Buli, Damui, Baigau, Dako, Malili, Nazir, Bambu, Dobam, Bobok, Nokep, Wadai, Arkerr Malili, Aukapim, Isaka, Kaigod, Kapen, Petelu, Ale, Epei, Bailat, Ema, Boggo Epei, Ikob, Annai, Eti, Aib, Wagai, Gedor, Dabad, Nazir, Kaupa, Nanai Pisupi, Sagiba, Nuku Idagi, Diwadi, Gewar, In, Aukapim, Timoto, Suere, Gemai, Pagai, Pai, Kapen, Kapen Kuk, Spia, Konai, Ani, Morabisi, Koreg, Kuri, Damu, Wasi, Gi, Mamai, Sesei (I), Kakai, Sesei (II), Sida, Maima, Wakaisu, Whaleboat, Supaiya, Tau, Ulud, Waisie, Wasada, Wimet, Mogi, Yart, Ziai, Assau, Oroki, Zib, Nazir or Gaiba; and

(b) Torres Strait Islanders who have been adopted by the above people in accordance with the traditional laws acknowledged and traditional customs observed by those people. (Federal Court of Australia, 2004, n.p., my emphasis on *Lui* and *Pitt* names)



The statistical reality is that many *Erubam Le* and their descendent families, as described in the Determination, now reside outside the Torres Strait. This includes my husband's family (Lui) and my father's family (Pitt). There are branches of the Lui and Pitt families still living on their land at Erub in the eastern Torres Strait so the connection to traditional custodianship of land is maintained. The Native Title Determination recognises that family links and ancestral heritage are the basis of *Erubam Le* identity regardless of where *Erubam Le* might live.

The third interesting issue raised by HRSCATSIA (1997a) refers to the unique identity of these Mainlanders suggesting that identity is something that could be, and should be, 'protected'. Protected 'from whom' and 'from what' is never clarified in the report; however, further analysis from the details of the report's findings and recommendations reveals a language of *deficit* and *lack* with reference to 'Mainlander' identity and cultural matters. Such statements include:

Torres Strait Islanders *retain a strong identity* with their home island, *even if living on the mainland*. (HRSCATSIA, 1997a, p. 9, my emphasis)

In addition, many Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland also identify with Aboriginal ancestors. *They do not wish to choose* between their Torres Strait and Aboriginal heritage. (HRSCATSIA, 1997a, p. xxviii, my emphasis)

Identity, when expressed in this way, becomes problematic under circumstances where the notion is represented as something that can be retained or chosen. This implies a rigidity and fixity of the 'identity issue' that has characterised many

discussions concerning the Torres Strait Islander population living outside the Torres Strait. While the HRSCATSIA had based its findings and recommendations on nationwide consultations with Torres Strait Islanders, it is arguable whether they truly understood the complexity of social relations between Islanders living in the Torres Strait and Islanders on the mainland, and the implications for 'Mainland Islanders' in expressing and articulating identities that more accurately represented their social, cultural and political positions. The following is an extract taken from a transcript documenting verbatim consultation that took place in Darwin on 22 April 1997 between members of the committee (Mr Harry Quick MP and Mr Anthony Smith MP) and community representatives (Mr Samuel Aniba Lagau Kazil Torres Strait Islander Corporation South Hedland Western Australia Administrator and Ms Grace Saylor Chairperson Lagau Kazil Torres Strait Islander Corporation South Hedland Western Australia). The dialogue between the two parties highlights the difficulty the committee had in understanding the worldview expressed by the Islander witnesses in explaining issues to do with cultural attachments to place, home and kin:

Mr Tony Smith - If there were economic opportunities back on the Torres Strait Islands, do you think many of your people would want to return home? In other words, if there were jobs, training, better education and better health, do you think many of your people would like to go home?

Mr Aniba -I don't think so, culturally. Some of our people have died and are buried in Port Hedland.

Mr Tony Smith – So you've really made your home there?

Ms Saylor – Yes, Port Hedland is my home.

My Tony Smith – Maybe some would go back, but not many, if there was a job, is that right?

Ms Saylor – Maybe a handful, I think.

Mr Quick – But you always see yourselves as Torres Strait Islanders?

Ms Saylor – Yes.

Mr Quick – So even though the link isn't as strong as it might have been, as generations go and the children for example, develop work skills and employment and raise families, do you think the links will gradually become weaker and weaker?

Ms Saylor – I don't think so. They still call themselves Torres Strait Islanders.  
(HRSCATSIA, 1997b, n.p.)

The exchange of dialogue evidenced here between HRSCATSIA committee members and Islander community representatives brings to light two important and related assumptions that characterise the 'Mainland Torres Strait Islander issue'. Firstly, Mr Smith's line of questioning suggests that 'Mainland Islanders' live outside the Torres Strait by reason of default rather than choice. That is, if economic conditions and opportunities in the Torres Strait were comparable to that found on the mainland, Islanders would be motivated to *return* to live in the Torres Strait. Secondly, the committee's questions focus on how 'Mainland Torres Strait Islanders' categorise and define themselves under circumstances where subsequent generations of this group will experience *weaker links* with their ancestral homes.

The exchange of dialogue analysed here may not be reflective of the sum total of HRSCATSIA consultations undertaken with Torres Strait Islanders living outside the

Torres Strait. However, the two assumptions relating to place and cultural identity appear to underpin the report's discussion on how 'Mainland Torres Strait Islanders' should be accounted for in community decision-making and representative structures. The assumptions, nevertheless, are flawed because they do not reflect the reality of present circumstances nor do they provide the space for 'Mainland Islanders' to fully express and represent what it means to claim an identity *as a Torres Strait Islander*. While idealised notions of returning to an ancestral homeland attempt to reconcile past and present yearnings for a *real home*, the economic and social reality of the Torres Strait ensures that any large-scale repopulation of Islanders to the region is a doubtful proposition. Young people, in particular, often have to relocate to the mainland for study and training opportunities not available in the Torres Strait (Arthur, Hughes, McGrath & Wasaga, 2004). Even in the long term, the Torres Strait does not have the resources or infrastructure to support and sustain reverse migration of Islanders from outside the Torres Strait. Overcrowding and acute housing shortages on many of the islands, including Thursday Island, the administrative centre of the Torres Strait, severely limit the possibilities for 'Mainland Islanders' to be accommodated upon their return. The assumption of returning home, furthermore, ignores the social implications an influx of 'Mainlanders' would have on local populations already stretched in their capacity to provide for their own families and communities.

The articulation of place identity is potentially misrepresented by an assumption that all 'Mainland Islanders' ultimately *want* to return to the Torres Strait. Such notions ignore the social and cultural ties that Islanders have forged while on the mainland as evidenced by economic contributions to 'mainstream' Australian society, the establishment of families and communities on the mainland and the intrinsic connection

we have with our families and kinsfolk here, both living and deceased, (I refer here to Mr Aniba's comment to the committee about family members who are buried on the mainland). The dismissal of decades of social, cultural and economic history shaped by the presence of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait leads to misunderstandings about the nature of this group, our cultural interpretations, and the transitional processes we negotiate in representing, expressing and articulating identities that reflect our past and present circumstances. It furthermore overlooks the agency of 'Mainland Islanders' in negotiating the passage of travel and change, the integration into a dominant society and the emergence of new and multifaceted identities anchored by ancestral links to island homes in the Torres Strait. The 'Mainland Torres Strait Islander issue' is far more complex than assumptions around returning home and dilution of culture and necessitates a deeper understanding of the composite layers that constitute the foundations of these identities.

Further to the HRSCATSIA (1997) report's release, some 'Mainlanders' questioned the validity of its conclusions:

The recommendations concerning 'Mainlanders' are also alarming.

'Mainlanders' identify strongly with their families in the Islands. However their needs in the quest for social justice are different, and they identify themselves as a 'minority living within a minority'. This is not adequately reflected in government bodies such as the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs (OTSIA) within ATSIC and the Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board (TSIAB), which is the primary advisor to the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. Neither can 'Mainlanders' avail themselves of the TSRA, which caters

only for the Torres Strait and does not have a mainland elected representative.  
(Smith & Lui, 1997)

The response from Smith and Lui (1997) to the HRSCATSIA report (1997a) underscores how matters pertaining to identity for Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait are not only of social and cultural relevance but are undeniably political issues that lie at the core of discussions regarding representation, governance and political voice for this group. Sanders (1999) further highlights the political implications of the HRSCATSIA report:

The HRSCATSIA recommendations relating to mainland Islanders represent a failure to come to grips with the strength and depth of Islanders feelings of distinctiveness and separateness from Aboriginal Australians and their dissatisfaction with being placed in combined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative structures Australia-wide. The Queensland Government faced this Islander dissatisfaction with its indigenous-specific State-level structures in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the late 1930s established separate Aboriginal and Islander structures. (p. 6)

The failures of the HRSCATSIA report (1997a) have been documented in detail (Sanders, 1999) so I will not revisit its shortcomings. However, it must be noted that in many respects the report drew attention to the need for Islanders to have greater control and autonomy over their lives (Nakata, 2007). I cite the HRSCATSIA report here as a way of emphasising how such a process nevertheless represented a missed opportunity for government and other key stakeholders to *understand the position* of Torres Strait

Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. This is underscored by the formation of bodies, including the Greater Autonomy Task Force in 1999 and the Greater Autonomy Steering Committee in 2002, which had minimal, if no, input from Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait (Sanders, 2004). Since the HRSCATSIA report was published over a decade ago, there have been no further attempts by governments at any level to investigate, in a holistic way, the needs, aspirations and challenges facing this group of Indigenous Australians despite their growing presence on the mainland and political lobbying by representative bodies including the National Secretariat of Torres Strait Islander Organisations Limited (National Secretariat of Torres Strait Islander Organisations Limited (NSTSIO), 2003).

## **1.8 Positioning this Research within the Literature**

Notwithstanding the implications for native title, representative structures and political voice, this research study is ultimately concerned with the question of *identity* for ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islanders’. The relevant literature on identity politics is as expansive as it is diverse in its approach to understanding socially constructed identities and their impact on the political and cultural landscape (Benhabib, 1994; Boyle, 2000; Habermas, 1991; Hall, 2003). Despite divergent analyses evident in the literature, models of identity tend to oscillate between opposing poles, namely, essentialism versus constructivism, primordialism versus instrumentalism, individual versus collectivity, unity versus fragmentation, and structure versus agency (Otto & Driessen, 2000). While the notion of identity can be found across the social science disciplines, I adopt a cultural studies approach to the term, using Barker’s (2004) description of identity as it most appropriately describes the phenomenon I am exploring in this research:

Identity pertains to cultural descriptions of persons with which we emotionally identify and which concern sameness and difference, the personal and the social ... Within cultural studies, identities are understood to be discursive-performative. That is, identity is best described as a discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names through citation and reiteration of norms or conventions. The concept of identity is further deployed in order to link the emotional ‘inside’ of persons with the discursive ‘outside’. That is, identity represents the processes by which discursively constructed subject positions are taken up (or otherwise) by concrete persons’ fantasy identifications and emotional ‘investments’. (pp. 93-4)

Consistent with Barker’s (2000) descriptor, the study defines self-identity as “the conceptions we hold of ourselves [whilst] the expectations and opinions of others” (p. 65) form our social identity. For the purposes of this study, identity politics is defined, then, as “the contest over and conflict arising from claims to, or about, social or group identity” (Stokes, 1997, p.6). As part of the research aims, the study asks ‘how do mainland Torres Strait Islanders see themselves’, and secondly, ‘how do others see mainland Torres Strait Islanders’?

The movement of Torres Strait Islanders from their ancestral islands is part of a social and cultural phenomenon witnessed worldwide as population movements become the norm rather than the exception. Such wide-scale movement has prompted increased analysis and theorising of migration, diasporic and identity discourses. Spoonley (2001) observes that ‘diaspora’ has gone from being associated specifically with Jews to a term for dispersed communities in a period of migration, highlighting “the historical and



experiential rift between the place of residence and place of belonging” (p. 82). Cultural theory, in recent years, has “increasingly adopted the notion of diaspora defined as the development through migration of dispersed communities that relate not only to their nation of residence but also to a homeland, or the idea of a homeland or to each other” (Chan, Curthoys, & Chiang, 2001, p. 19). Cultures and identity, therefore, are seen as mixing and moving, where here and there, past and present, self and other are constantly being negotiated with each other (Bhatia, 2002). Diasporic communities may or may not be immigrant communities. However, as highlighted by Tsolidis (2001), diasporic communities have real or imagined connections to a common culture or homeland. For Friedman (2000), diasporas can certainly be understood as the culturalisation of migration but, as identities, they usually imply some form of placedness or point of origin.

The writings on diasporic identity attest to the complex nature of identity formations for Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait, particularly at the juncture of place and location, individual and community affiliations, and social positioning. Brah (1996) thoughtfully uncovers critical questions about the ways identities are constituted and contested in racialised discourses and practices. The word ‘diaspora’, Brah (1996) argues, embodies a notion of centre, a locus of ‘home’ from where the dispersion occurs, invoking images of multiple journeys. Yet, paradoxically, diasporic journeys are about settling down and putting roots elsewhere. Bhatia (2002) maintains the notion of diaspora is worthy of examination because it shows how diasporic ‘identity’ negotiations are connected to a larger set of political and historical practices of both home and abroad, homeland and hostland. However, if the circumstances of leaving are important so, too, are those of arrival and settling down.

This makes the manner in which a group comes to be ‘situated’ in, and through, a wide variety of discourses, economic processes, state policies and institutional practices, critical to its future, “the concept of diaspora centres on the configurations of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another” (Brah, 1996, p. 183). Chan, Curthoys and Chiang (2001) similarly claim “diaspora theory has called attention to the subtleties of how diasporic communities construct and maintain their distinctiveness, alongside their negotiation with, and accommodation to, the rest of the society in which they live” (p. 20).

An examination of the Torres Strait Islander diasporic experience must therefore take into account the historical, racial and exclusionary discourses these groups were positioned in, both at the time of arrival and subsequent generational settlement into Australian society, as well as their ongoing connection to their islands of origin. Flores’ (2008) study of diasporic communities similarly emphasises the political nature of re-settled communities, as they develop a social consciousness as a distinct group that has simultaneous links to their new communities and their places of origin:

The life of any given diaspora starts not with the arrival of people to the host setting, but only when the group has begun to develop a consciousness about its new social location, a disposition towards its place of origin, as well as some relation to other sites within the full diasporic formation. (p. 16)

The large-scale movement of Torres Strait Islanders from their islands of origin raises the issue of how this group constitutes and expresses notions of individual and collective identity. A central focus of much research into ethnicity and migration is the

question of what happens to 'identity' in the migration and settlement process (Anthias, 2002). Werbner (2004) describes diasporas as "culturally and politically reflexive and experimental in that they encompass internal arguments of identity about who 'we' are and where 'we' are going" (p. 896). The collective nature of diasporic identity, however, can in itself be problematic. In his study of Pacific Island migration, Macpherson (2001) observed that "many migrants saw themselves as expatriate members of families and villages rather than members of a coherent migrant community and much migrant social and economic activity was organized around family and village" (p. 71). In this respect, the notion of diaspora is important as it reminds us of the multiple loyalties, collective memories, senses of belonging and intricacies of identity (Chan, Curthoys and Chiang, 2001).

The issue of identity construction for Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait is similarly fraught with complexities involving an ongoing process of negotiation, intervention and mediation of internal and external elements and influences. Moreover, while Islanders living outside the Torres Strait represent a diaspora, they are at the same time recognised as Indigenous Australians, occupying a shared space with Aboriginal Australians. Although commonalities abound with migrant and diasporic experiences of travel, displacement and resettlement, Islanders living outside the Torres Strait are paradoxically positioned as Indigenous Australian migrants raising further questions about the manner in which our identities are produced and orchestrated in contested spaces of place and belonging. Anthias (2002) warns that the concept of identity as a heuristic device fails to deliver an understanding of the contradictory, located and positional aspects of constructions of belonging and otherness, "the concept of identity is not only ambiguous and fraught with unresolved

conceptual difficulties but it obscures reintroducing essentialism through the backdoor and shifting attention away from context, meaning and practice” (p. 500). Vertovec (2001) believes the concept of identity, however, still has a useful place in examining the sociology of migration, despite its flaws, stating “identity although it has long been one of the slipperiest concepts in the social scientists lexicon, can suggest ways in which people conceive of themselves and are characterized by others” (p. 573).

My research takes a step back from the milieu of discussions concerning political representation and resource distribution in order to understand how Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait perceive themselves and their relationships to, and with, others. In many ways, identity has become a metaphor, a way of referring to forms of social and cultural authenticity while, at the same time, disguising disdain for all things less than pure; it represents a mode of unification while providing a vehicle for exclusion and marginalisation; it promotes stability while concealing paradox, ambiguity and polarities. Identity expresses strength, unity and consensus about all that is good about the collective. Identity, however, has a utility beyond the provision of feeling part of something bigger than yourself and has assumed meaning so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before. As Islanders, we speak of the production of identity and the constant need to maintain identity, to protect it, to strengthen it. At the same time we are perhaps reticent to speak of the circumstances that shape that identity, and the elements, processes and history that continue to influence the range of identities available to us. For us ‘Mainlanders’, identity is important but we have, perhaps, never understood how it is constituted or why it is critical to helping us understand our own political and social realities.

## **1.9 Mainlander Agency**

In highlighting the issues relating to lack of recognition, resources and political representation for Islanders living outside the Torres Strait, this thesis does not intend to locate Mainlanders in the roles of victims, complicit in their own marginalisation and disadvantage. Contrary to the latter, this thesis aims to provide evidence of ‘Mainland Islander’ agency constructed through discourses of social and spatial transformation, cultural interpretation and change, and political voice. Nakata (2007) cautions against the romanticisation of Islander agency, reminding us “Islanders were – and in most situations still are – positioned in restrictive terms at the Interface” (p. 208). This is certainly the case with Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. Yes, Islanders living on the mainland forged new and uncharted territory in leaving their ancestral home islands, got jobs, educated their children, bought houses, brought family from the Torres Strait to ‘down south’ and sent money home. ‘Mainlanders’ brought with them traditions and customs and changed them to construct new traditions and cultural practices on the mainland. ‘Mainlanders’ refused to be silent in the face of adverse government responses to ‘Mainlander’ issues. At the same time, however, ‘Mainland Islanders’ were still considered a ‘minority’, living in segregated areas on the fringes of coastal towns upon arrival in the 1930s and 1940s, excluded from pubs, confined to labouring jobs and domestic duties and denied equal rights to white Australians. Islanders living on the mainland enjoyed freedom of movement upon arrival in the 1940s and 1950s but lived under the constant threat of authorities arbitrarily sending them back to the Torres Strait. ‘Mainlander’ agency is a key feature of this thesis but it must be viewed in the context of our responses to, and negotiations with, our social realities and political environments.

The discussion on identity, the politics of identity, and the assertion of a positive identity inevitably raises expectations about what this thesis can deliver for Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. Nevertheless, any proposals relating to alternative models of governance, political representation and native title matters are beyond the scope of this research. This is not to suggest that identity discussions have no relevance to political matters, in fact, quite the opposite. However, if we are to more fully engage with, and eventually change, the political and social discourses that currently circumscribe and malign us as ‘Mainlanders’, we must first of all understand how we are both constituted by and located within them.

#### **1.10 Structure of this Thesis**

Chapter 1, titled Faces of Torres Strait Islander Identity, provides the introduction to the thesis and includes the background to Torres Strait Islander population movements to the Australian mainland. This chapter also provides justification for why ‘identity’ is important and central to any discussion on ‘Mainland Islanders’ political and social realities. The chapter describes my location within the research and how this impacted on my research design, data generation and eventual re-interpretation of the Storytellers’ narratives.

Chapter 2, titled Searching for a Better Life: Torres Strait Islanders’ Movement to the Mainland, provides a summative historical overview of Torres Strait Islanders’ movement to the mainland, the motivations for movement from ancestral home islands, Islanders’ aspirations for a better life and eventual permanent resettlement of communities outside of the Torres Strait. The chapter additionally examines the way Torres Strait Islanders have been historically defined in government legislation and

policy. This has particular relevance to Islanders living outside the Torres Strait, as little or no recognition has been given to the demographic reality of over 85 percent of Islanders now residing on the mainland on a more or less permanent basis.

Chapter 3, titled Lost in Space: Representing Mainland Islanders in Identity Politics, examines how Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait have been represented, spoken of and written about, in both academic discourse and popular texts. The literature review explores the social positioning of ‘Mainlanders’ within representational discourses of identity, culture, power, place, community and politics. The chapter critiques anthropological and historical writings, with a focus on the extent to which discourses of knowledge in describing issues of culture, place and identity have played to the politics of representation and ‘people making’. It cites numerous examples of deficit cultural and social discourses that characterise the ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islander experience’. The notion of ‘home’ and place identity is explored in this chapter as are the complexities around multi-layered, and sometimes contradictory, narratives of people and place.

Chapter 4, titled Doing things *prapa* (properly): Issues to do with Methodology, provides a description and analysis of my methodology and modes of analysis and interpretation. Particular attention is paid to my role as an insider researcher, necessitating the need for constant reflection of my own research practices, priorities and overall research conduct. The chapter identifies the implications for Indigenous people undertaking research with their ‘own mob’ and contributes to the discussion on appropriate research methodologies and practices which empower, engage and benefit the participant Storytellers and their communities.

Chapter 5, titled Welcome Home: Constructing Place Identity for Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait, is the first of a two-part presentation of my research findings. I refer to the ‘findings’ of my research as the ‘re-telling’ and re-interpretation of the Stories imparted to me in this research inquiry. The notion of home became central to the way the Storytellers expressed multiple and situational identities which encapsulated cultural norms, social processes and representations of individuals and groups. The chapter provides a framework for re-thinking the idea of ‘my island home’ in ways that pave the way forward for future discussions beyond the binary oppositions of the Torres Strait versus the mainland.

Chapter 6, titled Who do you think you are: Constructing Identity as Mainland Torres Strait Islanders, is the second part of my re-telling and re-interpretation of Stories generated as part of this research. The narratives of the Storytellers evidence a ‘Mainlander Identity’ that is socially constructed in that the personal and the social are inextricably linked through shared histories, experiences and family and community structures. The discussion in this chapter provides a framework for understanding how identity construction for Islanders living on the mainland has been, and continues to be, fluid, contingent and changing over time. The chapter’s discussion advocates the need for new languages, new conversations and new ways of speaking about, and to, Mainland Torres Strait Islanders about identity matters.

Chapter 7, titled New Ways of Thinking about Mainland Torres Strait Islander Identity, provides the concluding discussion for this thesis, highlighting the original contributions of the thesis, the limitations of the research study and the political context of the research findings.

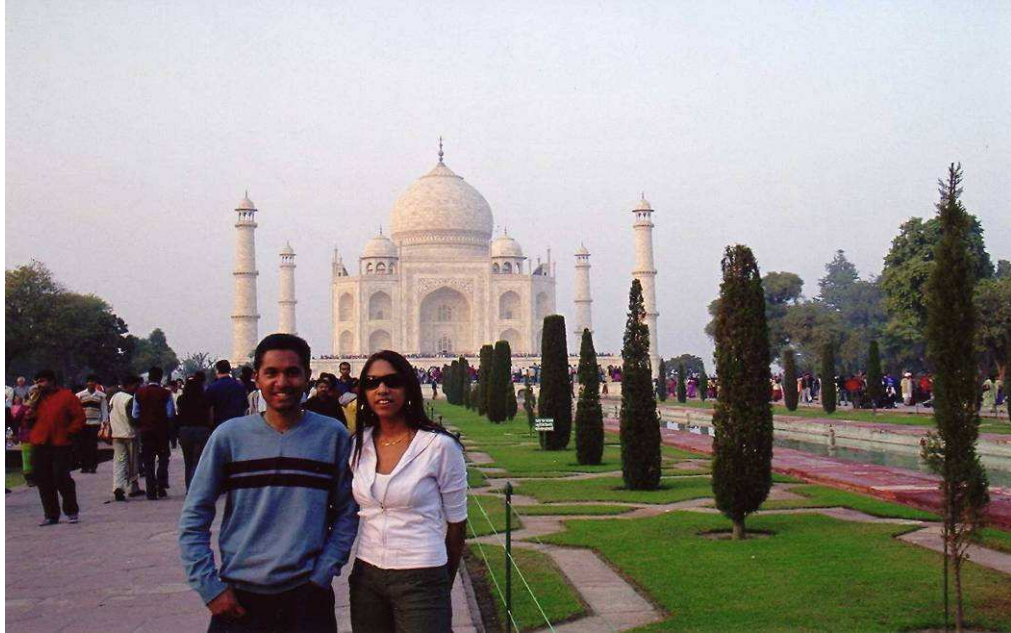


### 1.11 Concluding Comments

I end this introductory chapter to my thesis with reference back to the Stories of my nephew and niece. As young adults, navigating the social world as autonomous and independent people, they have within themselves the capacity to express and represent their identities in multiple, shifting and transformative ways. As Islander/Indian-Singaporean/Australians they are continually negotiating and traversing the boundaries which shape their social and material circumstances.

As family members, we have never asked them to *choose an identity* or give preference to one of their particular cultural backgrounds. In the real world however, they are confronted with the need to select a fixed identity for a variety of reasons. At home in Australia, they are asked to ‘tick a box’ indicating their Torres Strait Islander identity on everything from their university enrolment forms, scholarships, job applications and when accessing government programs and services. When abroad in India (see Figure 1.3), their luggage was labelled with stickers saying NRI: Non-Resident Indians, affording them special status and preferential treatment at hotels in their father’s ancestral homeland. It matters less, however, that my nephew and niece might look ‘typically Indian’, speak Torres Strait Islander Creole, perform traditional Islander dances (see Figure 1.4), or simultaneously observe Christian and Muslim religious practices. What matters is their capacity to understand representations of their identities in ways that reflect their political and social positions and circumstances. This thesis examines the critical aspects of those identity representations across different generations of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait with a view to exploring new ways and modes of representing ‘Mainlander’ identity. This journey of exploration begins with a historical overview, in Chapter 2, of key events and issues that have

influenced and shaped the identification of Islanders, within the context of their movement away from the Torres Strait and their political position within Australian society.



*Figure 1.3 Visiting their Father's Ancestral Homeland in India<sup>3</sup>.*



*Figure 1.4 Performing traditional Island dancing<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> My nephew and niece outside the Taj Mahal, January 2006. Photograph provided by Lenora Thaker.

## Chapter 2

# Searching for a Better Life: Torres Strait Islanders' Movement to the Australian Mainland

### 2.1 Introduction

I begin this chapter with the Story of my Grandmother, Felecia Watkin (nee Pitt). My Grandmother is pictured here (Figure 2.1), holding the hand of my Father, aged approximately six years, as they stride across a busy intersection in Cairns.



*Figure 2.1 Living on the Mainland<sup>5</sup>*

The year is 1942 and Australia is involved in World War Two. This image was taken on ANZAC Day, not long after the official parade. The cenotaph that towers over

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<sup>5</sup> My Grandmother and Father (highlighted in the circle) crossing the intersection of Abbott and Shields Streets in Cairns after the ANZAC Day parade, circa 1942. Photograph provided by Lenora Thaker.

the centre of the scene provides the focal point for the ANZAC ceremony with the flags of the world strung either side, flapping in the breeze. The fact that my Grandmother actively participated in the ANZAC commemorations on that day says much about *how she positioned herself* in that broader community.

My Grandmother was born and raised on Erub in the far Eastern part of the Torres Strait. Along with her siblings, my Grandmother left the Torres Strait with her parents sometime in the 1920s, first settling in Bloomfield (Cape York Peninsula) before moving to Cairns with her two young sons, the oldest son being my Father. She lived with her brother's family in Malaytown, a shantytown located on the Cairns mudflats just outside of what is now the city's central business district. While Malaytown was a segregated community populated by 'non-white' families, its residents, including many first-wave Torres Strait Islander families, did not regard themselves as separatists living on the fringe of the 'mainstream' of society. My Grandmother, like many of her Malaytown kinsfolk, worked across a diverse range of jobs that brought them alongside white people as colleagues, bosses and even friends. As an employee at the local steam laundry, my Grandmother was committed to earning a living, paying bills, educating her sons and leading a life seemingly 'free' of the protective controls she grew up with while living in the Torres Strait.

For the ANZAC Day parade, both my Grandmother and my Father are immaculately dressed. Their presentation says much about their sense of self-worth and pride against the backdrop of racism and marginalisation as a minority group. My Grandmother stands tall, with her head held high. She walks with definition and purpose, walking through, *not around or about*, the crowd of, mainly, white people. In

this way, my Grandmother's Story of personal and social agency becomes a metaphor for the initial movement of Islanders from the Torres Strait to the mainland. Her Story, like many of the first generation Storytellers in this research, is one of going forward, of 'infiltrating' mainstream society with intent and integrity and of guiding the next generation through the malaise of future opportunities and experiences of life on the mainland. The Story of my Grandmother is but one of the many journeys Torres Strait Islanders made in the search for not only a new life on the Australian mainland but, indeed, a *better* life.

This chapter provides a historical overview of Islanders' movement from the Torres Strait to mainland Australia. The history of the Torres Strait both pre-contact and post-colonial occupation, has been well documented (Beckett, 1987; Fuary, 1997; Kaye 1997; Mullins, 1995; Nakata, 2004a, 2007; Sharp, 1980a, 1980b, 1993; Shnukal, 2004; Singe, 1993). It is therefore not the intention of this chapter to provide a detailed account of times and events past but, rather, to provide a summative overview of key events, policies and practices that impacted on Torres Strait Islanders' views of themselves and others. To understand the circumstances faced by the first wave of Islanders on the mainland upon their arrival from the Torres Strait, it is important to revisit the historical conditions that shaped and contextualised their worldviews, their family and community links to the Torres Strait and their relationship with the broader 'white Australia' on the mainland.

This chapter also examines the way Torres Strait Islanders have been historically 'defined' within government legislation and policy. In recent times, recognition has been given to the social construction of identity for Torres Strait

Islanders (and Aboriginal people) with more emphasis placed on self-identification rather than the biological determinism reflected in administrative definitions of the past (Gardiner-Gaden, 2003). The process of defining Aboriginal people, and later Torres Strait Islanders, however, has a long and contentious history in Australia, with different classification systems, many with significant personal and social consequences, moving “in and out of fashion” (Gardiner-Gaden, 2003, p. 2). The legislative and policy practice of successive governments not only determined who was, and was not, a Torres Strait Islander at the time but, of greater consequence, was the ‘value’ and worthiness state and commonwealth policies attached to formal identifiers, definitions and classes of Islanders. The application and operations of various Acts governing Torres Strait Islanders (and Aboriginal people) continues to have much relevance for ‘Mainlanders’, particularly where legislation and associated policies provide the basis for determining access to services, resources, cultural heritage and political representation.

The opportunities afforded to Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait is limited under circumstances where legislation and policy documents do not articulate a position addressing the needs, issues and aspirations of this group. Instead, current legislative and policy practice at both commonwealth and state level appears to focus on matters pertaining to Islanders living in the Torres Strait with little or no recognition given to the demographic reality of over 85 percent of Islanders now residing on the mainland. The absence of any acknowledgement of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait in key legislation, by way of inclusion in definition, legislative scope, application or operational requirement, has perpetuated the abstraction of this group from a legitimate political voice, creating, in effect, a ‘silence by omission’. This chapter concludes with a focus on the part that historical government practice has

played in ascribing social and cultural identities to Islanders living outside the Torres Strait.

## **2.2 Colonising the Islander**

It is ironic that the ship that brought the ‘civilising light’ of Christ to the Torres Strait would be called the *Surprise*. (Mosby & Robinson, 1998, p. 38)

Although colonial occupation of the Torres Strait was eventually instituted by the British, numerous ‘contact’ visits to the area had been made by Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese explorers at least two centuries earlier. A strait between New Guinea and the ‘great south land’ began to appear on maps as early as the 1570s, although it is likely that this notation came from guess work rather than an expedition to the region (Kaye, 1997). Previous Dutch voyages, for example, had failed to detect the existence of the Torres Strait, giving the mistaken impression that Australia and New Guinea were joined (Kaye, 1997). The voyage of Spanish explorer, Luis de Vaez Torres in 1606, is the first reported European expedition to pass through the strait ‘safely’. Two centuries later, in 1770, James Cook landed on Tuidin (Possession Island) in the Torres Strait and claimed the great *Kie Daudai* for King George III of England (Toohey, 2001). Cook’s expedition confirmed the existence of the Torres Strait and, in turn, claimed the area for the British Empire.

The Torres Strait has a rich cultural and social history shaped by thousands of years of (sometimes cordial, sometimes conflicting) trade, travel, intercultural exchange and ritual between the islands and with their neighbours in the region (Beckett, 1987;

Brady, Bruno, Manas & Mualgal Torres Strait Islander Corporation, 2003; Sharp, 1993). Islanders had long established contact with the outside world, providing dynamic and contemporaneous social sites for cultural development, resistance and conflict. Before contact with Europeans, Islanders participated in a subsistence economy featuring fishing, gardening and hunting. These activities capitalised on the unique features (including topography and fertility of soil) of hundreds of individual islands, of which seventeen are inhabited, located amongst the numerous coral cays and reefs of the area (Office of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Affairs (OATSIA), 1997). The Torres Strait is not, and never has been, a homogenous and unified society. Shnukal and Ramsay (2004) note, “[t]he Islanders were not traditionally unified, but recognised five major ethno-linguistic groups or nations – Miriam Le, Kulkalgal, Saibaigal, Maluilgal and Kaurareg” (p. 33). Each island group, and its people, has a unique history interwoven into a rich and colourful tapestry of social, cultural and spiritual life marked by both harmonious relations and open warfare. The pearl rush of the 1870s saw an influx of ‘foreigners’ from all parts of the world, including the Pacific Islands, Philippines, Europe, Indonesia and Japan (Shnukal, 2001).

The settlement of outside groups signalled the first phase of cultural plurality in the Torres Strait with generations of ‘mixed’ race Torres Strait Islanders descended from the initial wave of ‘foreigners’ during this time. The arrival of new outside populations gave rise to lawlessness and social disorder as marine divers and crewman sought to exploit the commercial offerings of the Torres Strait’s natural resources, most notably, pearl shell, beche-de-mer and trochus. It would be the impact of colonisation, however, that would irrevocably change Torres Strait Islander societies, their social structures and the nature of their relationships with each other and the outside world



(Beckett, 1987; Sharp, 1993). Previous contact with outside and neighbouring cultural groups did not bring the change to Islander way of life as that which occurred through the permanent occupation of Christian missionaries, making the Coming of the Light, the single momentous event in Torres Strait history (Mullins, 1995).

The Reverend Samuel McFarlane, together with Reverend AW Murray and eight Loyalty Island teachers, arrived on the shores of Erub in the Eastern Torres Strait on 1 July 1871 (Mullins, 1995). The missionaries' arrival became more commonly known as the 'Coming of the Light'. The Christian presence quickly evolved into a governance structure that would permeate every aspect of Islanders' social, cultural and political livelihood (Sharp, 1993). The permanent presence of the London Missionary Society (LMS) signalled the first phase of colonial rule in the Torres Strait. The LMS had worked in the Pacific since the beginning of the nineteenth century, so their venture to the Torres Strait as agents of conversion was somewhat inevitable as they were looking to expand into Papua New Guinea at the time:

It was not surprising that the leaders of the newly formed London Missionary Society decided in 1795 that the South Seas would be their first field of operations ... They realized that in the Pacific Islands there was no strong religion ... Because the islands were small they hoped that the influence of missionaries would be a total one, affecting the entire life of the people, and they realized the advantage that the Gospel would have as the first strong outside influence in an isolated part of the globe. (Thorogood, 1960, p.19)

Seeking to exploit ‘cultural familiarity’ and expedite the conversion process, the LMS employed Pacific Islanders to carry out their missionary work in the Torres Strait, making it “the fastest conversion of an entire culture in the history of Christian missionary activity” (Mosby & Robinson, 1998, p. 38). In Reverend MacFarlane’s (1888) memoirs, he explains the LMS’ strategic employment of Pacific missionaries and their overall effectiveness in the conversion process:

One of the greatest peculiarities of the spread of Christianity in the South Pacific and New Guinea is the work accomplished by *native agency* ... These native teachers are better acquainted with the habits and manners and customs of the heathen than missionaries are, and so are well adapted to fill the gap between the debased savage and the European missionary ... My experience goes to show that our native teachers can get *at* the heathen of their class, and influence them in favour of Christianity, quicker than European missionaries.

(MacFarlane, 1888, pp. 137-38)

While Europeans established the overarching commercial, legislative, political, religious and educational institutions, daily life in the new order was mediated primarily by Pacific Islanders, firstly through the missions and, later, the maritime industry (Shnukal, 1995). The pervading influence of Pacific Islanders through intermarriage and social integration, was to “have a more lasting impact than the missionaries envisaged” (Mosby & Robinson, 1998, p. 39) with Polynesian styles and influences found in Torres Strait Islander music, dancing, cuisine, house building, and recreation (Beckett, 1987). The relationship between Torres Strait Islanders and Pacific Islanders,

therefore, played a decisive role in expediting the emergence of the colonial order (Mullins, 1995).

The missionaries' role in the commercialisation and economic organisation of the region's marine industry would further reshape the social fabric of Islander society. Sharp (1980a) identifies the relationship between Christian universalism and capitalism as a defining feature of the newly found collective identity emerging in the area at the time. The marine industry brought Islanders together in a new interrelationship that was activated by the effect of a common administration that imposed its will on the lives of Islanders:

Christianity and the knowledge system of the industrial society, perhaps brought with them a universalizing experience that enabled Islanders to see themselves and their Island communities in a new light ... the development of new inter-island bonds was reflected subjectively in a shared consciousness as one people: Torres Strait Islanders. (Sharp, 1980a, p. 6)

The relationship between commercial enterprise and the church during this time was tenuous, however, as evidenced by the establishment of Papuan Industries Limited in 1904:

The LMS expressed concern that this level of commercial activity was a conflict of interest with the missions' aims and was worried about antagonizing the powerful trading companies ... This was the continuing paradox of the missionary project: the pursuit of civilization required the pursuit of material

commodities but such a pursuit could also lead to the path of moral destruction.  
(Nakata, 2004a, p. 160)

The LMS eventually handed over administration of the Torres Strait to the Church of England in 1915, finding the ministry too burdensome. Their goal of absolute conversion, however, had proved successful. Despite the apparent conversion and subsequent governance of Torres Strait Islanders, Beckett (1987) argues the Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria was ill-prepared for mission work, with resources strained to provide for the Islanders' spiritual needs. The church, then, offered little, if no, challenge to the government's tightening control over the Islanders' lives.

### **2.3 Torres Strait Islanders under 'the Act'**

The Queensland government's control and administration of the Torres Strait began rather ambiguously, with the State initially content to have the missionaries manage both the people and the fishery industry even after the annexation of the area in 1872 (Sharp, 1980a). The publicly stated aims of the Torres Strait annexation included the regulation of the rapidly expanding pearling industry and maintaining law and order in the Strait that focused on the 'protection' of Islanders from pearlers, South Sea Islanders in the fishing industry and even the excesses of some missionaries (Sharp, 1980a). However, these aims were subordinate to the protection and advancement of British imperial interests, in particular, keeping other powers out of the area, including New Guinea (Sharp, 1980a). The same British colonial interests were also keen to control the pearling industry, fearing other powers, most notably the Japanese, would be in command of a major economic entity so close to Australia's northern coastline.

The impact of the annexation was, at first, felt through the introduction of laws and regulations that controlled the fishing industry. However, the effectiveness of government control was not immediate as Islanders had been involved in the fishery industry for some time and, under the direction of the government officials, had gained some control over their own affairs (Donovan, 2002). John Douglas, the Government Resident at the time, extended Islander control through the establishment of elected 'Island Councils' with court powers (Donovan, 2002). This system of governance would cease with the Queensland Parliament's enactment of the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* signalling the beginning of the State's protectionist policies towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This Act gave the Protectors definitive control over the lives of Aboriginal people and, later, Torres Strait Islanders:

Islanders were told what time they must go to bed; they were gaoled for speaking alone to a member of the opposite sex, they required a permit to visit even a neighbouring island, and the government representative on the island controlled how much money they could withdraw from their savings accounts. (Sharp, 2002, pp. 205-6)

Every aspect of the Islanders' lives was circumscribed by restrictive government legislation and policies during this period. The Act made no reference to the terms 'Torres Strait' or 'Torres Strait Islanders', instead defining Aboriginal as:

An aboriginal inhabitant of Queensland; a half-caste living with an aboriginal as wife, husband or child; a half caste habitually living or associating (otherwise

than as husband or wife) with aboriginals. (Section 4, *Queensland Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897*)

John Douglas insisted Torres Strait Islanders be exempt under the provisions of the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* because of their “marked superiority over the mainland native” and stated that they were “capable of exercising all the rights of British citizens and ought to be regarded as such” (cited in Donovan, 2002, p. 121). Douglas’ death, in 1904, and the appointment of a new Chief Protector would see Islanders brought under the jurisdiction of the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897*, placing them, along with Aborigines, “in a position of segregation” (Sharp, 1980a, p.7). Sharp (1980a) describes this colonial phase as *paternalist exclusion* in that “the cultural frame of Australian capitalism found expression in policies that combined racialist segregation with paternalist rule” (p. 7). The island reserves, overseen by superintendent teachers, would regulate the Islanders’ daily lives and 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. (Shnukal, 2001, p. 26)

The application of the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* to Torres Strait Islanders of Pacific Island, Filipino, Malay or other heritage

was problematic (Hodes, 2000) and highlighted the challenge the colonisers faced in managing and controlling the cultural plurality that existed in the Torres Strait after many years of contact with the outside world. There was already a sizeable number of Islanders with European, Asian or Pacific Island ancestry who posed a problem as far as the legislation was concerned (Beckett, 1987). During this period, many Islander families of mixed descent were re-settled at either St Paul's Anglican mission on Moa or at the Roman Catholic mission on Kiriri. Mosby & Robinson (1998) note that "those families that chose to remain on islands other than the administrative centre of Waiben became 'Islanders' in the eyes of the law" (p. 44). This achieved a superficial semblance of order among the diversity of racial groups in the Torres Strait at the time, with different groups now slotted into defined categories (Mosby & Robinson, 1998). Beckett (1987) similarly notes that, at the turn of the century, in "native and foreign, white and coloured, mixed freely and sometimes interbred, there emerged a stratified society, caste-like in its rigidity" (p. 57). However, this racial stratification must be understood as the product of the marine industry on the one hand and government policy on the other with the division between foreigners and Indigenous people forged by separate regulations and economic practices (Beckett, 1987).

The political grouping of Torres Strait Islanders divided people on the basis of racial premises to separate the various categories in an essentialist way with severe consequences for the lives of those to whom the categories referred (Borsboom & Hulsker, 2000). For example, the government made sexual relations between Islanders and others an offence and allowed inter-marriage only with the Protector's express permission (Beckett, 1987). Resentment came to a head with the passage of the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Acts Amendment Act 1934*

that redefined the term ‘half-caste’ to include many of the hitherto ‘free’ people of Thursday Island of Asian-Indigenous descent (Shnukal & Ramsay, 2004). The categorisation forced individuals to construct their identities in an essentialist way, thereby usurping previous self-identifications based on kinship connections and inter-relationships between families, communities and home islands. The legislative measures of the colonial order “made the Islanders into a formally defined category and bounded group” (Beckett, 1987, p.59). Thursday Island, the administrative ‘capital’ of the Torres Strait, represented a diverse ethnic and cultural society. However, despite being a multicultural and social ‘hub’, Thursday Island, paradoxically, represented the political bastion of racial segregation and social stratification that extended to exclude certain groups of Islanders from places such as swimming baths, hotels, dance halls and schools:

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. (Shnukal, 2001, p. 27)



The phase of paternalist exclusion would last for over thirty years and culminate in the Islanders' maritime strike in 1936. Nakata (2004a) identifies the interplay between the interests of the marine industry, the government and the missionaries as the paramount struggle that conditioned the lives of Islanders over this period, noting "administrative practice was often guided by an individual's administrator's disposition towards Islanders – moulding it more in the interests of expediency than by a premeditated plan to determine a place for Islanders in the new order" (p. 159). In the two decades immediately prior to the mass movement of Islanders to the Australian mainland, political and social struggles in the Torres Strait constructed a site of collective resistance to colonial authority (Sharp, 1993). This political resistance eventuated in the 1936 Maritime Strike with Islanders from eastern and western regions of the Torres Strait finding a common cause in the wake of growing discontent with life under the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* (Mosby & Robinson, 1998). The maritime strike of 1936 involved over seventy percent of the Islander workforce and revolved around the 'company' boats; pearl shelling vessels owned by Islanders and controlled by the Government Protector (Sharp, 1993). The strike represented an attempt by Islanders to regain control of their own lives and destinies, largely lost in the post-missionary era, and demonstrated how Islanders were prepared to give up their boats rather than work under the Protector's conditions (Mosby & Robinson, 1998). The political activism of the Islanders prompted the government to make a number of concessions, the most significant being the passage of the *Torres Strait Islanders Act 1939*.

The passage of the *Torres Strait Islander Act 1939* followed the political action of the maritime strike and, for the first time, defined Islanders in legislative terms:

Islander – a person of the native race of the Torres Strait Islands; a descendent of the native race of the Torres Strait Islands who habitually associates with Islanders; a person other than an Islander who is living on a reserve with an Islander as wife or husband; or any such person who habitually associates on a reserve with Islanders. (*Torres Strait Islander Act 1939*, Part 3, Definitions (a) (b) (c))

A Torres Strait ‘reserve’ was similarly defined:

Reserve – any Torres Strait Island or part of a Torres Strait Island granted in trust or reserved from sale or lease by the Governor in Council for the benefit of Islanders under the provision of any law in force in Queensland relating to Crown Lands. (*Torres Strait Islander Act 1939*, Part 3, Definitions)

The *Torres Strait Islander Act 1939* met the Islanders’ desire to be distinguished from Aborigines (Beckett, 1987). The period also marked a time of ‘cultural liberation’, albeit on a limited scale, where “feasting and dancing flourished, officially approved as the proper way to celebrate secular and religious holidays, as well as weddings, tombstone openings, departures and home-comings” (Beckett, 1987, p. 56).

Both the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* and the *Torres Strait Islander Act 1939* were intended to apply to all Torres Strait Islanders resident in Queensland. However, as Hodes (2000) notes, few Torres Strait Islanders who settled on the mainland, particularly in Cairns, ever came under the

provisions of the Acts and many Islanders in the Torres Strait also appeared to be exempt. How and why this occurred provides a “fascinating insight into government policy towards Torres Strait and its inhabitants, sympathetic government officials, the power exercised by the Protectors over the lives of Indigenous Peoples in Queensland during this period, and bureaucratic bungling when framing the 1939 Act” (Hodes, 2000, p. 166). Several Islander families, mainly involved in the pearling and trochus industries for example, had resettled on the mainland in the early 1900s after receiving exemptions from the 1897 Act. Further to the 1939 Act, there were no reserves in mainland Queensland for Torres Strait Islanders (Hodes, 2000) allowing many Islanders to ‘escape’ the strict legislative provisions. Nakata (2004a) affirms that “although there was no exemption clause in the Torres Strait Islander Act, Islanders were increasingly free to leave the islands to support themselves” (p. 171). The inconsistencies in the application of the 1939 Act are highlighted in the life story of Eddie Koiki Mabo:

The differential treatment of Torres Strait Islanders was sometimes reflected in their relations with officials on the mainland. In Innisfail in 1957 the police allowed Islanders to drink in the pubs even though all, including Koiki, were still ‘under the Act’. It would have been illegal for them to drink alcohol and illegal for the publican to sell it to them. At the time of the 1939 Torres Strait Islanders Act, the possibility of Islanders seeking exemption was not allowed for, as they were all confined to the Torres Strait, nearly all living on their own islands. (Loos & Mabo, 1996, p. 93)

## **2.4 Islanders' Journey to the Mainland Post World War Two**

World War Two represented a political and social watershed for people in the Torres Strait (Fuary, 1993). Prior to the outbreak of hostilities there were no formal restrictions to enlistment in the army and many Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders volunteered for war service (Kidd, 1997). Although not afforded the same monetary or social recognition as their non-Indigenous counterparts, Islanders gained a newfound confidence in the acquisition of skills that would assist in their incorporation into Australian society (Fuary, 1993). The advent of World War Two saw the formation of the Torres Strait Light Infantry and visits to the mainland by Island soldiers (Cromwell, 1983). Returning servicemen brought back to their home islands stories of new jobs and skills to be had on the mainland and particularly of the need of the Queensland sugar cane industry for labourers (Cromwell, 1983). The Islander soldiers' grievances over army pay and conditions highlighted the extent of their disadvantage in relation to the rest of Australia (Nakata, 2004a). Nevertheless, Islanders returned to the Torres Strait with a new sense of purpose, talking openly of freedom and citizen rights and, given the renewed powers of Island Councils under the *Torres Strait Islanders Act 1939*, their wartime experiences led them to hopes of a new deal (Sharp, 1993).

Australia, in the 1950s, represented a land of economic and social opportunity founded upon the country's plans for post-war reconstruction. The Australian Government embarked on a program of mass migration due to a fall in the number of births in the 1930s and the fear there would be insufficient workers to meet the expected high demand for consumer goods and lags in capital stock expected after the war (Jordens, 1997). The White Australia Policy, which favoured migrant applicants from certain countries, was 'loosened' during World War Two to allow non-European

refugees who had married Australians and Japanese war brides to remain in the country (Department of Immigration, n.d.). The revised *Migration Act 1958* made it easier to obtain Australian citizenship and brought to an end the controversial dictation test. A review of the non-European policy in 1966 signalled the abolition of the White Australia policy and non-European migration began to increase (Department of Immigration, n.d.).

While Torres Strait Islanders were not included in the post-war migration program, they nevertheless benefited from the government's need to address labour shortages on the mainland, albeit from an internal basis of population movement. The burgeoning sugar industry and railways in Queensland were in great need of labour in the post-war construction period, prompting the government to respond positively to requests from eastern Islanders who were not involved with company boats to emigrate to the mainland (Nakata, 2004a). Torres Strait Islanders working on the mainland were relatively 'free' from government controls over their movements and their earnings. The government had the power to regulate movement but, in practice, it used these powers selectively by delegating them to the Island councils (Beckett, 1987). Communities, like Badu, that still needed labour for the boats forbade emigration while those, like Murray Island, that no longer ran boats encouraged it (Beckett, 1987). The movement between the Torres Strait and the mainland was not necessarily one-way during this time. Although Torres Strait Islanders sailed down the Queensland coast on luggers fishing for pearl shell, trochus and beche-de-mer visiting mainland towns as far south as Mackay, they were not permitted to stay in the south (Singe, 2003). As the season drew to a close, many Islanders withdrew once again to their islands in the Torres Strait.

In the 1950s, cane-cutting provided a first stop for young Island men arriving on the mainland to seek job skills, travel and adventure (Cromwell, 1983). The pearling industry in the Torres Strait had collapsed by this time due to the introduction of plastic buttons, prompting an increasing number of Islanders to travel to the mainland for seasonal work. Forming work gangs based on kinship connections, Islander men became well known for their reputation as efficient and productive workers in the harvesting of sugarcane and the construction of railways. In the latter part of that decade, the Queensland railways discovered the ability of Islanders to work as efficient track-laying gangs. As the cane-cutting industry began to mechanise and larger holdings were broken up into smaller cane farms, many Islanders transferred to the railways (Cromwell, 1983). By the late 1950s, Islander men were firmly established as employees within the railway industry, assuming leadership positions as gang bosses responsible for the hiring and firing of fellow Island workers (Cromwell, 1983). Pidgin English, commonly referred to now as Torres Strait Islander Creole, was the *lingua franca* becoming the principal language of the workers and the primary form of spoken communication (Cromwell, 1983; Shnukal 2001). Families of the men soon reunited with them on the mainland giving rise to the burgeoning Island communities that would establish themselves in the railway and cane towns in North Queensland. Although there have been documented recordings of Islanders' movement to the mainland prior to this period (Hodes, 2000), the post-war era represented the time of critical mass movement of Islanders from the Torres Strait to mainland Australia, a phenomenon that Shnukal and Ramsay (2004) affirm set in train "the diaspora that today sees the great majority of Islanders living away from the Strait" (p.42). Islanders subsequently moved in large numbers from an 'underdeveloped' to a 'developed' country (Beckett cited in Fuary, 1993).

The social, political and economic climate of the Torres Strait had been irrevocably changed by World War Two and the impending economic collapse of the region. In response, Islanders sensed a renewed urgency to change their situation. The 1930s and 1940s were decades of significant social change in that Islanders exhibited increased confidence in having their rights recognised (Fuary, 1993). The timing of this ‘insurgence’ corresponded with political movements occurring on the mainland orchestrated through organisations such as the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, the Australian Communist Party and the Australian Legion of Ex-servicemen and Women (Nakata, 2004a). The Torres Strait was transitioning into a new political era. The collapse of the pearling industry would transform the local economy and the increasing movement of Islanders to the mainland would begin to change the very fabric and makeup of Islander society (Beckett, 1987).

For a century, pearling had been the *raison d’etre* for the community on Thursday Island and the chief activity in the collective life of the Torres Strait (Singe, 2003). Although the Islanders’ economic situation had been much improved after the war, the market imposed a limit to the expansion and, consequently, to the amount of labour that could be absorbed on the boats (Beckett, 1987). The marine industry was no longer the only field of employment and Islanders took up new state government positions as teachers, medical aides and assistants in retail stores (Beckett, 1987). In 1964, Islanders in the Torres Strait were permitted to vote in state elections and the 1967 Referendum gave the Commonwealth the power to legislate on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Beckett, 1987). The Islanders, both in the Torres Strait and on the mainland, were being exposed to a whole new range of external influences, both domestic and international, that reinforced their view of themselves as

a people-in-common, particularly as it related to their relationship with, and to, others. However, Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland still faced marginalisation and discrimination in a 'White Australia' while Islanders in the Torres Strait remained subjected to restrictive government controls:

For those remaining on the islands, however, the administration of their lives continued in much the same manner as it had just prior to the war. The 'Protector' was now known as the 'Manager' and the underlying viewpoint that the Islanders needed supervision or managing did not change despite the granting of Commonwealth voting rights to all Indigenous Australians in 1961 and state voting rights in 1965. (Nakata, 2004a, p. 171)

## **2.5 Establishing New Communities on the Mainland**

The movement of Islanders from the Torres Strait to the mainland continued throughout the post-war period with an increasing number of Islanders born and raised away from the home islands of their parents and grandparents. The reason for the large scale migration of Islanders is largely attributed to economics. However, there was an undeniable element of protest in the emigration, symbolising a collective statement of dissatisfaction with conditions in the Torres Strait (Beckett, 1987). Whatever the reasons, economical, educational, political or humanitarian, the move was a difficult and painful step suggesting no matter how attractive the opportunities on the mainland, separation from home islands was not a decision taken lightly by those Islanders who moved away from the Torres Strait (Gaffney, 1989; Loos & Mabo, 1996; Thaiday, 1981).



The journeys and pathways that Torres Strait Islanders followed in order to arrive on mainland Australia are as varied and diverse as the individual stories that describe the adventures, the passages and the heartache of those voyages. While the majority of Torres Strait Islanders who re-settled on mainland Australia did so voluntarily, forced removal of Islanders to other reserve communities occurred under the enactment of the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* and subsequent legislation. Although Islanders were not forcibly removed from their traditional lands to the same extent as Aboriginal people on the mainland, a significant number of Islanders found their way to the mainland through involuntary circumstances (Donovan, 2002). The power to remove Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to reserves remained entrenched in the legislation until 1965 with different reasons used to justify their removal and relocation to other areas:

... the experiences of Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders living under the Act differed, depending on whether they had been removed from their own country, whether they worked on or had become fringe dwellers on their own country, or whether they lived on stations, missions or reserves. (Donovan, 2002, p. 175)

Journeys to the mainland were also a result of evacuations, including the mass departure of Saibai Islanders to the mainland Cape York communities of Seisia and Bamaga due to serious flooding and tidal surges in the 1930s. Additionally, a number of Islanders, deemed eligible under the Act, made their way to the mainland following evacuation from the Torres Strait when the region was under threat during World War Two. With the rapid advancement of Japanese forces in the region, many ‘coloured’

evacuees were transported on passenger boats to towns on the Queensland coast (Mullins & Neuenfeldt, 2005). Mullins and Neuenfeldt (2005) note how the evacuees were accommodated together in family groups, “[t]hose who did have relatives to stay with in Queensland’s coastal towns usually found themselves in the midst of very small expatriate Torres Strait communities” (p. 115). There are a small number of biographical accounts of Torres Strait Islanders and their histories and experiences of life in the Torres Strait or movement to the mainland including; the documented life stories of Eddie Koiki Mabo, Ellie Gaffney and Willie Thaiday. The following discussion highlights their perspectives on movement to the mainland during the post-war period.

The Story of Eddie Koiki Mabo demonstrates how many Islanders looked forward to the newfound freedoms to be experienced on the mainland. Although the Queensland government had exiled Eddie Koiki Mabo from his home island of Mer in the Torres Strait, he was determined, nevertheless, to maximise the opportunities to be found on the mainland:

A number of factors seem to have contributed to Koiki Mabo’s decision to try to make it on the mainland. He had fallen foul of Mer’s Islander administration because of a youthful ‘misdemeanour’, that had flung him willy-nilly into the lugger work force ... His mother, Maiga Mabo, had also urged him to find work on the mainland because she thought working on luggers was a dead end in the changing world in that Koiki was growing up. Moreover, he had seen the world beyond the Islands and there were Islander friends and relatives already living there in employment that offered financial rewards unavailable in Queensland’s

Torres Strait Island colony. There was also a freedom from colonist controls. All of these factors contributed to the move to the mainland, a move that was not seen as permanent and certainly not as a rejection of his culture and people.

(Loos & Mabo, 1996, pp. 6-7)

This extract from *Edward Koiki Mabo – His Life and Struggle for Land Rights* (Loos & Mabo, 1996) demonstrates a number of factors at play in his decision to move and remain on the mainland (albeit temporarily). These issues included conflicts with the governing authority in the Torres Strait, economic imperatives and a chance to better himself and a prevailing exuberance for the opportunity to partake in a society seemingly ‘free’ from colonial controls. Interestingly, Koiki Mabo did not consider the move from the Torres Strait to the mainland as a permanent re-settlement or a rejection of his old life in favour of a new life on the mainland. The cultural ties that bind were evidently still very strong for Koiki Mabo and reflected how Torres Strait Islanders who left their island homes may have felt conflicted emotions at the time.

In *Somebody Now – the Autobiography of Ellie Gaffney, a woman of Torres Strait*, Ellie Gaffney (1989) describes her temporary movement to the mainland that was, largely, guided by humanitarian concerns:

In the midst of my young life, before I turned five, for some reason our family moved over to mainland Australia. We lived for a few years at a place called Galloways. Being only five years old, I was not very interested in the reasons for the move, so I did not question it, but I can recall my aunt Bebe Mareja saying to my mother, ‘Why yu palla go way to a nudder palla country?’

meaning ‘Why go to someone else’s country?’ ... Later in life I was told that my Papa used his spare time looking for malnourished or neglected Aborigines along the coastline from Cape York Peninsula to Small River, now known as the Cowal Creek Community. (p. 8)

This extract from Ellie Gaffney’s Story highlights some of the issues associated with Islanders’ relocation from the Torres Strait to the mainland. Questions of going to ‘someone else’s country’ remain relevant today with Islanders living on the mainland continuing to negotiate their sense of ‘place’ and belonging on land other than that of their ancestral home of origin.

Willie Thaiday’s (1981) Story, recalled in his autobiography *Under the Act*, depicts the harsh realities of Islander people living under the 1897 Act, his subsequent removal from Erub to Thursday Island in the Torres Strait and eventual forced relocation to Palm Island (off the coast of Townsville in north Queensland). After his marriage in 1936, Thaiday decided to remain on Palm Island. On recounting his arrival at Palm Island, Thaiday (1981) states:

We expect nothing at Palm Island, no people there to see us. The first time we come as free people working on a boat but this time we come as prisoners ... We land at Palm Island close to new year, December 27, 1932. We see many people there, about 1500, and 25 police are there ready to arrest us. The superintendent is Mr. Delaney and there is a rule there that you go to the office and open your port so they can find out what you got. (pp. 14-15)

During World War Two, Willie Thaiday was sent to Atherton (far north Queensland) for agricultural work on a banana plantation and did various farming jobs in his lifetime. He was sent back to Palm Island in 1950 and recalls the oppressive conditions they were subjected to:

We know it is wrong but still you can't say nothing because the moment you say something they throw you in gaol. If they say you go to gaol you can't say what for and you don't know when you come out. I saw some boys, two or three of them, who spent 18 months without court. ... They treat us like dogs on Palm Island. To them we are only animals but we are human, the same as them and we got feelings the same as them, only trouble is we are coloured. (Thaiday, 1981, pp. 27, 29)

As highlighted in these three cases, there were diverse circumstances under which Islanders moved from their ancestral home islands and came 'south' to the mainland. For a small yet significant number of Islanders, leaving their traditional islands was not a matter of free will with many subjected to restrictive legislative practices that regulated every aspect of their lives. For many however, the anticipation of new economic and social opportunities was tempered by the realities of leaving their ancestral homes and settling in a new environment as a marginalised minority group. As a minority group, Islanders tended to relocate in coastal towns, including Cairns, Townsville, Mackay and later Darwin and Broome, where there were established communities of other Islanders who were working in the sugarcane, railways and maritime industries.

## **2.6 Application of the Acts to Torres Strait Islanders Living on the Mainland**

The application of protective Acts to Torres Strait Islanders was sporadic and inconsistent (Hodes, 2000) allowing Islanders who moved to the mainland different opportunities and lifestyles depending upon the level of regulation and control instigated by the respective authorities at the time. This is due in large part to the ‘loose’ definitions and understandings of who constituted a Torres Strait Islander and who was subsequently eligible for specific forms of ‘treatment’ (Hodes, 2000). It was not until the 1970s that the Commonwealth government recognised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s calls for self-determination and the right to define and express themselves on their terms. The Commonwealth working definition of Aboriginal people based on biological and social forms of identification was extended, in 1972, to include Torres Strait Islanders (this definition was later endorsed by government in 1975):

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in that he lives. (Ross, 1996)

The significance of the Commonwealth definition in replacing interpretations of Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islanders based on preponderance of ‘blood’ is noted by Ross (1996):

The Commonwealth working definition with its elements of descent, identification and community acceptance departed radically from the traditional definition of preponderance of Aboriginal blood. By including social elements

as well as broadening the biological element, many more people were potentially within the official definition of Aboriginal. (p. 4)

Understandings of who constituted a Torres Strait Islander, or not, extended into all forms of social policy including, most notably, the Census. Prior to the 1947 Census, Torres Strait Islanders were regarded as Aboriginal and were therefore excluded from official Census counts if they were of more than 50 percent Torres Strait Islander blood (Ross, 1996). In the 1947 Census, Torres Strait Islanders were considered to be Polynesian and were included in official counts. In the 1954 and 1961 Censuses, they were considered to be Pacific Islanders and were again included in official counts. For the 1966 Census, however, Torres Strait Islanders were classified as Aboriginal and were excluded from official figures (Smith, 1980). The operational approach to Indigenous identification used in recent decades by the Australian Bureau of Statistics censuses has been based on the descent origin component of the definition. In the 1976 Census, the question asked was “What is each person’s racial origin?” (cited in Barnes, White & Ross, 1996, p. 62). Since then, all Censuses have asked ‘Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin’. Prior to the 1996 Census, respondents could not record dual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity. The recognition of dual Indigenous identities is significant as it more accurately reflects the level of cultural and historical interaction and interdependence between the two groups.

## **2.7 Silence by Omission**

While definitions of Torres Strait Islanders are now found in legislation and government policy, there is no corresponding application to be found of who constitutes an Islander living outside the Torres Strait in current legislation. On 15 April 2004, the

then Commonwealth government announced significant changes to the delivery of services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities including, most notably, the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and its service delivery arm, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS). On 30 June 2005, the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989* was amended by Parliament, abolishing both ATSIC and ATSIS (Arabena, 2005a). This research study does not debate the merits or effectiveness of the Commission or its service arm, nor does it assess the degree to which Torres Strait Islanders are able to access government services on the mainland, as this has been done elsewhere (Arthur, 1997). Rather, the following discussion regarding definitions, or lack thereof, pertaining to Torres Strait Islanders demonstrates the political circumstances that influence, shape and, to a large degree, legitimise the formation of social identities for Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. The cessation of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989* simultaneously signalled the end of legislative provisions that recognised Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait as well as support structures including the Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board (TSIAB) and the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs (OTSIA). Division 10 of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989* outlined the following matters in relation to Torres Strait Islander affairs:

#### 80 Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs

An Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs is established within the Commission.



## 81 Functions of Office

(1) The Office has the following functions:

(a) to monitor the conduct of programs affecting Torres Strait Islanders by the Commission, by other Commonwealth bodies (except the TSRA) and by State, Territory and local government bodies, and to evaluate the extent to which those programs meet the needs of Torres Strait Islanders;

(b) to monitor the development of programs and policies affecting Torres Strait Islanders by the Commission, by Regional Councils and by other Commonwealth bodies (except the TSRA), and to evaluate the extent to which those programs and policies are likely to meet the needs of Torres Strait Islanders;

(c) to report to the Advisory Board, the Commission and the Minister, as appropriate, on the results of the performance of the functions set out in paragraphs (a) and (b).

(2) In performing its functions, *the Office shall pay particular attention to the needs of Torres Strait Islanders who live outside the Torres Strait area.*

(3) The Office shall consult the Advisory Board from time to time in relation to the performance of the functions of the Office.

## 82 Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board

A Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board is established.

## 83 Function of Advisory Board

(1) The function of the Advisory Board is to provide advice to the Minister and the Commission for the purpose of furthering the social, economic and cultural advancement of Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait area.

(2) The function of the Advisory Board may be performed by the Advisory Board on its own initiative or at the request of the Minister or the Commission, as the case requires.

#### 84 Constitution of Advisory Board

(1) The Advisory Board consists of:

(a) a Chairperson appointed by the Minister, being the Commissioner who represents the Torres Strait zone; and

(b) *6 other members, being Torres Strait Islanders appointed by the Minister to represent Torres Strait Islanders living in the following areas:*

(i) *New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory;*

(ii) *Victoria and Tasmania;*

(iii) *Queensland;*

(iv) *Western Australia;*

(v) *South Australia;*

(vi) *the Northern Territory. (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989, Division 10, my emphasis in italics)*

In the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989*, the recognition of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait is clearly articulated in those sections relating to the administrative and service delivery functions of the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs and the representative structure of the Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board that consisted of members drawn from each of the mainland states (Sections 80-84). The Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board provided the following rationale for its establishment and scope of operations:

The TSIAB came into effect on 5 March 1990 when ATSIC commenced operations. The TSIAB and an Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs (OTSIA) were established under the ATSIC Act owing to calls by the Torres Strait Islander community for an advocacy point for their concerns within the ATSIC structure. Torres Strait Islander people recognised that their lesser population numbers (compared to that of Aboriginal people) would be to their detriment in the voting processes at ATSIC elections and therefore at Regional Council levels when it came to the settling of priorities and the distribution of funding. The TSIAB and the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs were therefore seen as an ‘answer’ to this inequity. (Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board (TSIAB), 1996, n.p.)

The abolition of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989* subsequently signalled the end of the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs and the Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board. Further to the abolition of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989* in 2005, minimal recognition has been given to Islanders living outside the Torres Strait, a fact underscored by the absence of any mention of this group in the Commonwealth *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2000* which replaced the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989*. The objects of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Act 2005*, as outlined in Section 3, are:

### 3 Objects

The objects of this Act are, in recognition of the past dispossession and dispersal of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their present disadvantaged position in Australian society:

- (a) to *ensure maximum participation of Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders in the formulation and implementation of government policies* that affect them;
- (b) to promote the development of *self-management and self-sufficiency* among Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders;
- (c) to *further the economic, social and cultural development* of Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders; and
- (d) to *ensure co-ordination in the formulation and implementation of policies* affecting Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders by the Commonwealth, State, Territory and local governments, without detracting from the responsibilities of State, Territory and local governments to provide services to their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents. (*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Act 2005*, my emphasis in italics)

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Act 2005* specifies that its purpose is to ensure maximum participation of Torres Strait Islanders (and Aboriginal people) in policy making, promote self-management and self-sufficiency, further economic, social and cultural development, and to ensure co-ordination of policy making while strengthening the delivery of services. In the same Act, a Torres Strait Islander is defined as “a descendent of an Indigenous inhabitant of the Torres Strait Islands” (p. 8). This definition should, by implication, include all people who identify as Torres Strait

Islanders based on the notion of ancestral descent and not residential location. Yet, the very operations of the 2005 Act, as specified in the definitions and scope of the legislation, do not cover Islanders who live outside the Torres Strait. The 2005 Act not only ignores any reference to Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland, it furthermore articulates the conditions and circumstances for *which* Torres Strait Islanders are covered by key provisions of the legislation. In this way, Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland are ‘defined by default’ as being those Islanders *not living in the Torres Strait area* and, therefore, not covered by the sections of the 2005 Act that relate to such matters as cultural practice (Section 4), governance (Section 142A) and representative political structures (Section 142U).

This research study does not advocate for explicit distinction between Islanders living in the Torres Strait and Islanders living on the mainland. Indeed, it has been the historical imposition of government and bureaucratic definitions on Islanders that has instituted racialised and essentialised identifications of Islanders as a people in both an individual and collective sense. Moreover, formal definitions and associated racial classifications have proved divisive in assigning positive and negative attributes to particular groups of Islanders resulting in different social circumstances and life opportunities between individuals, groups and even family members. The social stratification constructed through colonial discourses of racial hierarchy represents an abhorrent stain on Torres Strait Islander social history and one which will not be easily erased during the course and passage of time. Further measures that seek to define, identify and delineate between groups of Islanders for the purposes of bureaucratic and administrative convenience and expediency are, therefore, not supported by this research study. However, it is acknowledged that Indigenous governance structures and

institutions must, for operational requirement and ‘transparency’, specify the functions, scope and coverage of relevant legislation reflective of the government’s policy position. In this regard, legislative definitions are a necessary evil in order for administrative directives to be interpreted with minimal ambiguity. However, in the case of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005*, the definition of Torres Strait Islanders only serves to heighten any uncertainty about the position and location of ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islanders’ in Indigenous political discourse. For example, in the definition of *Ailan Kastom*, the 2005 Act, states:

***Ailan Kastom*** means the body of customs, traditions, observances and beliefs of some or all of the Torres Strait Islanders *living in the Torres Strait area*, and includes any such customs, traditions, observances and beliefs relating to particular persons, areas, objects or relationships. (*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005*, Section 4, my emphasis)

Why *Ailan Kastom* can only be interpreted as that which pertains to the cultural practice and traditions of Islanders living in the Torres Strait area remains unclear. In practical terms, however, it would appear almost impossible to limit the practice of culture and tradition to a defined ‘place’, particularly when the observance of *Ailan Kastom* is dependent upon the spiritual and cultural interactions that occur between and amongst people, their kinship relationships and the connection with community. Such cultural and spiritual interconnectedness transcends senses of place, space and time making what we know and understand to be *Ailan Kastom* a dynamic and ever changing cultural and social construction. To limit the interpretation of *Ailan Kastom* as that which pertains to Islanders in the Torres Strait ignores the fluidity of movement of

Islanders between the Torres Strait and the mainland. This limitation, furthermore, implies the non-transference or adaptation of Torres Strait Islander cultural practice, customs, observances and beliefs in different circumstances, environments and contexts. If, for example, an Islander from the Torres Strait travels to the mainland for a Tombstone Opening or a wedding (as many people do), are they no longer practicing *Ailan Kastom* when they arrive on the mainland? Additionally, if ‘Mainland Islanders’ are practising and observing cultural traditions and beliefs, is this not considered *Ailan Kastom* (for the purposes of interpreting the intent and application of the 2005 Act)? Such questions are answered by previous examinations of the practice of *Ailan Kastom*, including that undertaken by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (1997a):

A body of customs, traditions, observances and beliefs, referred to as *Ailan Kastom*, has survived European contact and continues to develop. *Ailan Kastom* combines strong elements of Christianity, as evidenced by the significance of the ‘Coming of the Light’ ceremonies, with traditional values associated with the authority of elders and sea and market garden based economies. *Ailan Kastom forms a strong bond between the different island communities between Torres Strait Islanders living in the region and on the mainland.* (p. 9, my emphasis)

The absence of reference to Islanders living outside the Torres Strait and the practice of cultural traditions in the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005* is further extended in the political governance structures established to represent and address Torres Strait Islanders’ interests. Specifically, the sections of the 2005 Act

relating to the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA), the peak representative and administrative body for Torres Strait Islanders, only pertains to the governance of people and issues of the Torres Strait region. In Section 142A of the Act outlining the functions of the TSRA, it states:

#### 142A Functions of TSRA

##### Functions

(1) The TSRA has the following functions:

(a) to recognise and maintain the special and unique *Ailan Kastom of Torres Strait Islanders living in the Torres Strait area*;

(b) to *formulate and implement programs* for Torres Strait Islanders, and Aboriginal persons, *living in the Torres Strait area*;

(c) to *monitor the effectiveness of programs for Torres Strait Islanders*, and Aboriginal persons, *living in the Torres Strait area*, including programs conducted by other bodies;

(d) to *develop policy proposals* to meet national, State and regional needs and priorities of Torres Strait Islanders, and Aboriginal persons, *living in the Torres Strait area*;

(e) to assist, advise and co-operate with Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal communities, organisations and individuals at national, State, Territory and regional levels;

(f) to advise the Minister on:

(i) matters relating to Torres Strait Islander affairs, and Aboriginal affairs, in the Torres Strait area, including the administration of legislation;



- (ii) the co-ordination of the activities of other Commonwealth bodies that affect Torres Strait Islanders, or Aboriginal persons, *living in the Torres Strait area*;
- (g) when requested by the Minister, to provide information or advice to the Minister on any matter specified by the Minister;
- (h) to take such reasonable action as it considers necessary to *protect Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal cultural material and information relating to the Torres Strait area* if the material or information is considered sacred or otherwise significant by Torres Strait Islanders or Aboriginal persons;
- (i) at the request of, or with the agreement of, the Australian Bureau of Statistics but not otherwise, to *collect and publish statistical information* relating to Torres Strait Islanders, and Aboriginal persons, *living in the Torres Strait area*;
- (j) such other functions as are conferred on the TSRA by this Act or any other Act;
- (k) such other functions as are expressly conferred on the TSRA by a law of a State or of an internal Territory and in respect of that there is in force written approval by the Minister under section 142B;
- (l) to undertake such research as is necessary to enable the TSRA to perform any of its other functions;
- (m) to do anything else that is incidental or conducive to the performance of any of the preceding functions. (*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005*, my emphasis)

The continued reference to the *Torres Strait area* as the scope of the TSRA's functions is confirmed by the eligibility criteria to vote for TSRA representatives specified by the 2005 Act:

142U People entitled to vote at TSRA elections

A person is entitled to vote at a TSRA ward election if and only if:

- (a) the person is a Torres Strait Islander or an Aboriginal person; and
- (b) either:
  - (i) the person's name is on the Commonwealth Electoral Roll and the person's place of living as shown on that Roll is within the ward concerned; or
  - (ii) the person is entitled to vote at the election under rules made under subsection 143G(3).

142V People qualified to be elected to the TSRA

(1) A person is not qualified to stand for election, or to be elected, as a member of the TSRA for a ward if:

- (a) the person is not entitled to vote at the TSRA ward election concerned; or
- (b) the person is a member of the staff of, or a consultant to, the TSRA; or
- (c) the person is bankrupt; or
- (d) there is in operation a personal insolvency agreement with the person's creditors under the law relating to bankruptcy; or
- (e) subject to subsection (2), the person has been convicted of an offence against a Commonwealth, State or Territory law and sentenced to imprisonment for one year or longer; or
- (f) subject to subsection (2), the person has been convicted of an offence against a Commonwealth, State or Territory law involving dishonesty and sentenced to imprisonment for 3 months or longer. (*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005*)

The requirement for Islanders to be registered on the Commonwealth Electoral Roll within the Torres Strait regional ward effectively excludes all Islanders permanently residing elsewhere on the mainland from participating in political processes of the Torres Strait. This is despite the inclusion of the definition of a Torres Strait Islander as specified in the 2005 Act as including all people of Torres Strait Islander descent. In this way, Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait are once again defined almost by default in that they are ‘ineligible’ persons who are not covered by the functions of the Torres Strait Regional Authority nor entitled to vote in TSRA elections or be elected to the TSRA as a representative (until such time they might be registered in the Torres Strait electoral ward). This research study does not argue that Islanders living outside the Torres Strait be allowed to vote or be represented on the TSRA. Several government inquiries and consultative processes with Torres Strait Islander and stakeholder groups have already addressed this very issue with the result being the current governance regime (Arthur, 2001a, 2001b). However, in confirming the operations of the TSRA, the 2005 Act overlooks how Torres Strait Islanders not covered by the representative structures of the Torres Strait are to be accounted for in comparable political processes that involve their ancestral home islands, access to resources and services on the mainland. While it is assumed that ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islanders’ would be covered by those sections of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005* that relate to both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, such a position is neither articulated nor confirmed in the legislation, prompting Torres Strait Islander scholar, Kerry Arabena (2005a) to comment:

The Government and its bureaucrats have never adequately explained why the reform agenda has retained active, representative and executive structures for

Torres Strait Islanders living in the Torres Strait, and why, through the budget process, the Torres Strait Islanders on the Mainland will continue to be supported to meet and make decisions in a national capacity. This level of prescription about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation will need to be addressed. (p. 38)

While the demographics of the Torres Strait Islander population indicate an increasing trend toward residency outside the Torres Strait, government policy and social attitudes have not responded to the reality that more Torres Strait Islanders currently live and work, on a permanent basis, outside the Torres Strait. Government policy at both the Commonwealth and State level has effectively silenced the needs, concerns and aspirations of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait with continued emphasis on programs and initiatives aimed at addressing the simultaneous economic, social and cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the mainland, and Islanders in the Torres Strait. George Mye MBE OAM, the inaugural ASTIC Commissioner for the Torres Strait region, stated in his submission, in 2004, to the Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs:

There were tears on my shoulder, north, south, east and west – across the country. They need something of their own because they are always last in the queue for anything down on the mainland. (cited in Arabena, 2005b)

The issue of ‘Mainlander’ invisibility from the political agenda is not just the concern of Torres Strait Islanders. Tom Calma, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, similarly cautioned, at the time of the review of

the arrangements in the administration of Indigenous affairs in 2004 (post-ATSIC), that Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland risked being ignored and forgotten in the new arrangements and sought to establish “the extent to which Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland are able to participate and the adequacy of their representation through the new processes” (cited in Arabena, 2005b).

Paradoxically, government publications espouse rhetoric of acknowledgement and recognition of ‘Mainland Islanders’ as a distinguishable group:

The migration of large numbers of Torres Strait Islanders to the towns and cities of the mainland did not cause an irreversible split in Torres Strait Islander society. Those that moved continued to identify themselves as Torres Strait Islanders and maintain close ties with their home communities. The enduring link between the experiences of life on the mainland and the experiences of life in the Islands is kinship. (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, n.d)

The social and political rhetoric suggests an enduring and permanent link between the populations of Torres Strait Islanders; however, the reality reflects the continuing struggle faced by Islanders living outside the Torres Strait to be included and/or covered by relevant legislation and policy. The lack of acknowledgement of the demographic reality of the Torres Strait Islander population living outside the Torres Strait exposes a complex, and often contradictory, interplay of social and cultural processes that have been constructed, shaped and maintained within the identity politics of representation, place and ‘people making’.

## 2.8 Summary

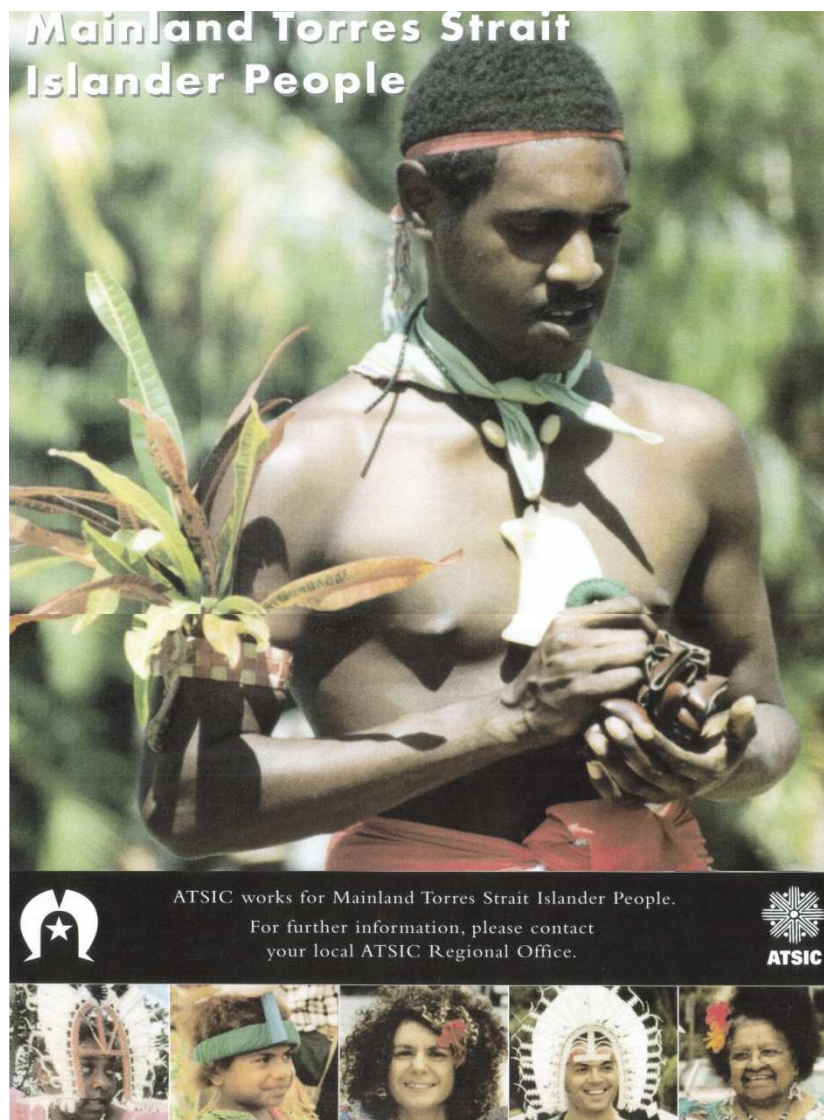
This chapter examined the initial movement of Torres Strait Islanders to mainland Australia, describing the motivating factors for resettlement that included, for some, forced removal from their ancestral islands. For the most part however, mainland Australia, in the period post-World War Two, represented a land of economic and social opportunities not available to Islanders in the Torres Strait at the time. Islander men working in the sugarcane, railway, construction and maritime industries were eventually joined by their families, ensuring a steady stream of Islanders to relocate and settle on the mainland. Island communities such as Malaytown in Cairns, was one of the many settlements that provided the social, economic and cultural support families needed to transition into a new way of life away from the Torres Strait. The chapter also explored the ways past and present government legislation and policy has influenced official consideration of the needs and aspirations of ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islanders’. A review of relevant legislation revealed a lack of acknowledgement of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait, particularly in view of policy positions that articulate the exclusion of this group from social and political processes afforded to other Torres Strait Islanders. The demographic reality of overwhelming population representation of ‘Mainland Islanders’ demands a reconsideration of how this group is positioned and ‘voiced’ in the Indigenous and ‘mainstream’ political landscape.

Many years ago, as an undergraduate university student in Brisbane, I attended a NAIDOC week rally in King George Square. Speaking on behalf of Torres Strait Islanders on the day, one of the Brisbane Torres Strait Islander elders stood on stage and opened his speech with a resounding cry of ‘THE SILENCE IS DEAFENING!’ A lot of time has passed for me to really understand and appreciate what he was trying to

say at the time. 'Mainlanders' have been effectively silenced by institutional and social structures that continue to ignore, omit and overlook the circumstances of the majority of the Islander population. The following chapter examines how Islanders living outside the Torres Strait have been considered, and socially constructed, in historical, anthropological and cultural texts. My critique of the way 'Mainlanders' have been located and positioned within the discourse of identity politics demonstrates why Islanders living outside the Torres Strait have been, and continue to be, silenced by omission.

## Chapter 3

### Lost In Space: The Identity Politics of the 'Mainland Islander' Experience



*Figure 3.1 Mainland Torres Strait Islander People Poster, circa mid-1990s.<sup>6</sup>*

<sup>6</sup> Poster produced by the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), 'Mainland Torres Strait Islander People', circa mid 1990s.



### 3.1 Introduction

This poster (see Figure 3.1), produced by the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in the mid 1990s, presents an interesting story about the ways Islanders living outside the Torres Strait might re-present and express themselves as Island people. The dominant image in the top half of the poster is of a young male dressed in traditional ceremonial attire, wearing a bright red *calico* and scarf around his head. He appears to be partaking in a traditional Island dance as denoted by his holding of the *gor*, his armband decorated with foliage, the handkerchief around his neck and decorative necklace of pearl shell and beads. Although the background is blurred, he is clearly in an outdoor setting with an abundance of trees and sunshine. The outdoor setting symbolises a connection between person and the natural environment. His adolescent-looking face and slight appearance signifies his youthfulness yet he is dressed in traditional dancing attire. The connection between past and present is therefore articulated in this context; his youthfulness represents the future but that future is firmly grounded in the traditions, culture and customs of the past.

At the bottom of the poster, several other images of Torres Strait Islanders are featured. Diverse ages and gender are represented, further emphasising connections between the future and past. Although there are obvious variations in physical appearance between them, the signifiers of Islanderness, including the Islander floral dress, the hibiscus in the hair, the wearing of the beads and various ceremonial headdresses, reflect easily recognisable symbols of identity-in-common as Islanders. The *dari* features predominantly in three of the smaller pictures (the older woman is wearing *dari* shaped earrings) and is represented again as a trademark close to the text.

As the dominant image on the Torres Strait Islander flag, the *dari* represents an almost universal symbol of ‘Islanderness’.

The text heading featured at the top left hand corner of the poster states ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islander People’. The use of the term ‘mainland’ contextualises and frames the text as a whole. The signifiers are easily recognisable as symbols of ‘Islanderness’ but without the textual heading the reader might not be able to recognise the locational context of the Islanders featured therein. The text therefore succeeds in constructing a synergy of identities between what is known, and understood to be representative, of Islander culture. It then seeks to authenticate this representation by anchoring the text with the ‘Mainland’ nomenclature. In recognising the future of Islanders (that may happen to be outside the Torres Strait), the text also emphasises the links to the past and the practice of traditional Islander culture. Movement to the mainland does not represent, therefore, loss of culture.

The smaller text featured in the bottom part of the poster declares ‘ATSIC works for Mainland Torres Strait Islander People’. This is an intentional political statement, declaring that Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland have a representative voice and that voice will be promoted through the (former) organisation perceived by some to be representative of the interests of Aboriginal people only. The political and cultural positioning presented in this poster exposes a very powerful story about the way Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait re-present themselves and, therein, their sense of identity within the collective of ‘Islanderness’. In an evocative way, this visual and textual image provides a counter narrative to

suggestions that Islander people living outside the Torres Strait have ‘lost’ their culture, their traditions, and their ties to the Torres Strait.

This chapter examines how Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait have been represented, spoken of, and written about in academic and public discourse. My review of the literature explores the academic and social positioning of ‘Mainland Islanders’ within representational discourses of identity, culture, power, place, community and politics. The following discussion is premised on the idea that the cultural construction of the ‘Mainlander’ cannot be understood without exploring, critiquing and engaging with the identity politics that contribute to its representation. This chapter examines anthropological and historical writings that have contributed to re-producing the forms, hierarchies and established mythologies that define, regulate and circumscribe notions of a ‘Mainland Islander’ identity. The task of reviewing representations of ‘Mainland Islanders’ inevitably leads to a subjective critique of ethnographic representations provided by, for the most part, anthropologists and historians. At issue is the question of the location from which anthropological and historical knowledge is constructed and the extent to which these discourses of knowledge, in describing issues of culture, place and identity, have played to the politics of representation and ‘people making’.

My review of anthropological and historical writing is fraught with the social and political interconnections evident in my personal, professional and scholarly exposure to these disciplines. The discussion outlined in this chapter is not intended as an attack on the reputations of researchers and academics who have worked in the Torres Strait for a long time, in some cases over a number of decades, forging close

associations with Islander families and communities. Nakata (1998) highlights the dilemma for Torres Strait Islander people who challenge and contest the order of things, particularly when their critique may involve people they know:

I stand before anthropologists who have worked in the Torres Strait, who have extended friendship, information and assistance at one time or another to me or to other Islanders. Any inferred criticisms are not directed at people, or work that they have done but at taken-for-granted practices which emerge in the processes through which we form knowledges about ourselves. (p. 2-3)

It would be an essentialist assumption on my part to submit that all anthropologists occupy a white, Western ‘they’ position within academic discourse (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). Such a view would locate anthropologists within a unitary political, social and cultural position and, furthermore, perpetuate the ‘victim’ narrative found in earlier postcolonial writing conceptualising Islanders-as-native subjects complicit in their own oppression and marginalisation. Moreover, an unmitigated critique of the discipline ignores the contribution anthropological research has made towards the production of Torres Strait Islander knowledge, histories, cultural processes and fields of enquiry. My discussion is, therefore, less concerned about anthropological practices and processes and more focused on the way the literature relating to the Torres Strait has located ‘Mainland Islanders’ within social and cultural discourses of identification. This chapter reviews literature from the 1970s to the present, drawing on comparative observations made, in some cases by the same author, over a period of time.

### **3.2 Reviewing the Literature**

Much of the literature relating to the Torres Strait has tended to focus on a pattern of discursive events and assumptions that have characterised and defined the mainland Torres Strait Islander experience. These assumptions include, firstly, that Islanders have left their ancestral home islands in large numbers since World War Two and re-settled on the mainland in the mainly urban coastal areas of Australia (Beckett, 1987; Cromwell, 1983; Fisk, Duncan & Kehl, 1974). Secondly, in moving away from their home islands, Islanders assumed 'minority status' in their new communities on the mainland both as Indigenous Australians and Australians more generally (Beckett, 1987; Sharp, 1993). Thirdly, Islanders living on the mainland maintain some connection with their ancestral home islands through family and kinship ties; however, there exist tensions, real or imagined, between the diasporic populations and home island communities (Beckett, 2004; Fuary, 1991; Kehoe-Forutan, 2004; Singe, 2003). Lastly, Islanders living on the mainland are effectively excluded from political and social processes in the Torres Strait (Beckett, 2004).

It is acknowledged that anthropologists and historians have not written about 'Mainland Islanders' in exclusively negative terms (Beckett, 1987; Fuary, 2004; Shnukal, 2004). This chapter focuses not on the specific writings of anthropologists and historians but, rather, explores how their writings have contributed to the overall identity politics prevalent in discussions regarding Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. The assumptions underpinning the production of a negative and deficit-driven form of identity politics has served to maintain notions of a 'Mainland Islander' identity that has been constituted within representations of loss, disconnection and social conflict. Anthropologists and historians have sought to expose the contradictions,

conflicts and interplays between Torres Strait Islander people, place and identity. However, it has been the lack of attention given to more positive analysis and interpretation of the 'Mainland Torres Strait Islander experience' that provides the focus on this literature review. The material and historical conditions derived from cultural discourses of disconnection have afforded Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland the status of a 'lost people' bereft of socio-economic foundations, geo-political space and cultural authority. With no place to purportedly call 'home' in the Torres Strait and, similarly, no place to call 'home' on Aboriginal Country on the Australian mainland, are Islanders living outside the Torres Strait 'lost in space'?

As a diasporic population, much of the focus of the literature on Mainland Torres Strait Islanders has been on this group's relationship to the Torres Strait and the associated sense of place and space emanating from journeys of travel, relocation and resettlement (Barnes, 1998; Beckett, 1987, 2004; Fuary, 1991; Sharp, 1993; Singe, 2003). One of the first examinations of the 'Mainland Islander' phenomenon was the 1974 Survey undertaken by Fisk, Duncan and Kehl (1974) on behalf of the then Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs, the Commonwealth government and the Australian National University. The survey aimed to provide "data for making decisions in the field of economic and social policy towards the Torres Strait and their people" (Fisk et al., 1974, p. vii). The study of fifty Townsville and Cairns households focused on a range of social, cultural and economic factors, including inquiry into the personal lives and habits of the Island participants. The survey methodology has since been debated with culturally ambiguous questions arguably skewing participant responses (Sharp, 1980a). The research is important, however, as it demonstrates how, as early as the 1970s, the government recognised the

need to examine, in a formal sense, the movement of Torres Strait Islanders to mainland Australia and what implications this had for policy making and the provision of services to this emergent population.

The findings of the survey undertaken by Fisk et al. (1974) suggest firstly, there is a tendency for migration to take place in a serial fashion, with one person or a small group coming first and other members of the family following from time to time after the original group has become established. Secondly, migration tends to be financed from within the family group and mainly from money earned outside the home island. This enabled the cost of the movement to be financed from earnings on the mainland and also made it possible for the mainland-based Islanders to solve the quite considerable housing problem before sending for the rest of the family. Fisk et al. (1974) conclude:

... the longer they stay, the more deeply their roots go down in the Australian mainland centres, the more committed they become to the way of life and work, the larger the proportion of their families that have grown up and made all their ties there, and with a very few exceptions, the less likely they are to want to re-migrate to the reserve islands. Greatly improved income possibilities in the reserve island, and/or reduced economic opportunities on the mainland, would be likely to slow down the rate of migration to the mainland, but there seems little reason to think that any foreseeable development in these directions would induce a large scale re-migration movement from the mainland. (p. 26)

Even in the mid-1970s, it became evident that the large scale movement of Torres Strait Islanders to the mainland was a trend unlikely to be reversed in the foreseeable future. The economic opportunities on the mainland would prove to be a huge incentive motivating Torres Strait Islanders to seek better lives for themselves and their families and, unless conditions were to change in the Torres Strait, there was little impetus to go back, at least in the short to medium term. However, as Sharp (1980a) points out “nowhere are Islanders living in Cairns or Townsville asked the straightforward question: were employment available in their home Islands would they move back? Yet more than 50 per cent moved south for employment reasons according to the survey” (p. 30). This trend towards an apparent ‘one way’ flow of population shift, invariably raised the question of the ties ‘Mainlanders’ would continue to have with their home Island communities. The question of ongoing ties, Fisk et al. (1974) argue, would be even more pertinent for subsequent generations of Torres Strait Islanders born and raised on the mainland. On the issue of Islanders sustaining cultural ties between the mainland and the Torres Strait:

The weak ties that Townsville-based Islanders have with the Torres Strait leads to the question of whether they have developed and substituted ties on the mainland ... when we assess the strength of these family ties, in terms of the degree of contact maintained between the household and their close relatives, generally mainland located family seems as unimportant as Torres Strait family. (Fisk et al., 1974, p. 44)

Fisk et al. (1974) assessed that Islanders on the mainland had relatively weak ties with the Torres Strait, arguing that the family and community ties on the mainland



had, over time, superseded the need to maintain and nurture relationships with family in the Torres Strait rendering the latter as relatively “unimportant” (p.44). This assessment of the level of social interaction between ‘Mainlanders’ and their Island-based families was based on the degree of contact between the two groups as evidenced by social communication between them, including frequency of visits, level of correspondence, and dealings with family matters. A review of the survey questions, however, demonstrates little inquiry of why the level of contact between Mainland participants and their Torres Strait families was sporadic. For example, the cost, time and official permission associated with travel from Townsville to the Torres Strait would have been prohibitive for most Islanders during the late 1960s and early 1970s:

For a returning Islander, just getting to their home on an Outer Island was a tortuous, sometimes impossible task. For a start the Outer Islands of the Torres Strait had no telephones, nor airstrips. Communication was by government radio, an awkward process controlled by the white administration on Thursday Island. Transport to Badu or nearby islands might be arranged on a Nona lugger. However, for most Outer Islands the only transport was by government vessels. You registered your name at the Department of Native Affairs office next to the courthouse. If the officials approved, then a berth was found for you. If not, then you simply did not travel beyond Thursday Island. (Singe, 2003, p. 19)

Furthermore there is no discussion in the survey about whether the emphasis on *frequency of contact* was the most appropriate indicator of ongoing connection between ‘Mainlanders’ and Islanders in the Torres Strait without the possibility of exploring the nature of the relationship between the two groups and the extent to which informal

means of communication (word of mouth, ‘blackvine’) facilitated meaningful contact and cultural exchange (Beckett, 1987). In assessing the degree of interconnection and frequency of contact between Islanders on the mainland and the Torres Strait, it is unclear whether Fisk et al. (1974) considered the role of social activities such as church attendance or “whether they enquired what happened in times of crisis” (Beckett, 1987, p. 229). Sharp’s (1980a) critique of the 1974 survey highlights the makings of an ongoing debate about the nature and degree of the ‘attachments’ Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait may have with their home island communities:

Failure to write letters, even infrequency of visits home are not indices of attachment or non-attachment. Nor are the answers on the relative attractions or deficiencies of ways of life in the respective places, home or mainland cities, evidence of weak ties to the homelands. (Sharp, 1980a, p. 30)

Fisk et al. (1974) acknowledge that ‘Mainland Islanders’ sent money back to family in the Torres Strait and, in many cases, financed relatives’ travel to the mainland. However, the study does not articulate the link between the provision of financial support and the value ‘Mainlanders’ placed on maintaining ties to the Torres Strait. As noted by Singe (2003), “[f]requently those returning were wealthy by the impoverished standards of the Torres Strait. In true Islander fashion they would distribute all their wealth as gifts to parents and family” (p. 19). With the economic disparity between the mainland and the Torres Strait becoming more evident over time through differences in employment and education opportunities, housing, infrastructure and government services, financial transactions initiated by ‘Mainlanders’ would prove an invaluable form of income support for their families in the Torres Strait. While the

report by Fisk et al. (1974) provides some useful baseline data that can be used for mapping the trends and attitudes of a sample of Torres Strait Islanders who resettled on the mainland, the lack of depth in the analysis of participant responses reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the social and cultural implications of Indigenous population movement and the complex nature of relationships between ‘Mainland Islanders’ and their kinsfolk in the Torres Strait. The survey’s conclusions evidence the researchers’ culturally biased assumptions implicit in their questions and interpretation of participant responses (Sharp, 1980a).

It is difficult to assess the degree to which the findings of the Fisk et al. (1974) survey impacted on actual policy development. However, the assumptions of one-way population movement, non-attachment between the mainland and the Torres Strait and the emergent binary of the Torres Strait versus the mainland have shaped, to large extent, contemporary understandings about the Islander diaspora and their relationship to people, identity and place. While there have been subsequent research enquiries focused on the economic and political issues facing Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland (Arthur, 2004; Arthur & Taylor 1994), there is a distinct lack of information relating to the perspectives of ‘Mainlanders’ on issues impacting on them, their relationship to the Torres Strait, their relationship to Aboriginal people and their views of their position within the social spectrum of Australian society.

### **3.3 My Island Home**

Like many groups that have moved away from their ancestral homelands, Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait invariably have diverse expressions, representations and identifications with the notion of ‘home’. Home is, furthermore,

given substance in *homeland*, that capacious concept and all that it connotes in terms of identity (Basu, 2004). In this sense, the notion of identifying with the symbolism of a homeland is empowering in that it unifies mobile and displaced people with “remembered places ... often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p.39). Islanders living on the mainland might, therefore, use ‘memory’ of place to ‘imagine’ an idea of a Torres Strait ‘homeland’. The *processes of construction* of a homeland may be more relevant to ‘Mainland Islanders’ under these circumstances. Although, under these circumstances, home and homeland needs some distinction:

Wherever they are, Islanders’ expressions of ‘home attachment’ are not primarily towards Torres Strait in general. They are towards their home islands and most especially to their clans and their own families. When asked where he or she comes from an Islander will usually name the particular Island which is identified as the ‘homeland’ ... Although it is difficult for those outsiders with an ‘either-or’ mental framework to grasp, the newer identification – Islander – does not supersede, preclude or obliterate home-island ties. (Sharp, 1980a, p. 31)

Although ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ are often expressed as both an experiential and spatial discourse, their application to the Torres Strait Islander experience has seen the notion of home represented as a place of origin and, therein, a marker of cultural and social identity, particularly for Islanders who have moved away from home and may seek to later return. The notion of *homeland* in a Torres Strait context becomes problematic, however, when it is assumed that there is only one home from which one can recount a narrative of origin, space and belonging. Fuary (1991) notes how, in some

cases, Islanders believe it is not possible to reconcile the multiple narratives of cultural identity associated with notions of 'home', particularly for those Islanders who return to their place of origin:

For those who really come home to stay, it constitutes a significant step in which they return to 'aylan way' (Yam Island traditions) after having lived and worked according to 'wayt man wey' (white people's traditions). For the short-term returnees, coming home represents a means by which they may charge their cultural batteries ... Often these individuals are burdened by unrealistic, inflated expectations and perceptions others hold of their capabilities. When these Islanders return home, they come with new values which often sit in direct contradiction to the dominant values held on the island. This results in role strain and role conflict for all the parties involved, which is ameliorated when the visitor returns to the mainland. (p. 224)

The use of the terms 'returnee' and 'visitor' in reference to the 'Mainlander' denotes a differentiation between which group of Islanders may lay claim to the island of origin as 'home'. Questions of cultural identity are similarly located in a cultural discourse whereby 'aylan way' or 'Yam Island traditions' exist as a stable entity within the geographic confines of the Torres Strait. To be located elsewhere implies assimilation into white people's traditions that ultimately cannot be reconciled with life on the Islands, hence, a return to the mainland. Fuary's (1991) description of how Yam Islanders describe themselves, each other and their interactions with the mainland returnees exposes the power play evident in social relations between individuals who 'stay' and those who 'leave'. The reference to the 'dominant values' underpinning the

practice of cultural traditions on the island, and the contrasting dilution of culture on the mainland, serves to not only emphasise implicit power relations but also represents what Leonard (1997) calls the “politics of location” (p. 135).

Implicit in the Yam Islanders’ assumptions of ‘place’ is the notion of an unchanged tradition and culture, the reasoning of which fails to account for historical and colonial influences on culture and practice and intergenerational movement of Islanders to and from the island. Gupta and Ferguson (1997) suggest that it is fundamentally mistaken to conceptualise different kinds of non- or supra-local identities (diasporic, refugee, migrant, national, and so forth) as spatial and temporal extensions of a prior, natural identity rooted in locality and community:

... such thinking, we find, often haunts contemporary anthropological approaches to local communities, where ‘the local’ is understood as the original, the centred, the natural, the authentic, and opposed to the ‘the global’ understood as new, external, artificially imposed, and inauthentic. (p. 3)

Fuery’s (1991) description of the Yam Island experience highlights the spatially territorialised notions of culture that are central to the processes and practices of place making. Conceptualisations of Torres Strait Islanders into distinct cultural and spatial binaries of the Torres Strait versus the mainland overlooks cultural kinship, family and community connections transcending the two spaces (the positive aspect of these connections is emphasised by Fuery, 2004). The Yam Island example reflects how movement away from the Torres Strait leads to perceptions of the forfeiting of home rights and, by implication, ‘cultural identity’ for that group of Islanders. ‘Home’, as a

marker of Islander identity, is thus firmly located in the physical, localised space of the Torres Strait leaving little room for identities to be continued, negotiated or contested outside the Torres Strait. Fuary's (1991) depiction of identity politics at the local level on Yam Island underscores the contradictions in the way Islanders describe the journey and process of 'going home', as evidenced in the following discussion.

### **3.4 Torres Strait Islander Perspectives on Going Back Home**

Torres Strait Islanders have written about the journey 'back home' to the Torres Strait, describing not only the physical act of 'going back' but also the spiritual and cultural passage that this journey represents. In *Edward Koiki Mabo – His life and struggle for land rights*, Loos & Mabo (1996) describe such ongoing association and co-existence between 'two homes' by Eddie Koiki Mabo:

Throughout his life, and certainly in the last seven years of his life, Mabo maintained contact with Murray Island not only by the frequent visits he made after 1977 but also through letters, by telephone and through discussion with Townsville's Islander community. (p. 171)

Ellen Jose (1998), Torres Strait Islander woman and artist articulates the direct connection between the journey to the Torres Strait and 'discovery' and strengthening of cultural identity:

My journey is the same journey that thousands of Mainlanders have embarked on. Some rediscover their culture, others hold onto and expand vestiges of culture that make them people. Some do it through family, others through art,

religion, work, sport or history. Each journey strengthens their individual and group identity. (p. 143)

Getano Lui Jnr (1995), former Chair of the Island Co-ordinating Council, similarly underlines the importance of the ‘journey home’:

There are now more Torres Strait Islanders living away from Torres Strait than in it. Some of these Islander communities on the mainland are very strong and close-knit. They maintain strong cultural ties, among each other in their new homes, and with their relatives at home in the Strait. Visits to Torres Strait become very important social and cultural events for the unity and culture of our people. (p. 1)

The notion of ‘returning home’ is not new, then, for Islanders living outside the Torres Strait, although the motivating factors influencing a ‘pilgrimage of return’ on the part of younger generations of ‘Mainlanders’ is undoubtedly different from that of their ancestors. Nevertheless, journeying back to places of origin is a social process that exposes the seemingly ongoing connection between diasporic Torres Strait populations with their ancestral homelands either in a real or imagined sense. While Torres Strait Islanders might refer to their Island homes in romantic and idealistic terms (Jose, 1998; Lui, 1995), the notion of an attachment to ‘home’ for the ‘Mainland Islander’ represents a key metaphor that guides and fosters the lives and desires of ‘Mainlanders’ towards the myth of return and of belonging to ‘place’. For Fuary (1993), the issue of the ‘mainland returnee’ is conceptualised in positive terms describing journeys back to the Torres Strait as a “return to their foundations, to their island” (p. 181). Additionally,



while reviewing the official opening of the Torres Strait art exhibition *Ilan Pasin (This is Our Way): Torres Strait Art*, Fuary (2004) describes how ‘Mainlanders’ have a ‘shared identity’ with their kinsfolk from the Torres Strait:

The five-hour opening was a quintessentially Torres Strait affair at which Islanders resident in Cairns, along with those who had travelled there for the opening, exhibited an impressive sense of pride and joy in celebrating their shared identity. In the mixed group of several hundred Islander and non-Islander participants, the Islanders confidently asserted their centrality to the event and this was most evident in their performances, singing and speeches. (p. 126)

An examination of the processes involving ‘place making’ for Torres Strait Islanders therefore necessitates a deeper understanding of the historical, geographical and cultural contingencies that underpin the ontology of place, space and ‘home’:

While there seems little likelihood of a general return to home islands there remains a strong feeling and an identification through kinship with their original homelands. Gradually there has developed a strong sense of identification among the various groups that they are above all, Torres Strait Islanders. (Manzie, 1988, pp. 4-5)

### **3.5 The Politics of Place Making**

The extent to which the ‘island home attachment’ debate has been ‘played out’ by Islanders and non-Islanders alike exposes the nature of Torres Strait identity politics as attention is paid to the degree to which ‘Mainlanders’ are able to articulate their

connections to a 'place of origin'. Dagmar (1989) observes, "it is mainly those who have left the islands who consciously emphasise family ties and locality and thus continuity with the past" (p. 801). Further evidence of this can be found in policy submissions concerning Islanders living outside the Torres Strait and their connections with, and to, the Torres Strait. The Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board's (TSIAB) submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into greater autonomy for the Torres Strait, *Unfinished Business, Future Policy Directions in Torres Strait Islander Affairs*, stated:

Torres Strait Islanders have left the Islands of their birth as a result of new education and employment opportunities on the mainland. Unless there were large scale economic development in the Torres Strait they could not be accommodated back on their islands should they return. In any event, they have planted themselves on the mainland, often forming strong Torres Strait Islander communities. (HRSCATSIA, 1996, p.4)

The emergent theme from the TSIAB submission suggests that Islanders living outside the Torres Strait have established strong ties with their new communities that are sustained through subsequent generations of their families now born and raised on the mainland. While highlighting the resettlement of Islanders in urban coastal centres on the mainland, the submission (in contrast to the Fisk et al. 1974 report) also emphasises that "in all these centres there is a strong sense of culture and identity which has been carried into mainland Australia" (TSIAB, 1996, p. 13). Similar, however, to the findings of the 1974 survey, the TSIAB submission suggests the possibilities for re-migration to their islands of origin are remote given the educational and employment

opportunities on the mainland and the social and cultural attachments ‘Mainlanders’ have to their ‘re-established’ communities. Such conclusions recognise the establishment and sustainability of Torres Strait communities outside the Torres Strait and, furthermore, suggest ways the Islander diaspora might be accounted for, and expressed, within identity discourse.

While Islanders living on the mainland may represent a diaspora, they are, at the same time, recognised as *Indigenous Australians* occupying a shared space with Aboriginal Australians. Although commonalities abound with migrant and diasporic experiences of travel, displacement, resettlement and intergenerational identity construction, Torres Strait colonial history has facilitated a ubiquitous link, historically, politically and socially, with Aboriginal Australians on the mainland. The historical alignment of Torres Strait Islanders, particularly ‘Mainlanders’, to Aboriginal Australians is not without its problems and accounts for the political vacuum Islanders living outside the Torres Strait are located within over recognition of rights, political representation and access to resources. The position of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait as Indigenous migrants, therefore, underpins the way ‘Mainland Islanders’ construct, negotiate and contest their diasporic identities within discourses of Indigenousness, place, belonging and home. The complexities inherent in the Mainlanders’ status as ‘Indigenous migrants’ is confirmed in Moreton-Robinson’s (2003) comments:

Indigenous people’s sense of home and place are configured differently to that of migrants. There is no other homeland that provides a point of origin, or place

for multiple identities. Instead our rendering of place, home and country through our ontological relation to country is the basis of our ownership. (p. 37)

Moreton-Robinson's (2003) statement makes a clear distinction between Indigenous and migrant ontological relationship to place and country. In the Mainland Torres Strait Islander context, such delineations are not that simple. 'Mainlander Islanders' are 'migrants' in the sense that they have left their place of origin to relocate to another host place. Yet, Torres Strait Islanders' status as Indigenous people (of Australia) is enshrined in legislation, policy and indeed historical colonial practice. The multilayered and contested aspect of 'Mainlander' identity is evidenced in social and cultural identities that simultaneously draw on individual and community connections to specific island homes, and categorical identities drawn from regional affiliation to the 'Torres Strait' and state-based identities of being Indigenous (to Australia as a nation state). No other group in Australia experiences this dual status as 'Indigenous migrant', further adding to the unique circumstances and multilayered contexts within which 'Mainlanders' represent not only their cultural identities but also their socio-political identities.

### **3.6 'Mainland Islanders' and Cultural Identity**

The dispersal of the Islander population outside the Torres Strait has lead to perceptions of 'Mainlanders' as 'displaced' persons, residing on land that does not belong to them. The assumption of minority status for Islanders living outside the Torres Strait has called into question the ability of this group to develop and maintain a cultural identity reflecting the essence, tradition and integrity of a comparable 'identity'

that is located in the Torres Strait. The ‘maintenance’ of culture, as a defining practice of a collective society, is thought to be problematic under these circumstances.

Beckett’s (1987) description of contemporary Islander society in Townsville in the 1970s and his rebuttal of Fisk’s et al. (1974) survey results, evidence the realism of the ‘Mainland Islander experience’. This is explained through Beckett’s (1987) references to employment opportunities on the mainland, the level of contact between Islanders on the mainland and the Torres Strait, the establishment of churches on the mainland, kinship connections and the practice of culture, “[a] tombstone opening on the mainland proclaims Townsville or Cairns as the new centre of Islander culture, even rivalling the Torres Strait” (p. 233). Yet, at the same time, Beckett questions the capacity of ‘Mainlanders’ to constitute a society as a minority population. With reference to Islanders living in Townsville during the 1970s and 1980s, Beckett (1987) makes the following observations:

Islander society is not a problem for Islanders living in the Strait; although it changes constantly, they experience it as continuous since they are in daily contact with the same individuals over long periods ... The mainland, by contrast is not Islander territory. Islanders are a small minority, even where they are most numerous, and the major public institutions take no account of their presence ... If Islanders are to constitute a society under these conditions they have to work at it, organizing occasions that will bring them together and renew the ties that bind. Islander society thus becomes problematic for the urban dweller, an option to be measured against others. (pp. 228-9)

The argument presented by Beckett (1987) is that Torres Strait Islanders can sustain individual and collective identities within conditions where the Islander population is the majority. In circumstances where the Islander population is in the minority, as in the mainland experience, the conditions for maintaining a cohesive collective are not favourable. Such a premise is based on the assumption that, as a majority, Islanders in the Torres Strait are able to constitute a society through ongoing contact with the same individuals over longer periods of time, suggesting perhaps a static and unchanging community. Fitzpatrick questions whether Beckett (1987) is able to accept “the possibility that Islanders are carving their own identity pathway through the weight of history and modernisation” (Fitzpatrick, 1989, p. 813). Regarding Beckett’s analysis of cultural continuity, Fitzpatrick (1989) further notes:

With regard to the ever-increasing numbers of Islanders resident on the mainland of Australia, he finally asks: ‘Can one then still think of them as constituting a society?’ ... One can’t help but ask what is to be gained from such speculation. (pp. 211, 813)

Beckett (1987) makes the case, however, for cultural continuity even in circumstances of movement and change. With reference to the practice of tombstone openings, he states “[i]t is thus a demonstration of the continuing capacity of Islander society, on the mainland as well as in the Strait, to call its members to customary order” (Beckett, 1987, p. 235). While critiquing the position of ‘Mainland Islanders’ nearly twenty years later, Beckett (2004) concludes, furthermore, that “[m]ore generally, Islander identity remains important, even to the mainland-born” (p. 13). Beckett’s (1987, 2004) observations of Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland over several

decades exposes, then, the multilayered complexities and ambiguity surrounding the description, analysis and interpretation of the 'Mainland Islander experience'.

Barnes' (1998) small scale study of Torres Strait Islander women, however, presents a more simple and one-dimensional argument, "of those Islanders that have migrated to the mainland many have migrated at different times, and for various reasons, ranging from employment opportunities, education, and further training, thus making identity harder to maintain because of geographical location" (p. 26). The acculturation and assimilation of Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait within the dominant culture is similarly advanced by Sharp:

... a sense of place in its original sense becomes eroded as new generations are born away from home ... Wherever they reside today, and this is the second qualification, Islanders face the full onslaught of the powerful forces of the commodity market which must lead to the dissolution of their culture. They do so under conditions of 'new wave' assimilation which denies any special distinction between them as indigenous people and other 'outback Australians'. (1993, p. 247)

When represented as the dominant culture in the Torres Strait, Islander identity is expressed with some validity and cultural authority. Conversely, Islanders living outside the Torres Strait, represented as a minority culture and subsumed under the 'other' dominant culture, ultimately face assimilation and potential abandonment of their cultural identities, contrary to the experiences of Eddie Koiki Mabo:

Mabo spent most of his life on the mainland, mainly in Townsville. He was one of the first wave of Torres Strait Islanders to live in Townsville, which now has the largest concentration of Torres Strait Islanders in Australia, more than live on the islands. Mabo became an active member of the Islander community in Townsville, not only in its political organisations but also in its cultural expression in festivals, dancing competitions, weddings, funerals, tombstone unveilings, and occasional attendance at church services. (Loos, 2005, p. 52)

Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait have similarly, yet incongruously, located themselves within essentialised discourses of identification, arguing that culture for 'Mainland Islander' youth is being lost through social integration and physical distance from the Torres Strait:

Young people are losing their culture ... need to involve young people more in Torres Strait Islander community activities, to teach them more about our culture, and to involve them more with elders. The majority of Torres Strait Islander relationships are with Aboriginal and non-indigenous people on the mainland. As a result our culture is hidden from young people due to lack of access to elders in the Torres Strait. (TSIAB, 1996, p. 21)

Despite Islanders' attempts to promote a position of lost cultural identity, particularly in the political sphere, biographical accounts of everyday experiences of culture and identity appear to contradict a deficit approach to the attainment and maintenance of traditional practice. Eddie Koiki Mabo, for example, was a strong



advocate for cultural teaching and learning on the mainland, establishing the Black Community School in Townsville in 1973 for this purpose:

When he established the Black Community School in Townsville in 1973, one compelling reason was for the Islander children born in Townsville to retain their culture and identity, and for Islanders this meant amongst other things learning the songs and dances of their parents and grandparents, and taking them into their being. (Loos, 2005, p. 54)

### **3.7 Representing Mainlander Loss of Culture**

The discourse of ‘lack’ associated with ‘Mainland Islanders’ is not confined to policy submissions and academic texts. The deficit-driven experience of ‘Mainlanders’ is evidenced in fictional and non-fictional (documentary) texts that serve to confirm populist perceptions of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait as a group devoid of cultural authenticity and lacking the capacity to re-connect with their Torres Strait Islander roots. Visual representations of lost ‘Mainlanders’ can be found in contemporary film texts including *Remote Area Nurse (R.A.N.)* (Chapman & Panckhurst, 2006), a six-part fictional drama series screened Australia-wide on SBS television during January-February 2006. The series was promoted as the first drama series set in the Torres Strait, based on Torres Strait Islander life and featuring Islander characters and actors. The series received critical acclaim and, based on the feedback from Torres Strait Islanders posted on the SBS website at the time, enjoyed widespread popularity and approval from the Islander community. The story is set on a fictional island in the Torres Strait with its narrative revolving around the experiences of a white remote area nurse who returns to the island after having spent some time away with her

family in the city. The landscape of the island paradise is a character in itself, with translucent blue water, white sandy beaches and tropical rainforest settings, its physical beauty almost masking the social and political problems facing the Islander inhabitants. The binary oppositions constructing the Torres Strait versus the mainland are played out in reference to one of the main characters, Paul, the adopted son of the Council Chair. A summary of the character's profile is provided on the SBS web site:

Paul Gaibui is in his early 20's and is the son of Russ and Ina and brother of Eddie, Solomon, Nancy and Faith. He is the defacto of Bernadette and father to Rhianna, Esther and Jasmine. A capable and committed health worker, openly resentful of white involvement in island health care. The Acting Health Centre Manager coping with the stress of the job, as well as the pressures of home life. Long overlooked by his father, his family banished to a one room flat out the back of his grandmother's, Paul struggles to balance study, work and family, at times turning to drink and pot to cope. But instead of dulling his anger, it only fuels it. (Chapman & Panckhurst, 2006)

Paul is an emotionally tortured character, never quite asserting his sense of belonging and integration into his own family and the local community more generally. Early reference is made to him being raised on the mainland and, in the following episodes, the consequences of life away from the Torres Strait become apparent. Some of these references include tension between Paul and his brother over the inherent right to the family's land on the island (particularly as Paul has been away and not looked after that land) and conflict with his father while asserting his independence. The cultural deficit Paul experiences includes an apparent inability for him to competently perform Island dancing in preparation for his son's Tombstone Opening (a cultural and

spiritual ceremony commemorating the life of a deceased loved one) and his apparent lack of ability to speak Torres Strait Islander Creole with the same amount of confidence displayed by his family. Paul's frustration and social ostracism eventually leads to bouts of substance abuse and domestic violence. His character redeems himself in the end but not before the audience might conclude that Islanders who have been raised on the mainland face serious social and cultural problems while finding their identity.

Coming of the Light (Doogue & Patrick, 2006), a documentary featured on the *Compass* program (screened Australia-wide on ABC television on 25 June 2006), provides further evidence of the way the narrative of the Torres Strait as place is socially and culturally constructed as a pivotal point of reference for Islander people. An outline of the program is provided on the ABC website:

28-year-old Meriam descendant, Marcus Smith has little understanding of his Torres Strait Island culture after spending his youth growing up in Trinidad-Tobago in the West Indies. *Compass* travels with Marcus on his revealing journey home to the annual "Coming of the Light" celebration in the Torres Strait Islands commemorating the landing of the first Christian missionaries on Erub Island. (Doogue & Patrick, 2006)

The documentary follows the emotional journey of a young Torres Strait Islander man's quest for self-discovery and cultural identification. His own personal narrative of self-affirmation is set against the text's dominant narrative regarding the significance of Christianity and religion in the context of Torres Strait Islander culture.

The documentary utilises film footage of the West Indies as a reference to his childhood experiences of growing up a long way from Torres Strait Islander family and cultural influences and his subsequent affiliation with Rastafarian religion. The documentary depicts his contemporary life as a 'Mainland Islander' and, in particular, his connection to his immediate family, his extended family and the local Torres Strait Islander community. The visual imagery features his involvement in a Tombstone Opening. The inclusion of film imagery of the Tombstone Opening attended by several hundred people at the unveiling of the headstone at the cemetery, the elaborate display of Islander food at the feasting, the observance of cultural protocol and participation in Islander dancing as part of the celebrations, provides counter-evidence to the myths that Islander culture and traditions have died out on the mainland:

Ultimately however, the young man's journey of self-discovery is incomplete without the journeying back to the place of his ancestors and his participation in the Coming of the Light, a significant cultural and social event celebrated by Torres Strait Islanders to commemorate the first arrival of the Christian missionaries to the area. In this regard, his journey, although undertaken in a contemporary context, is underpinned by a distinct reference to an event of historical and cultural significance. Unlike the experiences of the fictional character Paul in *R.A.N.*, the young man is embraced by family members in the Torres Strait, many of whom he had not previously met. The social connections established through elders and family members who knew his grandmother re-affirmed kinship and cultural ties that bind a sense of identity to place. The fulfilment of his cultural odyssey to Erub in the Torres Strait provides meaning to his life as a young Islander man. His experience of the Torres Strait as place provides

him with notions of belonging, spirituality, culture, a sense of self and an overall sense of identity.

In these film texts, the identity of the Torres Strait as place is constituted through enduring emotions of belonging and historical continuity and, therein, cultural influence. The interplay between the signifiers identified through the documentary and the fictional television series produces social codes of meanings associated with cultural symbolism and historical continuity that the Torres Strait, as place, has come to represent in an almost exclusive manner. The omission and further restriction of alternative signifiers of Islanderness, particularly more positive imagery or references to the 'Mainland Islander' experience reveals the power constructs associated with the politics of identity, particularly as it relates to place. The narratives underpinning the *R.A.N* and *Compass* film texts re-produce notions of locality and community in a way that emphasises the enchantment and tradition of Torres Strait Islander culture. Identity, in the context represented in the two film texts, requires authentication and, as depicted in these texts, this can only happen with the physical experience of being in the Torres Strait. Collard (1999) speaks of the paradoxical links of identity and place and the conflicted emotions that arise from establishing that relationship in a way that confirms validation of self and community:

I often go back to my own personal experience and my parents' experiences in life in order to justify my Aboriginality. In that I was brought up in a country town and with that living near the reserve - it's like you have to hang on to this in order to justify your Aboriginality - you have to hook into that stuff. But then again, it's what has been written (about stereotypical images of Aboriginal

people) that makes you do that - this places pressure on you to justify your Aboriginality. (p. 63)

At issue, then, is not that one is located in a certain place (either the Torres Strait or the mainland) but that the particular place represents a site of conflicted feelings, emotions and well-being associated with the question of 'Mainlander' identity:

Questions of identity therefore demonstrate with special clarity the intertwining of place and power in the conceptualization of "culture". Rather than following straightforwardly from sharing the "same" culture, community, or place, identity emerges as a continually contested domain. (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 14)

### **3.8 Constructing the Loss of Identity**

Notions of identity construction that are premised on the basis of 'loss' are problematic on two counts. Firstly, the prevailing assumption is that Islanders in the Torres Strait and Islanders on the mainland are two distinctive groups with little recognition given to Islanders' own writings regarding home island connections (Jose, 1998), kinship and community associations (Bani, 2000; Gaffney, 1989; Thaiday, 1981), ownership of traditional land and seas (Loban, 2008) and shared customs, traditions and practices (Bani, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d, 2004e; Elu, 2004; Lui-Chivizhe, 2001). This is not to suggest that Islanders in the Torres Strait and Islanders living outside the Torres Strait do not have distinct issues. However, conceptualisations of binary oppositions disregard the complexities underpinning identity formations and the social, cultural and political ties that underpin the construction of collective and individual identities. The extent to which dimensions of sameness and difference

actually coincide with social allegiance and cultural identity has not been fully explored through previous ethnographic or empirical research.

Secondly, the premise of homogeneity of the Torres Strait Islander collective overlooks the possibilities of multiple and multi-layered identities constructed under diverse social, cultural and political circumstances in both the Torres Strait and the mainland. Calls for cultural renaissance emanating from Torres Strait Islanders (TSIAB, 1996) highlight the politics at play in identification practices that favour public discourse over private expressions of culture, tradition and identity. However, culture, like identity, is not something that can actually be found or mislaid; rather, it is the object of continuing intervention and construction (Barker, 2004). Culture is a complicated and contested word making any exploration of its meaning contingent upon its uses and the consequences that follow (Barker, 2004). Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland have lobbied for the preservation, maintenance and survival of Islander culture, languages and traditions in a bid to acquire more resources to support cultural programs and initiatives (TSIAB, 1996). The corollary of this act, however, is that culture serves as a vehicle for justifying and regulating membership of a particular group:

Culture ... can be seen as the premise for a system of inclusionary and exclusionary practices where ideas are either won or lost. The supremacy of one over the other prevails as authority over the other, as either honoured or silenced, as positive or negative. (Nakata, 1993, p. 343)

In this way, Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait have paradoxically positioned themselves within representational discourses of cultural difference, marginalisation and disadvantage. Calls to assert the legitimacy and credibility of identities formed outside the Torres Strait are potentially compromised by public admissions of cultural processes and practices that are deployed under conditions of assimilation and absorption into the dominant culture on the mainland (TSIAB, 1996). In many ways then, (we) Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait contribute to the social myths underpinning the institutions, legal processes and political regimes that serve to regulate the identification of ‘Mainlanders’ in a social space characterised by fixity, homogeneity and purity. The process of defining ourselves as *authentic Torres Strait Islanders* through historical and contemporary populist texts has constituted a relational concept of self-identification and social ascription. At its most rudimentary, such a process signifies a re-defining of Torres Strait Islander identity by Islander people themselves. Whilst the assertion of an authentic Torres Strait Islander identity is advanced to rectify historical wrongs and colonial oppression, the discourse itself has become a rationale for excluding others. Dudgeon (1999), an Aboriginal academic, describes the contradictions and exclusionary practices Indigenous people place on themselves in the process of claiming a more authentic and traditional identity:

We’re trying to reclaim culture, rediscover it and undertake decolonisation; but, also, we do it to (challenge) each other ... the sharpest knife that we can cut each other with is to challenge our identity. So we’re involved in that comparative exercise for constructive reasons, such as reclaiming culture, but also for destructive reasons – when we play that ‘I’m more Aboriginal than you’ game. (p. 97)



The discursive task of deconstructing binary conceptual oppositions, including island/mainland, traditional/modern, natural/urban, has seen Islanders place more value on that part of the binary which may be seen from a Western worldview to be inferior or undesirable:

... there have been times and places where some of us have become the best representatives of ongoing colonial presence and dominance in our lives. So often, so many of our own people too continue content with recent liberal versions of our cultural history rather than with a more emancipatory agenda ... Colonial discourses and their narratives are now so dense that it is very hard to make out whether one speaks from within them or whether one can speak outside of them, or whether one can speak at all without them. (Nakata, 2003, p.134)

Nakata's (2003) observations in this regard highlight the extent to which colonial discourses have incongruously impacted on Islanders' capacity, and perhaps even willingness, to unpack the assumptions of texts that seek to represent them, both individually and collectively in essentialised terms. The absence of critical narrative around Torres Strait Islander notions of place, people and identity serves to sustain hegemonic forms of Islander identity. Davis (2004) writes "the geographic place of Torres Strait has been and continues to be constructed and reconstructed" (p. viii). However, with the exception of Islander scholars, Martin Nakata (2003, 2007) and Leah Lui-Chivize (2001), minimal critique has been given to the contestations of power embedded in the Torres Strait discourses of place and cultural identity.

... ideas Islanders themselves have about group membership appear as an apparent split between 'Mainland Islander's and strait dwelling Islanders related to notions of place, belonging, and who can call themselves a Torres Strait Islander. This relates to cultural notions of legitimacy, which at a community level is very important. But, how do people construct their identity in the face of assertions that they cannot be Islanders because of where they live? (Lui-Chivize, 2001, p. 2)

### **3.9 Changing Environments, Changing Identities**

Narratives underpinning representational discourses for Torres Strait Islanders have failed to account for the changing environments, circumstances and conditions under which Islanders acquire and negotiate their sense of self and their identity. Nakata (2003, 2007) challenges the representational discourses that non-Islander authorities have engaged in constituting realities for the Islander, arguing that Torres Strait Islander culture is only liable to preservation and maintenance of traditional identity, as opposed to ever-changing Western culture. Such a cultural paradigm serves as a regulatory device and a basis upon which identity is questioned as Islanders are viewed as struggling to live 'between two worlds':

I have actually been asked by white university lecturers and researchers and students whether I can really claim to be a Torres Strait Islander. After all, how long has it been since I lived there? ... If I don't behave, if I don't embrace and hold myself true to the textual representations of what constitutes a cultural Islander then I must in truth not be one. (Nakata, 2003, p. 334)

In their study of interracial families in Australia, and Luke and Luke (1998) caution against attempts to document multi-cultural and bi-cultural experiences based on the 'between two worlds cultures' metaphor, claiming it is "outmoded and condescending" (p. 750). Islanders' attempts to negotiate multiple representations within identity discourse would appear to support this argument. The experiences of Eddie Koiki Mabo demonstrate the capacity of Islanders to constitute their identities in a multiplicity of ways, reconciling past and present expressions of cultural identity:

The story of how Koiki Mabo became the master of two cultures, his own and mainland culture, will seem quite extraordinary to white Australians. Yet in its broad outlines it is typical of those Islanders who have emigrated to the mainland since the end of World War II. (Loos & Mabo, 1996, p. 5)

Eddie Koiki Mabo similarly used his knowledge of his own culture and that of the dominant culture to move in and between different systems of social structures, values and political discourse:

Mabo had been essential to the success of the challenge as he was a bridge between the two cultures, able to explain Murray Island culture, especially land ownership, usage and inheritance, to the lawyers supporting their case, and 'mainland' culture to the Islanders, especially the complex demands of the legal system. (Loos, 2005, pp. 51-52)

The ability to constitute identities in changing environments can be found in diasporic societies that engage in the creation of new identities while at the same time

modifying existing identities. In their study of Tongan Americans in the United States, Funaki and Funaki (2002) suggest the idea of a negotiated identity portrays the Islander as having the will and ability to determine the appropriate adaptations to be made so as to minimise the discomfort caused by the perceived discrepancy between the expectations of the 'Tongan way' and the realities of the 'American way'. Cultural identities, like everything that is historical, undergo constant transformation; as Hall (1996) notes "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (p. 112). In a Torres Strait Islander context, Shnukal (2004) explains how modern Islander identity is represented by the younger population of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait:

Further south, in mainland city schools, Islander students have also assumed an urban black, rather than specifically Torres Strait Islander, identity. Many of this generation, too, are of mixed Islander/Aboriginal/Pacific Islander descent and explicitly refuse to identify themselves as belonging uniquely to a single group. (p. 116)

These arguments highlight the political nature of identity as a production and call attention to the possibility that Torres Strait Islander identity may be articulated in multiple, complex and shifting ways. The idea that Islanders are constituted by a single, overarching identity that is historically situated in the Torres Strait and unable to be translated into different contexts and environments ignores the social and political discourses that have culturally circumscribed Islanders in the first place. The contestation over the meanings of identity for Torres Strait Islanders is intrinsically

bound up with questions of power as a form of social regulation that “enables some kinds of identities to exist while denying it to others” (Barker, 2004, p. 95).

### **3.10 Defining Torres Strait Islander Cultural Identity in Policy and Practice**

The lack of acknowledgement given to Islander identities that exist outside the Torres Strait is not confined, however, to the rumination of anthropologists and historians. As noted in the previous chapter, the legislative definition of *Ailan Kastom*, as a signifier and marker of Torres Strait Islander identity, clearly only recognises its practice in the context of Islanders living in the Torres Strait area.

Why locality was central to the government’s explanation and recognition of Torres Strait Islanders as a distinct Indigenous people is questioned by Islanders themselves. In response to such omissions, Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait have been inclined to accentuate and give emphasis to a unique Islander identity that is affiliated in the mainland context, but also underscored by the emotional investment linking this group to the Torres Strait. Torres Strait Islander scholar, Mary Bani (2000), notes:

... the definition of *Ailan Kastom* although intended to be comprehensive, does not recognize the significant Islander population living on the mainland. In many satellite communities there are Islanders who are highly involved in the promotion of their culture. With the establishment of Torres Strait organizations and increased access to services and resources, mainland communities are developing rapidly. (p. 72)

Bani (2000) further notes “we people who call ourselves Torres Strait Islanders maintain that identity whether we live in Torres Strait or in mainland communities - our connection to the past and one another through a shared history and culture make this possible” (p. 71). In defining its own interpretation of *Ailan Kastom*, the Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board (1996) similarly wrote:

Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland continue to celebrate our own culture, deriving from our homeland and our own *Ailan Kastom* ... while the focus is on mainland Australia, we recognize the “oneness” of Torres Strait Islander people deriving from our cultural heritage. (p. 6)

That the Torres Strait is the only site of cultural production and reception for Islanders would, therefore, appear questionable given the cultural meanings and practices underpinning the representation of ‘Islanderness’ on the mainland and understandings of *Ailan Kastom* in the same context:

Significantly the term Island Kastom is of great importance to the Islanders as it dominates the relationship of Islanders with each other and defines their ties to the ancestral homelands. Island Kastom reassures Islanders of their identity and provides status in the dominant Western society. (Wilson cited in Barnes, 1998, pp. 25-6)

### **3.11 Mainland Torres Strait Islanders Losing their Identity**

The positioning of Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait within the discourse of loss is often articulated through a comparative narrative of what these

individuals ‘gave up’ in their search for a better life away from their home islands.

Barnes’ (1998) study of Torres Strait Islander women concluded:

Torres Strait Islander women on the mainland have more career opportunities, have the desire to move up the workplace and to challenge men. But they lack the cultural and spiritual strength by not connecting with their land in a traditional environment. (p. 27)

The conclusion drawn here is that, while the mainland has presented many opportunities for Torres Strait Islanders, in this particular example, women, it has unfortunately come at the cost of their connection with their land resulting in an apparent lack of comparative “cultural and spiritual strength” (Barnes, 1998, p. 27). How cultural and spiritual strength is actually measured is not explained in this context. However, Barnes (1998) makes it apparent that Islanders living outside the Torres Strait cannot experience the benefits of economic prosperity without some trade-off of disconnection from their ancestral home islands.

The theme of economic trade-off is evidenced in Beckett’s (2004) view of ‘Mainland Islanders’ socio-economic status. He writes:

For Islanders, life on the mainland has not fulfilled its early promise. The demand for tropical construction workers fell away by the end of the 1960s, and the railways which provided steady employment in the longer term are now mechanizing, the older generation are retiring and are not being replaced. Education, once the great hope of the emigrants, has not provided a way forward

for many. Thus Islanders on the mainland are dependent on government assistance for housing and medical services. (Beckett, 2004, p. 12)

Beckett's (2004) assertions, however, do not appear to be supported by measurements of comparative economic status between Islanders living on the mainland, Islanders in the Strait and the Australian population generally. Moreover, his comments tend to freeze Islanders living on the mainland economic status in the immediate post-war era, omitting over forty years of economic progress for this group when he renders them solely dependent on social welfare. Arthur and Taylor (1994), in the discussion paper *The Comparative Economic Status of Torres Strait Islanders in Torres Strait and mainland Australia* note:

If CDEP (or work-for-the-dole scheme) participants in the Strait are discounted from census employment statistics, then the conclusion can be drawn that Islanders residing on the mainland have emphatically higher economic status than those in the Strait. Furthermore, unlike their counterparts in the Strait, the mainland residents are, according to some social indicators, approaching a position of statistical equality with other Australians. Viewed overall, Islanders on the mainland occupy a position of intermediate economic status between that of their counterparts in the Strait and that of Australians in general. (p. 15)

While Arthur and Taylor (1994) caution against the use of Census data which may unduly favour the economic status of Islanders on the mainland, they nevertheless conclude "migration has enabled Islanders to better their economic status" (p. 15).

Arthur (2003), in *Torres Strait Islanders in the 2001 Census*, similarly concluded:



Islanders are at the same or higher rates for the various socioeconomic indicators than are other Indigenous people, except in relation to home ownership. Again though census data can provide only a partial analysis of any social and economic situation, the slightly improved position enjoyed by Islanders according to 2001 Census data, may reflect the effects 50 years of migration to mainland towns and cities. (p. 14)

Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait undoubtedly have a considerable way to go to achieve economic parity with other Australians, particularly in relation to labour force participation, private sector employment, home ownership, year twelve completion rates and university attendance. However, despite nearly fifty years of development in the Torres Strait post World War Two, access to financial and educational resources remains limited. Until such time as Islander residents in the Torres Strait own and control their economic and social capital, including their land and seas, they remain subjected to the welfare colonialism identified by Beckett (1987) in previous research.

### **3.12 Finding a Political Voice for Islanders Living Outside the Torres Strait**

Several key historical events signalled a raised political and collective awareness of Torres Strait identity and represented times when Islanders were “taking stock of themselves in relation to others” (Sharp. 1993, p.177). The Islander in politics, therefore, developed through representations of resistance and solidarity. The demonstration of political solidarity to further the assertion of Islander rights gave rise to the construction of social collectivities based on the struggle with, and resistance to, the colonial ‘Other’. The collective resistance to colonial authority, culminating in the

maritime strike and the strike during World War Two, continued throughout the ensuing decades (Arthur, 2004; Sharp, 1993). Islanders increasingly called for wider recognition and acceptance as a political force, as demonstrated by the 1970s border dispute with Papua New Guinea, the protests for self-determination, autonomy and independence in the 1980s and, in recent times, disputes over title to land and sea (Kehoe-Forutan, 2004). These political struggles, while giving rise to a collective Torres Strait identity, also provided a vehicle for identity politics, creating discursive tensions both within and between Islander collectivities located in the Torres Strait and on the Mainland.

The social, political and economic climate of the Torres Strait had been irrevocably changed by World War Two and the impending economic collapse of the region (Arthur, 2004; Beckett, 1987; Fuary, 1993; Nakata, 2004a; Osborne, 1997). In response, Islanders sensed a renewed urgency to change their situation. The 1930s and 1940s were decades of significant social change in which Islanders exhibited increased confidence in having their rights recognised (Fuary, 1993). The timing of this ‘insurgence’ corresponded with political movements occurring on the mainland, orchestrated through organisations such as the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, the Australian Communist Party and the Australian Legion of Ex-servicemen and Women, with these organisations beginning to “act with and on behalf of Indigenous Australians for major reforms regarding their rights and disadvantages in Australian society, which eventually resulted in the direct involvement of the Commonwealth government in the Indigenous affairs of the states” (Nakata, 2004a, p. 170). Nakata further notes that “these ideas would circulate and infiltrate both the islands and the broader Australian community” (2004a, p. 170).

The Torres Strait was transitioning into a new political era in the post-war period. The collapse of the pearling industry would transform the local economy and the increasing migration of Islanders to the mainland would begin to change the very fabric and makeup of Islander society. The marine industry was no longer the only field of employment and Islanders took up new state government positions as teachers, medical aides and assistants in retail stores (Arthur, 2004; Beckett, 1987). In 1964, Islanders in the Strait were permitted to vote in state elections (Beckett, 1987) and the 1967 Referendum would give the Commonwealth the power to legislate on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. However, “full citizenship, the vote, improved social services and desegregation in many sectors ... could not overcome a region of neglect” (Kehoe-Forutan, 2004, p. 174). The Islanders, both in the Torres Strait and on the mainland, were being exposed to a whole new range of external influences, both domestic and overseas, which reinforced their view of themselves as a people-in-common, particularly as it related to their relationship with, and to, others (Sharp, 1993).

### **3.13 Calls for Independence, Autonomy and Self-Governance**

The 1970s border dispute erupted in the wake of Papua New Guinea’s independence from Australia in 1975. As a new and independent nation, Papua New Guinea began to assert its desire to share the resources of the Torres Strait, particularly given several islands’ proximity within its territorial sea and other maritime zones (Arthur, 2004; Kaye, 1997). The Commonwealth government, in response, proposed to cede eight Torres Strait Islands north of the tenth parallel to the newly independent Papua New Guinea as a demonstration of ‘good will’ (Kaye, 1997). The Islanders quickly mobilised into an effective lobby group, the Border Action Committee, and

successfully defeated the proposal, gaining media support and participating in an international arena for the first time (Kehoe-Forutan, 2004). The Islanders expressed their concerns about the potential transfer of Islanders to Papuan control, perceiving an Australian administration to be far more sympathetic to their needs than a New Guinea administration “both in terms of the likelihood of economic security for their people and recognition of their distinct cultural identity” (Kaye, 1997, p. 91). Shnukal (2004) describes the sentiment expressed by the ‘Islander collective’ at the time:

The anger expressed by Islanders at the attempt to annexe ‘their’ islands and cays arose primarily from the recognition of the threat to themselves as people who, despite diverse origins and heterogeneity, had for centuries maintained a separate identity from the Mainlanders to their north (and south) and had grown increasingly unified. (p.117)

Not since the maritime strike had Torres Strait Islanders united in a common cause (Kehoe-Forutan, 2004). Sharp (1993) affirms, “Torres Strait Islanders as a people of ‘unique identity’ with an ‘ultimate goal of independence’ was raised during the border controversy” (p. 243). The border dispute, therefore, not only provided Islanders with an opportunity to assert political rights to advocate change but also to contest the basis of a *unique* Islander identity based in large part on its political functionality. Shnukal (2004) describes the emergence of a national Torres Strait Islander identity in the face of political and social discontent:

National identity seeks its political expression in what Islander leaders have called variously ‘autonomy’, ‘sovereignty’, ‘self-determination’, ‘self-

management', 'self-government', and 'independence'. That is, national identity is analysed here as essentially a political manifestation of Islander's aspirations, as a self-conscious unified group, to create in their homelands a self-governing unit within the larger Australian polity. (p. 108)

The issue of autonomy, independence and Islander control of their land and seas re-emerged in the 1980s with calls for Torres Strait Islander independence. The independence movement also emphasised and articulated the basis of a *Torres Strait Islander identity*. In 1985, Getano Lui Jnr, then Deputy Chairman of the Island Coordinating Council, delivered this speech to Islanders on Torres Strait radio, which states in part, a demand for:

... total control of land and total control of sea, irrespective of whether the state government is coming up with the Deeds of Grant in Trust; irrespective of whether the Commonwealth Government is coming up with its land rights legislation. What we want is a separate identity or separate status for Torres Strait Islanders – not to be lumped with Aboriginal people because while we share the same problems with themfellar, yumi (ie. you and I or we) a [sic] unique race of people. (cited in Beckett, 1987, p. 196)

The goal of independence was not realised in the immediate term; however, Islanders gained an increased profile, improved resources for the region, leverage in negotiations with ATSIC and higher levels of Islander involvement in the shire (Kehoe-Forutan, 2004).

### **3.14 Fracturing the Mainland/Torres Strait Collective**

The Torres Strait political turmoil of the 1980s provided a vehicle for renewed purpose and the political need to articulate and promote a unified Torres Strait collective identity:

Torres Strait Islanders have moved into the 1990s with a strengthening identity as a sea culture with a common way of life. A Torres Strait Islanders' flag unveiled in 1992 symbolised that identity: green for the islands, blue for the sea and a white headdress (*dari*) for the people. Carried within that shared custom is a sense of place which implies a diversity. (Sharp, 1993, p. 244)

This Islander identity referred to by Sharp (1993) would increasingly begin to be representative of Islanders living in the Torres Strait. The Torres Strait independence movement of the 1980s would reveal the discursive tensions between Islanders in the Strait and those Islanders now living on the mainland. These tensions manifested in struggles for power, resources and political voice and resulted in the eventual 'fracturing' of what was known and understood to be representative of the 'Islander collective'.

In the early stages of the independence movement, political leaders in the Torres Strait welcomed the support of Islanders living on the mainland and used the media to communicate to those far away in the southern cities of Brisbane and Canberra (Kehoe-Forutan, 2004). Most notable was Jim Akee, the co-founder of the Townsville Torres United Party, and members of a newly formed Islander organisation from the south called Magani Malu Kes (Kehoe-Forutan, 2004). As the Torres Strait independence

movement progressed and political agendas played out, dissenting voices began to articulate alternative views of who could speak for Torres Strait Islanders and for what purpose. Kehoe-Forutan (2004) notes, “criticism was common of those who had not originally remained in their homelands and could return to their homes in the south when the ‘hard times’ came” (p. 184). The Island Co-ordinating Council also began to clearly define and position its constituency as being from the region of the Torres Strait rather than including Islanders living on the mainland. Further disassociation between the Island resident groups was expressed by Getano Lui (Jnr) in the *Townsville Bulletin*, 1988:

If they talk about the Torres Strait they are not reflecting the true views of Islanders. We are not stopping Island people coming back home, but we will not have people living on the mainland making decisions about the Islands. (cited in Kehoe-Forutan, 2004, p. 186)

Discursive tension between Islanders in the Torres Strait and Islanders living on the mainland was not a new phenomenon prior to the 1980s. However, the populist Islander independence movement that accelerated the process of recognition of rights and increased resources for the Torres Strait had, in the process, achieved a “clear direction separate to that of ‘Mainland Islanders’” ( Kehoe-Forutan, 2004, p. 187). The political manoeuvring of leaders in the Torres Strait, as described by Beckett (1987), has had a potentially adverse impact on Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland:

Whether intended or not, the effect of this has been to disenfranchise Islanders living on the mainland. Ignored for the most part by the Torres Strait leadership,

and without representative institutions of their own, they lack the official means of expressing themselves as Islanders. While the Queensland Government considers them virtually as assimilated, the Commonwealth groups them with Aborigines in the administration of its various aid programs. (Beckett, 1987, p. 201)

Political debates concerning autonomy, independence and native title have highlighted, in the public domain at least, the seeming disparity between the needs and aspirations of ‘Mainland Islanders’ and those Islanders residing in the Torres Strait. While the focus of the debates has centred on autonomy, independence and political voice, there is often a cultural subtext which pervades and underscores such discussions. Discussions surrounding relevant political issues invariably raise questions including, who has the right to have a say on matters relating to the Torres Strait? Should that right be extended to Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait, and, if so, how is this achieved? These concerns have served to hinder discussions regarding alternative models of governance and decision making arrangements for Torres Strait Islanders (Sanders, 1999).

With Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland constituting the overwhelming majority of people who identify themselves as Torres Strait Islanders, arguments dismissing the political concerns of this group are no longer sustainable. The arguments that seek to position ‘Mainland Islanders’ as a lost people nevertheless prevail, dominating and undermining attempts to further a positive and progressive political agenda for all Torres Strait Islanders. The Torres Strait Islander ‘political problem’, however, is not just about identity. The rhetoric of autonomy and self-determination



espoused by successive governments (HRSCATSIA, 1997a) is clearly served by the identification of two clearly defined exclusive groups that are characterised by competing political aspirations and identities. Drawing from the perspectives of psychological theories, “such a scenario can be understood in terms of intergroup processes which serve to increase the divisions between groups and promote cohesiveness within groups” (Trew, 1998, p. 61).

The *Islander in Politics* has many facets and continues to be a potent source of collective identity as Islanders contest their rights for self-determination and autonomy. Historically, Islanders have demonstrated their capacity to work as a collective, not only to facilitate their own social relationships but to also provide a catalyst for political change (Arthur, 2004; Kehoe-Forutan; 2004; Sharp, 1993; Shnukal, 2004). At the present time, however, the focus of the Islander in politics, whether as an Islander living on the mainland or as a Torres Strait resident appears to be the redressing of issues pertaining to the circumstances of Islanders living in the Torres Strait. Thus, the experience of resistance in a Torres Strait context has not only shaped ongoing struggles for power but also transformed the identification of Islander collectives in the process:

It is useful to think of resistance as an experience that constructs and reconstructs the identity of subjects. It may equally result in reconfirming or strengthening existing identities, ironically contributing to maintaining the status quo. (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 19)

### **3.15 The ‘Vulnerability’ of Torres Strait Islanders on the Mainland**

The residence of Islanders outside of their ancestral lands has left them in an otherwise vulnerable situation as a minority within a minority group, calling into question not only their right to be on Aboriginal Country but their claims to participate in the social and political processes of their home islands (Beckett, 2004). The legacy of Australian colonial history, and legislative practice in particular, bears witness to an indelible link between Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people (Donovan, 2002; Shnukal, 2004). The permanent movement of Torres Strait Islander people to Aboriginal Country and the subsequent artificial categorisation of these groups as *Indigenous Australians* have, not surprisingly, created tensions and power struggles over access to resources, recognition of status and political representation that successive governments appear disinterested to resolve:

Torres Strait Islanders are anxious to ensure that in the development of policies for Australia’s indigenous peoples, there is recognition of the special and distinct cultural characteristics of Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginals. A general lack of knowledge about the unique cultural differences between the two indigenous peoples has been reflected in policy-making and administration which has tended to see all indigenous Australians as a single group. (TSIAB, 1996, p. 10)

Previous governance structures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have similarly not favoured ‘Mainland Islander’ interests:

Being part of ATSIC, 'Mainlander's bid for resources alongside Aboriginal people through ATSIC regional councils. As Aboriginal people are in the majority and have the cultural legitimacy of being on their own land, 'Mainlander's feel disadvantaged. Though they live on the mainland, studies have shown that 'Mainlander's retain many attachments to the Torres Strait. (Arthur, 2001a, p. 18)

In its 2002-03 Annual Report (2003), the National Secretariat of Torres Strait Islander Organisations Limited, the peak representative body for Islanders living on the mainland, identified access and equity in relation to recognition, representation and resources as the main challenges facing their constituents. Tensions around these identified issues have manifested themselves in internal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander politics for some time:

Like many other Islanders, Mabo believed that Torres Strait Islander issues were being swamped by the sheer weight of numbers and political clout of his Aboriginal colleagues who, without malice, simply focused on their own issues ... The Black Identity that Mabo had enthusiastically espoused earlier had begun to splinter into two separate indigenous identities during the 1970s. There was a growing movement among Torres Strait Islander people which culminated in the creation of their own flag in 1992 and their thrust towards a separate autonomy for the Torres Strait Islands. (Loos & Mabo, 1996, p. 13)

That Torres Strait Islanders acknowledge the rightful ownership of Aboriginal people to mainland Australia is not in dispute, as evidenced by public declarations of

recognition in the Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, (1996), “Aboriginal people are the original occupiers and owners of the Australian mainland and Tasmania. Torres Strait Islander people give full recognition to the rights of Aboriginal people as traditional owners of the mainland” (p. 6). What remains contentious on the part of Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland is their contemporaneous political, social and cultural relationships with, and to, Aboriginal people on the mainland and their own kin and communities in their home islands of the Torres Strait.

In recent years, Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait have asserted their rights to have continuous involvement in the articulation of political agendas pertaining to the Torres Strait (HRSCATSIA, 1997a). Beckett (2004) maintains that ‘Mainland Islander’ attempts to re-engage in the political landscape of the Torres Strait emanates from a sense of “vulnerability” (p. 13). The susceptibility that Islanders living outside the Torres Strait are exposed to derives, firstly, from not having a representative voice in the Torres Strait and, secondly, their inferior positioning to Aboriginal people. These factors “effectively situate Islanders in the Strait, and Aborigines on the mainland, which means that Islanders on the mainland can be cast as intruders” (Beckett, 2004, p. 13).

Through intermarriage and social interaction, however, an increasing number of Indigenous Australians identify as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, making the continued dichotomisation of these two groups somewhat problematic in contemporary discussions regarding Indigenous Australian identities (Arthur, 2003).

For example, in the 2001 Census, the number of those electing to identify as both Islander and as Aboriginal increased by 73 percent (Arthur, 2003, p.3). The census data, therefore, points to a growing segment of the Indigenous population who identify as having both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestry. Moreover, the focus on the division between ‘Mainlanders’ and Aboriginal people overlooks the positive aspects of this complex relationship, forged under conditions of shared histories of oppression, resistance and solidarity:

Despite tensions between Islander and Aboriginal urban communities, largely over access to funding and services, their leaders have cooperated organizationally since the 1960s and Aboriginal aspirations for sovereignty and/or political separation, Aboriginal rhetoric and political savvy have influenced members of the Islander mainland diaspora who are active in local service and political organizations. (Shnukal, 2004, p. 116)

The discourse of loss and vulnerability that Islanders living outside the Torres Strait are positioned in is further advanced by arguments that highlight the tensions arising between ‘Mainlanders’ and their Torres Strait counterparts. However, historical and cultural divisions between Torres Strait Islanders are a feature of our social and cultural history:

Post-war marriages, blended families, Christian teaching and the material benefits available to those who identify as Torres Strait Islanders have blurred pre-World War II caste distinctions but the resentments and grievances, promoted by past official divide-and-rule policies based on ethnic origin, can

still be activated rhetorically as political weapons. Variants of traditional divisions have recently emerged between Mainlanders and ‘homelanders’ and between ‘traditional’ and historical’ people. (Shnukal, 2004, p. 119)

Nakata (2007) similarly argues that the Islander collective may reflect consensus in times of crisis but demonstrate less agreement under less pressured circumstances. This should not be interpreted, however, as a fundamental division in the Islander collective. Nakata (2007) notes:

To read any lack of a singular or fixed Islander perspective as the evidence of either deep divisions or that some Islanders have lost their way in relation to Islander priorities, threatening the collective notions of what it means to be an Islander, is once again to miss the point. The collective can maintain consensus on future goals while being quite fragmented about the various paths to achieve them. (p. 211-12)

Nevertheless, Islanders living outside the Torres Strait continue to be negatively accounted for in their relationship with Islanders in the Torres Strait, particularly regarding debates involving autonomy, independence and native title. Regarding the independence debate in the 1980s, Singe (2003) writes:

Many resented the noisy intrusion of Islanders living on the mainland, mostly from Townsville, into Torres Strait politics and gradually the debate polarized Islander participants into three groups. Islanders living on the mainland

continued to support independence for the Torres Strait, which was something of an irony since they did not live there. (p. 176)

Loos & Mabo (1996), from the perspective of Eddie Koiki Mabo, sheds a different light on the Torres Strait political debate, however, and the role 'Mainlanders' might play in that process despite the apparent tensions:

Mabo had advocated a self-governing autonomy for the Torres Strait based on the Norfolk Island model in the early 1970s and had been strongly criticized by other Islanders ... There is no doubt that the destruction of terra nullius and the acknowledgment of native title has given the Torres Strait Islanders a greater bargaining power with both State and Federal governments, and a greater confidence in controlling their own future and a more insistent assertiveness ... Had Koiki Mabo not died of cancer in January 1992, he would certainly have been an important voice in any debate concerning the future of the Torres Strait Islands. (pp. 13-14)

Islanders living outside the Torres Strait, including Eddie Koiki Mabo, were advocating a political agenda similar to the one shared by residents in the Torres Strait at the time. Paradoxically though, the opportunity to promote a 'united' political campaign gave rise to further discord between the two groups:

Koiki Mabo's relationship with the Meriam people was often unsettling, even turbulent, and sometimes very stormy indeed ... On Murray Island he was often seen as the outsider, the man who had left under a cloud and was absent for

twenty years ... In the Torres Strait he was seen by some an intruder, and an anti-government radical critical of those who had authority within government structures or who were willing to work along with government policies. Moreover, his return would challenge anyone occupying land that Mabo believed he had inherited. (Loos & Mabo, 1996, p. 157)

Despite documented tensions between the two groups over political agendas, others, including Shnukal (2004), cite these events as examples of Torres Strait unity and collective identity:

Emerging tensions between homeland and Islanders living on the mainland were submerged when in the 1970s both groups united in opposition to Papua New Guinea's formal request that the border between the two countries be redrawn to the more 'equitable' line of the 110 degree parallel ... The anger expressed by Islanders at the attempt to annexe 'their' islands and cays arose primarily from the recognition of the threat to themselves as a people who, despite diverse origins and heterogeneity, had for centuries maintained a separate identity from the Mainlander's to their north (and south) and had grown increasingly unified. (pp. 116-7)

### **3.16 Political Representation of 'Mainland Islander' Interests**

The debate involving Islanders' claims for autonomy and independence have been a central part of the Torres Strait political landscape for at least the past three decades. In 1996, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and



Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HRSCATSIA, 1997a) was required to report on, as one of its objectives:

What implications would greater autonomy have for Torres Strait Islanders resident outside the Torres Strait region including whether the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission or the Torres Strait Regional Authority should represent the interests of such residents. (p. 1)

The submissions to the HRSCATSIA Inquiry on autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders demonstrate how Islanders residing outside the Torres Strait wish to have some continuing involvement in the issues in Torres Strait (Arthur, 1997). The abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 2004 has made proposed models of Torres Strait Islander autonomy (presented at the time) largely redundant. However, it is interesting to review the ideas and sentiment expressed within the Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board's submission to the HRSCATSIA Inquiry in relation to 'Mainland Islanders'. The TSIAB submission repeatedly emphasises the links between Islanders on the mainland and Islanders in the Torres Strait and, in the process, advocates a model of governance that reflects and strengthens this connection:

While the focus is on mainland Australia, we recognize the "oneness" of Torres Strait Islander people deriving from our cultural heritage. It is essential that any autonomous separately constituted Torres Strait Islander governing body ensures unity between homeland, mainland and expatriate Torres Strait Islanders. It is important in any new administrative arrangements that strong links be maintained between Torres Strait Islanders in the Torres Strait and on

the mainland. Proper mechanisms need to be developed to maintain these links.  
(TSIAB, 1996, p. 6)

Interestingly, the TSIAB submission suggested that the establishment of an appropriate governing body was important for 'Mainland Islanders' cultural identity:

Bringing all Torres Strait Islanders under the one administrative umbrella has attractions to Torres Strait Islander people living on the mainland to ensure the achievement of ... in particular, the preservation of their heritage and culture for present and succeeding generations. (TSIAB, 1996, p. 5)

A decade on from the Inquiry, neither the Commonwealth government nor Torres Strait Islander representative bodies have been able to devise a model that addresses issues of autonomy, independence, political representation and decision making and one that subsequently meets the needs and aspirations of Islanders in the Torres Strait and Islanders living on the mainland. The complexities underpinning the development of such a model, particularly when Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland constitute the majority of Islander people, is again reflected in the TSIAB submission from ten years ago:

Whereas currently Torres Strait Islanders' culturally appropriate needs are being ignored, particularly on the mainland, it could be envisaged that this would no longer be the case under a separate Torres Strait Commission. Such an arrangement would also remove the divisions between Torres Strait Islanders living in the Torres Strait and those on the mainland ... Incorporating direct

representation of 20,000 mainland Torres Strait Islanders within the Torres Strait political structure would result in Torres Strait Islanders in the Torres Strait losing their majority in the region. Undoubtedly in whatever configuration is agreed on, there will continue to be a need for close links between mainland Torres Strait Islanders and the Torres Strait. (1996, p. 4)

Beckett (2004) notes how, in the context of regional autonomy, “Mainlanders have in vain requested a voice” (p. 12). Arthur (2001a) explains the ‘Mainlanders’ lack of success in this regard can be attributed to “their ability to legitimize their position” (p. 18), further suggesting:

Indigenous people in Torres Strait seem focused on regional autonomy for Torres Strait, that is for ‘place’, and so are attempting to address the position of non-Indigenous residents. ‘Mainlander’s meanwhile have been more interested in autonomy for a ‘people’, as in Islander autonomy from Aboriginal people. (p. 18)

Within this context, socio-political events and processes have been premised on various forms of exclusion, self-representation and otherness for Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. The discussion on the representational discourses of loss draws attention to the relationship between constructions of ‘locality’ and ‘community’ on the one hand and identity on the other (Leonard, 1997).

### 3.17 Summary

Previous government and academic examinations of the Islander migration have revealed diverse findings on the nature of the Torres Strait diaspora and its attachment or otherwise to ancestral home islands. The notion of home under these circumstances has particular relevance to the processes underpinning Torres Strait diasporic negotiations of home and homeland. Discourses of identity in a Torres Strait context reveal the complexities around multi-layered, and sometimes contradictory, narratives of people, place and culture. Previous explorations of Torres Strait Islander identity and its negotiation have rarely looked at the process of identity construction in terms of *lived experience*. Instead they have tended to concentrate on the identity politics that locate Islanders, particularly ‘Mainlanders’, within the discourse of loss, paying little attention to the politics of representation, the questions inherent in discussions of identity politics and the development of new forms of representation and cultural expression. The literature reviewed in this chapter exposes fundamental gaps in the documentation and analysis of the lived experience of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait, particularly as it relates to their conceptualisations of ‘home’, the nature of their relationship with their ancestral home islands, their relationship with, and to, Islanders living in the Torres Strait, and their practice, interpretation and representation of Torres Strait Islander culture. In this regard, the gaps in the literature provide the basis of inquiry for this research study. The methods used to generate the qualitative data for this research study are outlined in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4

# Doing Things *Prapa*: Issues related to Research Design, Data Collection, Analysis and Interpretation

### 4.1 Introduction

This picture (Figure 4.1) taken of me with some of the research Storytellers on Badu Island (29 June 2004) says much about the way I undertook this research. As Badu is the ancestral home island of my Mother, it was understood that she (along with my father and sister) would accompany me to this research site. My Mother, assuming both active and passive communication roles depending upon the context, facilitated my access to the site, introduced me and reacquainted me with key Storytellers and co-interviewed Storytellers as part of my narrative inquiry. Within this study, I was never an individual researcher conducting my own research in a social vacuum devoid of connections and inter-relationships with family members, relatives and Island communities. In the conduct of my research, particularly in the communities of Badu and Erub in the Torres Strait, I was assisted by local contact people who provided me with support on many levels including advice on cultural protocol and local *kastom* (cultural practices) and all important logistical issues such as meeting me at the airstrip, driving me around the island, introducing me to participants, making sure I was fed and providing me with accommodation. My research in the Torres Strait could not have

been undertaken without their leadership, mentorship, personal counsel and occasional *grauling* (getting a stern talking to). I name my mentors co-researchers in this chapter, reflecting the recognition of their skills, knowledge and research partnerships that overwhelmingly contributed to the outcomes of this research.

I was advised by one of my co-researchers to ‘do less talking, more listening and more watching’. Moreover, I was reminded to ‘make sure you do things *prapa*’. I understood this to mean adhering to cultural protocol, being respectful, being open and honest and knowing, most importantly, there is a right and a wrong way of going about things. As my research journey unfolded, the need to do things *prapa* articulated into an institutional research context where issues of academic rigour, ethical practice, authority, accountability and cultural propriety needed to be negotiated and resolved, sometimes with mixed results. The citation of examples that represent key turning points of discovery along my research journey is included in this chapter with the intent of scholarly contribution to emergent discussions regarding research methodologies in Indigenous contexts.

This chapter examines the issues related to methodology for this research study. It outlines the various processes of preparation, research design and choice of appropriate methods for data collection. I explore the practical and epistemological implications of reflexive and ethical practice, highlighting both the advantages of my own positioning within the research and the challenges and difficulties I experienced in doing research with *my own mob*. The premise of reflexive ethnography underpins the discussions in this chapter relating to research strategies, methods of data collection

(including videotaped interviews, observation and textual analysis) and interpretation and presentation.

My interviews with the participant Storytellers contained many interesting and revealing insights into the formations of individual and collective identity. Yet, at the same time, they were underpinned by the problematic notions of identity representation of which I was critical. I was presented, then, with what would be the first in a series of methodological dilemmas; how could I do justice to the lived experience of Torres Strait Islanders residing outside the Torres Strait while, at the same time, critically analyse cultural discourses that form the very core from which those experiences are made (Saukko, 2003). Gray (2003) argues that our choice of methods “says a lot about our approach to what is to be known and ways of knowing the world” (p. 4). While my choice of methodology reflects the overall epistemological approach adopted by the study, it was important not to separate, at least on a philosophical or political level, the more practical issues of method as both issues were integral to my research process and informed the structure of this study. The critical viewpoint evident in my methods, therefore, reflects an attempt to deconstruct the structures inherent in cultural representations of ‘Mainlanders’ through investigation of the underlying assumptions that are inherent in the language used to describe and inscribe the world ‘Mainlanders’ inhabit.

#### **4.2 Scope of the Research**

The focus of this research is Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. While this thesis explores the nature of the relationship between ‘Mainlanders’ and Islanders in the Torres Strait, it is not a comparative study between the two groups

of Islanders. Only two people in the participant group were current residents of the Torres Strait, with the focus of our discussions being the nature of their relationship to people and place on the mainland. This research, therefore, makes no claim to represent the views or perceptions of Islanders living in the Torres Strait. The views of Islanders living in the Torres Strait, where referred to in this thesis, have already been documented in published literature or audio-visual materials. This thesis is similarly not a comparable study of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait and Aboriginal people.

While the nature of the relationship between Islanders living outside the Torres Strait and Aboriginal people is addressed in other chapters of this thesis, that discussion is not the primary feature of this research. The relationship between Islanders living on the mainland and Aboriginal people is complex but it is often characterised by assumptions of division and power struggles over resources, recognition of rights and political representation (TSIAB, 1996). Unfortunately, those discussions that dominate Indigenous Australian discourse are not very helpful in attempting to understand a ubiquitous historical connection between Islanders and Aboriginal people forged through pre-contact traditional exchange, colonial oppression, collective resistance, power sharing and generations of intermarriage and cultural integration between the respective collectives (Shnukal, 2004). The issue of our ongoing connection and relationship with Aboriginal people, particularly as it relates to social and political agency, is an area worthy of future attention but is not addressed to a significant degree in this thesis.



### **4.3 Examining My Position in the Research**

The choice of methodology arose from the nature of my research question and reflections upon how best to address the issue of identity for my respondent group. Herbert (2003), Aboriginal academic and educationalist, describes her inquiry process as a 'journey' with various stages to navigate. Her first phase, called "preparing for the journey" (p. 83), describes her self-reflective practice in thinking through the background and context to her research and the impact on, and benefit to, potential participants; a process that had much relevance for the earlier phase of my own project as I faced the challenge of deciding the best way to approach the research (Herbert, 2003). Selecting appropriate research methods was particularly important in thinking through the ways participants would respond to the process and derive some benefit from the project and its outcomes.

Any description of my research process is, by necessity, a deconstruction of my own situatedness and location within the field of inquiry. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) argue that behind and within each of the research phases stand the biographically situated researcher, "every researcher speaks from within a distinct interpretive community that configures, in its special way, the multicultural, gendered components of the research act" (p. 30). The researcher is bound within a net of ontological and epistemological premises that "makes particular demands on the researcher, including the questions he or she asks and the interpretations the researcher brings to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 33). In researching my chosen topic, I needed to find ways of working with who I am; my underlying values, my philosophies on life, my views of reality and my beliefs about how knowledge is known and created (Etherington, 2004).

In this sense, my view of reality (ontology) and my understanding of what it means to know (epistemology) are entwined.

I embarked on a research process that enabled people to share their stories in their own words, gestures and other forms of cultural expression, representation and communication. Selecting the most appropriate and effective research methods was particularly challenging for me as I needed to find a way to encourage respondents to think about their own sense of self, their origins, values, cultural traditions and practice, their families, home affiliation and, to reflect upon where they are positioned and/or 'fit' within these cultural discourses (Herbert, 2003). Gaining access to, and further immersing myself in, the research participants' social world in their natural setting enhanced my capacity to understand their worldview and social reality.

I was faced with the question of how best to 'unpack' sensitive topics with respondents, knowing that the process itself would reveal certain 'truths' about the way respondents perceived themselves and their relationships to others. The nature of my inquiry regarding 'Mainland Islander identity' immediately assumed a larger historical, political and cultural context, prompting critical questions about the nature of social reality and how this reality was shaped by social, political and cultural factors. Smith (1999) further emphasises the political context of methodological considerations for research:

Methodology is important because it frames the questions being asked, determines the set of instruments and methods to be employed and shapes the analyses. Within an indigenous framework, methodological debates are ones

concerned with the broader politics and strategic goals of indigenous research.  
(p. 143)

I sought methods that would enable me to accurately record my observations while also uncovering the meaning the Storytellers attributed to their life experiences. The connection of the present to multiple possible pasts, Austin (2005) argues, “is an active element in the performance of living out of our subjectivities, through this self-defining activity the individual is required to engage questions of Self and Other” (p. 18). It became apparent that I would need to collect and draw upon a variety of empirical materials to describe moments, events and social processes in individuals’ lives. Storytelling, as a mode and method of communication, appeared to be the most appropriate way of capturing the participant narratives, thus allowing me to “approach the interviewee’s experiential world in a more comprehensive way, this world being structured in itself” (Flick, 2002, p. 96). Moreover, Storytelling allowed me to contextualise the Storytellers’ narratives from their perspective:

Stories provide data that have a focus on ways in which cultural and social constraints act upon individuals. They are a powerful tool for reflection. The language used is an act of epistemology. (Dunbar, 2008, pp. 90-91)

My approach to this research study is most consistent with reflexive ethnographies whereby Ellis and Bochner (2002) explain “the researcher’s personal experience becomes important primarily in how it illuminates the culture under study” (p. 211). In this way, I used my own experiences as a ‘Mainland Islander’ reflexively to ‘bend back on self’ and look more deeply at self-other interactions. Davies (1999)

defines reflexivity as “turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference [emphasising that] ... issues of reflexivity are particularly salient for ethnographic research in which the involvement of the researcher in the society and culture of those being studied is particularly close” (p. 4). Reflexive practice is particularly important, then, to researchers who are engaged in insider research with either their own group or another Indigenous group or community. Martin (2003) a *Quandamooopa Noonuccal* woman, notes how reflexivity is an important aspect of Indigenist methodologies:

Reflexivity in research design affords the ‘space’ to decolonize western research methodologies, then harmonise and articulate Indigenist research ... Reflexivity challenges us to claim our shortcomings, misunderstandings, oversights and mistakes, to re-claim our lives and make strong changes to our current realities. Being reflexive ensures we do not compromise our identity whilst undertaking research. (pp. 210-11)

Smith’s (1999) focus on Indigenous research methodologies underlines the problematic nature of being both an insider and an outsider in Indigenous contexts, emphasising the critical need for reflexivity in the researcher’s processes, relationships, data gathering and analysis. Hertz (1997) similarly maintains that, through personal accounting:

researchers must become more aware of how their own positions and interests are imposed at all stages of the research process – from the questions they ask to those they ignore, from who they will study to who they ignore, from problem formation to analysis, representation and writing. (p. viii)

By examining the full process of the interaction between myself and the research participants, I attempted to understand not simply ‘what I knew’ but ‘how I knew it’. Characterising myself as a ‘native ethnographer’ (Reed-Danahay, 1997) therefore necessitated reflexive examination of methodological aspects of my research. That is, whether knowing and understanding *Ailan Kastom*, traditions, communication and cultural protocols and kinship relations facilitated or hindered the research project. I, therefore, explored this issue through my own experience as both a native insider and outsider researcher and, in the process, confronted some of the personal and epistemological questions of writing within, and moving between, these two positions.

I was concerned about the more populist re-presentations of ‘Mainland Islanders’ within social discourse, an epistemological position that exposed the deep personal links I had to the historical realities I was documenting and analysing. As a native scholar, however, I questioned whether the privilege of birthright as a Torres Strait Islander woman lent itself to a higher authentic voice that occupied a space of cultural legitimacy and moral integrity. However, positioning myself in such a space would overlook the workings of power and hegemony so prevalent in previous ethnographic representations of my people. My own research process evidenced continued shifts between insider and outsider status, attributed for the most part, to participant perceptions of my position as a researcher *vis-à-vis* research Storytellers. While my status as native ethnographer allowed me easier access to participants and, as Bell (1999) suggests, “an intimate knowledge of the context of the research and the micropolitics of the situation” (p. 42), it does not necessarily follow that my representation of Islander identification is more valid or reliable simply because of my experiences as a ‘Mainland Islander’.

While reflecting a standpoint epistemology, my approach to this research does not lay claim to a truer or more authentic voice. To do so, lends itself to further essentialisation of Torres Strait Islander identity and this, I believe, contradicts the very rationale for conducting this research. The reflexive ethnography I adopted in this study represents a process of constant appraisal and re-appraisal of the assumptions surrounding the social constructions of identity under examination, and my own role (as critic) in situating meaning. In this way, I question the act of critique itself from the perspective of ‘native’ ethnographer and, in the process, make explicit the ambiguities, contradictions and knowledge I brought to the analysis. In this way, I acknowledge the impact of my own history, experiences, beliefs and culture on the processes and outcomes of this research inquiry. The articulation of the events and emotions, feelings and mindset described throughout this thesis, then, required a considerable degree of self-reflection and self-review of a life ‘lived’ and still ‘living’.

In locating myself within this research, I have drawn from the work and writings of Nakata (2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2007). As the first Torres Strait Islander PhD graduate, Nakata’s work challenges us (Islanders), among other things, to think more critically about the ways Islander knowledge has been produced for, and by, us. Nakata’s (2007) theory of the Islander Cultural Interface provided my research with a framework for not only understanding my own realities and position in the world but it also presented a way I could speak back to the corpus of ‘knowledge’ and ‘understanding’ of the ‘Mainland Islander’ experience. My worldviews, my social and personal interactions with others and my environment reflected my location within what Nakata (2007) describes as the Cultural Interface, the “space where Islanders live and act on a daily

basis and is in this sense both the personal space and the civic space – the place where we make sense of our individual and collective experience” (p. 210).

In defining the Cultural Interface, Nakata (2007) explains how the experience of being an Islander is “constituted in a complex nexus between ‘lived experience’ and discursive constructions” (p. 210), meaning there is no ‘authentic’ account of Islander experience that lends itself to a higher or absolute truth. In this way, my Stories of self, do not position my narrative as a more authentic or representative voice but instead reflect my own cultural and social frames of reference from which I undertake this research. The reflections of my own experiences reveal how identifications can be multiple and shifting, crossing the boundaries and discourses of culture, gender, class, and place. Moreover, my reflections expose the politics of sameness and difference promulgated within and between each of these discourses, confirming the notion that we are constituted as individuals within a social process. In this regard, identity is, as Barker (2004) argues “something we create, something always in process, a moving towards rather than an arrival” (p. 96). Before exploring the nature of the ‘emotional investment’ Islanders attributed to their own identification, it was imperative that I firstly examine the processes of describing, naming and classifying myself. How do I identify? What processes and events have influenced and shaped my own identification and acculturation?

My own experiences of identification reflect Nakata’s (2007) assertions of the “complex realities of Islander lives at the Interface” (p. 204). Our sense of identity, much like culture, is dynamic, changing and evolving in response to present and past experiences and circumstances. It is also shaped by our projections and aspirations for

the future. It would be wrong, then, to speak of 'Mainland Islander identity' as being defined by one thing or another. The Islander experience in the Interface is complex and multidimensional (Nakata, 2007). However, the complexity surrounding Islander identities that intersect, transgress and perform together at the constructed 'borders' of the past, present and future should not be dismissed as that which is beyond understanding. Indeed Nakata's (2007) theorising of the Cultural Interface challenges us as Islanders to understand our own locations within political and social discourses that not only transform but at the same time restrict us; to understand the elements and effects of colonial experience on our social and institutional frameworks; and to understand how we as Torres Strait Islanders represent and articulate our lived realities and identities as *Ailan Pipel*. This research study aims to promote some of that understanding.

#### **4.4 On the 'Inside': Conducting Research in the Field**

The following discussion outlines my use of research methods including interviewing (using audio and video recording), observation and textual analysis. In describing my experiences in the field, I also provide narrative of the challenges, pressures, impressions and feelings I encountered along the way. The personal narrative further illuminates the contemporaneous roles I occupied as a Torres Strait Islander woman, wife, mother, sister, daughter, daughter-in-law, niece, cousin, student, teacher, and peer, reflecting my own multiple layering of gender, cultural and social identities. In this regard, the reflexivity of the researcher and the research took on a level of meaning I could not have envisaged at the beginning of this project. I set about observing ordinary events and everyday activities while becoming directly involved with the participants involved in the research.



Several family members and relatives played key roles in every stage in this research including brokering access to participant Storytellers, accompanying me to interviews, supplying catering for Storytellers, offering advice and direction on cultural protocol and practice and imparting their wisdom in the translation and interpretation of Storytellers' contributions, cultural events and social processes. In this section, I refer to family members as *co-researchers* in recognition of not just their contribution to this research but the role they played in teaching me appropriate forms of conduct, sharing their knowledge and stories, mentoring me through problem solving and providing encouragement and reassurance when needed. My re-telling of experiences in the field reflects an autobiographical narrative of the highs and lows, the challenges and achievements and overall realisation that life did not 'go on hold' when I undertook my doctoral research:

The researchers themselves have a life which they cannot ignore. They are the people meeting the interviewees, beguiling the gatekeepers, soothing the sponsors, placating the supervisors, dealing with resentment at being patronized or being put in the position of father-confessor, drinking the sixth cup of coffee, saying sorry that the tape has prematurely come to an end, wondering whether respondent 45's invitation to continue the interview over a meal is exploitation. (Hannabus, 2000, p. 3)

#### **4.5 The Research Design**

Deciding on an appropriate sample size proved to be a difficult task in the initial stages of the research project. How many people should I interview and in what locations? Flick (2002) argues:

the appropriateness of the structure and contents of the sample, and thus the appropriateness of the strategy chosen for obtaining both, can only be assessed with respect to the research question of the study: which and how many cases are necessary to answer the questions of the study? (p. 71)

In thinking through these questions of design, I referred to Neuman's (2003) explanation on qualitative sampling:

Qualitative researchers focus less on a sample's representativeness or on detailed techniques for drawing a probability sample. Instead, they focus on how the sample or small collection of cases, units or activities, illuminates social life. The primary purpose of sampling is to collect specific cases, events, or actions that can clarify and deepen understanding. Qualitative researchers' concern is to find cases that will enhance what the researchers learn about the processes of social life in a specific context ... the qualitative researcher selects cases gradually, with the specific content of a case determining whether it is chosen. (p. 211)

I decided to place less emphasis on a representative sample of 'Mainland Torres Strait Islanders' and focus more on how potential participant Storytellers' lives,

experiences and social processes had relevance to the research topic. Silverman (2000) argues “purposive sampling demands that we think critically about the parameters of the population we are interested in and choose our sample case carefully on this basis” (p. 104). Based on this rationale, I deployed purposive sampling with a view to identifying particular types of cases for in-depth investigation.

Financial and time constraints limited the fieldwork to the eastern Australian coast and included the conduct of interviews and observation in the locations of Cairns, Townsville, Mackay, Brisbane, Canberra and the Torres Strait Islands of Erub, Badu and Thursday. I chose those particular islands due to ease of access, as I had established connections in those communities and because it also represented ‘eastern’ and ‘western’ sides of the Torres Strait, a reflection of my own identification with islands of origin. With the exception of Cairns (where I was based), I visited each location at least twice, (Brisbane was visited five times). The mainland locations were chosen on the basis of higher populations of Torres Strait Islanders, although it is acknowledged that other areas have well-established communities of Islanders including New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Although the chosen sites have high Torres Strait Islander populations, they also represent diverse social settings, cultural circumstances and community interaction. On this aspect, “sites that present a web of social relations, a variety of activities, and diverse events over time provide richer, more interesting data” (Neuman, 2003, p. 371).

The selection of respondents on the basis of cultural identity was rather straightforward as this was based on participant Storytellers’ self-identification as a Torres Strait Islander and evident connection with a relevant Islander community.

Categorising people as ‘Mainlanders’, however, exposed the diversity of perceptions and circumstances associated with this term. Some people were comfortable describing themselves as ‘Mainlanders’, having been born and raised outside the Torres Strait. However, there were several participants who identified their home as their island of origin in the Torres Strait, even if they had resided on the mainland for an extended period of time. It became apparent during the course of the research that there was yet another category of ‘Mainlanders’ who were born and raised outside the Torres Strait and who have now relocated to the Torres Strait for work and/or retirement. For the purpose of defining the sample, I categorised participants on the basis of where they ‘mostly lived’ but with the view to unpacking participants’ perceptions of whether they identified with the term ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islander’ or not at interview. I profiled participants on the following criteria outlined in Table 4.1. The number of participants in each category is also included in the table.

Although there was a small number of Islander families who resettled on the mainland in the decades prior to World War Two (including my paternal grandmother’s family), this research study includes, for the most part, those individuals and families who represented the mass movement of Islanders from their ancestral home islands during the post World War Two era. The project included twenty-three individuals who represent first, second and third generation Torres Strait Islanders who live outside the Torres Strait. The first generation interviewees represent the first wave of Torres Strait Islander movement to the mainland and includes those who left their island homes during the decades of the 1930s through to the 1960s. This period is significant as it represents a time when the Islander diaspora was relatively small and Islanders were still living under the protectionist regime. This period also pre-dates racial

discrimination laws and the introduction of government programs and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Within these four categories (outlined in Table 4.1), I sought respondents who were diverse in terms of gender, age, social upbringing, cultural knowledge, religion, occupation and ‘physical appearance’. I also sought participants who were politically active and had publicly advocated for Torres Strait Islanders and, in particular, ‘Mainlanders’. I similarly sought participants who had no known association with political activism or who, in one person’s words, decided to ‘stay out of black politics’. In total, twenty-three people were included in the sample. A smaller sample size allowed me (within budget and time constraints) to spend considerable time with the participants and the opportunity to do several follow-up interviews with each respondent. Of the twenty-four people I approached, only one declined on the basis they were ‘too busy with work’ but ‘wished me all the best’ anyway. In total, the interviews generated over eighty-five hours of verbal data that was transcribed into written text.

**Table 4.1 Profile of the Research Sample**

Category	Definition	No. of Storytellers	Locations
First Generation Storytellers	Born and raised in the Torres Strait and now mostly living on the mainland	6	Cairns (2)*, Mackay (2), Brisbane (2)
Second Generation Storytellers	Born and raised on the mainland, now mostly living on the mainland, but have	10	Cairns (6), Mackay (1), Brisbane (3)

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	visited and/or lived in the Torres Strait (for work, family, social and cultural events, holidays)		
Third Generation Storytellers	Born and raised on the mainland, living on the mainland and never visited the Torres Strait	5	Cairns
First and Second Generation Storytellers 'returnees'	Born and raised on the mainland, re-located to Torres Strait to live for extended period of time	2	Badu (1), Thursday Island (1)
	TOTAL	23	

\*(#) denotes number of times visited

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#### 4.6 Gaining Access to the Field

Further to obtaining ethics approval from the James Cook University (JCU) Human Ethics Sub-Committee for my research (JCU Ethics Approval Number H1486), I set about publicising the project and enlisting the help and support of potential Storytellers and co-researchers. The recruitment of Storytellers was done, largely, by word-of-mouth, through personal and community contacts. I undertook measures to ensure confidentiality was maintained for participants; however, it became apparent that anonymity could not be guaranteed. I discussed with participant Storytellers the implications of having their involvement in the project publicly known and sought their approval to tell others of their participation as I was asked on many occasions 'who else are you speaking to or have spoken to?' I did not volunteer this information, unless

asked, and, most importantly, only disclosed people's names if I had their permission as participants to do so. Most participants agreed to let others know of their involvement but there were some participants who asked to remain anonymous and this request was duly respected. I discovered the sharing of information of participants' involvement was an important factor in whether someone would participate in my project or not. Knowing who else was involved encouraged Storytellers' participation for the most part.

I was acutely aware as an inside researcher that my own reputation and credibility was fundamental to building sustained and trustworthy relationships with participants that would extend beyond the life of the research study. In the conduct of this research, there were many roles I had, in some cases, been assigned and, in other circumstances, negotiated between myself and participant Storytellers. These roles, in turn, influenced and shaped the nature and level of access and 'acceptance' I experienced as a researcher. The notion of acceptance in a community is difficult to define and thereafter measure with many variables influencing the way you perceive yourself and how others perceive you in a cultural and social context:

Membership of a group does not automatically mean that one will have free access to information ... Information may be hard to obtain and the researcher may be required to walk a tightrope before they gain access and to continue to walk this narrow path as the research unfolds. (Walsh-Tapiata, 2003, p. 66)

In my case, determining variables relating to participant access included, most notably, my gender, age, family background, educational history, current employment,

marital status, parental status and perceptions of community contribution. The relative importance of these variables was noticeably different when I undertook field research with Torres Strait Islander women participants as part of my Masters degree. During that phase of my life, I was younger, single and living in Brisbane. Contact with participants was made directly by me and kinship connections with respondents were made with reference to my mother and father's families in both Cairns and the Torres Strait. With my doctoral research, I found my roles had shifted dramatically, particularly with the change in my marital and parental status affecting the conduct of my study. I was now married to a Torres Strait Islander man, a status that represented new layers of cultural protocol, expectations, obligation and, generally speaking, a different dimension to my role as an Island woman researcher. The Information Page that was given to the Storytellers outlining the research objectives and details included not just information about my own family background and island/s of origin but also that of my husband's family. For many of the participant Storytellers, I was '*Mrs. 'blo Gary*' and this was how most people referred to me. How this personal and constant reference to my marital status sits with my feminist sensibility is perhaps the subject of another study but the example, nevertheless, demonstrates how I was drawing on, yet contesting, the constructs of gender, social and cultural identity in the conduct of this research (Watkin, 1998).

I quickly learned by trial and error, through *graulings*, much laughter and occasional tears, there was a 'right' and a 'wrong' way of going about things with many shades of grey in between. I furthermore understood that wrong choices, even if well intentioned at the time, impacted on my standing with people and affected my level of access to participants. Access to each participant was negotiated on a case by case basis.



While I contacted most of the participants directly (in person, by telephone and via email), my husband, as co-researcher, contacted and approached a number of respondents on my behalf (particularly older males) including setting up the date, time and location for interview. My Mother and Father, acting as co-researchers, similarly brokered access for me with older participants.

#### **4.7 Setting up Interviews**

The interview locations reflected people's diverse circumstances, distinct requirements and availability. For the most part, I interviewed participants one-on-one at a location of their choice, usually their homes. Most of the interviews were videotaped. All interviews were recorded in digital audio format. On two occasions, I interviewed people at their place of work (including the staff lunch room) and another in a quiet corner of a coffee shop across from their workplace. At one time, I interviewed an older female participant while sitting on a huge tree trunk on an isolated beach at Badu while the sun set (my Mother and sister as co-researchers were present at the time) (see Figure 4.2). I interviewed two young men together in my hotel room with my older brother present (as co-researcher). On another occasion, for an interview with a male elder in his home, I was accompanied by my younger brother (as co-researcher). Although my co-researchers were passive observers on those occasions, their presence provided for a more culturally appropriate setting, particularly when interviewing male Storytellers, and the conduct of a more comfortable and open interview for both myself and the respondents.



*Figure 4.1 Conducting an interview at Badu Island Torres Strait 30 June 2004<sup>7</sup>.*

The subjectivity surrounding issues of access and perceptions of acceptance was accentuated by my field trip to the outer island of Erub in the Torres Strait. I was to be accompanied by other family members on the Erub trip and I believed, at the time, their presence would collectively constitute an appropriate ‘chaperone’. Close to the time of departure, however, an elder co-researcher of mine advised my husband that it was not appropriate for me to go to Erub without my husband. The rationale included, in part, that as Erub was my husband’s home island so it was not *prapa* for me to visit the island on my first occasion without him. We knew at the time that this dilemma was an important test of my commitment to the project in the short term and personal credibility in the longer term. I, furthermore, ran the risk of disengaging the elder co-researcher who was not only central to my project at the time but also played a significant role in family and community interactions and relationships. The inherent

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<sup>7</sup> From left to right: me; research Storyteller, my Mother (as co-researcher). Photograph taken by Lenora Thaker.

risks associated with ignoring the elder co-researcher's advice had to be weighed up against issues of logistics and common sense as alternative plans needed to be made only the week before my scheduled departure. In making the decision for my husband to accompany me, we had to seriously consider child care issues, leave arrangements from my husband's busy work schedule, flight availability from Cairns to Erub via Horn Island and, finally, the financial costs (it was cheaper to fly to New Zealand or Hawaii). Having assessed the options, we decided that my husband would accompany me to Erub as the potential benefits, both personally (as a family member) and professionally (through the research), outweighed the costs that could have long term ramifications.

As a postscript to this Story, my trip to Erub was very productive and rewarding. I was introduced to numerous people and made to feel welcome, whether it was in someone's home, on their land or at an official community event. I was accompanied at all times by my husband. He was not accompanying me in the capacity of passive observer but rather his presence defined my social context, my personal status and, generally, explained the social structure and order of things. This example underscored the dilemmas insider researchers face in working with their own communities. Having occupied an insider role it became apparent there was a different level of community expectation and obligation attached to decision making that was not just concerned with me but also reflected how I, as an individual, was connected and interrelated to a broader set of personal, family and community circumstances and contexts.

While many of the Storytellers had been involved with research projects on previous occasions with non-Torres Strait Islander anthropologists and historians (both

male and female), they were less familiar with undertaking research with *one of their kind*. Access to people in my capacity as a relative, family member or friend was almost unconditional. As a researcher, however, there was no expectation on my part that previous entry to people's lives would translate automatically into a different context or environment. Giving careful consideration and thought to my role as a Torres Strait Islander woman researcher was imperative at each stage of the process as it had major implications for the achievement of successful and productive interactions with respondents. Hannabuss (2000) uses the biblical analogy of Jonah being swallowed by the whale to describe the inherent risks in insider research:

Being inside the whale gave him unique insights which, as we know, were put to good use later ... There are, equally, risks in being inside the whale. You are known in one role ... and now seek to change that role to researcher: it is often impossible to change the mindset of potential respondents about this, and this can mean that, when you interview them, they disclose to you only what they would disclose to you in your "normal" role. (p. 5)

In the course of ongoing decisions about the granting of access to people's lives, the attainment of trust and the issue of informed consent, I placed emphasis on people's perceptions of my role as an insider researcher. In turn, I considered how these perceptions might influence people's willingness to participate in the study and the quality and quantity of information they might eventually disclose as part of the research. In this regard, Hodkinson (2005) reminds "achieving recognition as an insider may require different levels and types of effort and technique in different contexts" (p. 138).

#### **4.8 Conducting the Interviews**

In designing this research project, it became apparent that participant interviews would constitute the primary source of data collection. How people describe themselves and others and express their identity both as individuals and within a collective could be best articulated through narratives of 'being a mainland Torres Strait Islander'. My epistemological position further suggested that a legitimate way to generate data on these ontological properties was to interact with people, to talk to them and to gain access to their accounts and articulations (Mason, 1998). Neuman (2003) maintains "the field interview is a joint production of researcher and a member" involving a mutual sharing of experiences which encourages and guides a process of mutual discovery (p. 390). In this way, Mason (1998) argues, "you cannot separate the interview from the social interaction in which it was produced, and should not try" (p. 40). In these circumstances, both knowledge and evidence are contextual and situational requiring a more flexible approach to interviewing, allowing Storytellers the opportunity to reflect upon their understandings and responses while enabling me to follow the narrative or sequence provided by them.

I considered semi-structured interviews as the most appropriate method for generating verbal data, although my application of this mode occurred in two phases; the narrative interview followed by an interview with more structured questions. I interviewed most of the Storytellers on more than one occasion allowing me the scope to apply semi-structured interviews in a flexible way while at the same time building rapport and mutual trust in the exchange of information. My first interview with Storytellers, therefore, reflected a more narrative style of inquiry whereby I firstly asked

interviewees when and where they were born and then asked them to describe what it was like to grow up in that particular location (whether in the Torres Strait or an identified town on the mainland). I often integrated the use of visual imagery in the narrative interview, encouraging Storytellers to display photographs and other memorabilia as a way of stimulating discussion about their life histories. On one occasion, a Storyteller brought out a copy of their family tree and proceeded to construct a narrative around their family origins and kinship connections. In keeping with the narrative approach, I afforded the participant minimal or no interruption during the telling of their life histories. This open approach encouraged Storytellers to tell me about their Stories and the people, places and events that shaped their lives. In this way, the discussion of Storytellers' biographical accounts allowed me to "approach the interviewee's experiential world in a comprehensive way" (Flick, 2002, p. 96).

As both a genuine learner and a researcher, I was especially interested in the Storytelling process and this proved to be a very enjoyable part of the research process. I felt very privileged and humbled at the same time to learn about, and share in, the experience of people's past lives. The building of rapport and empathetic relationships subsequently emanated from these early discussions of Storytelling, emphasising the importance of rapport in unstructured interviewing:

Because the goal of unstructured interviewing is *understanding*, it is paramount that the researcher establish rapport with respondents; that is, the researcher must be able to take the role of the respondents and attempt to see the situation from their viewpoint, rather than superimpose his or her world of academia and preconceptions on them. (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 655)

The initial use of the narrative approach proved to be invaluable in developing my understanding of the respondent's social and cultural history and experiences. It also enhanced my rapport with interviewees providing for open and comfortable communication and the opportunity to move towards more structured questions. Consistent with the mode of semi-structured interviews, I referred to an interview guide with questions relating to my topic but, at the same time, was open to the way Storytellers talked about these topics and other topics that might be related to issues of 'identity'. Focusing directly on the question of identity was less useful in these circumstances given the highly subjective nature of the term itself. Some interviewees requested to see the questions beforehand and others were satisfied to respond to (unseen) questions at the time of interview. I conducted up to two follow-up interviews with respondents where logistics and availability allowed this to happen. Follow-up interviews gave the interviewees opportunities to elaborate on, and clarify, previous responses having had the time and space to reflect on their earlier discussions with me.

The interviews provided invaluable scope and insight into the way the Storytellers saw themselves and how they perceived others on matters of identity. There were, however, challenges and limitations associated with interviewing as a method of data generation. Firstly, conducting narrative interviews, while extremely effective, proved to be time consuming (on average three hours in duration) sometimes prompting rescheduling of interviews and meetings as it was often difficult to predict how long each session would run. The time factor also meant a huge commitment for the Storyteller to engage in a process that was not only lengthy but emotionally and physically draining. While the semi-structured interviews were shorter in duration, I

was faced with the challenge of keeping the discussion focused and on track without being too directive or abrupt.

Posing a second challenge, narrative inquiry (and unstructured interviewing) as a method raises questions relating to validity and reliability. Fontana and Frey (2000) note how “relevant to the study of oral history (and in fact, to all interviewing) is the study of memory and its relation to recall” (p. 656), particularly in its use to reconstruct biographical episodes of past life. Anthias (2002) advances the argument that identity can be understood as relating to narratives of location and positionality. In this way, the narrative “constructs experience as well as being a product of it, that it deploys available cultural resources that are used selectively and that it is not *merely a story about identity*” (p. 501). Despite the limitations of narrative inquiry and semi-structured interviews, I considered these methods the most appropriate approach to data generation with the Storytellers. I did not consider the interview data a less authentic representation of the *truth* but rather acknowledged Storytellers’ likelihood to subjectively interpret their experiences, feelings and meanings within a social and cultural context. What a Storyteller held to be *true*, therefore, resulted from their own social interaction and interpretation of events. Further to the adoption of appropriate research methods, consideration was given to the most effective and appropriate means of documenting the data.

#### **4.9 The Storytelling**

Throughout this thesis, I refer to my research interviewees as Storytellers and refer to their narratives as Stories, inspired by Martin’s (2008) approach to Storywork. My approach to Storytelling reflected the Storytellers’ engagement with me as a listener



and learner that extended beyond the mode of question/answer responses. Our social and cultural interactions with each other replicated in many ways the process and intellectual traditions of oral Storytelling. Martin's (2003) work on Indigenous relational ontologies and theories of relatedness resonated strongly with my efforts to understand the nature of my relationships to, and with, the people involved in my research, particularly at the point of 'access'. Martin (2003) further notes how, when engaging with Aboriginal people and groups, "we immediately set about establishing identities, interests and connections to determine our relatedness" (p. 210). By way of introducing herself, her family, ancestors and Country as a point of cultural protocol, Martin explains:

In providing these details, I am claiming and declaring my genealogy, my ancestry and my position as a researcher and author. The purpose is to locate myself firstly as an Aboriginal person and then as a researcher. As a researcher, this clearly presents the assumptions upon which my research is formulated and conducted. This also allows others to locate me and determine the types of relations that might exist. So, in providing these details, I am also identifying, defining and describing the elements of Indigenist research. (2003, p. 204)

Herbert (2003) similarly describes how, within a research context, cultural connection with the participant is of paramount importance:

... in my first meeting with any student, whether in a group or an individual situation, I need to tell them who I am as an Aboriginal person. Again the personal takes precedence over the professional in that sense. The purpose of

this process is that it allows us to relate to that person and to establish the possible links between our families. It has to do with belonging and identity and is a very powerful tool in establishing your credibility and gaining the trust of other Indigenous Australians. (p. 128)

The initial establishment of connection between myself and potential Storytellers often extended into the construction of a dialogic interaction whereby each party (as social actors) was able to generate and negotiate meaning relating to our own social, cultural and historical circumstances. Within this dialogic performance, we engaged in processes of verbal exchange and non-verbal observation, listening to each other's responses about who we were, how we were connected and generally describing what my grandmother would call 'what road you come from'. I call this process *identity mapping* to describe the ways this dialogic not only produced knowledge about social relations but how these interactions further facilitated identification whereby each party merged at least some of the other's identity with their own. When used in this way, *identity mapping* provides a means for tracing ancestral heritage and kinship relationships with a view to establishing and charting a 'common road to travel' based on mutual trust, accountability, reciprocity and, in due course, a 'shared' identity. In this regard, Storywork was established not just for the purpose of determining kinship connections but positioned in a way that created a continuous dialogue of self as part of others, constituting a dialogic self in the process. The telling, listening and pedagogy of Storytelling was not a passive interaction that articulated kinship connections (for the sake of it) but, rather, one that promoted agency of identification between the social actors.

The numerous social processes that shape my identity and nurture my sense of self influenced my decisions, level of access and field procedures in researching this project. The subjective construction of my own identity as a Torres Strait Islander woman furthermore pervades the representation of the Storytellers in my writing of their experiences and processes of identification. My understanding of Self, and the relational subjectivities I inhabited, could not be detached from the analysis of narratives of identification submitted by my Storytellers. My approach, therefore, was congruent with the idea of identity formation as one of “progressive repositionings of the Self along a myriad of lines or axes of identity” (Austin, 2005, p. 17). As an examination of people’s life histories, experiences, knowledges, practices and social relations, my research was concerned with exploring the complexity and entirety of peoples’ lives in an everyday context. By exploring perceptions of self-identity, I was seeking to understand the meanings that were brought to the social and cultural life of ‘Mainland Islanders’ through close personal interaction (by way of interviews and life stories) and observation between me and research Storytellers. There was little possibility, therefore, of objective observations devoid of social relationships and human experience between me as ‘the observer’ and the Storytellers as ‘the observed’.

#### **4.10 Documentation of Data**

Most of the interviews were recorded by both video-camera and the use of a digital audio-recording. I used video-recordings for a number of reasons. Firstly, it provided a visual record of the interview for the Storyteller and this proved to be a very valuable documentation of their life stories. Although I was responsible for documenting Storytellers’ life stories and responses to questions of identity, I did not own the information. Being able to *give back* to people a copy of their interview/s on

DVD or videotape therefore became symbolic of acknowledging not only participant ownership but the importance of documenting oral history for the benefit and use of Storytellers and their families. Videotaped interviews, furthermore, provided me access to additional visual forms of data for analysis and interpretation. Banks and Morphy (1997) claim a “major advantage of visual recording methods is that they enable the ethnographer to scan and record for later inspection and re-analysis” (p. 14). In my case, I was particularly interested in connecting the visual with the audio components of the interview in order to obtain a more complete version of participants’ dialogue, which often featured non-verbal forms of communication including hand gestures, facial expressions and physical re-enactments of events. Flick (2002) cautions against the overuse of recording technology, “the greater the effort in videotaping and the more comprehensive the insight it permits into everyday life under study, the greater may be the possible scepticism and reservations on the part of participants in the study” (pp. 167-8). For the most part however, Storytellers were comfortable with the use of the video-camera and, as the interview/s progressed, tended to focus on it less as an instrument of data collection.

Like most forms of visual data, there were performance issues on the part of Storytellers to ensure they were captured in the best light. Gergen and Gergen (2000) maintain the communicative medium itself has a formative effect on “what we take to be the object of research, the distinction between film as a recording device as opposed to performance is blurred” (p. 1029). The notion of performance as a mode of research representation was evident in my video documentation of Storyteller narratives. For example, one Storyteller changed their clothes twice before finally settling on a colourful floral printed shirt. On another occasion, it took me nearly half an hour to find

a suitable camera angle to film a Storyteller's best side. Banks and Morphy (1997) note how "increasingly film and photography are not simply means of recording data ... but data in themselves" (p. 14). These examples, however, do not represent annoyance or inconvenience on my part but, instead, reflected times of much laughter and frivolity that often helped 'break the ice'. I aimed to make Storytellers feel as comfortable as possible in front of the camera, so if that meant waiting for numerous costume changes, brushing of hair or application of make-up or just generally allowing the opportunity for them to *style up* (look your best), then, so be it. For this reason, visual documentations of interviews (and my sites of participant observation) became an effective and efficient means of recording data including compositions of performance narratives (see Figure 4.2).



*Figure 4.2 Video-recording an interview at Erub Torres Strait 2 July 2004<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> From left to right: me, research Storyteller, my sister (as co-researcher operating the videocamera). Photograph taken by Gary Lui.

I documented extensive field notes in addition to the video-recordings. Similar to the note taking techniques adopted during observation, I utilised mind maps to record my subjective views of participant's responses (both verbal and non-verbal) during the interview. Using these mind maps, I made notes about analyses and interpretations, identifying potential codes for classification of data, my assessment of the quality of the interview, particularly my role as interviewee, and general reflections of the research process (Appendix C). My mind maps started in the centre with a main idea and worked outward in all directions, producing and growing an organised structure composed of key words and images. The various branches show connections between ideas generated in the map, constructing visual and meaningful relationships between ideas and concepts (Buzan, 2006). The videotaped interviews (and several audio taped only interviews) were transcribed into text for analysis and interpretation. This included verbatim accounts of discussions that often included words, phrases and concepts expressed in Torres Strait Creole. I found the translation of my visual data into mind maps helped to streamline my data, making it more manageable and 'user-friendly' for the purpose of coding and analysis.

#### **4.11 Malaytown Digital History Project**

During the course of my doctoral research, I obtained a research grant, in 2005, from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). The Stories of Malaytown (Cairns) and the first wave of Torres Strait Islanders to move to the mainland was the focus of a digital history project I undertook as part of this research study. The project was co-researched and co-produced with Mrs Lenora Thaker and Mr Douglas Watkin. The DVD of the Malaytown Stories is at Appendix D and the related press release is at Appendix E. The settlement of Islanders

in Malaytown pre-dated the post World War Two boom with some families and individuals receiving unofficial 'exemptions' under the Act or similarly being asked to leave the Torres Strait by the authorities based on perceptions of being 'troublemakers'. Although originally a fishing settlement established in the 1890s, Malaytown soon became home to many Torres Strait Islander families, including my Father's family, who had moved from the Torres Strait from the mid 1930s onwards. Six former Malaytown residents and/or their descendents were interviewed as part of the digital history project. The DVD was launched at a special screening at the JUTE Theatre in Cairns on 20 December 2006 and was attended by approximately 300 members of the community, including family and friends of the participant Storytellers. The interviews for the Malaytown project (organised by my sister, Lenora Thaker) were undertaken during the time I was interviewing other Storytellers for my doctoral study and their narratives are included as part of the research findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis. The following discussion on gaining access to the field, conducting interviews and recording data includes references to the research undertaken as part of the Malaytown digital history project.

#### **4.12 Data Collection through Participant Observations**

A significant part of my data collection was the documentation of what I observed as a participant, experienced and recalled during the course of my research. In order to get 'good qualitative field data', Neuman (2003) notes:

A great deal of what researchers do in the field is to pay attention, watch and listen carefully. They use all the senses, noticing what is seen, heard, smelled,

tasted or touched. The researcher becomes an instrument that absorbs all sources of information. (p. 381)



Absorbing all sources of information was for, the most part, very purposeful, yet it also presented many challenges as an inside researcher. From the time that I set out on my doctoral research, it became apparent that every social and family event I attended, every site of cultural exchange, every photo or videotape recording I viewed and each interaction I experienced would represent a potential source of information or data. I made a conscious effort to switch off from researcher mode at times but found



myself inadvertently scrutinising my environmental surroundings, noting individual characteristics and group processes, watching human behaviour and communication, analysing texts and asking myself “what is going on here?” All of my participant observations were systematically recorded in my research journal. My roles in various contexts (in my capacity as an inside researcher) changed my status along the continuum of participant observer. The main problem with participant observation, however, as Flick (2002) argues, is defining a role for the observer which he or she can take and “which allows him or her to stay in the field or at its edge and observe it at the same time” (p. 136).

***Figure 4.4 National Mainland Torres Strait Islanders Conference Gold Coast  
November 2003<sup>9</sup>***

Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) critique ‘experience’ as a source of knowledge arguing that “any one person’s experience will be limited, partial and socially located, and so cannot be taken as general knowledge of how social phenomena are organized as social relations” (p. 125). In my attempts to gather first-hand information, then, about social processes in a ‘naturally occurring’ context (Silverman, 2000), I needed to reflexively examine how my own experiences of Torres Strait Islander people, culture and social practice influenced and, furthermore, inter-related with my interpretation of observations in the field. During the course of four years, I attended numerous social events as part of my data collection process, including weddings, baptisms, birthdays, first hair cut, Tombstone Openings and Coming of the Light festivities, meetings, art exhibitions and conferences (see Figure 4.4). Most of the events were Torres Strait Islander specific. However, there were other occasions, such as a university graduation, where the research participant was involved as either a family member in support or an actual graduate. In the case of visiting the family graves at cemeteries, I accompanied research Storytellers in this ritual. My capacity as participant observer and level of active involvement varied according to the vicarious nature of my relationship to the research Storyteller and/or my relationship to the convener or organiser of a particular event. For example, for one Tombstone Opening, I was involved with the feasting preparation, the serving of food at the event and performing several island dances after the feasting (see Figure 4.5). I never attended an event or observed an occurrence without at least one participant and/or organiser of the

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<sup>9</sup> Participant observation. Photograph taken by Felecia Watkin Lui

event knowing that I was undertaking a research project and consenting to my participation as an observer.

A summary of events I attended as sites of collection for observational data is provided in Table 4.2:

During the course of my field work, I learned to adjust to what Neuman (2003) calls “the rhythms of the setting” (p. 382), to operate on other people’s schedules of *Ailan time*, (Island time) and to observe how events occurred within their own flow of time. For example, preparation for the Tombstone Openings was months in advance and it was not always obvious what phenomenon I was meant to observe in the lead up to that event. Neuman (2003) reminds us, “[s]erendipity is important in field research. Many times, a field researcher does not know the relevance of what he or she is observing until later” (p. 382). This was particularly relevant for those times I was waiting for something to happen. The slower times, however, afforded me the opportunity to attend to detailed note taking of my observations in the field. I used concept/mind maps to document and analyse my observations in summary form as this assisted me in conceptualising themes, identifying commonalities and, most importantly, establishing connections between different sources of data. I supplemented my note taking with digital photographs and video diaries of events I attended and used these sources together to establish a coherent and comprehensive record of the experiences I encountered in my research journey.

**Table 4.2 Events, occurrences and locations where participant observation was undertaken.**

<b>Event/Occasion</b>	<b>No. of occurrences</b>	<b>Location/s (including no. of times visited)</b>
Weddings	3	Cairns (2), Townsville (1)
Family gathering night before wedding	1	Townsville
Tombstone Opening	2	Cairns
Family gatherings before Tombstone Opening	>8	Cairns
Island dance practice	>12	Cairns
Child's first haircut	1	Cairns
Coming of the Light	2	Cairns, Erub
Baptism	2	Cairns
Family 're-union'	1	Badu
Visiting family graves at cemetery	>8	Cairns (>5), Mackay (1), Badu (1), Erub (1)
Gab Titui Cultural Centre	2	Thursday Island
Paipa Torres Strait Exhibition	1	Canberra
Haddon Torres Strait Exhibition	1	Cairns
Christmas / New Year Festivities	4	Cairns (2), Mackay (2)
National Mainland Torres Strait Islander Conference	1	Gold Coast
University Graduation	3	Cairns (2), Brisbane (1)

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My systematic documentation of notes, photographs and video recordings of events and occasions, analysed through the use of mind maps became an important source of data (Appendix F). Additionally, I had to think more creatively about possible data sources and methods including my experiences, interpretations, memories, understandings, thoughts, ideas, emotions, perceptions, actions, humour, conversations and interactions. In thinking through possible data sources I questioned how the use of these data sources matched my ontological perspective on what constitutes the social world, and my epistemological perspective on how knowledge about that world is produced (Mason, 1998). The following discussion outlines how observation and

participation are interwoven with narrative inquiry, taking into account my ontological and epistemological perspectives within the data generating process.

#### **4.13 Making Sense of the Data: Analysis and Interpretation**

The generation and interpretation of the research data was interwoven as the project progressed, ensuring that habitual analysis informed and shaped the design and conduct of the study along the way. Silverman (2000) emphasises the importance of analysing your own data as you gather them, “data analysis does not come after data gathering. If you have one interview or recording or set of field notes, go to it! Where appropriate, start transcribing. In all cases, start reviewing your data in the light of your research questions” (p. 121). Silverman’s (2000) salutary comments provided the cornerstone of my approach to data analysis. Moreover, analysis during the data collection stage facilitated some form of order to my accumulated assembly of ‘raw data’ including interview transcripts, field notes, miscellaneous ‘notes-to-self’, video-recordings, photographs, literature and newspaper clippings. In this way, analysis turns raw data into ‘cooked data’ or results, organising and reducing data so that the ideas, themes, patterns and structures within them begin to become apparent.

In the formal analysis, I adopted an approach of theoretical coding to categorise key concepts and relationships between data. I sought to develop a coding system that captured the regularities and patterns evident in my data that reflected certain words, patterns of behaviour, participants’ ways of thinking and cultural events and social practices. My framework for data coding reflected, however, the complexities involved with analysing the articulation of narratives around notions of identity, self, communities and culture/s of identification. My framework for analysis was therefore

not only concerned with Storytellers' literal references to 'identity' but how notions of identity, self and community and representation were reflected and expressed in their narratives, interview responses and observable practices and conduct. Analysis of language and its effect became important in understanding how identities and subjectivities are continuously produced, accepted, resisted and fragmented.

Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) note how "[l]anguage is a critical element in connecting knowledge and experience if it is through language that identities, subjectivities and experiences are made, given meaning and remade" (p. 153). They further suggest "[l]anguage has powerful effects in producing meanings, so interpretation of data is like translation in constructing rather than just conveying meaning" (p. 118). In this way, my approach to analysis reflected a model of inductive and deductive theory generation, recognising the influence pre-existing theories had in sensitising me to particular issues and aspects of the phenomenon being studied:

The task of the grounded theorist is to allow deductions from preexisting theory to suggest specific research problems and foci, but the researcher must not allow this preexisting theory to constrain what is noticed. The grounded theorist uses deductively derived theory, but also examines questions and issues beyond what is suggested by deductively derived theory. (Ezzy, 2002, p. 12)

The analysis stage evidently merged with the stage of interpretation as I questioned the significance of the findings, the representativeness of the research and issues for further consideration and examination. Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2001) explain how "[i]nterpretation is the process by which you put your own meaning on the data you have collected and analysed, and compare that meaning with those advanced

by others” (p. 219). The process of interpretation therefore required me to arrive at my own assessment of what the data meant, reviewing at the same time other perspectives, authorities and literature on ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islanders’. Specifically, I reviewed, in a comparative way, the thick descriptions provided in the Storytellers’ interview transcripts, my own detailed notes of observations and the relevant literature.

The literature presented in the previous chapter demonstrates the narrative of loss pervading contemporary discussions about ‘Mainland Islanders’ and their claims of self-identification as a people who have a relationship to, and interest in, the social issues, cultural practices and political processes of Islanders residing in the Torres Strait and on the mainland. This narrative, in turn, enacts a cultural discourse whereby social relations are organised in a way that seem almost natural or common sense. In this way, Torres Strait Islanders share and partake in cultural processes and activities that construct systems of meaning around inclusive relationships of kinship, community and collective identity yet, paradoxically, these same social institutions are founded upon interplays of power, exclusion and marginalisation. By way of comparison with the established literature, I sought to determine the extent that the research data agreed or disagreed with other literature and scholars in this area. With reference to the current literature on ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islanders’, did the data reflect a narrative of ‘loss’; the displacement of culture and people; a binary of Torres Strait versus mainland localities and positions? In considering my data in view of these issues, I furthermore questioned how ‘supportive’ or ‘contrary’ accounts of the experiences of ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islanders’ contributed to, or generated understandings about, the constructions of their cultural identity (and the issues relating to the same).

Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) suggest that interpretation should be treated as a “political as well as an intellectual process” (p. 118). They further argue “[t]ranslation and interpretation of data are processes of knowledge production in which researchers are accountable for the understandings they produce” (p. 118). Hodkinson (2005) argues, however, against the notion of a “privileged access to a singular insider truth” (p. 142). This requirement for accountability and for the existence of ‘multiple truths’ prompted me to return to the Storytellers to discuss (and negotiate where ideas diverged) my analysis of their information, checking the meaning and intent of the data in the process. The process of analysis and interpretation brought to bear, once again, issues of voice and reflexivity, my own historical and social situatedness, my personal investment in the research and the biases I asserted by promoting some views and suppressing others:

Although a valuable addition to the vocabulary of inquiry, reflexive moves are not entirely successful in subverting the concept of validity. Ultimately, the act of reflexivity asks the reader to accept itself as authentic, that is, as a conscientious effort to “tell the truth” about the making of the account. We are thus poised at the threshold of an infinite regress of reflections on reflection. (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1028)

There is the potential, then, for researchers to engage in never-ending reflections of their own reflections (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). Reflexivity as a principle of sound research practice, however, remains a relevant ideal. Further exploration of how I was socially situated within the research and how the research process has, in turn, been



constituted is included in the following discussion of ethical issues relevant to the project.

#### **4.14 Finding the Right Balance: Ethical Issues**

Consideration of ethics, both as principle/s and in practice, underscored each stage of this research project, from conceptualisation of initial ideas and research design to methodology, analysis, interpretation and communication of findings. The ethical issues associated with my proximity to, and affiliation with, the research group, and subsequent insider status, have been previously outlined in my discussion of methodology. The examples highlighted how power is enacted and enabled in research relationships, sometimes explicitly, while at other times, the exercise of power is hidden. In the interests of reflexivity with integrity, this section explores the personal, political and academic juncture at which knowledge is produced and re-presented. The notion of accountability was a recurring theme in my relationships with the individuals and groups with whom I was working, questions of whose voice was represented, the silences, the exclusions and the inclusions were ever-present in my reflections of what constituted ethical practice.

In determining the potential benefits and harmful factors for Storytellers, I had to reflect on what concepts, assumptions and knowledge systems I was drawing on, translating and contesting within the research. I was concerned with avoiding the adoption of Eurocentric research epistemologies that had, in the past, universalised and promoted hegemonic discourses for Indigenous histories, experiences, beliefs, cultural traditions and knowledge systems (Smith, 1999). This would pose an immediate challenge for me, as Irabinna Rigney (1999), Aboriginal academic, writes, “Aboriginal

researchers who wish to construct, rediscover, and/or reaffirm Indigenous knowledges must function in traditions of classical epistemological methods of physical and/or social sciences” (p. 114). I was, after all, an inductee into, and product of, the Western education system with cultural assumptions informed by dominant epistemologies pertaining to race, gender, class and structure in Australian society. Irabinna Rigney (1999) comments “there is little evidence that research epistemologies and methodologies in Australia were modelled on any knowledge of the Indigenous population or that it was produced from presumed equals” (p.113). Moreton-Robinson (2004), Aboriginal academic, similarly notes that academics:

produced knowledge about Indigenous people but their way of knowing is never thought of by white people as being racialised despite whiteness being exercised epistemologically ... whiteness is constitutive of the epistemology of the West; it is an invisible regime of power that secures hegemony through discourse and has material effects in everyday life. (p. 75)

I developed a research process that was not isolated from people’s historical contexts, social settings and cultural realities, including their previous experiences as research subjects. This meant, by necessity, an examination of the colonising effect of research *on Indigenous people* and the historically derived expectations and subjectivities my research Storytellers were likely to inhabit. Research of Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people was historically underscored by colonial interests that exploited, appropriated and abused Indigenous peoples and cultures (Smith, 1999). The legacy of colonial research has manifested itself in a justifiable lack of trust on the part of Indigenous people with Smith (1999) revealing “the word itself, ‘research’, is

probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary" (p. 1). Martin (2003) similarly explains:

we are over-researched, and this has generated mistrust, animosity and resistance from many Aboriginal people. One reason for this reaction is that, until recent times, research conducted in Aboriginal lands was done without the permission, consultation, or involvement of Aboriginal people. (p. 203)

The examination of people's previous encounters with 'research' was important, then, in understanding their initial response to me as a 'researcher'. Bishop (2005) notes how colonial power imbalances have devalued Indigenous knowledge and learning practices in an attempt to "enhance those of the colonisers and adherents of colonial paradigms" (p. 110). The previous experiences of participants with research ranged from very positive to very negative. The negative end of the spectrum demonstrated a distinct lack of trust of the researcher's intentions and subsequent actions. Storytellers shared with me their stories of betrayal by white researchers, the taking of information and materials (including old photographs) and not returning them and the commercial profit gained from the publication of books that they received no recognition or royalties. When I asked what action they took at the time as a matter of recourse, the response was invariably 'nothing', not from lack of motivation or purpose on their part but because of the prevailing attitude that the researcher occupied a position of intellectual, institutional and social authority. This power dynamic was not immediately ameliorated by my position as an Islander woman researcher. While my research had altruistic intentions of benefiting 'my people', the project would ultimately result in the attainment of my doctoral degree and, on this point of individual gain and self-service, I

differed little from researchers who had gone before me. It was important, therefore, that I not only gained the trust of Storytellers and those associated with the research but that I furthermore demonstrate this trustworthiness in all aspects of the conduct of the research.

When researching your own group, Maori researcher, Walsh-Tapiata (2003) believes there is a “particularly stringent requirement on insiders as researchers to treat the oral interviews, the written documentation and the observations that constitute research data with dignity and integrity” (p. 62). This means “maintaining the *mana* (prestige) of the people who are being talked about, and being aware of the ongoing social, cultural and emotional obligations that attach to insider status” (Walsh-Tapiata, 2003, p. 62). In practical terms, this meant a vigilant self-review of my role as insider researcher and habitually reflecting on how this impacted on the research. Hodkinson (2005) cautions “[i]nsider researchers should be aware that, although their status may often improve rapport in a general sense, it may in some situations cause respondents to feel threatened, or pressured into giving particular kinds of responses” (p. 140). I sometimes felt awkward about eliciting certain responses from Storytellers (particularly elders), taking them down the journey of life under ‘the Act’, leaving the Torres Strait, their ‘Island homes’ and the feelings of inevitable grief and loss associated with their movement to the mainland. I was particularly cognisant of setting up appropriate support structures for Storytellers (where needed) to make sure I did not leave ‘open’ or ‘raw’ emotional wounds for the participants. I aimed to ensure the research act was a positive experience for participants, most importantly for their well-being, but also so that they may engage in future research projects with other researchers on a more equal footing of mutual respect, recognition and accountability. As an ethical principle, I

wanted to ensure that the Storytellers had a real sense of ‘ownership’ of their information, their knowledge and their Stories:

Ethical research systems and practices should enable Indigenous nations, peoples, and communities to exercise control over information relating to their knowledge and heritage and to themselves ... Above all, it is vital that Indigenous peoples have direct input into developing and defining research practices and projects related to them. To act otherwise is to repeat that familiar pattern of decisions being made for Indigenous people by those who presume to know what is best for them. (Battiste, 2008, p. 503)

#### **4.15 Assessing the Validity of Research Findings as Ethical Practice**

In October 2008, I successfully obtained graduate research funding from James Cook University to run a workshop for the research Storytellers. Funding constraints and logistics meant that not all participant Storytellers could attend the workshop. For those Storytellers who could not attend, or whom I could not meet individually face-to-face, I used other strategies for communication, including teleconferencing and e-mail.

The workshop provided an opportunity for me to explain the findings of my research, to update Storytellers of my overall progress and future directions and to obtain feedback from the Storytellers on their experiences of being part of the research study. Advice was also sought from the Storytellers about future directions for the research study, including publications and the dissemination of information to other Islanders and the wider community. At the all-day workshop, a considerable amount of time was spent on reviewing the direct quotes of the Storytellers and ensuring I was

using their voices in the right context and, more importantly, that I had derived the right meaning from their words and other supporting data generated from my participant observations. This was an important part of the process in ensuring that my research findings were validated by the Storytellers. As an additional means of validation, I presented the Storytellers with an overview of the literature as a way of comparing their data with what had been previously written about Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. The workshop with the Storytellers provided an invaluable opportunity for me to validate the research findings and interpretation and, for participants, to share in the ownership of the research outcomes. Most importantly, the workshop provided a chance for the participant Storytellers to endorse the research and engage in a dialogue about identity matters across different generations of Islanders (a key feature of this research study) (see Figure 4.6).

#### **4.16 Scholarly Support for the Research Journey**

During the course of my research journey, I was fortunate to be part of the postgraduate student group of the School of Indigenous Australian Studies (SIAS) JCU. As part of the scholarly and support activities of the SIAS postgraduate group, I was able to receive critical and constructive feedback on periodic presentations/progress reports of my research study, as well as receive significant input into my data analysis and interpretation. The SIAS postgraduate group, consisting of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and academic staff from the School, provided invaluable assistance and critical dialogue on all aspects of my research design, methodology and validation of research findings and interpretation.

The mentoring I received from senior Indigenous academic staff and students ensured that students and staff, like me, were able to raise matters and debate issues in a safe and supportive environment and to learn from their knowledge, wisdom and life experiences.

#### **4.17 Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of my approach to the research project and my methodology. My discussion outlined my methodological practice, examining my own journey of identification as a ‘Torres Strait Islander woman’ and, in the process, confronting my own politics of Self, identity and community. My personal experience became central to understanding the ontological and epistemological positions I occupied as a researcher, including the questions I asked through to the set of assumptions, biases and interpretations I brought to the project. My role as an inside researcher called for a heightened awareness of reflexivity in the research process and the need to reflect upon how I was socially situated in the research itself. While reflecting a standpoint epistemology, my approach to this research did not lay claim to a truer or more authentic voice but rather represented a process of constant review of the assumptions surrounding the subject under examination (identity) and my own role (as researcher) in situating meaning. The project deployed purposive sampling in finalising the respondent group of twenty-three ‘Mainland Islanders’ who participated in both narrative and semi-structured interviews and sites of participant observation. Further to the collection and generation of data, I discussed the process of analysis and interpretation with reference to the processes of knowledge production, strategies for inclusion and the construction of meaning. This led to the discussion of ethical considerations that underpinned each stage of the research process. Acknowledging my

own voice in the production of knowledge exposed the politics and processes of giving voice to the multiple truths, experiences and understandings of the research participants. The ‘voices’ of the participants is the focus of the next two chapters on the research findings.



## Chapter 5

# Welcome Home: Constructing Place Identity for Torres Strait Islanders Living Outside the Torres Strait

### 5.1 Introduction

*“I’d like to give a special welcome to the Watkin family –*

Of all the social exchanges I encountered during my time at Erub in Eastern Torres Strait, this public declaration made by my Uncle and respected Elder at the community gathering of the Coming of the Light Celebrations was by far the most powerful. The ‘Welcome Home’ extended to me (and my family) on our inaugural visit to Eastern Torres Strait was somehow premised on the notion that Erub represented our Grandmother’s island of origin; her home was our home and our visit there represented a *journeying back* rather than a first time outing. I was aware at the time of the sentimentality attached to the moment and Cohen’s (1997) caution of the “idealisation of the supposed ancestral home” (p. 185). Fortier (2003) similarly notes how possession of ancestral connections is often used to “support and naturalize a desire to say ‘this is my culture’ and ‘this is my home’ (p. 198). Yet at the same time, I also acknowledged that I was witnessing a social process that disavowed itself of territorial boundaries,

fixity of place and the political vanguards that played gatekeeper to who was and wasn't considered *Erubam Le* (people of Erub).

I arranged to go to Erub during the Coming of the Light celebrations, a time of great religious and social significance as this was the place where the missionaries first landed in the Torres Strait on 1 July 1871. As the plane descended on the tiny Erub airstrip, I could not help but feel a sense of immediate connection and bond to the place where my Grandmother (and her brothers and sisters) was born. I had been to Thursday Island many times over the last ten years but no previous trips to the Torres Strait had prepared me for the overwhelming feelings of connection I experienced towards a place I could only describe as having some sort of vicarious birthright. My sense of relationship to place was further confirmed by the social encounters we had with my *Erubam Le* aunties, uncles and my in-laws who openly received us with the warmth and enthusiasm reserved for reunions with long lost family members. The place identity I was constructing at the time through these social, cultural and collective exchanges with kin quickly transcended the boundaries of spatial locality ubiquitously evident in the positioning of the 'Torres Strait'/Mainland binary.

This chapter discusses the construction of place identity, specifically the place, space or environment that people refer to as their 'home'. These are presented in a way that reflects the diversity of experiences, histories and expressions of 'home' and sense of place across the different generation of Mainlanders. As a point of self-reflexivity, this chapter is underpinned by the positioning of my own voice alongside that of my Storytellers. As a 'Mainland Torres Strait Islander' woman, it would be impossible, and undesirable, to suppress my own subjectivities and experiences in any analysis and

interpretation of the Storytellers' voices. By describing my own journey of 'going back' to home island, I aim to unpack my own assumptions that have influenced and shaped my approach to this research and the following discussion of its findings. The inclusion of self-narrative throughout this chapter does not represent a singular lived experience as some sort of authentic or universal truth that is 'I know because I am'. Rather, I sought to position my narrative alongside that of my Storytellers locating, in the process, points of convergence between different histories, experiences and realities in an attempt to piece together a more in-depth and nuanced analysis of 'Mainland Torres Strait Islander' identities. Using the comparative voices of Storytellers in response to previous writings on 'Mainland Islanders', this chapter seeks to provide a framework for rethinking the very idea of 'My Island Home' in ways that may pave the way forward for future discussions beyond the current dualities of 'Torres Strait' versus 'Mainland'.

## 5.2 Oh T.I. My Beautiful Home

The links between family and home for Torres Strait Islanders are often expressed in popular cultural expressions of song, dance and Storytelling. In this regard, the conceptual links between 'family' and 'home' are mutually reinforcing as they have come to sustain one another (James, 1998). In the song *T.I. My Beautiful Home*, the connection between home (in this case Thursday Island in the Torres Strait) and family is lamented in chorus:

THESE LYRICS HAVE BEEN REMOVED DUE  
TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

THESE LYRICS HAVE BEEN REMOVED DUE  
TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

The longing for home is further reflected in the World War Two song *As the Goodwill Sailed Away*, a song describing the emotional evacuation of Islanders from Thursday Island to the mainland during this time:

THESE LYRICS HAVE BEEN REMOVED DUE  
TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

In Neil Murray's *My Island Home* (1985), first sung by the Wurumpi Band and then later by Torres Strait Islander singer Christine Anu, the sentiment of home is expressed in the opening verse:

THESE LYRICS HAVE BEEN REMOVED DUE  
TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

‘Home’ is one of the most emotive words in the English language due to its ability to conjure up nostalgic images of a place of origin, belonging, safety and comfort. Home brings together memory and longing and, in this regard, its sentiment is often expressed in terms of a connection to a shared past (Rapport & Dawson, 1998). In this chapter, I use Rapport and Dawson’s (1998) working definition of ‘Home’ as the place, “[w]here one best knows oneself – where ‘best’ means ‘most’, even if not always the happiest” (p.9). In this way, the notion of home serves to encapsulate an ambiguous yet fluid construct that underpins Stories of movement and the subsequent search, creation and struggle for cognitive and physical places of ‘belonging’. The narratives of the ‘Mainland Storytellers’ presented in this chapter demonstrate how the very notion of Home or place has been enacted in their lives through the inherent connection with their ancestors, family and communities. The very description of a ‘sense of home’ illuminates the ways ‘Mainland Islanders’ form emotional attachments to places and, in this way, promote ‘home’ as a synthesis of the physical and the social (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001). Home, as both a conceptual and physical space, is an idea that guides our actions and, at the same time, a spatial context where identities are worked on (James, 1998). Expressions of home provide a sense of grounding, of having some roots that define who we are as individuals and our place in the world.

In this chapter, I have specifically used the metaphor of My Island Home to represent the social, emotional and cultural attachment ‘Mainland Islanders’ express towards a specific island of origin as opposed to the notion of a ‘homeland’ constructed

as a collective of islands under the auspices of the ‘Torres Strait’. Specifically, in describing affiliations with an Island Home, the following discussion unpacks the way Islanders living outside the Torres Strait ‘practice place’. As Henry (1999) notes, “[i]t is through the practice of place, through placing themselves, that people constitute themselves in terms of identity and difference” (p.37). My adoption and application of the Island Home metaphor is consistent with the way many Torres Strait Islanders tend to express their identification to a particular localised island rather than to a region (Herle, 2001; Sharp, 1980a). Despite the travel and movement of generations of Torres Strait Islanders, there remains an ongoing connection and affinity to their place or island of origin. Torres Strait remains ‘home’ for many Islanders living outside the Torres Strait, in both a real and imagined sense, because it provides the basis upon which identification is founded and, to a large extent, validated.

### **5.3 Life in the Torres Strait under the Act**

For first generation Mainlanders, ‘home’ was often expressed in a comparative sense with Storytellers providing a very rich and detailed account of an idyllic yet hard life in the Torres Strait. The older first generation Mainlanders, now aged in their seventies and eighties, could recall living under both the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* and the *Torres Strait Islander Act 1939*. However, for these Islanders the outcome of living under restrictive legislative provisions was the same, regardless of the actual name of the Act for which the timeframe referred. For the younger first generation Mainlanders, their stories reflected the harsh realities of life under ‘the Act’, even up to the mid-1960s when Islanders in the Torres Strait still lacked personal autonomy and control over their lives:

When I lived there, we were still under the Act so you do as you're told and you obeyed. Every fortnight, we had inspection in the village ... yeah and they look at your property ... When we were under the Act, we worked for what we got. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 60s, referring to life on Erub during the 1950s and 1960s)

During the same era of life under 'the Act', many Islanders in the Torres Strait were largely living a subsistence lifestyle with little or no access to infrastructure and services that were afforded to many other Australians at the time:

And so the house was just this little old house just at the back of the island. No running water, no fridge, no electricity. We had to actually walk, you know down the road to the well. It seemed like miles and miles away ... We got the water from the well for washing our clothes and then we used to rely on the rain for drinking water ... Because we didn't have a fridge, we really didn't kind of buy any kind of fresh meat. We ate seafood and my grandfather was an avid gardener so we had all varieties of different mango trees around our house ... We had six or seven different mango trees and we had guava trees, custard apple, five corners ... (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s, referring to life on Thursday Island during the 1950s and 1960s)

While mainland Australia bore witness to major social and economic change in the 1960s and 1970s, including the assertion of human rights and Indigenous political activism, Islanders in the Torres Strait continued to be subjected to racist government policies which regulated and determined cultural and racial identification. The

categorisation of Torres Strait Islanders on racial grounds forced individuals to construct their identities in an essentialist way, thereby usurping previous self-identifications based on kinship connections and inter-relationships between families, communities and home islands. The categorisation of Torres Strait Islanders on racial and ethnic grounds does not suggest cultural diversity was absent from the political and social consciousness of Islanders prior to colonisation (Shnukal & Ramsay, 2004). Colonial government practice, however, divided and segregated Islanders on the basis of their ethnic backgrounds, thus, the construction in a formal sense of the 'Native Islander', 'Pacific Islander', 'Japanese Islander etcetera. Although each of these groups of Islanders could lay claim to the Torres Strait as their 'home', there were undoubtedly different conditions, rules and restrictions for particular groups of people:

Basically, they separated the children according to the colour of their skin. So the blacker you were, you were in a different class. They separated all the Island kids into a different group, and the light skinned children, you know, all the Japanese, Malay, Chinese kids, the European kids all in a different class. They had all the proper Torres Strait Islander, native Torres Strait Islanders put into a different class and they were basically seen as the dumb ones ... I was with all the white kids – how you say – all the half caste kids. I was with them because of my surname you know, I had a Polynesian surname. I went to school from 1965 to 1975. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s, referring to her schooling on Thursday Island during the 1960s and 1970s)

Such discrimination actively discouraged Islanders from having a positive view of themselves as 'Island People':



If you were caught speaking your own language you were sent to the office to be caned, and we thought that they were actually trying to teach us good English, but I never ever spoke English, I only spoke English to my teacher. I always got in trouble because I was always such a chatterbox and I was always outside ... They were basically trying to show us that their culture was much more superior and they saw us as being inferior to them and that was how I grew up too. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s)

The Stories of Islanders' experiences with the education system, highlights the degree to which government policies and practices at the time facilitated and enabled institutionalised racism. The Storytellers' narratives evidence an acute awareness of their political and social circumstances, perpetuated by a 'system' that aimed to not only educate them in Western discourse but to reinforce a view of black inferiority. The essentialisation of racial groupings, formalised through segregated class rooms, furthermore constructed a crude caste-like order with 'native Islanders' on the bottom and mixed race Islanders and Europeans on top of the social hierarchy. The social impact on the way Torres Strait Islanders perceived themselves and their relationships, both within and between racial groups, is further explained:

My Aunty used to say, if you're outside and you see a white person walking pass, don't be afraid to take a rake and start raking up the yard so they can see that you're trying to be as clean as they are (laughs) ... So I just thought that white people were like you know, just Gods you know ... I couldn't even imagine that they even go to the toilet, that they went to the toilet 'cause it's

such an unclean act (laughs)... I grew up with this very ... with this inferiority complex. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s)

Despite the harsh conditions described by the Storytellers of life in the Torres Strait, there were still Stories of resilience, community life and of sharing and cultural celebration:

I was really blessed ... growing up at (name) and because (name) is a reserve as you know, where they put all the Island people from all the other islands that came. So I grew up with people from Saibai Island, Mabuiag, Badu, St Paul and like all the different island groups were all on (name). So there was always dancing and singing, someone was always using a drum ... you know you always hear the drum noise coming out and some Island song. Christmas time was excellent, people would dance from house to house. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged late 40s, speaking about growing up on Thursday Island during the 1960s)

The first generation Storytellers expressed very fond memories of life in the Torres Strait prior to their movement to the Mainland. Their Stories, however, were mediated by their experiences of living under the 'Act', of lack of personal control and freedom and the right to determine how they should live. While Islanders were restricted in their capacity to exercise ownership and control over their islands, they were nevertheless able to construct a sense of community or group identity under the circumstances. This sense of community was facilitated through family gatherings and social networks that continued to flourish despite the social impact of protectionist

regimes, World War Two and the impending collapse of the maritime industry. The narrative of the first generation Storytellers speaks of the resilience of kinship connections, the emphasis on Christian and family values and the practice of traditional forms of cultural celebration. While the colonial regime actively sought to separate, divide and stratify Islander society on racial lines, the Storytellers' narratives evidence a capacity to come together, to celebrate 'sameness' whilst paradoxically acknowledging 'difference' and 'otherness'. The example of different Island groups coming together in (name of place) to celebrate Christmas, as told by one of the first generation Storytellers for example, reflects the sense of collective identity that transcended individual notions of place or 'island of origin'. A parallel sense of place identity, formed on the basis of a collective, represents recurring themes of belonging, kinship, cultural exchange and reciprocity (people dancing from house to house at Christmas represents all these themes coming together). In this way, place identity is not tied exclusively to a physical space but is instead overlaid with connections to people and the sense of belonging those people engender as individuals and a collective. The capacity of Islanders to construct a strong sense of place identity under circumstances of oppression and dispossession reflects the social agency of Islanders. This social agency is similarly evidenced in the narratives of the Storytellers as they describe the processes underpinning the formation of place identity outside the Torres Strait.

#### **5.4 Pathways to the Mainland**

The conditions and circumstances under which Torres Strait Islanders came to the mainland are not only highly divergent (from free movement to forced removal) but also necessarily account for differing constructions of place, resettlement and sense of 'home', as emphasised by the following narratives. For the first generation Storytellers,

‘home place’ represented a paradoxical synthesis of memory and longing and of grief and promise:

We decided to bring Mum and them down for a holiday ... so they came down in '65 I think or '66 thereabouts, and they stayed because Pop was having asthma attack up on (name of Island), like I said it wasn't planned but for the sake of Pop ... At the time it was sad to leave but they look at ways to have a better chance in life, the kids have better opportunities. You know you have the chance to go ... in some ways it was sad to leave. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 60s, speaking about the decision to move from the Torres Strait to Cairns in the mid 1960s)

As for our family, it was for education purposes. My father always wanted to be educated – apparently he used to Island hop just to get this education, when the teachers went up there. He decided he wanted us to be educated down here [referring to the mainland]. Apart from that, he didn't like being under the Act business, so he decided he wanted to get out and bring us all to Cairns. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged late 70s, speaking about the late 1930s and her family's motivation for moving from the Torres Strait to Cairns)

The administration moving into Darnley Island, they exiled the (surname) brothers, about four of them. They sent Grandmother to Palm Island but, because she was a free woman, the Pitts got lawyers to bring her back and that's how she come to be in Malaytown [Cairns] because I think her brother was living there at the time. (Female Storyteller, 2nd Generation Mainlander, aged early 60s, speaking about her Grandmother's journey to the mainland, which

was originally due to her family's government imposed exile from the Torres Strait)

When I went to school they didn't have grade 11 and 12. Grade 11 and 12 you had to go over to Bamaga, or you had to come down to Cairns or Brisbane or Townsville you know to finish your schooling. I never ever, ever come to the mainland like, well I went to Bamaga when I was a little kid. Bamaga is the mainland, but I travelled down south when I was 13 years old. I went to Cairns and to Townsville and to (name of place) to stay with my Mum's sister. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s, speaking about moving to the mainland in the mid 1970s to continue her schooling)

In Mackay and Broome, there's a very small community compared to those on the east coast and there basically everybody has to come together because there are so little or few of them that they have to and each of them come from different islands and that's quite interesting. There was a sadness from the old people but also joy that they made that decision. Most of it was based on employment and better opportunities on the mainland ... (Female Storyteller, 3rd Generation Mainlander, aged early 30s, speaking of her work with Island elders)

These narratives reflect a number of factors at play in Islanders' decisions to move away from the Torres Strait and reside on the mainland. These issues included conflicts with the governing authority in the Torres Strait, economic imperatives, a chance to better themselves and a prevailing exuberance for the opportunity to partake

in a society seemingly 'free' from colonial controls. The movement of Islanders from the Torres Strait to the mainland has continued throughout the ensuing decades with an increasing number of Islanders born and raised away from the home islands of their parents and grandparents. The reason for the large scale migration of Torres Strait Islanders to the mainland is largely attributed to economics. However, there was an undeniable element of protest in the large scale emigration, symbolising a collective statement of dissatisfaction with conditions in the Torres Strait (Beckett, 1987). This element of protest was reflected in the heightened awareness Islanders displayed of their social and political circumstances. The narratives of the first generation Storytellers attest to the political agency performed by Islanders at the time, as evidenced by the Storytellers' previous comments relating to the desire for education, employment opportunities and better health facilities for sick relatives. The Storyteller who recalled how her family employed lawyers to free her Grandmother from forced exile on Palm Island furthermore evidences an ability to *work the system* and to use the knowledge and education Islanders received under colonial rule to their advantage in asserting their human rights.

Whatever the reasons for the movement, educational, economical, political or humanitarian, the first generation Storytellers acknowledged the move was a difficult and painful step, suggesting that no matter how attractive the opportunities on the mainland, separation from home islands was not a decision taken lightly by those Islanders who moved away from the Torres Strait, including those Islanders who made their way to the mainland following evacuation from the Torres Strait during World War Two:

Well when we came out of T.I. it was very strange for us because we had never been out of the Islands and coming onto the big ship was really amazing. But then again when we found out there was so many people that we slept on the deck and that you know. We came away when my sister June was only nine months old and then we came to Cairns. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 70s, speaking about the evacuation from Thursday Island during World War Two)

## **5.5 Missing Home**

There were diverse circumstances under which Islanders moved from their ancestral home islands and came 'south' to the mainland. Although many Islanders were reunited with family and kin on the mainland, the first generation Storytellers still recalled the major social and cultural upheaval they experienced at the time:

It was a big change. It was a big change when we come to Australia, but you adapt though. I just sort of follow what people were doing. When I come from (name of Island), I been to T.I. a few times and that's one step before coming to Australia. It was a big change for me. I didn't plan anything, we were young fellas. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 60s, speaking about moving to North Queensland in the mid 1960s)

But one thing when I first came to the mainland – it was really daunting because I found that when I looked around there was no water and especially when we went inland to (name of place), and it was like, there was land everywhere as far as the eye could see and ... I was getting a bit anxious because there was no

water around. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s, speaking about the late 1970s)

The difference is you haven't got your family, see here [referring to the Mainland] you got to have something to survive ... you got to get money, get a job, because there was no social security at the time, so it's very hard ... We use to go down to (name of place) picking strawberries ... We use to walk seven miles there everyday and back ... It was good money but hard yakka. In the wintertime it was very cold and we got no blanket or nothing. So we cut the vines and put that around us and then we sandbank the side of the shed for our shelter and that's where we stayed. We had the one saucepan [for cooking] ... I missed Erub a lot. But you know you can't get there at the time. Moneywise pretty hard. You know the only transportation is train from here [Brisbane] to Cairns, but the coppers are looking for you, but once you got job they can't touch you. But we really miss home. The first time, I hadn't been back in eight years I think. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 60s, referring to life in South-East Queensland during the 1960s)

As a minority group, Torres Strait Islanders tended to relocate in coastal towns where there were established communities of other Islanders who were working in the sugarcane, railways and maritime industries, including Cairns, Townsville, Mackay and, later, Darwin and Broome. In the immediate post World War Two period, Torres Strait Islanders began to hold heightened expectations, their children became increasingly mobile and they experienced increased contact with a new set of outsiders and were influenced by new and different values (Fuary, 1993). The period witnessed a



changed political and social world order for Torres Strait Islanders, giving them “the intellectual impetus to pursue their own freedom from the conditions of the Act, under which they returned to live after the war” (Nakata, 2004a, p. 180). Further to the *1939 Torres Strait Islanders Act*, there were no reserves in mainland Queensland for Torres Strait Islanders, allowing many Islanders to escape the strict requirements of this Act. The degree to which Torres Strait Islanders enjoyed new found freedoms on the mainland varied considerably as highlighted by the Stories of the first generation ‘Mainlanders’ who arrived on the mainland during the 1950s and 1960s:

I went to Townsville see, and when you get to the mainland, you got to report to the Department, where you are. So most of us, at that time when I come down, you more or less run away from the Department. When they check that you on the mainland. And we avoided the coppers ‘cause they looking for you and if you got no job, they deport you back to the Strait because we were under the Act. I call it the Dog Act because ... yeah ... It was a risky time. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 60s)

The pearling industry in the Torres Strait had collapsed by the 1950s, due to the introduction of plastic buttons, prompting an increasing number of Islanders to travel to the mainland for seasonal work. Forming work gangs based on kinship connections, Islander men became well known for their reputations as efficient and productive workers in the harvesting of sugarcane and the construction of railways. The railway work, in particular, facilitated the establishment of a collective identity that transitioned these men and their families from the Torres Strait to the mainland:

We worked on the railway, lots of boys from Erub and the Torres Strait. Hard work but fun times. It was '67, '68 when we started the band, played in Townsville and Tully and Cairns. When we worked on the railway, every weekend we always try to get together with our countrymen. So we all meet there. Railway would pay every fortnight, so we would get together. Enjoy talk and yarn and whatever and we would catch up with the latest gossip. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, early 60s, speaking about social gatherings and how common employment in the railways industry facilitated social connections)

It was very important for us [all to be connected] because we come from the same *Kustom* background, family background ... you know Erub in those days we were poor families and up there we learned how to survive so we survive down here. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 60s, speaking about how he transferred his cultural practices to the Mainland as a form of survival)

The social interaction the first generation Storytellers engaged in with family and kin during the initial movement from the Torres Strait laid the foundations for the establishment of new communities and homes outside of their islands of origin. Malaytown in Cairns was one of the many communities established by Torres Strait Islanders in the early years of re-settlement on the mainland. Not all Islanders in Cairns lived in Malaytown during this time but the site in itself represents an interesting thriving community that, in many ways, replicated life on the islands. For example, there were areas called Malaytown on Thursday Island and Badu in the Strait. The term

Malay was loosely used back then to include everyone with Chinese, Filipino, Malay, Japanese, Indian and Sri Lankan heritage (Shnukal, 2004). Hence, the Malaytown in Cairns included residents from these backgrounds as well as Torres Strait Islanders, Pacific Islanders and Aboriginal people. As home to many Islander families at the time, it became one of the earliest forms of a multicultural community in the Cairns region, representing a place of social and cultural integration and sharing and a supportive mini-community within a dominant white culture:

Because it was so big [our house], all the dances were held there and Christmas time, the tables were set there and anybody off the street would be able to come. And that's how all the swaggies from Cairns, that's how they all came to be friendly with the Islanders down Malaytown because they could come off the street and have a good feed. Because anyone could come to the table on Christmas day (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged late 70s)

Well they had their own string band, you know Uncle Frank and Uncle Tom and Uncle Dougie they all played. They had their own guitars and mandolin and all that, and Uncle Ben. Yeah it was good. They [dances] were pretty frequent, it was the only entertainment we had. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, mid 80s)

Communities such as Malaytown served an important social, cultural and economic function in facilitating the early settlement of Torres Strait Islanders to the mainland. Although Torres Strait Islanders were still subject to the provisions of the *Torres Strait Islanders Act 1939*, the relevant authorities at the time chose to largely

ignore the residents of Malaytown on the unspoken 'understanding' they remain a segregated community located on the fringe of Cairns, the residents were employed and, furthermore, they did not 'cause trouble' with the local white community. My Father's family made Malaytown their home during the late 1930s through to the late 1940s. They relocated to Malaytown after spending several years in Bloomfield (outside Wujul Wujul on Cape York) where my Father's Uncles ran a pearl lugger between Erub and the mainland. Due to the availability of mainly seasonal work on the mainland at the time, it was not uncommon, during the early years of settlement, for Islanders to move around to several coastal towns before settling on a more or less permanent basis in the one place. These early years of settlement were long before access to social security benefits or other forms of income support, prompting Islanders to find work alongside non-Indigenous people in the community. Before widespread participation in the sugarcane and railway industries, Torres Strait Islander men and women on the mainland were employed as domestic servants, nannies, cleaners, steam laundry workers and timber mill workers. The mainland economy also provided the opportunity for Islander men to utilise their seafaring skills as fishermen, pearl graders and deckhands. Within these new communities, Islander families maintained practices of reciprocity and social obligation, often sharing what little resources they had with each other.

The narratives of those Malaytown residents and first wave Torres Strait Islander settlers to the mainland demonstrate how important community support was to the settlement process, particularly when they longed for home:

We used to have a lot of dances down at Malaytown at the Sailors' home and that was our good time. And we never felt homesick at all because that's what really happened to us and there was no sadness or anything like that. Just good times is all we can think about. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 70s, speaking about Malaytown dances in the 1940s)

Community and social support was not just confined to celebratory activities and events. The opportunity for Islanders to engage in communal mourning during the passing of a loved one is an important cultural aspect of grieving and this practice was similarly carried out on the new mainland communities:

We went over to the (name of family) house, Granny (name) was my Grandfather's sister ... they had the coffin there of my Grandfather at their house, they had a bigger lounge room than our place. They call it like a mourning period where they have the coffin there, and that night he died we all had to sit around, singing Island hymns ... When we finished the viewing part of it, they put the lid back on the coffin and we went back to our houses and later on that day the funeral was on. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 70s, speaking about a mourning practice in Malaytown in the late 1930s)

The extensive family and kinship networks ensured a sense of community and place for these Islanders through mutual support and social and cultural interaction. This mutual support provided by the early arrivals helped these families establish themselves on the mainland, survive and eventually prosper (Hodes, 2000). The social

and cultural support the early arrivals provided to each other facilitated mobility and the exploration of new opportunities in different areas of the mainland. Some of the first generation Storytellers expressed a new found social acceptance demonstrated towards them by white people on the mainland, making them extremely proud of their 'difference' and the attributes this difference highlighted, particularly their sporting or musical prowess:

We played [basketball] for Townsville and we toured down to Sydney and back again. We played opening game for the Globetrotters when they first went up to Townsville – all T. I. boys, one Aboriginal boy and one white man as captain of the team. So we travelled down there. We called ourselves the Torres Strait Troubadours. We played basketball during the day and then we Island dance at night ... So when we come back here to Brisbane we put a concert on here to pay our fares back ... My brother was the manager of the basketball team and the dancing team ... he sent us the fare to come back to Townsville but we cashed it in [laughs] 'cause we wanted to stay in Brisbane.

We entered a talent quest at the Majestic Hotel for Channel 7. And we entered the talent quest and we won the competition – 13 week contract with Channel 7 on the rock and roll show at the time called Swinging School and Teen Times. So we called ourselves, our group, the Shades [laughs]. That's the name of our group. We were all Erub boys, and we got bookings everywhere, we were really popular. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 60s speaking about the late 1950s/early 1960s period)

Other Storytellers spoke of their strong sense of community and family and the need to look after one another, particularly when it was their first time away from the Torres Strait:

All of us Torres Strait Islander girls would basically look after each other ... even if some of us were coming in late, might have been a boyfriend or whatever, coming in late, we would make sure we would leave a door open or unlocked or let them know the backdoor, this is where we leave the keys and stuff. So we always watch out for each other and we found the older Torres Strait women, a couple of aunties would come and take us and take us to their house for dinner and would come and visit us at the hostel. At the boarding house where we were staying, we really maintained the community by being that close connection plus many of us we had family there in Cairns so we would go and visit our family and stay with family and stuff and spend time with family. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s, speaking of her time in a youth hostel in the early 1970s)

Older second generation Storytellers recalled how their parents located to areas where there were already established Torres Strait Islander families and communities:

Bungalow [in Cairns] had a lot of Island people, there were lots of families there. Two houses up were Uncle (name) and Aunty (name) and the house next door was the (name), they lived next door. And we watched them build their home, he built it himself, so we used to go over there and spend a lot of time there when he was building the house. And on the other side, there were lots of

families, the (name), the (name), the (name), the (name) and grandmother we used to visit a lot. And then they had the other district, Malaytown, where the (name) and the old lady (name) and others were there. When we were younger we always knew there were things going on down there and we go down there and mix in with them. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation, mid 50s, speaking about growing up in Cairns in the 1950s)

If the circumstances of leaving the Torres Strait were important, so too were those of arrival and re-settlement, making the manner in which a group like Mainland Islanders comes to be ‘situated’ in and through a wide variety of discourses, economic processes, state policies and institutional practices critical to its future (Brah, 1996). Islanders living outside the Torres Strait have established strong ties with their new communities which are sustained through subsequent generations of their families now born and raised on the mainland.

## **5.6 My Island Home is Waiting for Me**

Despite the establishment of new communities outside the Torres Strait, the first generation Storytellers recounted narratives of home which were firmly entrenched in the notion of an ‘Island Home’. Although many of the older generation Storytellers had resided on the mainland for decades since their arrival in the immediate post-war period, reference to a home island was very much at the heart of their narratives, representing a sense of connection to place, of belonging and of their identity. The narratives of the first generation Storytellers therefore reflected diverse expressions, representations and identifications with the notion of ‘home’. The journeying back to their Island Homes furthermore illuminated the themes of place identity, even under



circumstances when the 'idealised' version of an Island Home had been mediated by changing social and cultural times. For some first generation Storytellers, their Island Homes had been irrevocably changed through political and economic circumstance yet, in some ways, this very change could not usurp the existential power and connectedness to their place of origin or the experience of 'being at home':

I remember going back the first time ... 25 years after. Oh very emotional.

When I arrived I went up to the village, I saw how much it had changed. It's not what I remembered. It wasn't as pretty as before. The village was very untidy.

That generation, they don't have any respect for anything or anybody ...

I thought I was young and I could hear voices [pauses and cries] ... I could hear Mum and I walked up and cried. Yeah and those pictures of being up there.

Same as when we left. It was emotional, the first time, very emotional. I walked around there and knew what was there. I cried, I could hear Mum talking. Like when we left, it was sad. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 60s, speaking about going back to the Torres Strait for the first time after 25 years)

I was really sad like 'cause you're always connected to your home. Because every time I go home, I come back - I always cry. Because I feel really, that's my home and because I grew up on TI, I know every rock and every tree and like, I know every spot on the island. As children we used to walk everywhere because we didn't have a car, we didn't really take buses, so we use to go to the school, we use to walk over the top of the hill, we use to walk around the other

side, we use to walk round to back beach way and when come town we walkabout come town. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s, speaking about childhood memories of growing up in the Torres Strait)

It's not the (island) that I left. See they started drinking. And the beaches use to be nice and clean. The beach was now blue with cans of Fosters, that's what really disheartened me ... I feel the Council has just let them go. Before we got lot of things to do. The cemetery where (the island) there, we village work, everybody be go there. You can stand one end of the cemetery and there's no grass and you can spot the Japanese (graves) there. You see these things are gone now. You see money come in and people want to be paid to do them things, it's not voluntary ... Too many things change, television one, grog, alcohol, smoking grass and laziness. They can't be told. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 60s, expressing his disappointment about his former island home)

The disappointment and disdain first generation Storytellers expressed towards the apparent social and political apathy on their home islands needs to be viewed in the context of the circumstances under which this very group left the Torres Strait and relocated to the mainland. Life under the Act was indeed oppressive and restrictive yet, at the same time, it maintained a social order and a sense of personal discipline and self-respect that the older generation believed was now missing in their home island communities. The physical and substantive descriptions of an Island Home in various stages of social and economic decay, however, did not appear to represent nor

undermine the first generation Storytellers' experiences of *feeling at home*. Memories of home are important, however, in establishing attachment to place "in acts of remembering 'what it was like', so that I can move on, into another place, another becoming" (Fortier, 2003, p. 124). In this way, the notion of forever belonging to an Island Home was promoted as a positive ideal within the narrative of the first generation Storytellers, constructed through discourses of family and community, identity and place. Even under circumstances where returning first generation 'Mainlanders' experienced intense alienation from an Island Home that had changed and evolved in their absence, there remained a sense of intimacy and inherent connectedness to a place where their origins and, indeed, their cycle of life emanated from:

Home is (name of island). If I find a place, I would go back and live. That's my roots. That's where my umbilical cord was buried, so you go back there. If I go back there, I'll live there. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 60s)

Home for me now is Brisbane, I've established myself here, working ... since 1961. (Name of island) is still home. When I get close to (name of island), I feel nearly complete. So when I get to (name of island), I'm a complete being because my ... umbilical cord is buried there ... I think everyone of my age got something be buried there, so part of you is always there. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 60s)

The paradoxical articulations of home and place expressed by the first generation Storytellers demonstrate why the word ‘home’ is marked by ambiguity and lack of absoluteness (Jackson, 1995). For this group, the idea of home has particular, layered and contradictory meanings connoted in multiple narratives of place and space (Ifekwunigwe, 1999). For example, home is here on the mainland, and home is also their island of origin. Sheller (2003) describes the simultaneous attachments to home as a form of creolisation where the process of being uprooted in one place and re-grounded in another “implies the displacement (yet not total loss) of a previous home/culture and the claiming of a new place of belonging” (p. 276). Under these conditions, the notion of place and home for the first generation Storytellers in particular, becomes an encompassing and capacious concept used to describe a sense of feeling at home, of being home and belonging to home. Yet, at the same time, home for first generation ‘Mainlanders’ is given materiality and tangibility through its physicality, in that home island represents a place of birthright, making the experience of home unequivocally real and, therefore, essential in terms of identity (Basu, 2004).

For the subsequent generation of Storytellers, including me, who were born and raised on the Mainland, the discourse of my Island Home is found in the metaphorical constructions of a home island. For the second and third generation Storytellers, the paradox of home comes to be enunciated in the *re-presentations of a home island* creating, in the process, an anchorage for individual and collective identification, conceptualisations of self-image and belonging within a collective, as well as images of identity particular to themselves as ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islanders’.

## 5.7 Being an Islander without an Island

One of the most contentious issues underpinning the politics of Torres Strait Islander identity has been the lack of ‘authentic birthright’ afforded to those Islanders who have been born and raised outside of the Torres Strait. What does it mean to speak of an Island Home for an increasing number of Torres Strait Islanders who are born into established Islander families and communities on the mainland? The narratives of the second and even third generation Storytellers revealed the very notion of an Island Home is given substance through the Stories of their parents, grandparents and elders who were either born or raised in the Torres Strait:

He never ever went back home. He used to talk about home. He would talk about home a lot. Oh yes he would cry and say “I’m never going to get back home”. He wanted to go back home. He used to always talk about (name of island) and the deep blue sea where he used to dive and things like that and T.I. and his diving days. He never made it back. It was too hard because they didn’t have planes and things, and it would take you days, you had to go by boat. It was too hard because he had seven children and he couldn’t take us back. Yeah, he never went back to visit his father’s grave. Yeah it was sad. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, late 50s, speaking of her father)

The same Storyteller recalled how her Father’s grief of never being able to return to his Island Home played out in his everyday life and that of his family:

He did think (name of island) was his home. He found it hard to live in Cairns. He was never settled in Cairns. He used to drink a lot, coming out of the (name

of occupation) because that's what he did in the (name of occupation) and smoked, until he took on religion and he stopped all that, he stopped gambling. It was hard because they had the gambling thing all over (name of suburb). They used to gamble their whole pay if they could. It was a big thing. Gambling schools were everywhere and that was unsettling in the family until he found religion. And he focused on religious life then and we all started going to church. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, late 50s)

This quote regarding her Father's longing for his Island Home reflects a 'myth of return' that Leavey, Sembhi and Livingston (2004) describe as the "unfulfilled expectation or desire of the migrant to return to their country of origin" (p. 764). The phenomenon is referred to as a myth because it arises from a commonly held belief that the move away from a home of origin is only temporary, although the reality suggests that the majority of migrants do not go back because of economic reasons and their children's future (Leavey, Sembhi & Livingston, 2004). In the case of the participant Storytellers, the 'myth of return' serves to anchor the relationship between a past and present home, reinforcing and 'handing down', in the process, a sense of belonging and longing for the next generations of Islanders born and raised outside of the Torres Strait. An inherent connection to the Torres Strait as a place of great social and cultural significance was evident in the narratives of the second and third generation Mainland Storytellers. Family and kinship connections were the biggest influences shaping the narratives of place and home, responsible for fostering a sense of belonging to a collective, even if they had never been to the Torres Strait:

I always like it when our rellies up there come down and claim us and encourage us to go back up there and this sort of thing and that's good because

you feel like you are still part of it – the Islands even though you have never physically set foot on them. I think it would be a very sad day if the day would come when that wouldn't be the case. (Female Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s)

Another third generation Storyteller spoke of the family connections he maintained in the Torres Strait and how those same connections facilitated links with other Torres Strait Islanders whom he met on the mainland:

I've never been up to the Torres Strait Islands before but it's just funny how most of the people I've met who are from the Torres Strait Islands, most of the young fellas or the women who have come down from the Islands to study, I identify with them straight away. I know a lot of people from the Islands. I've got cousins up there [referring to the Torres Strait] so we yarn and say do you know such and such ... (Male Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 30s)

## **5.8 Constructing Multiple Narratives of Home and Place**

In a comparative sense, the multiple narratives of home and place were most pronounced for the second and third generation Storytellers who, through a combination of family and community ties, professional and social mobility and life opportunities, were able to construct a sense of home and place in plural and multilayered ways:

It may sound very cliché, but home is certainly where my heart goes and I believe I'm blessed in thinking that I can have a family based in Cairns ... but in

saying that I can equally share the same emotion and the same sense of belonging in a place called Brisbane which currently serves as a place where I have a house, I now have a wife and there is a sense of work identity that has been built around being located in Brisbane. Home for me is where really you place a sense of importance and a sense of belonging and in this instance I would have to say that, there are a multiple of places that are a place called home to me. (Male Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 40s)

This multiple worldview of home was similarly shared by another Storyteller:

My home is everywhere, I don't have one home. This is home for now [speaking about Thursday Island]. Yes it is where my family is for now. I've also got family I don't know down south. I really don't have a home base if you like, you know wherever the job is at the time. I haven't really planted myself anywhere to where I'm going to say I'm here forever. I don't think I could ever do that anyway. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 30s)

One young Storyteller spoke of his Torres Strait Islander culture and traditions as reinforcing his sense of home on the mainland:

I think to be honest my home would be Cairns now even though I now live in Brisbane because of the fact that I was born and raised here my whole life and my immediate family was always there. I still get to know some of the traditions from the Torres Strait Islands. Like we have a group there now and like I said with my schooling we had the traditional dancing and so I have learnt a bit you



know just from living in Cairns and I still consider that to be my home. (Male Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 20s)

The connections with family and kin in already established Torres Strait Islander communities outside the Torres Strait further reflected multiple notions of home and place:

Well we've been here (name of place) for nearly 30 years so I suppose when we are talking about home we mean here but because we were brought up in Cairns it's like half and half. I think of Cairns as home, even though its different to when I was there you know, I think of it as home. Growing up in childhood Cairns would be home but then I say home, it's (name of place). Its in-between, it's hard. [Cairns is home] because the people I grew up with are still there and we were close. (Female Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 50s)

The multiple narratives of home suggest that place identity for second and third generation 'Mainlanders' is not simply a location of residence but, rather, an expression of various affiliations that are diverse, contingent and frequently contradictory (Rajan, 1993). An examination of the processes involving 'place making' for second and third generation Storytellers therefore necessitates a deeper understanding of the historical, geographical and cultural contingencies which underpin the ontology of place, space and 'home'. Their narratives, for example, highlight the interactive and fluid nature of the relationship between Islanders on the mainland, Islanders in the Torres Strait and the social and geopolitical space of the 'Torres Strait' or, more specifically, home islands and islands of origin. These interactions between people and place call into

question the premise of discontinuity and the related images of uprooting, disconnection and loss of 'home' origins (Baldassar, 2001). While migration has been commonly theorised as a process that ends with settlement, the phenomenon of the 'journey back home', particularly for younger generations, remains very much a part of migration experience long after the settlement phase (Baldassar, 2001). The visit to an island of origin in the Torres Strait parallels the phenomenon Baldassar (2001) observes with Italian migrants, where the journey to the homeland serves as a "key metaphor which orients the lives and desires of those who foster it, whether 'going back' occurs frequently or rarely ever" (p. 4).

## **5.9 Journeying Back to My Island Home**

The notion of 'returning home' is not new for Islanders living on the mainland, although the motivating factors influencing a 'pilgrimage of return', on the part of younger generations of mainlanders, is undoubtedly different from that of their ancestors. There are many reasons why Islanders return to their islands of origin for short or long term stays, including family gatherings, retirement, cultural ceremonies and events. In recent times, new economic and social opportunities have provided incentive for a younger generation of Islanders to relocate to the Torres Strait for employment and the chance to 'give back' to community. Regardless of the motivation, journeying back to places of origin is a social process that exposes the seemingly ongoing connection between diasporic Torres Strait populations with their ancestral homelands, either in a real or imagined sense. Some of the younger second and third generation Storytellers, in particular, expressed a strong desire to visit the Torres Strait, particularly the birth islands of their ancestors and the need to embark on a journey of self-discovery and cultural 'enlightenment':

I haven't been to the Torres Strait before. But probably next year actually, my mum's going on another trip there, so I'll probably tag along there. It'll be good to go along and see what the islands are like because I haven't actually experienced them myself. It will be good to see where like my ancestors came from because I've always been living in Cairns and Brisbane so I've stuck here and I haven't really gone out. (Male Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 20s)

For other Storytellers, the reality of returning to their Island roots, however, did not match the social mythology of an Island Home espoused by their parents, grandparents and ancestors:

Dad would sing "Oh T.I. my beautiful home" and when I got there I thought it was a big dump [laughs]. I thought that's not what Dad used to say or sing about [laughs]. I thought it would look better but I hadn't seen the outer islands only T.I. T.I. really put me off. When we went to (name of island) which was much later, I liked it. I thought it was nice. I was impressed by the home they [in-laws] had up there. I was taken and shown the place where my Dad grew up. I felt some sense of connection to the place where Dad grew up but it was sad that there was nothing left there for the family. (Female Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 50s)

One Storyteller spoke of the need to go back to the Torres Strait to physically and spiritually connect with a place of origin and to furthermore 'learn' and

‘understand’ a sense of collective and individual identity founded upon the notion of ‘place’:

The main thing is that if possible whether you’re from the Torres Strait or from here [referring to the Mainland] or you’re Aboriginal – the most important thing, if you can, if you know where you come from, is to go back and have a look around because it is important to know what it all means ... You need to be actually on the ground in your traditional Country to know what it means properly. So the most important thing in the future for my son is to someday go to the Torres Strait and appreciate what it is to stand on his family’s land in the Torres Strait because that is something that puts everything in context for kids.

In the Islands you can fish, you can garden, you can do this, you can do that, your whole day is taken up. So it’s an important step because if you’re going to physically be up there, you can taste food that’s made and grown there, you can talk to people that live there, you can listen. (Male Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, mid 30s)

Another Storyteller described how she maintained her physical connection with the Torres Strait:

I do visit every 2 or 3 years because my extended family still lives up there and on both my mother and my father’s side. So that’s how I maintain my links through my family more than anything else and visit. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged late 30s)

Other second and third generation Storytellers, however, questioned the very premise of ‘journeying back’ to the Torres Strait as a way of reaffirming both place and associated cultural identity:

There is always a sense of needing to return or needing to make a connection to one’s cultural birthplace or one’s family’s cultural birthplace or birth roots in order to establish greater need or greater sense of identity. I myself have never carved out a need or even intend to carve out a need because ... relocating to a place like the Torres Straits or for that matter needing to replenish my cultural stock by going back up to the Torres Straits is a non-issue for me.

[The need to go back] hasn’t shaped who I am, who I want to be or where I’m going and even though it’s with pride that I connect with the Torres Straits when asked about my cultural heritage and cultural background, it’s never been in my mind that my life or my future life would be anything of the lesser without having the richness of either growing up or even going back there from time to time. (Male Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 40s)

In line with this sentiment, another Storyteller spoke of the metaphorical ‘journey back’ referring to the intangible sense of connection that transcended distance and time away from the Torres Strait:

This quote that I got from this old fellow in (name of place) that says wherever we are there will always be a Torres Strait community because no matter where you are on the Mainland, you still have a connection to here [referring to the

Torres Strait], you know. You will always have family, you will always have the connection to sea, land, connection to your own cultural background as well. *So it doesn't matter where you are placed down south, because you will always come back here in one form or another* [my emphasis]. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, early 30s)

This convergence of worldviews about the journeying back process revealed how these Storytellers, even in an intergenerational context, are involved in 'place making' in ways that yield and sustain emotional attachments between people and places. The above quote (emphasised in italics) provides the best example of how spatial metaphors, in this case "come back here in one form or another" combine geographical and social meanings in such a way as to make them inseparable (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001). The meaning attached to the Storytellers' descriptions of 'place' and 'home' brings, perhaps, a level of understanding and almost a rationale for our very existence or 'place in the world'. The meanings attached to a spatial construct of 'home' provide us with a sense of 'belonging' and 'ownership' which is reinforced and maintained by social relationships with family and kin, both in the Torres Strait and on the Mainland. Having reference to an Island Home relates people and place in a way that saturates the latter with cultural and social meaning. This meaningful relationship between people and place therefore plays an important part in the formation of our individual and collective identities as Mainland Islanders (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001). In this way, 'home' becomes both the physical and metaphorical site whereby cultural and social identities are worked on, negotiated and articulated.

My own experience of ‘journeying back’ to Erub highlighted how a sense of physically being and feeling ‘at home’ was cultivated by a sense of place towards which I had formed an emotional tie. As I connected and even re-connected with family on Erub, it became apparent there existed a fluidity of cultural and social exchange that operated at different levels. For me, it represented a time of less talking and more observation not just in my capacity as a researcher but, at the time, primarily as a younger Torres Strait Islander person who had journeyed back to her Grandmother’s island home and was now being exposed to a continuous spectrum of interaction and social relationships on a scale I had not before experienced.

The links I established between identity and place through my *Erubamle* kin raised questions for me about shared social meanings, of experiences-in-common and the ways we make sense of the world. The social and cultural world I was experiencing on Erub, for instance, did not reflect the competing meanings and versions of the ‘Torres Strait’/‘Mainland’ binary so often characterised by patterns of power, contestation and the fight for ascendancy. This same political binary, conceived as a site of collective struggles organised around location, resources, representation (and control of the same) seeks to re-ascribe the social relationships and cultural politics between the two groups of Islanders in terms of specific values, critical positions and responses to social and cultural change. My own lived experience, and that of the research Storytellers, illuminates the idea that this Torres Strait/‘Mainland’ binary, particularly as it relates to place identity, is far more complex in its construction, enactment and eventual agency.

### **5.10 Journeying Back to Stay**

The complexity underpinning the construction of a unique place identity for ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islanders’ is found in the narratives of those Islanders who were born and raised on the mainland and have since relocated to the Torres Strait to live on a more permanent basis. For these second and third generation Storytellers, their sense of place is not only characterised by their movement to (rather than from) their Islands of origin but also the inter-relationships they have had to establish and maintain as they integrate into a new community in the Torres Strait. In describing the reasons for moving from the Mainland to Thursday Island, one Storyteller explained how she was motivated not just by career prospects but also the opportunity to ‘contribute back’ to her community:

It’s to give a contribution and we want to see things change and that’s only going to happen if there is more of us starting to come back ... For me personally it was for me to come back here and do this particular job and get it done, I just thought that’s it, I’ll just go up there and do it and it will be done, so that’s what I did ... There was determination myself to prove a lot of things and especially to those on the Mainland that we can come back here, that we can do these things and achieve just as much.

It’s been a good journey. And I wanted to give a contribution. This is my personal thing, give a contribution back to here to show people that it can be done with the right people ... But you know I think I’ll stick around for a while, you know. The roots are sort of established here. We’ve got our family here and



it's a good lifestyle. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 30s)

For this Storyteller, the reality of moving to a remote area location was reflected in the response from her family on the Mainland:

I remember the day when I came home and we were sitting around having dinner and I said to my Dad, 'I think I'm moving to T.I., and he went 'What?! What are you doing that for?' I said because there's a new project on the boil and it would be great to go back and he went 'are you crazy?' I mean everything is here [referring to the Mainland] that we need, the convenience which is true. Because here [referring to Thursday Island] there is no movies, you can't just jump in a car and go down you know driving 2 hours and be somewhere else you know, maybe in a dinghy but you know its very different, very different. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 30s)

For another Storyteller who relocated to the Torres Strait to live, the actual prospect of trading in her lifestyle on the Mainland and making a 'sea change' provided the motivation to move:

I decided to call (name of island) home when we built our house here seven years ago. I like the quietness, the relaxation, stress free. It's just the lifestyle and we both like fishing ... This life is very hard to describe, the remoteness and the beauty.

I don't see myself as a Mainlander anymore. It's good to go back to the mainland and see my family but as far as living there, no. Not unless anything happens to me or to Uncle, I'll decide whether I want to go back to the Mainland. But this is home now [referring to the island]. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 50s)

These Storytellers also spoke of the process of adjustment and reintegration into a new Islander society located in the Torres Strait:

It took me five years to adjust, things like electricity, water and living in a caravan when we first moved up after coming from living in a house. It took me five years to settle down.

The people were lovely, very friendly people. Only a couple of people were jealous when the family gave us the land but we proved that we could look after the land. So the family had a meeting and we took on the caretaker role. Every 2 or 3 months we have a meeting to talk about the land. Like that fence there to keep the dogs in, we had to get approval from the family.

We go to all the community functions and we help, you have to be part of the community. You have to earn the respect of people in the village and once they respect you, it's great. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 50s)

[People here responded to me] pretty okay actually and I think that's because of my family links and I don't get out there and party every weekend and everything ... Because I'm studying part time and I don't have the time for anything else anyway. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 30s)

The literature in this area suggests the possibilities for 'Mainlanders' re-migration to their islands of origin are remote given the educational and employment opportunities on the mainland and the social and cultural attachments to their 're-established' communities (TSIAB, 1996). The lack of infrastructure on the Islands, particularly housing, further constrains the likelihood that 'Mainland Islanders' could move to the Torres Strait in great numbers in the short term. The 'Mainland Storytellers' who have relocated to the Torres Strait, nevertheless, highlight through their narratives how the 'journeying back to stay' process is a valid prospect today given improvements in education, employment and income levels and physical access to the Torres Strait (via air travel). The emotional attachment to place, in this case island of origin, is also prevalent under these circumstances:

I feel a spiritual connection to this place because of my ancestor's connection, especially out the back here, you can feel it. I wouldn't trade it for anything. I've been back to the Mainland and it's good to push the trolley around [the shops]. But to come back to this place and it's stress free and you feel it yourself. This is home for me. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 50s)

The sense of belonging to an Island Home, expressed in various ways across the different generation of Storytellers, extends beyond representations and feelings of belonging to a place that had some physical and social significance for either themselves or their Ancestors. Rather, it reflects an ontological relationship to a place of Ancestral origin, to the Stories of beings of Creation and of spiritual connection and relatedness. Moreton-Robinson (2003) notes how:

Indigenous people's sense of belonging is derived from an ontological relationship to country derived from the Dreaming, which provides the precedents for what is believed to have occurred in the beginning in the original form of social living created by ancestral beings. (p. 31)

Sharp's (1993) work on the myth of Tagai explores how the developing social reality and cultural identity of Torres Strait Islanders reflects four themes of the Tagai myth including a sea people who share a common way of life and manner of ordering the world; everything and everyone has a place within the cosmos; Tagai is the harbinger of the new, as well as the sign of the repetition of the eternal circles of time; and Tagai is a mediator integrating the *Kala Lagaw Ya* speakers and the speakers of Meriam Mir. These themes identified by Sharp (1993) are evident in the Storytellers' narratives of belonging, spirituality and inherent connectedness to place (although not necessarily articulated in the same language). Fuary (1997) similarly notes how "[p]eople draw their strength, confidence, feelings of belonging and well-being from the past, and from their identity as Islanders from particular islands" (p. 247). Moreton-Robinson (2003) acknowledges that to "suggest an ontological relationship to describe Indigenous belonging is essentialist or is a form of strategic essentialism because I am

imputing an essence to belonging” (p. 32). However, she argues that the anti-essentialist critique, while commendable, overlooks the epistemological recognition of difference and power (Moreton-Robinson, 2003). For this study, the knowledge and understanding of belonging to an island of origin carries with it the historical and cultural subjectivities that form the basis of ‘Mainlander’ political, social and cultural identities. While such a conclusion may attract criticism of strategic essentialism (insofar as ‘belonging’ may derive some political benefit), it is argued here that the meaning of ‘belonging to an Island Home’ serves diverse functions for those Islanders who express such a notion, and should be seen as an inclusionary rather than exclusionary practice of knowledge and ownership of Ancestral land and seas.

### **5.11 Concluding Comments**

Identity for many Storytellers was about ways of *knowing* who you are, your family roots, your place of origin, your sense of ‘culture’ and *kastom*, all constituting the knowledge of self within these social domains. In listening to, and engaging with, Storytellers in this research project, I was particularly drawn to the narratives of self-identity which linked past and present circumstances and ideals with the past, present and future of the Torres Strait Islander collective. However, at the same time, these narratives interrogated and undermined any simple or uncomplicated sense of origins, traditions and linear movement between the Torres Strait and the mainland. Considering the dispersal of Torres Strait Islander people, cultures and lives, I was inevitably confronted with mixed histories, cultural diversity and composite languages that were also central to *my* sense of history, time and place. Researching the ways Islanders living on the mainland perceive themselves and others in the context of identity presented me with new ways of thinking about myself and my relationship to not only

‘others’ with whom I had connections and affiliations based on family and kinship ties but also to a sense of ‘place’ which grounded the social identity in question. The research process, in effect, prompted me to reconsider the histories I have inherited and continue to inhabit, the histories of language, of politics, of culture and experience of place.

The notion of ‘home’ became central to the way people in this study expressed multiple and situational identities that encapsulated cultural norms, social processes and representations of individuals and groups. In this sense, the concept of a ‘home island’ or a ‘home place’ represented, for many of the research Storytellers, a paradoxical synthesis of memory and longing, of grief and loss, of belonging and exclusion and of the ideal and the political. What comes across strongly in the cultural narratives of Storytellers is not the resolution or absolute determination of home island status but rather an exploration of a series of related and interconnecting themes around ‘the making of a home/homes’, family and home, and community and home. At the core of this chapter was an exploration of the conditions and circumstances faced by research Storytellers in the journey away from their island homes and their re-settlement and establishment of new homes outside the Torres Strait and an ongoing connection and affiliation to their places of origin through family and kin. For the subsequent generation of research Storytellers who were born and raised on the Mainland, this chapter furthermore explored the metaphorical constructions of a home island. For the latter group, the paradox of home comes to be enunciated in the *re-presentations of a home island* creating in the process an anchorage for individual and collective identification, conceptualisations of self-image and belonging within a collective, as well as images of identity particular to themselves as ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islanders’.

This chapter provided a framework for rethinking the very idea of ‘My Island Home’ in ways that pave the way forward for future discussions beyond the current dualities of ‘Torres Strait’ versus ‘Mainland’. The conditions and circumstances under which Torres Strait Islanders came to the Mainland are not only highly divergent (from free movement to forced removal) but also necessarily account for differing constructions of place, resettlement and sense of home. What follows in the Stories is the consideration of ‘home’ in terms of the plurality of experiences, histories and multiple positions that provide the social agency through which ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islander’ identities are constituted, negotiated and enacted. In this regard, this chapter brought together both discussion and dialogue on Torres Strait Islander movement that pays particular attention to the social processes, modes and constructs of that interchange through different voices in various contexts and cultural positions in relation to place. The next chapter examines how place identity has influenced and situated these cultural positions in ways that shape and construct ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islander’ cultural and social identities.

## Chapter 6

# Who Do You Think You Are? Constructing Cultural Identity as a Torres Strait Islander

### 6.1 Introduction

I think there is a distinctive mainland Torres Strait Islander culture more so now than ever before, simply because there have been so many of us born on the mainland and we have grown up with traditional cultural adaptations. (Female Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s)

This statement, from a third generation ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islander’, informed the basis and structure of this findings chapter. Firstly, the Storyteller drew a mark of difference based on the ways ‘Mainlanders’, as Torres Strait Islanders, distinguish themselves from others. Secondly, the Storyteller articulated a form of identity politics that not only locates the boundaries of sameness and difference but also promotes a valuing of this distinction through the citation of changing demographics (so many of us born on the mainland) and the adaptation of traditional culture; representing, over time, the best of both worlds. This Storyteller’s statement reflects and privileges a positive value attached to a ‘Mainlander identity’, and represents a direct challenge to the deficit discourses of loss and displacement so often associated with Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland.



If representations of an Island Home provide ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islanders’ with the foundations of an individual and collective identity based on a sense of place and space, what might be the building blocks that this same group draws upon in the conceptualisations and negotiations of self, community and the meanings attached to the same? While the establishment of roots seeks to ground and shape identity from the perspective of home island and kin-in-common, it represents only a starting point from which the narrative of self launches itself along the journey of identification. This chapter presents the findings of this research in relation to the construction and representation of identity from the perspective of the first, second and third generation Storytellers. In particular, it examines the Storytellers’ journey of identification with reference to core themes and pivotal moments that constitute the notion of a ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islander identity’. In doing so, this chapter focuses on how identity is represented by Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. Addressing this issue through the narratives and voices of the Storytellers, this chapter aims to provide an explanatory framework for understanding the multi-faceted dimensions and formations of a ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islander identity’. The very act of articulating this ‘Mainlander identity’, promotes personal and social agency for this group through a description of identity politics marked by the drawing and transgression of boundaries, distinctions of difference and the opening of spaces within which to speak of political voice and action.

I was concerned that my interpretation of the Storytellers’ voices did not result in the same reductionism of the ‘Mainlander’ so often represented and marginalised in both historical and contemporary texts (Beckett, 2004). My approach to the identification subject matter was, therefore, guided by the way these Storytellers *spoke*

*back* to the discourses of language and representation that had, in the past, both silenced their voices and masked their visibility. While the Storytellers did not directly respond to what had been written and known of ‘Mainland Islanders’ in the past, their narratives nevertheless revealed a language and content that secured an identity as people-in-common with their own notions of historical and social structures. The main themes drawn from their narratives and outlined in the following chapter include multiple pasts and identities, the practice of Torres Strait Islander culture outside the Torres Strait, living as a minority outside the Torres Strait and creating spaces from which ‘Mainland Islanders’ can speak of new representations of identity.

## **6.2 Multiple Pasts, Multiple Identities**

The convergence of Australian Indigenous people, Asian and other ‘Coloured’ immigrants and European colonists created a polyethnic society, whose members have, through time, forged the social and familial connections that underlie the claim of their descendants to be a single people. (Shnukal & Ramsay, 2004, p1).

Torres Strait Islanders have a long history of collective identification that has operated (and continues to function) on numerous and multi-layered levels. Long before the departure from their islands of origin to the Australian mainland, Islanders were exposed to interplays of cultural, social and identity politics (Shnukal, 2004). The Torres Strait was already a culturally rich and diverse area in the pre-colonial period, founded upon thousands of years of travel and movement, trade, exchange and cultural ritual with its regional neighbours on the Australian mainland, South-East Asia and the

Pacific. Torres Strait Islanders, prior to their movement to the mainland, were already positioned within contested spaces of spatial borders, social values, economic interactions and political practices that were claimed, challenged and negotiated to produce new 'polyethnic' cultural discourses (Shnukal & Ramsay, 2004). The act of 'storying the self' (Woodward, 2002, p. 45) through the narratives of the Mainland Storytellers revealed personal journeys of identification that were inextricably linked to a social and historical past shaped by (but not limited to) the influences of pre-contact trade and movement, colonialism, Christianity, World War Two, migration to the mainland, participation in the mainland labour market, the border issue and, generally speaking, the 'mainland minority' experience. All of these events/phases/issues have represented major change and transformation for Islander societies and, in the process, resulted in different forms and expressions of cultural collectivism.

The 1936 maritime strike was the first organised challenge to European authority that, in the process, succeeded in embarrassing a government that prided itself on its native administration (Beckett, 1987). At its core, the strike was a "great cultural refusal" (Shnukal & Ramsay, 2004, p. 45) to accept the increasingly restrictive conditions imposed on the Islanders by the workings of the Protection Acts. The event also symbolised a newfound opportunity for Islanders to work as a social collective with a view to political and social change, a pre-cursor for future activism. The themes of equality, land rights and autonomy, inherent in the strike, constituted the essential preconditions of a collective social Torres Strait Islander identity that would reach a fuller expression in later events (Sharp, 1993). Islanders who moved to the mainland, both during and immediately after this time, were therefore positioned within processes of social change and reformation that drew on distinctions of difference in the

construction of borders around relationships between ‘them’ and ‘us’. The political struggles fought by the Islanders in the Torres Strait resulted in a heightened awareness and understanding of how reciprocity, unity and strengthened social networks could function on the mainland for their benefit and advancement:

There aren’t a lot of Torres Strait Islander people in this town, so when there is a division it’s really noticed and it’s hard to get people together. But the community does everything here [on the mainland] that they might normally do up there [the Torres Strait]. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged late 40s)

Islanders, however, have not been merely passive subjects of the historical influences and discursive practices that have helped shaped their individual and collective social identities. Indeed, historically, Islanders have demonstrated an uncanny capacity to adapt to ever-changing social environments, selectively integrating ‘outside’ elements into their own cultural institutions and practices (Fuary, 2004; Sharp, 1980a; Shnukal, 2004). Islanders’ aptitude for change in response to their circumstances, both pre-colonial and post-colonial, demonstrates the power of their own agency in not only refusing social annihilation (Sharp, 1980a) but constructing modes of consciousness around self-awareness as a people-in-common. This re-interpretation of outside influences resulted in a unique cultural fusion which merged these same external influences with traditional Torres Strait cultural practice.

When my brother and I got to Australia (from the Torres Strait), because we had been so isolated and we used to listen to the radio, we wanted to be pop stars.

(Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 60s, speaking about moving from Erub during the early 1960s)

The Storytellers' narratives provided evidence of how, in changing times, 'Mainland Torres Strait Islanders' were able to shape their own identities by making sense of the changes that were taking place at the time, becoming, in effect, agents in their own development:

It was a big change. It was a big change when we came to Australia [from the Torres Strait] but you adapt though. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 60s, speaking about moving from Erub during the early 1960s)

By drawing on the intellectual traditions of oral storytelling, traditional knowledge and cultural practice, the Storytellers explained how they not only adapted to their new circumstances but, furthermore, they sought ways to actively engage with their new environment and community:

In (name of place), they've got a couple of men that do the *dari* making and what have you. Now here in Queensland or here in the Torres Strait, traditionally we've got them made out of Torres Strait pigeon feathers. In (name of place), instead of using the white feathers, they have chicken feathers. We thought it was hilarious, because it's still white but it's a very different type of feather. Making *kup muri* as well, instead of having hot rocks like we would have over here [in Queensland], they use hot iron like from the train track iron.

No matter where Island people migrated to or resided in the end, they keep adapting to their environment. It just came as a natural thing. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 30s)

One first generation Storyteller spoke about her desire to learn and adapt to her new environment on the mainland, realising that change was an inevitable part of re-settlement and survival away from the Torres Strait, particularly as a minority group:

I was trying to understand a lot about this new place I was in. You know try and understand where I was, what is this place all about, what I was doing there, the purpose of why I was there. My whole focus at the time was learning about this new place, learning about the new systems, learning different people because this was my first time being in the non-Torres Strait Islander community.

(Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged late 40s)

The Islanders' response to constantly changing social and economic circumstances both at an individual and community level demonstrates their resilience and capacity to shape and structure their own identities. Their long-standing connection to the outside world, the impact of colonialism and subsequent responses to 'new outsiders' ensured that Torres Strait Islanders have never constructed their identities in stable, secure and isolated conditions. In contrast, Islanders have, through necessity and survival, asserted various expressions of individual and collective identity during periods of cultural diversity and fragmentation, free economic trade and enterprise, colonial control and oppression, political resistance and the eventual movement of people between the Torres Strait and the mainland. The ability of Islanders to exercise

agency in their own identification processes under conditions of flux and change has, to a large extent, facilitated their successful transition and resettlement from the Torres Strait to the mainland.

### **6.3 The Impact of World War Two on Constructing New Identities for Islanders**

The advent of World War Two and eventual movement of Islanders to the mainland in the decades immediately following the war lead to the further transformation of Islander society and the emergence of new identities, affinities and inter-relationships between themselves and others (Beckett, 1987; Fuary, 1993; Nakata, 2004a). The first generation Storytellers recalled how, despite living under the Act and all the restrictions that entailed, they were able to engender a sense of community through family group gatherings and events. For one Storyteller, this form of social enterprise was not only maintained but definitely strengthened during the absence of their fathers who were involved in Australia's World War Two campaign. For a small community like Erub, any contribution to the War effort, least of all the recruitment of their fathers who occupied the role of heads of family and primary providers for the family, was significant:

Sunday we use to go to service, we invite all the family after the service and they come together, have dinner and yarn, and another Sunday, another family invites you over. We share everything, like Christmas, birthday, wedding, we come together, and that always been a part of my upbringing. Sharing and family values – very, very important ... The community [referring to that island] was very small at the time. All our fathers were in the war during that time.

(Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, mid 60s, speaking about life on a particular island during the 1940s and 1950s)

Torres Strait Islanders' participation in World War Two offered them new forms of identification and a re-thinking of how people saw themselves in re-defined social and geographic spaces. The war effort re-positioned Torres Strait Islanders in a global context providing a direct link to a much bigger outside world. While links to the outside world were facilitated in the Torres Strait through extensive foreign trade networks, both pre- and post-European contact, World War Two represented new economic, political and social circumstances for Islanders. One Storyteller spoke proudly of her father's participation in the war and the opportunities it presented him, particularly for overseas travel and improved social status as a commissioned army officer following his tour of duty as a 'Rat of Tobruk':

He was pretty young, early 20s [when he joined the army]. In the army he was in the World War and travelled all over the world. He saw a lot of action and ended up in New Guinea. He you know, had a lot of medals. He was commissioned. He was a boxer and had a pretty good name for himself as a boxer. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged late 50s)

Another second generation Storyteller shared similar proud stories of one of her elders involved in World War Two and the official recognition he received for his war service, albeit several decades after the war had ended:



He travelled all over. He went to Syria, Cyprus, Egypt, you know Korea and Japan. He's fought in battles and he won these encouragement awards or awards of courage or whatever you call them and he got one from the British High Commander. I think that was in the '70s or '80s and he was one of the first Torres Strait Islanders to ever receive that. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, late 50s)

How young men from the Torres Strait could end up on the other side of the world fighting for 'their country' underscores the impact World War Two had on constructing Islander identities in a changing world, a world that connected them to far away places while paradoxically bringing them socially closer to Australia, a place that had, up until that time, represented yet another 'outside world'. Torres Strait Islander women similarly assumed new roles and responsibilities in the absence of men during the war, increasing their opportunities for education and employment (Osborne, 1997). The opportunity to be mobile during the war years was not confined to servicemen who travelled overseas. The threat of enemy attack prompted the forced evacuation of many Islanders from the Torres Strait to the mainland; a move that indirectly improved opportunities for Islanders, particularly women, in both education and employment:

When people were taken down south [referring to the mainland] they were given other opportunities. She [referring to female elder] was given opportunities to study nursing. Now that would not have come about if she didn't move, if she wasn't evacuated because of the War. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 30s)

The subsequent movement of people to the mainland opened up questions of what it meant to be a Torres Strait Islander, an Australian or any other identity for that matter. The parallel economic and social changes occurring in the Torres Strait and the mainland in the post-war period offered Islanders a multiplicity of identities at once, ranging in scope from a racialised underclass to contributing members of Australian society, with every permutation in between. The phenomenon of the post-war movement of Islanders to the mainland, coupled with the changing European migration, represented an opening of spaces where the populist search for an authentic ‘Australian identity’ intersected with numerous diasporic heritages with their own multicultural identities, languages and ideals. The negotiation of new identities for Islanders in such circumstances involved re-mapping the self through shared histories, practices and the formation of narratives that sourced an identity linking the stories we tell about the past in locating who we are in the present.

#### **6.4 ‘Storying’ the Self**

We tell stories about ourselves in order to make sense of who we are.

(Woodward, 2002, p. 25)

If identity should be viewed as a journey rather than a destination, then it was important to explore the historical positioning of the Storytellers in their expressions of who they were as Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland. In exploring questions of self with the Storytellers, it was important to consider the inter-relationship between the personal and the social with a particular focus on the external social processes involved in identity formation. In this way, I sought insight into the impact of the social

upon the internal formation and experience of self for the ‘Mainland Storytellers’. What were their earliest recollections of being self-aware as Torres Strait Islanders and what were their Stories of relationships and events that connected the personal and the social and the past to the present and future? I asked Storytellers to share with me their childhood memories of growing up in an Island family. As noted by Luke and Luke (1998), “[c]entral to identity formation is the narration of the self, people’s situated accounts of their childhoods, communities, families, partners and child-rearing” (p. 749). In this way, I explored the processes and worldviews involved with the formation of their identities and sought to reveal, in the process, some of the historical circumstances that have interwoven the spaces from which the personal, social and political subjectivities are played out. Martin (2008) challenges us to re-think our worldview through ontology (the nature of being and what we believe to be real in our world), epistemology (the knowledge that informs how we think about that reality) and methodology (how we understand, define and redefine our ontological selves). The relational activities expressed, explained and represented by the participant Storytellers, in turn, informs their Stories of relatedness, their relationship to themselves, people, place and their ‘identity’.

In re-visiting the past with the Storytellers, I was aware of the “performance ethics” (Denzin, 2003, p. 53) enacted by the participants in recalling emotional truths of a past that is “constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (Hall, 1996, p. 113). The narratives of the Storytellers are, therefore, not intended to be a representation of their families’ experiences, their lives or their Stories but, rather, should be considered as projections of their own life experiences that reveal moments in time where their identification has been nurtured, challenged, contested and even

imposed. As a re-creation of past events, the Storytellers' narratives represented a collection of past images, events, feelings, emotions, sights, sounds and smells that, in turn, "make the past usable" (Austin, 2005, p. 21).

## **6.5 Engendering a Sense of Belonging**

The first generation Storytellers shared their experiences of feeling like they were part of a group or community at an early age in the Torres Strait:

I remember just sitting around where ... some Aunty or Athe would sit and tell us a story about them islands, about Dogai. Tell the story about where everyone was making the *kup muri* and they'd go fishing and when they'd come back they used to dig up the *kup muri* and eat all the *kai kai* ... So they were telling the story like this, the story of like *Gelam* ... You know that used to happen like around night time and we'd be lying on the mat on a pillow and Aka [grandmother] or an older cousin sitting and telling us some stories. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s)

For the first generation Storytellers, the emphasis was on group activities, representing what they later came to know as community life. Nearly all of the first generation Storytellers grew up in villages on their respective home islands and these communities became the focus for their social and cultural interactions:

Everything you have you share. The family life then was excellent. Discipline was very important in my upbringing. You listen to mum and dad. Like from there to now I can see the difference in the upbringing [of kids]. The respect for

mum, dad, aunty, uncle, grandparent – that’s the tradition. That’s always been part of my upbringing – sharing and family values. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 60s, speaking about life on a particular island during the 1940s and 1950s)

Another first generation Storyteller also emphasised the importance of mutual respect as a precursor to understanding and knowing how traditional customs and values were imparted to them as children:

I think it [referring to growing up in the Torres Strait] instilled in me like respect, respect for you elders, respect for basically your neighbours, respect for people that come to you. That’s what I think I learnt mainly about respecting the customs because I think like there were these unwritten rules that you needed to know ... Like when all the big people talk, even if you disagree you don’t argue back. When they go say “yupla go play there outside, mipla go talk now”, you know they would always send us kids outside and the big people would sit down and talk. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s)

The same first generation Storyteller went on to further explain how these ‘unwritten rules’ formed the basis of cultural protocol that established modes of social structure and organisation within family groups and communities:

It’s like the rules when there is dying, it’s actually how to tell them the news this kind, how to tell someone is passing away this kind. Gathering everybody in the one place and then some person, a person can speak, a person that’s been

nominated to tell them the news of the death ... We learnt about all that kind thing ... I think those things I kept with me, even though I believe I'm a modern person and I'm living in a modern society and stuff like that, I still carry those values, those belief systems and stuff. It's that *Ailan Pasin* you know. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s)

## **6.6 Constructing Identity through Shared Values**

For the first generation Storytellers, lessons of respect, mutual obligation and reciprocity were mapped out in accordance with the relational hierarchies of family and kin. Their references to church and examples of the discipline enacted by older family members demonstrates how the Christian ethos and work ethic, ascribed by the missionary administrators at the time, further mediated, regulated and nurtured social and community relationships. The Stories of the first generation participants were saturated with the intricacies and explanations of connections to other individuals and families within their community.

For second and third generation Storytellers, the retention of family ties and the practice of customs outside the Torres Strait were framed around notions of difference to others, particularly as they represented a minority group in contrast to their parents' and grandparents' experiences of community life in the Torres Strait. One second generation Storyteller recalled how, as a child, she quickly learned the notion of difference through the observations of her own family and the other children she went to school with:

I think the most tangible evidence of being *Ailan pipel*, 'cause we considered ourselves *Ailan pipel* back then was probably through my grandmother which is my dad's mother because she had them strong *Ailan* looks. She had the really dark skin and curly hair ... you know you had this little old *Ailan* lady that you were calling Granny you know and other people's granny didn't look like her. Other people's granny was some little old white ladies. (Female Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s)

The same Storyteller went on further to explain the influence her grandmother had on framing her points of social and cultural reference:

We'd have these hats to put on to go out in the garden that were woven out of leaves and at the time you don't think it's an Island hat, it's a hat like any other kind of hat ... Gran had a big thing about hibiscus flowers too. She had a big hibiscus tree growing in her yard and I realise now what a strong connection she still had with her Islander roots by having these kinds of reminders or symbols around of life on the Islands. Quite often you would go over to Gran's place and she would have a hibiscus stuck in her hair if she had been out working in the garden and you sort of didn't think anything of it. But now I think back what a very Island woman thing to do you know – stick a flower in your hair. (Female Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s)

Another third generation Storyteller recounted how his earliest memories of exposure to Torres Strait Islander culture instilled in him a sense of group identity:

I think I remember tagging along to various functions and activities that had a Torres Strait Islander bent to it. The ones I can remember were tombstone openings. There were like family events where you would often see played out Torres Strait Islander family values and cultural activities like the dancing, the feasting with those things. So it was mainly those types of experiences that allowed me to recognise myself in a cultural group identity sense. (Male Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, late 40s)

For the second and third generation Storytellers, descriptions of the interconnectivity that exists between individuals and groups, was central to the examination of the conceptions they held of themselves (their self-identity) and the perceptions and expectations of others (their social identity). In describing the overlapping and shifting domains in which the self is negotiated and constituted, Fuary (2000) notes how “[t]he Self in these domains is constituted by an increasing collective identification (as Islanders, as Australians, or as Indigenous peoples) and by increasing collective differentiation from recognised and/or imagined Others” (p. 230). In a general sense, the Storytellers’ identity was dependent not only on their numerous relationships with others but also what Bourke (1998) refers to as the experience of self as part of others. Again, notions of mutual sharing, exchange and reciprocity were prevalent in this form of identification. In describing her father’s role in the community, one second generation Storyteller noted how sharing was associated with good Christian values and the practice of good *Ailan pasin*:

Religion ... was a really strong thing ... He was very kind hearted. He’d go fishing and catch a bag of fish and we’d only keep a couple. He’d go around in



the car and give so and so some and by the time he got home there was hardly any left for us. But he was always like that, cook for everybody. If he saw somebody was hungry, he'd take them home and feed them. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged late 50s)

Another Storyteller similarly described the congruence between Christian values and strong cultural 'codes of practice':

A lot of it's biblical you know, treating people as you want to be treated and showing that *prapa Ailan Pasin* and showing that caring with people. If you find that if you turn up at somebody's house and it's dinner time ... they invite you in and make a place for you to sit and eat with them. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 40s)

The impact of ubiquitous Christian influence on Islanders' lives has endured in the construction of these Storytellers' identities, illuminating, in the process, a collective identity based on perceptions of desirable Christian values, ethos and way of life. The practice and administration of Christianity through education, employment and governance structures constructed a collective identity that was founded upon Christian values, beliefs and protocols. The 'Christian Islander' was thus structured on social codes of meanings, values and related cultural myths of belonging to an educated, 'socially cultured' and respectful (and respected) collective. The Islanders' willingness to embrace Christianity continues to be interpreted and debated by Islanders and non-Islanders alike with explanations including 'compatible belief systems' (Elu, 2004), 'the rescue of Islanders from extinction' (Mosby & Robinson, 1998), 'incongruous co-

existence of older spiritual beliefs and cultural practices’ (Lawrence, 2004), and ‘intercultural reciprocities reinforced by South Sea Islanders’ (Sharp, 1993). Conversely, it has been argued that the fusion of Island practice and Christianity has resulted in the subjugation and erosion of traditional Torres Strait culture (Bani, 2004a).

During the course of this research, I observed and participated in numerous events and occasions where Islander cultural practice fused with Christian practice. These events included weddings (Townsville May 2003, Cairns July 2004, Cairns December 2005, Sunshine Coast November 2007), baptisms (Cairns 2002, Cairns 2007), tombstone openings (June 2005, November 2006) and Coming of the Light celebrations (Cairns 2003, Erub 2006). I observed the seamless merging of what Islanders consider ‘traditional culture’ with Christian ceremony and protocol, particularly when an Indigenous priest (coincidentally a family member) was an integral part of the event. On most of the occasions, Island hymns were sung during the ceremony and Islander dancing conducted at the feasting afterwards. Outside of cultural events and celebrations, I noted how Christian observance was practiced at ‘non-cultural’ activities such as meetings and conferences. At the National Mainland Torres Strait Islander Conference held at the Gold Coast in 2003, I documented the following observation in my research journal:

I counted at least three group prayers today that involved the whole forum. An elder opened the day with a prayer asking for God’s blessing over the conference and the people attending. Grace was said by an elder before lunch time. And another prayer was said at the end of the day giving thanks to God.

(Researcher's Field Note, 7.32pm, Wednesday 5 November 2003, Gold Coast Queensland)

The social interchange between Torres Strait Islanders and Christianity is fraught with complexities and ambiguities around the construction of frameworks for Christian interpretation and practice. While the Church could be seen as the purveyor of colonial authority, it paradoxically undertook the liberal humanitarian role in Islanders' struggle against government control and oppression (Nakata, 2004a). Such inter-cultural encounters have created spaces for various acts of resistance, acceptance and incorporation (Lahn, 2004). Torres Strait Islanders have created new contexts and meanings for the expression of Christianity, as denoted by the multitude of denominations and institutional affiliations to which they subscribe:

He was constantly searching for religion, we went to many churches. I mean I was christened Catholic but they tried Seventh Day Adventist and then Mormans ... He finally settled into the Pentecostal way of life and he was very strong with that until he died. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged late 50s, referring to her father)

Despite denominational pluralism, the indelible link between Christian ideology and collective understandings (and sense) of identity and self were ever present in not only the narratives of these Storytellers but the ways in which they organised their social lives around church activities. During the course of one interview with a first generation Storyteller, I documented the following observation in my research journal:

Setting aside time to do actual interview was difficult. I had to interrupt his evening schedule. He also had to do other chores. Interview had to be done prior to midnight mass. (Researcher's Field Note, 11.20pm, Wednesday 24 December 2003, Mackay Queensland)

Such evidence underscored the influence of Christianity in maintaining notions of collective identity and social organisation within Torres Strait Islander communities living outside the Torres Strait even within an intergenerational context:

I think that being involved in the Anglican church activities and events probably lead to my sense of being or moving in non-Indigenous community settings as well as being in the Torres Strait Islander community setting ... I can always remember a church or Christian function or event that it was associated with. (Male Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, late 40s)

Conversion to, and subsequent practice of, Christianity has been far from a universal experience in both the Torres Strait and the mainland. The Christian discourse, however, has provided Islanders with a vehicle for social change and reinvention through commercial fishing enterprises (Papuan Industries Limited in the early 1900s) and the establishment of schools, churches and other forms of social and economic infrastructure. The knowledge systems introduced and shaped through these new forms of social and economic infrastructure enabled Islanders, over time, to see themselves and their communities in a new light reflected in a "shared consciousness as one people" (Sharp, 1980a, p. 6). Moreover, the cultural collectivism that resulted from these social changes paradoxically ensured that political activism was embedded in the

practice and administration of Christianity in the Torres Strait, even as recently as the last decade. The Anglican Church, for example, provided a site for Islanders' assertion of their rights to political and democratic participation culminating in a split from the church and the formation of the Church of the Torres Strait in the late 1990s (Lawrence, 2004). The formation of the Church of the Torres Strait symbolised ideas around self-determination and self-management and the move away from the Anglican 'mission' to an independent Torres Strait church (Lawrence, 2004). While the impact of church politics is possibly less pronounced outside the Torres Strait due to population dispersal and community representation, the Storytellers' narratives, nevertheless, provided evidence of collective forms of identity rich in Christian practices, representation and ideology. For these Storytellers (and for the participants I observed during cultural events and activities), Christian cultural discourses have not only given meaning to social practices but, furthermore, constituted social relations and collectivities around these discourses.

The formation of personal and group identity for the Storytellers was inherently a dynamic, interactive and social process highlighting how individual identity is inextricably bound up with its relationship to a collectivity (Stokes, 1997). The construction and articulation of an 'other' was central to these Storytellers' sense of distinctiveness as reflected in their commonality of experiences, history, family values and beliefs. For the Storytellers, this form of identification was constructed through recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group within an ideal (other Mainlanders represented in the collective). The end result represented an increased collective differentiation from recognised and or/imagined others (Fuery, 1997). The Storytellers' claims to a 'Torres Strait Islander' identity, as

well as feelings of commonality and otherness, “are important aspects of social relations and for individuals themselves (Anthias, 2002, p. 496). The family often provided the means through which this collective differentiation occurred, reflecting how one’s identity is “grounded in identifications and transactions with others” (Weinreich, 2002, p. 1). As explained by one Storyteller:

All I know is every time you met another Island person they were either aunty so and so or uncle so and so, you know like that. Even if they weren’t closely related they were still considered as part of that wider family you know. Then when you met an Island person who was much more closely related to Grandma or even my parents, they would say ‘this is *prapa* relation’. Like you got them other relations but this is *prapa* so sit up and take notice of this one. (Female Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, early 40s)

The reference to common family values was emphasised by one third generation Storyteller as being a distinct feature of Torres Strait Islander culture reinforcing, in the process, the notion of a collective identity:

One of the stronger values that I take away with me about Torres Strait Islander culture is one of family and the notion of an extended family and love, caring and sharing associated with that. If we go back to the early events ... for example ... various feastings whether they be for birthdays, special memorable events or tombstone openings, then certainly you could get a strong sense of culture through the observing of the types of foods that were served up and the way in which people would interact and relate to each other. That sense of

intergenerational participation within the group, and also the sense of the roles that various people would bring to those types of gatherings. (Male Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged late 40s)

The Stories of these intergenerational connections with others served to provide the context within which discourses of culture, ceremony and tradition operated in mainland Torres Strait Islander communities. In this way, the Storytellers were not only mapping out a course of identification for themselves as young Islanders growing up in the Torres Strait and on the mainland (for second and third generation ‘Mainlanders’), they were, in the process, providing the *meaning* of these Stories and events. The Storytellers’ earlier identifications combined with their biographical experiences provided a backdrop for exploring how they conceptualised themselves across and between various categories within which they identified and/or groups that were ascribed to them as ‘Torres Strait Islanders’, ‘Torres Strait Islanders living on the Mainland’, ‘Descendents of Torres Strait Islanders’ and ‘Indigenous Australians’. One third generation Storyteller described how he felt ‘forced’ to publicly identify as a Torres Strait Islander for political purposes and how he managed to turn the situation into a positive experience for himself:

Back in 1982 ... you know people weren’t identifying as Torres Strait Islander, Kooris, Murris, what they were doing was lumping everybody together as Aboriginals ... Everyone wanted their own group names and so it was part of the era of changing and identifying who you were. And suddenly now, ‘you are a Torres Strait Islander you aren’t one of us’. I used the distinction to identify. Because I was a Torres Strait Islander, I could go in and say “I am a Torres

Strait Islander, I have no allegiances here”. (Male Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 40s)

The desire to maintain, protect and promote a positive self-image as Torres Strait Islanders draws attention to the ways these Storytellers negotiated their identities with others, deploying, in the process, a range of strategies that would help them either ‘fit in’ with a chosen group or conversely ‘stand out’. One first generation Storyteller explained how he used his traditional dress on the mainland to maintain his distinctiveness and public identification as a Torres Strait Islander:

I would wear my calico and they [white people] would say “have you got any pants under that?” [laughs]. I had to explain to them that this was my traditional dress and they were asking me how do you put it on and how do you keep it up because it had no zipper. When we dress up like that we wear the calico all the time. (Male Storyteller, 1st Generation Mainlander, aged early 60s, speaking about going to the pub)

The ‘presentation of self’ in these circumstances highlights the ways in which discourses are used to position one’s identity in relation to others in various social contexts (Weinreich, 2002). The emphasis on social contexts in shaping notions of individual identity explains, to a large degree, how these Storytellers conceptualised and located themselves as part of a broader group commonly known as ‘Torres Strait Islanders’. While the Storytellers shared Stories of themselves as individuals and considered themselves in personal terms, they invariably outlined processes that



focused on themselves as a member of the group (in this case Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait):

It was good to catch up with other Island people, especially our people. When we worked on the railway, every weekend, we always try to get together with your countrymen. So well all meet there. It was good, there were very few people and we were all spread out. (Male Storyteller, 1st Generation Mainlander, aged early 60s)

This Story of weekend get-togethers demonstrates how the first and second generation Storytellers, in particular, expressed themselves with regard to their relationships with others. The Storyteller's positive reference to Erub people, furthermore, calls attention to the fact that Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait are not, and never have been, a singular, homogenous collective. Islanders living outside the Torres Strait were, and still are, a multicultural and diverse group with many different languages and kinship groups with varied cultural practices and historical experiences. Although there are sufficient shared practices and commonalities across languages and cultural expression to provide grounds for perceived unity as a 'group' of 'Mainland Torres Strait Islanders', it is recognised that reference to a collective identity does not overlook the many and diverse collectivities that constitute the social construction of the 'Mainland Torres Strait Islander'.

Although a strong social element was evident in the Storytellers' narratives, it was clear that collective social identification served multiple functions and purposes. The inherent "need to belong" (Tice & Baumeister, 2001, p. 73) is a basic and powerful

aspect of human nature motivating people to form relationships with others. As a minority group on the mainland, the first generation Storytellers described how they readily formed relationships with kin and fellow ‘countrymen’ for social and emotional support, well-being and to establish and maintain ‘interconnectedness’. The strong sense of family and community expressed by the first generation Storytellers provides some explanation for how the Islanders re-presented their notions of kinship following their movement to the mainland. The second and third generation Storytellers similarly noted how family and kin were integral to their knowledge and understanding of collective group practice and interaction.

## **6.7 The Minority Experience**

The need to belong or identify with a group, for these Storytellers, was definitely heightened in times of perceived racism and marginalisation. While the experiences of colonialism had heightened Torres Strait Islanders’ sensitivities to racism and oppression in extreme conditions, the encounters of discrimination on the mainland occurred under circumstances where they were a minority group living within a dominant white society. The second and third generation Storytellers, in particular, shared their experiences of being a minority group on the mainland:

We went to private schooling from day one and ... it was really exclusively white you know. Very few kids like us. I don’t ever recall in those early primary years of there being any Aboriginal children and I think the only Islander kids that were there were us and whatever cousins we had that came to that school as well. Certainly the other kids at school particularly the white kids I mean they

gave you the wake up call you know ‘get away from me you dirty black girl’.

(Female Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 40s)

Another third generation Storyteller similarly shared his negative experiences of the school system, noting a discord between images of Indigenous people he was learning about at school and his own perception of who he was as a ‘black kid’:

In grade 5 I had to draw an Aboriginal with a spear in a lap lap and a little dilly bag and all that sort of thing. I was looking at it and I suppose I was thinking well that’s not me, I don’t look like that. But I am. I got an A<sup>+</sup> for that assignment. It did make a marked impression. I still remember the assignment. I’ve still got the assignment at home somewhere. (Male Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 40s)

One of the second generation Storytellers spoke of the coping mechanisms she used to manage incidents of racism and discrimination:

In high school I saw a lot of racist things. I remember my dad used to say to me, just fight for your rights. Either way you had to do it because you had just as much right to be there than them. He was a big believer in not sitting back so I sort of managed through high school in that way and I used to learn boxing. At school you had to line up, and I’d always get knocked back to the end of the line and there were these two girls that thought they had it over me and one day I went home and told him and he said ‘you should just elbow them in the guts’ and so I did [laughs uncontrollably]. When I went home he said ‘how’s that

problem at school’ and I said ‘it’s not a problem anymore [laughs aloud again].

‘Cause that was his way of fixing things. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged late 50s)

In comparison to the second and third generation Storytellers, the first generation spoke less about their direct experiences of racism and more about how they struggled in hard times and managed to ‘carve out a living’ for themselves at the time as Islanders living in ‘white towns’ like Cairns and Townsville. This group, in particular, benefited from the labour shortages experienced on the mainland, both during and immediately after World War Two, allowing them to obtain employment in areas where they might not normally be hired by white people. The first generation Storytellers proudly told of their experiences as fishermen, mill workers, laundry workers, nannies and caretakers working in Cairns during the 1940s and 1950s. While not afforded the same pay and working conditions as their white counterparts at the time, the first generation Storytellers enthusiastically took up opportunities to work in areas that they had not known about in the Torres Strait:

I used to work in the steam laundry. It was very interesting work. I’d never done anything like that before. So yeah, it was good. (Female Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 80s)

The fact that Torres Strait Islanders in the 1940s and 1950s could obtain roles in what might be referred to as ‘mainstream’ employment in towns such as Cairns, Townsville and Mackay does not suggest, however, that colour-blindness was necessarily at the forefront of their white employers’ minds. Despite achieving a certain level of social acceptance in the predominantly white towns in which they settled,

Islanders still faced the prospect of living in areas on the towns' fringes in their own self-made communities, away from the rest of the population. However, to claim a position of passive victim in these narratives would overlook the Storytellers' own agency in transforming and responding to discursive processes and habits of racism and difference. For example, Torres Strait Islanders who moved to the mainland, particularly in the period immediately before and after World War Two, actively sought support and network opportunities with other 'minority' cultural and ethnic groups (for example, Malaytown in Cairns during the 1930s through to the 1950s).

Mainland Islanders' affinity with other black collectives, nevertheless, does not imply a universality of the 'black experience' or a simple construction of 'black people' in opposition to white people. Such simple binary oppositions representative of 'them' and 'us' do not expose the complexities of race and inter-cultural relations that existed, either back then or now, between minority groups such as Mainland Islanders, Aboriginal people, ethnic groups and the dominant white society. For example, there were intermarriages between white Australians and Torres Strait Islanders and as noted by one Storyteller:

We practiced two cultures because Mum was white Australian (dad was Torres Strait Islander. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged late 50s)

Another Storyteller similarly stated:

My mother's a fifth generation European Australian [father is an Asian Torres Strait Islander] ... My family roots, my heritage go certainly back to the islands [in the Torres Strait] in one direction and in another direction it goes over to

England somewhere, you know Sheffield and places like that over there. (Male Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 40s)

Interracial tensions were not confined however to 'black' and 'white' relations. Racism and perceptions of prejudice were also prevalent within the Torres Strait Islander community as explained by one Storyteller:

There's a class structure and it still exists. There are still remnants of that today. It's based on people's skin colour and marriages to a certain extent as well. I mean it's not voiced openly but between the lines it still exists. The darker skinned people are very judgmental in the sense that if you're light skinned you really don't understand what it was really like and those that are light skinned really don't get that sort of harassment or racism that's given to people who are darker skinned. For example [referring to the evacuation of people during the war], the Islanders, the other people, the dark skinned were not evacuated. They were left here [referring to Thursday Island], because most of those who were evacuated were intermarried [with non-Torres Strait Islanders]. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged mid 30s)

While the negative experience of racism has not escaped these Storytellers of all generations, such prejudice and intolerance has, ironically, given impetus to a range of self-asserted identities that have been creatively expressed in the arts, multimedia and other forms of communication (for example, the Paipa Torres Strait Islander exhibition of arts and cultural icons featured at the Australian National Museum, 2006). These new expressions and representations of cultural pride and positive self-image give

emphasis to the ways Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait have continued to produce new contexts and meanings for their social identities in response to different places and different times, facilitating, in the process, a constant re-siting of boundaries between ‘them’ and ‘us’ (Hall, 1996).

## **6.8 The Practice of Torres Strait Islander Culture on the Mainland**

Irrespective of what happens, irrespective of whether I return to the Torres Strait or not, I know who I am. I know my identity, I know my culture. (Jose, 1998, p. 144)

The Storytellers’ recollections of their formative years and their earliest experiences of Torres Strait Islander culture and practice extended into very descriptive narratives about the practice and adaptation of cultural practice, traditions and values on the mainland. For the first generation Storytellers, the passing on of culture became central to linking their children (and subsequent generations) to the Torres Strait and their islands of origin. The ongoing practice of culture and custom served several important social functions including the maintenance of both real and imagined ties to the Torres Strait, the facilitation of individual and group interaction and intergenerational cultural exchange and learning. The latter was particularly emphasised with reference to respect and responsibility, cultural knowledge and values:

The lack of respect the young people have for the older generation these days isn’t something I reckon would happen if more Indigenous youth were in contact or in touch with their cultural heritage and values. They might have been

taught when they were younger but they've lost contact. So I think it's important to maintain that because there are a lot of good values in that. I mean there's a good side and bad side to everything but as far as traditional values go, there is a lot of good things about it. Basically you do for others as you would have them done for you, that's a good thing. (Male Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged late 30s)

The need to maintain strong links between the younger and older generations for the sake of 'cultural teaching' and the passing on of traditional knowledge and learning was articulated by many of the Storytellers. The first generation Storytellers emphasised the importance of respect for older people as a core principle that needed to be observed if traditions were to be 'kept alive' by the younger generations. The first and second generation Storytellers, in particular, outlined the ways they tried to maintain those connections between younger and older Islanders within family and community social structures. On keeping family 'together', one Storyteller commented:

It was very important when Mum and Pop was alive. We travelled up to Cairns every Christmas time so the children would learn and know their grandparents, their cousins and learn the respect. It's the [family] teaching to have respect for your elders. We used to get flogged if aunties, uncles or big people were talking. You were not allowed to play anywhere around them – "go play outside, don't run through here" – really respect your elders that sort of thing. It's very relaxed now, it's not so enforced. Still you hear people chase them little ones, it's that teaching of respect ... Family means love and support. Big thing to have that respect. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 60s)



The second and third generation Storytellers described their experiences of growing up with Torres Strait Islander culture and practice within their families. One Storyteller spoke of the many social activities she participated in as a child in Cairns during the late 1950s:

They use to have dances and kids used to have things themselves like dance groups, hula groups for the girls ... You had to go to practice every week and then you'd have a big group going and dancing ... You'd get all dressed up, put makeup on, flowers in our hair. Mothers would be busy at the back and everybody sitting in the hall and we'd go out dancing. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, late 50s)

The public performance of cultural practice, specifically dancing and singing, accentuates, to a large extent, the visual systems of representation that reproduce and provide sites for identity positions (Woodward, 2002). The Storyteller's reference to hula dancing evidences the strong multicultural influence, particularly Pacific Island culture, on the practice of Torres Strait Islander cultural activities. She furthermore highlights the performance aspect of Torres Strait Islander culture as evidenced by the need for weekly practice sessions, big group routines and the palatable presentation of the female dancers complete with costumes, make-up and hair nicely done. Reference to the role of the mothers furthermore highlights how cultural activities at that time organised and structured social roles for family members and the community. The primacy of visual representations of 'culture' in this context emphasises the ways identity becomes meaningful through cultural fusion (Torres Strait/Pacific Islander); cultural symbols (costumes, flowers in the hair) and social practice (mothers facilitating

preparation and the dancing presentation). The range of cultural practices and symbols that constitute discourse in these settings reinforces the sensory perceptions of a culture which needs to be seen, heard and felt in order to be fully experienced.

Further evidence of the performance aspect of culture was found in the narrative of another Storyteller who spoke of his involvement in school-based Torres Strait Islander dance troupes during the 1980s in Cairns:

I remember when I was back in primary school, I was in the Torres Strait Islander dance group. There were a group of us. The Aboriginal group and the Torres Strait group and we both had the dancing and we did this in actual school time too so all the non-Indigenous people saw us. Yeah, it was really good fun.  
(Male Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 30s)

The performance aspect of culture was a recurring theme in the narratives of the Storytellers involving descriptions of singing, dancing, feasting and ceremony. In this regard, I was particularly interested in unpacking some of the underlying thoughts and assumptions of the Storytellers involved with ‘enacting’/‘acting out’ their interpretation of traditional Torres Strait Islander culture on the mainland. During the course of this research, I participated in and observed the haircutting ceremony of a very young male child (September, 2003, Cairns). For the participant family, this ceremony marked an important rite of passage for the young boy (18 months old at the time) and represented the first of several initiation ceremonies planned for him on his journey to adulthood. The following summary of the event was documented following my viewing of the videotape of the event.

The ceremony was conducted at the participant family's home and attended by approximately forty people including elders, grandparents, aunties, uncles and cousins of all ages. After the feasting, a speech was presented by the grandfather. In the speech he stated:

The cutting of hair and then later on in life when he becomes an adult and has his shave, this is the process of being initiated into adulthood. Tonight we come together to witness and share with the family, this special time for my grandson- the oldest grandson, the only grandson. We can start if he will sit still while cutting his hair. Usually it is the privilege of the [immediate] uncle for cutting the hair, but none of the uncles are here so godfather and oldest uncle will cut the hair. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 60s)

I made the following field notes at the time:

The young boy was seated in the middle of the crowd with a towel draped over his shoulders. He was fidgeting in the seat and a biscuit was eventually given to him by his aunty to help distract his attention away from the fuss that was about to take place. One by one, the child's uncles were called upon to come forward to cut a lock of the boy's hair. The child's aunty dutifully caught the discarded hair in a plastic container, careful to ensure none of the boy's precious curly locks fell to the ground. When the ceremony was completed, the audience broke into rapturous applause as the little boy was taken into the house by two of his aunties to straighten up his haircut and make sure it was evenly cut.

(Researcher's Videotape Notes, 24 October, 2003, Cairns)

Shortly after this event, I interviewed a first, second and third generation Storyteller respectively to seek their views on the significance and meaning of the cultural haircutting ceremony they had attended. The first generation Storyteller emphasised the importance of the connection between ‘knowing your culture’ as a way of knowing or finding out more about yourself. The need to ‘understand who you are and where you come from’ underscored a heartfelt desire (on his behalf) for his grandson to fully appreciate his connection with the Torres Strait, an almost necessary precondition for ascribing an identity for oneself. His narrative furthermore highlighted the need to keep cultural practice ‘alive’ exposing an overriding concern that culture may somehow ‘die off’ on the mainland unless it was constantly practiced and shared with as many younger people as possible:

It’s very important to learn the traditional custom and later on when he grows older he will have his first shave. We keep the customs, the traditional way of life. We bring our kids up that way and it’s something we pass on to our children and they in turn hand down to their children. It won’t die, it will carry on and on and on. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, early 60s)

He went on to explain why it was important to keep these traditions and practices ‘alive’ for a sense of mainland Torres Strait Islander identity:

It’s very important to the value of the Torres Strait Islander people, so the practice won’t die away, we continue to practice that. It more or less gives you an identification, *so when you practice culture then you understand who you are and where you come from and what you believe in.* That’s why we need to

keep it alive and get our children to carry on and keep it alive. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, early 60s, my emphasis)

The second generation Storyteller (who was also the father of the child) expressed a similar view that participation in a haircutting ceremony could provide a tangible link for the child between the present, past and his future as a Torres Strait Islander. The need to maintain some semblance of contact for his son to his cultural heritage was emphasised as a significant factor motivating the staging of this event. The ceremony, therefore, served a number of purposes including bringing family together for the sharing of and participation in cultural practice, the establishment of contact with a past that connects the boy child to his ancestors and Torres Strait Islander heritage and equipping the child with a ‘sense of culture’ against the backdrop of disparate and less extensive family networks existing on the mainland in the future:

It was important for the boy because of the fact that he is a Torres Strait Islander who will find it I suppose difficult in the future, more difficult than it was for his parents to keep in contact with his cultural heritage. There are a lot more influences these days for young kids and also in the future there won’t be the same family network that his parents were use to when they grew up. There are just ways to keep in touch with where you have come from. No matter where you go you can always say “when I was young I took part in these types of ceremonies”. *It’s a way of helping to keep him in contact.* It’s not the only way and on its own it’s not going to provide the link with, or to his cultural background but it’s a step in the right direction. (Male Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, mid 30s, referring to the ceremony, my emphasis)

For the third generation Storyteller, the haircutting ceremony offered her the opportunity to reflect upon her own cultural background, particularly her ‘Torres Strait Islander side’. Her reference to her ‘Torres Strait Islander side’ reflects an increasing trend for young Islanders to express their identity in pluralistic and diverse forms. In this regard, notions of Torres Strait Islander identity are represented less in terms of a discrete, static, unchanging ‘core essence of self’ to be found, lost or maintained. Instead, the Storyteller’s narrative suggested that identity productions are a constant and evolving ‘work in progress’ that are represented (in this case) through discourses of culture, tradition and self-biography. The same Storyteller went on to further explain that participation in the ceremony made her ‘feel closer’ to her Torres Strait Islander heritage. Having said that, however, her language suggested that the ‘Torres Strait side’ was but one of the varied and diverse dimensions that constituted her sense of identity. While the interface at which these identities engage may be a site of contestation for competing authenticity (“sometimes it gets confusing” she noted), the language of ‘layered identities’ points towards new dialogues to be pursued in the future by Torres Strait Islanders around the identity subject matter:

It’s pretty important because it’s good especially for him [the boy child] and even me to show that side of the culture. It’s good to expose that stuff to us because *I learned more about my culture, my Torres Strait Islander side* that I didn’t even know so it’s good to see it instead of somebody telling you about it. So yeah it is kind of important, you get to learn more about yourself.

With this Torres Strait Islander haircutting ceremony, *it sort of made me feel more a part of being a Torres Strait Islander*. Sometimes it gets confusing at

times you know because I don't speak the language of the Torres Strait Islanders or anything like that. I don't dress traditionally and all that sort of stuff so these ceremonies are pretty important. (Female Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, late teens, my emphasis)

The perspectives of the Storytellers involved in the haircutting event provided insight into the issues motivating Islanders to practice cultural ceremonies and initiations outside the Torres Strait. It also raised questions around cultural practice and new forms and expression of identity drawing upon themes of custom and tradition. For example, is the practice of ceremonies, traditional events, singing, dancing and language necessary pre-requisites for the expression of a more 'authentic' individual and collective social identity? For an increasing number of Islanders born and raised away from the Torres Strait, collective immersion in cultural practice and social habits may not be as readily available or accessible when compared with their parents' and grandparents' upbringing. Improved opportunities for education and employment, across a wide range of fields, has resulted in increased dispersal of Islanders in towns and cities all over Australia, and even overseas. While social and collective support remains a desired ideal, economic and social imperatives have gradually superseded the need for Islanders to locate to areas with established Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

The impact of these changing demographics (coupled with changing social structures and family values) can be found in situations where there is no intergenerational family or community social support to facilitate the 'passing down' or teaching and learning of traditional cultural practices. The emphasis on visual culture

and representation furthermore accentuates the experiential aspect of Islander cultural knowledge, traditions and social practices (hunting, fishing, gardening, singing, dancing and language in particular). For new societies of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait, how does one speak of an identity in the absence of the ‘experience of culture’ most popularly expressed in cultural discourses including singing, dancing, language and other forms of cultural practice (hunting, fishing, seafaring, diving etcetera)?

## **6.9 I Can’t Dance, I Can’t Sing**

For the second and third generation Storytellers, expressions of cultural knowledge, tradition and practice were diverse and varied. The first generation Storytellers, however, lamented the loss of traditional culture in Torres Strait Islander communities:

Well in society today, everything is more tempting. Everything’s at their fingertips, they can do what they want to do. But if we practice more culture, the traditional ways of life, hopefully they will understand what Torres Strait Islander way of life is all about ... I believe young people know their culture but they learn different things in life today. We were talking about the old ways in the good old days when everyone had respect for one another but in today’s society there is no respect. The more the kids growing up and in turn handing down [tradition and custom] to their kids, I think it will bring the people together and bring that respect back into the community. (Male Storyteller, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Mainlander, aged early 60s)



In a changing and modern world, the second and third generation Storytellers' narratives reflected a desire to create spaces for new forms of identity and cultural expression in contrast to representations of authenticity and antiquity which confirm expectations of completeness, tradition and essence (Russell, 2001). As outlined by one Storyteller:

I don't have a lot of cultural knowledge and I don't practice Islander culture. I don't have a big family. I don't have the obligatory system of interacting, socialising, economics and you know the multiple distribution of assets and resources, things like that. I don't have the sharing that comes from being part of a big family network, that sort of thing, being reliant on one another. My father's family is very strongly religious and I haven't got a religious bone in my body. I've never practiced that. My father used to go diving for turtle, used to go shooting for crocodile and sharks. I don't do that. I don't dance, I don't do art.

How do I identify? Well firstly, I identify in that I have a biological connection to the islands [in the Torres Strait]. Two, I am who I am. I look like an Islander, although some people contest that. Somebody did contest that. But I have the colour, I have the forehead, I have the curly hair when I grow it long. I have the appearance - that's part of the identity because that's something you can't escape. I don't think I have the aspiration to be an 'Islander Islander'. (Male Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, mid 40s)

Another Storyteller similarly spoke of his own lack of *cultural knowledge* while at the same time outlining what he considered to be important for maintaining his sense of cultural integrity:

I can't dance, well I can, but I can't Islander dance. I can't make a mat. But I can tell you the history of where we came from. I'm not saying that none of those other things are important. I'm just saying that for me, to keep my cultural integrity together, I think my take on it, it's important to know where you're from. Like who's your family and where does your name come from and those are the important things. I don't know all that other stuff, but I can identify the history of where we are from. (Male Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, mid 30s)

A much younger Storyteller pointed out that she did not feel any less of an Islander given her circumstances:

I don't speak the language or dress traditionally. But when you're with your family and stuff it makes you feel like a part of it [Torres Strait Islander culture]. It doesn't make me feel 'less' it just makes me feel really slack. I could get to know the language, I could get to know more about the beliefs and stuff about Torres Strait Islander culture. I don't know much about that, but it doesn't make me feel less [of a Torres Strait Islander]. (Female Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, late teens)

Another Storyteller offered an overview of the impact of cultural identification on young people's sense of self worth and sense of belonging:

With some of the work that I've done, many young people can be led astray into thinking that they can't identify themselves as belonging to a culture or a collective because they've never been part of an initiation ceremony or they haven't lived in a particular site or they've never been brought up in the customs or the ways that would deem a person to be associated with a particular cultural group or cultural collective. (Male Storyteller, 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Mainlander, late 40s)

The Storytellers' narratives underscored how, from their perspective, a lack of knowledge or experience in traditional custom and practice did not take away from their sense of identification as Torres Strait Islanders. For these 'Mainland Islanders', expressions of cultural identity can be found in numerous and diverse forms that are not constrained by notions of what constitutes tradition, custom and accepted Torres Strait Islander social practices. In this regard, these Islanders have sought to engage with representations of 'authentic Islanderness' and the more hegemonic forms of individual and collective representation with a view to re-presenting themselves and their culture in new and dynamic ways:

Not having lived with Torres Strait Islander people socially as parents or as extended family, the challenge for me is to understand what it does mean for me. People do not pick me up as being Torres Strait Islander so you know I've always had to think about why the conscious decision to identify. I suppose the

thing is, I'm not ashamed of my heritage and I'm not ashamed of my father's history. I suppose because I have a social justice bent and still being influenced by my mother and being influenced by people while growing up, being able to be an agent of change for others, has reinforced the need to maintain an identity that involves being a Torres Strait Islander. Acknowledging that and being seen to be that doesn't mean marching down the street.

I play a role being an advocate for my own people by showing non-Indigenous people alternative images and models of what Indigenous people are and can be. I can speak, I've got a degree, I dress in suits, you know, all those sorts of things. (Male Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, mid 40s)

#### **6.10 Re-presenting New Identities**

The political and social construction of new spaces from which Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland can speak of identity exposes a very powerful story about the ways this group exercise agency in order to adopt a particular identity position. The relational aspect of identity, constructed through relations of difference between ourselves and others, goes beyond binary representations as evidenced by an increasing number of Mainland Islanders acknowledging, negotiating and traversing the boundaries between 'them' and 'us'. While historical moments have shaped the social and material circumstances influencing identity construction for Torres Strait Islanders, equal consideration must be given to the ways Islanders have asserted, accommodated and invested in their identity positions during times of change and social transformation. The narratives of the Storytellers evidence a 'Mainlander' identity whereby the personal and the social are inextricably linked through shared histories,

experiences and family structures underscoring the relatedness between individuals and their sense of community. The narratives of the self and the stories we tell about ourselves in this chapter have provided a framework for understanding how identity construction for 'Mainlanders' has been, and continues to be, fluid, contingent and changing over time.

'Mainland Torres Strait Islander' identity is constitutively paradoxical in that its existence depends upon the identities that ostensibly comprise it; the 'Torres Strait Islander' element and its Mainlander 'counter-identity'. We are, as 'Mainland Islanders', defined by the metaphorical hyphen which on the one hand circumscribes our identification as Torres Strait Islanders yet it is this very distinction as 'Mainlanders' that promotes our sense of distinctiveness, represents a point of difference between ourselves and others and sustains our engagement in the "politics of recognition" (Taylor, 2004). The metaphorical hyphen between the Mainland and Islander, however, does not represent a 'between two worlds' phenomenon. Rather, this thesis posits that a more critical approach is needed in the description, analysis, explanation and interpretation of the everyday experiences of Islanders living on the mainland. Nakata (2007) advocates that "any Islander standpoint needs to emerge in the process of analysis [if we are ever to understand the] complex positioning that is constitutive of Islander experience at the Interface" (p. 212). My research represents a starting point for that analysis with the involvement and engagement of other 'Mainlanders' in the process of examining and investigating their positions in identity discourses. The aim of this research is not to produce some universal truth about what it means to be a Torres Strait Islander on the mainland but, rather, to encourage critical

scrutiny about what is known and understood about ‘Mainlanders’ and the workings and implications of this very knowledge.

Much of the contemporary focus on the ‘Mainland Islander experience’ has been on the politics of place making and the application of binary oppositions that often present themselves as rigid constructions of people, place and space (whether it is Torres Strait versus the Mainland, Islanders in the Torres Strait versus Islanders on the Mainland and/or ‘Mainland’ Islanders versus Aboriginal people). Nakata’s (2007) theory of the Cultural Interface not only exposes the mythology of the ‘between two worlds’ phenomenon but, furthermore, presents a framework for understanding how Islanders operate across and between simultaneous trajectories of our historical and present circumstances. Nakata (2007) reiterates how the Cultural Interface is the “overlay of myriad intersections of sets of relations” (p. 210) in that:

Islander experience is constituted in a complex nexus between ‘lived experience’ and discursive constructions that play out in many shifting intersections that are never reducible to any one intersection (for example, the relation between the traditional and mainstream. (p. 210)

My research draws on Nakata’s (2007) framework to explore how ‘Mainlander’ identities are constituted not only through lived experience but also through the discursive practices that influence the way Islanders living outside the Torres Strait speak of, and represent, individual and collective identities. This research evidences how identification of ‘Mainland Islanders’ is shifting and variable across multi-level ‘planes’ that overlap, interconnect and draw parallel with one another. These ‘planes of

identity', representing macro conceptualisations, or themes, of People, Place, Home and Culture, are constantly being re-negotiated, re-configured and re-presented in response to individual and collective histories, present circumstances and aspirations for the future. The macro themes constituting these planes of identity derive from the findings of this research and are premised on the principles of empowerment, self-determination and personal autonomy. The macro themes represent a diverse range of discursive practices including for example, identifications of People (gender, age, ethnicity, religion, social status and political position), Place (residence, employment, environment), Home (current home, ancestral home, imagined home, belonging) and Culture (cultural practice, customs, and traditions). The interconnection and operations of the planes of identity result in representations of identity that can be expressed, displayed and, conversely, internalised in a myriad of ways. No one macro theme dominates the other, although there may be times, as this research has shown, where the themes produce different and potentially contradictory identities. The planes of identity should be viewed as functioning alongside each other as a set of continually shifting positions, providing differing sites for interaction, social relationships and environmental contexts. As Barker (2004) affirms, "one does not have an identity or even identities; rather, one is described as being constituted by a centre-less weave of beliefs, attitudes and identifications" (p. 129). These planes of identity are similarly centre-less insofar as they do not represent an overarching organising 'Mainland Torres Strait Islander identity'. Rather, the planes represent contested sites of multiple and fractured identities in which 'Mainlanders' move in-between, around and through. The planes of identity do not work to provide a unified core self but, instead, expand the possibilities for 'Mainlanders' to engage in identity dialogues that represent more accurately the plurality of lived experience as Islanders.

The concept of shifting across planes of identity can be seen in these twin paintings done by one of the participant Storytellers in 2007 (see Figure 6.1). The depiction of herself as a young Torres Strait Islander woman conveys strength, confidence, a contemporary sense of style and leaves little doubt of her self-assuredness. Here she provides an explanation for her art, titled *Laila: A Self-Portrait*:

These paintings represent my life as a young Torres Strait Islander/Indian woman. I am contemporary, sophisticated and outward looking. The turtle and *dari* symbolise my Islander roots and the links to my ancestral heritage in the Torres Strait. The paintings are distinctively minimalist, a stripping back of pretence to reveal a raw honesty about myself. The paintings do not seek to offer explanations of myself as either a Torres Strait Islander or Indian woman, but rather serve as an expression of myself in the world at this point in time. (Laila, 28 October 2007)





*Figure 6.1 Laila: A Self Portrait<sup>10</sup>.*

Identity, for Islanders living outside the Torres Strait, has been, and continues to be, marked by contemporaneous themes of continuity and enduring change, representing, in the process, contested sites for ‘Mainlanders’ sense of distinctiveness, difference and recognition. Islanders living outside the Torres Strait (as represented in

<sup>10</sup> Imagery of artwork provided by Laila.

The participant (and other young Islanders like her) are not defined by their location in binary oppositions of ‘loss’ and ‘no loss’. Instead, ‘Mainlanders’ are engaging in the type of social agency they have deployed in historical and contemporary contexts to re-invent and re-interpret themselves, their inter-relationships with others and their environments. This thesis maintains that if ‘Mainland Islanders’ are to more fully engage with, and eventually change, the political and social discourses that currently circumscribe and malign ‘Mainlanders’, we must first of all understand how we are both constituted by, and located within, them. With more and more Islanders being born, raised and living outside the Torres Strait, questions of identity will become even more prevalent in the future, underscoring the need for Islanders to not only maintain critical insight into the ways they are positioned by these discourses but, more importantly, how they position themselves.

#### **6.11 New modes, Re-presentations and Dialogues of Identity**

The formation of ‘Mainlander’ identity incorporates the way this group is defined (or not defined as is mostly the case) in legislation and policy, the ways that they are perceived by others and the ways they self-identify as Islanders. Rather than providing a definitive and prescriptive explanation for this formation of identity, this thesis provides a lens through which we can examine, look back on and investigate the meaning we derive from the identity narratives that constitute our day-to-day experiences as Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. This research evidences the contradictions in the identity narratives that explain ‘Mainlanders’ complex sense of place and home, their relationships with family based in the Torres Strait and their practice of cultural traditions on the mainland.

The role of re-presentation and the importance of symbolic systems of ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ have provided, in recent times, sites of contestation, resistance and debate about the presentation of essentialised forms of authentic identities. These same systems of representation have, in turn, created spaces for ‘new’ more contingent, hybrid and fluid understandings of identity. New forms of cultural expression and identity can be found in numerous and diverse modes of communication and organisation including, most notably, the arts, multimedia and technology. Technology, in particular, has transformed the possibilities for the representation of identity in contemporary Torres Strait Islander societies on the mainland. For example, my own research project has resulted in the recording of digital histories of the first wave of Torres Strait Islanders to the mainland. The production of the DVD *Malaytown Stories: First Wave of Torres Strait Islanders to the Mainland* and similar multimedia products has meant improved accessibility to, and interest in, Islanders’ own histories of culture, resilience and movement to the mainland.

The establishment of e-mail groups, including [torresstraitislanders@yahoo.com](mailto:torresstraitislanders@yahoo.com), informing subscribers of recent events and community information has facilitated the interconnection between Torres Strait Islanders not just in Australia but also in a global context. In recent times, the same e-mail group has been used to recruit and inform participants in research projects for Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. Family groups have similarly set up e-mail networks and associated websites as a form of communication and social interaction. Franklin’s (2003) study of Pacific articulations of race and culture through Internet discussion forums demonstrates how generations of postcolonial South Pacific Islands are redefining what it means to be Polynesian in a diasporic context:

The discussion threads that traverse these parts of the worldwide web are weaving their own online tapestry of the everyday. As they go, they have been evolving into not only spaces for personal expression and mutual support but also challenges to old and new sociocultural and political pressures emanating from both 'original' and diasporic cultural contexts. (p. 485)

Nash's (2003) study of cultural geographies of relatedness similarly shows how technology facilitates shared experiences of ancestry and genealogy for relatives separated by distance:

This contact via email and the internet is a routine part of genealogy, as people respond to information or enquiries posted on personal or organizational websites and to a range of general and specialist email discussion lists ... These internet sites and groups foster informal on-line networks that link individuals across the world who share interests in specific places or ancestries. (p. 195)

While the Torres Strait e-mail groups and websites may not be as sophisticated as those models described by Franklin (2003) and Nash (2003), they nevertheless represent new forms and modes of communication and interconnectedness which, in turn, promote new models and vocabularies for expressing Islander social, cultural and political identities.

Multimedia production in the arts, most notably the *Paipa* Exhibition displayed in the Torres Strait Gallery of the Australian National Museum in Canberra from 2002

to 2005, has similarly provided a public forum for ‘telling the Stories of mainland Islanders’ with involvement from younger Torres Strait Islanders. *Paipa*, Western Torres language *Kala Lagaw Ya* meaning windward, explores the story of Torres Strait Islander migration to the mainland from historical and contemporary perspectives. The website for the exhibition outlines the purpose and themes for the collection of Stories, photographs, music, artefacts and personal display items including clothing, artwork and cultural icons. The official description from the National Museum of Australia describes the diverse circumstances that motivated Torres Strait Islanders to move away from their ancestral home islands, the contribution Torres Strait Islanders made to mainland industry, particularly in pearling and fishing, the sugarcane and agricultural sector and the settlement of new communities on the mainland, including Broome in Western Australia and Mackay in Queensland. There is continuity evident in this story, as reflected in the *Paipa* metaphor of the four winds drawing people from and through the Torres Strait. The overview of the exhibition features a strong narrative of connection between Islanders who moved away from the Torres Strait and their home islands and the family and kinship groups still residing there:

The essence of the exhibition is to demonstrate that although Islanders migrated to different mainland communities, they remain closely affiliated with their culture and kin relations in the Torres Strait.

*Paipa* contains five modules that represent a flow in migration. The modules explore how the many beliefs, traditions and customs have responded to the many influences migration and industry have brought. The modules examine the historical and contemporary forms of Torres Strait Islander culture and people.

The five modules are:

Module 1 Coming of the Light

Module 2 Pearling/Fishing Industry

Module 3 Cane Cutting Industry

Module 4 World War II

Module 5 Young People's Perspective on the Environment. (National Museum of Australia, n.d.)

The descriptions of the respective modules similarly emphasise the connection between 'Mainland Islanders' and the Torres Strait, through Christian practice (including the re-enactment of the Coming of the Light on the mainland), the transference of maritime knowledge and skills in the pearling and fishing industries, the recruitment of workers from the Torres Strait for the sugarcane industry in eastern coastal towns of Queensland and the links younger Torres Strait Islanders have with their cultural heritage and the impact of 'Westernisation' on contemporary Islander representation of identity. In module 3 of the exhibition, the emphasis on connection and cultural ties to the Torres Strait is outlined in the following descriptor:

Module 3 Cane Cutting Industry

From 1947 the cane cutting industry in Queensland experienced a surge in Islander labour. Torres Strait Islanders were seen to fill the gap and a readily attainable labour source. Many Islanders were recruited directly from the Islands to work on the mainland. Today, there are Torres Strait Islander communities along much of the east coast of Queensland.

This module focuses on the Torres Strait Islander community in Mackay. It centres around the story of how Islanders moved south and the hardships encountered in the sugar industry such as the working conditions. When the demand for pearl shell ceased, Islanders then went into cane cutting as another form of employment. *However, although Islanders moved away from the Torres Strait, they remained closely bonded to kinship ties.*

The visitor will be able to follow the migration trend from Torres Strait to east Queensland through the cane cutting industry. The visitor will gain an understanding of the transition from pearling to cane cutting, as well as some of the hardships faced by Torres Strait Islanders when they settled along the Queensland coast. (National Museum of Australia, n.d.)

When I visited the *Paipa* exhibition in Canberra in October 2004, I immediately noted the seamless transition between the five themes. The same themes of interconnectivity, reciprocity and relatedness were similarly represented in the narrative of the exhibition. As explained by one of the curators for the exhibition:

*Paipa* – windward – western language meaning looking at the four directions of the wind that pushed and pulled people through the Torres Strait and beyond.

What I wanted to do with *Paipa* was to demonstrate the connection of mainland Torres Strait Islanders to Torres Strait here. So *Paipa* is broken up into five components; the Coming of the Light, Pearling and Fishing, Cane Cutting, World War Two and Young People's Responses to the Environment. I thought young people really needed to have their own space because it's really providing

an avenue for their voice as well and too often that gets shut down in most places. (Female Storyteller, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Mainlander, Thursday Island, 28 April 2004)

The *Paipa* exhibition represented new ways of representing ‘Mainland Islander’ identity. The unpacking of the historical journey of Torres Strait Islanders to the mainland (presented in both visual and audio formats – see Figure 6.2) promoted a better understanding of the push/pull factors behind Islanders’ movement away from the Torres Strait. The Stories of the first wave ‘Mainlanders’ included in the exhibition gave ‘voice’ to many of the untold accounts of the adventure and exploration of new opportunities to be found on the mainland, balanced with descriptions of the drudgery of manual labour in the cane fields and, later, on the railways. Each of the exhibition’s modules demonstrated the ongoing connection and affinity ‘Mainlanders’ had, and continue to have, with the Torres Strait and the numerous adaptations and re-interpretations of their cultural practice outside the Torres Strait (for example the use of pigeon feathers for the *dari*, Islander headdress). The inclusion of a contemporary module representing young Torres Strait Islanders was particularly significant as it reflected the intergenerational context of identity formations. While influenced by Western and modern styles of music, dress and popular culture, the exhibition displayed (through Stories of connections with the sea and ancestral home islands) how Islander culture still had relevance to the everyday experiences of young people born and raised outside the Torres Strait. The *Paipa* exhibition demonstrated the social agency performed by ‘Mainlanders’ through their initiative and enterprise in emergent industries, their engagement with their new environment and the establishment of new and modified social structures and cultural practice outside the Torres Strait.



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*Figure 6.2 CD featuring songs performed by Islanders living outside the Torres Strait as part of the Paipa Exhibition<sup>11</sup>*

The agency exercised by Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait in the shaping of new identities is multi-faceted. It nevertheless reflects the phenomenon of every changing material and social circumstances through which Islanders have actively engaged in to produce and shape the dimensions of their economic, social, political and cultural life. The establishment of networks facilitated by technologies has been taken up by Islanders seeking to maintain the relatedness between individuals, families and communities and across generations. These emergent networks and related social systems provide spaces where new identities can be forged, negotiated and challenged. Such observations underscore the need for new languages, new conversations and new ways of speaking about (and to) Mainland Torres Strait

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<sup>11</sup> CD provided by Edward and Patricia Watkin.

Islanders about their identities and points the way forward for new possibilities for engagement and meaningful dialogue with this group.

New conversations can be undertaken within a framework that represents and gives voice to identities formed, negotiated and contested outside the Torres Strait. Such a framework, or story of relatedness, evidences the multiple ways 'Mainlanders' are expressing and re-presenting their identities in contemporary Australia. The themes of relatedness, reciprocity and understandings of *Ailan Pasin*, reflected in more 'traditional' forms of Islander identity, are evident in 'Mainlander' representations of identity. For an increasing number of Islanders born, raised and living outside the Torres Strait, such 'traditional' forms of identity expression are supplemented, re-interpreted and re-presented through new modes of representation and communication. These new modes of representation and identification continue to tell a story of Mainlander relatedness, of connection to ourselves, each other and a simultaneous sense of ancestral origin and 'mainland' place.

## Chapter 7

# New Ways of Thinking about ‘Mainland Torres Strait Islander Identity’

### 7.1 Introduction

Inspired by our Ancestors’ Stories of travel to the mainland, of connection to place and people, and the journey of return to their Island Home, my sister, Lenora Thaker (2008)<sup>12</sup>, composed the following poem, titled “On Luggers of Hopes and Dreams.”

#### *On Luggers of Hopes and Dreams*

*From across the waters we came*

*As the ancestors did before*

*In the belly of wooden boats*

*Carried our hopes and dreams*

*Great seas served and mastered*

*Sisters and brothers now sleep*

*Soundly beneath the waves*

*The cost of our passage paid*

*Toward the great south land*

*Cast the seeds of our tomorrow*

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<sup>12</sup> Poem by Lenora Thaker used with permission

*Upon sand, mud and rock  
We took root, we bloomed, we thrived*

*Beyond the reef, beyond the sea  
On luggers of hopes and dreams  
Island homes from whence we came  
Wait for our return.*

This thesis examined the representation and critical aspects of identity across different generations of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. The research study furthermore explored new ways of representing ‘Mainland Islander’ identity in a contemporary context.

This research demonstrated how Islanders living outside the Torres Strait have engaged in the social agency required to not only survive in changing circumstances but also to re-invent and re-interpret themselves, their social practices and intellectual traditions in response to that very change. While this change has been explained in terms of loss, lack and cessation, even by Islanders themselves (Beckett, 1987; Fuary, 1991), this research has evidenced change processes that are characterised by improvisation, creativity and innovation. Moreover, Islanders living outside the Torres Strait have kept in close touch with their families in the Torres Strait analogous with the type of transnational identities and multiple loyalties formed by migrant communities (Voigt-Graf, 2005).

It would be wrong, however, to assert that current government legislation and policies pertaining to Islanders living outside the Torres Strait are merely a product of

white hegemony. It would be equally wrong to assert a counter-narrative that describes 'Mainlander' identity as being immune from hegemonic world views, grounded in a heightened awareness of political positioning, steeped in cultural traditions and practices, of ongoing connection to ancestral place and of intrinsic 'acceptance' by, and 'belonging' to, the broader Islander community, including in the Torres Strait. Such an assertion only serves to apply yet another binary construction that this thesis is arguing against.

'Mainland Islanders' have been described and analysed as a minority group (Beckett, 1987; 2004), silenced by institutional structures (*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005*) and located in deficit cultural discourses (Barnes, 1998). But as this research has evidenced, 'Mainland Islanders' have continuously engaged in processes of re-defining and re-presenting themselves not simply as a collective living outside the Torres Strait but as individuals and groups forging new and shifting identities out of the experiences and historical memories of an Island Home, cultural tradition and practice and everyday life. This thesis was, therefore, not merely a response to negative accounts of the 'Mainland Islander' experience. Rather, this research study aimed to create spaces from which Islanders could speak about the critical aspects of their identity, how that identity is represented and will continue to be represented in the future.

This research demonstrated how Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait are not merely passive actors operating in plural social structures and discourses but are, instead, active agents engaging in the construction of systems of meanings about themselves and their interactions with the world. The identity of the Islander diaspora comes into existence, nevertheless, through sometimes contradictory

considerations of a shared ancestral homeland (Torres Strait) and a shared sense of our current home (the mainland). These contradictions in identification often express themselves in multiple narratives around the notion of home, affiliations with ancestral homes, relationships with Islanders in the Torres Strait, and representations of culture, tradition and customs. Indeed, Islanders (both in and outside of the Torres Strait) have, for a long time, deployed multi-layered narratives to articulate their social and political positions under conditions of cultural co-existence and conflict (Beckett, 1987; Kaye, 1997; Kehoe-Forutan, 2004; Mullins, 1995; Sharp, 1980a, 1980b, 1993) and assertion of pro-Islander standpoints (Arthur, 2004; Nakata, 2004a, 2004b; 2007; Shnukal, 2004).

## **7.2 Original Contributions to Knowledge**

The original contributions of this research about mainland Torres Strait Islander identity are twofold. This research provides the first study of identity across different generations of Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. Secondly, in presenting key insights into the way different generations of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait identify, negotiate and contest the ‘Mainlander’ experience, this research exposes the complex and nuanced conditions of this collective reflecting, in the process, its paradoxical arrival and departure of consensus of who and what constitutes home, culture and identity. The perspectives across the different generations of ‘Mainland Islanders’ provides a composite counter-narrative to claims of cultural and political dissolution and displacement for a population (increasingly) born and raised outside the Torres Strait. This counter-narrative, representing a plurality of identities, histories and experiences speaks back to, and engages with, the identity politics that have positioned ‘Mainlanders’ in discourses of lack, loss and unauthenticity.

The intergenerational counter-narrative is defined and shaped by its political context, the naming and claiming of a 'Mainlander Identity' that gives voice to the validity and credibility of identities formed, negotiated and contested outside the Torres Strait. This research articulates a story of 'Mainlander' relatedness, a multilayered and complex process of identification. It is articulated through a strong sense of place identity, relating and connecting across generations, the shared experiences and memories of belonging to an *Island Home*. The relational aspect of place identity, in turn, informs our knowledge of who we are, our connections with ourselves, each other and our position in the world.

This research evidences 'Mainland Islander' utilisation of multimedia, the arts and technology in the creation of systems of representation, cultural expression and interconnectivity between individuals and the collective. The themes underpinning the formation of identity for the first generation 'Mainlanders', including connectedness, reciprocity and understandings of *Ailan Pasin*, are evident in these new representations of identity and processes of identification for generations of Islanders born and raised outside the Torres Strait. In this way, identity for Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait has never been lost or displaced across the generations but, rather, re-fashioned and re-interpreted in innovative and changing ways. Traditional forms of identity expressions (for example language, dancing, singing, hunting, seafaring) are still evident in 'Mainlander' societies but these are also now supplemented and re-interpreted through new modes of representation and communication.

### **7.3 Limitations of this Research Study**

The limitations of this research study relate to methodology and the scope of the research. This study concentrated on research sites in Queensland where there are higher populations of Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland. It is acknowledged there are significant populations of Torres Strait Islanders in other cities and states, particularly Western Australia, New South Wales and Victoria. It would have been interesting to explore issues of identity with individuals and communities located further away from the Torres Strait as proximity from home islands represents a potentially different set of circumstances for Islanders who do not have either ready access to family in the Torres Strait or the opportunity (affordability and time) to visit the Torres Strait. Based on my own experiences of living long term in Brisbane and now in Cairns, there are certainly different processes of identification that occur when the Islander 'community' represents a larger proportion of the overall population of a town or city. Although resource constraints did not allow for a national approach to the research, it is recognised that broadening the scope of the research locations, if permissible, would have enhanced the diversity and range of responses from participant Storytellers.

My research study inevitably raised expectations about what this thesis could deliver for Islanders living on the mainland. This is understandable given that for a long time now, Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland have been involved with processes (including the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs inquiry on autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders 1997; and the review of ATSIC, 2004-05) that have promised much, but delivered little, in terms of positive outcomes. However, any proposals or recommendations relating to



alternative models of governance, political representation and native title matters were beyond the scope of this research. This is not to suggest that discussions concerning identity have no relevance to socio-political matters, in fact, quite the opposite. The question of 'Mainland Islanders' political position has never been more relevant in view of the absence of any representative or administrative structures since the abolition of the Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board and the Office of Torres Strait Islander Affairs in 2005. Nevertheless, the political circumstances facing Islanders living on the mainland were not covered in-depth with the participant Storytellers as it was thought these matters could dominate the core subject matter (of identity) and detract from the main aim of this research study. The Torres Strait political matters have been dealt with in earlier examinations (Arthur 2004; HRSCATSIA, 1997a; Sanders, 1999; Sanders & Arthur, 1997) and any new models of governance or representation emanating from this research would not have differed significantly, I believe, from proposals that have been previously advanced to governments, past and present.

#### **7.4 Implications of this Research**

This thesis is unique in its authorship by a Torres Strait Islander woman. While Torres Strait Islanders are gradually increasing their representation across a broad spectrum of professional fields, including academia, there is still a long way to go before we achieve parity with non-Indigenous people, and even our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, in the field of formal research. As noted previously, my self-identification as a Torres Strait Islander does not lend itself to a higher, more authentic voice that is positioned with authority over non-Torres Strait Islander researchers and academics who have gone before me. At the same time, I cannot deny the perspective I brought to this research in terms of my history, my values, my understandings of culture, customs,

traditions and protocols, all of which contributed to my relationships with Storytellers, my access to research sites and my interpretation and re-telling of their Stories.

Nakata's (2007) work highlights how, for the Islander scholar, the personal and the political are entwined in the creation of spaces from which we speak as both the producers and critics of our own knowledge production. The integrity and credibility of Nakata's (2007) work derives, in no small part, from his lived experience as an Islander as evidenced by his comment "I think that my family's history and my own experiences provide a sharp edge to my perceptions of the outside world and our position in it (2007, p. 7). Nakata's (2007) work has inspired me to pursue a research inquiry that aims to impact positively on future discussions involving Torres Strait Islanders and our positions within, and to, the rest of the world. And it is hoped that, in time, more Torres Strait Islander people will engage in the challenge of research, of re-telling Stories, documenting our histories and analysing, critiquing and thinking about our own lifeworlds and experiences as Islander people. For us, it is more than an academic exercise because, as Denzin, Lincoln and Tuhiwai Smith (2008) note "[c]ritical Indigenous qualitative research is always already political. The researcher must consider how his or her research benefits, as well as promotes, self-determination for research participants" (p. 2).

Outside of the benefits derived from this research on the part of the participant Storytellers, this thesis has relevance for Indigenous people more generally. Many Indigenous Australians are no longer residing on their traditional or ancestral lands having been forcibly removed during colonial rule or having moved off their land voluntarily in response to changing economic and social circumstances. The Stories that

are re-told and re-interpreted in this thesis may resonate with other Indigenous Australians who are negotiating their identities under circumstances where their cultural legitimacy and authenticity are questioned in a bureaucratic and administrative world that prefers to deal with absolute and stable identity environments. This thesis offers a counter-narrative to the deficit discourses that undermine the right of minority groups to express and represent their identities in changing, evolving and multiple ways, even in contested sites of resistance, struggle and emancipation. As a Torres Strait Islander researcher, this thesis also contributes to the area of Indigenous research methodologies. Grounded in the principles centred on autonomy, home, family and kinship (Denzin et al, 2008), this research aims to enhance the capacity of all researchers, both Torres Strait Islander and non-Islander, to better understand the position of research Storytellers so that we, in turn, may engage in research practices that are reflexive, ethical, respectful and thankful of Storytellers' contributions to the production and critical reflection of both old and new knowledge.

## **7.5 New Ways of Approaching the Mainland Torres Strait Islander Issue**

With more than 85 percent of the total Torres Strait Islander population now living outside the Torres Strait, it is now more imperative to re-consider how this group is engaged on the political and social front. The enactment of legislation (*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005*) and government policy that not only ignores but effectively excludes 'Mainlanders' does not auger well with the government's aims for social justice, equity and Reconciliation for *all* Indigenous Australians. The silence by omission results in a level of engagement that is hardly commensurate with either the demographic reality of the representation of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait or the distinct social and political needs of this group.

This research advocates for a different approach to dealing with the ‘Mainlander’ issue, an approach that transcends binary oppositions and discontinuity of place and culture. A different approach that recognises, in a formal sense, the strong sense of place identity ‘Mainlanders’ have with their Island Homes in the Torres Strait regardless of whether people were born there or not. Moreover, any political approach must also take into consideration the multiple and diverse ways ‘Mainlanders’ are now expressing and representing their cultural identities in contemporary modes and forms. New political approaches must be open to the possibility of ‘Mainlander’ identity representations that are grounded in the connection to Island Homes but, at the same time, shaped, influenced and negotiated within the context of their experiences, history and connection to the mainland.

However, it is not only up to governments to recognise the complexity and nuances of identity representation and expressions of Islanders living outside the Torres Strait. We ‘Mainlanders’ are equally responsible for reviewing our own institutional systems and practices, critiquing the way we are positioned by others and ourselves in political and social discourses and understanding how we might articulate the spaces from which we speak of our lived realities and experiences as *Ailan Pipel*. It will only be through the shifting, changing and transgression of boundaries and understandings of ‘who we are as Islander people’ that Torres Strait Islanders living outside the Torres Strait might achieve the *better* life our ancestors aspired for us.

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## Glossary

<i>Athe</i>	Grandfather
<i>Aka</i>	Grandmother
Coming of the Light	Cultural and religious celebration commemorating the arrival of the London Missionary Society on Erub, 1 July 1871
<i>Dari</i>	Islander headdress used in dance. It represents the most recognisable Torres Strait Islander symbol and is the central feature of the Torres Strait Islander flag
<i>Gor</i>	Shaker used in traditional Torres Strait Islander dances for rhythm and beat
<i>Sop sop</i>	Islander vegetable dish cooked in coconut milk

# Appendix A Distribution of the Torres Strait Islander Population (ABS, 2007)

44

2006 CENSUS COUNTS, Persons of Torres Strait Islander origin(a)

State/Territory	Torres Strait Islander people		Proportion of State/Territory population
	no.	%	%
USUAL RESIDENCE			
New South Wales	7 720	16.3	0.1
Victoria	3 072	6.5	0.1
Queensland	28 866	61.0	0.7
South Australia	1 477	3.1	0.1
Western Australia	2 059	4.4	0.1
Tasmania	1 892	4.0	0.4
Northern Territory	1 957	4.1	1.0
Australian Capital Territory	268	0.6	0.1
<b>Australia(b)</b>	<b>47 325</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>0.2</b>
PLACE OF ENUMERATION			
New South Wales	7 693	16.3	0.1
Victoria	3 055	6.5	0.1
Queensland	28 867	61.0	0.7
South Australia	1 474	3.1	0.1
Western Australia	2 061	4.4	0.1
Tasmania	1 876	4.0	0.4
Northern Territory	1 993	4.2	0.9
Australian Capital Territory	292	0.6	0.1
<b>Australia(b)</b>	<b>47 325</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>0.2</b>

(a) Comprises persons who are Torres Strait Islander or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in origin.

(b) Includes Other Territories. See Glossary.

Note: Totals and components may not be consistent within and between tables due to introduced random error to protect confidentiality of Census data. See Census Dictionary, 2006 (cat. no. 2901.0).

## Appendix B Distribution of the Torres Strait Islander Population (ABS, 2007)

**45**

2006 CENSUS COUNTS(a), Indigenous Areas in Queensland—by size of Torres Strait  
Islander count(b)

Selected Indigenous Areas	Torres Strait Islander people		Proportion of population which is Torres Strait Islander
	no.	%	%
Cairns (C) - Central Suburbs	1 742	6.1	8.2
Mackay (C)	1 474	5.1	1.7
Townsville (C)	1 441	5.0	1.5
Thuringowa (C)	1 034	3.6	1.7
TRAWQ (Thursday Island)(c)	935	3.2	88.0
Torres - Rem(d)	892	3.1	82.8
Port Kennedy (Thursday Island)	844	2.9	56.7
Gold Coast (C)	711	2.5	0.2
Badu (IC)	706	2.5	86.0
Bamaga (IC)	681	2.4	87.0
Cairns (C) - White Rock	517	1.8	5.4
Ipswich (C)	493	1.7	0.4
Rockhampton (C)	484	1.7	0.8
Cairns (C) - Edmonton	470	1.6	4.2
Mer (IC)	461	1.6	96.0
Cairns (C) - Barron	446	1.6	2.2
Brisbane City Northern Outer	404	1.4	0.2
Cairns (C) - Trinity excl. Edmonton Whiterock and Gordonvale	393	1.4	4.2
Caboolture (S)	384	1.3	0.3
Brisbane City Southern Outer	365	1.3	0.2
Napranum (S)	347	1.2	41.4
Horn Island	346	1.2	58.9
Mareeba (S)/Etheridge (C)/Croydon (C)	344	1.2	1.8
Injinoo (S)	338	1.2	81.1
Innisfail	336	1.2	4.1
Saibai (IC)	312	1.1	92.3
Cairns (C) - Western Suburbs	304	1.1	2.5
Iama (IC)	283	1.0	91.9
Erub (IC)	282	1.0	89.3
Logan (C) - Rem	278	1.0	0.2
Cairns (C) - City	272	0.9	3.3
Yorke (IC)	267	0.9	88.7
Cardwell (S)	268	0.9	2.8
Brisbane City Western Outer	266	0.9	0.2
Weipa (T)	261	0.9	9.2
Maroochy (S)	260	0.9	0.2
Boigu (IC)	255	0.9	90.4
Toowoomba (C)	240	0.8	0.3
Warraber (IC)	238	0.8	96.7
Mabuiag (IC)	238	0.8	94.8
Queensland balance(e)	8 161	28.4	0.4
<b>Queensland</b>	<b>28 773</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>0.7</b>

(a) Usual residence.

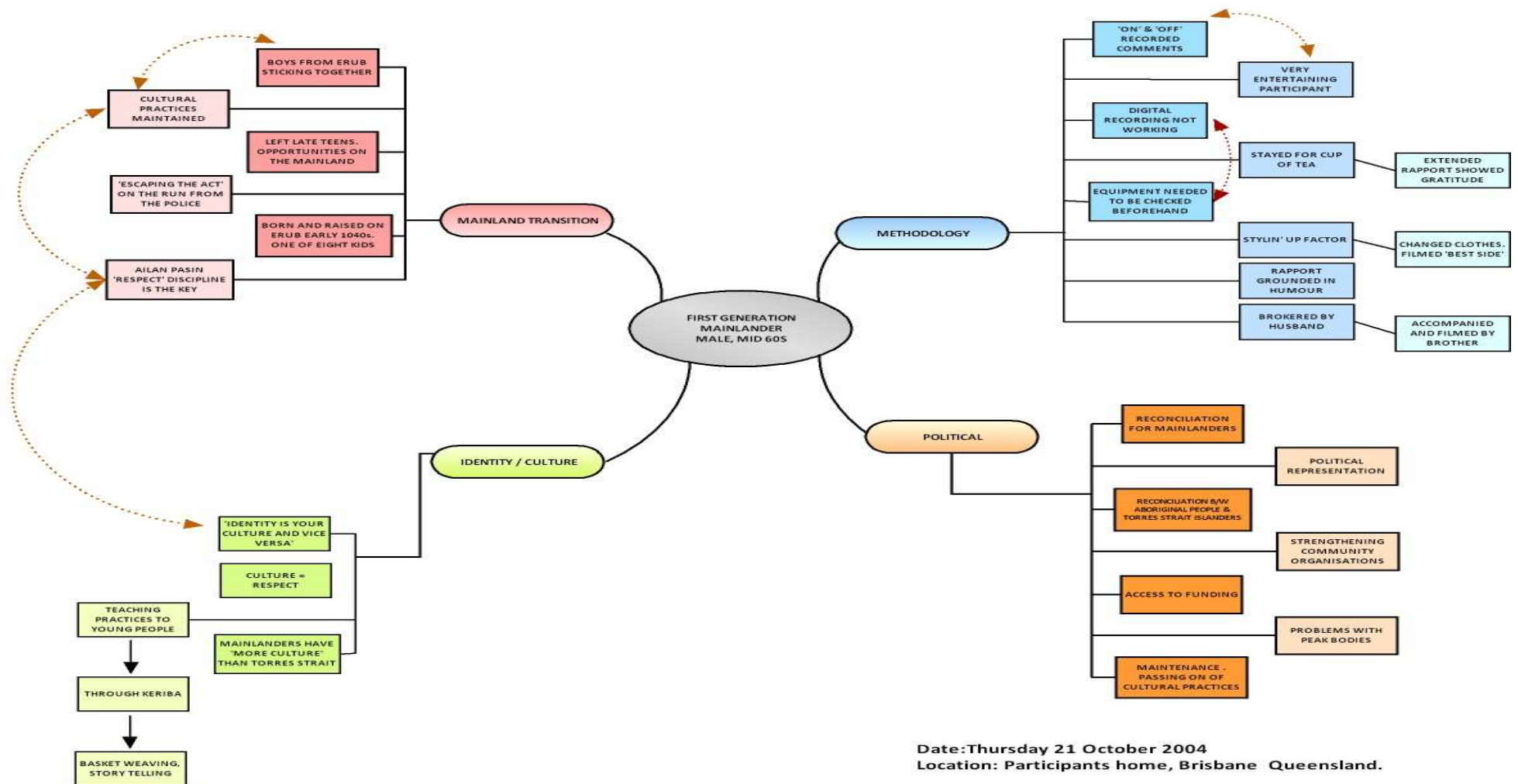
(b) Includes the Indigenous status output categories 'Torres Strait Islander' and 'Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander'.

(c) TRAWQ - Tamoi, Rose Hill, Applin, Wyborn and Quarantine.

(d) Includes Dauan Island, Hammond Island, Kubin (Moa Island), Seisia, and Torres Strait Region Bal.

(e) Includes persons whose place of usual residence was inadequately described.

## Appendix C Mind Map: Analysis of Interview



## **Appendix D DVD**

Malaytown Stories: First Wave of Torres Strait Islanders to the Australian Mainland



## Appendix E Media Release: Malaytown Stories DVD Launch



**Filmmakers Douglas Watkin, Lenora Thaker and Felecia Watkin-Lui**

**F**amily, work and Christmas all collided, in a good way, for School of Indigenous Australian Studies lecturer Felecia Watkin-Lui and her sister (and former JCU lecturer) Lenora Thaker.

With their brother Douglas Watkin, Felecia and Lenora launched a documentary on the historic Cairns district of Malaytown in late December.

Originally a camp set up by Malay fishermen along the

### Malaytown premiere

swampy banks of Alligator Creek in the 1880's, Malaytown later became home to one of the first waves of Torres Strait Islanders who moved to the mainland.

"By the mid-1920s it was a thriving community, which in many ways replicated life on the Islands," Lenora said.

"Being close to the sea, it enabled Islanders to continue many of their cultural practices. They created a community that provided social and economic support in tough times."

*Malaytown Stories* features interviews with

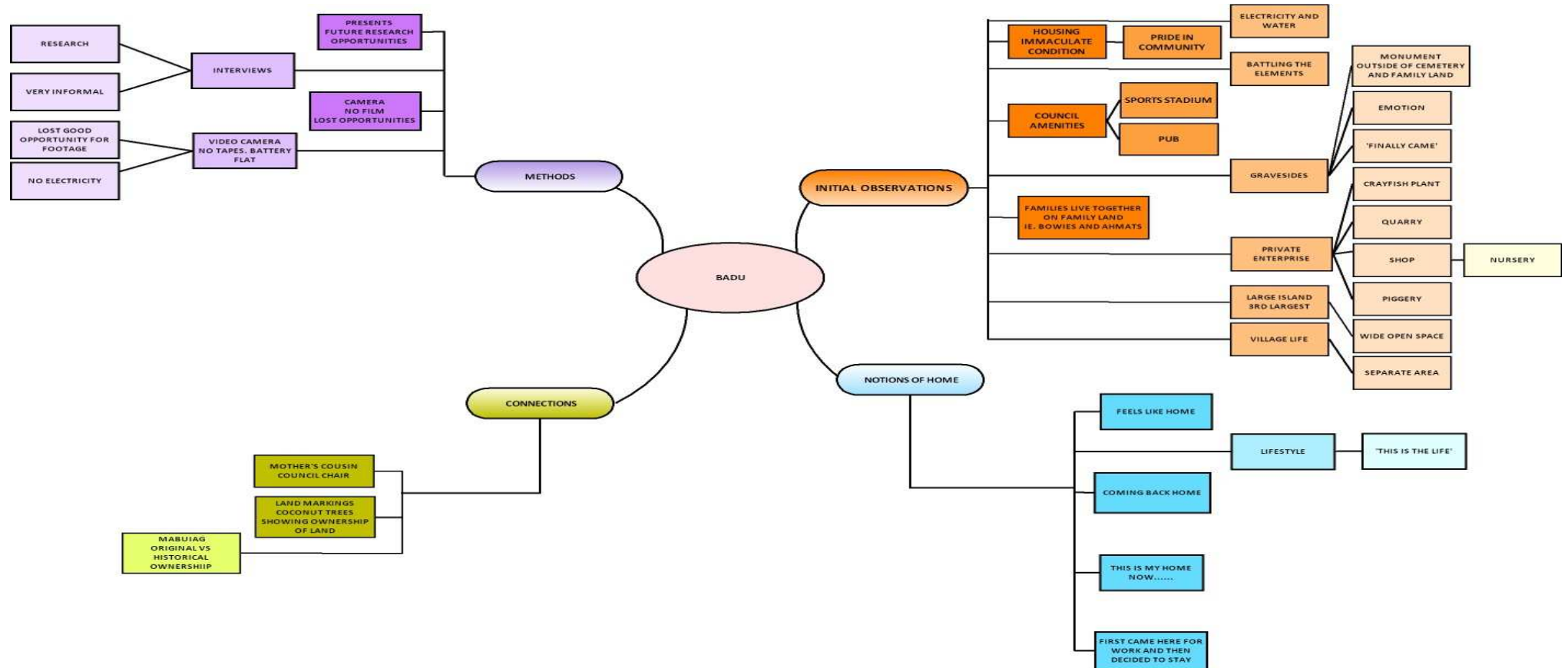
six former Malaytown residents and their descendents. It was funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and supported by JCU's SIAS.

Lenora, Felecia and Douglas said it had been inspiring to listen to and record stories about how people helped each other build lives here for generations to follow.

The premiere grew into a huge family and community reunion, with people flying in from all directions to see the documentary and then stay home for Christmas in Cairns.



## Appendix F Mind Map: Participant Observation



Date: Tuesday 29 June  
Location: Badu Island, Torres Strait.