

Reading and riding the waves: the sea as known universe in Torres Strait

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Abstract

This paper describes and evaluates the ways in which Torres Strait Islanders read, work and live with their seascape. As marine oriented people, their cultural and natural heritage is fundamentally connected to their seascape through the trajectories of history, knowledge, beliefs, values, social organisation and resource use. Indeed the connection between self and place, the flow between people, seascape and landscape is crucial to Torres Strait Islander identity. I draw upon long term research and connection with people in the Torres Strait, professional experience in researching marine hunting and foraging practices, and knowledge systems, my continuing involvement since 1996 in debates about knowledge and use of seascapes; and the study of small island societies (McCall 1996; Hay 2006; Hviding 2003) in order to demonstrate some of the techniques by which the sea is rendered visible and knowable to Torres Strait Islanders and thus to ourselves.

In particular I discuss the flow between landscapes, seascapes and people, and the socio-cultural dimensions of marine knowledge and use. I present this case study on how a specific seascape redolent with meaning and activity is understood by Islanders, to exemplify a means by which some of the 'intangible heritage' (UNESCO 2003) of other seascapes might be approached or revealed. It is through understanding the ways in which people 'know' and live in this watery realm, as an essential attribute of who they are, that we can see its significance as a primary dimension of their cultural heritage.

Introduction

This paper considers the ways in which Torres Strait Islanders living on the predominantly small islands between the two mainlands of Australia and Papua New Guinea read, work and live with their seascape. As we are aware from our own experience, the sea is both dynamic and constant. Understanding how the sea moves, its possibilities, its limits, and what it contains and yields is crucial to being a Torres Strait Islander, and to their 'being at home' in the Torres Strait. For any human to feel 'at home' they need to inhabit a world of shared meanings and shared horizons. It is about knowing 'how to be-in-the-world' and 'how to be-with-others' (Augé 1995; Jackson 1995, 1998; Schutz 1972) in the everyday, existential sense, without needing to engage in self-conscious practice. It is associated with a sense of ease and relaxed comfort: one feels 'at home', when one is in place with like others.

As marine oriented people, the cultural and natural heritage of Torres Strait Islanders is fundamentally connected to that body of water known as the Torres Strait. Like many of the other island configurations in the Pacific, the Torres Strait is a sea 'full of islands...' (D'Arcy 2001: 164).



Figure 1: Cultural Zones of the Torres Strait (in Fuary 1993).

Central Torres Strait is characterised by a belt of extensive platform reefs and coral cays (Fuary 1991: 43), as well as a small number of high, continental islands. The Western islands are all continental granitic islands surrounded by warm shallow seas which support extensive seagrass beds and herds of dugong and Green turtle. Volcanic islands lie to the east and north of the Great Barrier Reef and they are small, steep, very fertile and surrounded by deep channels abounding in fish. The low mud islands of the Top Western region lie just a few kilometres to the south of Papua. They support dense mangrove vegetation and sedges, and barramundi, swamp birds and crustaceans are abundant.

In exploiting their physical environments Island people utilise a number of cues and strategies based on generations of cultural knowledge about flora, fauna, winds, tides, cloud formations, constellations, and phases of the moon (Fuary 1991, 1993; see also Nietschmann & Nietschmann 1981; Nietschmann 1989). This knowledge is acquired through observation, copying, listening and experience. It is reinforced through song, dance, art, and through the recounting of traditional myths, such as the story of Dugama told by Mareko Maino on Yam Island in 1966 (Lawrie 1970: 260-66). Many of these myths encode and impart in narrative form ecological and cultural knowledge about reefs, currents, islets, islands, their inhabitants, and the creation of people and place. Thus in a myth from Western Torres Strait, the female culture hero Aukum stocks the waters with fish (Fitzpatrick 1990). In some of the origin myths, such as those of the 4 Brothers (Haddon 1904: 373-377), places are seen to be created, and essences and powers are left in situ which are harnessed through subsequent male religious ritual practice.

Islanders are a land and a sea-based people. For them the land and sea flow into the other, particularly in the in-shore, coastal zones where seascape and landscape merge. In another

region of the Pacific, the Kanak Mayor of Poindimie, Vanuatu says of the relationship between land and sea: 'From our perspective, land is either out of the water or under the water. Dry land is on an island and submerged land is the river or sea bed' (Neaoutyine 1994:109). Likewise for Torres Strait Islanders land and sea are not discrete entities- the one exists and only makes sense in relation to the other (see also Scott & Mulrennan 1999; Scott 2004). Like the land the sea is ubiquitous and has a sensory materiality. It is, in most cases, always visible, audible or able to be smelt and felt. Not being able to experience this in a deeply visceral way is expressed as a loss. Thus, one young man from the Central Islands described his sense of dis-ease when away from his island, poignantly stating that when you can't see the sea, it is 'like losing your wife' (Lahn 2003: 153).

To be a Torres Strait Islander is to be of the sea and at home in the sea. Indeed, during the negotiation of the international border between Australia and the newly sovereign state of Papua New Guinea in 1975, one Islander leader resisted the proposed move of the border further south into the Torres Strait, declaring 'We belong to the Sea' (the late Getano Belford Lui snr). Such a proposal to move the border was seen as a strategy to cleave Torres Strait and Torres Strait Islanders in half, and to 'remove' them somehow, from their home.

The critical place for Torres Strait Islanders then is the sea and the islands rising above its surface. This is home for Islanders and as demonstrated by McCall (1996: 77) regarding the 'sea as home' is a distinctive feature of all island peoples of the globe. The sea provides Torres Strait Islanders with their *raison d'être* as well as sustaining them at a minimal level of subsistence and at the maximal levels of cosmology, selfhood, regional networks and sociality. It connects all Torres Strait Islanders with each other, and it is, inter alia:

- a source of meaning: a place replete with cosmological, historical and contemporary meaning and activity;
- a means of orienting themselves cosmologically, socially and existentially in time and place over a very long trajectory of thousands of years;
- a means of physically and existentially connecting them to related others across the sea, who together through their use and tenure of the sea constitute the broader cultural bloc of Torres Strait Islanders;
- a site of creation stories;
- a signifier of their uniqueness, as Torres Strait Islanders, known for their traditions of marine hunting and foraging, their past use of sailing canoes in their long-distance exchange networks and head-hunting sorties throughout Torres Strait, Papua New Guinea and Australia, and in their staging of elaborate ceremonies and feasts;
- a site of subsistence activity; and
- a site for socialisation and the inculcation of knowledge, as well as for play, leisure and quiet contemplation.

The sea is the locus of habitual Islander commentary and evaluation and its characteristics are related in their stories, sung into their songs, danced into their dances, and signified in their highly figurative artworks (York 1998, 2000; Fuary 1993; Herle & Philp 2000; Alfonso & Kershaw 2001; see also Nietschmann 1989 & Mosby & Robinson 1998), as well as more recently being deployed in their football teams! (see Lahn 2003). Likewise Herle & Philp describe the 'visual imagery associated with dance' (2000: 160) in an Islander song. It articulates the similitude between the white feathered headdress males formerly wore in battle and now wear in

dancing (*dhoeri*), and the spray from water crashing against a rock (*waidemua*):

Malu kula, malu kula, dari waidemua. The waves breaking over a stone at the edge of the reef, throw up foam, it looks like *dari* (Herle & Philp 2000: 160)

Dance and song continue to play a significant role in imparting or reinforcing knowledge, as well as simply celebrating life. For example during the 1890s a team of Cambridge scholars visited Torres Strait and amassed a large collection of material culture, amongst which were items used in dance. These included

...hand-held ornaments and storyboards, many of which relate to a detailed knowledge of the movement of the stars, the currents of the sea, and the changing of the seasons. A hand-held ornament from Mer...a wooden carving of a crab... shows great attention to anatomical detail...(Herle & Philp 2000: 159-160).

Or, again

Some figurative designs appear to have been employed as a method of specific instruction. For example, a shell knife collected by Haddon from Mabuig has the incised figure of a dugong with detailed lines showing the proper cutting places for butchering. (Herle & Philp 2000: 161).

Not only is the Torres Strait a creation of Islanders but it has also created who they are as evidenced in their cosmology. Creation beings come out of the sea and travel across or under the sea in their mythology (see also Fitzpatrick 1990). In some instances they then become an island or its most distinctive feature, as in the case of Mer and the dugong-boy, Gelam and the octopus Malo; or Waubin in the case of the Kaurareg of the Inner Islands (Southon & Kaurareg Elders 1998). In lying down on the island, or offshore, they also lay down the foundations of the society and its laws, as demonstrated for example in the role of Malo and his laws for the success of the Murray Island Land case.

This interpenetration of people and place continues to be recounted in Islander stories and in their continuing traditions of knowledge, sea use, and tenure. Without this rich cultural dimension the sea would be simply space, empty space.



Figure 2: Children from Kubin Village, Moa dancing the story of 'Gelam'. Bamaga Show Dance Competition, 1982. (Photograph M. Fuary)

Indeed, this consubstantiality (Keen 2004) between people, place, the past, the present and the future reveals the sea as domesticated space- a 'seascape' (see also Fitzpatrick 1990; Nietschmann & Nietschmann 1981; Nietschmann 1989; Scott & Mulrennan 1999).

Torres Strait Islanders consistently scan the horizon and the water from the land, the sea and the sky. From their land bases (which include jetties) they watch the tides, the weather and the comings and goings of kin and others (see also Lahn 2003). As they wade through shallows looking for live bait, or swimming for crayfish, they work with the tides, the weather and their knowledge of where best and how best to catch their target species (Fuary 1991, 1993). Likewise as they travel on and across the water in aluminium and fibreglass dinghies they draw upon their observations and prior knowledge of the seascape, and in their flights to and from the islands they are afforded a penetrating bird's eye view of the land masses, sandbanks, reefs, channels, currents, waves, and waters.

The use and knowledge of the seascape is gendered, age related and also influenced by individual capacity. Exploitation of the sea's resources, for example, involves both intentional



Figure 3: Erub reefs and stone fish weirs, 2005. (Photograph M. Fuary)

and opportunistic fishing, hunting and foraging by both sexes of all ages, using a wide variety of techniques and strategies, spanning 24 hours in the day and extending throughout all seasons (Fuary 1991: 145, Fuary 1993; see also Fitzpatrick 1990; Lahn 2003, 2006). A diverse suite of fish, shellfish, crustacea (mud crabs, sand crabs, squid and crayfish), sea birds and their products (eggs and feathers for dari-ceremonial head-dresses), wetland birds, marine reptiles (turtles) and mammals (dugong) are regularly sourced from their waters. Fishing alone, for instance, is comprised of 7 major forms: dropline fishing, trolling, two types of spearfishing, scooping, netting, and fish drives using stone weirs or nets.

While only a limited number of people are credited with having exceptional expertise in line fishing, spear fishing, manoeuvring a dinghy or in hunting turtle and dugong, on the other hand every able-bodied person from middle childhood can reliably procure food from the sea. Indeed, as Lahn (2006) argues, there is a moral imperative for them to do so.

All marine hunting and foraging strategies are aligned with specific technologies, and require the confluence of knowledge about many factors, such as what is happening in the sea (e.g. tidal action, currents, water clarity, lunar phases), the season,



Figure 4: Cousins Perinna Thalofa and Luisa Samuel fishing at Tura Landing, Yam Island, 1981. (Photograph M Fuary)

weather conditions (wind speed & direction), as well as knowledge of the target species' behaviour and their preferred locations (Fuary 1991, 1993; see also Nietschmann & Nietschmann 1981; Nietschmann 1989; Bani 2004). They also require knowledge on how to prepare the food for consumption and its social distribution (Fuary 1991, 1993; Nietschmann & Nietschmann 1981; Lahn 2006). In the past magical substances and objects (such as sculpted dugong stones) were used, and some hunters continue to observe certain practices to bring 'good' as opposed to 'bad' luck in the hunt (Nietschmann & Nietschmann 1981) or to 'call up' species (Southon & Kaurareg Elders 1998). Some people believe they can influence weather conditions and outcomes by enlisting the help of men (usually from PNG) with powerful magic.

So how can we begin to access such a specialised knowledge domain? Perhaps one starting point is to tune into attributes of the sea:

- its differing water qualities, water surface appearance, sub-marine features and sea actions; and
- the variety of constituent coastal zones which are locally recognised, such as- home islands and reefs, offshore islands, the intertidal zone, zones above the high water mark, seagrass beds, mangrove areas, wetlands, shallow reefs in lagoons, open sea, sand banks, reef flats, reef drops, creek mouths, lagoon passages, shoals, channels, bommies, tracks or 'roads' (on island 'roads' see Bonnemaision 1985) (*yabagud*) by which people move through the sea.



Figure 5: Magical carved dugong stone from Tudu, 1888. (Photograph D. Moore)

Knowledge of currents, tides and waves is augmented with the use of stars in night navigation. *Magan*, the main current in the central islands originating in a whirlpool near the island of Tudu continues to be worked. Indeed, so crucial is understanding this current, and of being one with it, that in recent years the Yam Island rugby league team has named itself 'Magan Warriors' (Lahn 2003: 211).

Similarly, in western Torres Strait, Nietschmann (1989:62) documents the powerful connection between the seascape and Mabuiag people's own sense of who they are, with the following song:

The afternoon tide is running slowly
 The waves move down to the whirlpool of the island
 The waves smash together and spread clear white foam on
 the surface of the sea
 The colliding waves seem to say
 M-A-B-U-I-A-G-I-S-L-A-N-D

And for the Kaurareg of the inner islands of Torres Strait, the powerful current running through their territory is known as Waubin's sea, created and defended by the ancestral being, Waubin (Southon & Kaurareg Elders 1998: 221).

The intertidal zone, including estuaries, salt marsh flats, seagrass beds, mangroves, reef flats and shallow lagoons is crucial in the procuring of inner-shore fish, crabs, octopus, squid, shellfish and crustacea (see also Bird & Bird 1997). People comment on the particularities of each of these zones, for instance the ways in which water floods into some lagoons at a different rate from others, or to distinguish between the different types of sand/silt/mud bottoms in each of these zones. Zones above the high water mark include rocky shores, the foreshore, wetlands, fore dunes, colonizing vines, shrubby vegetation, and the forest line.

One of the multiple ways in which Torres Strait Islanders read the sea is in noting water clarity and water depth and the places where these differences occur. It includes differentiation between waters as freshwater springs, lagoons, muddy water (*usul*), clear water, rough water, glassy water (*gris*), deeps (*Darnley deep*), shoals, wetlands and so on.

Water surface features are those readable signs which reliably indicate what species of fish, sea mammal or reptile lies below. For example, when the surface looks like drops of rain are falling on it Islanders know they have chanced upon a school of garfish; a boiling sea indicates sea snakes mating; the unusually skittish behaviour of sardines signals the presence of a large predator (Anon, pers.comm, Hammond Island 2007); and small species of fish leaping out of the water reveal below-surface hunting by large pelagic fish, such as mackerel.

Sub-marine features are recognised by Islanders utilising prior knowledge of their location as well as by noting the colour of the water, its clarity, and the behaviour of the water on the surface. In so doing named sandbanks, reefs, rocks (see Nietschmann & Nietschmann 1981), anchorages, bommies, other coral formations, wrecks, navigational hazards or the feeding trails of dugong, for example, are revealed.

Sea actions include the differentiation of specific waves, currents and tides, including their interaction with each other, with the winds, with the lunar phases and with tidal cycles. In the 1970s anthropologist Judith Fitzpatrick and geographer Bernard Nietschmann were taught over 80 terms relating to tides and

waters by their Mabuiag Island co-workers (Nietschmann & Nietschmann 1981: 58). The seas include; rough, hard to negotiate seas such as 'boxing sea' (where the tidal stream meets the waves and the waves 'stand up'); the glassy, flat seas (*'gris'*, *'gris fine'*) which obtain in fine weather; and waterspouts. Interestingly in the 1890s Haddon et al collected several wooden carvings of the spirits (*muri*) who are believed to use waterspouts to obtain fish (Herle & Philp 2000: 159-160).

The dimensions of the sea are also lyrically encoded in songs and dances. Important reefs, sandbanks and other places, the environment, weather, water conditions and what Islanders are doing figure in Yam Island dancing songs for example (see York



Figure 6: Danny Larry jumping for turtle, 1980. (Photograph K. Taylor)

1998: 42-43). Many songs are about the north-west wind bringing the first rains, so important an event that it is referred to as 'our wind' *kuki gub* (York 1998: 26-27).

Dances and songs about *sik* (sea foam) are usually women's dances, and one dance apparatus

...represents foam whipped off waves during stormy weather. The white [bird] feathers represent the sea spray and the star in the centre of the bottom panel is the morning star. (Mosby 2000: 172)

This knowledge of the sea and its multitude of zones and behaviour is crucial to Torres Strait Islanders (Fitzpatrick 1990; Fuary 1993; Nietschmann & Nietschmann 1981; Nietschmann 1989; Scott & Mulrennan 1999) and it is no surprise to see it currently being expressed, over and over, in contemporary Torres Strait performance and art. One of the late Joeban Harry's compositions speaks of the roar of waves breaking on the edge of a specific reef (York 1998). Similarly in describing the art work of Laurie Nona, Anna Eglitis says:

Every line in his linocuts holds a symbolic meaning, weaving patterns of incredible intricacy to tell the story of the tides that rush through the Torres Strait. (1998: 140)

This consubstantiality between people, the landscape and seascape is also evidenced in clan totems. The following species typically function as totems in the Torres Strait: Dugong, Green turtle, Stingray, Sea snake, Fish sp. Frigate Bird, Sharks (especially Hammerhead and Tiger Shark) and Crocodile. In Central Torres Strait for example, some of these totems are associated with a wind/ wind direction/season:



Figure 7: Traditional Meriam dance about the wind. Aboriginal and Islander Cultural Festival, Townsville 1982. (Photograph M. Fuary)

Hammerhead shark with the South-East (*sager*) season; Crocodile with the North-West season (*kuki*); Dog with the South-West (*zey*); and Shark with the North-East (*naygay*) season (Ohshima 1983: 339).

Speaking of the extraordinary art work of Ken Thaiday, Mary Bani says:

Thaiday's Beizam (shark dance headdress) epitomises his art. Consisting of a hammerhead shark on top of a large shark's head, it is articulated so that the jaws open and close and the head can move back and forth, imitating the shark's feeding action. The movements of the head-dress combined with the gyrations of the performers make for a hair-raising performance. The shark is an important totem in Torres Strait Islander culture, and one of many that signify the deep connection that Islanders have with the sea. (Bani 2000: 713)

And finally, the connection between Torres Strait Island people and their home is elaborated metaphorically (Fuary 1993; see also Scott 2004). Not surprisingly the sea and some of its most significant creatures are regularly deployed as similes to connote individual or cultural characteristics and experiences. Thus for example, when a mother dies her children are often spoken about as being like driftwood, *wazey bethey*, floating around in the ocean, coming to rest only where the tide takes them. Their solid base is seen to have been taken away from them, and as such they are no longer 'anchored' in the way they were prior to their mother's death. Some leeway for social misbehaviour is thus given to individuals so recently bereaved.

Another key simile refers to people as being just like sea turtles, especially Green sea turtles: *wazey tortol*. In 1980 an elderly man told how he began working in the maritime industries in the late 1920s. Along with all the other young men he finished school at 16 years of age and was sent to work on boats: 'like a turtle on the land it goes into the sea' he explained (AB

pers.comm. 26/3/1980). And when adults are exasperated by the laziness of someone they may disparagingly refer to them as being like a dugong, *wazey dugong*, lazing around and doing very little.

I have demonstrated in this paper the dialectic between Torres Strait Islander people and place as exemplified by the seascape. As people 'of the sea', their cultural and natural heritage is anchored in their seascape. Through quite specific relationships and systems of knowledge the sea is rendered visible and knowable to them. It is a familiar, almost intimate domain, and the connection between self and place, the flow between people, seascape and landscape is crucial to their heritage as Torres Strait Islanders. It is through understanding the ways in which people 'know' and live in this watery realm, as a primary attribute of who they are, that we can see its significance as a quintessential dimension of their cultural heritage.

The following description of a song composition poetically invokes the similitude between people and the 'natural' environment:

In 1995 men from Yam Island were using the islands of Tudu and Zegey as their bases for *bêche-de-mer* fishing (York 1998: 40). Joeban Harry 'found a song' while working there which describes the waves breaking on the reef edge at Tudu.

Here we are at Maza working

In a strong wind on top of Wapa reef

At the edge of the reef is the constant noise of breakers

The breaking water looks like a white lace edge on a blue sarong. (York 1998: 41, 233)

Such a song celebrates in an understated yet elegant way the interconnectedness between work, emotion, observation, place and everyday life- exemplified by the blue sarong, worn daily by men in and around the domestic sphere, as well as in dance. In a few carefully chosen words it makes tangible some of those seemingly intangible dimensions of cultural heritage, writ large in the milieu of island life.



Figure 8: Jalag Larry poling his dinghy, Yam Island 1982. (Photograph M. Fuary)

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