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## **WARNING**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this document may contain images or names of people who have passed away. Some material may contain terms that reflect authors' views, or those of the period in which the document was written or recorded, but may not be considered appropriate today.

This thesis is dedicated to all the Torres Strait Islander women who lived through the dark days of the Pacific War on their small, remote island communities, invisible to mainland Australians.

**OUR VOICES: TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WOMEN IN A  
WAR ZONE, 1942-1945**

Thesis submitted by

Elizabeth OSBORNE BA(Hons)

in March 1995

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of History and Politics  
James Cook University of North Queensland



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# **DECLARATION**

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

.....15 March 1995-  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is in the form of an inquiry: What were the present perceptions of Torres Strait Islander women about their experiences during the Pacific War from 1942 to 1945? It is based largely on the oral testimonies of old island women. The aim was a partial inversion of the historical episode, or the best possible insider perspective of it. Extensive oral history was incorporated in the text to effect this outcome.

In early 1942, it became clear to the people that the women would not be evacuated. Then, all but two white government men evacuated to the mainland. A distressing enlistment campaign followed. Nonetheless, many men saw enlistment as a catalyst to a new deal for all Torres Strait Islanders after the war. They wanted to break free of the internal colonial yoke which had kept them 'innocent' and apart from the world beyond Torres Strait for too long.

The women, children and old people were left sandwiched between Australia's front line of defence and the rapidly advancing Japanese forces, undefended and with virtually no civil defence preparation. Only seventy years before the Pacific War, Torres Strait Islander warriors, after the performance of rituals associated with cult heroes, went to war confident of victory. From 1942 to 1945, they believed it was the women's prayers to their Christian God that camouflaged the enlisted men from danger and defeat.

In their semi-subsistence societies, gardens had to be maintained under unprecedented circumstances; clothing and store foods were scarce and the women had little money to make purchases. They took responsibility for the schooling of their children and for village health. The Pacific War was the most fearful and uncertain period in their history but the women did not abandon all social activities. Indeed, it was a time of breaking down barriers with white men, the servicemen who went to the communities.

There were gaps in the women's recollections. It was too late to get the stories of women who were grandmothers during the war. The women spoke mainly of the things that touched them in the most personal ways. They did not speak of all the negative aspects of their experiences which were disclosed in the archival material.

The merging of the Torres Strait Islander identity with the

Aboriginal identity contributed to the smaller indigenous group's invisibility as a people with a different culture and history. The wartime episode is made more intelligible to an outsider audience, by contexting it in that culture and history. Moreover, the women's plight is highlighted by a discussion of the progress of the Pacific War and insights into what was happening on mainland Australia.

The inquiry establishes that, in remarkable ways, Torres Strait Islander women carried the heavy burden of maintaining their societies under unprecedented circumstances of modern warfare, to ensure the survival of their culture. Moreover, many of their experiences prepared them for, not the freer world they had envisaged, but certainly a different one.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

A.A.	Australian Archives
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
A.I.F.	Australian Imperial Forces
A.R.	Annual Report
A.R.P.	Air Raid Precautions
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
A.W.M.	Australian War Memorial
BOARD	Island Industries Board
C.M.F.	Citizen Military Force
C.P.A.	Chief Protector of Aborigines
DEPARTMENT	Department of Native Affairs
DIRECTOR	Director of Native Affairs
D.N.A.	Department of Native Affairs
J.O.L.	John Oxley Library
L.M.S.	London Missionary Society
MAC	Medical Aid Centre
MAP	Medical Aid Post
<u>Q.P.P.</u>	<u>Queensland Parliamentary Papers</u>
Q.S.A.	Queensland State Archives
<u>Q.V. &amp; P.</u>	<u>Queensland Votes and Proceedings</u>
R.A.A.F.	Royal Australian Air Force
TISHSS	Thursday Island State High School Students
TSIMA	Torres Strait Islanders' Media Association
TSIRECC	Torres Strait Islander Regional Education Consultative Committee
TSLIB or TSLI	Torres Strait Light Infantry Brigade
U.S.	United States
V.D.C.	Volunteer Defence Corps

GLOSSARY OF TORRES STRAIT ISLAND NAMES<sup>1</sup>

BADU	Mulgrave Island
BOIGU	Talbot Island
DAUAN	Mount Cornwallis Island
DAUAR	Dauar Island
EDGOR	Nepean Island
ERUB	Darnley Island
GIALAG	Friday Island
KERIRI	Hammond Island
MABUIAG	Jervis Island
MASIG	Yorke Island
MAUAR	Rennel Island
MER	Murray Island
MOA	Banks Island
MURALAG	Prince of Wales Island
NAGI	Mount Ernest Island
NURUPAI	Horn Island
PALILAG	Goode Island
PURMA	Coconut Island
SAIBAI	Saibai Island
TUDU, TUT	Warrior Island
UGAR	Stephens Island
WAIBEN	Thursday Island
WAIER	Waier Island
WARABER	Sue Island
YAM	Turtle Backed Island

<sup>1</sup>


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Anna Shnukal, Broken: an introduction to the creole language of Torres Strait (Canberra), 1988, pp. 249-250.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am particularly grateful and indebted to the Torres Strait Islander women who were so willing to share with me, an outsider, their recollections of perhaps the most poignant period in their history. They made the writing of this history possible. To them I say a BIG ESSO. Among these women are three in Cairns with whom I have been able to spend much time listening and learning about Torres Strait Islander women. An especially BIG ESSO to Angela Morrison, Elsie Smith and Florence Anderson. A big 'thank you' also goes to the island men who participated in this inquiry.

There were many outsiders, too, who willingly gave of their time to enable the widest possible reconstruction of a most important historical moment to be recorded. Thanks goes to each one.

I appreciated very much that Torres Strait Islanders, Rocky Naia, Romina Fuji, Florence Anderson and Sandra Pilot, were willing to read drafts of various chapters during the writing stage. Their comments were positive and encouraging, and I thank them.

My supervisor, Associate Professor Noel Loos, told me this thesis was possible. Now it is written, I can express my appreciation that he had so much faith. When on study leave in England in 1993, he may have wavered in that faith but he persisted with his copious feedback. Today I am able to say thank you Noel Loos.

I am grateful to the Department of History and Politics of the James Cook University both in Townsville and Cairns for its technical support. The Printery must be congratulated for the fine job it did with the illustrations. Thank you Dr. Dawn May for constantly urging me on. And, to my co-labourer in thesis writing, Caterina Wallbank, I say thank you for the great discussions we had about some very deep contemporary theories while we both sought to find our way out of the maze.

My final thank you goes to my husband, Barry Osborne. He has lived every moment of this thesis with me and his undying encouragement at every point of exasperation or depression must be put on record. He, too, never ceased to challenge my thinking. A big ESSO to you Barry Osborne.



A young Torres Strait  
Islander woman - on  
the brink of a changed  
world, 1942.

I NEED TO MAKE MY OWN CHOICES...

I NEED TO LIVE WITH DIGNITY...

I NEED TO REMEMBER MY  
TRADITIONS...

I NEED TO LIVE IN HARMONY WITH MY  
CREATOR...

I NEED TO BE HEARD AND  
UNDERSTOOD...

I NEED TO BE ACCEPTED FOR WHAT I  
AM...

#### A TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER WOMAN

(Adapted from Poster displayed in  
Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies  
University of Alaska, Fairbanks  
produced by Custom Visuals  
Corporation, Ottawa.)

## Chapter one

### The initial focus and process

Sadie and Bessy Delany's lifelong insights provide us with a priceless oral history of our nation's past century. And what they "have to say" shows us, as no one else can, where we've been, how far we've been, how far we've come...and how far we have to go.<sup>1</sup>

#### The focus

This review comment refers to the Delany sisters, two Black American women both over 100 years, who are in their own words: 'having our say'. In doing so, they have articulated a dimension of American society to which members of the dominant culture had no access, or chose not to, or could not, look at. Moreover, even though they subsequently expressed surprise that people would be interested in 'hearing what two old Negro women [had] to say about their lives', their words help to break down barriers which continue to keep White Americans ignorant of not only Black Americans' experiences but also of their own. Both women claim that their life stories were not meant to be 'black' or 'women's' history but a history that belonged to all Americans.<sup>2</sup>

Marginalised groups of women in different parts of the world today, like the Delany sisters, probably also without knowing how interested others are in their experiences, are wanting to have their say. For instance, Daphne Patai, a literary theorist who collected life stories of both women of colour and white women in Brazil, was told by one of the marginalised women she interviewed: 'I'm glad you're doing this. We need to know one another'.<sup>3</sup> Julie Cruikshank

---

<sup>1</sup> Sarah and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth, Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years (New York, 1993) (reviewer's comment).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 209, xii.

<sup>3</sup> Daphne Patai, Brazilian Women Speak: Contemporary Life Stories (New Brunswick, 1988), p. 3. In this inquiry, I have used as authorities authors from disciplines other than history because of a growing awareness amongst academics that there is an 'artificiality' about the academic division of knowledge (Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds), Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History (London, 1991), p. 3). Researchers in the social science disciplines who take a postmodern/poststructural view of the world have 'progressively drawn upon the discoveries and definitions' of each other (Steven Connor, Postmodernist

who worked with Athapaskan (Athabaskan) women in Northern Canada said that they had a 'commitment [to] document their past in their own voice'.<sup>4</sup> Australian historian Ann McGrath interviewed Aboriginal men and women in the Northern Territory who believed their 'pioneering role in building up the cattle stations' should be recognised.<sup>5</sup> It is only by this 'speaking out' that marginalised women's views of the world will be added to the historical records of the dominant western societies which kept them marginalised for so long. For the purpose of this inquiry, I approached one such group, the Torres Strait Islander women, a black indigenous Australian minority, to gain their perspective about a specific period in their lives. They too, I discovered, wanted to be heard: 'Well at last someone wants to know about us', was one woman's comment when she was asked to participate in the inquiry.<sup>6</sup> Others by positive responses, such as arranging for the presence of kin to help them recall or bringing along their own interpreter if they thought that was necessary, indicated that they too wanted their voices to be heard.

My undertaking was parallel in some respects to Daphne Patai's in Brazil. She wanted 'to work on the problem of invisible

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Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary (Oxford, 1992), pp. 38-39). Bronwyn Davies concluded that poststructural theories undo the 'boundaries between the disciplines of sociology, psychology, history and the studies of literature' (Bronwyn Davies, Shards of Glass: Children reading and writing beyond gendered identities (St. Leonards, New South Wales, 1993), p. xviii). The contemporary social theories of Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard and F.R. Ankersmit which support the nature of this inquiry are discussed in Chapter two. These theorists belong to the postmodern/poststructural tradition and should not be confused with any other school of critical theorists. Throughout this thesis the three theorists are designated 'contemporary social theorists'.

<sup>4</sup> Julie Cruikshank, 'Myth and Tradition as Narrative Framework: Oral Histories from Northern Canada', International Journal of History, Vol. 9, No. 3, November 1988, p. 198.

<sup>5</sup> Ann McGrath, 'Born or Reborn in the Cattle', Meanjin, Vol. 47, No. 2, Winter 1988, p. 172.

<sup>6</sup> Personal communication, Thursday Island, February 1989. Throughout this thesis where the words of Torres Strait Islanders are used they will be highlighted in italics. Texts which are frequently italicised in academic writing, such as the titles of books, will be underscored.



women...to learn from these women how their lives appeared to them'.<sup>7</sup> Like her, I had a desire 'to learn' from a group of women whose voices were silent.<sup>8</sup> My project too was not only to hear their life stories but to discover how they interpreted their experiences of a particular period in their lives after almost fifty years. I hoped that their present collective testimonies would form the basis for a representation of their experiences during the Pacific War from 1942 to 1945. Indeed, I, also like Patai, was relatively innocent and ignorant about what I might find; I had no funding and I represented no one. I went to Torres Strait in late 1988 with nothing more than the desire to hear what any old woman I could locate might be willing to tell me. In the following section of this chapter I discuss my approach to the study, how the interviews were conducted and the circumstances and constraints which surrounded the collection of the oral testimonies which shaped what was told.<sup>9</sup>

Patti Lather in discussing the 'politics of interpretation' in social inquiry contends the 'writer is always in the text, "one among others creating meaning"'. Moreover, the written text is '"a point of intersection between two subjectivities"'.<sup>10</sup> In the writing of this text, there is an interweaving of my own subjectivities with those of the oral historians. It is important that the reader does not lose sight of the role of the writer in this social inquiry. Thus, to assist the reader to remain aware of my presence in the text I use the personal pronoun periodically.

\* \* \*

I had lived on Thursday Island from 1967 until 1972 during

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<sup>7</sup> Although Daphne Patai is a literary theorist, she said her work with the Brazilian women was not meant to be a literary project: 'I had assumed that [it] would be a prose narrative whose primary function was to convey information' about the women. She continued: 'I was following the standard practices of anthropologists, sociologists and historians who work with life histories' (Patai, Brazilian Women, pp. 17, 143).

<sup>8</sup> 'It is the "other" who can tell the "me", if the "me" can just stay quiet and listen: listen to those who carry forward their own ways, those with that originality within them' (Nonie Sharp, Stars of Tagai: The Torres Strait Islanders (Canberra, 1993), p. 14).

<sup>9</sup> See ibid., pp. 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> See Patti Lather, Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy With/in the Postmodern (New York, 1991), pp. 91-92.

which time many Torres Strait Islander women befriended me and, while they sometimes spoke about the men's army service from 1942 to 1945, they did not talk about their own experiences during the Pacific War years.<sup>11</sup> In 1988, after a lapse of almost fifty years since that event, nothing had been written about what was a unique period in the history of this small group of indigenous women. So, in November, as a starting point, I returned to Thursday Island with the intention of locating old women who would be able, and willing, to recall their experiences of the war years. Here women from the different island communities in Torres Strait were located. The search subsequently fanned out from Thursday Island to the communities on Boigu, Saibai, Dauan, Badu, Moa (Kubin and St. Paul's), Mabuiag, Masig (Yorke Island) and Mer (Murray Island). Other people from all of these communities, as well as Erub (Darnley Island), Yam, Purma (Coconut Island) and Ugar (Stephens Island), were located in Cairns, Townsville and Brisbane. Over a period of two years, about 150 people were interviewed. Even with this number, which for reasons subsequently discussed included men as well as women, the piecing together of their present interpretations highlighted the lateness of the inquiry. This was particularly evident from the gaps in the oral testimonies which could have been filled only by people who were over thirty at the time and had since died. Nonetheless, the inquiry established a starting point for the inclusion of Torres Strait Islander women in Australian historiography.

Before looking at the methods used to collect the oral histories and the problems which arose, the importance to Torres Strait Islanders of passing down oral traditions (legends), in Jan Vansina's words, by 'chain of transmission' by people without writing, and their authenticity is illustrated.<sup>12</sup> Ephraim Bani, a Torres Strait Islander linguist and a man with a deep commitment to his culture, told the legend of Kuiamu, an Aborigine from the Gudang Tribe which '*ruled the northern coast of Australia*'. He travelled in search of adventure and arrived at Mabuiag Island in the Torres Strait '*a long time ago...with no aid of sea travel*'. Ephraim made

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<sup>11</sup> Because of its cosmopolitan nature and its common designation 'T.I.', I use the English name for Thursday Island throughout this thesis in lieu of its traditional name, Waiben. For all other Torres Strait communities I use their traditional names, except for the village of St. Paul's on Moa, for which there is no traditional name (see Glossary for English names of the islands).

<sup>12</sup> Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology, trans. H.M. Wright (London, 1965), p. 76.

the assumption that Kuiamu undertook this journey at the end of the last Ice Age when the sea in Torres Strait was rising. However, this was not before the route along the plain which Kuiamu took, via the channel between Nagi and 'the Dollar Reefs and the Long Reef close to Moa' (which were actually a mountain range), was submerged (see Map 2). Ephraim wrote:

*This story is the oldest story ever told. It was first recorded in 1899 by Dr. Haddon of the Cambridge Expedition. I first heard this story when I was probably 12 years old. I did not hear this once but it was told to me over and over again by my mother, grandfather and uncles.*

In 1974, Ephraim discovered the written version of the legend in the library at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra. He was elated:

*This particular story of Kuiamu amazed me to an infinite extent. It's the way it was recorded. What I knew about the story from my childhood and through my maturity was there before my eyes word for word in my native tongue which I was able to translate. It was as if I was suctioned through time to actually listen to an elder I did not see and behold. Most interesting thing was that the story was preserved exactly the same I knew for those 75 years.*

Ephraim stressed not only the accuracy of the transmission of this knowledge but also that in this tradition there was 'bound to be a formula capable of determining the time of our existence' in Torres Strait.<sup>13</sup>

Within the last decade, the oral testimonies of Torres Strait Islanders as they related to their customs and laws passed down from generation to generation were presented in evidence in the highest courts in Australia. A Meriam man, the late Eddie Koiki Mabo, without written texts, knew exactly what land belonged to his people when land rights issues were discussed:

*what I know about my people and our culture did not come from books written by academics. My text books were my parents, especially my late mother and father Maiga and*

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<sup>13</sup> Ephraim Bani, 'Warapaw UU: "Echo of Drums"', Torres News, 21-27 February 1992, pp. 20-21. The possibility that Haddon's record had informed Torres Strait Islanders between 1899 and 1974 is remote. Given the rampant paternalism with which the people were administered, none of Bani's older relations would have had access to the written record in Canberra. It is not difficult to understand that his grandfather would have passed the story down even before Haddon recorded it in 1899. Therefore, not only do I take Bani's account at face value, I also believe that the authority of the Torres Strait Islander voice must be respected.

*Benny Mabo of Las village, and so many other people who contributed to my traditional education, and all my people of the Eastern Torres Strait Islands who unknowingly contributed to the knowledge I now have.*<sup>14</sup>

As a consequence of a land rights action instituted in 1982 by Koiki and other Meriam men, the High Court of Australia, a decade later, overturned the English law of terra nullius as it applied on this continent.<sup>15</sup> In so doing, the oral testimony of Torres Strait Islanders was accepted by the western judiciary in its search for a truth.

During the war, the Torres Strait Islanders expressed the poignancy of much that had happened to them and the things they learnt and saw in song and dance, which were not written down but were remembered. The old people who contributed to this inquiry did not recall the day to day events of the war years with the same accuracy with which they remembered their legends, codes or even their songs. Nevertheless, oral transmission of knowledge was then, and still is, very important in their culture and this was apparent from the way the people reeled off their complex genealogies, all remembered because parents had passed the details on by word of mouth to their children. The old Torres Strait Islanders who participated in this inquiry were totally dependent for the information sought on their memories, which while old were well practised. Thus, even though these memories had been affected by the time, this posed no greater problem for me than if I had had to rely upon the interpretations of outsiders written fifty years ago. Theirs would have been outsider knowledge and the prime focus of my inquiry was to find insider knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Eddie Koiki Mabo, 'Land Rights in Torres Strait', in Eric Olbrei (ed.), Black Australians: The Prospects for Change (Townsville, 1982), p. 143.

<sup>15</sup> See Brian Keon-Cohen, 'Eddie Mabo and Ors v The State of Queensland: High Court of Australia, Full Bench, 3 June 1992', Aboriginal Law Bulletin, Vol. 2, No. 56, June 1992, pp. 2-3.

<sup>16</sup> E.H. Carr considers documented 'facts' are no more reliable than oral testimony: 'No document can tell us more than what the author...thought had happened...' (What is History? (Hammondsworth, 1976), p. 16). Wendy Lowenstein argues for a human perspective on history - 'ask the people who were alive...[this is] far more reliable than...written records' (Wendy Lowenstein, 'Foreword', in Catherine Watson (ed.), Boots and All: an oral history of farming in Victoria (Collingwood, 1984), p. xiii).

As a background to the study I read the writings of anthropologists, Haddon, Beckett, Fuary and the Torres Strait Islander academic, George Passi; sociologist, Sharp; historians, Mullins, Singe and the educational historian Williamson. The London Missionary Society (L.M.S.) records on Torres Strait and reports, documents and publications of other authors who went to Torres Strait in the early period of white intervention, were examined. Visits were made to the State and Commonwealth Archives in Brisbane, the Commonwealth Archives in Melbourne and Canberra and the Australian War Memorial. Data were also located in the then Department of Community Services which administered Torres Strait Islander affairs, the Education Department and the Premier's Department as well as the John Oxley Library.<sup>17</sup> In these institutions, all files which made reference to Torres Strait and the Torres Strait Islanders were examined. However, in all archives, the material for the particular period was overwhelmingly concerned with the prosecution of the war - its military, naval and aerial aspects. Indeed, from the documentary evidence, it was almost as if about three thousand women, children and old people left on their island communities beyond the front line of Australia's north-eastern defences while their able-bodied men served on Thursday Island were non-existent during 1942 and early 1943. In the archival material their presence was briefly recognised in May after a visit to Badu by the Governor of Queensland and then the Public Service Commissioner for Queensland with the Queensland Director of Native Affairs.<sup>18</sup> Subsequent occasional references to the women were contained in army intelligence reports, medical reports made by army survey teams, the minutes of a conference of Torres Strait Islander councillors held on Masig (Yorke Island) in August 1944 and the Auditor General's reports with related correspondence on the financial administration of the island communities. The few comments in the latter reports and correspondence were, generally, about the people's health while secondary sources, such as the official war histories and other books

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<sup>17</sup> Further references to the Department which administered Torres Strait Islander affairs at any given time will be by the designation 'the Department'. Its current title is: Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs - see Appendix 1 for history of the Queensland Government Departments which administered Torres Strait Islander affairs.

<sup>18</sup> Throughout the thesis, the Director of Native Affairs is designated 'the Director'. He also carried the title 'Protector of Islanders' (see Part V - Preservation and Protection, Sec. 21, Torres Strait Islanders Act, 1939 (Qld)).

and articles, yielded no information at all about the Torres Strait Islander women during the war period.

Historical investigations of the Aborigines resulted in more and more publications appearing on library shelves from the late 1960s, and while there were people researching in Torres Strait, they were generally not historians. The occasional published school and community history and autobiography made no more than brief references to the women's wartime experiences. No one had kept a wartime diary, nor did anyone produce other relevant written material, such as letters.<sup>19</sup> A few women produced copies of Ion Idriess's book, Drums of Mer, which they had had in their possession for a long time and which they somehow thought might help my inquiry.<sup>20</sup> People on the island communities did not have cameras before the war;<sup>21</sup> moreover their use was banned by the military during the war. Thus, it was extremely difficult to get photographs: one signaller had surreptitiously taken snapshots and a few are reproduced in the thesis. In the final analysis, apart from occasional references in archival documents, there were no papers, secondary source materials, diaries, letters or photographs to support the inquiry. Nonetheless, once analysed, the oral testimonies of the Torres Strait Islanders contained sufficient information, considering the time lapse since the Pacific War, to give the best interpretation possible of the women's present perceptions of their experiences.

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### The process

The initial step in the collection of the oral testimonies was to decide on the most appropriate method of recording them. Having established some close friendships with a number of older women when I lived on Thursday Island in the early 1970s, I knew I would be

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<sup>19</sup> I heard of only one diary being kept during the war. A woman of Torres Strait Islander descent and raised on Thursday Island kept a diary of the journey on the evacuation boat but it was confiscated by the military when she arrived in Cairns in early 1942 (Personal communication, Cairns, November 1992).

<sup>20</sup> Ion Idriess, Drums of Mer (Sydney, 1936).

<sup>21</sup> This was confirmed in Cairns in December 1994 in a conversation with three old women, originally from different communities.

doing many interviews in busy homes there with children milling about making demands on their akas (grandmothers), or sitting on a platform in the yard with the wind rustling the leaves of the overhanging trees, or on the beach with its many distractions.<sup>22</sup> In the early 1970s, although it was possible to get permission from the Torres Strait Islander councillors to visit other island communities, that permission was frequently overridden by the Director in Brisbane or the Local Manager of the Department on Thursday Island. However, by the time this inquiry was commenced in 1988, the policy had changed. The Director can no longer override councillors' decisions and I was confident I would get the required permission to visit the outer island communities. But, I had no reason to believe the environment for tape recording would be any better than on Thursday Island. I was also sensitive to the possibility that most of the old women had not previously participated in an academic research project and that they would be nervous about speaking at an electronic device. Moreover, I was certain there would be many interruptions because old Torres Strait Islander women are often responsible for the care of small grandchildren who, as suggested, would be likely to distract the old women during the interviews. This was the main reason for choosing to record the people's recollections, verbatim, in shorthand.<sup>23</sup> It was easy to stop the pencil and pick up the thread of conversation after the women had met the children's needs.<sup>24</sup>

Most of the people spoke slowly in the form of Torres Strait

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<sup>22</sup> An advantage in the collection of the data was my husband and I were known to many of the people. Thus, barriers of shyness and awkwardness were not too difficult to break down. One person questioned whether I was just another white person who wanted to make money doing research on the islands (Personal communication with Mabuiag man, May 1990). This accusation was levelled at me only once although Torres Strait Islanders are becoming more determined to have a say in who uses their knowledge and to what end.

<sup>23</sup> This was a wise decision. When my husband was on Saibai he taped an interview which proved almost impossible to transcribe because it had been done in the open and the wind blotted out the voices.

<sup>24</sup> While sociologist Nonie Sharp tape recorded interviews with Torres Strait Islanders, they were a selected few and I can only think she must have worked in more agreeable environments. At least one of the two female oral historians was a woman with a wider view of the world than any of the old women interviewed in this inquiry. In the circumstances of this inquiry, there was a comfortableness for both the women and myself in the method of recording chosen.

Islander English generally used when speaking to outsiders. It was not difficult to record. Several women provided their own interpreters because they felt more comfortable using language. One woman's son happened to be present and he translated his mother's words. When Torres Strait Creole was spoken, any doubts I had about words were overcome by further explanation.<sup>25</sup> Quite quickly, the women adopted a relaxed and 'yarnlike' approach in the interviews.<sup>26</sup> The accounts were subsequently transcribed on to the word processor and hard copies printed out.

The inquiry necessitated reaching as many old Torres Strait Islanders as possible. I wanted to be sure I was plumbing the depths of the available perceptions. The oral historians were spread over a large area of North Queensland, most in particularly remote island communities in Torres Strait. To return to check typed transcripts with about 150 people in these distant locations, together with the time needed to do so and the cost involved, was not a viable proposition. The testimonies of some of the women who lived locally were verbally discussed with them but I did not send transcripts to the remaining interviewees. The probability of receiving written feedback was remote. The majority of older Torres Strait Islanders, the women in particular, are sensitive about what they see as their inability to speak, and undoubtedly write, 'proper English'. For instance, an old Meriam woman requested me not to use the people's words as they would be '*shamed for their English*'.<sup>27</sup> English is a

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<sup>25</sup> According to Anna Shnukal, Torres Strait Creole is a recent creation. It was developed from pidgin which is the mixing of two or more languages. Creole is not the speaker's native tongue. It is pidgin which becomes the first language of a group of children (Anna Shnukal, Broken: An Introduction to the Creole Language of Torres Strait (Canberra, 1988), p. 4).

<sup>26</sup> Torres Strait Islander people are comfortable with yarnning: 'Listening to yarnning, yarnning, yarnning. Yarnning is reflecting. And yarn too and listen...' 'Listen first: our custom may be quite different to yours...' (Sharp, Stars of Tagai, p. 14).

<sup>27</sup> Interview 056, Mer, January 1989. She meant they would be ashamed if English speakers read their testimonies unedited. An Aboriginal oral historian who worked with Margaret Somerville thought her 'Aboriginal English' was regarded 'as of less worth' too (Margaret Somerville, The Sun Dancin': People and Place in Coonabarabran (Canberra, 1994), pp. 13-14). In deference to requests from some oral historians for anonymity, all testimonies are coded. Each is given a number followed by the place, month and year of the interview. Subsequent references are abbreviated, for example 'Int.056'.



second or even third language for most. Anna Shnukal, a linguist specialising in Torres Strait Islander language, points out:

Speakers of any Island language (including Broken) always remark on how uncomfortable they feel when using English, how "frozen" they find it even when they speak it extremely well. They find it difficult to express themselves fully. This is because, as a product and shaper of European culture, English is alien to much of Islander thinking.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, when the women's testimonies were analysed, there were many incidences of corroboration of what women from one community had said and also across communities. Several younger generation Torres Strait Islanders, more comfortable with English, read chapters during the writing stage. Their comments on what had been told to them by their mothers and their knowledge of the culture, were positive.<sup>29</sup>

An initial concern was that it proved difficult to conduct the interviews on a one-to-one basis with the old women, the occasions when an interpreter was present excepted. Sometimes a woman invited a sister, a female cousin or a friend of about the same age to help her. These groups, however, proved most informative because the women picked up on one another's recollections and they filled in gaps in each other's reminiscences. At some homes, husbands answered the door and seemed taken aback when it was explained that I wanted to talk to their wives about the women's experiences during the Pacific War. It must have seemed an unusual request: I was subsequently told that it was not until 1989 that the old women on Saibai were asked by the men to speak publicly at the Anzac Day celebrations about their own wartime experiences.<sup>30</sup>

The mention of the war to the men who had served in the army was generally a signal for them to tell their stories. During many interviews they talked about their own war experiences while their wives sat silent. Occasionally, old women chose to have their husbands present. They did not dominate but assisted the women to 'relive' their experiences.<sup>31</sup> Some widows were very communicative

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<sup>28</sup> Shnukal, Broken, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Personal communications, Cairns, April 1993.

<sup>30</sup> Interview 062, Townsville, October 1990.

<sup>31</sup> Agnes Heller, A Philosophy of History in Fragments (Oxford, 1993), p. 43.

and talked comfortably for hours about their lives; only two refused to be interviewed. Unfortunately, there were a few very old women who must have had a wealth of experience and seemed to comprehend what was said but were unable to carry on a meaningful conversation. I was reminded that the lateness of the inquiry had made it almost impossible to get the impressions of women over thirty during the war; grandmothers' testimonies were totally missing. The significance of the amount of detail I needed to answer the inquiry was a problem for several women. For instance, one account ran: *'My husband was in the war...We were inside bush. I liked it inside the bush. We built bush houses in there. We were near the river...We were frightened'*.<sup>32</sup> A woman who had already been interviewed was puzzled about why I would want to interview someone else from her village: *'I told you everything. What do you want to talk to her for?'*<sup>33</sup> Some women, who were young teenagers during the war years, gave sketchy information: *'I was a young girl in the war. I think school stopped in the war...We were frightened we would die'*.<sup>34</sup> Conversely, others of the same generation had many memories of their teenage years in the Torres Strait war zone. Despite frustrations and disappointments during the oral history collection stage, the majority of the testimonies contained valuable insights.

After a number of interviews, themes began to emerge from the women's free-flowing accounts: desertion, evacuation, civil defence, enlistment and so on. These were pursued with more direct questions but only while there were indications of a willingness to answer them. Most importantly, I wanted the speaker to develop a sense of 'what mattered to her'. Thus, I interfered as little as possible with the 'rhythm of the story'.<sup>35</sup> The themes ultimately determined the chapter headings in the thesis.

The original intention was not to tamper with the words in the Torres Strait Islander testimonies to be incorporated in the thesis. However, as indicated, one old woman made a special point of explaining that the Torres Strait Islanders would feel ashamed if their experiences were recorded in the text in their island English. Martin Nakata, a Torres Strait Islander doctoral student, suggested that to present the testimonies just as they were spoken, was to

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<sup>32</sup> Interview 138, Kubin Village, March 1990.  
<sup>33</sup> Personal communication, St. Paul's, March 1990.  
<sup>34</sup> Interview 133, Thursday Island, November 1988.  
<sup>35</sup> Patai, Brazilian Women, p. 10.

demean Torres Strait Islanders in the eyes of those whose first language was English.<sup>36</sup> Clarity too was important. How difficult would it be for readers who had no familiarity at all with Torres Strait Islander English? Like Peter Read, I came to the conclusion that clarity was preferable to non-interference and probably misunderstanding: 'It seems that the mind can accept a good deal more disorder while listening to a story than by reading one'.<sup>37</sup> In her work with the Brazilian women, Patai opted for 'standard English' to avoid catering to the sense of 'exoticism and class distance' which she said can be conveyed by the use of 'dialect'.<sup>38</sup> For these reasons, I chose to edit some of the testimonies, but as minimally as possible.<sup>39</sup>

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My initial focus was to find Torres Strait Islander women who could talk about their experiences during the Pacific War. I wanted to listen to what they had to say and represent, as faithfully as possible, their present perceptions of that event. Some of the old men were also keen to talk about the war years. I was not, however, foolish enough to believe that the intervening years had left any of their memory lenses in a pristine condition so that they could recall their experiences just as they had been. Their testimonies were an interpretation of events just as this thesis is my interpretation of what they told me. Nevertheless, because the old people still had respect for the oral transmission of their knowledge and in the context of the contemporary social theories discussed in Chapter two, I was confident about the work I had embarked upon.

In the ways described in this chapter, I approached the study and met the initial problems. In Chapter two, my theoretical positionings are discussed.

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<sup>36</sup> Personal communication, Cairns, August 1993.  
<sup>37</sup> Peter Read (ed.), Down There With Me On The Cowra Mission: An oral history of Erambie Aboriginal Reserve, Cowra, New South Wales (Sydney, 1984), p. xvi.  
<sup>38</sup> Patai, Brazilian Women, pp. 15-16.  
<sup>39</sup> I have not changed the wording of Torres Strait Islander testimonies cited from other written sources.

## Chapter two Theoretical positionings

Our most fundamental task as historians...is to solicit those fragmented inner narratives to emerge from their silences. In the final analysis, what is the past but a once material existence, now silenced, extant only as sign and as sign drawing to itself chains of conflicting interpretations that hover over its absent present and compete for possession of relics, seeming to inscribe traces of significance upon the bodies of the dead?<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, the inquiry is positioned in the historiography of indigenous Australians and I discuss contextuality, the contemporary debate on oral history and the incommensurability of discourses. Certain contemporary social theories and feminism are examined as they relate to Torres Strait Islander women's knowledge and experiences.

### Historiography

The history of the Torres Strait Islanders has differed in many respects from that of the Aborigines. Indeed, Jeremy Beckett suggests that 'European invasion was not the catastrophe for [Torres Strait Islanders] that it was for many Aborigines'. They were not displaced by the pearlers and trepangers who first came to Torres Strait. Rather, Beckett says, it was in the invaders' interests 'to keep the Islanders where they were as a labour force'.<sup>2</sup> Thus, they did not lose the use of their islands and sources of food. They were not institutionalised in the same way as many Aborigines and their children were not taken from them to be brought up under supervision of the Whites in dormitories. They did not become fringe-dwellers in the sense that the Aborigines did. The Torres Strait Islanders were more spontaneous in their acceptance of the missionaries' teachings: Christianity was soon 'blended into [their] customary life'.<sup>3</sup> Generally, too, their responses to some of the 'civilising' influences of the missionaries and government officials were relatively rapid. They were not a threat to European commercial

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<sup>1</sup> Gabrielle M. Spiegel, 'History and Post-Modernism', Past and Present, No. 135, May 1992, p. 208.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Beckett, 'Whatever happened to German Wislin', in Diane E. Barwick, Jeremy Beckett and Marie Reay (eds), Metaphors of Interpretation: Essays in Honour of W.E.H. Stanner (Rushcutter's Bay, New South Wales, 1985), p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> David S. Trigger, Whitefella Comin': Aboriginal responses to colonialism in northern Australia (Cambridge, 1992), p. 224.

activity. Nonetheless, the heavy arm of government containment was felt by both groups of black indigenous Australians from the early 1900s.

Throughout the first three or four decades of this century, it was widely held that the Aborigines were a 'dying race' and they should be treated as 'generously as possible', even if that meant their containment.<sup>4</sup> Torres Strait Islander containment, however, was a government expediency to ensure a pool of cheap labour for the capitalist marine enterprise in Torres Strait. And, for both groups, the maintenance of a white national monoculture under the White Australia policy was clearly also a motive for containment. Government control and segregation of both groups of indigenous Australians were entrenched in legislation passed by the various States and the Commonwealth for the Northern Territory.<sup>5</sup> Torres Strait Islanders and Aborigines were set apart physically and denied even the most basic rights and privileges of white Australians. Moreover, they were ignored by historians, which Beckett suggests was not surprising because the Aborigines, and I include the Torres Strait Islanders, were not seen to play any 'heroic roles' in the emerging 'Anglophone nation state'.<sup>6</sup> In 1968, W.E.H. Stanner, in a Boyer Lecture, told ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission) radio listeners that in the case of the Aborigines, white historians had reflected 'something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale'.<sup>7</sup> M.C. Hartwig in an historical perspective written on Aborigines and racism suggested that it would not be difficult to show that this forgetfulness was grounded in disrespect.<sup>8</sup> And the Aboriginal perspective of Eric Willmot is that it was more than

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in W.E.H. Stanner, 'The Australian Aborigines', in William S. Livingstone and Wm. Roger Louis (eds), Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands since the First World War (Austin, 1979), p. 152.

<sup>5</sup> See Noel Loos, 'A Chapter of Contact: Aboriginal-European Relations in North Queensland, 1606-1992', in Henry Reynolds (ed.), Race Relations in North Queensland (Townsville, 1993), pp. 4-39.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Beckett, 'The past in the present; the present in the past: constructing a national Aboriginality', in Jeremy Beckett (ed.), Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality (Canberra, 1988), p. 195.

<sup>7</sup> W.E.H. Stanner, After the Dreaming: black and white Australians - an anthropologist's view (Crows Nest, New South Wales, 1974), p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> M.C. Hartwig, 'Aborigines and Racism: An Historical Perspective', in F.S. Stevens (ed.), Racism: The Australian Experience. A study of race prejudice in Australia, Vol. 2 Black versus White (Sydney, 1973), p. 10.

forgetfulness: certain history, including indigenous history, was deliberately covered up: 'It was apparently not in the interests of a crookedly intent or racist establishment to promote...parts of the Australian story'.<sup>9</sup> These claims might just as easily have been written about Torres Strait Islanders.

Before 1900, some attention was paid to the 'great tragedy of destruction and dispossession' occasioned by the Whites on Aborigines. However, early in the twentieth century Australian historians were 'nationalistic' and wrote to 'foster patriotism in the present, pride in the past'.<sup>10</sup> Australia's indigenous minorities were ignored. It was not until 1969 that D.J. Mulvaney challenged traditional historical accounts which emphasised the exploits of European explorers and pioneers. He wrote: 'The discoverers, explorers and colonists of the three million square miles which are Australia were its Aborigines'.<sup>11</sup> In the early 1970s, C.D. Rowley, in three publications, Outcasts in White Australia, The Destruction of Aboriginal Society and The Remote Aborigines, recorded and assessed the impact of European invasion on Aboriginal Australia.<sup>12</sup> In 1975, Evans, Cronin and Saunders wrote on race relations in Queensland in Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination.<sup>13</sup> These histories fall within the 'oppositional' school of historical writings, one of three 'overlapping schools of writings' or categories constructed by Bain Attwood - the others being 'revisionist' and 'Aboriginal'.<sup>14</sup> These earlier writings

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<sup>9</sup> Eric Willmot, Pemulwuy: The Rainbow Warrior (Sydney, 1988), p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Reynolds, 'The Breaking of the Great Australian Silence: Aborigines in Australian Historiography 1955-1983', in P. Quartermaine (ed.), Diversity Itself: Essays in Australian Arts and Culture (Exeter, England, 1983), pp. 30-43.

<sup>11</sup> D.J. Mulvaney, The Pre-history of Australia (London, 1969), p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> C.D. Rowley, Recovery: The Politics of Aboriginal Reform (Ringwood, Victoria, 1986), p. ix; C.D. Rowley, Outcasts in White Australia (Canberra, 1971); C.D. Rowley, The Destruction of Aboriginal Society (Hammondsworth, 1972); C.D. Rowley, The Remote Aborigines (Ringwood, Victoria, 1972).

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Evans, Kathryn Cronin and Kay Saunders, Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination (Sydney, 1975).

<sup>14</sup> Bain Attwood, The Making of the Aborigines (London, 1989), p. 135. I have used Attwood's categories of Aboriginal history since 1970 because they are useful for my own reflections on and analysis of the developing corpus of writings about Torres Strait Islanders. I am not implying, by so doing, that I agree with all of Attwood's claims about oral history or the writing of

were, generally, 'eurocentric discussions' about black/white relations in which Aboriginal people seemed to stand still and let things happen to them.<sup>15</sup>

In a new wave of writing in the 1980s, historians Henry Reynolds, Noel Loos and Bob Reece, among others, looked at post-contact society from the Aborigines' side of the frontier.<sup>16</sup> The Aborigines were cast as 'active agents rather than passive objects shaped and controlled by European colonisers', which positioned these histories in Attwood's 'revisionist' school.<sup>17</sup> Reynolds and Loos depended largely upon the written evidence of the invading colonists, although they were also assisted by indigenous oral testimonies in the creation of their dispossession-resistance model of contact with the Aborigines.<sup>18</sup> Reece, without oral evidence, built his model of contact on accommodation. John Mulvaney presented a wide picture of Aboriginal-European relations as well as turning 'a sympathetic eye toward missionary involvement with the Aborigines'.<sup>19</sup>

Two other historians, Marie Fels and Ann McGrath, looked at Aboriginal acculturation as well as their accommodation of the

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- Aboriginal history.
- <sup>15</sup> Marie Hansen Fels, Good Men and True: The Aboriginal Police of the Port Phillip District 1837-1853 (Carlton, Victoria, 1988), p. 1.
- <sup>16</sup> Henry Reynolds, The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia (Ringwood, Victoria, 1986); Noel Loos, Invasion and Resistance: Aboriginal-European relations on the North Queensland frontier 1861-1897 (Canberra, 1982); Bob Reece, 'Inventing Aborigines', Aboriginal History, Vol. 11, Nos. 1-2, 1987, pp. 14-31.
- <sup>17</sup> Attwood, Making of the Aborigines, p. 136. In the past decade the number of histories which come within the 'revisionist' school has substantially increased, a most recent publication being Dawn May's, Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry: Queensland from White Settlement to the Present (Oakleigh, Victoria, 1994).
- <sup>18</sup> Reynolds and Loos both made reference to Torres Strait Islanders. However, Steven Mullins claims they did not acknowledge the cultural differences between the two groups of people: they had the 'tendency to extrapolate from one pattern of contact to another existing in a different place and time' (S. Mullins, On the Frontiers of History Torres Strait 1864-1884, Paper presented to the 57th ANZAAS Conference, Townsville, 1987, p. 13).
- <sup>19</sup> D.J. Mulvaney, Encounters in Place: Outsiders and Aboriginal Australians 1606-1985 (St. Lucia, 1989); Bain Attwood, 'Aborigines and Academic Historians: Some Recent Encounters', Australian Historical Studies, Vol. 24, No. 94, April 1990, p. 128.

Europeans.<sup>20</sup> Fels acknowledged that she was able to find 'few recorded rhetorical statements of Aboriginal feeling and intent' but that there was evidence of their actions in the records to substantiate her thesis that Aborigines did make 'positive choices': it is a history of co-operation.<sup>21</sup> Like McGrath, Anna Haebich saw the Aborigines as active in the European economy.<sup>22</sup> Fels' and Haebich's works, along with many others not cited, belong to the 'revisionist' school. However, the histories of the growing number of non-indigenous authors using substantial Aboriginal oral testimony do not belong to this second school of writings nor to Attwood's third school, 'Aboriginal' history. Examples are McGrath's 'Born in the Cattle' and Peter Read's A Hundred Years War.<sup>23</sup> McGrath used substantial oral evidence to give an Aboriginal perspective on life and work in the outback north.<sup>24</sup> Read worked amongst 'hundreds' of Wiradjuri people to gain the insights to write their history. In his publication, Down There With Me on the Cowra Mission, Read arranged the oral testimonies of the Erambie people so that they spoke for themselves about the human price they paid as a consequence of decades of ill-founded government policy.<sup>25</sup> While these histories cast the Aborigines as active agents, because of the indigenous voice I will subsequently argue that they belong to a fourth school of historical writings not delineated by Attwood.<sup>26</sup> However, before considering this proposition, writings about the Torres Strait Islander experience which fall within the 'revisionist' school are discussed.

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<sup>20</sup> Fels, Good Men; Ann McGrath, 'Born in the Cattle': Aborigines in Cattle Country (Sydney, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> Fels, Good Men, pp. 2, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Anna Haebich, For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the Southwest of Western Australia 1900-1940 (Nedlands, W.A., 1988).

<sup>23</sup> Peter Read, A Hundred Years War: The Wiradjuri People and the State (Rushcutters Bay, New South Wales, 1988).

<sup>24</sup> McGrath, 'Born in the Cattle', p. viii.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Read (ed.), Down There With Me.

<sup>26</sup> The following works by anthropologist Bruce Shaw might be situated in this fourth category of historical writings because they make important contributions to Aboriginal history and because of outsider involvement in their presentations - Grant Ngabidj (as told to Bruce Shaw), My Country of the Pelican Dreaming: The life of an Australian Aborigine of the Gadjerong, Grant Ngabidj, 1904-1977 (Canberra, 1981); Jack Sullivan (as told to Bruce Shaw), Banggaiyerri: The Story of Jack Sullivan (Canberra, 1983).



Jeremy Beckett, an anthropologist 'with historical inclinations', published The Torres Strait Islanders in 1987, one of the few scholarly inquiries about Australia's smaller indigenous group of people in recent times.<sup>27</sup> His historical analysis leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that the Torres Strait Islanders' colonial experience was different in many respect from that of the Aborigines. Some of his insights were informed by the people. Sociologist Nonie Sharp incorporated extensive 'conversational narratives' of Torres Strait Islanders who had 'lived both the old and the new' in an historically oriented doctoral thesis, subsequently published under the title Stars of Tagai. From the recollections, she wrote about the survival of Torres Strait Islander culture in a 'socio-historical' context.<sup>28</sup>

In a colourful, if less academic tradition, John Singe, historian and long-time high school teacher on Thursday Island, published a book on the people and history of Torres Strait.<sup>29</sup> His subsequent publication incorporated a collection of histories from the Torres Strait area.<sup>30</sup> In neither work did he use oral histories although many of his insights emanated from his close associations with Torres Strait Islanders. In his doctoral thesis, educational historian Alan Williamson made some use of the people's voices to examine the diverse and complex character of schooling in Torres Strait from 1873 until 1941.<sup>31</sup> Two other authors who wrote about early Torres Strait Islander history had little alternative but to rely upon evidence from the written word. Historian Steven Mullins investigated the significance of culture-contact on the Torres Strait frontier from 1864-1884, while another educational historian, John Langbridge, examined the London Missionary Society's enculturation and evangelisation of the Torres Strait Islanders from 1872 until

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<sup>27</sup> Jeremy Beckett, The Torres Strait Islanders: custom and colonialism (Sydney, 1987), p. x.

<sup>28</sup> Sharp, Stars of Tagai, p. 13. Sharp's thesis is entitled Springs of Originality among the Torres Strait Islanders and Vol. 2, Book of Islanders, Ph.D. thesis, Department of Sociology, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria, 1984. Again I include a work from another discipline because of the importance of its historical content.

<sup>29</sup> John Singe, The Torres Strait: People and History (St. Lucia, 1979).

<sup>30</sup> John Singe, Among Islands (Thursday Island, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> Alan Williamson, Schooling the Torres Strait Islander 1873-1941, Ph.D. thesis, Department of Education, The University of Sydney, 1990. This thesis was recently published under the title Schooling the Torres Strait Islander 1873-1941: Context, Custom and Colonialism (Underdale, S.A., 1994).

1915.<sup>32</sup> For the period of this inquiry, the army historian Robert Hall wrote a comprehensive account on the army service of the Torres Strait Islander men. He made no mention of the women.<sup>33</sup> It is not a simple matter to situate some histories in one or the other of Attwood's categories. Langbridge's thesis fits into the 'oppositional' school.<sup>34</sup> Bearing in mind that the categories are overlapping, the histories of Mullins and Williamson might be more appropriately designated 'revisionist' because the Torres Strait Islanders are portrayed in some instances as being active agents. The works of Hall, Beckett and Sharp more clearly cast the Torres Strait Islanders as active agents in their inter-relations with the outsiders. These texts are consonant with the 'revisionist' school of histories. However, as Sharp makes extensive use of the people's voices, I would argue her thesis falls within the fourth school of historical writings not delineated by Attwood.

Attwood's third category, 'Aboriginal' history, includes histories and autobiographies written by Aborigines about themselves and their people. This is a relatively new school of writing. It includes, among others, the works of some extraordinary female Aboriginal authors - Marnie Kennedy, Glenyse Ward and Ida West.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the extensive writing which has now been done by and about Aborigines suggests a new, more complex Aboriginal identity.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Steven Mullins, *Torres Strait 1864-1884: a history of occupation and culture contact*, Ph.D. thesis, Department of History, University of New England, Armidale, 1989; John William Langbridge, *From Enculturation to Evangelization: An Account of Missionary Education in the Islands of Torres Strait to 1915*, B.Ed. (Hons.), Department of Education, James Cook University of North Queensland, 1977.

<sup>33</sup> Robert A. Hall, *The Black Diggers: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War* (Sydney, 1989).

<sup>34</sup> I have not included Singe's social histories in these academic categories.

<sup>35</sup> Marnie Kennedy, *Born a half caste* (Canberra, 1985); Glenyse Ward, *Wandering Girl* (Broome, 1987); Ida West, *Pride against prejudice: Reminiscences of a Tasmanian Aborigine* (Canberra, 1987).

<sup>36</sup> Whether Sally Morgan's *My Place* and her story of Jack McPhee fit into 'Aboriginal' history might be a moot point for some Aborigines since Attwood set the scene for debate about the 'nature of Aboriginality' asserted by Morgan. However, I do not intend to explore this topic in the thesis. See Sally Morgan, *My Place* (Fremantle, 1987); Sally Morgan, *Wanamurraganya: The Story of Jack McPhee* (Fremantle, 1989) and Bain Attwood, 'Portrait of an Aboriginal as an Artist: Sally Morgan and the Construction of Aboriginality', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 99, October 1992, pp. 302-318 and

For the purposes of the inclusion of Torres Strait Islanders in the third historical category, termed 'Aboriginal', I have chosen to rename it 'Islander/Aboriginal' history. In this category there is only one autobiography of a Torres Strait Islander woman who was born and raised in an urban environment on the administrative centre for Torres Strait at Thursday Island.<sup>37</sup> Two Torres Strait Islander men have published their life histories.<sup>38</sup> Other writings in the 'Islander/Aboriginal' school are the history of the religious experiences of the people on the eastern islands written by the Torres Strait Islander Anglican priest, Father Dave Passi, and the Master's thesis of Torres Strait Islander anthropologist, the late George Passi.<sup>39</sup> The latter is included because it contains valuable historical data on the Torres Strait region and its people. In 1991, the Boigu Community Council, assisted by the white school principal and his wife, published a book, 'prepared and written by Islanders', about their own history and culture.<sup>40</sup> With the people of Saibai, linguists Rod and Judy Kennedy, who have spent many years in translation work on Saibai, incorporated extensive historical data recorded by Torres Strait Islanders in their joint publication directed toward greater cultural sensitivity amongst outsider workers in Western Torres Strait.<sup>41</sup> The works of the Boigu Community and the Saibai people were certainly done in association with outsiders.

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replies by Jackie Huggins, Tim Rowse and Isabel Tarrago in Vol. 25, No. 100, pp. 459-469.

<sup>37</sup> Ellie Gaffney, Somebody Now: The Autobiography of Ellie Gaffney, a woman of Torres Strait (Canberra, 1989). Ellie's grandmother, Dadu, married Jacob Summers, a Scotsman. The widowed Dadu's daughter, Geti, was sent from Mabuiag to work as a servant for a government employee on Thursday Island. She married Simeon Sadir (known as Tommy Loban) and they lived and brought up their children, including Ellie, on that Island.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Lowah, Eded Mer (My Life) (Kuranda, Queensland, 1988); Willie Thaiday, Under the Act (Townsville, 1981).

<sup>39</sup> Dave Passi, 'From Pagan to Christian Priesthood', in G.W. Trompf, The Gospel is not Western: Black Theologies from the South West Pacific (Maryknoll, New York, 1987), pp. 45-48; George Passi, Knowledge, Education and Self-Management: Autonomy of Torres Strait, Degree of Master of Social Planning and Development, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Queensland, St. Lucia, 1986.

<sup>40</sup> Boigu Island Community Council, Boigu: Our History and Culture (Canberra, 1991). The white school principal and his wife worked with the community to collate these histories.

<sup>41</sup> Rod and Judy Kennedy with the people of Western Torres Strait, Adha Gar Tidi: Cultural Sensitivity in Western Torres Strait (Darwin, 1990). The contributions of the oral historians in this publication and from Boigu expand the bank of texts for future analysis.

However, the people's histories in both might appropriately be included in the 'Islander/Aboriginal' school because they were not interpreted by outsiders and bearing in mind again that the categories are overlapping.

The histories, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, which I would argue are more difficult to locate within the 'Islander/Aboriginal' school are those of outsider authors who rely substantially on the oral histories of indigenous people, for example McGrath, Read and Sharp. This inquiry also does not fit comfortably in that category. Arguably there are textual elements which might sit well in the 'oppositional' and 'revisionist' schools. The 'eurocentric discussion' which portrays the Torres Strait Islander women as innocent victims caught on the margins of a nation-state at war and as pawns in the larger outsider games could be situated in the 'oppositional' school. In accord with the principle promoted in the 'revisionist' school in which outsider authors portray indigenous people as being active agents on their own behalf, sections of this inquiry fall within that category. Nonetheless, the essence of the inquiry was dependent upon the testimonies of the oral historians and there is substantial use of their voices in the thesis. Although written by an outsider author, the thesis affords readers, through the oral histories, the fullest possible insider insights into the women's experiences. The incorporation of the substantial Torres Strait Islander voice achieves a partial inversion of the historical perspective. An absolute inversion is possible only when Torres Strait Islanders, or Aborigines, write their own histories. When they hand their knowledge to outsiders to interpret, the textualisation of it is necessarily coloured by the intersection of the author's and the oral historians' subjectivities. Thus, such histories constitute partially inverted historical perspectives of indigenous people's knowledge about their past and comprise a separate school of writing.

This inquiry aims to textualise the Torres Strait Islander women's experiences for inclusion in Australian historiography. To set their discourse apart from my own, their testimonies are italicised. The next section of this chapter looks at the theoretical implications of oral testimony.

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As already indicated, I went to Torres Strait to learn from the old people and, like Patai, concluded the best way to do this was by conducting 'rather unstructured' types of interviews.<sup>43</sup> This would allow the people to 'speak about what was uppermost in their minds' with the fewest possible interruptions.<sup>44</sup> They could then 'give priority' to what they wanted to say about their experiences rather than my asking them about what I thought I wanted to hear. Thus, they would have 'a good deal of autonomy' in organising their responses.<sup>45</sup> The possibility of forcing uniform accounts would be minimised. Generally, however, because of the loose nature of the inquiry and the 'nature of oral history' itself, the Torres Strait Islander women spoke with greatest clarity about those events which were most 'significant in their own lives'. The women, as will be shown, lacked political consciousness about events beyond Torres Strait and, in some respects, even their own communities. Peter Read who recorded the Errombaie people's voices suggests that officials 'seldom took the trouble to explain' the government's plans for Aborigines. There is no doubt that this was the case in Torres Strait and there was no indication the women were better informed by the army during the war. Therefore, as will become apparent, their testimonies were, generally, narrowly content based and less analytical than I probably expected. Nonetheless, their colonial history was reflected in some of their testimonies, just as Read found with the Aborigines he worked with. That history was 'deeply interwoven into [their] personal stories'.<sup>46</sup> For instance, the Torres Strait Islanders' colonial status was reflected in these words of a Saibai woman: 'I was head teacher in the war...but I was not allowed to stay in that teacher's house. That's how they treated Torres Strait because we are not so good to live in the White's house'.<sup>47</sup> An awareness of this sort of government paternalism and its reflection in the testimonies had ramifications for the written text. However, during the collection of the oral history stage, it

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<sup>42</sup> McGrath, 'Born or Reborn', p.173.

<sup>43</sup> Patai, Brazilian Women, p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Read, 'Oral history interviewing', in Diane Barwick, Michael Mace and Tom Stannage (eds), Handbook for Aboriginal and Islander History (Canberra, 1979), p. 143.

<sup>45</sup> Louise A. Tilley, 'People's History and Social Science History: New School for Social Research', International Journal of History, Vol. 6, No. 1, February, 1985, p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> Read (ed.), Down There With Me, p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Interview 072, Thursday Island, February 1989.

was entirely up to the women to express their recollections in any way they wanted. I was looking for accounts independent, as far as possible, of my own eurocentric viewpoint in order to construct a partial inversion of the historical interpretation of the women's experiences.

I realised my loosely structured approach to the collection of the oral testimonies would not sit well with everyone in the oral history movement.<sup>48</sup> John Murphy is concerned about letting people 'simply speak for themselves': the transcriptions 'lack focus, problematic and, eventually interest'; and responsibility for interpretation is 'simply abdicated'.<sup>49</sup> Conversely, Paul Thompson believes that the 'very diversity' of the oral history movement is a 'great part of its strength', including the way people choose to speak about their past.<sup>50</sup> Patai said her role as interviewer 'varied considerably': some women 'took charge', others 'were reticent'.<sup>51</sup> No two researchers will find themselves in identical circumstances in relation to the collection of oral evidence and her or his intuition about the best method must not be totally ruled out. Indeed, how a historian will represent the past must be answered 'in the context of her purpose'.<sup>52</sup> As Alessandro Portelli suggests there is no need for everybody to 'play the same game'.<sup>53</sup>

Long-standing debate has certainly surrounded the subjective

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<sup>48</sup> I do not intend to critique Bain Attwood's 1994 treatise on oral history in A Life Together, A Life Apart: A History of Relations Between Europeans and Aborigines (Carlton, 1994), pp. 194-218. The proliferation of debates about feminism, postmodernism and oral testimony have made it virtually impossible to lay down definite principles in any of these fields of inquiry. Nevertheless, in each debate there are points which are pertinent to this study and they are discussed.

<sup>49</sup> John Murphy, 'The Voice of Memory: History, Autobiography and Oral Memory', Historical Studies, Vol. 22, No. 87, October, 1986, p. 162.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Thompson, 'Between Social Scientists: Responses to Louise A. Tilly', International Journal of History, Vol. 6, No. 1, February 1985, p. 20.

<sup>51</sup> Patai, Brazilian Women, p. 16.

<sup>52</sup> Ellen Somekawa and Elizabeth A. Smith, 'Theorising the Writing of History or, "I can't think why it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention"', Journal of Social History, Vol. 22, Fall 1988, p. 160.

<sup>53</sup> Alessandro Portelli, 'Between Social Scientists: Responses to Louise A. Tilly', International Journal of History, Vol. 6, No. 1, February 1985, p. 39.

nature of oral history and its implications for academic historians.<sup>54</sup> However, more recently, most historians seem to have 'accommodated in varying measure...to the loss of historical objectivity'. It is 'an ideal' aimed for but never achieved.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, historical objectivity as a theoretical issue is certainly not dead. For instance, in a recent review essay, Raymond Martin raised the question whether there are ways to interpret human actions that are not evaluative (subjective).<sup>56</sup> For more traditionalist historians this is the problem with oral history: are subjects' personal accounts historically true or authentic?<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the historians' own subjectivities can be seen as a stumbling block to good history: 'The truths we discover...are modified by the fact that we, as investigators, are part of the very process we seek to investigate'. The question too is asked, are oral testimonies 'significant snapshots of historical fact...[or] present understandings used to filter or gloss past memories?'<sup>58</sup> These are essential questions for the historian to confront. However, there are rigorous tests to which historians should expose their data,

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<sup>54</sup> See Bain Attwood, 'Understandings of the Aboriginal Past: History or Myth', Australian Journal of Politics and History, Vol. 34, No. 2, 1988, pp. 265-271; Tim Rowse, 'Tolerance Fortitude and Patience: Frontier Pasts to Live With?', Meanjin, Vol. 47, No. 1, Autumn 1988, pp. 21-29; McGrath, 'Born or Reborn', pp. 171-177.

<sup>55</sup> Jane Sherron De Hart, 'Oral Sources and Contemporary History: Dispelling Old Assumptions', The Journal of American History, Vol. 80, No. 2, September 1993, p. 582. Bill Gammage says objectivity is an ideal to work towards, but it is 'entirely another thing to claim that it has ever been obtained' ('Some Comments on Oral History', Australian 1938 Bulletin, No. 2, 1980, p. 23). Somekawa and Smith ('Theorizing the Writing', p. 158) contend that if historians reject practices which make their presence clear, they 'perpetuate the illusion of objectivity'.

<sup>56</sup> Raymond Martin, 'Objectivity and Meaning in Historical Studies: Toward a Post-Analytic View', History and Theory, Vol. 32, No. 1, 1993, pp. 38-42. See also Robert S. Newman, 'Objectivity and Subjectivities: Oral Narratives from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam', Oral History Review, Vol. 21, No. 2, Winter 1993, pp. 89-97.

<sup>57</sup> See Trevor Llumis, Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence (Totowa, 1988). The nature of historical truth for those writing black, women's and workers' history is frequently questioned - are they digging up the buried past, uncovering a different side of the story and one sometimes not favourable to the heroes (Somekawa and Smith, 'Theorizing the Writing', p. 150). I was accused of 'raking up the muck' by a white outsider (Personal communication, Thursday Island, May 1990).

<sup>58</sup> Newman, 'Objectivity and Meaning', p. 97.

whether oral or written text, before they can be satisfied that it is material which will meet academic standards.

In considering documentary sources, the historian must ask: how did it come into existence? what is known about the author? what is the purpose of the writing? And the list goes on. The processes of the memory are no less problematic and must be met with equally rigorous questions. Oral testimonies are generally teleological views of past events and the researcher must be aware the teller's mental lenses will be blurred by intervening events; there may also be confusion or corruption of events occurring at different times which have run together; the person may not have fully comprehended the event before it was retained in the memory and the information will be distorted; the memory may have discarded information which would have been important to the understanding of the historian; there may be an unwillingness on the part of the oral historian to remember - a 'conscious avoidance of distasteful facts or unconscious repression'.<sup>59</sup> The documentary data and oral testimonies used in this thesis were subjected to appropriate tests. Moreover, the consonance found in the collected testimonies was corroboration of much of what was said. Like McGrath, I acknowledge there is still a 'surfeit of information on the harmful side effects' of the oral history method but 'other methods have equally disturbing risks'. The aim in this thesis is 'to get away from the victims' model and to integrate a powerless group of women into the historical record'. There was no 'better alternative'.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, as will be discussed subsequently, the oral histories were necessary to present an interpretation of the episode, not to reconstruct the past.<sup>61</sup>

An increasing number of historians are concerned about the ethics involved in the collection of oral testimonies. Patai points out that the researcher who has access to oral histories also has the means of transforming them into a commodity. There is the potential for capitalistic entrepreneurship. The researcher is also a labourer, 'turning spoken words into written ones, editing...studying and interpreting the testimonies'. However, whether as labourer or

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<sup>59</sup> Paul Thompson, The Voice of the Past: Oral History (London, 1978), pp. 91-137.

<sup>60</sup> McGrath, 'Born in the Cattle', p. 176.

<sup>61</sup> Somekawa and Smith ('Theorizing the Writing', p. 159) want historians to 'abandon their false illusions about objectivity and their ability accurately to represent the past'.



capitalist entrepreneur, it is the 'researcher's time and investment that is acknowledged and rewarded'.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, there is the consideration of inequality. As with any research of the nature of this inquiry there is the potential for 'relations of power when the researcher comes as "expert" to record the words of the others'. This position was emphasised by the contributors to Gluck and Patai's publication, Women's Words. A reviewer's comment was:

Through relentless self-criticism, [the thirteen contributors] explore how feminist oral history has often unwittingly betrayed its own goals, unintentionally collaborating with the forces of hierarchy and exploitation that feminists intended to challenge.

It was suggested, however, that the contributors found some solutions in 'better theorized understandings of communication, culture and power'.<sup>63</sup> Reviewer's of Patai's Brazilian Women responded similarly: '[Patai] gives voice to those instructive discomforts that oral historians experience so often': 'exploiting the very people' they feel worthy of attention; concern for the ethics involved when entrusted with others' stories. Patai dealt with these discomforts by acknowledging, as I did, the 'autonomy of the speaker; a thorough consideration of the context of the speaker's culture', the constitutive power of spoken language, and a rigorous self-criticism with respect to her purpose in interviewing and particularly in publishing.<sup>64</sup> One reviewer of Women's Words concluded the editors and their contributors had been exceptionally honest in discussing 'serious issues of theoretical, practical and ethical concerns...All oral historians, feminist and non-feminist alike, benefit from their frankness'.<sup>65</sup>

The autonomy the Torres Strait Islander women had in speaking about their experiences mitigated against a sense of power they may have detected in me or which I might have, even unwittingly, exercised over them. Moreover, it was an alien culture, as was their discourse. Thus, rather than feeling I had power over the women I was humbled by my outsidersness.

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<sup>62</sup> Patai, Brazilian Women, pp. 6-7; see also Llumis, Listening to History.

<sup>63</sup> Susan Armitage, George Lipsitz and Gary R. Mormino, 'A Review Symposium: Women's Words', Oral History Review, Vol. 20, Nos 1 & 2, Spring-Fall 1992, p. 106.

<sup>64</sup> Susan Tucker, 'Book Review: Brazilian Women Speak: Contemporary Life Stories by Daphne Patai, Oral History Review, Vol. 18, No. 1, Spring 1990, p. 127.

<sup>65</sup> Armitage, Lipsitz and Mormino, 'Review Symposium', p. 111.

## Cultural interchange

This thesis is not the locus for entry into the timely debate on the principles behind Edward Said's 'Orientalism', as redefined by Attwood as 'Aboriginalism' (or in the case of Torres Strait Islanders, 'Islanderism'). Nevertheless, like Attwood, I am concerned for a 'cultural interchange, neither patronising or [sic] exploitative' between Whites and Torres Strait Islanders, however that may be worked out in the future.<sup>66</sup> This includes cross-cultural historical writings. Throughout the writing of this thesis I was uncomfortably aware of the chasm between the Torres Strait Islanders' and my own eurocentric discourses.<sup>67</sup>

The contemporary social theorist Jean-François Lyotard talks about 'language games' (rather than discourses).<sup>68</sup> He contends that the social is made up of 'many different language games - a heterogeneity of elements' to which the idea of consensus does 'violence'. It is the acceptance of their diverse natures which 'refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy'.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, within and between these language games contradictions are inevitable. Bronwyn Davies claims:

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<sup>66</sup> Bain Attwood and John Arnold (eds), Power, Knowledge, and Aborigines (Bundoora, Victoria, 1993), p. i; Edward W. Said, Orientalism (London, 1978); Edward W. Said, Culture and Imperialism (London, 1993).

<sup>67</sup> Stephen Muecke, 'Lonely Representations: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies', in Attwood and Arnold (eds), Power, Knowledge, p. 34. Mary Catherine Bateson points out that in working with other cultures we are reminded that these 'strangers are behaving in ways that are only intelligible if their world is recognised [and I suggest respected] as structured differently, laid out according to different landmarks' (Mary Catherine Bateson, Peripheral Visions: Learning Along the Way (New York, 1994), p. 56). Attwood suggests Aboriginal writing 'constitutes a very different historiographical tradition' ('Aborigines and Academic Historians', p. 123).

<sup>68</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1991), p. 10. The term 'language games' was used by Wittgenstein and according to Lyotard he meant 'that each of the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put'. These rules determine the way they are used (Ibid.).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., pp. xxiv-xxv.

[with the] advent of post-structuralist theory into the study of social worlds and social relations, contradictions both within each person's experience of the world, and within each groups' methods of making sense of the world are understood as inevitable and even fundamental to the human condition.<sup>70</sup>

Thus, 'every historical insight has a paradoxical nature'.<sup>71</sup> Recognising differences and paradoxes is the first step in any move toward a cultural interchange. A further step is to acknowledge that cross-cultural textual representations impinge on the 'politics of identity'.<sup>72</sup> The author selects and organises the oral histories to be incorporated into the text. This brings about a joint interpretation of the material and the oral historian's absolute identity is lost. In some cases, such as this inquiry, the author 'tidies up and edits' the testimonies which further impinges upon the identity of her subjects.<sup>73</sup> In these ways, outsider control of Torres Strait Islander knowledge contributes to 'Islanderism'.

The identity of indigenous people is also eroded by academic restraints on their own authors. In the last decade, Aborigines have taken up the challenge to write about themselves to a greater extent than the Torres Strait Islanders. Moreover, one of their number, Aboriginal author Mudrooroo Narogin, has articulated the alienation of the writings of his people from the mainstream.<sup>74</sup> Andrew Lattas says: '[Narogin] raises the problem of authenticity...when those on the fringe have to write for a metropolitan centre which sets the canon of what is literature [or history]'.<sup>75</sup> Aboriginal historians are bound by eurocentric forms which do not easily acknowledge the authenticity of indigenous writings. Judith Wright, writer and Aboriginal activist, says that white traditionalists question the

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<sup>70</sup> Davies, Shards of Glass, p. xv.

<sup>71</sup> F.R. Ankersmit, 'Historiography and Postmodernism', History and Theory, Vol. 28, No. 2, 1989, pp. 142-143.

<sup>72</sup> See Gillian Cowlishaw, 'Introduction: Representing Racial Issues', Oceania, Vol. 63, No. 3, March 1993, p. 183. Andrew Markus points out that 'on the current agenda of academic research is the argument by Aborigines...that for centuries they have been misrepresented and libelled and that it is time for Aborigines themselves to write their own history'. Some white scholars have been discouraged from working in the field (Andrew Markus, Australian Race Relations 1788-1993 (St. Leonards, N.S.W.), p. xiii).

<sup>73</sup> Muecke, 'Lonely Representations', p. 34.

<sup>74</sup> See Mudrooroo Narogin, Writing from the Fringe (Melbourne, 1990).

<sup>75</sup> Andrew Lattas, 'Essentialism, Memory and Resistance: Aboriginality and the Politics of Authenticity', Oceania, Vol. 63, No. 3, March 1993, p. 252.

'objectivity' of much Aboriginal knowledge and that it is subjected to the rules of 'white standard setters'. These rules, she says, were developed from traditions and conditions 'very different from any milieu Aboriginal writers live in or have to draw upon'. Thus, she fears the Aboriginal voice with all it has to say to us [emphasis added]', will be silenced.<sup>76</sup> None of this will be less true for future Torres Strait Islander historians if indigenous discourses continue to be measured by eurocentric rules. Meanwhile, Martin Nakata, speaking as a Torres Strait Islander, is concerned for his people's silence and identity: '*the Islander has been silent for too long...we have been written about primarily by Western "experts" with their universalising sciences*'.<sup>77</sup> What will happen when their silence is broken? Presently, even if outsiders left the writing of indigenous histories to the people, eurocentric standards of 'truth' would still impinge on their identities.

What then was the answer to my own discomfort about a white representation of another culture's knowledge in this academic thesis.<sup>78</sup> Muecke recognises that there is a 'strain' on university protocols 'in the sense that Aboriginal knowledges and post-colonial Aboriginal practices are posing a challenge'. Torres Strait Islanders must be included in this challenge. Indeed if the differences between Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and the universities' discourses are totally incommensurable, how can the differences be accommodated? Muecke says that there can be no simple reversal of the Western episteme, it would have to be 'slowly eroded, or rapidly, depending on what is at stake'.<sup>79</sup> Will the institution of an independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university be the ultimate resolution? For the purposes of this inquiry, I have sought to present a partial inversion of the historical perspective

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<sup>76</sup> Judith Wright, 'Critics, Reviewers and Aboriginal Writers', Aboriginal History, Vol. 11, Nos. 1-2, 1987, pp. 24-25.

<sup>77</sup> Martin Nakata, 'Culture in Education: For us or for them?', in Noel Loos and Takeshi Osanai (eds), Indigenous Minorities and Education: Australian and Japanese Perspectives of their Indigenous Peoples, the Ainu, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (Tokyo, 1993), p. 334.

<sup>78</sup> Several Torres Strait Islanders assured me that it was easier to speak with an outsider about some things because of the internal politics of the various island groups. Whilst I respected this point of view, I was not dissuaded in my opinion that a stronger move by the people toward more legitimated control of their own knowledge is not only desirable but imperative.

<sup>79</sup> Muecke, 'Lonely Representations', pp. 42, 47.

of the episode under inquiry, and with the intention to speak of and not for the Torres Strait Islanders.

#### Contexting the episode<sup>80</sup>

The question might be asked about this inquiry: Why are there so many seeming divergences away from the central focus, which is what were the present perceptions of Torres Strait Islander women about the Pacific War experiences?

Martin contends that the 'meaning of history' calls for a 'movement away from the local and particular...toward a larger perspective'. The episode needs to be linked to something that is both 'intelligible and important'. As will be shown subsequently, Torres Strait Islanders were a little known group of indigenous Australians in 1942. Even today, many outsiders are not conscious in what ways Torres Strait Islanders are culturally and historically set apart from the Aborigines. Thus, to context the episode, particularly as it was of no more than three years' duration, into the largest possible frame was essential to meet this need for intelligibility.

In the first instance, the men's testimonies were important in framing much of what happened to the women so I listened to their accounts. Men like Getano Lui Senior (storekeeper), the late Sam Passi (teacher/storekeeper), Joseph Stephens (Chief Councillor) and the late Canon Eddie Mosby (crew member on the Mulgrave, the cargo boat which serviced the island communities) had roles in relation to the women during the war which gave them access to specific knowledges. What happened to the men in the army reflected on the women's experiences. Reference to the war's progress in the South-West Pacific and what was happening socially, militaristically and politically on the mainland obtained from archival and secondary sources increased the possibility of intelligibility and interest for a wider audience.<sup>81</sup> The contextualising of the women's experiences also enriches the Torres Strait Islanders', particularly the women's,

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<sup>80</sup> The discussion in this section is based on the theories put forward in Martin, 'Objectivity and Meaning', pp. 42-50.

<sup>81</sup> See Somekawa and Smith ('Theorizing the Writing', p. 157) who claim writers of radical history, such as 'people of colour [with no official history]...must think about expanding [their] audience'.

understanding of the roles they played in the Pacific War, the scope of which was beyond their comprehension at the time. Contextuality benefits both the insider and the outsider reader.

Martin wants the writing of history to do more than make the episode intelligible. The historian should ask, 'is the episode significant because it is 'consequential' or is there a 'recurring pattern of general significance'? On the former count, the wider picture disclosed that while change was occurring in the lives of the women before 1942, it was the wartime episode that more directly shifted their position toward a greater possibility of a smoother entry into the westernised world of the Whites to which they aspired. On the latter count, the pattern of paternalistic treatment of the Torres Strait Islanders by the Protector is made evident throughout the thesis: *'Too long the way of treating us'*.<sup>82</sup> Thus, the divergences from the three-year episode constitute its greater intelligibility to a wider audience, its greater understanding of the associated consequential issues, as well as to reveal the continuance of patterns of internal colonialism in Torres Strait.<sup>83</sup>

#### Contemporary social theories

The contemporary social theorists, Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard and F.R. Ankersmit, have much to say that is relevant to the central concern of this thesis: that there is value in the subjugated knowledges of people previously considered unimportant. The silenced voices of people like the Torres Strait Islander women need to be heard in any search for a wider world view. Foucault, Lyotard and Ankersmit are generally associated with the postmodern/poststructural school of contemporary social theorists. However, it is not my intention to emphasise the terms 'postmodern' and 'poststructural' in this thesis. Much confusion has grown up around them and this inquiry is not the locus for any unravelling of that confusion.<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, some of the theories developed by the three contemporary social theorists, as I have designated them,

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<sup>82</sup> Interview 064, Thursday Island, July 1990.

<sup>83</sup> On internal colonialism see Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 13.

<sup>84</sup> See Ankersmit, 'Historiography and Postmodernism', p. 140.

are tools which can be used in the inquiry.<sup>85</sup>

Foucault's name is probably one of the most popularly associated with postmodernism and poststructuralism, although he said: 'I prefer not to identify myself and...I'm amused by the diversity of the ways I've been judged and classified'.<sup>86</sup> Historians have damned and praised him but, as Rudy Koshar suggests, many have done 'little to give his thought a systematic hearing'.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, when Foucault says: 'we must not imagine a whole world of discourses divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated, but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that come into play in various strategies', he has something to say to this inquiry.<sup>88</sup> Once this position is taken, 'unsuspected knowledges', such as the Torres Strait Islander women's, can no longer be devalued as they have been by the modernist rationalist notion of knowledge. As Docherty points out, 'these [unsuspected knowledges] will not sit comfortably with any of our received ideas of what constitutes truth, history and so on'.<sup>89</sup>

In 1942, Torres Strait Islander women were a marginalised group of Australians under an internal colonial regime. Their knowledge was excluded and devalued in the dominant Australian society because it set the rules about what counted as knowledge.<sup>90</sup> It centred

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<sup>85</sup> 'Foucault's political theory is a "tool kit..." (cited in Thomas Docherty, 'Criticism, History, Foucault', History of European Ideas, Vol. 14, No. 3, May 1992, p. 375).

<sup>86</sup> Cited in Paul Rabinow (ed.), The Foucault Reader (New York, 1984), p. 384.

<sup>87</sup> Rudy Koshar, 'Foucault and Social History: Comments on "Combined Underdevelopment"', The American Historical Review, Vol. 98, No. 2, April 1993, p. 354. At a Social Science History Conference in Minneapolis in 1990, the few post-modernist approaches presented 'drew a mixture of highly defensive dismissals and expressions of interest' (Peter N. Stearns, 'Social History Update: Encountering Post-Modernism', Journal of Social History, Vol. 24, Winter 1990, p. 449).

<sup>88</sup> Cited in Caroline Ramazanoglu (ed.), Up Against Foucault: Explorations of some tensions between Foucault and feminism (London, 1993), p. 19.

<sup>89</sup> Docherty, 'Criticism, History, Foucault', p. 365.

<sup>90</sup> Andrew Markus contends: 'White Australians did not interest themselves in the opinions of Aborigines. They were not believed to have views worthy of consideration' (Andrew Markus, Governing Savages (Sydney, 1990), p. 173). Again this attitude was true for Torres Strait Islanders.

truth in 'scientific discourse and institutions'. For Foucault every society has its 'regime of truth', (a 'general politics of truth') which lays down:<sup>91</sup>

the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned, the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.<sup>92</sup>

And, this is why the 'popular knowledges' (particular, local, regional knowledges) of the 'psychiatric patient,...the ill person,...the nurse,...the doctor...the delinquent etc.' (to which I add the Torres Strait Islander women) were subjugated.<sup>93</sup> It has only been in the last quarter of a century that 'things, institutions, practices, discourses' have become increasingly vulnerable to criticism not dependent on the approval of the established regime of truth. Thus, there has been an 'insurrection' of the 'buried knowledges of erudition and those disqualified from the hierarchy of knowledges and sciences'. It is with the insurrection of the knowledge of the Torres Strait Islander women, knowledge previously disqualified as 'naive', located low down on the hierarchy, 'beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity', that this thesis is concerned.<sup>94</sup> The insurrection of the memories of the women establish a 'historical knowledge of struggles' previously disqualified under the claims of 'a unitary body of theory'.<sup>95</sup> Foucault's emancipatory theories legitimate this knowledge.

Lyotard's concern is for the 'condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies'.<sup>96</sup> He sees what he calls the 'postmodern condition' as a universe of a multiplicity of

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<sup>91</sup> Larry Shiner, 'Reading Foucault: Anti-method and the Genealogy of Power Knowledge', History and Theory, Vol. 21, No. 3, 1982, p. 384.

<sup>92</sup> Michel Foucault (Colin Gordon ed.), Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper (New York, 1980), p. 131.

<sup>93</sup> Foucault defines subjugated knowledges as 'blocs of historical knowledge...present but disguised within the body of the functionalist and systematising theory and which criticism...has been able to reveal' (Ibid., p. 82).

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 80-83.

<sup>95</sup> Madan Sarup, An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism (Sydney, 1988), p. 64.

<sup>96</sup> See Lyotard, Postmodern Condition, p. xxiv.



incommensurable 'language games', without metadiscourses, such as the progress of reason and freedom, Hegel's logic, or Marx's class conflict.<sup>97</sup> He is opposed to totalising theories which hierarchise knowledges in any society. Indeed, Lyotard says: 'simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives'.<sup>98</sup>

Moreover, for Lyotard the search for knowledge is not bound to the criterion of rational truth: 'Knowledge...in general cannot be reduced to science...knowledge...includes notions of "know-how", "knowing how to live", "how to listen"...etc.' Thus, Lyotard contends: 'Understood in this way, knowledge is what makes someone capable of forming "good" denotative utterances, but also "good" prescriptive and "good" evaluative utterances'.<sup>99</sup> There is room for subjective knowledge. And, all are judged "good" if they 'conform to the relevant criteria [of justice, beauty, truth and efficiency] accepted in the social circle of the knower's interlocutors', in this inquiry the Torres Strait Islander women. In conclusion to his treaty on the postmodern condition, Lyotard calls for a war to be waged on totality: 'let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the difference'.<sup>100</sup> Thereby, the potential for unravelling the many realities which exist in any social context is greater, for instance the Torres Strait Islander women's reality which is certainly different from the outsider reality of their situation.

F.R. Ankersmit, a Dutch scholar from the University of Groningen, has something to say to this thesis also. He suggests

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<sup>97</sup> Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, Just Gaming, trans. Wład Godzich (Minneapolis, 1985), pp. 46-48, 81.

<sup>98</sup> Lyotard, Postmodern Condition, p. xxiv. Lyotard on his definition of 'postmodern' says: '...if a metanarrative implying a philosophy of history is used to legitimate knowledge, questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing the social bond: these must be legitimated as well. Thus, justice is consigned to the grand narrative in the same way as truth'.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., pp. 18-19.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. and p. 82. There are certainly those who oppose a 'war on totality', the avoidance of what these contemporary social theorists see as the problems of eighteenth and nineteenth century European modernism which Lyotard says have 'given us as much terror as we can take' (Ibid., p. 81). Critics of both Lyotard and Foucault refuse to acknowledge they have provided 'new means of thinking through some of the areas of understanding social life which have proved contradictory and problematic' (Ramazanoğlu (ed.), Up Against Foucault, p. 10).

that the modernist historian 'follows a line of reasoning from his [sic] sources and evidence to an historical reality hidden behind the sources'. Conversely, 'postmodernists' claim their evidence does not 'point towards the past but to other interpretations of the past'. Evidence, Ankersmit suggests, 'does not send us back to the past but gives rise to the question of what an historian here and now can or cannot do with it'. Moreover, he sees history as no longer 'the reconstruction of what has happened to us in the various phases of our lives, but a continuous playing with the memory of this'. For almost fifty years the women's memories had been playing with what they told me. Their testimonies contained the 'scraps, the slips of the tongue', which formed the historical evidence about what had remained important to them over that period of time. Furthermore, Ankersmit exhorts historians to 'think about the past, rather than investigate it'.<sup>101</sup> This helped me to conceptualise that my task in this thesis was not to 'discover a past reality and reconstruct it scientifically' but to think about the scraps of evidence I had collected and to produce as meaningful and authentic interpretation of the women's experiences as was possible.<sup>102</sup>

Ankersmit's claim is that 'the goal [of history] is no longer integration, synthesis, and totality, but it is those historical scraps which are the center of attention'.<sup>103</sup> From such scraps, many micro-histories have been produced which manifest differences and which help us to understand ours as well as other forms of civilisation, as does this history. But many historians see their discipline being reduced to a pastiche or, even worse, that theories, such as those discussed in this section, will mean an end to history.<sup>104</sup> However, they may find comfort in the words of David Goodman, a presenter at a recent symposium on postmodernism, who

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<sup>101</sup> Perez Zagorin, in his critique of Ankersmit, suggests that Ankersmit has tried to 'aesthetize history and sever it from its formerly accepted grounding in conditions of truth and reality' (See Perez Zagorin, 'Historiography and Postmodernism: Reconsiderations', History and Theory, Vol. 29, No. 3, 1990, pp. 263-296). However, the modernist notions of truth and reality made no provision for the legitimization of 'naive' and subjugated knowledges.

<sup>102</sup> Ankersmit, 'Historiography and Postmodernism', pp. 145-146, 152, 148.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>104</sup> See on living in an 'age of information surplus' and of overproduction and specialisation in history in Ankersmit, 'Historiography and Postmodernism', pp. 136-138; also Gianni Vattimo, 'The End of (Hi)story', Chicago Review, Vol. 35, No. 4, 1986, pp. 20-30.

suggested that while the lessons on difference are important, 'we should not remain at that moment in the conversation forever'. Meanwhile, he says, the theories of contemporary social theorists, like Foucault, Lyotard and Ankersmit, should not be 'viewed as some exotic importation, but as part of a set of debates in which all are implicated'.<sup>105</sup> Their theories make room for all knowledges and afford greater possibilities for obtaining them.

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In this final section of Chapter two, I address a contemporary western feminist notion that when women write about women a feminist critique is warranted. The responses of some Black American and Aboriginal women to white feminism are examined before introducing Torres Strait Islander women's perspectives.

'Research by, about, and for women'

Gluck and Patai in their 1991 publication, Women's Words, suggested that the collection of oral histories had had an understandable appeal to feminist researchers. They saw this as consistent with the feminist principle 'codified in the phrase "research by, about, and for women"'. However, the authors pointed out that women's oral history was more problematic than imagined when it was 'examined through the lens of the expanding feminist scholarship'. What was most striking, in retrospect, was the innocent assumption of many white feminists that gender united women more powerfully than race and class divided them. The phrase which defined feminist scholarship seemed simple enough, but what must be recognised is that there are still many cultures where women are more strongly positioned 'within a complex web of relationships, loyalties and demands' than they are with other women. This is particularly so for many black women.<sup>106</sup>

Patti Lather points out that grand social theories which attempt to speak for all women are subject to disruption by pressure from those 'left out'; for instance the work of women of colour documented resistance to the universalising tendencies of feminist

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<sup>105</sup> David Goodman, 'Postmodernism and History', American Studies International, Vol. 31, No. 2, October 1992, pp. 21-22.

<sup>106</sup> Gluck and Patai (eds), Women's Words, pp. 1-2.

theorising, resistance not for better theory but for survival.<sup>107</sup> Sheila Radford-Hill, an African-American woman has intimated that she believes there are 'countless reasons why Black and other Third World women [have] not identified with contemporary feminism in large numbers', although she did see feminism as a model for social change.<sup>108</sup> Another African-American feminist, Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, argued that the 'self-image of black women cannot be determined by a prescribed norm based on male and/or white middle-class values and experiences': they must be 'anchored to culturally relevant constructs'.<sup>109</sup> Moreover, the flush of literature in America leaves no doubt that African-American women are defining their own self-image. In Australia, seeds of self-definition are being watered by Aboriginal women. Many are no longer in awe of Whites and their universalising theories. Kate Corrigan, an Aboriginal Education Officer, made it clear that 'Aboriginal women have found it hard to join the ranks of [white] feminists for fear they will be separated and used against their own communities'. Another Aboriginal woman who spoke out on these issues was Devina Woods. She told a New South Wales Teachers' Conference that 'the European culture delineation of men and women's roles is viewed by Koories as divisive'.<sup>110</sup>

What is the response from Torres Strait Islander women? There is no monolithic unchanging Torres Strait Islander women's identity and their perceptions of their roles will undoubtedly differ and change with time. An older woman saw the younger ones, 'modern women' who had been to the mainland for their education, as:

*looking [in] from the outside. They come out for a look at life outside and they want to take it and introduce it to our people...but we should look at ourselves and say, "Now we go that far", not that we are women to take other culture into our culture but we build on what we have and be proud of it.*

She was in favour of her sex's speaking out, and they do. Torres

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<sup>107</sup> Lather, Getting Smart, p. 27.

<sup>108</sup> Cited in Sheila Radford-Hill, 'Considering Feminism as a Model of Social Change', in Teresa de Lauretis (ed.), Feminist Studies/Critical Studies (London, 1986), pp. 161-162.

<sup>109</sup> Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, 'Black Women's Life Stories: Reclaiming Self in Narrative Texts', in Gluck and Patai (eds), Women's Words, p. 44.

<sup>110</sup> ABC Broadcast, Cairns Radio, 15 May 1993. This broadcast in Cairns was reporting on a conference in New South Wales. Aborigines in southern Queensland and New South Wales use the name 'Kooris' to describe themselves. In northern Queensland, 'Murris' is used.

Strait Islander women are active in their communities for the betterment of women. However, money is always a problem so that one younger woman at a Mura Kosker Sorority meeting of about 100 island women made a call to her sisters: 'Get off your backsides and start something and if the government sees this they will see the need for it and give you the money...start doing things on our own for the government to take notice'.<sup>111</sup> But, 'it's not a women's lib', the older woman said:

We just want to stand close to our husbands and help. I have not heard women speak about women's lib. We still want our menfolk to be head of the table and we are there to support them in case some of the things they miss out and this is what women of Torres Strait are doing.

In order to speak out effectively, Torres Strait Islander women realised they would get nowhere without training. With this vision in mind, she said, they attend workshops to develop greater 'self-esteem, [and] assertiveness without aggressiveness'.<sup>112</sup>

In July 1989, another younger Torres Strait Islander woman spoke out on women's equality with their men at a forum of 3 000 indigenous women at the first International Indigenous Women's Conference in Adelaide. Her vision for island women was for more independence: '[Our] women today are equal partners with their menfolk. Quite often they are the decision-makers. They should stop regarding themselves as merely support people and enjoy the truth about themselves'.<sup>113</sup> A spokesperson for the Mura Kosker Sorority movement on Thursday Island, which has a numerically strong membership of young and old women from all Torres Strait Islander communities, recently clarified the position generally taken by members on the issue of feminism.<sup>114</sup> What they wanted was 'just equality', which included equality with their men, which she indicated was on the way: 'One time we carried all the water and wood. Now when we go shopping we say to that husband, "You carry that", and he carries the parcels. We want to work with our men, not against them'. And, she was adamant that these things were made

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<sup>111</sup> Notes taken by author at Meeting of Mura Kosker Sorority held at Thursday Island, 23-24 March 1990 (in author's possession).

<sup>112</sup> Interview 055, Townsville, September 1990.

<sup>113</sup> 'Torres Women Recognised', Torres News, 18-24 August 1989, p. 30.

<sup>114</sup> Mura is Western Torres Strait Islander language for 'all', kosker is Eastern Islander language for 'women' and sorority denotes 'sisterhood' - Mura Kosker Sorority, all women sisters. Non-Islander women are admitted to membership but their numbers are small.

clear to 'those white women when they come up here [Thursday Island] and tell us about feminism'.<sup>115</sup> At a National Women's Conference held in Cairns in June 1993, a group of Torres Strait Islander women were asked where they stood in the feminist debate, to which they all replied it was 'no big deal' for them.<sup>116</sup> While what the women have said does not demonstrate an absolutely unified view of their present identity, Torres Strait Islander women have come a long way since the Pacific War in claiming space for themselves. Perhaps for white middle-class feminists their identity is still too closely tied to the male discourse. However, if they want further separation, they will work it out for themselves.

The stand being made by Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal women indicates the importance they place on certain cultural norms. They are working out their roles. This may result in challenging the men to change some of their roles, like carrying the groceries for the women. Meanwhile, a Torres Strait Islander women's 'statement of principle', formulated at the indigenous women's conference in Adelaide, is telling: 'We...stand side by side with our men folk to strive towards the legitimate and rightful claim in securing our stand as a race of people'.<sup>117</sup> The statement makes it clear that race is as important to their sense of identity as it is for Black American women and Aboriginal women. Like these counterparts, Torres Strait Islander women want to anchor their self-definition to culturally relevant constructs unique to their indigenous culture. For both groups it is a struggle toward the empowerment of all women and men to 'actualize a humanist vision of community', which will not happen until 'race, color, sex, and condition are seen as accidents and not the substance of life'.<sup>118</sup>

This is my reading of the attitude of many women of colour to white middle-class theories of feminism. Black American women's writings reveal their familiarity with these theories. They do not totally reject them nor the benefits that have flowed from them. What these women want is to define their roles in ways they determine appropriate for their culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

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<sup>115</sup> Personal communication, Cairns, May 1993.

<sup>116</sup> Personal communication, Cairns, October 1993.

<sup>117</sup> 'Torres Women Recognised', p. 30.

<sup>118</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment; Perspectives on Gender, Vol. 2 (New York, 1991), pp. 37-38.

women have not written about feminism in the same academic vein as their American counterparts. Nevertheless, there is commonality in their responses to it, as I have shown. Moreover, the absence of a feminist critique in this cross-cultural inquiry is compatible with the avoidance of a further definition of the Torres Strait Islander women by an outsider.

If the foregoing, in feminist terms, is based on a false consciousness, the commitment in this inquiry was, from the outset, to encourage Torres Strait Islander women to record their own recollections of a specific period in their history, not to define them and their roles within the white middle-class theories of feminism I am familiar with. As Chilla Bulbeck suggests, 'women of colour' ultimately retain their moral and political right to their 'own betterment in their own terms...white feminists must be careful when they speak about them'.<sup>119</sup>

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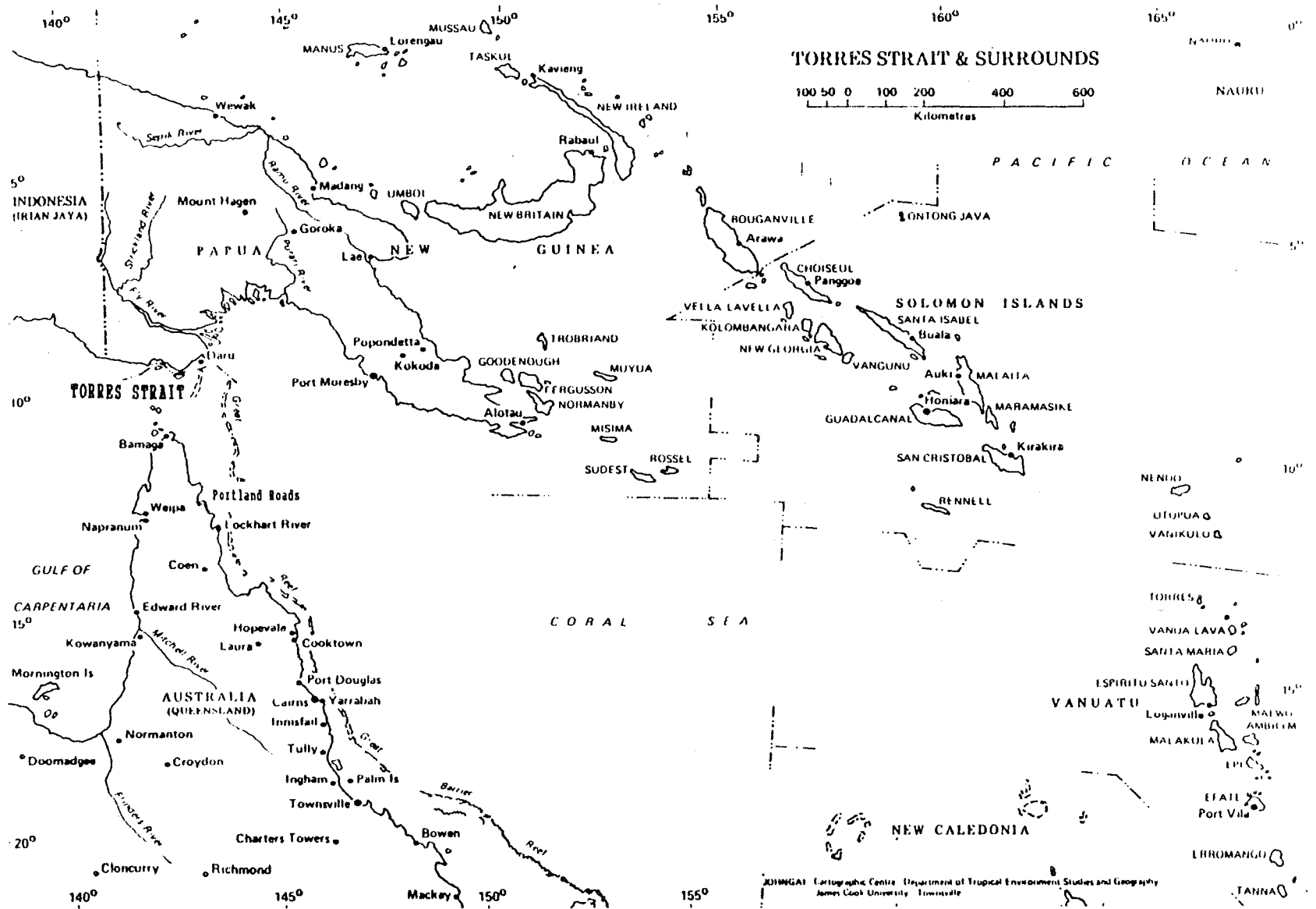
In this chapter the inquiry is positioned in a suggested fourth school of indigenous Australian historical writings by outsider authors using substantial oral testimonies. Moreover, it is contended that the subjective nature of oral testimony is not a bar to the writing of academic history and that historians must approach their work with the realisation of the ethics involved in the use of the oral history method. This inquiry is focused around two main incommensurable discourses, the Torres Strait Islander women's and my own. My concerns in this regard are discussed as well as the reasons for juxtaposing happenings and events outside the women's means of knowing. Moreover, by the discussion of certain contemporary social theories there has been a dismissal of the modernist notion of the hierarchical nature of knowledges. This dismissal makes way for the insurrection of knowledges previously subjugated by the modernist notion of ranking, such as the Torres Strait Islander women's. The final theoretical positioning related to feminism.

In Chapter three, the inquiry moves forward to the physical, political and social environments in which the women lived and the roles they played in their island societies prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War in December 1941.

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<sup>119</sup> Chilla Bulbeck, 'Third World Women: Dialogues with Western feminism', Meanjin, Vol. 51, No. 2, 1992, pp. 323, 330.

Map 1: Torres Strait and Surrounds





Chapter three  
The Torres Strait islands and the women

*'We have to learn or we won't survive'.<sup>1</sup>*

Torres Strait and its people

The islands of Torres Strait lie within an area defined by latitudes 9° 20' and 10° 45'S and longitudes 142° and 144°E. Torres Strait is the sea channel between Cape York Peninsula on the Australian mainland and the Western Province of Papua New Guinea. A land bridge once linked these two land masses. However, with the post-glacial rise in the sea level about 6 500 to 8 000 years ago, much of the land bridge was submerged and the profusion of islands, cays and reefs which now exist in the Torres Strait began to take form.<sup>2</sup>

There is much detailed archaeological work to be done in Torres Strait. Consequently, speculation continues about the timing of the arrival of the first inhabitants of the area. J. Golson suggested that the Western Islands were most probably occupied before the area was inundated (6 500 to 8 000 years ago), which is in line with the legend of Kuiamu who walked from the Australian mainland to Mabuiag, where he took a wife. A later population, Golson hypothesised, arrived in double outrigger canoes perhaps 5 000-6 000 years ago, by which time the Strait had approximated its present form.<sup>3</sup> According to the anthropologist Maureen Fuary, what is certain is that the Strait was well and truly drowned 4 000 years ago. Nevertheless, in a conversation she had with archaeologist John Campbell in 1991, he said it might be presumed that human occupation of some islands occurred before that time. Campbell also suggested that much of the land bridge was occupied 'perhaps throughout the period after people

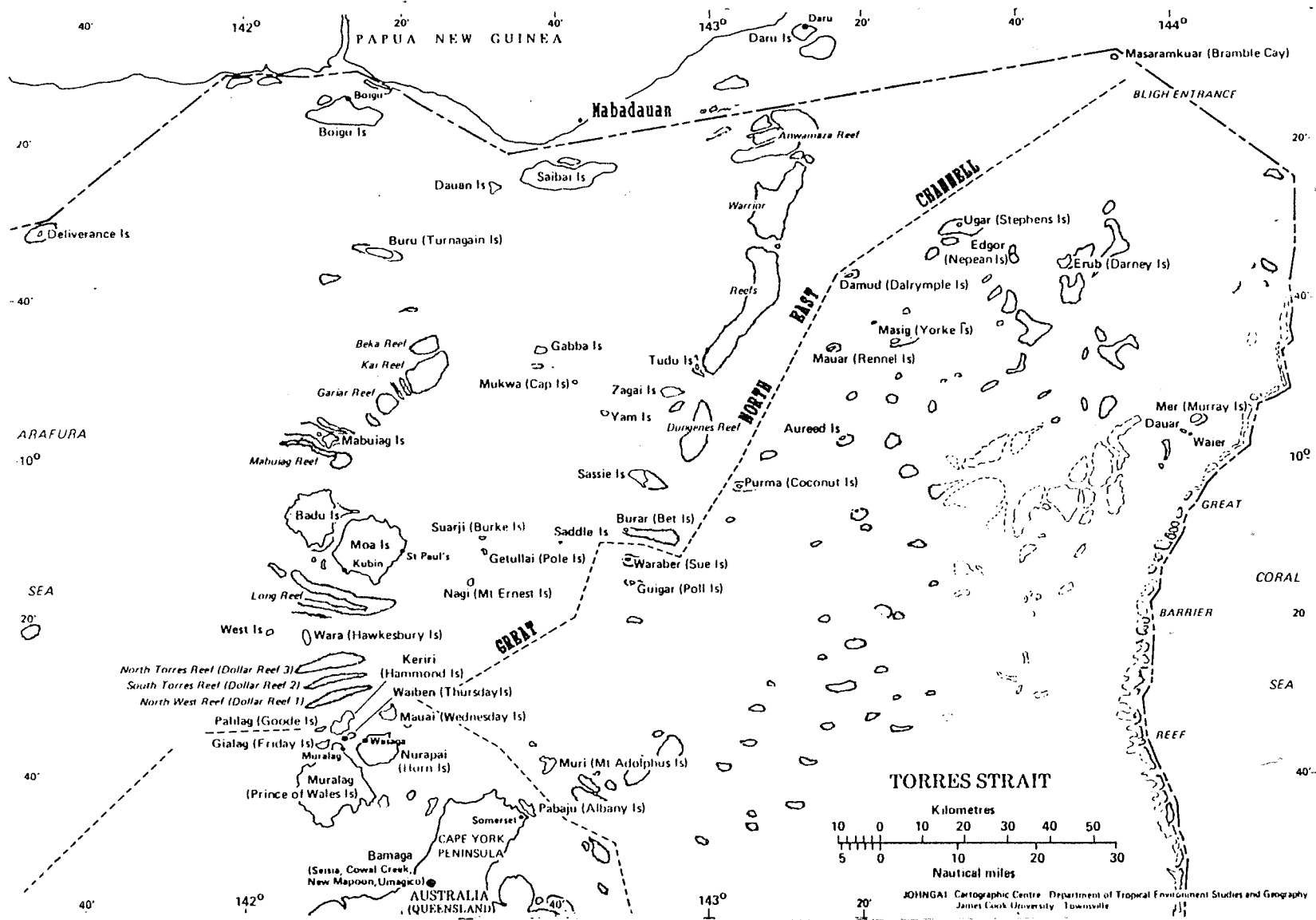
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<sup>1</sup> Interview 117, Thursday Island, February 1989.

<sup>2</sup> J.N. Jennings, 'Some Attributes of Torres Strait', in D. Walker (ed.), Bridge and Barrier: The Natural and Cultural History of Torres Strait (Canberra, 1972), p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> J. Golson, 'Land connections, sea barriers and the relationship of Australia and New Guinea Prehistory', in Walker (ed.), Bridge and Barrier, p. 379.

Map 2: Torres Strait



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James Cook University Townsville

first arrived in Sahul or "Greater Australia"'.<sup>4</sup> Whatever speculations are made, there is no doubt that colonial occupation of the area pales into insignificance before the thousands of years of indigenous occupation.

Not all of the islands in Torres Strait are habitable because of their physical features and small area: a good water supply also detracts from islands which might otherwise be suitable. When the Pacific War broke out in 1942, there were people living in the following village communities:<sup>5</sup>

Mer (Murray)	Nagi
Dauar	Poid (formerly Adam)
Erub (Darnley)	St. Paul's
Ugar (Stephens)	Badu
Masig (Yorke)	Mabuiag
Purma (Coconut)	Dauan
Yam	Boigu
Waraber* (Sue)	Saibai
Mauar* (Rennel)	Edgor* (Nepean)

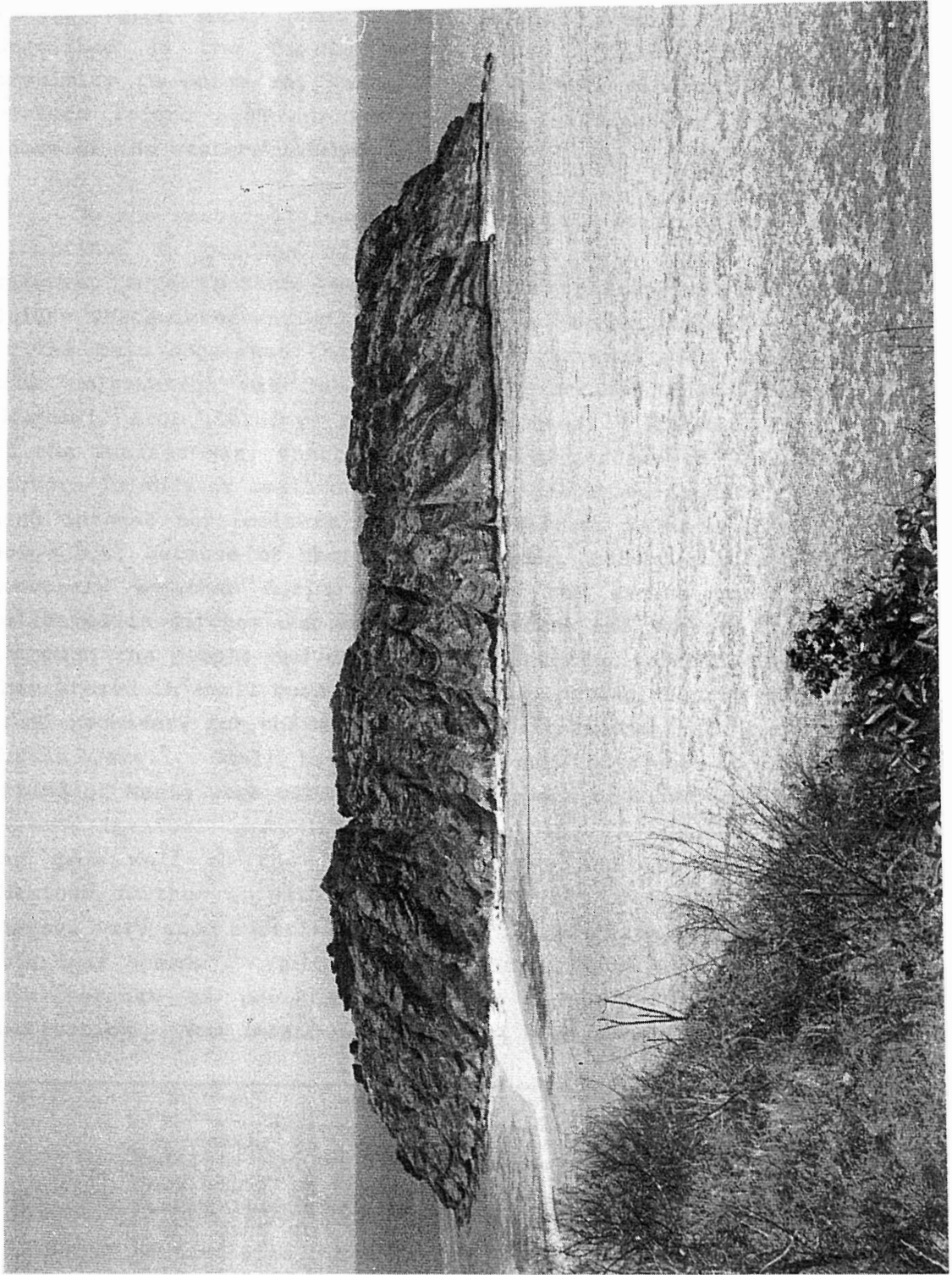
\* The populations on these communities probably consisted of one family.

The physical features and vegetation in the Torres Strait area vary considerably. Thus, the inhabited islands and cays have been designated within four categories. In the first category are the high volcanic Eastern Islands of Mer (Murray), Dauar, Waier, Erub (Darnley) and Ugar (Stephens). With the exception of rocky Waier, these islands support dense vegetation. The coral cays of the Central Islands, Masig (Yorke), Purma (Coconut) and Waraber (Sue), belong to the second category. Only low vegetation is found on these sandy islands. Muralag (Prince of Wales Island), Thursday Island, Nurupai (Horn Island) Nagi, Moa, Badu, Mabuiag, Yam and Dauan belong to the third category, known as the Western Islands. In this group are the largest and highest islands, with mounds of basaltic rock and light vegetation in open areas. They are mostly well watered: some are fringed by mangrove swamps. In the fourth category are Boigu and Saibai which have extensive mangrove swamps. These large low-lying islands were formed from the alluvial soil brought down by the Papuan

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<sup>4</sup> Maureen Majella Fuary, In So Many Words: An Ethnography of Life and Identity on Yam Island, Torres Strait, Ph.D. thesis, Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, James Cook University, Townsville, 1991, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> The spelling of the following community names, and other Torres Strait Islander words, are taken from Anna Shnukal's publication Broken. There are other spellings for many of such words used in this thesis.



Volcanic Eastern Island - Waier

rivers which empty into Torres Strait. Boigu and Saibai are described as the Top-Western Islands. Dauan, because of its proximity to Boigu and Saibai, is generally referred to as a Top-Western Island although its physical features are consonant with those of the Western Islands.<sup>6</sup>

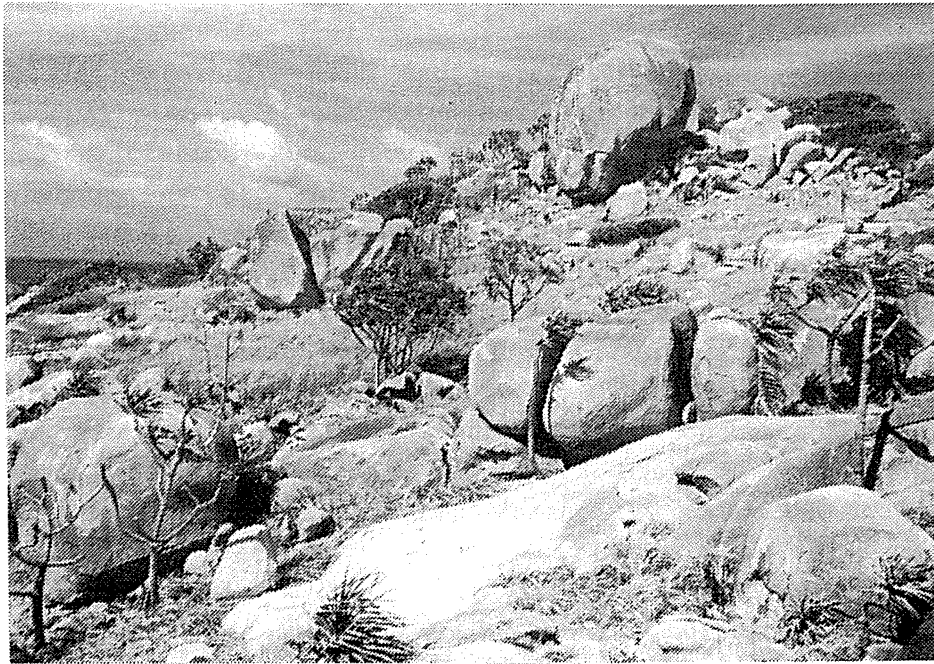
On the Eastern Islands a great variety of fruit and vegetables flourished in gardens of rich volcanic soil: yams, taro, corn, cassava, sweet potato, melons, bananas, pineapples and paw paws. Before white intervention, on the larger Western Islands, like Badu, it has been suggested that the people gathered wild vegetables and that cultivation was less intensely practised there than on Mer (Murray), Erub (Darnley) and Ugar (Stephens). However, by the time of the Pacific War, there were extensive gardens on Badu and other Western Islands or small uninhabited neighbouring islands. There was also intense horticulture on the Top-Western Islands of Saibai and Boigu but, because of their low altitudes, raised garden plots were necessary so that during heavy rains the excess water could be collected in ditches dug around the gardens and run off in trenches. Although the people had methods of preserving certain tubers, which they stored in small bush-material sheds, during 'hungry time' it was still necessary for the men to visit their Papuan trading partners to obtain yams.<sup>7</sup> Small uninhabited islands adjacent to the Central Island of Masig were used for growing crops of sweet potatoes, yams, cassava (manioc), pumpkins and watermelons. Nevertheless, yams did not grow well on the small sandy cays and the Masig Islanders obtained further supplies from Erub and St. Paul's. Pumpkins and cassava were good substitutes and surplus pumpkins could be stored in 'big leaf houses'.<sup>8</sup> Cultivation was not intense on any of the sandy cays because of poor soil and the lack of land suitable for cultivation. Yam Island is rocky and high so the people also used

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<sup>6</sup> Beckett, custom and colonialism, pp. 27-28.

<sup>7</sup> G. Passi, Knowledge, Education and Self-Management, pp. 44-45. 'Hungry time' coincided with the monsoonal season beginning in December. The new crops were planted but until they could be harvested, it was necessary to get yams from the Papuan villages because they could not be stored like other tubers. Throughout Torres Strait there has been an increasing dependence upon store goods since the Pacific War which has alleviated the scarcity of food on the Top-Western Islands in the wet season. Trade has continued with the Papuans, although many of their visits to Saibai and Boigu are for the purpose of buying store goods.

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication with Masig woman, Cairns, November 1993.



(Top) Rocky outcrops found on Western Island - Dauan  
(Bottom) Flat coral cay - Masig

neighbouring islands for horticulture. However, 'wild foods', such as coconuts, wongai plum and indigenous almonds, were plentiful. Surplus wongai plums were sun-dried and specially packed in bags to prevent deterioration and weevil infestations. Throughout the Strait, bananas cropped all the year and were a good subsistence food.<sup>9</sup> The L.M.S. missionary W. Wyatt Gill suggested that coconuts were not to be found in the Strait in the 1870s. He observed: 'coming straight from the South Sea Islands, it seemed strange to see the large islands of the Straits without a cocoanut-tree [sic] on them'. He planted fifty trees which he hoped would 'prove useful to shipwrecked mariners'.<sup>10</sup> Beckett suggested that coconuts flourished on the 'northerly and easterly islands'. Most of the old women emphasised that coconuts were an essential commodity in their subsistence economy by the 1940s, and they were to be found on all islands. Corn, watermelons and different varieties of nuts alleviated food shortages on some islands during the leanest months.<sup>11</sup>

The waters in Torres Strait abound with marine life. Fish, shell fish, crustacea, several varieties of turtles and dugong provide a rich source of protein in the people's diet. However, dugong and turtle were only hunted on special occasions: to fulfil kinship obligations and for ceremonial occasions. Torres Strait Islander men are skilful hunters of the sea and their knowledge of it has been passed down from generation to generation. The hunter knew from his '*knowledge of mythology*' the areas where certain dugong would be found. He read the stars, moon, tide and clouds to ascertain the right time to hunt. He knew the behaviour of the dugong and the precise moment to harpoon it, but care had to be taken. If his leg became entangled in the rope attached to a harpoon embedded in the dugong, the hunter could be drowned. Reef fish were caught daily by the women, they dived for crayfish in the lagoons, searched for crabs in the mangroves and collected shellfish on the rocks. Deep water fishing was generally undertaken by the men.

On the Eastern and Central Islands, stone fish traps, sai, were

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- <sup>9</sup> See G. Passi, *Knowledge, Education and Self-Management*, pp. 41-48.
- <sup>10</sup> W. Wyatt Gill, *Life in the Southern Isles; or, Scenes and Incidents in the South Pacific and New Guinea* (London, 1876), p. 201.
- <sup>11</sup> Jeremy Beckett, 'Torres Strait Islanders', in Walker (ed.), *Bridge and Barrier*, p. 315.





(Top) Low lying, swampy Top-Western Island - Saibai  
 (Bottom) Hilly Western Island - Moa (St. Paul's in foreground)



built out from the beaches. These traps were used at specified times only. On Mer, a day was appointed for the whole community to participate in the carrying out of repairs to the traps. Women and girls who were pregnant or menstruating could not go into the water while the repairs were being carried out because that would cause the catch to be small. Instead they prepared the food for the working party. The trap was repaired at low tide and at the next ebb tide great quantities of fish were washed into the weir and collected. Everyone in the working party took a share of the catch. However, within a few days the size of the catch diminished because the fish became wary of the danger of the enclosure. The weir was left unattended until the next season. An old Meriam technology, said to have been invented in mythical times by a man named Iriamuris, was used to catch sardines. Three men waited on the beach for a wave to bring in a large shoal. Two men frightened the sardines to the surface by beating the sea with bamboo poles while the other scooped the fish from the top of the swell into his weres, or scoop.<sup>12</sup>

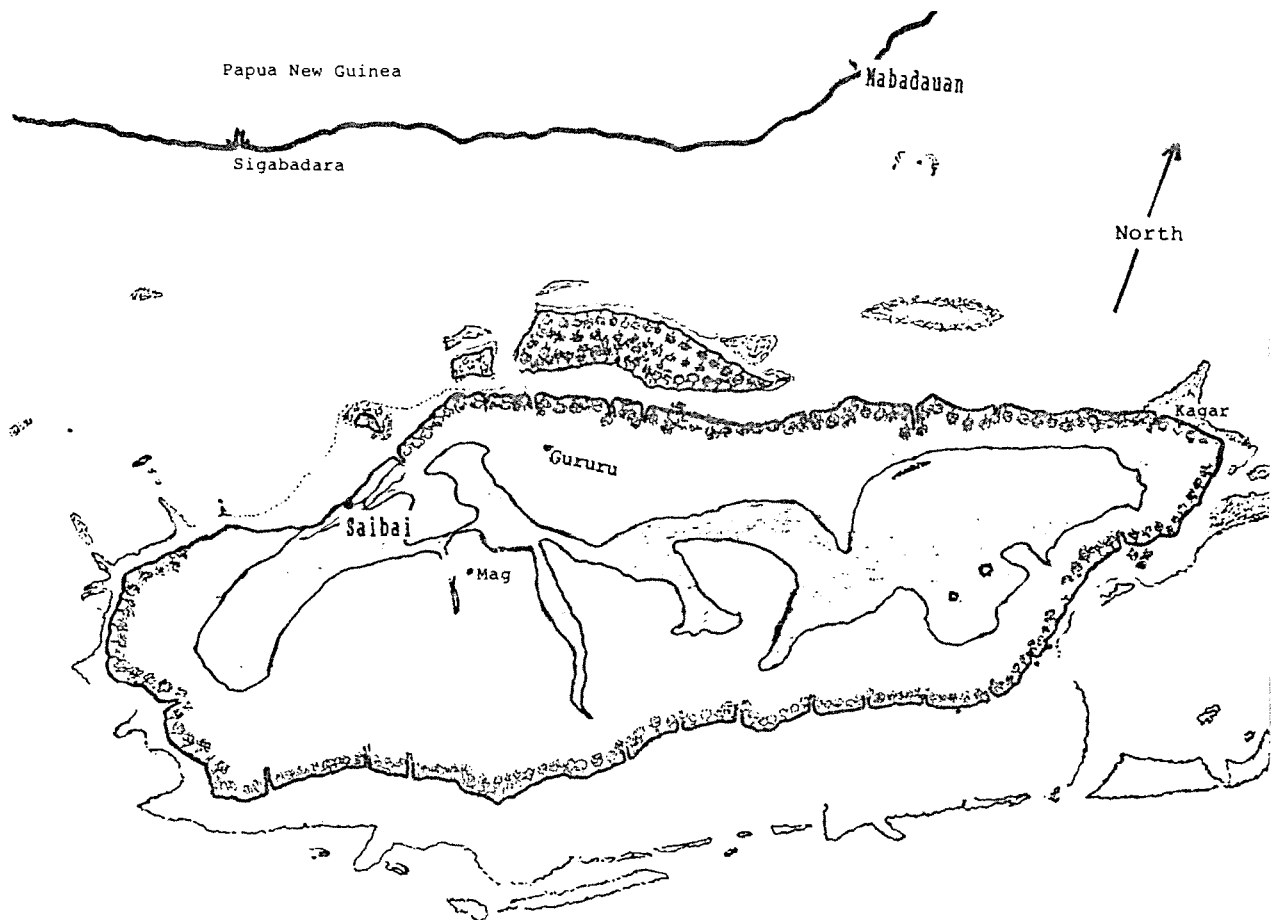
Trade amongst these Torres Strait Islander communities and with the villages along the south Papuan coast meant survival. The groups traded a variety of goods through intricate networks. Seacraft were essential for transportation of warriors in traditional times, trade, deep water fishing, hunting dugong and turtle and friendly visits to other islands. However, without suitable trees on the islands, hulls for the fast, long, outrigger canoes had to be obtained from the Papuans. The hulls were traded for turtle, dugong, human heads taken in war, waps (dugong spears) or arm band shells. Villagers further removed from the Papuan coast used intermediaries to obtain hulls for them. A Muralag (Prince of Wales) man would place his order with someone on Badu. The Badu man would discuss it with a trading partner at Mabuag who in turn sent a message to Saibai and the canoe was eventually obtained from a Papuan trading partner.<sup>13</sup> Goods were passed between the groups along a 'sort of relay system'.<sup>14</sup> A Nagi man exchanged 'shell ornaments, fine lines of coconut fibre, tobacco, coconuts and bamboo containers' for a

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<sup>12</sup> See G. Passi, Knowledge, Education and Self-Management, pp. 19-40.

<sup>13</sup> A.C. Haddon, 'The Ethnography of the Western Tribes of Torres Straits', Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, Vol. 19, 1890, p. 341.

<sup>14</sup> D.R. Moore, 'Cape York Aborigines and Islanders of Western Torres Strait', in Walker (ed.), Bridge and Barrier, p. 333.



Map 3: Saibai Island, Torres Strait

canoe made from a tree trunk washed up on Muralag.<sup>15</sup> Stone, suitable for adzes and clubs, and ironwood for spears was obtained from the Papuans. Drums, bird-of-paradise plumes and ochre were further items traded from New Guinea. Red and white ochre from Saibai were in demand by other island groups and the Papuans.<sup>16</sup> From the Cape York Aborigines, the Torres Strait Islanders and Papuans obtained spears and spear throwers. Canoes and shells for breast ornaments were items traded through the networks to the Aborigines.<sup>17</sup> After European contact, the Torres Strait Islanders obtained iron from passing vessels or wrecks and it was put into the trading networks.<sup>18</sup> By the time the Pacific War broke out, store food, clothing and money had become items of exchange in trade with the Papuans. Charlie Gibuma from Boigu explained:

*We might go to Daru for shopping. On the way back we might call up there at Mabadauan for the night. We'd sit and talk and yarn. We might start talking about canoes. The Mabadauan man might say, 'Ah, you've come to buy a canoe'. Then he might say, 'All right, thirty pounds and mainsail'. That was how the deal was made.*<sup>19</sup>

The foregoing general discussion indicates something of the diversity which existed in the physical features of Torres Strait, land and sea use and the trading networks of the people. Another area of difference among the Torres Strait Islanders is language. In Eastern Torres Strait a Papuan language, Meriam (Meriam Mir), a member of the Papuan Trans-Fly family is spoken. On the other islands, Mabuia is the language. It has Melanesian elements but an Aboriginal structure. At some point in the past, Mabuia broke into two closely related languages; Kala Lagaw Ya spoken on the Central Western Islands and Kalaw Kawaw Ya on the Top-Western Islands of Saibai, Boigu and Dauan.<sup>20</sup> As the number of aliens using Torres Strait increased in the 1800s, a means of communication between the members of the various language groups became necessary. A pidgin, or a mixing of languages, evolved from which Torres Strait Creole

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<sup>15</sup> David R. Moore, Islanders and Aborigines at Cape York (Canberra, 1979), p. 303.

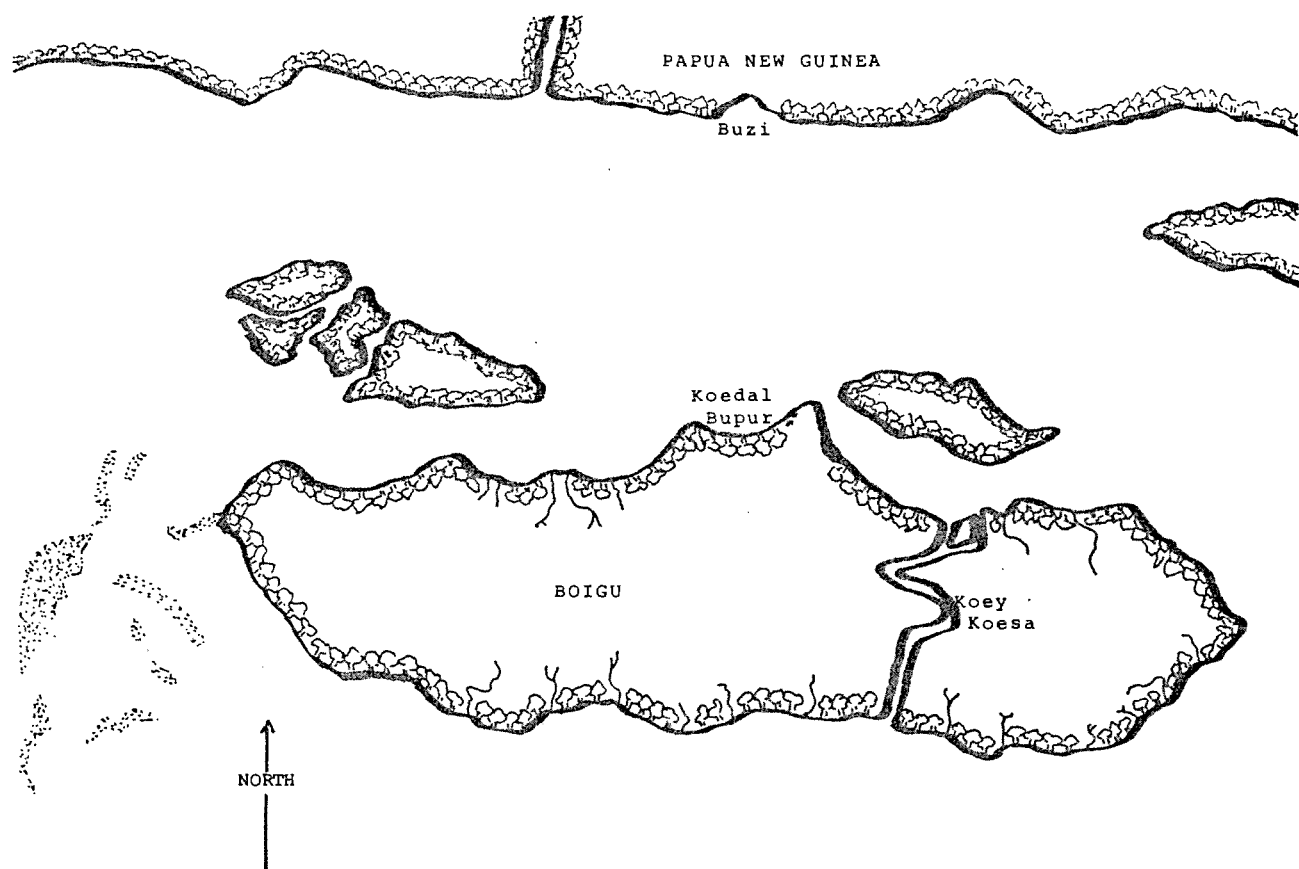
<sup>16</sup> Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> Moore, 'Cape York Aborigines', p. 333.

<sup>18</sup> Moore, Islanders and Aborigines, p. 303.

<sup>19</sup> Charlie Gibuma, 'Buying a canoe from Mabadauan', in Boigu Island Community Council, Boigu, p. 115.

<sup>20</sup> Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 25.



Map 4: Boigu Island, Torres Strait

developed.<sup>21</sup> Differences also existed amongst the island groups because they were 'neither politically united nor culturally homogenous'.<sup>22</sup> Before white intervention, it is believed the people lived in societies in which decision-making rested with the old men.<sup>23</sup> It was at the instigation of the missionaries and the government in 1878 that a chief, or mamoose, was chosen by the people on each community. The mamoose was subsequently instructed to appoint a magistrate and police to administer local justice. In 1899, John Douglas initiated on Mer a 'constitution' which consisted of four elected councillors and one nominated by himself as Queensland Government Resident on Thursday Island - a system described by Beckett as 'a remarkable innovation, without precedent anywhere in the colonial South Pacific'.<sup>24</sup> The constitution was subsequently extended to all communities.

Until 1936, the Department's agents were the white school teachers who increasingly assumed the council's powers. By the time of the Pacific War, an overarching system of government management and control on all of the outer islands had been firmly established.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, all the people were, at least, nominally Christian and so caught up in a secondary system of control and socialisation administered by the Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria. Nonetheless, the various island groups remained diverse because of their long individual histories and the differences in many of their customs. Talking about marriage customs in the 1930s, one woman said: *'This is the way we did it on Erub. I don't know how they did*

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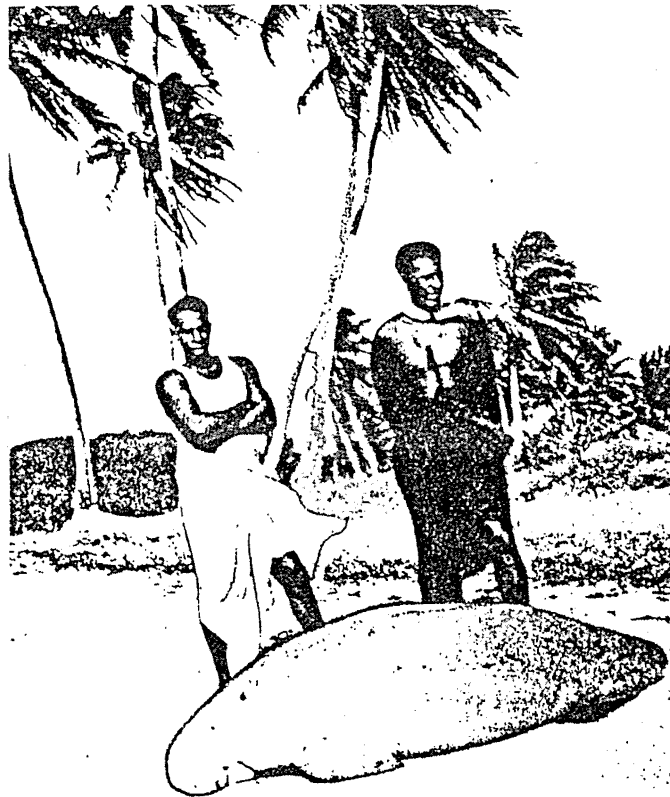
<sup>21</sup> See Shnukal, Broken, pp. 3-5. It must be assumed that, prior to 1800, the traders from the different language groups in Torres Strait and along the southern coast of New Guinea had developed some form of speech communication.

<sup>22</sup> Beckett, 'Torres Strait Islanders', p. 308.

<sup>23</sup> A.C. Haddon (ed.), Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait, Vol. 5 (Cambridge, 1904), p. 264. This leadership by a group of old men was different from that found to exist in Melanesia where the politically autonomous coastal and bush villages each had a 'chief' (Darrell L. Whiteman, Melanesians and Missionaries: An ethnological study of social and religious change in southwest Pacific (Pasadena, California, 1983), pp. 37-38).

<sup>24</sup> Haddon (ed.), Reports, Vol. 6 (1908), p. 179; Haddon (ed.), Reports, Vol. 5, p. 264; Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> The people's attempt to break the teachers' powers and regain council autonomy is discussed in Chapter four - Under the Act.



(Top) The dugong and its hunters  
(Bottom) Fish traps (sals) on Mer

it on other islands'.<sup>26</sup> The people were Meriam, Baduans, Yam Islanders and so on.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, as Nakata has pointed out, his people still see themselves as: *'a complex and diverse heterogenous group of people with differing needs'*.<sup>28</sup>

While diversity in customs amongst the Torres Strait Islander groups was evident in what the old people said about their lives, on this island or that, this was one of the instances of the difficulty I, as an outsider, had in grasping the extent of those differences. This was not only a consequence of the frequently sketchy descriptions given by the oral historians but also because of the different 'language games' involved.<sup>29</sup> Their experiences were supported by a wealth of esoteric knowledge not incorporated in my eurocentric discourse.

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#### Loss of identity

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the collective designation 'Torres Strait Islanders' seems to have been adopted by the outsiders.<sup>30</sup> From this time, the concept of difference amongst the island groups was eroded until the Torres Strait Islanders increasingly came to realise they had no separate identity in the eyes of the outsiders nor were they identified apart from the Aborigines. This was reflected in various ways by the actions and representations of government groups. From 1904, Torres Strait

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<sup>26</sup> Personal communication with Erub woman, Cairns, February 1994.

<sup>27</sup> Queensland, Legislative Assembly 1939, Debates, Vol. 174, p. 463.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Nakata, Constituting the Torres Strait Islander: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of the 1989 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy: Joint Policy Statement, Paper presented at AARE Annual Conference, Sydney, 1990, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> See Chapter two - Contemporary social theories.

<sup>30</sup> Until about 1891, John Douglas referred to the Meriam people as 'Murray Islanders' (Report: Government Resident, Thursday Island, respecting Condition of Aboriginal Natives of Murray Island, Queensland Votes and Proceedings (Q.V.&P.) 1891, Vol. 4, pp. 1421-1422). The designation 'Torres Strait Islanders' was probably adopted in the late nineteenth century from the anthropological term. At this time, extensive anthropological work was being done in Torres Strait by Haddon and his team.

Islanders were progressively administered under Queensland legislation, The Aborigines Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Acts, 1897 to 1934, designed to control and segregate mainland Aborigines whose cultures and circumstances were totally different from those of the minority group living in Torres Strait.<sup>31</sup> Official references to Torres Strait Islanders as 'Aborigines' signified the loss even of their eurocentric group designation as Torres Strait Islanders. Along with Aborigines, their mental powers were seen as different from their white colonisers. Therefore, like the Aborigines, the children's school curriculum was designed to suit their 'native circumstances'.<sup>32</sup> In a contemporary comment on his people's status, Nakata articulated the situation which had pertained for almost four decades before the war: They were a 'minority within the indigenous minority in Australia...Not only were they spoken about as "Aborigines" but always by people other than themselves'.<sup>33</sup> An old Meriam woman's recollection was: 'In 1936 I was thirteen. Everyone was angry. We are not Aborigines; we are Islanders. They fought for that name'.<sup>34</sup> By this she meant that the Torres Strait Islander seamen, with the support of their families, went on strike in 1936 to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the Queensland government's treatment of them and their loss of identity.

It might be argued that this was not so: the Queensland government was aware of the cultural differences and indeed the Torres Strait Islanders were seen as superior to the Aborigines, although inferior to Europeans, and that their affairs were managed

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<sup>31</sup> The fourth edition of the Style Manual published by the Australian Government Publishing Service in 1990 has been followed for this thesis. For instance the first reference to an Act of Parliament is underlined; subsequent references are not. A fifth edition was published in 1994 which does not contradict any style used.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in Williamson, *Schooling the Torres Strait Islander*, p. 124. This subject will be discussed more fully in a subsequent chapter devoted to Torres Strait Islander education.

<sup>33</sup> Nakata, 'Culture in Education', p. 334.

<sup>34</sup> Interview 160, Cairns, September 1993.



accordingly.<sup>35</sup> If that was the case, the Torres Strait Islanders certainly did not see themselves as being treated as a distinct or superior minority. When the Queensland Minister for Health and Home Affairs, E.M. Hanlon, visited Torres Strait in July 1937, a year after the Torres Strait Islander seamen went on strike, 'very strong representations' were made to him in which the people said that they did not want to continue to be treated in 'the same way as mainland Aborigines'.<sup>36</sup> In 1939, the Queensland parliament enacted the Torres Strait Islanders Act. The people finally had their own Act but what difference did it make to their identity beyond Torres Strait? Ignorance about their identity and even their existence was not made evident to the rest of Australia for a long time to come.

Both State and Commonwealth publications continued to reflect the general lack of awareness of the difference between the two groups of people. Torres Strait Islanders were frequently referred to in footnotes and with asterisks under statistical tables. For example, their population numbers were relegated to a footnote beneath the estimated Commonwealth Aboriginal census figures for 30 June 1940, which read: 'Exclusive of Torres Strait Islanders (853 in regular employment 2 864 in supervised camps, and 10 other)'.<sup>37</sup> Queensland treated the Torres Strait Islanders similarly in their schedules of population figures. Before 30 June, 1940, they were included in the figures for Aborigines. In 1941, the following comment was made below the schedule: 'As Torres Strait Islanders are not now classed as aboriginals [emphasis added], they have been excluded from the above table'.<sup>38</sup> And, despite Queensland's

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<sup>35</sup> Regina Ganter would agree with this and she cites eurocentric evidence of it in her publication The Pearl-Shellers of Torres Strait: Resource Use, Development and Decline 1860s-1960s (Melbourne, 1994), p. 41-42. However, the focus of this thesis is on the Torres Strait Islander perspective and implications which substantiate that perspective.

<sup>36</sup> Queensland, Legislative Assembly 1939, Debates 1939, Vol. 174, p. 464. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs were administered as a sub-department of the Department of Health and Home Affairs.

<sup>37</sup> The Commonwealth of Australia, Official Year Book, No. 34, 1941, p. 307. Until 1961, Commonwealth Census figures for Aborigines were estimated. The 1966 Census was the first in which '"complete" enumeration of the Aboriginal population' was obtained (Leonard Broom and F. Lancaster Jones, A Blanket a Year (Canberra, 1973), p. 41). Torres Strait Islander figures, such as those in the footnote of the 1940 Census, were the estimated numbers of the Queensland Department of Native Affairs.

<sup>38</sup> Queensland, The Year Book, No. 5, 1941, p. 54.

enactment of separate legislation for Torres Strait Islanders in 1939, both the State and Commonwealth Governments failed to recognise them in the titles of their departments until much later. In 1966, the Queensland Department of Native Affairs became the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs but the Torres Strait Islanders had to wait until 1989 before the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs was superseded by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). Furthermore, it was not until 1990 that the words 'Torres Strait Islander' were included in the title of the Commonwealth funded Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. Under the auspices of the Research Council of the Academy of Social Sciences of Australia, two publications, The Structure and Growth of Australia's Aboriginal Population (1970) and A Blanket a Year (1973), both of which discussed Aboriginal population trends, made no mention of Torres Strait Islanders as inclusive in Aboriginal figures or as a separate group.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the lack of acknowledgment of the separate identity, or even the existence, of the Torres Strait Islanders as a group of indigenous Australians was one of the factors which maintained mainland Australians' ignorance of them.

It is understandable, therefore, that three contemporary politically active Torres Strait Islanders, the late Ted Loban, Seppie Woosup and Benny Mills, complained: *'for far too long the wording "and Torres Strait Islanders" has been a quote and not supported by fully recognising the Torres Strait Islands, its people and their culture'*.<sup>40</sup> Nakata further claimed that his people were *'"add-ons" to the larger discourse categories of Aboriginal people'*. They were *'commatised'* within the term *'Aboriginal'* as having the *'same Aboriginal experience'*.<sup>41</sup> In the light of these and other omissions, Beckett's suggestion that Torres Strait Islanders were *'less known to the public at large'* than the Aborigines, is not without support.<sup>42</sup> The Japanese sociologist, Hironobu Kitaoji, who worked in Torres Strait in the 1970s, was moved to reply when

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<sup>39</sup> F. Lancaster Jones, The Structure and Growth of Australia's Aboriginal Population (Canberra, 1970); Broom and Jones, Blanket a Year.

<sup>40</sup> Torres Strait Islander Regional Education Consultative Committee (TSIRECC), Nagampula Yawadhan Ziawali: Education Policy for Torres Strait (Thursday Island, 1992), p. i.

<sup>41</sup> Nakata, *Constituting the Torres Strait Islander*, p. 4. *'Commatised'*, included in the word Aborigine in inverted commas.

<sup>42</sup> Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 177.

questioned on his perceptions of the 'border issue' that Canberra did not appear to understand the Torres Strait area or the culture of the people.<sup>43</sup> Anthropologist, Judith Fitzpatrick-Nietschmann was frustrated in her research. Her comment was: 'A most exasperating aspect of much of the early archivist material, as well as later government reports, is the lack of differentiation made between Torres Strait Islanders and mainland Aborigines'.<sup>44</sup> Torres Strait Islanders have a long history of resistance to what they have seen as attempts 'to tag [them] after Aborigines or even to relegate them as an \* [asterisk] that reads something like "we include [or exclude] Torres Strait Islanders under the generic term Aborigines"'.<sup>45</sup> They had lost their unique identity, not only as it affected their lives but also because it contributed to their invisibility to the majority of mainlanders with the consequence that they had no idea of the grievances of this small group of Australians.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, their invisibility extended to the international scene. In August 1989, several Torres Strait Islander women attended the First International Indigenous Conference, held in Adelaide. One delegate told a Torres News reporter:

*Most people have not been aware that Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders are two distinct races within Australia. As a result our delegation came as a surprise to many people. They know now and we are thrilled.*<sup>47</sup>

Thus, while the lives of Torres Strait Islander women were being dramatically affected by their innocent involvement in the Pacific War, little, if anything, was known by most Australian citizens of their existence in a war zone within the nation's border,

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<sup>43</sup> Hironobu Kitaoji, 'Culture of the Torres Strait', Arena, No. 50, 1978, p. 61. The 'border issue' concerned the extent of territorial water New Guinea and Australia should have in Torres Strait when New Guinea became independent. In 1973, Prime Minister Whitlam proposed to divide Torres Strait at the tenth degree parallel, halfway between Australia and New Guinea. Among other things, this would have placed members of the same family in different countries.

<sup>44</sup> Judith Fitzpatrick-Nietschmann, *Another Way of Dying: The Social and Cultural Context of Death in a Melanesian Community, Torres Strait*, Ph.D. thesis, Anthropology Department, The University of Michigan, 1980, p. 15. I experienced the same frustration.

<sup>45</sup> TSIRECC, *Education Policy*, p. iv.

<sup>46</sup> Although little was taught in schools about Aborigines prior to the war, most Australian school children were totally unaware of the existence of Torres Strait Islanders until decades after the war.

<sup>47</sup> 'Torres women recognised', p. 30.

let alone their plight. In the next section, the history of the Torres Strait Islander women until World War Two is reviewed to make the record of their wartime experiences that much more intelligible to outsider readers.

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During the period of the Pacific War, Torres Strait Islander women were exposed to totally new experiences which will be discussed in subsequent chapters. However, it is important to understand that just as their traditional subsistence societies were dependent on the women's work skills so too was the semi-subsistence society which evolved from about the mid-nineteenth century. Furthermore, under the unprecedented circumstances of war, without the work traditions passed down to women from generation to generation, the survival of the people would have been in even more jeopardy than from enemy fire.

#### Women's unpaid work

In Torres Strait, the traditional roles of men and women seem to have been more loosely defined than has often been attributed to such societies. Women generally performed the domestic and gardening work, fished and carried fuel and water. They were the craft workers, plaiting the endless number of mats and baskets required in a traditional home. They assisted the men in house construction. An old Muralag (Prince of Wales) woman described the intrinsic nature of the traditional work roles of the women in her village where most of their food was gathered: *'They had all the chores, looked after the baby, they went hunting for food...fished got wild yams or fruits, they did all the work...They were strong and they did the lot'*.<sup>48</sup> The diversity in the physical features of the islands in Torres Strait meant that different emphases were placed on aspects of the women's work. On islands like Tudu (Tut or Warrior Island), once described as 'a sandbank with a few stunted trees', generally the women did more fishing than those on some of the more fertile

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<sup>48</sup>

Interview 102, Thursday Island, May 1990.

islands.<sup>49</sup> This was the case on most of the Western Islands. On the Eastern Islands, extensive gardening was done. For instance, on Mer the gardens flourished on the fertile slopes of Gelam Hill. The women did all their gardening with the one tool, the digging stick. The men were the deep-sea fishermen, warriors, hunters and traders. Nonetheless, they dug the hard virgin soil for new gardens with their shell hoes. They helped the women to carry food and fuel. J. Beete Jukes, while on survey work in Torres Strait in the 1840s, saw a man and a women on Erub (Darnley) returning from the gardens 'both loaded with yams and firewood'.<sup>50</sup> On Muralag (Prince of Wales), where it was suggested that the women had a very hard life, Barbara Thompson, a shipwrecked Scottish girl who lived on the Island for four years before her rescue in 1849, indicated that the men 'might go out with their wives and help them'.<sup>51</sup> Women were also seen to assist the warriors when the island was under threat: Jukes saw women on Erub standing with the men in battle against their attackers.<sup>52</sup> Thus, it might be said that throughout the islands in traditional times there was no absolutely rigid demarcation of the work roles of Torres Strait Islander women and men.<sup>53</sup>

From the old people's testimonies, it became apparent that a collaboration, or complementarity, in the labour relations of men and women continued after colonisation on most communities. A Masig man

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<sup>49</sup> J. Moresby, 'Recent discoveries at the eastern end of New Guinea', The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society, Vol. 44, 1874, p. 3. In late 1872, Captain Moresby was given orders to sail to Torres Strait to suppress the illegal employment of South Sea Islanders (Melanesians) by the pearl-shellers. He quickly accomplished this and then went on to complete survey work in the area begun by Captain Owen Stanley.

<sup>50</sup> J. Beete Jukes, Narrative of the Surveying Voyage of H.M.S. Fly, Vol. 1 (London, 1847), p. 253. Jukes was a naturalist aboard the H.M.S. Fly which undertook survey work in Torres Strait from 1844 to 1845.

<sup>51</sup> Moore, Islanders and Aborigines, p. 167.

<sup>52</sup> Jukes, Narrative of the Surveying Voyage, pp. 249-254.

<sup>53</sup> Julie Cruikshank working among Native Americans in Northern Canada also found that there was a complementarity or a principle of male/female balance in the work relationships between the men and women: 'Women's accounts of their adult lives differentiate clearly between appropriate behavior for men and for women, even though environmental constraints and domestic necessity meant that, when necessary, members of either sex could do tasks normally assigned to the other. By and large men provided and women prepared the food, clothing and shelter necessary for smoothly functioning camp life' (Cruikshank, 'Myth and tradition', p. 201).



(Top) Island garden on Badu  
(Bottom) Replicas of digging sticks used by the women

said: *'It was traditional, women did the same as men'*.<sup>54</sup> A Meriam man suggested that on his Island women's and men's roles were *'not much different'*.<sup>55</sup> Another Meriam man declared gardening to be his *'first priority...My father was a real gardener and he taught me too. That's why I love gardening. It's in my veins'*.<sup>56</sup> According to the late Koiki Mabo, Meriam men were *'proud of their gardening prowess'*.<sup>57</sup> Less gardening was done on the Central and Western Islands, but even there the men were known to do gardening.<sup>58</sup> A Mabuiag woman said: *'My father was a good garden man'*.<sup>59</sup> There was, however, a suggestion of a more clear cut division of labour in at least some families on Saibai:

*every morning my wife makes the fire, does the cooking and you cannot see any dirt on the ground before the family wake up. The man goes early fishing and hunting. They got a different life. When every work is done, finish ready for sleep the man and wife sleep together. When the sun comes up at six o'clock they spread out, man did his work woman did her work.*<sup>60</sup>

However, after colonisation many men worked away from their islands for long periods of time on the pearl-shell and trochus boats so that during their absence their wives were totally responsible for the gardens. When they were home *'the men helped in the garden with the women'*.<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, women played the major role in food production. They were the carers of the children and home, carriers of fuel and water as well as taking responsibilities for house maintenance and village work. As will be shown, all of these skills attributed to their survival during the Pacific War.

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Torres Strait Islander culture has never remained static, as no culture does. Thus, after colonisation began it was inevitable changes would take place although there is no suggestion that there was a total erosion of the island cultures. Of great impact, however, was the introduction of a monetary economy and it became the responsibility of the women, as well as the men, to support it. It

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<sup>54</sup> Interview 121, Masig, January 1989.

<sup>55</sup> Interview 112, Mer, January 1989.

<sup>56</sup> Cited in Sharp, *Stars of Tagai*, p. 80.

<sup>57</sup> Communication between the late Koiki Mabo and Noel Loos conveyed to the author, January 1995.

<sup>58</sup> Personal communication with Maureen Fuary, Cairns, January 1995.

<sup>59</sup> Interview 078, Mabuiag, February 1989.

<sup>60</sup> Interview 144, Thursday Island, February 1990.

<sup>61</sup> Interview 054, Cairns, April 1989.

also will be subsequently disclosed that the women's ability to earn money was vital to the survival of their families during the Pacific War.

The people in Torres Strait were introduced to European manufactures when they salvaged wrecks and exchanged food and artefacts for iron with crews on passing ships. An old Purma (Coconut Island) man, talking to a group of school children on Waraber (Sue) in 1987, recounted what his grandfather had told him: *'They don't know about money, they exchanged things, they got shell and gave it to the white man and they got tobacco, calico, knife'*.<sup>62</sup> In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Torres Strait Islanders entered the European monetary system. The Reverend James Chalmers, an L.M.S. missionary, recorded in 1894:

When they visit Thursday Is'd. Mr. Douglas [Government Resident] is ever kind to them, and they get good prices for their mats, etc. Asking the price they got for fowls - I was answered "You savee woman fowl - afa kerosene - man fowl two silings".<sup>63</sup>

Robert Bruce, the first white government teacher on Mer (Murray), described the experiences of two men when they went shopping on Thursday Island with the ten shillings Chalmers had given each of them: *'I think that was the most delightful part of it to them in giving a piece of money - that to them had no value and getting say in exchange a knife - an article of great value'*.<sup>64</sup>

Reciprocity, based on kinship and the responsibilities associated with this principle, had always been a central dynamic of Torres Strait Islander societies. This emphasised the value of sharing and co-operation rather than competition. In 1911, the white government teacher was horrified that the Mabuiag Islanders could give away 14 000 coconuts when the demand for copra was high.<sup>65</sup> They preferred to share rather than sell and this was something their white colonisers continued to frown upon. Nevertheless, the people discovered that there was no escape from the new monetary economy.

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<sup>62</sup> Philemon Pearson, Talking to a class of children on Waraber, Videotape produced by Barry Osborne, James Cook University, Townsville, 24 April 1987.

<sup>63</sup> Papuan Reports: James Chalmers, 5 March-12 April 1894, p. 25, L.M.S. Microfilm, Reel 11M, James Cook University, Townsville. 'Afa' meant 'half of' and 'silings' meant 'shillings'.

<sup>64</sup> Papuan Reports: Robert Bruce, 18 April 1894, p. 5, L.M.S. Microfilm.

<sup>65</sup> Cited in Sharp, Stars of Tagai, pp. 162-163.



For example, money was needed to support the work of the church. Chalmers' 1894 report disclosed:

Now began the great work of the day. Plates were put in front of me - a long line was formed, which passed through the church, and out at the end door, after having placed their contributions for the Society in the plates. The interest was very great. All contributed, old and young and living and many dead.

Mabuiag gave	£25. 5s.0d.
Badu	8. 7s.0d.
Moa	2. 2s.0d.
	<u>£35.14s.0d.</u>

They expressed themselves as very sorry it was such a small amount this time but "No got money now. No plenty shell, no plenty beche-de-mer, bye and bye you see".<sup>66</sup>

Now, too, money was needed to buy store goods, such as flour, rice and sugar, items upon which the people increasingly became dependent. Consequently, the missionaries encouraged the men not already involved in the marine industry to collect beche-de-mer and dive for pearl-shell around their own home reefs. Later, as the men's involvement in the industry increased, the missionaries and the government assisted clans to purchase boats which became known as 'company' boats. Moreover, Torres Strait Islander labour was essential to the success of white entrepreneurs' and the Department's involvement in the industry so that most of the remaining able-bodied men were recruited on privately owned boats, the 'master' boats. These men spent long periods away from their islands each year. An old man recalled that during these long absences, the seamen worried about their families because they had to be at sea for so long and could not help the women: 'I wonder how they are getting on back home?'<sup>67</sup> In the villages, however, the women continued, to a large extent, to do what generations of their women had done before them to maintain their families:

*for the food line, women had to work and make gardens, just to keep the family together and things like that and at the same time they used to go fishing. They had to plant food and vegetables because the men would be out on the boats.*<sup>68</sup>

Many recollections were about the women's responsibilities in

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<sup>66</sup> Papuan Reports: Chalmers, 5 March-12 April 1894, pp. 22-23, L.M.S. Microfilm.

<sup>67</sup> Interview 098, Badu, March, 1990.

<sup>68</sup> Erub Islander, Early History Workshop, Videotape made by Pro-Octa Productions Pty. Ltd., Thursday Island, March 1987 (transcribed translation in author's possession). Older Torres Strait Islanders use the terms 'food line' and 'money line' when talking about how much food or money they had.

the new society and the hardships associated with their work. A St. Paul's woman said that when she was young, girls had to learn all the skills of their mothers and grandmothers for the sake of their survival.<sup>69</sup> A Saibai woman corroborated this:

*I always went with mum and grandparents and they had to teach me, show me the way they worked how to garden how to plant, when to plant when it's ready and like everything, yam, taro, cassava, sweet potatoes, well that's the main diet, that's our staple foods. You have a tattoo on your arm to measure the depth you plant it. There's different ways to plant yams; some yams they grow sideways, some yams grow down...like you plant them two feet, three feet down.*<sup>70</sup>

When it was too swampy to go on foot across the Island, the women sailed to the garden site at Kagar in dinghies and canoes and camped there.<sup>71</sup> A Badu woman said that her grandparents 'grew her up' and that they trained her 'very hard'. Her grandmother would say to her, 'Tomorrow we go to plant yams'. They went after school and she carried heavy loads up Kamat hill, 'a long way away'.<sup>72</sup> On Erub the gardens were some distance from the village: 'Near that aerodrome', one woman said, 'We walked for two hours and came back. We had to get fresh food every day and be busy to keep our garden going'.<sup>73</sup> The daughter of a widowed Mabuiag woman with five children remembered how hard it had been for her mother and that her big sister had to help:

*When baba [father] been dead there's no one to help ama [mother] and we were small ones. She had to climb up the hill, she took our big sister with her, to dig yam. They were very tired when they come back from the top of the hill, it's not near the village and you have to climb up and then go down. We were looking for mum. Poor mum came down when sun been on top with two baskets, firewood, water. When she got home she had to cook kaikai [food].*<sup>74</sup>

The Nagi women said that it was the men's job to go out in the boats for trochus and pearl-shell but that the women had to 'grow things'. They walked a long way to the garden every day because there was no

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<sup>69</sup> Int. 117.

<sup>70</sup> Int. 054.

<sup>71</sup> Interview 143, Thursday Island, February 1990. In addition to their long outrigger canoes, they had wooden clinker dinghies (rowing boats). Many of these were built at Badu where a boat-building industry was initially established by the L.M.S.

<sup>72</sup> Interview 130, Badu, March 1990.

<sup>73</sup> Interview 107, Thursday Island, May 1990. The airstrip on Erub was not constructed until 1989 but she used this contemporary landmark to indicate the distance they went almost fifty years earlier.

<sup>74</sup> Interview 140, Thursday Island, February 1989.

refrigerator in the house. Gardening was a 'back-breaking' job: 'You don't plant on top of the soil but arm's length deep we plant our yams and bananas'.<sup>75</sup>

Planting and carting food were not the only traditional back-breaking jobs the women continued to do in the new society. There were no carts, barrows, bikes or other wheeled vehicles on the islands so that, as a Badu woman recalled, 'We got to carry everything on our backs but we were all strong girls before. We carried firewood, one big bundle, sometimes two'.<sup>76</sup> The same thing applied on Nagi: 'We came from the hills and carried down loads of wood on our backs. We had to have firewood every day for cooking and washing'.<sup>77</sup> Women climbed the steep slopes of Gelam Hill on Mer (Murray) with their babies to get wood: 'We take all the kids up too and we feed those little babies green coconut water up there'.<sup>78</sup> A Saibai woman remembered: 'That's our life, carry wood on our backs'.<sup>79</sup>

Furthermore, the women and children still had to cart all the water used in the households each day. Most of the women mentioned carrying water. It was as if the memory of it had been engraved on their minds. The women on Saibai and Purma (Coconut Island) frequently had to transport their water from nearby islands. The story of how the Purma people found water on Waraber (Sue) was told to one old man by his father, who was only a boy at the time. An old blind man came to a spot and he said:

*"All right dig here". They dig, keep digging. I don't know, take one day, two day, but anyhow they found water and it sprang up. They tell him, "We got water here", and he said, "Bring it to me first". My dad took the bailer shell and he tasted that water and said, "That belongs to your children".*

The old man telling the story saw this event as very important for his people. Perhaps even as he spoke his memory was being filtered through a contemporary lens which reflected the struggles most Torres Strait Islander communities continued to have for decades after the Pacific War to get the government to sink bores, construct dams and

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<sup>75</sup> Interview 069, Thursday Island, February 1989.  
<sup>76</sup> Int. 130.  
<sup>77</sup> Int. 069.  
<sup>78</sup> Interview 087, Mer, January 1989.  
<sup>79</sup> Int. 054.

provide reticulated water.<sup>80</sup> So, for years the Purma women went to get the water from the well on Waraber: *'Come to summer time there's no rain water...we went over in the dinghy, sailing to Waraber and get the water'*. Waraber was *'over the horizon'* so it could take two hours, depending on the weather. Their water containers had no lids and the salt water splashed into them in rough weather making the water a bit salty. To stop the water from bounding out of the buckets, green leaves were placed on top of the water.<sup>81</sup> A Saibai woman recalled that they *'had to carry water all the time. Mostly they carried buckets on their heads, like New Guinean women'*.<sup>82</sup> When the water was high enough in the small well *'on the Gururu side'* of the Island the women drew it from there. Sometimes they had to go *'miles away at Mag, probably about three miles, right in the centre of the Island'*. However, much of the time the women went by canoe to Dauan, *'six miles by sea'*, to collect drinking water and to wash their clothes.<sup>83</sup> Many years before the war, the Ugar (Stephens) Islanders went in *'sailing dinghies'* to Erub (Darnley) and Masig (Yorke) for water. By the time they returned home, the water was *'half salt and half fresh'*: *'Then we tried to find water on Ugar, we dig for six months and it's twenty feet down and we found water and it's really beautiful'*.<sup>84</sup> Again it seemed important for the old man telling the story to talk about how the water was found. Accessibility to water has always been imperative to the survival of the people in Torres Strait.

Many communities had wells and they had to be maintained. A Masig (Yorke Island) man said that the boys helped with this chore. They bailed the water out periodically because dirt ran into the well when it rained: *'The skinny one had to go in and scrape the dirt off the top and we don't use the well for a couple of days, let the water*

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<sup>80</sup> In 1971, Etta Passi of Mer was the first woman elected to an island council in Torres Strait. She recalled that during her three-year term, the government sank a bore on Mer. Until then the women had to carry water from the wells. The position was no better on other communities (Int. 056).

<sup>81</sup> Int. 064.

<sup>82</sup> The analogy with New Guinea women was probably associated with visits the women made to the Papuan villages with the old men on trading expeditions. Water on other islands was carried in pairs of coconut shells attached to the ends of a bamboo pole which rested across the shoulders or similarly with buckets or tins. Water could also be carried in hollow bamboos.

<sup>83</sup> Int. 054.

<sup>84</sup> Interview 028, Thursday Island, April 1990.

settle in. Mum told us when to drink the water again'. He explained that no one was allowed to 'help themselves' to a drink from the well if they had just swum in the sea because to go within ten feet of the well after a swim would turn the water salty: *'That's what they said, and we got the belt for doing that'*.<sup>85</sup> Such taboos were, in all probability, in response to the need to take care not to spoil or waste a drop of water. It was a precious commodity everywhere.

On most of the islands containers of all kinds were placed around the houses in the wet season to catch rain water. They might be large bailer or clam shells. They might be scoured forty-four gallon drums or big stone storage jars which had been discarded by ships' crews, all of which items were highly valued by a people who *'never threw anything away...Whatever we find useful, whatever we find better thing for our own use, we use'*, was how an old man explained it.<sup>86</sup> On Mer (Murray) the women left big clam shells at their gardens *'on the other side of the Island'* to catch drinking water otherwise they had to carry it there every day.<sup>87</sup> Because of the hard work involved in carrying water, there was overwhelming agreement amongst the women that it was the worst chore of all.<sup>88</sup> In the tradition of non-industrial societies, such as the Torres Strait Islander's, the women's work of carrying daily the households' food, fuel and water, too frequently, has been dismissed as trivial by white observers even though such work formed the basis of the maintenance of their societies.<sup>89</sup>

A more enjoyable chore was fishing. A European journalist, with the pseudonym 'Kosker', described the work of Torres Strait Islander fisherwomen as she saw it in the 1920s:

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<sup>85</sup> Interview 154, Thursday Island, February 1989.

<sup>86</sup> Int. 064.

<sup>87</sup> Int. 087.

<sup>88</sup> In 1990 I spoke with a woman from Mer who was a spokeswoman for her people in political arenas. She explained to me how Torres Strait Island women were concerned about things that were *'not understood by the men'*. One of those concerns was about water on the outer islands. She said: *'We look at things that men never thought about...The men come and they have their shower but they don't know the struggle that women went through with water'* (Int. 055).

<sup>89</sup> Bateson, taking the San, the !Kung of the Kalahari, as an example of such a society, concluded that for a long time *'anthropologists focused almost exclusively on the male half of the society'* until it was realised that the women provided two-thirds of their family's diet (Peripheral Visions, p. 98).

At night, at low water, women and girls bearing torches search for fish imprisoned within the stone traps or fences: seek crayfish hiding in their sandy nests or hunt crabs with spears. They net sardines - a great delicacy when lightly cooked in the native saucepan (a mammoth bailer shell) on hot coals.<sup>90</sup>

At dawn they speared, netted and scooped fish.<sup>91</sup> The traditional method of using fish traps, sai, was still in use.<sup>92</sup> Another method of catching fish in these traps, or in pools, was to drop the smashed roots of a plant the women called sad into the water tied in a piece of cloth. The fish became 'blind and drunk' and it was an easy matter to spear them.<sup>93</sup> The women made their own fishing lines and nets from bush materials, such as guinea grass and coconut fibre, or from embroidery cotton; hooks were made from pearl shell or pieces of metal, even a crochet hook. Torres Strait Islander women were exceptionally strong swimmers. Two Nagi women said they swam to the reef every day and returned with a full basket of fish held high above the water by one hand, a feat which undoubtedly required extraordinary strength. Their philosophical approach to the danger sharks posed in these waters was that: '*They don't bite in the reef, they have to turn over to get at you because of the mouth. We go shoo and they're off*'.<sup>94</sup>

As their mothers had done before them, women on Saibai and Boigu helped the men when they went on dugong and turtle hunts, working as crew members on the outrigger canoes. They also caught turtles on the beaches. A Meriam woman explained that there were rules associated with catching turtles. These indicated their environmental sensibilities:

*In the middle of the night when it was real low tide  
sometimes turtles came inside the reef and up the beach  
to lay their eggs. I am strong and I can turn a big*

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<sup>90</sup> Kosker (pseud.), 'Women's Work in the Torres Straits', The Australian Woman's Mirror, 26 June 1928, p. 54. This article by 'Kosker' (Eastern Island language for woman) is a unique record of women at work in Torres Strait in the 1920s. Only a few women were able to give any information about the pre-war period and I chose to quote from the article, despite its ethnocentric European expression.

<sup>91</sup> It is sometimes maintained that only boys and men speared fish. Several women said they used spears.

<sup>92</sup> Int. 056.

<sup>93</sup> Personal communication with Masig woman, Cairns, November 1993.

<sup>94</sup> Int. 069. Whether or not sharks turned over to bite was not the important thing. What was important was that their philosophy worked for them. This is an example of where an outsider must respect insider knowledge.

turtle over. In the old days we were only allowed to turn it over for three days. If you don't eat it, you send it back. You could only tie it in the water for three days. Our great grandparents used to live like that. I killed him with an axe, knocked him on the head or cut his throat and cleaned him.<sup>95</sup>

Turtle eggs were a delicacy and the women searched the beaches for nests. They poked sticks into the mounds built by the mother turtles to protect their eggs high above the water line. If they came out wet and sticky with yolk, a number of eggs were taken, but never all of them. Again their concern to efficiently manage their natural food resources was shown. With the fish, turtle and eggs caught and collected by the women, they were the more regular suppliers of their families' daily intake of protein.

While the old women did not talk about their traditional role as co-workers with the men in the construction of the village houses, during her stay in Torres Strait Kosker observed the women at work and recorded the following observations. The women cut:

the green leaves...from tall cocoanut-palms [sic] [which were] split and quickly plaited by deft fingers into ornamental designs. [They were] dried in the sun and in a few days [were] ready to be handed up to the men astride the bamboo or cocoanut [sic] beams, there to be used as roof-lining or walls.

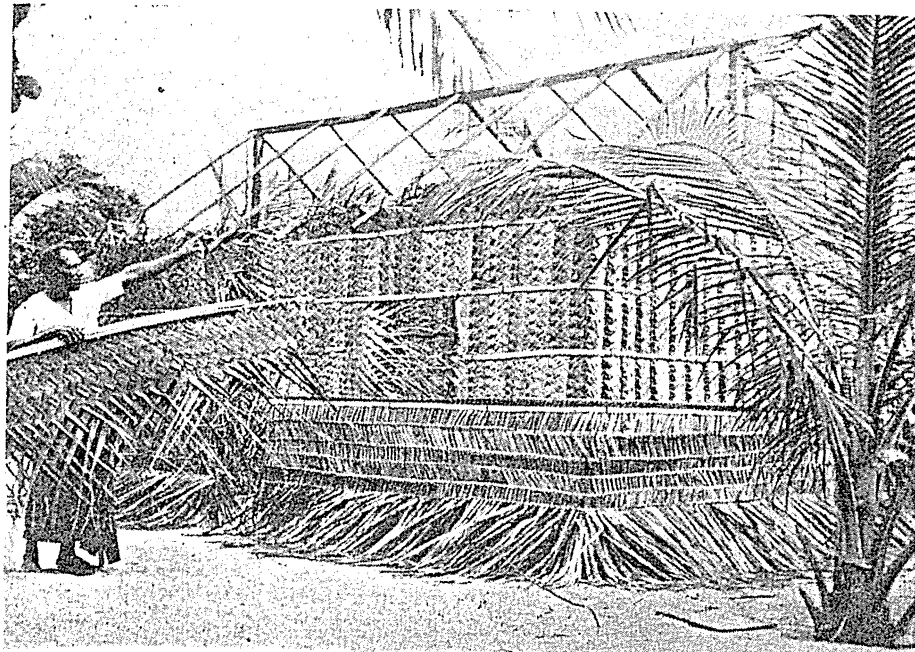
They also cut the grass for the thatched roof weeks before and left it to dry in the sun. When dried, they carried bundles of dried grass 'on their backs' to the new house. All the builders were fed while the work continued. Kosker also observed that the women rose 'at dawn to net or spear fish [to feed the workers], and theirs were [the] "weary backs" that carried much of the building material as well as the food'.<sup>96</sup> House maintenance, an old Torres Strait Islander woman said, frequently fell to the women, particularly as so many of the able-bodied men went to sea. They replaced the thatch on the roof every 'year or two' when the old grass 'went rotten'. The process of cutting, drying and laying the grass on the roof was repeated on each occasion.<sup>97</sup> On the subject of how they furnished their homes, several old women had more to say. For instance, mat weaving, they said, was taught to women only, the knowledge again being passed from mother to daughter. They made mats of all sizes and for many purposes: 'for sitting and shelter, roofing and interior decorating, sails for canoes and most important...[for] the burial

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<sup>95</sup> Int. 087.

<sup>96</sup> Kosker, 'Women's Work', p. 12.

<sup>97</sup> Interview 126, Mer, January 1989.



(Top) Building a house with matting walls plaited by the women  
(Bottom) A house on Mer (c1948)



and wrapping up of the dead bodies'.<sup>98</sup> The son of a very old Badu woman, Ugari Nona, clearly remembered his mother working at mat-making: 'If she started a fair-size mat today, about ten feet square, she was very quick, a couple of days and she finished it. She would work late at night with only a lamp'.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, the women spent much time and energy travelling into the bush to locate, collect and carry home carefully selected raw materials to make the numerous baskets needed for both carrying and storage.

Some of the women said that it was different when they were young. They did not buy a lot of things from the store but manufactured many of the items used in their homes themselves. For example, they made pillows, flour bags stuffed with fibre from the 'cotton trees' which grew on the islands. Plates and spoons were made from coconut shells. And for the endless sweeping in and around their houses and the village streets and squares, the women manufactured brooms from the dried thick veins of the banana leaves. A lamp was made from the seed-packed dried trunk of the banana palm. The roots of the sulee (Eastern Island, gurgur Western Island) tree lathered when rubbed on the body and in the hair in salt water. Yellow dye was made by scraping the roots of the ubar (Eastern Island, aubai Western Island) tree.<sup>100</sup> The women made coconut oil which was rubbed into the body to soften the skin and moisten the hair.<sup>101</sup> Great sago palms, or 'floating logs' as the women called them, floated down the Fly River in New Guinea and were washed up on some islands in the Strait. They were split open and a line of women scraped the sago pulp away from the shell on to a clean sheet. The pulp then went through the washing processes necessary to eradicate the poison to make it an edible product.<sup>102</sup> A type of cornflour was manufactured from a 'celery-like plant' called gusi, or wild arrowroot. The bulb was scraped and the scrapings were put in a bag and squeezed repeatedly in a tub of water until the residue was 'really white'. This was dried in the sun: 'It comes up like flour. You can boil it with coconut milk and little bit sugar. Good as

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<sup>98</sup> Saibai Islander, Early History Workshop, March 1987.

<sup>99</sup> Interview 097, Badu, March 1990.

<sup>100</sup> Personal communication with Masig and Meriam women, Cairns, November 1993. I checked the spellings with these Eastern and Western language speakers. They said: 'Put the words in the English way of saying it, write it as it sounds to you. It will come out the same'.

<sup>101</sup> Int. 069.

<sup>102</sup> Personal communication with Meriam woman, Cairns, November 1993.





(Top) Maleta Lota collecting bush materials on Nurupai  
 (Left bottom) Lizzie Nawia making baskets on Kubin  
 (Right middle) Unidentified women making mats (1920s)

porridge. You can put it in a tin and it lasts for a year'. The women roasted the nut from the egere (tar) tree taking care the wind blew the poison in the smoke away from their bodies.<sup>103</sup> They dried the (prune-like) fruit from the Wongai tree.<sup>104</sup> All of these household items and food were manufactured almost exclusively from local materials.

In other ways, however, western influence was more intrusive. An old man reminisced about how his people prepared their food: 'Before before time we eat raw fish...we got no fire, put it on stone...all sun on it, and the fish cooked'.<sup>105</sup> Later, he said they learnt to make fire: '[We] got no matches, rub sticks, fire comes out...You get dry grass when that coal burns, blow on them, flame going to come up...put more wood on and put fish on top...you got no saucepan, knife, bucket, golden syrup'. Then when European food items were introduced on the islands, no one knew what to do with them. They did not know that flour had to be mixed with water to make a damper dough: 'First time our great grandmothers...made damper, they made a big fire..opened up the flour bag and put the flour in the hot ashes'.<sup>106</sup> The wearing of European clothes was introduced by the missionaries soon after their arrival. They considered it important to 'civilise' the people in this way. As early as 1876, only five years after the first missionaries landed in Torres Strait, Gill commented that some of the people divided 'mankind [sic] into two classes - missionary people who wear clothes, and those who have no missionary and wear no clothes'.<sup>107</sup> The old man also recalled what he had been told by his parents: 'That day they got no material...they got special grass and make grass skirt for themselves. So later the people start to learn something else'.<sup>108</sup> Mrs. Walker, the wife of the L.M.S. missionary who was instrumental in setting up the first store in the Strait in about 1904, taught the young women on Badu to sew. Sewing was also included in the school curriculum for girls. In the early part of

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<sup>103</sup> Int. 056.

<sup>104</sup> Int. 064.

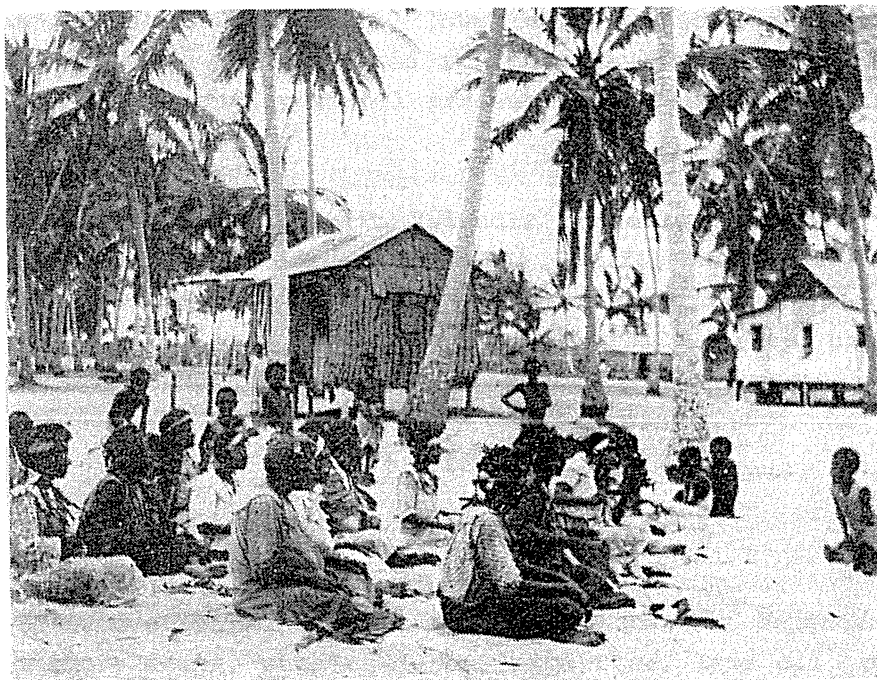
<sup>105</sup> Old Torres Strait Islanders use the expression 'before before time' when talking about the traditional period. 'Before time' describes the period after that - their own parents' time.

<sup>106</sup> Pearson, Talking to a class of children on Waraber, 24 April 1987.

<sup>107</sup> Gill, Life in the Southern Isles, p. 217.

<sup>108</sup> Pearson, Talking to a class of children on Waraber, 24 April 1987.





Women and children on Badu (1935)

this century, the women made their clothing in the home, by hand. During the 1930s, a few women acquired hand-operated sewing machines. They became adept at embroidery, crochet and lace-making. Their calico dresses were embroidered with brightly coloured threads and they trimmed their petticoats with handmade lace and crochet. The women's 'European-style' clothing, made from imported fabrics, was complemented by jewellery and perfume manufactured from local materials. They patiently and intricately threaded crimson seeds, red and black gidee-gidee berries and fine shells.<sup>109</sup> Perfume was manufactured by mincing the leaves of a garden plant, called pas (basil), and cooking it in coconut oil until a 'nice smell' was given off.<sup>110</sup> One old woman recalled how this contributed to the fabric of social life. She said, with a wistful smile, that an appreciative friend would comment: 'Ooh, you smell nice!'<sup>111</sup> Three old women laughed as they talked about a 'love potion' which was made from another plant. When the boy used it, they said, the girls 'chased them'.<sup>112</sup> In the women's personal presentation, the old and the new had become partners.

Even though Torres Strait Islander societies had been semi-subsistence for some decades before the Pacific War, there is no doubt that the survival of those who were left on their island communities in 1942 was dependent to a great degree upon the traditional skills described in this chapter.

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#### Women's paid work

The introduction of a cash economy, a growing dependence on some basic store items, such as flour, rice, tea, lamp oil, calico, and the need for money to support the Church, forced many women from early in the colonisation period to engage in paid work to supplement the seamen's grossly inadequate incomes. In the remainder of this chapter the kinds of paid employment they engaged in are discussed.

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<sup>109</sup> Kosker, 'Women's' Work, p. 54.

<sup>110</sup> One type of basil was for cooking. Another, with a purple flower, was used for perfume (Personal communication Meriam woman, Cairns, November 1993).

<sup>111</sup> Interview 127, Mer, January 1989.

<sup>112</sup> Personal communication with Meriam, Masig and St. Paul's women, Cairns, November, 1993.

The first commercialised industry to come to Torres Strait was beche-de-mer fishing. It has been suggested that there were a number of Chinese (or Malay) trepangers working close to the Western Islands before European entrepreneurs entered Torres Strait. There seems to be no evidence that these fishermen interacted or interfered with the people in the island villages.<sup>113</sup> Captain Banner established a trepang and pearling station on Tudu (Warrior Island) in 1868. More European-owned beche-de-mer and pearl-shell boats soon arrived in the Strait with their South Sea Islander skippers and crews. Torres Strait Islanders, both male and female, became a convenient pool of cheap labour for the burgeoning marine industry. Some Torres Strait Islander men agreed to work in the industry. Others, however, as well as women, were abducted by the outsiders and never returned to their islands. Harsh treatment and non-payment of wages were not uncommon nor was the sexual abuse of the women.<sup>114</sup> Women were left on isolated beche-de-mer stations where they worked hard and long hours to prepare the sea slug for Asian markets. Island women gained a reputation for being more dependable divers than the men so that when the Papuan Industries Limited and the Queensland government assisted some clans to buy boats in the 1890s, women worked alongside the men on them.<sup>115</sup>

In the early days of the pearl-shelling industry the women had to help and they were considered better divers than the men...men who were fishing for shell to pay for boats or canoes generally tried to get women friends to help them.<sup>116</sup>

An old Meriam (Murray Island) woman remembered being told her mother had worked with her father on his cutter until it was time for her to have her babies: *'My mum went with my dad. She was diving for three years. She stayed with dad and we were not born yet. Then he said, "That's enough. You stay home now", and she had babies'*.<sup>117</sup>

Torres Strait Islanders, working for themselves in these early days were 'swimming divers'. They worked without the aid of the new underwater breathing apparatus which had been introduced in Torres Strait in the 1870s and was used by the non-Torres Strait Islander divers on the European-owned boats.<sup>118</sup> The quest for suitable and

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<sup>113</sup> Langbridge, *Enculturation to Evangelization*, p. 23.

<sup>114</sup> Beckett, *custom and colonialism*, pp. 36, 101.

<sup>115</sup> Moresby, *'Recent discoveries'*, p. 30.

<sup>116</sup> Haddon (ed.), *Reports*, Vol. 1 (1935), p. 112.

<sup>117</sup> Int. 064.

<sup>118</sup> See Ganter, *Pearl-Shellers*, pp. 28-31 for discussion of labour requirements in the industry.

sufficient labour for the marine industry resulted in the recruitment of divers from the Philippines ('Manillamen') and the Dutch East Indies ('Malays'). They wore the new apparatus and were known as the 'hard hat' divers. However, it was eventually the Japanese who became overwhelmingly the divers who wore this dress and also skippered the boats.<sup>119</sup> Some South Sea and Malay men married Torres Strait Islander women they met when they visited the islands for fresh water and vegetables or to pick up crew members. They might take their wives on the boats, not to dive, but to protect them from risks associated with 'hard hat' diving:

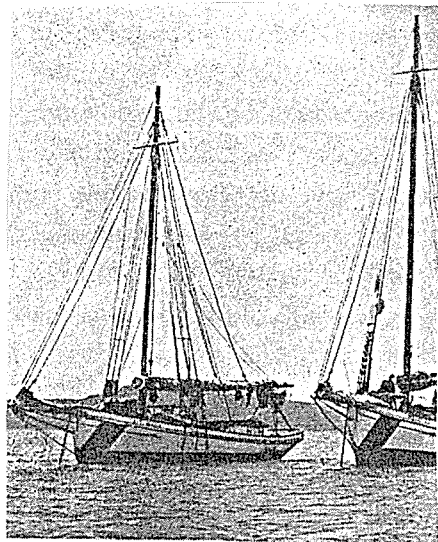
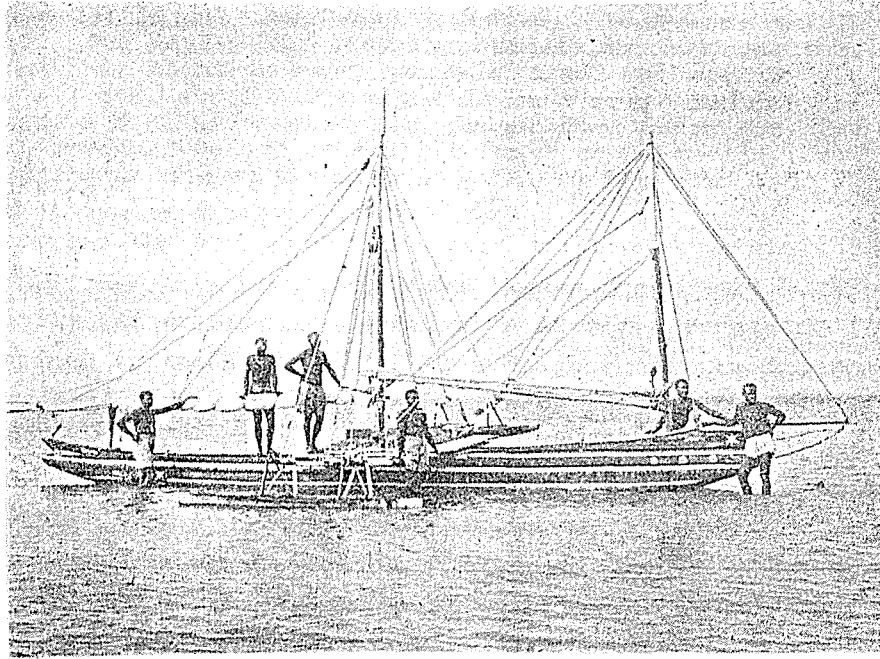
*If they were boss of their own boat, well their life was mostly in danger, so always their wife held the lifeline. So they carried their wives on the boat when they dived. Children too, oh yes. She handles his lifeline because it was dangerous in those days; if you didn't like anybody you just killed them when they were down. A lot of that went on.*<sup>120</sup>

Thus, although this work was not a source of income for the women their presence on the boats ensured the safety of their bread-winning husbands. By the late 1930s these practices had ceased, although the brothers of one widowed Masig woman took the unusual step of making her a partner in their cutter. She did not work on the boat but she went to Thursday Island with her partners to sell the shell.<sup>121</sup> With her share she was able to support her family. By then young women were also contributing to their families' financial capacity by earning a small income as monitors or teachers in the schools.<sup>122</sup>

Seamen's wages were kept low under awards set by the Protector's Department. From about the 1920s they ranged from £3-£4 a month but when the shell market was depressed they fell as low as £2 a month.<sup>123</sup> How large families survived on even the average wage of £3 was explained by an old seaman: 'Money belong to the men was three pound a month. That money lasts one year only because mummy worked in [the] garden'.<sup>124</sup> Moreover, from 1914 when the shell market in Europe closed because of the war, the women gathered trochus and beche-de-mer from around their home reefs.<sup>125</sup> A Meriam (Murray Island) woman recalled what this work involved:

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29. 'Hard hat' divers wore a full suit including a diving helmet. See Ganter, *Pearl-Shellers*, p. 103 for table of Japanese participation in diving.  
<sup>120</sup> Cited in Sharp, *Springs of Originality*, Vol. 2, p. B99.  
<sup>121</sup> Interview 161, Cairns, September 1993.  
<sup>122</sup> This employment is discussed fully in Chapter nine.  
<sup>123</sup> Int. 028.  
<sup>124</sup> Cited in Sharp, *Stars of Tagai*, p. 166.  
<sup>125</sup> Ganter, *Pearl-Shellers*, p. 84.



(Top) Outrigger canoe - hulls obtained from Papuan trading partners  
 (Middle left) Pearling luggers  
 (Bottom right) Hard hat diver returning to the lugger



*It was little bit deep when you dive. Your eyes nearly burst. But we try our best for our living. We get tet, it was big beche-de-mere, prickly one. We cut it and take all that stuff out and put it on a stick and dry it. We made a fire and smoked it. We got good money for that one. Trochus, we got to boil it, wash those shells, pick the fish out and we packed the shell in bags and sent it to T.I.*<sup>126</sup>

When the Pacific War broke out women were still earning small incomes from shelling. By this time too, a few Meriam women were working for a white capitalist enterprise on Dauar: a sardine processing factory was established in the late 1930s. The daughter of the forewoman at the factory said: 'The company took a lease of the Island and they brought big machinery there to can the sardines...I don't know how much wages they got. They were under the Act, so I suppose it wasn't much'.<sup>127</sup> There was a certain resignation in her tone. She would have known that the men's work in the marine industry was devalued under the government's award. The value of women's work was hardly likely to attract more, even from a private enterprise which, if it had wanted to pay more, undoubtedly would have been restrained by the Department.

In 1938, wolfram was discovered on Moa and this opened up a new avenue of paid employment for whole families. None of the Torres Strait Islanders understood efficient mining practices which meant that everyone had to do 'a lot of hard work' for minimal returns. An old woman explained the operation: 'The men were at the top and they had to blast it with dynamite then dig for it, like you dig for gold, and the women were on the creek side where they washed it out and you got that pure stuff that ran down from the hill'. Families came to the mines from 'everywhere' - Kubin, St. Paul's, Mabuiag, Mer (Murray), Boigu and Saibai. Some camped at the site in tents, some built bush houses and others made the long trek to and from the mine each day.<sup>128</sup> The whole operation was undertaken without machinery or even packhorses to cart the heavy ore from the mine at Eet Hill to St. Paul's.<sup>129</sup> The diggings were, for a fit man, 'may be three or four hours' walking time' away from the village. Nevertheless, women and children worked with the men and carried heavy loads of metal

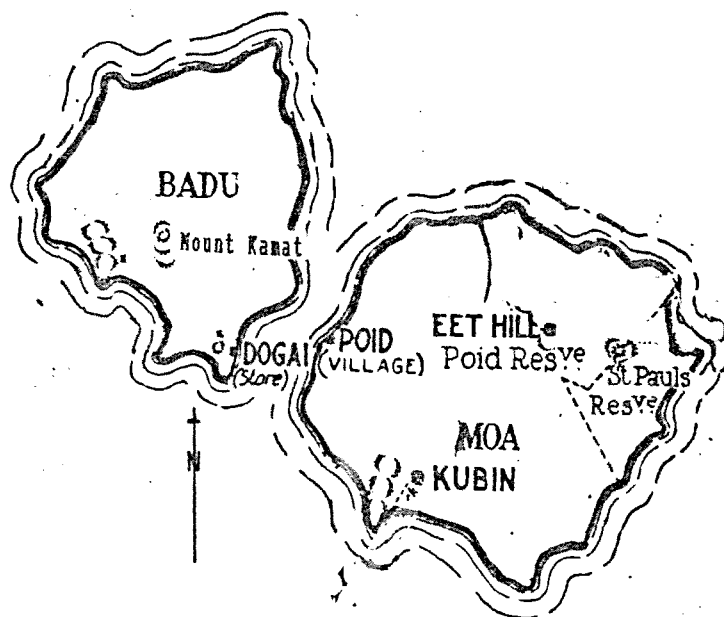
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<sup>126</sup> Int. 064.

<sup>127</sup> Int. 160. The sardine factory closed in early 1942 and did not start up again after the war. See Chapter four for a discussion of the term 'under the Act'.

<sup>128</sup> Interview 118, St. Paul's, March 1990.

<sup>129</sup> S.R.L. Shepherd, 'Wolfram on Banks Island', Queensland Government Mining Journal, Vol. 45, 12 August 1944, p. 214.



Map 5: Badu and Moa Islands, Torres Strait

down the hill on *'the backside, like a horse'*, where it was sold at the store.<sup>130</sup> The women who camped at the site established gardens nearby: *'No stores there'*, one of these women said, *'you had to live on bush tucker'*.<sup>131</sup> However, the important thing for the women was that they could keep powdered milk tins of wolfram in the house and when the men were away and they were short of money they sold it in small quantities.<sup>132</sup> Without realising it, the women were becoming more and more enmeshed in western capitalist enterprises. Moreover, wolfram mining brought island groups together in their attempts to tap into this new, and much-needed, source of income.

On the communities there were *'few [paid] jobs for girls when they left school'*.<sup>133</sup> With the skills they had learnt from Mrs. Walker and in the schools where domestic subjects had been introduced early in the century, one or two young women might find employment on each community as domestics and cooks in the white teachers' homes. An old Badu woman recalled that Mrs. Walker had shown her how to *'wash clothes nicely'*, and when making scones she was told not to touch the ingredients with her hands: *'I used the spoon all the time. I learnt very well how to do it'*. Consequently, she was asked to cook and wash for any white dignitaries who came to the Island.<sup>134</sup> The elders on the communities were not opposed to the young women learning European skills and earning a small income in the homes of the Whites on the islands, but it seems that any suggestion that they should work away from Torres Strait was strongly opposed. These men were convinced that it was not so much the girls' domestic skills which were in demand as their services for immoral purposes.<sup>135</sup> Nevertheless, some did go to Thursday Island. One old Kubin woman said that she had worked in the Grand Hotel before the war: *'Mr. O'Leary sent me in and I was a house girl, I looked after the*

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<sup>130</sup> Int. 028. This man may not have seen a horse before the war so that he used a contemporary image to describe how the metal was carried.

<sup>131</sup> In the latter part of the war, a store was opened at the mine site.

<sup>132</sup> Interview 068, Cairns, April 1989.

<sup>133</sup> Int. 161.

<sup>134</sup> Interview 131, Thursday Island, February 1989 and February 1990.

<sup>135</sup> Queensland, Legislative Assembly 1939, Debates, Vol. 174, p. 464.

*children and I did the housework*'.<sup>136</sup> Her widowed mother was a domestic in the home of the sergeant of police.<sup>137</sup>

When Papuan Industries Limited on Badu was sold to the Department in 1930 and renamed Aboriginal Industries Board, avenues of paid employment in the retail industry opened up for female school leavers on that Island.<sup>138</sup> One was for seamstresses. Mrs. Zahl, the teacher on Badu, recommended girls suitable to work in the small clothing industry which was set up in the store: *'They got a wage and they used material from the store...it was cheap...the material was one shilling a yard in those days'*. A young woman who had *'had a good schooling over at St. Paul's'* was employed as cashier and ledger-keeper.<sup>139</sup> Several female shop assistants were employed as well. A former employee recalled there were three counters in the store; two drapery and one grocery from which each assistant operated a *'monkey chain, one of those things you pulled the string and the money goes along to the cashier in the box'*. A Masig woman said she and her cousin were very lucky because, just as they left school, a store was opened on their Island and they obtained positions as shop assistants.<sup>140</sup> However, the number of young women who could get store work was limited and on most communities it was not available at all.

The new type of work being offered in the stores in the late 1930s, resulted in a change in the way some women thought about themselves. A former Badu shop assistant said that she married a Nagi man and went to live with his family. There she was struck by the basically traditional roles still played by all of the women in her husband's family. They all *'worked for their living in the garden or swam for trochus'*, she recalled. Fifty years later, her recollection of these women, probably influenced by the role she had

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<sup>136</sup> Cornelius (Con) O'Leary was Protector of Islanders from 1936-1939. On 23 December 1939, T.R. Pryor took this position and O'Leary became Deputy Director of Native Affairs at Brisbane. After the Director of Native Affairs, J.W. Bleakley, retired from the public service on 30 June 1942, O'Leary officially became Director - see Appendix 1 (File on C.D. O'Leary, Department of Native Affairs, 1913-41, A/4291, 5254, Q.S.A.).

<sup>137</sup> Interview 071, Kubin, March 1990.

<sup>138</sup> Aboriginal Industries Board was renamed, under Sec. 24 of the Torres Strait Islanders Act 1939, Island Industries Board.

<sup>139</sup> Schooling at St. Paul's is discussed in the Chapter nine.

<sup>140</sup> Int. 161.

played as a functionary in a capitalist enterprise and in words couched in contemporary terminology, was that they were 'working class' women:

*in the morning when they got up, one went out fishing and brought home fish for lunch and the rest went to the garden. They never stopped working and when it was hot in the day, they sat out in the shade mending clothes and weaving mats. They were very busy women.*<sup>141</sup>

Another Badu woman who had worked in the store made a similar comment about her mother: 'She was a working woman she did the gardening and fishing - she was a hard working woman'.<sup>142</sup> Both women saw store work as easier than the traditional-type work most Torres Strait Islander women did then - probably a reflection of their perception that white Australians' lives were easier than theirs. Nevertheless, two Nagi women who, at that time, had had no experience working in a store described their own busy lives without labelling themselves as 'working class':

*Some go to the garden. One stays home, and the others get fish and she cooks it. We work all day until sunset. We take a piece of damper and we eat fruit from the tree and continue with our garden. Come sun up we go to the garden and go back when sun sets.*<sup>143</sup>

The Nagi women's daily routine was typical of that of generations of Torres Strait Islander women. If they can now be described as working class women, that designation had little meaning for them before the Pacific War. What they did was women's work and it would remain so for many for a long time to come.

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For about five decades before the Pacific War, Torres Strait Islander women's work roles were affected by the impact of outsider intervention in Torres Strait. Nevertheless, before the Pacific War the new knowledge could be described as complementary to the old in their evolving semi-subsistence culture. However, when the 3 000 women, children and old people were left on their communities in 1942, sandwiched, for about two years, between Australia's front line of defence and the oncoming Japanese forces, it was the old knowledge that overwhelmingly contributed to their survival.

This inquiry is about survival and in the ensuing chapters old

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<sup>141</sup> Interview 095, Thursday Island, April 1990.

<sup>142</sup> Interview 096, Badu, March 1990.

<sup>143</sup> Int. 069.

Torres Strait Islander women talk for the first time about their struggles to survive and their joys during a time of unprecedented fear and uncertainty.

## Chapter four No word of evacuation

### Evacuation policies differ

Plans for the evacuation of white children and non-essential citizens from vulnerable zones around Australia were formulated by the six Australian States well before the Pacific War began with Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941. These plans fell broadly within the common principles that removals would be from areas where there was danger of aerial and naval attack and where enemy invasion or military operations could be anticipated.<sup>1</sup> Towns and cities along Queensland's north-eastern coastline came within these guidelines. However, in August 1941, E.M. Hanlon, Queensland's Secretary for Home Affairs and Health, under whose umbrella responsibility for the administration of Native Affairs also fell, addressed a local authorities' conference on the topic of coastal evacuations. He told his audience that in total war it was absolutely false to believe that fit men and women could run away to safety. An emergency evacuation of coastal towns, he emphasised, would be 'tantamount to complete surrender to the enemy'.<sup>2</sup> Once war with Japan was declared, Labor Prime Minister John Curtin confirmed the Commonwealth's position on evacuation. It was that women should remain 'at their posts with their families and keep them in good fettle'.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, when the nation was faced with imminent danger of invasion, the various Australian State authorities responded by formulating plans to meet their own anticipated evacuation needs.

Victoria had made elaborate plans to evacuate 90 000 children. However, New South Wales, which fully supported the national policy, made no plans for mass evacuations until December 1941 when public pressure forced that State to plan the removal of 100 000 school children and adults away from the coast.<sup>4</sup> In the same month, Victoria revised its figures and provision was made for the evacuation of

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<sup>1</sup> A. Spaul, Australian Education in the Second World War (St. Lucia, 1982), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> 'Coastal Evacuations', Townsville Daily Bulletin, 7 August, 1941, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Spaul, Australian Education, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Spaul, Australian Education, pp. 10-11; 'Removal of Children: Sydney's Plan', Townsville Daily Bulletin, 15 December 1941, p. 15.

300 000 children and adults from vulnerable areas.<sup>5</sup> The response in Western Australia was the relocation of some Perth children to safer zones in the metropolitan areas and school hours were staggered to cope with the extra numbers. Farther north, the Geraldton High School was evacuated inland to Wubin where classes were held in a public hall. At the southern-most extremity of the nation, fear of attack or invasion prompted the voluntary evacuation of children from one primary school in Hobart.<sup>6</sup>

In early 1942, Queensland was probably the most vulnerable State. A central evacuation committee had been established in Brisbane in February 1941. Evacuation and accommodation committees were set up by local authorities in cities and towns along the coast. They were to co-operate with the military authorities in the event of a compulsory evacuation. However, mass evacuation posed a severe problem in Queensland as eighty per cent of its population lived along the coast. Thus, government reaction in January 1942 was to close schools in all coastal towns and cities and inland north from Townsville. Schools in the far north remained closed, except for more senior students, for eight months and there were no intakes of five-year-olds in that year.<sup>7</sup> Plans for the compulsory evacuation of Queensland children and adults on a large scale were only to be implemented in a 'grave emergency'.<sup>8</sup> This did not become necessary on mainland Queensland, except for a group of mixed-race women and children on the tip of Cape York Peninsula, although voluntary evacuations from Bowen north were encouraged.<sup>9</sup>

Fear of invasion reverberated throughout Australia in early 1942 and thousands of people living in what were thought to be the more vulnerable areas took their safety into their own hands and voluntarily

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<sup>5</sup> 'Victorian Education Plans: 300 000 from vulnerable areas', Townsville Daily Bulletin, 11 December, 1941, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Spaul, Australian Education, pp. 12, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> 'Child Evacuation: Education Minister's Statement', Townsville Daily Bulletin, 7 January, 1942, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> E. Osborne, The Forgotten Evacuation, B.A. (Hons) thesis, Department of History and Politics, James Cook University, Townsville, 1990, pp. 40-41.



evacuated their homes.<sup>10</sup> The value of houses in coastal areas from Cairns south to Sydney dropped dramatically and the demand for and the cost of accommodation of any kind in inland towns skyrocketed.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, at a meeting of State Premiers held on 4 February 1942 it was unanimously resolved to accept the Federal Government's policy on evacuation: large-scale compulsory evacuation would be discouraged while limited evacuation might be undertaken, to be confined, as far as possible, to the evacuation of young children in areas near to possible targets in certain congested areas.<sup>12</sup>

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With Japan's entry into the war, the fear of an imminent attack on Darwin was heightened. Plans for its compulsory evacuation were made as early as June 1940 and in December 1941, the compulsory evacuation of women and children was carried out, although without legal authority.<sup>13</sup> The first evacuation ship, the Koolinda, sailed from Darwin Harbour, via Torres Strait, on 19 December 1941. By 15 February, four days before the first bombing attack on Darwin, a further five evacuation ships had sailed and on 13 July the number of evacuees who had left by ship, plane, train and road convoy totalled 4 274.<sup>14</sup> Non-Aboriginal and 'half-caste' women who were reluctant to leave Darwin were told that they were being evacuated 'for their own

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<sup>10</sup> Michael McKernan, All In! Australia During the Second World War (Melbourne, 1983), p. 108. McKernan wrote that it was 'impossible to know precisely how many people fled the cities', while Spaul (Australian Education, p. 12), quoted from the Australian Committee on Educational Research, 'General Survey of Evacuation Plans' as at 15 August 1942, a figure of 'a quarter of a million' which, in his opinion, was 'an overestimate'.

<sup>11</sup> 'Cairns Evacuation: Heavy Voluntary Departures', Townsville Daily Bulletin, 29 January, 1942, p. 4; McKernan, All In!, p. 103.

<sup>12</sup> Resolutions: War Cabinet and Advisory War Council, 4 February 1942, Department of Defence (II) and Department of the Army, MP729/6, Secret correspondence files, multiple number series (class 401), 1936-1944, 16/402/91, Australian Archives (A.A.) (Vic.).

<sup>13</sup> The reason for the illegality was that the National Security (Emergency Control) Regulations which gave the Commonwealth Government power to order the evacuation of civilians had not, at that date, been gazetted for the Northern Territory.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Hasluck, The Government and the People 1942-1945 (Canberra, 1970), p. 138.

protection'.<sup>15</sup> However, 'full-blood' Aboriginal women without white husbands to press for the right to be evacuated, were moved to labour camps in the North, as were many Aboriginal men.<sup>16</sup> In his book Australia's Pearl Harbour, Lockwood succinctly described the government's position: 'Official gallantry had decreed Women and Children First, but not black women and children'.<sup>17</sup> The tiny picturesque pearling town of Broome on Western Australia's far north-west coast had become a staging point for supplies from Perth to the American-British-Dutch-Australian Command Forces in Java. When the allied resistance there was on the verge of collapse in February 1942, Broome provided a stop-over haven for an estimated 8 000 refugees escaping from the advancing Japanese. Sometimes there were fifty flying boats refuelling simultaneously in the harbour. After the first bombing of Darwin, it was thought that Broome's involvement in the refugee operation would put it at risk also. The compulsory evacuation of women and children was ordered by the War Cabinet on 23 February, 1942. Sixty-three white women and sixty children embarked for Fremantle on 27 February on the Koolinda. The remaining white women and children left a few days later on American aircraft. Within two weeks, on the 3 March, the Japanese made a vicious aerial attack on the fifteen flying boats lying in the harbour packed with refugees about to leave Roebuck Bay for Perth.<sup>18</sup>

While discrimination was undoubtedly an element in the formulation of policies on compulsory evacuation, there were white women and children as well as 'half-caste' women and children in other remote parts of Australia's northern coastline, who, although they were ordered to leave, were left to their own devices to get out. One such group comprised white women and children from missions along the Arnhem Land coast. They looked to the military to assist them, without success. Army leaders had 'slender means at their disposal' in early

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<sup>15</sup> Such terms as 'half-caste', 'full blood', 'coloureds' are used in this thesis only when they reflect the thinking of the time.

<sup>16</sup> Some Whites believed that Aboriginal sympathies would lie with the Japanese and Colonel Murray of the Volunteer Defence Corps in Townsville ordered that they were to be shot if the Japanese landed (Heather Brown, 'Australia 1942: The Most Dangerous Years', The Australian Magazine, 25-26 January 1992, p. 12). See Hall, Black Diggers, pp. 12, 20 for discussion of indigenous loyalties.

<sup>17</sup> Douglas Lockwood, Australia's Pearl Harbour: Darwin 1942 (Adelaide, 1966), pp. 184-185.

<sup>18</sup> William Tyler, "Flight of the Diamond": The story of Broome's War and the Carnot Bay Diamond (Carlisle, W.A., 1986), pp. 1-3.

1942 with most of the Second A.I.F. (Australian Imperial Forces) troops overseas.<sup>19</sup> Naval and air defences in the North were 'almost non-existent'. The bulk of their limited resources were deployed in other areas of the Pacific War.<sup>20</sup> Thus, when a request was made for naval assistance the reply was that 'there was a war on and other things had much higher priority'. The problems associated with an airlift of seventy-seven evacuees were that only light aircraft could operate in these areas, the airstrips were often unserviceable in the wet season and aviation fuel was unprocurable because it was earmarked for defence purposes. The small mission lugger was their only hope. The army replied to a further request, this time for fuel, with the now familiar excuse: 'There's a war on. There are more pressing needs than yours'. Finally, with the assurance of some fuel from a small R.A.A.F. refuelling base on Groote Eylandt, the party set out on its nightmare trek of 6 500 kilometres to safety by mission lugger, a police officer's truck, a mission car and a derelict car resurrected from a rubbish-tip.<sup>21</sup>

There are other stories, recorded and unrecorded, of the determination and stoicism of people resident in isolated communities across Australia's northern coastline at the outbreak of the Pacific War. Perhaps the most memorable recorded story is that of the epic journey of ninety-six 'part-Aboriginal' children, under the leadership of Margaret Sommerville and the Reverend Leonard Kentish, from the Croker Island Methodist Mission north-east of Darwin, by foot, in trucks, on horseback, in canoes, on trains and in lorries to Adelaide and on to Sydney.<sup>22</sup> Seventeen children returned to the Wyndham school on 10 February 1942. What happened to them and their families after the Japanese raid on 3 March 1942 has still not apparently been disclosed.<sup>23</sup> Grant Ngabidj told Peter Shaw about the responses of Whites on stations east of Wyndham when it was bombed. Those on Ningbing Station north of Carlton Hill left. On Carlton Hill they made

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<sup>19</sup> The First A.I.F. was formed at the outset of World War One. The Second A.I.F. was formed in 1939 when war broke out in Europe.

<sup>20</sup> David Murray Horner, Crisis of Command: Australian Generalship and the Japanese Threat, 1941-1945 (Canberra, 1978), pp. 43, 34.

<sup>21</sup> Harold Thornell, as told by Estelle Thompson, A Bridge over Time: Living in Arnhem Land with the Aborigines 1938-1944 (Melbourne, 1986), pp. 105-111.

<sup>22</sup> 'The Aussie Pearl Harbour', The Bulletin, 18 February, 1992, pp. 39, 44.

<sup>23</sup> Spaul, Australian Education, p. 14.

'a big hole underneath [air raid shelter]' to fit two or three white men. The black families on the station went into the bush.<sup>24</sup>

The European civilian population on Thursday Island, through its political organ the Progress Association, wrote to the Minister of Defence as early as December 1938 complaining of the 'totally unprotected [military] condition' on the Island.<sup>25</sup> The complaints continued until war broke out. Late in December 1941, the Mayor's complaint to the Premier of Queensland was relayed to the Prime Minister.<sup>26</sup> During the ensuing month the enemy continued to move rapidly south. Finally, the Mayor pointed out to the Minister of the Army that the enemy was at the 'very gate' and made a plea for the earliest consideration of the grave position of the women, children, aged and infirm on Thursday Island.<sup>27</sup> A compulsory evacuation order was finally made on 24 January 1942.<sup>28</sup> Official notification was published in The Torres Straits Daily Pilot three days later.<sup>29</sup> On 29 January 1942, the first contingent of 459 evacuees sailed out of Port Kennedy (Thursday Island harbour) on the S.S. Ormiston.<sup>30</sup> The poignancy of that departure lives on in the memory of an old Badu man who was standing on the wharf when the ship sailed away: *'Women cried and children cried, they all cried. When the ship moved out they sang*

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<sup>24</sup> Ngabidj, My Country, pp. 138-139.

<sup>25</sup> N.M. Hockings, Resident Thursday Island, to Minister of Defence, 1 December 1938, A816/1, 14/301/153, A.A. (A.C.T.).

<sup>26</sup> W. Forgan Smith, Premier of Queensland, to The Prime Minister of the Commonwealth, 22 December 1941, A1608/1, M41/1/9, A.A. (A.C.T.).

<sup>27</sup> Telegram: Vowels, Mayor of Thursday Island, to Hon. F.M. Forde, Minister of the Army, 23 January 1941, A1608/1, M41/1/9, A.A. (A.C.T.).

<sup>28</sup> Minute: War Cabinet, Melbourne, 24 January 1942, A1608/1, M41/1/9, A.A. (A.C.T.).

<sup>29</sup> 'Notice to Thursday Island Public', The Torres Straits Daily Pilot, 27 January, 1942. Although the notice stipulated 'women and children of Thursday Island', the women and children from other Islands in the Prince of Wales group which comprises Keriri (Hammond), Nurupai (Horn), Muralag (Prince of Wales) and Gialag (Friday) also came under the same order - for details of this evacuation see Osborne, *Forgotten Evacuation*, pp. 30-34.

<sup>30</sup> Teleprinter message: 30 January 1942, A1608/1, M41/1/9, A.A. (A.C.T.).

"Old T.I.". Everybody cried'.<sup>31</sup> After further evacuations, only a handful of civilian Thursday Islanders remained.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, in the desperate situation which existed across the North in late 1941 and early 1942, white and 'coloured' women and children were being sent to safer areas, but not Aboriginal women and children. On the outer islands of Torres Strait, the Torres Strait Islander women and children met the same fate.<sup>33</sup>

'Leave the Islanders where they are'

In early 1942, about 3 000 Torres Strait Islander women, children and aged, living on remote island communities in what was, by then, a war zone awaited a government decision about where they would spend the war years. Military personnel on Thursday Island did not discount the possibility that, in the event of an invasion in the Strait, the Torres Strait Islanders would 'be rounded up and used as a labour force' by the Japanese. The Intelligence Officer at Thursday Island, after discreet talks with the island councillors, indicated to his superiors that evacuation would be 'welcomed by the people', and that such a move was both practical and advisable. Military officers subsequently suggested to the Director that the Torres Strait Islanders be moved south to work in primary industries where they could contribute 'one hundred per cent' to the war effort 'instead of being innocent potential assistants of the enemy'. His reply was to 'leave the Islanders where they are'.<sup>34</sup> Thus, outer island women and children

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<sup>31</sup> Interview 066, Thursday Island, January 1990. The song 'Old T.I.' was sung when the first volunteer Torres Strait Islander men of mixed descent sailed away from Thursday Island in early 1940. Verses were added to record subsequent evacuations from the Island. The composer/s' names are unknown to me. The song is sometimes referred to as the Torres Strait Islander people's anthem. They told their stories in song and 'Old T.I.' remains to this day a sad reminder to those who lived through that time.

<sup>32</sup> Report: Governor of Queensland, 28 April 1943, p. 6, Governor's Correspondence, Gov/93, Queensland State Archives (Q.S.A.).

<sup>33</sup> The 'outer islands' of Torres Strait consist of those islands not belonging to the Prince of Wales Group.

<sup>34</sup> Lt.-Col. R. Bolton, Australian Military Forces, Northern Command (AMF-NC) to Director of Native Affairs, 12 March 1942, CA753, Commonwealth Investigation Branch, Qld., BP242/1, Correspondence Files, c1924-1954, Item Q25356, A.A. (Qld). What the justification for such a stand was is not made clear in the correspondence. There were suggestions the Director harboured a long-range view that a large labour pool would be needed in Torres Strait when

were to be left in the same unique position vis-a-vis Australia's front line of defence as the 'full-blood' Aboriginal women and children on Melville and Bathurst Islands adjacent to Darwin. On all of these islands there were indigenous Australian women and children who were nearer to the advancing Japanese forces than their defenders stationed at Australia's northernmost fixed defences. The decision to leave these women and children in such potentially dangerous locations must be seen as an act of blatant discrimination.

Self-evacuation was not a viable alternative for the Torres Strait Islander women and children. There were no airstrips on the islands and a lift of about 3 000 people by seaplanes or naval vessels would have been impossible without a government order to evacuate, and the provision of such means of transport. It would appear, however, that they could have effected their own evacuation if their men had been there to crew their boats: *'It was wartime. We could go if we wanted to'*, an old Ugar man recalled.<sup>35</sup> In such circumstances, the only means of transport available to them would have been their own sail-powered vessels and, even though the men's seamanship was unquestionable, out on the open sea there would be the constant danger of detection by enemy airmen. With naval resources stretched to the limit, there was little hope of the naval protection essential at that time for all ships using Torres Strait and the passage inside the Great Barrier Reef as far south as Townsville. Moreover, an escort ship was no guarantee against submarine attack, subsequent proof of which was the attack on the M.V. Malaita just outside Port Moresby on 14 August 1942 while it was being escorted by the H.M.A.S. Arunta. Seven days prior to that event the same submarine had sunk the M.V. Mamuta, 200 kilometres north-east of Thursday Island with the loss of 114 lives,

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the marine industry started up again after the war and he wanted to be sure the Torres Strait Islander men remained on the islands (Minutes: Conference AAG First Aust Army, Mr. McCracken, Public Service Com., Q'ld State Government, n.d., Written records 1939-45 war, AWM54, 628/1/1, Australian War Memorial (A.W.M.) (Canberra)). If the women were evacuated would they want to return to the islands after the war? The majority of 'coloured' (mixed-race) people who were evacuated from Keriri (Hammond Island) in 1942 did not return although this was not the case with their counterparts from Thursday Island. The difference was that the latter group were not restricted to the extent that the Keriri women were under the Catholic Church (see Osborne, *Forgotten Evacuation*, pp. 116-120, 158).  
Int. 028.

most of them evacuees fleeing from Port Moresby in the wake of the enemy's advance.<sup>36</sup>

There were other considerations which mitigated against self-evacuation in their own craft. In the early months of the year, there was always the possibility of cyclones and angry seas. Even without cyclones, overloaded sailing vessels would be at great risk on such a long, open sea journey. In any event, where were they to get enough seamen to man the boats? Until Nurupai (Horn Island) was bombed on 14 March 1942, many able-bodied men were on luggers and cutters working away from their home islands. Over 100 had already enlisted and they were in the army on Thursday Island. In April, all seacraft in Torres Strait came under military control.<sup>37</sup> Once further extensive recruitment of the men began in early 1942, the outer islands were bereft of nearly all of the ablest seamen.

The women knew nothing of the world beyond their own islands so it would have been unlikely that they would have contemplated leaving without the men, and particularly without the help of a government agency. Only a few may have had relations on the mainland with whom they could stay.<sup>38</sup> At no time prior to the Pacific War had their colonisers permitted these women the freedom to go even to Thursday Island without the Director's permission, which was generally only given if someone was seriously ill. The irony was that it took a war to press the government into letting the women leave Torres Strait but, in early 1942, as already indicated, that was not a realistic option for them. Moreover, would their arrival on the mainland have caused hostility amongst the Whites as had been the case when the mixed-race women evacuated from Thursday Island were about to arrive in Cairns?<sup>39</sup> By December 1942, submarines had been sighted off Mer and the people heard bombs exploding out to sea. Everyone was very frightened. Three women were given the opportunity to leave the Island on the army vessel Reliance. They had a cousin who was an 'intelligence officer' on the

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<sup>36</sup> P. D. Wilson, North Queensland WWII 1942-1945 (Brisbane, 1988), p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> Proclamation: Major H.R. Langford, 22 April 1942, Written records, 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/1/3, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>38</sup> Torres Strait Islander women who married South Sea or South-East Asian men working in the marine industry could obtain an exemption from the Act and they were able to reside with their husbands wherever they chose to live.

<sup>39</sup> See Osborne, 'Forgotten Evacuation', pp. 31-34 for a discussion on the hostility in Cairns toward the landing of the Thursday Island women.

"The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Acts, 1897 to 1901."

## CERTIFICATE OF EXEMPTION.

This is to Certify that .....  
of THURSDAY ISLAND ..... is hereby exempt from the provisions of  
"The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Acts, 1897  
to 1901," and the Regulations thereunder.



Minister for Health and Home Affairs.

(Date) 8 - SEP 1967

N.B.—If at any time he thinks it necessary so to do, the Minister may revoke any certificate issued by him to any half-caste.

Certificate of Exemption under the Act



boat and he got permission for them to travel to Thursday Island. They continued on to Cairns on a vessel carrying evacuees from Timor. On arrival in Cairns, their presence was reported to the Director. He ordered them to go to Cherbourg Aboriginal Reserve where many of the mixed-race Thursday Island women had been taken in early 1942. Fortunately the three women had a male relation who told the Director the women would be staying in Cairns.<sup>40</sup> Was the Director acting in his typically paternalistic manner or was it a racist act? He certainly knew about the hostile reaction in Cairns in January 1942 to the landing of the 'coloured' women and children from Thursday Island. Apart from these women, there would have been no 'back door' of escape from the enemy, if they had advanced through Torres Strait, for almost 3 000 women children and old people left on their outer island communities.

In early 1942, the situation in Torres Strait was precarious. Japan's intentions were unknown and Australia's chances of defending its long northern coastline were very slim indeed. Harold Thornell, missionary and wartime coast watcher at Yirrkala, wrote:

Whatever politicians have subsequently said, the north of Australia was to be abandoned in a mood of near panic. Coded messages the coast watchers were receiving hinted that invasion was considered inevitable. And indeed, in the circumstances, no doubt the north would have been beyond defending, no matter how willing anyone may have been to try.<sup>41</sup>

War historian, Paul Hasluck, also recorded his assessment of the situation in the North:

At this time there were marked differences in the experience of war between various parts of Australia. Northern Queensland, the Northern Territory, and Western Australia had an experience of the crisis different from that of the rest of the continent. They were the areas nearest to the advancing enemy and, despite any policy of resisting the Japanese wherever he attacked, they knew that they were in fact practically defenceless. For the people of Southern Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, talk of invasion meant a fight with some prospect of success. People in the more remote parts of Australia knew that, though they would fight, they would be certain to be overwhelmed.<sup>42</sup>

These subsequent assessments of the situation in early 1942 were in line with military thinking at the time. The concept of a 'Brisbane line', which was the allotment of the bulk of the land forces to defend

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<sup>40</sup> Personal communication with Meriam woman, Cairns, February 1995.

<sup>41</sup> Thornell, Bridge over Time, p. 110.

<sup>42</sup> Hasluck, Government and the People, p. 132.

the main areas of industry and population from Brisbane south, was never officially sanctioned by the government. Nonetheless, Australia's 'crippling' defence limitations forced the Australian Chiefs of Staff to adopt an initial plan based on the most effective deployment of the troops then available, which meant that the remote areas of northern Australia for the time being would be inadequately or, in some places, totally undefended.<sup>43</sup> Across the North, where evacuations had not taken place, station owners and towns people did target practice with their .303 rifles and became, collectively and individually, the only defence force in many of Australia's remotest areas.<sup>44</sup> The situation, it was hoped, would be rectified as soon as the 6th and 7th Divisions of the A.I.F. returned from overseas and American forces arrived. In the interim, it was highly probable that northern Australia could not be successfully defended. Thus, all isolated northern areas were especially vulnerable. They were without sealed roads and airstrips and sea routes were made all the more dangerous because air cover for shipping was inadequate. In all of the circumstances, it was astonishingly callous that an order for the evacuation of the Torres Strait Islander women and children was not made by early March 1942.

The war historian, David Horner, suggested that by mid-March 1942 an 'air of panic or desperation hung over the government, including the Prime Minister and also some quarters of the Australian population'.<sup>45</sup> However, despite the desperateness of the hour, any hope that Torres Strait Islander women and children would be evacuated had certainly faded. By the same token, these women had no realistic understanding of the military strategies and machines of modern warfare which had the potential to threaten the continued existence of this unique group of people if the Japanese attacked their small communities with the same force and ruthlessness with which they had bombed Darwin and Broome. One old man who lived on Keriri (Hammond Island) at the time of the First World War remembered seeing German warships passing through the Prince of Wales Channel north of that Island. Their presence, he said, generated fear amongst the people and they fled into the bush: 'We saw a lot of warships...which made everyone frightened so everyone fled the villages and went into the bushes'.<sup>46</sup> Even so, none of the people in

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<sup>43</sup> Horner, Crisis of Command, pp. 27, 34.

<sup>44</sup> Ngabidj, My Country, p. 138.

<sup>45</sup> David Murray Horner, High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy 1939-1945 (Sydney, 1982), p. 183.

<sup>46</sup> Philemon Pearson, Early History Workshop, March 1987.

Torres Strait from 1914 to 1918 experienced anything like the dread of modern warfare which their 1942 counterparts were to experience. However, in early 1942, they too did not know the extent of the danger that threatened them. An old Boigu woman recalled that they *'did not know what this war was about, only that people were being killed'*.<sup>47</sup> A Badu woman said: *'We don't know what the enemy is like, only that he comes to destroy our life'*.<sup>48</sup>

With the withdrawal of the Director's staff and the white priests, it could only be concluded by the people that the women would have to get through the war by themselves: *'They leave the women, nobody to protect them, only old men and wives and children left...They don't worry about us when white people are gone'*.<sup>49</sup> Fear became paramount in the minds of the women after the bombing of Nurupai (Horn Island) on 14 March 1942 and the subsequent rapid recruitment of their men. Moreover, when the men were posted to Thursday Island, there was good reason for them to worry about what was happening back on the communities: *'We were too far from our wives. Everybody left. How they going to get out? No ammunition, nothing!'*<sup>50</sup>

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#### Deserted and abandoned

Graphic pictorial reporting of the European war brought home to all white Australians the stark realities of modern warfare. Apart from such reporting in newspapers and magazines, cinema news bulletins captured the suffering of people in other parts of the war-torn world. The cinema was a great attraction for Torres Strait Islander seamen when they were on the mainland and Thursday Island so that they too were exposed to moving images of the European war on a large screen which depicted just how terrible the war was. Their women at home were isolated from all media reporting and they gained their impressions of modern warfare second-hand through stories the seamen told. However, when Nurupai (Horn Island) was bombed, modern technological warfare was no longer something they just heard about. Within a range of forty kilometres, on the nearby islands of Badu and Moa, the bombing was

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<sup>47</sup> Interview 058, Boigu, May 1990.

<sup>48</sup> Int. 066.

<sup>49</sup> Interview 074, Thursday Island, November 1989.

<sup>50</sup> Interview 063, Boigu Island, May 1990.

visible and audible, and vibrations from bomb blasts were felt on Nagi.<sup>51</sup> For about two years, both allied and enemy planes were daily phenomena in the skies over Torres Strait. They saw 'dog fights' between allied and enemy planes and Yam Island was strafed.<sup>52</sup> Allied warships passed close to some islands on their way to and from New Guinea.<sup>53</sup> The women on the Top-Western Islands heard about mines: 'Yeah, when the army boys came back to Saibai they talked about all kinds of things and we listened...they tell us something like a buoy it floats on the water and it bursts if something hits it'.<sup>54</sup> Enemy submarines were reported in the deeper waters off the islands of Eastern Torres Strait.<sup>55</sup> Here too, the women were in the 'grandstand' of the Battle of the Coral Sea when, as a signaller described it, 'thousands' of allied planes flew over their islands for days and nights.<sup>56</sup> Torres Strait Islander women had had no preparation for this type of warfare. Nor were they prepared for their abandonment by the Department's white officers and teachers and the Anglican priests, which event occurred before the people even had time to recover from the shock of the first Japanese bombing attack.

Eight days after that attack, the Local Protector's personnel were ordered to leave.<sup>57</sup> W.C. (Wally) Curtis, Manager of the Island Industries Board (the Board) at Badu refused to follow the lead given by W.T. Pryor, the Board's Chairman and Local Protector, and other government officers.<sup>58</sup> Of the five European teachers on the outer islands at the beginning of 1942, only one chose to remain in the

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<sup>51</sup> Interview 093, Badu, March 1990; Interview 114, Thursday Island, February 1989.

<sup>52</sup> Int. 118.

<sup>53</sup> Interview 100, Thursday Island, July 1990; Interview 082, Thursday Island, November 1988.

<sup>54</sup> Int. 115, Saibai Island, July 1989. The only official evidence of mines in the Torres Strait area was that the Australian mine layer H.M.A.S. Bungaree, laid a defensive minefield off Bootless Inlet in the Torres Strait and in passages through the Great Barrier Reef (F. Cranston, Always Faithful: A History of the 49th Australian Infantry Battalion, 1916-1982 (Brisbane, 1983), p. 139).

<sup>55</sup> See Appendix 3, Submarines in Torres Strait.

<sup>56</sup> Signaller 3, Audiotape, May 1989, Brisbane (after the initial reference to a signaller, the code is abbreviated, for example in this instance Sig. 3). The signallers referred to throughout this thesis were army coast watchers stationed on the larger outer island communities from early 1942.

<sup>57</sup> Director of Native Affairs to Under Secretary, Department of Health and Home Affairs, 5 September 1945, p. 5, Auditor General's Reports, AUD/W146, 45/7489, Q.S.A.

<sup>58</sup> See Appendix 2, Brief History of Island Industries Board, Badu.

Strait, and of him an old Torres Strait Islander said: 'The white teachers walked off the job when the Japs came into the war; Charlie [W.C.V. Turner, commonly called 'Charlie' in Torres Strait] elected to stay...He was doing the right thing'.<sup>59</sup> Another said: 'That's the one good man that didn't go. He spent his life for the Torres Strait'.<sup>60</sup> Otherwise, the widespread perception was that: 'The government they run away, on all islands the white teachers, they all run away, frightened from dead and leave us'.<sup>61</sup> The Governor of Queensland suggested, after his visit to Badu in April 1943, that for the people to 'see the white man "running away" from the Jap, as they put it, had an effect that could hardly be realised in the South'.<sup>62</sup> Many Torres Strait Islanders were so 'disgusted' with the Local Protector for 'running out on them' that they did not want him to return after the war.<sup>63</sup> The men were angry: 'That's the way they treat us that way...Like a dog, let them eat the bone. It was an act of Grace we didn't starve'.<sup>64</sup> Conversely, the Director suggested in 1946: 'On every hand statements such as "the Government fed us during the dark war years; others did not care whether we died or not", or similar sentiments [were] being freely expressed'.<sup>65</sup> This subsequent interpretation, perhaps even special pleading, does not negate the feelings of abandonment most Torres Strait Islanders felt then and express even to this day: 'We felt helpless when the white people went'.<sup>66</sup> The feeling expressed by old people who had been on the Anglican Mission of St. Paul's in 1942, was also that they had been deserted: 'the Church just left us'.<sup>67</sup> In

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- <sup>59</sup> Interview 053, Thursday Island, February 1989.  
<sup>60</sup> Interview 021, Thursday Island, April 1990. For history of W.C.V. Turner's role in Torres Strait see Betty (Elizabeth) Osborne, 'In the Midst of War: A Lone Teacher in Torres Strait', The Educational Historian, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1990, pp. 1, 7.  
<sup>61</sup> Int. 074.  
<sup>62</sup> Report: Governor of Queensland, 28 April 1943, p. 2, Gov/93, Q.S.A.  
<sup>63</sup> Cited in Hall, Black Diggers, p. 36.  
<sup>64</sup> Int. 074.  
<sup>65</sup> Memorandum: Acting Under Secretary, Department of Health and Home Affairs to the Auditor General, 11 April 1944, Auditor General's Reports, AUD/W129, Q.S.A.; Annual Report (A.R.), Director of Native Affairs for Twelve Months ended 30 June 1946, Queensland Parliamentary Papers (Q.P.P.) 1946, Vol. 2, p. 1039.  
<sup>66</sup> Int. 160.  
<sup>67</sup> Interview 116, Thursday Island, February 1989. The Anglican Mission on St. Paul's was set up in about 1904 at the request of the Government Resident on Thursday Island who had been approached by a remnant of South Sea men who were living on Mabuiag with their Torres Strait Islander wives. These men were permitted to stay in Australia after the passing of the Pacific Island Labourers' Act of 1902

places like New Georgia in the Central Solomons and in New Guinea where the Japanese actually landed, the scenarios were certainly different. In New Georgia, the British Resident Commissioner and the five District Officers remained on the Island, which act D.C. Horton, a war historian, suggested 'had the effect of convincing the islanders that their faith in His Majesty's Government was justified and that they would be led by the people to whom they were accustomed and who they trusted in their fight against the Japanese'. These men contributed to the safety of the people and their food supplies by warning them about what to expect. On their advice, villages and gardens were moved to the high bush so that they would not be so vulnerable to Japanese attack.<sup>68</sup> Dorothea Tompkins and Brian Hughes recorded in The Road from Gona the events in the lives of a number of Anglican missionaries, both male and female, who refused to leave New Guinea in early 1942 and who were subsequently killed by the Japanese. In a radio message to his mission staff in January 1942, the Bishop of New Guinea said:

I have from the first felt that we must endeavour to carry on our work in all circumstances no matter what the cost may ultimately be to us individually. God expects this of us. The Church at home, which sent us out, will surely expect it of us.

And in a letter written by the Reverend Vivian Redlich to his father in July 1942 from 'Somewhere in the Papuan Bush', he said:

The war has busted up here...am now somewhere in the parish trying to carry on, though my people are horribly scared...I'm trying to stick whatever happens. If I don't come out of it just rest content that I've tried to do my job faithfully.<sup>69</sup>

Of course, the Torres Strait Islanders had no way of knowing that these things were happening in other places not so distant from them. Nevertheless, there was justification for their disappointment, anger or whatever adverse feelings they had about the government officers and white priests who turned their backs on them when the women most needed support.

Throughout 1942 and most of 1943, Curtis attempted to maintain some semblance of administration of the Department's affairs in the

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(Cwlth) because they had married Australian women. However, the Mabuiag people believed that South Sea should marry South Sea and Torres Strait Islander should marry Torres Strait Islander and they told the South Sea men to leave.

<sup>68</sup> D.C. Horton, Battle is joined: New Georgia pattern for victory (London, 1972), pp. 32-34.

<sup>69</sup> Dorothea Tompkins and Brian Hughes, The Road from Gona (Sydney, 1969), pp. 27, 146.

Strait under conditions 'unparalleled in any other centre in Queensland'. In this he was helped by R.W. Stephenson who made visits to Badu until he joined the army in mid-1942. To add to the drastic lack of staff in the Board's store, transport around the Strait and from southern ports became increasingly chaotic so that irregular shipments of inadequate store supplies were commonplace. O'Leary subsequently recorded that in those early months of the war Curtis and Stephenson had accepted 'a responsibility in excess of what two men could reasonably be expected to carry'.<sup>70</sup> The situation was further aggravated as a consequence of the segregationist and protective legislation under which the Torres Strait Islanders had been administered for so long. Because they had been made dependent upon the official guidance of the Protector, they had few, if any, opportunities to gain an understanding of the wider world. This was even more so for the women. However, when those upon whom they had been made dependent withdrew, O'Leary subsequently suggested in a letter to the Under Secretary that in their desperation the people on the outer islands had had no alternative but to throw themselves on the Badu administration.<sup>71</sup> That would have been difficult to do during 1942 and well into 1943.

The Protector's vessel, Q.G.V. Melbidir, was withdrawn to a safer anchorage on Palm Island a week after the bombing of Nurupai (Horn Island).<sup>72</sup> Curtis, on Badu, was then without a vessel to visit other islands which meant that he was unable to administer effectively the Board's business around the Strait. Indeed, the women had great difficulty in obtaining even the most basic store supplies until Colonel H.R. Langford, commander of the Torres Strait Force, intervened and made some store food available from army supplies.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, all

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<sup>70</sup> Director of Native Affairs to Under Secretary, Department of Health and Home Affairs, 30 March 1944, p. 1, Auditor General's Reports, AUD/W129, 44/1283, Q.S.A.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Director to Under Secretary, 5 September 1945, AUD/W146, Q.S.A. Q.G.V. (Queensland Government Vessel).

<sup>73</sup> Acting District Finance Officer to Deputy Director of Native Affairs, undated but about June 1942, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/1/1, A.W.M. (Canberra). On 26 March 1942, Major Langford arrived on Thursday Island to take over from Lt.-Col. R.J.R. Hurst, the Fortress Commander on the Island. On 6 June 1942, Langford was appointed Fortress Commander of the Torres Strait Force and promoted to the rank of Colonel (notes taken by author from TI Defence Files, AWM52, Fortress Fixed Defence Sigs., 7/18/2, A.W.M. (Canberra)). On 10 October 1943 he was appointed Commander of all troops under Command 4 Australian Division in the Torres Strait Islands (War

movement around the Strait was severely restricted and controlled by Langford. Finally, the people's luggers and cutters were impressed by the army, and they were ordered to beach their dinghies.<sup>74</sup> An Erub man recalled that *'nobody was allowed to sail across to Mer, Ugar, Masig, T.I...If you want to go, like you are sick, you must get the war boat to come and get permission to be picked up and taken in'*.<sup>75</sup> There was no doubt that the remnant of the administration which the Torres Strait Islanders believed had abandoned them proved hopelessly inadequate to give more than minimal support to anyone. In a further communication to the Under Secretary, O'Leary stated:

Torres Strait was under enemy fire and continuous enemy air activity and the Islanders were on the verge of panic. The transport system from [the] South broke down and Messrs. Curtis and Stephenson in common with the Islanders were on many occasions deprived of even adequate food supplies. This position obtained until towards the end of 1943...the Military virtually dictated all transport movements and activities of the staff.<sup>76</sup>

This statement hardly supported O'Leary's initial suggestion that the people had thrown themselves on the Badu administration when they were deserted.

Dire circumstances pertained in the Strait for up to two years during which time most of the women, children and old people were remote from the Department's 'one-man' operation on Badu. Torres Strait was declared a military zone and priorities were geared to maintain the effectiveness of this status - civilian needs were not the army's first priority. Thus, it was not difficult for the women to conclude that *'everybody had left'* and that they had to *'do it themselves'*.<sup>77</sup>

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The women and old people's feelings of desertion and abandonment, were compounded, as already suggested, by their lack of a realistic perception of the world beyond Torres Strait, a world which had burst in on them with hitherto unknown fury, and because they had no

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Diary, 1-13 October 1943, AWM52, H.Q. Torres Strait Area, 1/5/58, A.W.M. (Canberra)).

<sup>74</sup> Proclamation: Lt. Col. H.R. Langford, 9 August 1942, Written Records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/1/3, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>75</sup> Int. 074.

<sup>76</sup> Director to Under Secretary, 30 March 1944, p. 1, AUD/W129, 44/1283, Q.S.A.

<sup>77</sup> Int. 063; Int. 074.



understanding of modern warfare at all. They had been drawn into a war being waged between societies whose ideologies and technology were incomprehensible to them: 'We were innocent. We don't know what's going on in the outside world', an old Saibai man explained.<sup>78</sup> Another man put it this way: 'We are still learning before the war. We don't know anything about these things'.<sup>79</sup>

From their own oral historians, Torres Strait Islanders knew about the wars which had gone on for generations between the different islands and between themselves and the tribes from the southern coast of New Guinea. On Boigu the people have a constant reminder of the wars of their forefathers in the form of a very old and revered fig tree called dhani or the Tree of Spy, which was brought from Deliverance Island and planted in the village a long time ago. From high up in this tree, the first Islander 'coast watchers' in Torres Strait kept a look out for their worst enemy, the 'Tuger' (Thuger), a tribe of people who lived at Tuger in the Moorehead River area near the West Irian border with New Guinea. Another reminder of those wars is the Tree of Skulls. After successful battles with the Tuger, the warriors returned with the heads of their enemies. A 'most-loved sister' would be given a head which she hung on a branch of the tree.<sup>80</sup> They were also placed in the kwods: some were used for trade or 'retained as precious treasures' by the island warriors.<sup>81</sup> Skulls were also painted, anointed with fragrant leaves and used for divination.<sup>82</sup> Cheek flesh was eaten by uninitiated young men to make them 'strong and hard hearted'.<sup>83</sup> Bows and arrows were the weapons used in those wars.

In about 1887, the men of Saibai met for the last time in battle with their old and dreaded enemies, the Tuger. Just prior to that war, the government had entrusted a gun to the Saibai leaders, Alis (of the cassowary clan) and Anau (of the wild yam clan). That gun was used

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<sup>78</sup> Interview 076, Townsville, January 1990.

<sup>79</sup> Int. 144.

<sup>80</sup> Abia Ingui, Ishmael Banu, Jacob Matthew, Ganalai Matthew, Charlie Gibuma, Melezina Gibuma, Aggie Pina Matthew, Kada Waireg and Isobel Tom, 'Traditional Warfare', in Boigu Island Community, Boigu, pp. 78-84.

<sup>81</sup> Beckett, 'Torres Strait Islanders' p. 317; Gill, Life in the Southern Isles, p. 207. Kwod, men's special place or initiation ground to which women could not go.

<sup>82</sup> A.C. Haddon, 'The Ethnography of the Western Tribes of Torres Strait', Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, Vol. 19, 1890, p. 326.

<sup>83</sup> Ingui et al., 'Traditional Warfare', p. 84.

against the Tuger who, being totally unfamiliar with fire power, were too afraid to attack the village of Saibai again. The old man Aniba from Saibai who told this story to Margaret Lawrie in 1967 would have been no more than a young boy at the time of that war so he probably learnt these things from his father or other elders in the community.<sup>84</sup> The old woman, Ugari Nona who lived on Badu in 1942, was a young woman of about twenty-four when she resided on her home Island, Saibai, in 1887. She was born when the custom was to wear a nose ring (a custom pre-dating L.M.S. days), and she is reputed to have been about 105 when she died in 1968.<sup>85</sup> Ugari Nona and Aniba may have been the only persons in Torres Strait in 1942 who had a living but dim memory of the last war with the Tuger. From 1942 until 1945 both Aniba and Ugari experienced a war 'different altogether' from the traditional wars of their people.<sup>86</sup>

It is difficult to gauge the degree of understanding Torres Strait Islander women had in early 1942 about whether the modern enemy was more formidable and merciless than the dreaded Tuger in the 'before time'. They had heard the stories about inter-island wars and the wars with the Tuger because these feats belong to the oral history of the Torres Strait Islanders: *'They know the war, you know, civil war...between Papua New Guinea and Torres Strait Islands, and that was with bow and arrows'*. The Saibai woman who said this also indicated that the people knew these wars were 'scary' but that their enemies then had *'nothing like planes'* and, of course, nothing like warships and submarines.<sup>87</sup> Such destructive aerial and naval technology was absolutely new phenomena about which they were to learn much.

Modern warfare too was no respecter of the traditional ways of life which the Torres Strait Islanders had maintained despite the 'civilising' influences which had been imposed upon them. For generations they had taught their children to read the sky as a white person reads a calendar or a clock. An old man explained: *'I can tell you very straight, before time they don't know what this is* [pointing

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<sup>84</sup> Margaret Lawrie, 'Death of the Head-man Alis', Torres Strait Islanders, Issue 4, 1983, pp. 6-9.

<sup>85</sup> Information about Ugari Nona was obtained from her headstone in the cemetery on Badu and from conversations with her son. It is sometimes suggested from a white perspective, that ages in societies without written records can be miscalculated. I prefer to accept her son's calculation of her age.

<sup>86</sup> Int. 084, Brisbane, December 1989.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

to the watch on his wrist], they are living by the stars'.<sup>88</sup> So, the chief said to his son:

*"Go and find out the position of the star Waisu the younger of two Meur wer constellation". The son told his father the position of the star the next morning and the father said that it was not yet time to rain. One morning, the son told the father the position of the star and the father said, "Go and plant your crops now as it will soon rain". The son did as he was told, and several days later heavy rain fell.<sup>89</sup>*

They taught their children to respect the moods of the sea: '...Ailanman never growl the sea or anything. Not say anything bad about the sea when you're on it. Because the sea we treat like a polite thing like you say, not criticism'.<sup>90</sup> Getano Lui Senior, an old Torres Strait Islander leader, explained the spiritual and historical meaning his people placed on the sea: 'Our spirits live in our seas and our people sailed them in our war canoes, our trading canoes and our fishing canoes'. Seamanship was 'the test of [the] young men's manhood', and the seas were their highways. He spoke out about these things in the early 1970s when the Australia/New Guinea Border Issue was being debated: 'We came from the sea; our history and culture is tied up with it. Even winds, tides, currents, the air, the cays and reefs are part of our culture'.<sup>91</sup> When the L.M.S. missionaries introduced a monetary economy and it became imperative for many men to participate in the capitalist enterprise built on the marine industry in Torres Strait, their relationship with the sea did not change: 'We have always grown our children from the sea and the sea-beds, and they have continued to work in the sea'.<sup>92</sup> But, in 1942, outsiders came in planes, warships and submarines and the Torres Strait Islanders' sky and sea space were made areas of great fear. In this environment, the women, children and aged became potential victims of the hostilities.

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<sup>88</sup> Int. 144.

<sup>89</sup> G. Passi, Knowledge, Education and Self-Management, p. 58.

<sup>90</sup> Cited in Sharp, Stars of Tagai, p. 3. Ailanman is Torres Strait Creole for Island Man.

<sup>91</sup> See James Griffin (ed.), The Torres Strait Border Issue: Consolidation, Conflict or Compromise (Townsville, 1976), pp. xxv, 33.

<sup>92</sup> Cited in Nonie Sharp, Torres Strait Islands 1879-1979: Theme of an Overview (Bundoora, Victoria, 1980), p. 36.

### Under the Act

In early 1942, there were Torres Strait Islanders who wanted to believe that the Pacific War would be the watershed in their lives which would put them on a 'footing of equality within Australian society'.<sup>93</sup> When in 1897 the Queensland parliament passed legislation for the 'protection and segregation' of Aborigines, the Torres Strait Islanders were seen as 'natives...of a somewhat superior race to the mainland natives, and better able to look after themselves'. Thus, it was deemed unnecessary to protect and segregate them. Men, already working in the marine industry, were encouraged to acquire boats and clans took up the challenge. In 1907, the Chief Protector of Aborigines reported on this initiative:

By the authority from the Treasury given in 1903, the natives of Torres Strait Islands are allowed limited number of vessels to work in the pearl shell and beche de mer fisheries...with the object of assisting them to become self-supporting and provident. During 1907, eighteen such boats were working. The Department and the Papuan Industries Company Limited in equal shares advanced the money for their purchase and nine of the boat crews have already repaid the amount advanced with interest.<sup>94</sup>

However, even prior to this statement, when cleared of debt, the boats, although reputed to be 'the sole property of the natives', were registered in the Supreme Court at Townsville in the name of the local Protector at Thursday Island 'on behalf of particular Islanders'.<sup>95</sup>

Simultaneously, reports reached the Protector's ears that the men were being cheated by 'unscrupulous employers and alien storekeepers'. Thus, increasingly from 1904, the Protector applied the provisions of the Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of Sale of Opium Acts to many of the Torres Strait Islanders' activities and, as already suggested, they became 'Aborigines' for the purposes of these Acts.<sup>96</sup> However, the government's claim that Torres Strait Islanders would be protected from exploitation was not the only reason for bringing them under the Act. It was also the means by which they were kept in Torres Strait to work the beche-de-mer and pearl-shell boats for the benefit of white

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<sup>93</sup> See Nonie Sharp, 'Culture Clash in the Torres Strait Islands: The Maritime Strike of 1936', The Royal Historical Society of Queensland Journal, Vol. II, No. 3, 1981-2, p. 120.

<sup>94</sup> A.R., Chief Protector of Aborigines (C.P.A.) 1904, Q.P.P. 1905, Vol. 1, pp. 752, 771; A.R., C.P.A. 1907, Q.P.P. 1908, Vol. 3, p. 930.

<sup>95</sup> A.R., C.P.A. 1905, Q.P.P. 1906, Vol. 2, p. 940.

<sup>96</sup> A.R., C.P.A. 1907, Q.P.P. 1908, Vol. 3, p. 930.

entrepreneurs and the young State of Queensland.<sup>97</sup> At that time, too, the new Commonwealth's obsession with the 'threat of colour' justified segregation in the eyes of people indoctrinated with the racist notion of white supremacy. In these ways, both the lucrative capitalist enterprise in Torres Strait and the emerging 'white monoculture' in Australia were safeguarded.<sup>98</sup>

Once they were under the Act, the Torres Strait Islanders' world of 'mutuality', of kinship obligations and reciprocity, came under fire from officers of the Department.<sup>99</sup> The eurocentric perception of them was that the men preferred to 'loaf about on the islands' rather than take employment on the boats; they had 'no idea of the value of money'; and they did not want to work their boats in a 'systematic manner'.<sup>100</sup> In 1914, the local Protector at Thursday Island, W.M. Lee-Bryce, put forward a solution to their 'life of idleness'. It was the introduction of legislation which would 'insist upon every able-bodied man doing a fair day's work'. He admitted that 'in some quarters this procedure would be termed "slavery"' although his perception was that the Torres Strait Islanders were 'overgrown children' and, as wards of the State, should be 'managed for their own welfare, as a prudent parent would discipline his family'.<sup>101</sup> What this man could not see was that the individualism and the materialism of the capitalist structure of white society was alien to them: 'Before time we were civilized to be kind to people, we have known our ways of living through generations. We do not want to buy and sell - we give and take, that's our watchword', an old island man explained.<sup>102</sup> They wanted to embrace the new society on their own terms, but this was not condoned by their paternalistic administrators. In 1933, the Torres Strait Islanders' hopes for political and economic progress toward equality in the wider Australian society, however vague and unconceptualised at the time, was intolerably thwarted. That year was the beginning of a period of even more oppressive rule under an administration in Torres Strait headed by the newly-appointed Local

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<sup>97</sup> Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 47.

<sup>98</sup> Sharp, Torres Strait Islands, p.73.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 45-46; 87.

<sup>100</sup> A.R., C.P.A. 1911, Q.P.P. 1912, Vol. 3, p. 1005; A.R., C.P.A. 1913, Q.P.P. 1914, Vol. 3, p. 1031; A.R., C.P.A. 1914, Q.P.P. 1915-1916, Vol. 3, p. 1688.

<sup>101</sup> A.R., C.P.A. 1914, Q.P.P. 1915-1916, Vol. 3, p. 1688.

<sup>102</sup> Cited in Sharp, Torres Strait Islands, p. 46.

Protector, J.D. McLean, a former patrol officer in New Guinea.<sup>103</sup> He, together with his agents (the white teachers) on the outer islands, placed 'firmer hands on the reins' and tightened the Department's grip on the people's affairs.<sup>104</sup> Thus, their perception of their status under the Act was that: 'You couldn't do what you wanted to do...It was very bad, everybody seemed to be mastered by the Protectors...very similar to slavery'.<sup>105</sup> Ironically, the term 'slavery' alluded to in 'some quarters' in 1914 was decades later being applied by the Torres Strait Islanders to themselves.

The people's anger against the administration of the Department could not be contained in early 1936. The feeling was that 'the government treated them as natives', and that 'the Islander boat owners were only boss of the wood, just for the timber of their boats, but somebody else had all their takings'.<sup>106</sup> When McLean went to the outer islands to recruit labour in January, seventy per cent of the work force refused to man the company boats.<sup>107</sup> The strike was an unprecedented act of cohesion by members from all Torres Strait Islander communities, which had for generations maintained their individual political and cultural autonomy.<sup>108</sup> It was also unprecedented as a joint act of resistance against the paternalistic policies of the Department. The men boldly told the Protector: 'You

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<sup>103</sup> The Governor of Queensland said of J.D. McLean in 1933: 'I can imagine that there are few men better suited for this important work' (Report: Governor of Queensland on a visit to Torres Strait, 1 November 1933, Islands Torres Strait, A3664, 1933, 33/9519, Q.S.A.). The Bishop of Carpentaria said, more perceptively, in January 1936: 'I am sure the [Aboriginal Department] requires a man of different temperament to the present protector' (Bishop of Carpentaria to Governor of Queensland, 9 January 1936, Governor's Correspondence, A12228, Islands of Torres Strait, 00013, Q.S.A.).

<sup>104</sup> Sharp, 'Culture Clash' p. 111.

<sup>105</sup> Nasela Nona, Early History Workshop, March 1987.

<sup>106</sup> Int. 072.

<sup>107</sup> In January each year, the Local Protector went from island to island on the Melbidir, the Department's ketch, to sign up the majority of the men to work the community vessels, or 'company' boats. In January 1936, the fleet comprised twenty-five cutters and luggers and they were identified by their black and white striped railings. Some men obtained employment on the 'master' boats, those owned by European entrepreneurs.

<sup>108</sup> The uniting of the various island groups was referred to by Getano Lui during the Border Issue debate: 'Our Island tribes fought against each other, just as other tribes did. But at all times we remained Torres Strait Islanders, quick to unite against an outside threat' (Griffin (ed.), Torres Strait Border, p. xxvi).

can anchor up the boats and sail back to T.I.; we refuse (voice getting louder) we can stay on the land doing gardens'.<sup>109</sup>

The outcome of the Strike was a 'New Law' for the Torres Strait Islanders. They were given more freedom of movement around the Strait, the night curfew was abolished, the white teachers were theoretically stripped of their power, new conditions of employment were implemented and local police appointments were revised. McLean left Torres Strait. The government also legislated to return local autonomy to the island councils.<sup>110</sup> The Torres Strait Islanders Act, which passed through the Queensland parliament in 1939, entrenched that autonomy:

The Island Council shall have delegated to it the functions of local government of the reserve, and shall be charged with the good rule and government of the reserve in accordance with island custom and practices.<sup>111</sup>

Thus, overtly the government had loosened some of its control but covertly it maintained its paternalistic stance. Self-management was, in Sharp's words, a 'partnership of non-equals with a right of veto by the self-appointed senior partner [the Director]'. Additionally, the newly introduced two-way radio service on the outer islands enabled the Director to keep in touch with 'everything the Islanders were saying'.<sup>112</sup>

The gains from the 1936 Strike did not go far enough for all Torres Strait Islanders. There was resentment of the Protector's continued control of their pass books. An old man explained how it was: 'D.N.A. you know has power over every money going through the account. So, any money you want you go there and then you ask for money, "How much money you want?"', an officer would say. Generally, they were only permitted to draw a lesser amount: 'funny when the government took over the money - it was not right'. They were indignant: 'One of our own people should have been appointed to care for the people, good sensible person - it was okay if [the Island] council controlled it but not D.N.A.'.<sup>113</sup> Importantly too, the people were still totally dependent upon the official guidance of the

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<sup>109</sup> Cited in Sharp, Stars of Tagai, p. 189.

<sup>110</sup> See Sharp, 'Culture Clash', pp. 107-126 for Queensland government and Torres Strait Islander perspectives on the 1936 Maritime Strike in Torres Strait.

<sup>111</sup> Section 18 of The Torres Strait Islanders Act of 1939. The passing of this Act was the first legislative move to distinguish Torres Strait Islanders and Aborigines.

<sup>112</sup> Sharp, Stars of Tagai, pp. 216-218.

<sup>113</sup> Int. 064.

Department as it related to their interaction with the outside world. Thus, when that Department's officers were withdrawn from the outer islands in March 1942, it was not surprising that the people who had had no preparation for their desertion and abandonment, felt *'helpless - everybody did not know what to do'*. When everybody had left, it *'gave them a feeling of being very worried'*.<sup>114</sup> In 1944, some expressed the feelings they had about the desertion of their women in a petition to the Governor of Queensland: *'When Japan declared war against Australia all our European leaders of Torres Strait were escaped for their lives, leave us helpless. There was no word of evacuation. We were left as a precious bait for the enemy'*.<sup>115</sup> They saw themselves as *'really left as meat in the sandwich'* between Australia's front line of defence to the south and the rapidly advancing Japanese forces to the north.<sup>116</sup>

After the abandonment of the women, children and aged, there was no question that confidence in the Department's administration was at its lowest ebb. However, for some years prior to that time, there had been widespread hope that the Commonwealth Government would take over Torres Strait Islander affairs, citizen rights would be ushered in and there would be an end to the paternalistic rule of their State colonial masters. In August 1935, the Bishop of Carpentaria addressed an Anglican Synod in Townsville. J.W. Bleakley, the then Protector of Aborigines, interpreted certain words from that address to mean the Bishop believed *'it would be for the benefit of the natives of Australia if the whole question of aboriginal control were vested in the Commonwealth government'*. Newspaper reports on the Bishop's address fell into the hands of some Torres Strait Islanders and they were elated at the prospect. The Protector's response to the situation was consistent with the previous thirty years of the Department's paternalistic control:

These ignorant natives...have jumped to the conclusion that this action was to be taken, and that they would then be free to work their own boats as they pleased, sell their produce where they liked and spend the money as it suited them.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Interview 065, Thursday Island, March 1989.

<sup>115</sup> Petition: Torres Strait Islanders to Governor of Queensland, 13 April 1944, Native Affairs General, TR12257, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>116</sup> Murray Lui, History of Coconut Island (Purma), World War Two, July 1990.

<sup>117</sup> Chief Protector of Aborigines to Governor of Queensland, 17 January 1936, p. 1, Governor's Correspondence, A12228, Islands Torres Strait, 34/1406, Q.S.A.



Just a few years later, this protective government saw nothing contradictory in its decision to abandon the people who they had seen as so incapable of managing their own affairs. Moreover, at the time of the seamen's strike in 1936, the people had been told that it was impossible for them to be completely free of the Department. They replied: '*We are in a closed box and wait for the lid to be taken off*'.<sup>118</sup> The prospect of the men's participation in the Pacific War was seen to be the key that would open the box.

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The testimonies of so many of the old people, after almost fifty years, demonstrated not only the belief expressed by some that God sent World War Two to put them '*in a right position*' with the Commonwealth Government but also that Torres Strait Islander women played a dominant role in the survival of this unique indigenous group of Australians.<sup>119</sup> This they did during the absence of most of their able-bodied men who were serving in the army on Thursday Island. In the next chapter, the people recall the recruitment of the men.

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<sup>118</sup> Cited Sharp, Stars of Tagai, p. 181.  
<sup>119</sup> Int. 098.

Chapter five  
Enlistment: the quest for freedom

*For our country and own welfare  
We hop in to do our share  
Side by side with the bronze Anzac  
We fight and never relax*

*Although we are so small on map  
You could not see us at all  
Yet we come put our name to  
Keep all Australia free*

*Onward to victory we're marching  
March on with pride and glee  
When war bring peace, and victory won  
We all march home one day*

*This coloured boys of our Strait  
Like those of other State  
They stand to keep the enemy off the shore  
For their homeland and country they adore*

*They always march with smile  
So you often see them smile  
Wherever they may pass  
The lads of the TSLIB<sup>1</sup>*

Before recruiting

When the Pacific War broke out in December 1941, the New Law that came out of the 1936 Maritime Strike had merely ushered in an era of control which was less direct: the power of the 'big mamus [mamoose]' in Brisbane had not been broken.<sup>2</sup> The two-way radio system installed throughout Torres Strait in 1937 linked the outer islands to Thursday Island which gave the local Protector even closer contact with the people than he had previously had and he was able to influence certain councillors in a more personal way. He was made quickly aware of any 'trouble-makers' on the islands and they were 'isolated'.<sup>3</sup> A Torres Strait Islander man who assisted a white teacher in the operation of

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<sup>1</sup> This poem was composed by George Mye, a long-time leader in Torres Strait. A copy of the poem was given to me by Ettie Pau, a former member of the Torres Strait Light Infantry Brigade (commonly designated TSLIB or TSLI, pronounced T.S.L.I.). The various companies of Torres Strait Islander men were formed into the Torres Strait Light Infantry Brigade in June 1943.

<sup>2</sup> Sharp, *Springs of Originality*, pp. 241-242.

<sup>3</sup> Nonie Sharp, *Faces of Power in the Torres Strait Islands: The 1980s and the 1930s*, Paper presented at 57th ANZAAS Congress, James Cook University, Townsville, 1987, pp. 20-21.

one of these radios recalled the situation which pertained even after the war:

*the only means to get to the outside world was to go through the office here on Thursday Island and it was under the Department's control and you had nothing, only a smoke signal, and it could not be seen by the outside world. All messages were checked, I am sure.*<sup>4</sup>

The Maritime Strike had not been just about autonomy for island councils and the lifting of certain restrictions on village life and employment. Most importantly, the strikers yearned to be free of the paternalism of the Department and for equality within Australian society. These aspirations were very much alive when the Pacific War broke out.

A Saibai man said that parents were still passing their aspiration to be free on to their children long after the war: 'One day we will be free', they told them.<sup>5</sup> This aspiration had carried over from the late 1930s when the old leaders began to think about how they could free the people from the paternalism of their colonisers. One woman recalled how her old father, Barney Mosby, had 'tried to get away and plan something for Torres Strait, for six months by himself. In his own place he sat down all day thinking about what to do'.<sup>6</sup> This was before the Maritime Strike in 1936. Then, the day came, early in the Pacific War, when another wise old leader, Marou Mimi the Chief Councillor on Mer, called a meeting. He told the young men: 'If you want freedom, now is your time. You are going to fight for your country'.<sup>7</sup> And that, according to the daughter of the Masig leader, was why the men went to war, 'to try to help themselves - they were looking for the new light'.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, many Torres Strait Islanders claim today that the war had Divine approval: 'God sent World War Two to put us in a right position with the [Commonwealth] government'.<sup>9</sup> All around Torres Strait there were those who saw the war 'as a good thing'. The men grasped their opportunity blindly: 'Nobody knew about the war, but they quick joined because they might get help from the

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<sup>4</sup> Interview 059, Thursday Island, April 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication, Townsville, October 1990. In 1958, thirteen years after the war, Jeremy Beckett said that 'freedom' was a word he heard 'all over Torres Strait'. He understood it to mean: 'removal of the [Queensland] government's oppressive controls...and a raising of the Islanders' standard of living to that of white people on the mainland' (Beckett, 'German Wislin', pp. 60-61).

<sup>6</sup> Int. 072.

<sup>7</sup> Int. 065.

<sup>8</sup> Int. 072.

<sup>9</sup> Int. 098.

army', help to gain freedom from their white colonial overlords even though it might mean that they would kill Japanese men who had been their friends or be killed by them.<sup>10</sup>

Bleakley claimed in his book, written in 1967, that the Torres Strait Islanders had no love for the Japanese and 'would doubtless have given a good account of themselves if the enemy had invaded their island villages, as their cousins in New Guinea did'.<sup>11</sup> After his visit to Torres Strait in 1943, the Governor suggested that the people 'had a very supreme contempt for the Japanese, a personal hatred for them'.<sup>12</sup> A white soldier in the Torres Strait Force claimed the TSLI men regarded the war as an 'opportunity to free the [marine] industry for ever from the fetters of Japanese competition'.<sup>13</sup> Gerald Peel, a communist journalist who went to Torres Strait in 1945, said he was told by Torres Strait Islanders that before the war some of the people felt they had been given a 'raw deal' by the Queensland government and initially questioned whether they should 'support Australia'. Peel's information was that at a conference of councillors from all islands, held in early 1942, and despite the expression of some contrary views, it was finally unanimously resolved 'to support the allied cause 100

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<sup>10</sup> Int. 072. Patriotism was not the motive of every white soldier who enlisted. Many questioned the notion that another war would end all wars. A man who had been unemployed for five years admitted: 'I joined to get a job...A lot of people wouldn't admit it' (Cited in Daniel Connell, The War at Home: Australia 1939-1949 (Crows Nest, Sydney, 1988), p. 11). Another long-term unemployed thought that the 'pay and conditions in the army greatly surpassed life on the dole'. There were also petty criminals who were induced to be patriotic by magistrates who handed down suspended sentences on a promise of enlistment (Cited in McKernan, All In!, p. 6).

<sup>11</sup> John William Bleakley, The Aborigines of Australia; their history, their habits, their assimilation (Brisbane, 1961), p. 272. Not all the indigenous peoples in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands were able to 'give a good account of themselves'. Some chose to assist the Japanese rather than be killed. Jack McPhee, told Sally Morgan that Aborigines in the Pilbara region of Western Australian had often talked about the Japanese. They had had good relations with the Afghans and Chinese and some thought that 'everyone from that part of the world was the same'. They thought the Japanese would probably be as good to them as the Chinese: 'Either way, they figured the Japanese wouldn't be as bad as the Aussies' (Morgan, Wanamurraganya, p. 146).

<sup>12</sup> Report: Governor of Queensland, 28 April 1943, p. 2, Gov/93, Q.S.A.

<sup>13</sup> A.C. Thompson, Fortress Engineers Torres Strait Force, My Impressions of the Torres Strait Islander, n.d., Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 805/7/1, A.W.M. (Canberra).

percent, in spite of what they looked on as the "funk" policy of the whites' toward them. However, one Torres Strait Islander he met said 'he hated the Japs' and his main wish had been to be 'with the Yanks, at the death, in Tokyo'.<sup>14</sup> These outsider constructions certainly do not accord with the testimonies of many old Torres Strait Islanders who participated in this inquiry: indeed, there was general agreement that the Japanese in pre-war Torres Strait had been their friends.<sup>15</sup> A St. Paul's woman said although the people were 'angry with them because of the war, they did not hate them'.<sup>16</sup> Fifty years later the Japanese divers were remembered with respect, even appreciation. One former seaman recalled: 'My wages were £3, sometimes £2 a month...the Japanese skippers wanted to give us more but the government won't allow it. The law is there. Torres Strait Islanders get so much but the Japs gave us money out of their pockets'.<sup>17</sup> An old man from Purma recalled:

*We were friendly with the Japanese. They were good people. I was with them for a meal. We were always friendly to each other and that's how Torres Strait people learnt about pearling and later we did the diving.*<sup>18</sup>

Back on the islands, Japanese men had good relations with the women: 'The Japanese called in for food and made great friends with us. My mother gave them vegetables, pumpkin, sweet potato and they gave us rice and tinned stuff', a St. Paul's woman explained.<sup>19</sup> Another woman from the same community said: 'We were all good friends with the Japanese before the war'.<sup>20</sup> A younger Mabuiag man recalled that his uncle told him 'the Japanese didn't want to do anything to them'.<sup>21</sup> Japanese skippers anchored their luggers off Mer for 'three or four weeks at a time' while they waited for the neap tide.<sup>22</sup> An old Meriam woman remembered how Japanese seamen visited the island homes for meals; they went to feasts and learnt island dancing: 'They were one of us...When they left they gave us bags of flour and rice and tinned

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<sup>14</sup> Gerald Peel, Isles of the Torres Strait (Sydney, 1946), pp. 8, 115.

<sup>15</sup> See Betty (Elizabeth) Osborne, '"Looking for the New Light": Torres Strait Islanders and the Pacific War, 1942-1945', in Loos and Osanai (eds), Indigenous Minorities, p. 53.

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication with St. Paul's woman, Cairns, November 1993.

<sup>17</sup> Int. 028.

<sup>18</sup> Int. 064.

<sup>19</sup> Int. 078.

<sup>20</sup> Int. 068.

<sup>21</sup> Interview 147, Thursday Island, June 1990.

<sup>22</sup> The tide after the moon's first and third quarters when high-water level is at its lowest. During this period the water is not clear enough to dive for shell. Torres Strait Islanders refer to it as 'dirty water time'.

stuff. They were good people - how do you say it - generous - yes, good people and not bad like they said. It was the war that made things go bad'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Beckett found Torres Strait Islander men 'of that generation...spoke well of their old skippers, who they suggested had dissuaded the Japanese air force from bombing their villages'.<sup>24</sup>

With these attitudes toward the Japanese, it was not easy for Torres Strait Islander men to take up arms against them. However, although they nursed grievances against the Queensland government, the people wanted to remain Australians. The Governor of Queensland became convinced of the Torres Strait Islanders' loyalty to the Crown after his visit to Torres Strait in 1943, and he told his audience on Badu he would assure His Majesty the King of that loyalty.<sup>25</sup> Words from George Mye's poem, reproduced at the head of this chapter:

*They stand to keep the enemy off the shore  
For their homeland and country they adore*

are a retrospective testimony to that loyalty. Eight hundred able-bodied Torres Strait Islander men, however, were not compensated for that loyalty on an equal footing with the white soldiers who served beside them.

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For some time before the European war broke out many Aboriginal activists wanted to believe that under political pressure from the Aborigines themselves the Commonwealth Government would change its stand on their citizenship status.<sup>26</sup> In 1939, after realising this was

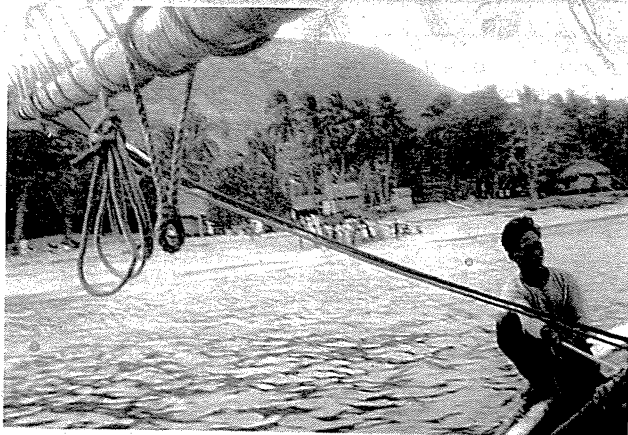
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<sup>23</sup> Personal communication with Meriam woman, Cairns, February 1995.

<sup>24</sup> Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 63. Some Aborigines also had similar attitudes toward the Japanese. They preferred to work with them: 'Japanese gave good tucker...They looked after the boys properly. They used to ring Jack Dunwoodie at T.I. for pocket money [for us]' (Cited in Ganter, Pearl-Shellers, p. 56).

<sup>25</sup> Report: Governor of Queensland, 28 April 1943, Gov/93, Q.S.A.

<sup>26</sup> During World War One, 400 Aborigines served in the Australian Imperial Force. David Huggonson pointed out that Central Army Records had not identified soldiers by race and that the 'Aboriginal diggers were afforded honorary white status, and enjoyed the same pay and conditions as their comrades'. However, after their discharge they soon learnt that military service, 'no matter how gallant, was not going to win for their race improved social acceptance, better working conditions or equal access to social security benefits'. Thus by the mid-1920s they began to believe 'collective political



(Top) Torres Strait Islander and Japanese seamen aboard lugger anchored off Mer.

(Centre) Margaret Abednego with Japanese friend on Mer.

(Bottom) Group of Meriam waving farewell to lugger with Japanese seamen on board.

not going to happen, the Australian Aborigines' League, in anticipation of a call upon Aboriginal men to enlist, took a 'tougher line' - there would be no enlistment without citizenship.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, as Robert Hall indicated, by the end of 1939 'at least 22 Aborigines and Islanders had enlisted in the Second A.I.F. and there may have been more'. Three men from Torres Strait, Charles Mene, Ted Loban and Victor Blanco, were among these early recruits.<sup>28</sup> Hall makes the point that it was because of a 'policy vacuum' on non-European enlistment that these men were admitted into the ranks of the military in that early period of the war. However, from the beginning of 1940, senior military officers in Australia had been formulating racist enlistment policies without investigating whether Aborigines and 'coloured' men from Thursday Island already serving were accepted by their white counterparts. No account was taken of the experience of other countries, such as, New Zealand where Maoris were enlisted freely. The military simply maintained, apparently as an axiomatic truth, that to force white and black soldiers to live in close proximity would result in 'intolerable pressures upon race relations leading to poor operational performance'. Moreover, there was an attitude that it was neither necessary nor desirable to draw indigenous men into the army. While the war remained in Europe and the Middle East and Australia was not directly threatened, it was relatively easy to adopt such an 'ethnocentric approach'. On 5 May 1940, the army entrenched its discriminatory policy in Military Regulation 177:

Every person before his enlistment in the Military Forces will be medically examined, and no person is to be enlisted voluntarily unless he is substantially of European origin

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action was the only way they were going to achieve these ends' (David Huggonson, 'Aboriginal Diggers of the 9th Brigade First AIF', Journal of The Royal Australian Historical Society, Vol. 79, Parts 3 & 4, December 1993, pp. 223).

<sup>27</sup> See William Cooper's response to a proposal by New South Wales Aboriginal Activist John Patten that a force of Aborigines should be enlisted (Markus, Governing Savages, p. 189).

<sup>28</sup> Hall, Black Diggers, pp. 8-11, 16. Hall's use of the term 'Islanders' in all probability was a reference to the mixed-race men of Torres Strait Islander descent who were not under the control of the Director of Native Affairs. It was not until later in the war that the question of the enlistment of the outer island men was raised. Charles Mene was from Mabuiag and he was working on Thursday Island in 1939. Victor Blanco was the son of a Filipino man and his Torres Strait Islander wife. Ted Loban was also a descendant of a mixed-race marriage. Inquiries I have made suggest that any other 'Islanders' who enlisted in the A.I.F. in 1939, were of mixed-race descent and were not under the Department's control.



or descent and reaches the standards of medical fitness, age, height, chest measurement, eyesight and teeth authorised by the Military Board.<sup>29</sup>

A year later the army was forced to relent its opposition to the enlistment of Australia's first inhabitants.

Despite this racist mind set, the possibility of enlisting outer island men was being discussed 'discreetly' in 1940. In August, the Local Protector and the Bishop of Carpentaria approached a senior army officer visiting Thursday Island. In a subsequent communication with his superior, the officer stated that he had been informed 'the men of Murray Island [Mer] had volunteered in a body'.<sup>30</sup> The Meriam seamen had withdrawn their labour from the company boats after the 1936 Maritime Strike.<sup>31</sup> Thus, these men were eager to don army uniforms not only to gain a means of income but also in the hope that military service would be the catalyst in their quest for freedom. However, the Director opposed enlistments from one community only. That, he suggested, would result in 'severe dissatisfaction' amongst those not given an opportunity to serve, as government service was regarded as 'a great honour' amongst the people.<sup>32</sup> Otherwise, the Director suggested, all Torres Strait Islanders would be 'quite suitable in every respect' for army service. He further suggested that the officers in charge of any contingent of Torres Strait Islander men should be white and that an appropriate rate of pay would be £3 per month for the lowest rank with increases for higher ranks. The Director was adamant that the army rates of pay should remain in line with the men's civil remuneration, which was £3 to £4 per month.<sup>33</sup> He was obviously trying to prevent a war contingency from reinforcing Torres Strait Islander aspirations for greater equality with white Australians.

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<sup>29</sup> Hall, Black Diggers, pp. 13-15. Australian Military Regulations were 'merely for the guidance of the Services' and carried no legal weight as did the Defence Act 1903-1941 (Cwlth) which permitted the voluntary enlistment of non-Europeans. However, the legality of the regulations was never challenged.

<sup>30</sup> Minute Paper: Department of Army, 16 August 1940, MP508/1, General Correspondence 1939-1942, 275/701/210, A.A. (Vic.).

<sup>31</sup> Sharp, Springs of Originality, p. 241.

<sup>32</sup> Government positions as councillors, policemen, teachers, storekeepers and also as priests or wardens in the Anglican Church were certainly sought after jobs, even though they attracted very low salaries and, in some cases, none at all.

<sup>33</sup> B. Weavers, Colonel i/c, AMF-NC to The Secretary, Military Board, 29 November 1940, p. 1, General Correspondence 1939-1942, MP508/1, 275/701/293, A.A. (Vic.).

Other opinions on the suitability of Torres Strait Islanders for military service were considered. One unfavourable, but typically ethnocentric comment, was that 'the average Aboriginal [Torres Strait Islander] is intensely fond of "grog"' and he should be kept away from it because 'he might do anything if he gets it, especially if he is armed'. Favourable comments were that the men had 'superior eyesight' which would make them excellent coast watchers; they had great powers of endurance which would enable them to 'walk the feet off the average white man'; language would be no problem if the company officers had 'some smattering' of Meriam Mir or Kalaw Kawaw Ya, because the Torres Strait Islanders 'pick[ed] things up quickly'.<sup>34</sup> Thus, on 4 January 1941, despite Army Regulation 177, the Minister for the Army was requested to authorise the raising of one company of Torres Strait Islanders for service on Thursday Island for the 'duration of the war and twelve months thereafter'.<sup>35</sup> It was anticipated that if these soldiers proved 'to be good material', they would be deployed on Thursday Island to free up a company of the white 49 Battalion to serve in another military district.<sup>36</sup> The request was approved on 17 January 1941.<sup>37</sup> The subsequent raising of a segregated company of outer island men to serve on Thursday Island negated the army's prior opposition to the recruitment of black men. Unlike the situation which pertained for Aborigines in World War One, segregation made it possible to formulate discriminatory policies, particularly those related to conditions of employment of the Torres Strait Islander men, even though it appeared the army did not have an initial intention in this regard.<sup>38</sup> The men's pay rates had a direct effect on the women.

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#### Recruitment - 1941

On 9 May 1941, twelve months after the formulation of Army Regulation 177, the Secretary of the Department of the Army was given

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Director of Organisation and Recruiting to Military Secretary, 17 May 1941, General Correspondence 1939-42, MP508/1, 273/701/376, A.A. (Vic.). The strength of the company was to be 'Whites - 5 Officers 1 Warrant Officer 4 Sergeants...Islanders - 10 corporals 103 privates'.

<sup>36</sup> Minute Paper: Department of Army, 4 January 1941, General Correspondence 1939-42, MP508/1, 275/701/328, A.A. (Vic.).

<sup>37</sup> Minute Paper: 4 April 1941, MP508/1, General Correspondence 1939-42, 274/701/328, A.A. (Vic.).

<sup>38</sup> Hall, Black Diggers, p. 34.

details of the proposed conditions of service for Torres Strait Islanders. Rates of pay for each classification were raised by ten shillings a month above the base rate of £3 originally suggested by the Director because of a comparable increase in the civil wage.<sup>39</sup> This meant that these soldiers would receive less than half the rate paid to white soldiers of equivalent rank even though the army knew that to pay these men at the 'lower rate was illegal and that serious repercussions might follow'.<sup>40</sup>

In April 1941, the Intelligence Officer on Thursday Island expressed concern that the men's dependants would not receive military allotments: 'No consideration has been given to provision for the families of the men enlisted, nor has the point been raised by the Director of Native Affairs'.<sup>41</sup> And, as if he needed justification for his concern and apparently in the belief that his superiors knew little about the Torres Strait Islanders, the Intelligence Officer communicated to the appropriate military authority certain facts extracted from The Pacific Island Year-Book for 1939, which stated that, despite being 'the least known of the world's civilised natives',

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<sup>39</sup> Minute Paper and Schedule of Conditions of Service: 9 May 1941, General Correspondence 1939-42, MP508/1, 275/701/328, A.A. (Vic.).

<sup>40</sup> Hall, Black Diggers, p. 45; Report: First Australian Army Departmental Conference - Employment of Natives in the Army, 19 June 1944, p. 1, AWM54, Written records 1939-45 War, 628/1/1, A.W.M. (Canberra). £8 a month was paid to Privates in the Second A.I.F.

Torres Strait Islander rates of pay looked good when compared with the rates paid to the Papuan Constabulary. They were:

Private 1st year	10/- a month
Private 2nd year	15/- a month
Private 3rd year	20/- a month
Lance Corporal	25/- a month
Corporal	30/- a month

(Col. W.J. Urquhart, Officer i/c, AMF-NC to the Secretary, Military Board, 20 February 1941, General Correspondence 1939-42, MP508/1, 274/701/328, A.A. (Vic.)). Low rates of pay for Torres Strait Islanders were also justified on the argument that the cost of 'rent, food, clothes, amusement, travelling, etc.' for the white soldier was 'considerable' while there was a very simple standard of living on the outer island communities (Report: C.F.M. Godtschalk, Capt. OC, "D" Coy, 5 January 1944, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra)).

<sup>41</sup> Minute Paper: Department of Army, 4 April 1941, MP508/1, 275/701/328, A.A. (Vic.).

they had made 'extraordinary progress' in recent years.<sup>42</sup> The military subsequently agreed that because there had been 'a degree of civilisation' of the people, 'provision for families might well prove necessary'. However, it was also suggested that there was 'a good deal of employment...on some islands for the women', which was far from the case.<sup>43</sup> The final decision on the matter was, once again, left to the Director who ultimately advised the army to follow the arrangement in force for men employed on boats away from their islands, which was that each man made an allotment of £1 or £1.10s.0d. for his dependants out of his monthly pay.<sup>44</sup>

Recruitments on the outer islands began on 9 June 1941. Three white Thursday Island identities were commissioned as the company's officers. They were Captain J.H. Cadzow and Lieutenants S. West-Newman and H.N. Hockings. Captain Cadzow and a small detachment of troops accompanied a military doctor and the local Protector on the recruitment drives to the outer islands.<sup>45</sup> Sixty-one men (36 Meriam men, 4 from Erub, 18 from Moa and 3 from Badu) were enlisted out of an anticipated 113.<sup>46</sup> The local Protector's interpretation was that, apart from Saibai where the councillors 'did not favour enlistment' and despite the shortfall in numbers, the opportunity of volunteering was

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<sup>42</sup>. R.W. Robson (compiler and editor), The Pacific Islands Year Book (Sydney, 1939), p. 220. The points raised to substantiate this claim were that the Torres Strait Islanders had: £100 000 invested in Government Bonds; a unique radio service and newspapers; a modern fishing fleet valued at over £20 000 which earned about £25 000 annually; their own bank accounts; a unique form of self-government. This sounds impressive when taken out of the context of their internal colonial status. All the Torres Strait Islanders' assets and moneys were controlled by the Department and they had little understanding how the Protector applied them.

<sup>43</sup> Minute Paper: Department of Army 4 April 1941, MP508/1, 275/301/328, A.A. (Vic.). In Chapter three I discussed the avenues of paid employment available to the women.

<sup>44</sup> Major-General Rob. E. Jackson, AMF-NC to the Secretary, Military Board, 29 April 1941, MP508/1, General Correspondence 1939-42, 275/701/328, A.A. (Vic.).

<sup>45</sup> Col. B.J. Urquhart, AMF-NC to the Secretary, Military Board, 14 June 1941, MP508/1, General Correspondence 1939-42, 275/701/393, A.A. (Vic.); Col. Alec M. Forbes, AMF-NC to Secretary, Military Board, 4 August 1941, MP508/1, General Correspondence 1939-42, 275/701/393, A.A. (Vic.).

<sup>46</sup> Col Alec M. Forbes, AMF-NC to Secretary, Military Board, 22 August 1941, MP508/1, General Correspondence 1939-42, 275/701/393, A.A. (Vic.); Col. G.P.W. Meredith, Commander Fixed Defences Northern Command to Director of Native Affairs, 30 May 1941, Aboriginals - Thursday Island Administration, A/4218, 5101-5800, Q.S.A.

'enthusiastically received'. The Director suggested that it had been 'an inappropriate time' to recruit as most of the eligible men were already signed up on pearling boats.<sup>47</sup> Military officers concluded that the disappointing response was because many of the men were 'dissatisfied with the rates of pay and comparisons were made by them between this pay and that of the coloured personnel in the 49 Battalion'.<sup>48</sup> The 'coloured' personnel referred to were not outer island men, but residents of Thursday Island. They were men of 'Malay' or 'Filipino' and Torres Strait Islander descent and they were not under the Director's control. With further recruitments until October 1941 the total number of enlistments rose to 106 (Meriam men 61, St. Paul's 13, Badu 6, Ugar 1, Mabuiag 9, Erub 7, Poid 7, Yam 1 and Moa 1).<sup>49</sup>

In December 1941, the question of the payment of allotments to the men's dependants was once again raised. The Premier of Queensland, W. Forgan Smith, wrote to the Prime Minister in December 1941 drawing the latter's attention to the monthly rates of pay, which ranged from £3.10s.0d. for a Private to £4.15s.0d. for a Corporal, the highest rank any Torres Strait Islander soldier could attain. The Premier pointed out that these amounts were inadequate for the support of immediate families not to mention mothers and fathers or even more distant relatives. It was emphasised that 'it was characteristic of this race that they consistently support[ed] their dependents [sic]'. A further reason was that it would be an inducement for more men to enlist if it became necessary to recruit again on the outer islands.<sup>50</sup> As always,

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<sup>47</sup> Director of Native Affairs to Under Secretary, Department of Health and Home Affairs, 4 July 1941, A/4218, 5001-5800, 41.5643, Q.S.A.

<sup>48</sup> Forbes to Military Board, 22 August 1941, MP508/1, 275/701/393, A.A. (Vic.). McKernan suggested that 'part of the "failure" of recruiting' on the mainland in the early stages of the war also 'lay in the rates of pay offered recruits' (McKernan, All In!, p. 16).

<sup>49</sup> Col. Alec M. Forbes, AMF-NC to Secretary, Military Board, 30 October 1941, MP508/1, General Correspondence 1939-42, 275/701/393, A.A. (Vic.).

<sup>50</sup> W. Forgan Smith, Premier, to Prime Minister, 5 December 1941, MP508/1, 10/719/23, A.A. (Vic.). If the allowances suggested by the Premier had been granted in December 1941, the total family rate for an Torres Strait Islander Private, his wife and one child would have been £5.15s.0d a month (Private's Pay £3.10s.0d., wife's allotment £1.10s.0d., child's 15s.0d). Looking at a white Private's pay before October 1941, his wife and one child received £2.16s.0d. a week out of his pay and he was left with 'one shilling a day for himself'. Prime Minister Robert Menzies justified the low rate of army pay for white soldiers on

the final decision rested with the Director. He reiterated his initial stand on the payment of such benefits: allotments were to be taken from each soldier's pay and transmitted to the outer islands through the Protector's accounts, as was done in the civil employment of seamen.<sup>51</sup> This negative resolution adversely affected the women's potential spending power during 1942 and 1943.

Ironically, as late as August 1942, the Deputy Director of Native Affairs was forced to draw the Department of the Army's attention to the fact that on 12 June the District Finance Officer had been requested to make payment of all allotments to the Director but that this had not been done. The army was requested to give the matter its urgent attention.<sup>52</sup> Urgent indeed! By this time many of the women on the outer islands were experiencing severe financial hardship, of which fact the army was not totally ignorant. As early as mid-March a copy of a report written by the Intelligence Officer at Thursday Island had been sent to the appropriate army officer. It noted:

Since evacuation most of the Islanders [seamen] have returned to their respective islands, and are now without [paid] employment of any kind...They are, in the main living on the child endowment or rations.<sup>53</sup>

Because of the army's bureaucratic delays, the women's economic viability was being affected. However, what caused the women even greater concern during the first half of 1942 was the further enlistment of their able-bodied men.

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The Japanese advance southward was alarmingly rapid. Labor Prime Minister, John Curtin, frustrated by the British government's seeming

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the premise that 'the call to military service [was] a call to patriotism' (Gavin Long, To Benghazi (Canberra, 1952), p. 66). In October 1941, under the newly elected Curtin Labor government's war budget, a white Private, his wife and one child received £3.6s.6d. a week ('Labor Government's New War Budget', Townsville Daily Bulletin, 30 October 1941, p. 5). However, according to the war historian Gavin Long, the increase was only enough to enable a white family to 'subsist' (Long, To Benghazi, p. 66).

<sup>51</sup> Secretary, Department of Army, to Department of Treasury, 9 April 1942, MP508/1, General Correspondence 1939-42, 275/701/376, A.A. (Vic.).

<sup>52</sup> Deputy Director of Native Affairs to District Finance Officer, Department of Army, 18 August 1942, Written records, 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/1/1, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>53</sup> Bolton to Director, 12 March 1942, BP242/1, CA753, Q25356, A.A. (Qld).

indifference to Australia's desperate plight in late 1941, determined to link Australia's hopes and plans with the United States of America.<sup>54</sup> On 27 December 1941 he announced: 'without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom'.<sup>55</sup> The first American troops landed on Australian soil on 5 January 1942, and General Douglas MacArthur arrived in Melbourne on 17 March to take up his position as Commander of the South-West Pacific Forces. He subsequently assessed Australia's position:

The immediate and imperative problem which confronted me was the defense of Australia itself. Its actual military situation had become almost desperate. Its forces were weak to an extreme, and Japanese invasion was momentarily expected. The bulk of its ground troops were in the Middle East, while the United States had only one division present, and that but partially trained. Its air force was equipped with almost obsolete planes and was lacking not only in engines and spare parts, but in personnel. Its navy had no carriers or battleships. The outlook was bleak.

MacArthur quickly expressed his opposition to the purely 'passive defense' strategy for Australia which lay behind the 'so-called Brisbane line' concept. He formulated a new strategy. His forces would move forward into eastern Papua and halt the Japanese in the Owen Stanley Ranges - 'to make the fight for Australia beyond its own borders'.<sup>56</sup>

Simultaneously, the Federal Labor government passed what Hasluck described as 'totalitarian' regulations under the National Security Act, which had been amended in 1940 to give the government just such powers. No aspect of civilian life would be left untouched by these regulations, which Prime Minister John Curtin saw as absolutely necessary to direct the whole community toward the 'essential needs' of the war. To him, the government's objective had to be to ensure that the resources of 'manpower and woman-power be appraised and applied in the best possible way' for the benefit of the nation now on a total-war footing. Under the National Security (Manpower) Regulations, adopted on 29 January 1942, a Manpower Directorate was set up. Labour was immediately transferred from non-essential to essential industry. Not everyone agreed that Curtin's far-reaching National Security regulations were necessary or appropriate but he never wavered under his opposition. While the very survival of the nation was at stake, he

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<sup>54</sup> MacArthur, Reminiscences, p. 152.

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Hasluck, Government and the People, p. 39.

<sup>56</sup> MacArthur, Reminiscences, p. 152.

claimed the Australian people, their services, and their property should not remain inviolate.<sup>57</sup> On the mainland, except where able-bodied men were employed in essential industries, young men were called up for armed service.

By mid-1941, as will be recalled, there had been growing concern for the security of Torres Strait. Thus, the army was forced to waive its former ethnocentric policy on black enlistments and a company of Torres Strait Islander men had been formed to serve on Thursday Island. Now, with an overwhelming demand for troops to take MacArthur's offensive campaign off-shore, it was inevitable that the army would again target outer island men for service in the Torres Strait area. Japan's focus was fixed on Port Moresby. Major-General Morris of the New Guinea Force stated that whoever held Port Moresby would control the 'vitally important' supply line through Torres Strait.<sup>58</sup> Not only would this close the sea lane to allied shipping but it would also place the small outer island communities in an extremely vulnerable position. Soon after the bombing of Nurupai (Horn Island), further recruitments began in earnest. Consideration of the moral issue of enlistment, which continued to concern some members of the Aboriginal community, was not a stumbling block to enlistment for Torres Strait Islander men who, although daunted by the process, saw army service as their ticket to freedom.<sup>59</sup>

#### Recruitment - 1942

During 1941, approximately 500 Torres Strait Islanders had been employed in the marine industry. This number was considerably reduced when the 1942 season began. About 100 men found employment on master boats which subsequently transferred their operations to southern ports.<sup>60</sup> Some company boats also located their operations away from Torres Strait.<sup>61</sup> Thus, with these men absent from their home islands in early 1942, military recruitment necessitated not only visiting all of the outer islands but also locating the luggers which were working along the coast of Queensland as far south as Mackay. The old people expressed their present recollections of how recruitment was carried

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<sup>57</sup> Hasluck, Government and the People, pp. 120-121, 283-284.  
<sup>58</sup> 'Port Moresby Now Vital to Australia', Courier Mail, 18 December, 1942, p. 1.  
<sup>59</sup> Hall, Black Diggers, p. 12.  
<sup>60</sup> A.R., Deputy Director of Native Affairs for Eighteen Months ended 30 June 1942, Q.P.P. 1942, p. 696.  
<sup>61</sup> Int. 097.



out. A Purma man recalled: 'An army launch called Reliance was sent to advise all fishing vessels to return immediately to their nearest port and report to army officials'. He continued his story: 'Poruma and Caroline were at Dugong Island and because the south-east wind was blowing they sailed to Cooktown for shelter...At Cooktown they were told to sail to Cairns'.<sup>62</sup> The crew on a Badu lugger was also sent back to Cairns: 'We were working on the coast outside of Palm Island and up to Cooktown way...we were caught [emphasis added] by the Australian Army and ordered to go to Cairns...later we went back to the Torres Strait'.<sup>63</sup> The boats were intercepted 'a long way away from home...They never saw their parents and families. They reported from the working area straight to Thursday Island'.<sup>64</sup> Enlistment was not a matter of choice: 'They called everyone. They said, "Anchor your boats and go into the army camp". They never asked them, "Do you want to join army?"'<sup>65</sup> The men picked up by the recruiting party aboard the Reliance were afraid to disobey the officer's orders:

*The boat from T.I. it was looking for trochus boats...we were in there at Portland Roads cutting our firewood, then after that we had a big dance, Aboriginal and Torres Strait mixed up...Mr. Hockings was in the launch. Mr. Cadzow was captain. They came in the dinghy, pulling Mr. Hockings, and went up where we're dancing, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.<sup>66</sup> The boat come in and Mr. Hockings said to us, "Take the boat back to T.I.". They had machine gun on the boat and we don't disobey, we followed Mr. Hockings. We go straight to T.I. and we signed on the army.<sup>67</sup>*

Once intercepted, the seamen came immediately under orders from the army. Those on the Purma boats said that, when they arrived in Cairns, the men and the luggers were 'now under the authority of the army. The army after giving them some foodstuffs, ordered them to sail non-stop from Cairns to T.I.'. After four days' sailing, they arrived at Thursday Island. There they left the boat and joined the army.<sup>68</sup>

The present perceptions of the Torres Strait Islanders were that recruiting was carried out indiscriminately and in such a manner as to arouse fear, particularly amongst the women:

*The army boat came, they grabbed those boys off the boats and what's left on the islands they went around recruiting. Just grabbed anyone. More or less they don't ask, grabbed*

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<sup>62</sup> Int. 064. These boats belonged to clans on Purma.

<sup>63</sup> Walter Nona, Early History Workshop, March 1987.

<sup>64</sup> Pearson, Early History Workshop, March 1987.

<sup>65</sup> Int. 093.

<sup>66</sup> Old Torres Strait Islanders talk about 'pulling' the row boat rather than rowing it.

<sup>67</sup> Int. 126.

<sup>68</sup> Pearson, Early History Workshop, March 1987.

*them and sorted them out on T.I. If they cannot go through the doctor, they send them back to the island.*<sup>69</sup>

Men who 'weren't suitable to be soldiers' were recruited.<sup>70</sup> Hall contends that in their haste to recruit the men, the army relaxed medical requirements - chest x-rays and blood and urine tests, standard procedures for white recruits, were not carried out and men with flat feet were accepted.<sup>71</sup> They took children. A Masig woman recalled: 'They pointed to the boys and said, "How old are you? You go"'.<sup>72</sup> A boy of eleven or twelve was taken without his father's permission. One man recalled: 'They took him, put him in the boat and said, "You got to come"'. He served as a batman and 'only got pocket money, no wages like the soldiers. He had to clean the boots, 1s.6d'.<sup>73</sup> A Saibai woman recalled: 'Many of the young army fellows were very young, only seventeen or eighteen and some hadn't begun to shave. Some cried for their parents as they left'.<sup>74</sup> There were mothers who hid their young sons.<sup>75</sup> However, as was also the case on the mainland, there were the fearless, under-age boys on the islands who wanted to join up. George Mye, a long-time leader in Torres Strait, recalled that he was one such hopeful. He was on Thursday Island in early 1942:

*I thought it was a good excuse to put on a big pair of pants and I put my age on...the day I went down, bad luck, don't get in. The corporal was a relation, "Go back home and look after baba and ama", he said.*

A couple of months later, while recruiting was taking place on his island, he saw another under-age boy accepted without question.<sup>76</sup>

There were many recollections of white armed soldiers arriving on the islands and recruiting the men 'at gun point'.<sup>77</sup> One man said it was not like 1941 when the men were asked if they wanted to join; in 1942 the 'sergeant fired a pistol in the middle of the street and

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<sup>69</sup> Int. 114.

<sup>70</sup> Pearson, Early History Workshop, March 1987.

<sup>71</sup> Hall, Black Diggers, pp. 38-39.

<sup>72</sup> Personal communication with Masig woman, Cairns, November 1993.

<sup>73</sup> Interview 124, Thursday Island, February 1989.

<sup>74</sup> Thursday Island State High School Students (TISHSS) (ed.), Torres Strait at War: a recollection of wartime experiences (Thursday Island, 1987), pp. 38, 19. Shaving was an important step in an island boy's life. On Boigu when a boy's beard began to grow his mother told her brother, whose 'responsibility it [was] to introduce the boy to manhood,...."My son's becoming an adult"'. The brother said, '"Go tell your husband. The matter will be taken care of"' (Boigu Community, Boigu, p. 48).

<sup>75</sup> Int. 072.

<sup>76</sup> Int. 065.

<sup>77</sup> Int. 124.

frightened the boys to join. After the 1941 and 1942 recruit nobody's left except school children, women and more or less older ones'.<sup>78</sup> A St. Paul's man, Thomas Lowah, wrote in his biography that 'officers came with escorts and with fixed bayonets and revolvers. They asked who would join up. My people did not hesitate in putting up their hands, they were more scared than willing...thinking they may get shot by the officers'.<sup>79</sup> However, George Mye's recollection was that when the recruiting party came to his island 'the sergeant wore a pistol [but] he didn't threaten anyone. They had the gun and bayonet to protect the officers'.<sup>80</sup> An Anglican priest who went to Torres Strait after the war said that no 'press gang' tactics were used to recruit the men and he thought that under-age boys may have been taken because they did not know their birth dates.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, the weight of evidence in the testimonies of the people cannot be discounted: nor can the strength of their convictions, after almost fifty years, be ignored. A Masig woman recalled:

They took all those men and never warn them. Just take them with the gun and bayonet and uniform and all Torres Strait women ran away. They pointed the gun, "You got to go, you got to go". The women ran away with the kids into the bush, everybody ran, all day and night they stayed in the bush.

She said that the men 'never talked with their wives, they just signed on...the poor women cried, they were left on the islands, some had nothing in the house'.<sup>82</sup> The women on Poid were very confused:

The sergeant came out recruiting, taking all the men and boys to go over to Badu to recruit, but when they did go over they didn't come back. The wives cried when their husbands went and didn't come back. The women didn't understand what was going to happen to them.<sup>83</sup>

A Saibai woman remembered that the women ran to the old trenches which had been dug during World War One: 'They went inside the olden day holes because they were frightened. They all sat down inside, they didn't care what was inside the holes, snakes or anything'.<sup>84</sup> Perhaps the major source of their fear was that they 'didn't know anything about the war. We were like the blind lead the blind. It was a sad

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<sup>78</sup> Int. 116.

<sup>79</sup> Lowah, Eded Mer, p. 75.

<sup>80</sup> Int. 065.

<sup>81</sup> H.E. Palmer, Women on Thursday Island during the Second World War, 19 March 1991 (in author's possession). Palmer was an Anglican Priest on Thursday Island immediately after the war.

<sup>82</sup> Int. 072.

<sup>83</sup> Int. 071.

<sup>84</sup> Int. 115.

time'.<sup>85</sup> These were the recollections of old people about their present perceptions of how they had been treated in the unprecedented circumstances of the Pacific War.

A few of the new recruits were subsequently returned home:

*Next morning after they arrived on Thursday Island everybody was in camp. The officer asked the sergeant, "Which people did you pick up from the islands? Put them outside". They lined up Ugar and Erub men, and they asked what jobs we had been doing on the islands. I was chairman. "All right, ship him out". He told me, "Tomorrow the truck will pick you up, straight down to the wharf and take you back to the island. The chairman got to go back, coloured teacher, you got to go back, policeman you go back and the manager".*<sup>86</sup>

For the men who did not return there were mixed emotions. There was a lot of excitement, they remembered, about what they could learn in the army and about what they believed their prospects would be when peace was restored. By the same token, they could not divorce themselves from the knowledge that their women and children had been abandoned by the white administration. The women would have to maintain their families under hitherto unprecedented circumstances of fear and uncertainty and with little or no money. Several veterans' reflections were: 'We were too far from our wives. They are lonely, no husbands, we are sorry for them, but it can't be helped...That was cruel to take those men and leave all those women and kids'; 'My wife was told we were in army. You have to cry because you leave your mother and your wife'; 'Out on the island they felt insecure. How could a woman mind her family without the help of her husband? She believes that most of the support comes from her husband'; 'When we were on T.I. we always think about our mothers, fathers, sisters. We worry about them'.<sup>87</sup>

All around Torres Strait there was sadness:

*When all that was going on, it brought a lot of sadness, sorrow and even brought tears to the Torres Strait Islanders' eyes on that day because they had never seen anything like that before, seeing all the men and young boys taken away from their homes to go and defend their country and their islands, their homes, their families.*<sup>88</sup>

The men's recollections, after so many years, still reflected the poignancy of the women's wartime situation.

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<sup>85</sup> Interview 073, Mer, January 1989.

<sup>86</sup> Int. 028.

<sup>87</sup> Interview 080, Masig, January 1989; Int. 127; Int. 126; Interview 103, Mabuiag, May 1990; Interview 119, Masig, January 1989.

<sup>88</sup> Pearson, Early History Workshop, March 1987.

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This discussion on recruitment raises the question: Did the men join voluntarily or were they coerced? Beckett concluded the TSLI men were all 'volunteers' and a strong motive for enlistment was the belief they would receive a 'better deal' after the war.<sup>89</sup> Hall also believed the men 'enlisted voluntarily', although he suggested they had 'little alternative but to serve' given the impressment of all luggers and cutters in the Strait meant the seamen had lost their principal means of livelihood.<sup>90</sup> In George Mye's poem, the TSLI men '*hopped in to do their share...to keep all Australia free*'. There is no hint of coercion in these interpretations. One old TSLI man gave his own interpretation of the distinction between volunteers and those recruited. He and a mate were on Thursday Island in late 1941 when Captain Cadzow and Lieutenants West-Newman and Hockings asked them if they wanted to join the army. They said they did but were told to go home and wait for the army boat to pick them up: '*When the boat went out to pick us up we were already volunteered...I was not a recruit. I signed on. I was a volunteer here on T.I., me and my mate*'.<sup>91</sup> Apart from this man, why did so many people talk about having no choice; being told or ordered to join up? In the people's minds, was there a distinction between volunteering and being recruited? Why was there such a consensus in the interpretations about the menacing manner in which the 1942 recruitments were conducted if, as suggested, the guns were part of military procedure only?

The Torres Strait Islanders seemed to be saying two things: the men wanted to join the army, but it was the manner of recruitment that angered and even frightened them and made them feel they had no choice. The adults would have known about white men who, in the past, had come to their islands in uniforms and with guns to exert authority over them. The story of Captain Bligh's arrival at Tudu in 1792 and his use of fire power against the bows and arrows of Kebisu and his men, was well known. In 1879, when the Queensland government completed the annexation of the Torres Strait islands, Captain Pennefather of the Q.G.S. Pearl, on that government's authority, visited the communities

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<sup>89</sup> Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 63.

<sup>90</sup> Robert A. Hall, 'Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders', in Desmond Ball (ed.), Aborigines in Defence of Australia (Canberra, 1991), p. 37.

<sup>91</sup> Int. 074.

to proclaim the people's 'new subordinate status'.<sup>92</sup> At Tudu, where Bligh had fired at Kebisu, the ship's guns were again fired to demonstrate the power of the new masters.<sup>93</sup> An old Kaurareg woman said that while she did not see Frank Jardine, the Police Magistrate at Somerset, shoot Muralag people, the elders said that they saw him shoot six people.<sup>94</sup> Frank Jardine, who died in 1919, and his father John were notorious for their treatment of Torres Strait Islanders and Aborigines around Cape York Peninsula. The same old woman was twelve years old in 1922 when Bleakley came to Keriri (Hammond Island) with policemen to forcibly remove her people to Adam (later named Poid) on Moa: *'My mummy told me, "Don't cry"...I was frightened they would shoot us'.*<sup>95</sup> An old Kubin man recalled that incident too: *'I was only a kid...I hid behind my mother and grandmother. When the police took the revolver out and try to make me frightened I had never seen that thing before'.*<sup>96</sup> The recruiting soldiers' appearance and authoritative manner in 1942 must have revived memories of the stories of white men's violence toward Torres Strait Islanders in the past. Their colonial history had left them with gleaming constellations of this violence, still reflected through the clouds of past generations. Thus, it is understandable even the men felt intimidated despite their willingness to join the army. For the women, their fears were even more justified because they had been so isolated from the outside world. As will be discussed in Chapter seven, the women's fears of white men were great and when those men were armed and in uniform they presented an even more fearful spectacle for the women. And, because of their ignorance about Torres Strait Islanders, the recruiters were totally insensitive to fears which had been nourished in the people's minds by a history of adverse dealings with white men.

It might also be argued that the Torres Strait Islanders' perceptions of recruitment were influenced by another four decades of

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<sup>92</sup> The islands in Torres Strait were annexed to Queensland in two bites. The first was in 1872 when all islands within a sixty mile radius were annexed. In 1879 the remainder became part of Queensland also.

<sup>93</sup> See Sharp, Stars of Tagai, p. 27.

<sup>94</sup> Somerset on Port Albany was commissioned in 1864 as a joint venture between the British and Queensland governments to serve as a refuge for shipwrecked sailors and an outpost in the Torres Strait region. It was found unsuitable as a harbour and following the government's annexation of the islands in Torres Strait within sixty miles of the coast in 1872, Thursday Island became the centre of administration under Police Magistrate H.M. Chester.

<sup>95</sup> Int. 102.

<sup>96</sup> Interview 051, Kubin Village, March 1990.

struggle for freedom. No one would argue that the old people's memories were frozen in 1942, but it is also relevant that no one suggested they were pressured to join during the first recruitment in 1941: 'They didn't force people to go then. They asked if you would like to join...That was recruit time but we volunteered' (again there is a distinction between recruiting and volunteering).<sup>97</sup> The difference in 1942 was that there was an urgency about everything.<sup>98</sup> Recruits had to be found quickly. In this context, and in the context of their treatment as second-class citizens under a paternalistic administration which determined what was best for them, the Torres Strait Islander interpretations are very credible. Moreover, the Director's influence with the army was persuasive and it is reasonable to suggest that the people's choice was not an issue for him. Recruitment was another reminder of their subordinate status.<sup>99</sup>

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From 1941 until 1946, about 800 out of approximately 900 able-bodied Torres Strait Islander men in a population of 3 727, enlisted from the outer island communities.<sup>100</sup> In the early months of 1942 not

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<sup>97</sup> Int. 116; Int. 127.

<sup>98</sup> Hall, Black Diggers, pp. 38-39.

<sup>99</sup> It might be argued that white Australian able-bodied males had no choice about enlistment in early 1942. However, they had a status as Australian citizens to which the Torres Strait Islanders could only aspire in 1942. They could not vote and they were treated as second-class people, not even citizens, by the dominant society.

<sup>100</sup> Brigadier i/c Administration, AMF to Allied Land Forces HQ, 29 October 1943, p. 1, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 506/5/10, A.W.M. (Canberra); Commonwealth of Australia, Official Year Book, No. 34, 1941, p. 307. The figure of 800 recruits was quoted to me in a conversation with Dana Ober in 1990. In 1983, he compiled the list of ex-TSLI men entitled to back army pay after a group of them had successfully negotiated a \$7.4 million settlement with the Commonwealth Government for distribution amongst those Torres Strait Islanders on the list. The Director's report for 1943 corroborated that figure, although the 1945 and 1946 reports both suggested a figure of 700 (A.R., Director of Native Affairs for Twelve Months ended 30 June 1943, Q.P.P., 1943, Vol. 1, p. 685; A.R., Director of Native Affairs for Year Ended 30 June 1945, Q.P.P. 1945, Vol. 2, p. 1078; A.R., Director of Native Affairs for Year Ended 30 June 1946, Q.P.P. 1946, Vol. 2, p. 1040). Hall concluded from his research that '830 Islanders served during the war (812 in the Torres Strait Force alone)' (Black Diggers, p. 39). Beckett gave a figure of 900 (custom and colonialism, p. 63). Whatever the exact number, out of a population of 3 727 the majority of the able-bodied men in Torres Strait did leave their home islands to serve in the

all able-bodied men had responded: *'Some didn't turn up. They hid in the bush. They didn't understand properly'*; some were dissatisfied with the amount of army pay.<sup>101</sup> These men were picked up in subsequent recruiting drives. By September 1943, there had been an almost clean sweep of able-bodied men from the islands. For example, in July there were only about ten able-bodied men left on Mer.<sup>102</sup> Then in September, after four recruits were picked up, it was reported to the Fortress Commander that there were 'practically nil' able-bodied men on that Island.<sup>103</sup> An army medical officer found that a similar situation existed on Dauan in May 1944:

I found the island to be peopled by approximately 70 natives, consisting of women and children, with the exception of 4 adult males, two of whom were aged and decrepit, and another, the local school teacher, to be in an enfeebled state of health. I was informed that all able bodied males of the island had been removed for military duties.<sup>104</sup>

This had been the case for a long time.

It has been suggested that even though a 'higher proportion of males' was absent from the communities during the Pacific War than when the able-bodied men worked on the luggers, the absence of even the number of men who enlisted could not be seen as 'unusual or abnormal': it was a 'regular aspect of island life'.<sup>105</sup> It was certainly correct to say that all communities lost large numbers of able-bodied men to the marine industry for long periods of time each year. So long, as one woman recalled, that *'we don't see them from February to December. We had our babies and our husbands don't know'*.<sup>106</sup> It is also true that the women were aware of the dangers which constantly beset seamen: sickness, sharks, the bends. They were very happy when the boats returned and there was no flag flying half-mast to indicate that a crew

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- 101 TSLI on Thursday Island.  
Int. 078.
- 102 Brig. Lt. Gen. S.F. Legge, Comd. First Army to LHQ (Aust),  
23 July 1943, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 506/5/10,  
A.W.M. (Canberra).
- 103 Brig. Lt. Gen. S.F. Legge, Comd. First Army to LHQ (Aust),  
15 September 1943, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54,  
506/5/10, A.W.M. (Canberra).
- 104 Report: Medical Condition of Torres Strait Islanders, Col.  
G.N. Robinson, A.D.M.S. 4 Aust. Div., 22 May 1944, General,  
Thursday Island, TR1227, Health position of Torres Strait  
Islanders, Bundle 140, Q.S.A. The survey on Dauan was made  
by F/Lieut. S.D. Mecoles and incorporated in Col.  
Robinson's report.
- 105 Palmer, Women on Thursday Island during the Second World  
War, 19 March 1991.
- 106 Int. 068.



member had lost his life. However, modern warfare was a very different thing. It brought a totally new dimension to their lives. It disrupted the peace and serenity which they had experienced on the islands since their traditional wars had been rendered obsolete by the influence of the pearlers, missionaries and government men from the mid-1800s.<sup>107</sup> It had caused the white administrators, upon whom they had been made totally dependent, to desert them and it had taken their able-bodied men away to a fate the women could not imagine. Many women, quite justifiably, feared that something dreadful was about to happen to them, not because the Japanese people were the fearful enemy white women believed them to be or they understood the intentions of those in power in Japan and the strategies of the Japanese High Command, but because of those visible elements of modern warfare, the planes, bombs, warships, submarines and mines. The enlisted men on Thursday Island believed that they were helping to defend their families on the outer islands. However, this was little comfort to most women who really did not know what the men were doing there. For a few only, there were other ways of seeing the situation. One woman said that her old father had a blind faith about their safety on Badu because the 'boys were in the army'. Therefore, he refused to let his daughters evacuate into the bush with the other villagers.<sup>108</sup> Some old people were afraid but thought it did not matter if they were killed because they had lived their lives.<sup>109</sup> Nonetheless, the reaction to their situation, recalled by a Purma woman after so long, must have been widespread amongst the women:

*My husband left me with a baby two months old and a boy. I got real cross. We ran inside the mangroves or the bushes when the planes come. The three of us we sat together and we would die together if we were bombed. It was an awful life.*<sup>110</sup>

From whatever angle it is taken, the women's situation must be viewed as worse than when the men were at sea.

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<sup>107</sup> Langbridge, *Enculturation to Evangelization*, p. 58.

<sup>108</sup> Int. 093.

<sup>109</sup> Int. 069.

<sup>110</sup> Interview 123, Keriri, April 1990. This woman found it hard to reconcile the taking of her husband into the army and the situation in which the women and children were left. Her testimony reflected how incomprehensible the war was to her.

## Army time

On Thursday Island, the enlisted men embarked upon a whole new experience: they were excited to have a 'soldiers cap'.<sup>111</sup> A white Digger recalled their arrival in the camp on Thursday Island:

I could hear the thump, thump, thump of feet in the night. I felt sorry for them because half of them didn't know where the hell they were: just marched into camp dead of night...didn't know whether they were going to be slaughtered or not.<sup>112</sup>

They fell into army routine, but not without a sense of confusion, which an old Meriam man described:

*When we join the army we don't know anything. When he gives the command, we don't know about left hand, right hand turn. No savvy anything from A to Z, - about turn, right turn, left turn, right incline, left incline. Strange, because we no savvy anything.*

Army discipline had to be learnt and the old man's recollection was: 'That was very hard. We didn't think about the army before. The army taught us discipline. Our culture, white people's culture they are different cultures'.<sup>113</sup> Another veteran explained:

*I got everything from the Second World War, discipline of life, discipline of war, discipline of living...to examine myself and the attitude of myself, I learnt a kind of respect for people, any person black or white.*<sup>114</sup>

The thing was: 'We joined the army and we learnt something about Europeans'.<sup>115</sup>

The men were initially formed into a labour force for the army. Later their skills were used in special ways. Sixty former seamen worked for a time at their old trade, pearling. During the New Guinea campaign, the army needed gold lip pearl shell and cowries to pay the indigenous people in their own currency.<sup>116</sup> An old Badu man said the

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<sup>111</sup> Int. 072. Initially, the men were issued with 'forage caps' rather than the slouch hat which was 'a potent symbol of the Australian Army' (Hall, Black Diggers, p. 34).

<sup>112</sup> Cited in Sharp, Springs of Originality, p. 244.

<sup>113</sup> Int. 073.

<sup>114</sup> Int. 144.

<sup>115</sup> Int. 073. Although Torres Strait Islander seamen had contact with Europeans when they were away from their islands, it was not like working with them in the close and sustained circumstances of army life.

<sup>116</sup> Hall, Black Diggers, p. 42. Hall stated that twenty tons of shell were harvested worth an estimated £23 987 in terms of New Guinea labour. He also stated that this employment 'created some resentment' among the soldiers who were diving for the shell. The TSLI men believed that some white officers were getting benefits from these shelling activities and they considered they were entitled to a

Torres Strait Islander had 'everything in his head': 'I don't use a chart', he said, 'because I have got the chart in my head. I know it to Swain Reef outside Mackay...the last reef on the Barrier Reef'.<sup>117</sup> A Water Transport Company was formed and, with their knowledge of the sea, they navigated small craft around the treacherous waters of Torres Strait, along the New Guinea coastline and into the Gulf of Carpentaria.<sup>118</sup>

The TSLI men were given the opportunity to gain knowledge of things previously denied them. Pre-war the Department of Native Affairs had not trusted them to do such things as 'touch the knobs on the [island] radios'.<sup>119</sup> An old man also recalled that the 'government didn't let [them] use a motor in the boat before time' because they might burn themselves.<sup>120</sup> In the army they became air compressor operators, boot-makers, crane drivers, carpenters, motor transport drivers, motor cyclists, plumbers and tinsmiths, pigeon handlers, signallers, tractor drivers and winchmen.<sup>121</sup> An old soldier recalled: 'We trained to be soldiers, and a carpenter, and any such work which we were given to do even to do what engineers do...then we started to learn about patrolling and all these things'.<sup>122</sup> And, even though the white teachers had thought they were not reliable enough to touch the knobs on the radios, the army gave some Torres Strait Islanders the opportunity to become wireless operators, at which they proved their reliability.<sup>123</sup>

They did jobs which were not strictly 'men's work'. A Saibai woman explained that 'all house cooking was done by the women' but that the men helped when there was a kapmauri or when 'the woman was sick, he would cook'.<sup>124</sup> The new recruits, however, did not envisage that

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share. I too was told this during a conversation with an old TSLI man, although I gained the impression that he did not know why the shell was harvested (Int. 119).

<sup>117</sup> Int. 097.

<sup>118</sup> TISHSS, Torres Strait at War, p. 6.

<sup>119</sup> Cited in Sharp, Springs of Originality, p. 244.

<sup>120</sup> Int. 098.

<sup>121</sup> Hall, Black Diggers, p. 56.

<sup>122</sup> Pearson, Early History Workshop, March 1987.

<sup>123</sup> Report: Training Wireless Exercise, 2-18 June 1945, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/4/4, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>124</sup> Int. 054. Other names for a kapmauri are amai, or amei. Definition: 'a sand oven' or 'to cook in a sand oven': 'Food for feasting, such as turtle, dugong, damper and bush vegetables, are prepared [wrapped in banana leaves or plaited strips of palm fronds], and placed on hot stones, lining the bottom of a pit dug in the sand. The food is covered with fragrant branches, hessian bags or a woven

they would have to do cooking and mess orderlies' duties for a whole lot of men. Nonetheless, the problem was overcome with the introduction of 'roster duty': then everyone was seen to be doing that work at some time. Subsequently, the white officers in the unit pronounced the quality of their food as 'excellent'.<sup>125</sup> Likewise, western-style medical care of the sick was not exactly men's work. In traditional times, the maidelaig, the medicine man or sorcerer in the white mind, applied his magical and practical therapeutic techniques in the treatment of the sick.<sup>126</sup> There were also bush medicines, used by everyone.<sup>127</sup> When their 'colonisers' arrived, health care evolved as the responsibility of the outsiders. Army time, however, gave Torres Strait Islander men practical experience in the use of European medical practices. A Meriam man remembered that although he was trained to 'shoot and kill the enemy', he also 'trained for the medical aid force...We learnt about medicines, bandaging and first aid, we worked in the Thursday Island hospital'.<sup>128</sup> The work horizons of many of the men broadened and they were, according to an old soldier, 'very thankful' because they 'never learnt anything about these things before'.<sup>129</sup> They were anxious to learn because they would need these skills in the new order of things envisaged after the war: a better life for their families.

Army time strengthened the men's resolve to stand up for themselves. A Boigu man recounted how initially they 'weren't being trained to do anything...they didn't give them ammunition'.<sup>130</sup> He plucked up courage and talked with the Major who said, 'Don't worry, you can have it. They gave us gear, and no worry', he said.<sup>131</sup> Another TSLI man said: 'I know nothing. We were all frightened, very frightened. It was very hard to speak English to the officers but we

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mat, sand and, finally, a sheet of corrugated iron. The food cooks for several hours in the sand oven' (Shnukal, Broken, p. 143).

<sup>125</sup> Forbes, AMF-NC to Military Board, 4 August 1941, MP508/1, 275/701/393, A.A. (Vic).

<sup>126</sup> David R. Moore, Arts and Crafts of Torres Strait (Aylesbury, Bucks, U.K., 1989), p. 32.

<sup>127</sup> See Chapter ten for discussion on health care in Torres Strait.

<sup>128</sup> Int. 126. This man became one of the few 'medical men' on the outer islands after the war and he was associated with that work for more than thirty years.

<sup>129</sup> Int. 073.

<sup>130</sup> Initially, the men did labouring work on military camp sites on Thursday Island; they worked on an underground hospital on Palilag (Goode Island) and dug a well there (Int. 063).

<sup>131</sup> Int. 063.

tried and then we got action, we were allowed to use the rifle'.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, contrary to army opinion in 1940, Torres Strait Islander men did get on well with their white counterparts: 'We were glad to work with white soldiers. We learnt things from them. They treated us well. We didn't fight with them'.<sup>133</sup> One white Digger said: 'I still think they're the equal (given the right weapons and further advanced training) of any soldier in the world. I had nothing but respect for them; I loved them'. He carried his concern for these men to his superiors:

I remember talking it over with my officers that they took the same oath, they could be ordered to go anywhere same as me or the others and they weren't getting the same amount of pay: they were only getting a pittance in pay. I always have thought it unfair.<sup>134</sup>

Among the white troops they earned the 'reputation as the best workers in the Strait'.<sup>135</sup> Many of their new found friends 'sympathised' with them and 'tried to radicalise them'.<sup>136</sup> In late 1943, seven TSLI men went on patrol with white troops to Merauke, an area in Dutch New Guinea disputed by the Japanese. Two were wounded. Thereafter, the TSLI men were absolutely convinced that there could be no suggestion that they were 'second-class soldiers suited only for labouring'.<sup>137</sup> In addition, the men claimed that promises about pay increases had been made to them by their white officers while serving in Merauke.<sup>138</sup> If they were fighting men and not just labourers, they were adamant they were entitled to equal pay and equal rights with their white counterparts. Moreover, they wanted the abandonment of island laws, such as those which prohibited them from drinking alcohol and gambling for which they could be punished while white soldiers went unpunished.<sup>139</sup> Thus, their grievances forced the TSLI men to again act as a cohesive group. An Erub man said that although the three groups of Torres Strait Islanders, eastern, central and western, were in their 'own battalions', they had 'no feeling of hate' towards one another - 'no growl now'.<sup>140</sup> Whatever differences they had as separate island

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<sup>132</sup> Int. 144.

<sup>133</sup> Int. 072.

<sup>134</sup> Cited in Sharp, *Springs of Originality*, pp. 244-245.

<sup>135</sup> Thompson, *Impressions*, AWM54, 805/7/1, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>136</sup> Beckett, *custom and colonialism*, p. 65.

<sup>137</sup> Hall, *Black Diggers*, p. 48.

<sup>138</sup> Report: Alleged promise of increase in pay to Torres Strait Islanders, 5 January 1944, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>139</sup> Hall, *Black Diggers*, p. 52; Report: Sit-Down Strike, 30 December 1943, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>140</sup> Int. 103.

groups were put aside. On 30 December 1943, despite warnings that they risked charges of treason and they could be shot, the TSLI men went on a sit-down Strike. Their grievances aired, they returned to work on 31 December 1943.

Subsequent to the sit-down strike, it was suggested by army officers that the 'tactics' adopted by the strikers were those of trade unionists and that 'sorcery' had been used to force the participation of any who were hesitant. And, in words which smacked of the paternalism from which they had hoped to escape by enlistment, the army's conclusion was that the TSLI men 'knew they were doing wrong' and took their punishment with the 'firm resolve not to be lead blindly into anything again'.<sup>141</sup> Whether or not the men had adopted trade unionist practices or sorcery had been used to compel unwilling participants was not the core of the matter for them. As was the case at the time of the 1936 Maritime Strike, they were calling attention to what they believed were legitimate grievances.

The sit-down strike precipitated a conference in Melbourne in early 1944 between representatives of the army, the Queensland Public Service and the Department of Native Affairs. The members of the conference formulated recommendations related to rates of pay, deferred pay and dependants' allowances, and even though the army's preference was for all soldiers to serve under the same conditions to 'simplify administration', the new rates were still below those of their white counterparts. A Private's rate of pay was raised to £6.10s.0d. a month plus deferred pay at the rate of 1s.6d. per day. Dependant wives received 1s.6d. per day and a first child 1s.0d. - subsequent children received 6d. per day. There were proportional increases for ranks above Private. The new rates, were made retrospective from 1 July 1943, with the exception of deferred pay which was paid from December 1941 or from six months after the date of enlistment.<sup>142</sup> In a lengthy report compiled by the army dated 19 June 1944, these rates (just as illegal as the initial rates) were once again determined on the Director's advice: if the enlisted men received a greater income than they were likely to earn after the war, 'they may be spoilt from the

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<sup>141</sup> Report: Army Intelligence for week ending 9 January 1944, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>142</sup> Recommendations: Melbourne Conference for altered rates of pay, Torres Strait Island Infantry, 24 April 1944, Altered Rates of Pay - For T.S.I. Infantry, A/12257, Q.S.A.

State point of view for times of peace'.<sup>143</sup> This was undoubtedly the reason for his rejection of the higher pay scales from the outset. The army's acquiescence, however, was not unrelated to the greater 'sum involved' if these men received the proper rates of pay.<sup>144</sup>

O'Leary expressed his reservations about the increases. His concern was that the men would buy more drink or gamble the money whereas he wanted them to be encouraged to save their money 'with a view to purchasing and furnishing better class homes after the war and to re-equipping themselves for their trades'. To placate O'Leary, the army gave certain undertakings. It would discourage large withdrawals of money from the men's accounts, treat as a serious offence the supply of liquor to them by Whites, constantly check that the prohibition on gambling was enforced and educate the men to improve their knowledge of the value of money.<sup>145</sup> Such undertakings placed the army in the same paternalistic relationship with the Torres Strait Islanders as the Protector had had with them for four decades.

As in the late 1930s, the TSLI men's action in 1943 did not achieve the freedom and the equality they sought. Their settled rate of pay was raised from less than half to about two-thirds of that of the A.I.F. men, and their dependants' allowances and deferred pay were also less. Island laws on drinking and gambling were not abolished. Nevertheless, the monetary gains did give the women improved economic viability.

With the clean sweep of the able-bodied men from the islands, the women, children and old people were left defenceless on their communities with no back door of escape. They turned to face a new dilemma. How could they best protect themselves?

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<sup>143</sup> Minutes: Conference AAG First Aust Army, Mr. McCracken, Public Service Com., Q'ld State Government, n.d., AWM54, 628/1/1, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>144</sup> Report: Employment of Natives, 19 June 1944, p. 1, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/1/1, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>145</sup> Minute: Conference at Brisbane Director of Native Affairs, State of Queensland and AAG First Australian Army, p. 1, 15 May 1944, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/1/1, A.W.M. (Canberra).

## Chapter six Civil Defence - meeting the enemy

Dealing with the question of civil defence, the circumstances of the present war emergency are very different from the circumstances of any previous war emergency. On previous occasions the Commonwealth has never had to contemplate the possibility of attack or the possibility of air raids. The complete immunity of the Commonwealth from attack does not now exist, and less still is there complete immunity of the Commonwealth from air raids. The position today is that the people of the Commonwealth have to take into account these possibilities, and accordingly there has arisen a new problem - namely, the problem of civil defence, bringing with it additional obligations. Particularly do these possibilities concern Queensland with its great length of sea-coast.<sup>1</sup>

E. M. Hanlon, 1 February 1941

### On the mainland

At the outset of World War One (1914-1918), Australians responded with great enthusiasm for overseas service. It was the war to end all wars. However, only two decades later, Australia was again at war. On 3 December 1939, the conservative Australia Party Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, in his announcement that Great Britain had declared war against Germany, stated: 'as a result, Australia is also at war'.<sup>2</sup> Menzies 'passionately' believed that 'British institutions and the British way of life were synonymous with civilisation'.<sup>3</sup> Once they were put at risk he did not hesitate to commit this tiny off-shoot nation, sitting precariously on the Asian Pacific rim, to another war. This time, many Australians were not so convinced that the war had anything to do with them despite Menzies' assurance that 'Britain was fighting [Australia's] battles as well as her own'.<sup>4</sup> And, because there was now an even greater possibility than in the 1914-1918 war that Australia would be attacked, the government set the wheels in motion for the civil defence of the country.

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<sup>1</sup> Report: E.M. Hanlon on establishment and operations of Civil Defence of Queensland, 1 February 1941, Department of Defence (II) and Department of Army, MP729/6, Secret Correspondence files, multiple number series (class 401), 1936-1945, 82/713/13, A.A. (Vic.).

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Long, To Benghazi, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Manning Clark, A Short History of Australia (New York, 1969), p. 236.

<sup>4</sup> 'Second A.I.F. to serve in Europe', Melbourne Age, 9 December 1939, p. 29.



As was pointed out in Chapter four, responsibility for the evacuation of the civilian population was delegated by the Commonwealth Government to the six State Governments and, in 1941, the Department of the Army took responsibility for the Northern Territory. These agencies were also responsible for the general safety of all civilians and their property. Civil defence plans were just as imperative as those for evacuations. In March 1941, representatives from all of the State organisations met with the Commonwealth Director of Civil Defence in Melbourne to discuss 'uniformity and co-ordination' of plans.<sup>5</sup> Three months later a Commonwealth Department of Home Security was created with J.P. Abbott as Minister. Nevertheless, different policies and practices between the States evolved, such as, codes for air-raid warnings - in Queensland the warning siren gave a 'fluctuating note' while in New South Wales it was sounded by 'intermittent blasts'- and States varied in their colour codes for warnings. Such differences presented dangers in interpretation for people moving from State to State. Abbott visited each State in an attempt to co-ordinate plans and practices over a wide range of services.<sup>6</sup>

In the cities and larger towns with multi-storey buildings, industrial areas, wharves, airports, railways, and large populations, the civil defence problems were vast and complex. The efficiency of essential civil services, such as fire-fighting, ambulance, police, medical care and social services, were dependent upon finding voluntary workers at a time when enlistments were drastically depleting labour resources. Female air-raid wardens were recruited for daytime duty while middle-class women everywhere emerged from their domesticity to be trained in first aid, emergency care of children and Red Cross work.<sup>7</sup> Air-raid warning systems were installed all around the States. The needs of big cities with high noise levels required a complex network of sirens, for example,

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<sup>5</sup> Statement: Civil Defence, Appendix A, 31 May 1941, pp. 2-3, MP535/13, Directorate of Civil Defence Publication and Other Productions relating to civil defence and camouflage in Australia c1940-1944, Department Interior, File M41, A.A. (Vic.).

<sup>6</sup> Hasluck, Government and the People, pp. 636-645.

<sup>7</sup> Report: Plans Prepared and Measures Instituted for Civil Defence in Queensland, 1 February 1941, pp. 2-3, MP535/13, Directorate of Civil Defence Publication and Other Productions relating to civil defence and camouflage in Australia c1940-1941, Department of the Interior, File 41, A.A. (Vic.). The total number of wardens in Queensland in late 1941 was 9 411.

sixty-three were placed in fixed positions around Brisbane while lighter hand sirens were supplied to police or wardens in smaller coastal towns. In some communities, alerts were to be given by wardens with clackers or by blowing sharply on police whistles.<sup>8</sup> However, the emphasis was on cities and large towns. Fire-fighting equipment was upgraded and respirators for use by civilians in the event of gas warfare were ordered.<sup>9</sup> Decontamination dressing stations were set up and provision was made for the demolition of dangerous buildings. Householders were instructed in the press and by air-raid wardens how to construct their own garden trenches or refuge rooms, trenches were dug in streets and parks and building basements were converted to shelters.<sup>10</sup> Practice raids were conducted in schools and every child carried ear plugs and a stick to bite on.<sup>11</sup> Householders were required to be familiar with brown-out regulations, and enthusiastic 'foot-slogging' wardens tried to enforce strict compliance.<sup>12</sup> These were the sorts of measures adopted to meet the new problem of civil defence for certain areas on mainland Australia.

While the war was in Europe, life in Australia went on much as usual with many people enjoying a new economic prosperity: there was an air of unreality about it all. Thus, after an initial enthusiastic response in 1939, many air-raid wardens came to view their duties as onerous and irrelevant. A warden from Nowra in New South Wales commented: 'Neither the G.P.O. Sydney nor our gum trees appear to be in any immediate danger'. The sceptics decided that the 'enthusiasts' were being misled by government and that the whole business was a 'piece of amateurish political window-dressing'. Nevertheless, those who took their duties seriously continued to conduct air-raid practices, encourage people to gas-proof rooms in their homes and build shelters, as well as to brown-out and shatter-

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<sup>8</sup> Statement: Civil Defence, 31 May 1941, p. 4, MP535/13, M41, A.A. (Vic.).

<sup>9</sup> Prime Minister to Premier of Queensland, 8 January 1942, A1608/1, M41/1/9, A.A. (A.C.T.). In January 1942 one million civilian containers were on order from England, the face-pieces for which were produced in Australia.

<sup>10</sup> Report: Hanlon, 1 February 1941, p. 5, MP729/6, 82/713/13, A.A. (Vic.).

<sup>11</sup> Peggy Warner and Sadao Seno, The Coffin Boats: Japanese Midget Submarine Operations in the Second World War (London, 1986), p. 90. This equipment was to prevent ear damage and the biting of tongues in the event of bomb blasts.

<sup>12</sup> McKernan, All In!, p. 118.

proof their windows. Then in late 1941, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour brought the war closer to Australia and forced the stepping up of civil defence. City buildings were sand-bagged against incendiary bomb blasts and windows were taped to minimise the danger of splintering glass. Street black-outs, tested in earlier trials, were enforced. Cars crawled about the streets at night with headlights showing only a slit of light. Trench digging was accelerated. Sand was dumped in streets and parks to extinguish fires.<sup>13</sup> Air-raid precaution drills were seen as imperative in congested areas. The Sydney Morning Herald reported on 13 December that 130 staff and public from the Sydney General Post Office had been evacuated in three minutes to basement air-raid shelters designed to cater for 5 000 people. In New South Wales fire-fighting skills, which had taken 'three years to evolve', were tested.<sup>14</sup> In suburbs, the impromptu wail of sirens sent housewives and children fleeing to backyard trenches, transport ceased and streets were graveyard still.

Despite these preparations, on the eve of what was to be the realisation of that recurring nightmare - 'Oriental' aggression against Australia - and after years of fearing the worst and planning for it, there were doubts all around the country about the effectiveness of the civil defence measures.<sup>15</sup> In December 1941 air-raid wardens' posts in Sydney were reported to be 'almost completely without equipment'.<sup>16</sup> Two months later, trial air-raid warnings failed because 'only twenty-five per cent of wardens in the suburbs reported', and there was not enough shelter accommodation in the city.<sup>17</sup> In Townsville, the 'chief city of the threatened North Queensland coast', there were insufficient trailer pumps for fire-fighting, and fire-watching posts had no telephones. Ingham, the small sugar town further north, had only twelve whistles for the wardens, and the list of wardens was constantly recast because of departures from the district; fire-brigade staff dropped from twelve

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 23-25.

<sup>14</sup> 'City's Partial Blackout', Sydney Morning Herald, 13 December 1941, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> F.K. Crowley (ed.), A New History of Australia (Melbourne, 1974), p. 464.

<sup>16</sup> 'City's Partial Blackout', Sydney Morning Herald, 13 December 1941, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> 'First Daylight N.E.S. Trail', Sydney Morning Herald, 20 February 1942, p. 7.

to five.<sup>18</sup> The editor of the Brisbane Courier-Mail suggested that the Queensland Minister was 'simply playing with civil defence, treating it as a sort of Sunday diversion' because tests were conducted on that day in order to 'save air raid wardens and other officials from being distracted by city crowds'. A ridiculous plan, the editor asserted - drills should 'assume the worst possible conditions, a sudden alarm for a crowded city'. He hoped that the enemy would respect the Sunday timetable and not raid the city during the working week.<sup>19</sup> In this environment, people could only hope that their fears would not be realised.

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### Across the North

The real test of Australia's civil defence plans came in towns across the North and North-West of Australia. In June 1940, Arthur Miller, the newly-arrived Chief Surveyor in Darwin, was appointed chief warden. He zoned the town and appointed wardens. Two warnings of raids preceded the bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942. The first occurred on 11 December 1941. The Sydney Morning Herald reported that 'most of the town was completely blacked out', although wardens had to break the glass to extinguish lights left burning in a shop window. The locals complained that sirens were not loud enough.<sup>20</sup> A second alert was sounded in the early hours of New Year's Day 1942, but again no raid eventuated. The people lived expectantly. On 19 February Darwin was devastated by Japanese bombs. Ironically, the sounding of the air-raid sirens was delayed because of the slow military response to the coast watcher's report from Melville Island. The recollections of a Thursday Island man working in Darwin at the time confirm its inadequate civil defence:

*We had mock battles - lights went out, there were bags of sand all round the town. The whistle goes, take a bottle of water to the trench, and the Northern Standard said, "If the Japs come to Darwin the citizens are well prepared". So, when they did come there was no whistle, no nothing.<sup>21</sup>*

Miller's civil defence force had been drastically reduced a month

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<sup>18</sup> 'Far North Lacking in ARP Plant', Courier Mail, 27 February 1942, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> 'Playing at Air Raid Precautions', Courier Mail, 1 May 1942, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> 'Air-raid Alarm in Darwin', Sydney Morning Herald, 13 December 1941, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Interview 016, Thursday Island, February 1989.

before the raid.<sup>22</sup> However, despite the devastation and a loss of 243 lives, the censor's pen made sure that the rest of Australia remained ignorant of the gravity of the attack.

There were further attacks on Darwin but the Japanese did not confine their raids to this town. Many locals believed that Broome was beyond the capacity of a Japanese strike from Timor so that the sound of approaching planes on 3 March 1942 did not alarm them. They were accustomed to the daily roar of seaplanes carrying refugees from the Dutch East Indies as they arrived to refuel. When the attack commenced, the townspeople fled to their trenches until they realised the flying boats on the bay, filled to capacity with evacuees, were the targets. The scene on the water was horrific - sinking flying boats, dead bodies, and people struggling to survive in a sea of burning oil. Seventy people died: it may have been more. Some grief-stricken Dutch refugees buried their dead. Others, in their despair and confusion, left the grim task to the Volunteer Defence Corps. Japan's aircraft range had been underestimated and the town's civil defence was little more than a few ill-equipped Volunteer Defence Corps personnel with .303 rifles.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that even the best civil defence plans could have done more for the people in the circumstances of the vicious attacks on both Broome and Darwin.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> By late January 1942, Miller and most of his civil defence workers had resigned because of a lack of government support and civilian apathy.

<sup>23</sup> Tyler, "Flight of the Diamond", pp. 1-6. The Volunteer Defence Corps was formed in July 1940 by the Returned Soldiers' League, composed mainly of returned soldiers from World War One. It was expanded to take in men between eighteen and sixty years who were willing to give up evenings or weekends to train. The army subsequently took over the Corps and the men were trained in guerilla warfare, defended certain areas, guarded high points and provided local intelligence. Some of its members took over anti-aircraft and coastal defences, thus releasing permanent troops for battle areas (Hasluck, Government and the People, p. 63).

<sup>24</sup> Broome and Darwin suffered further aerial attacks. Attacks were also made on Wyndham, Derby and Port Hedland. In these towns, like Broome, the civil defence organisations consisted of small bands of Volunteer Defence Corps (V.D.C.) men. Jack McPhee told Sally Morgan that there was great fear in the Pilbara Region of Western Australia that the Japanese would invade Australia through the North where there was 'not much of a northern defence'. Local defence groups formed but 'no tribal people were allowed in the V.D.C.', although there were some 'good trackers' amongst them. The Aborigines thought the government was 'afraid that they might go

Townsvillians might have expected a repetition of Japanese devastation on their town because of the naval shipping in their harbour, airfields, army camps and vast numbers of allied servicemen in the town. As late as June 1942, General Milford, Commanding Officer of the North Queensland Area, described air-raid precautions in Townsville as 'frankly unsatisfactory'. The acting Secretary of the Commonwealth Department of Home Security, A.W. Welch, concluded that:

there was no clearly identified person to co-ordinate civil defence measures, no one seemed to have the power to enforce the blackout regulations, the press was "unhelpful" and the essential services of supply were both strained and vulnerable.<sup>25</sup>

However, when the first four Japanese raiders appeared over the town on the 25 July 1942, unlike Darwin and Broome, the town was given ample warning; wardens moved quickly to their posts and the civilians to their shelters. The black-out was regarded as 'effective', although one resident told a warden to put an aerodrome light off before he would extinguish his.<sup>26</sup> There was also a delay in extinguishing the lights on the wharf because the watchman had to walk some distance to secure the keys to access the switch.<sup>27</sup> Some civilians subsequently recalled that the potential seriousness of their situation was not fully realised: 'We weren't in our slit trenches we was out...excited...watching to see'.<sup>28</sup> There were two further raids on Townsville by single flying-boats within the space of three days. Unlike Darwin and Broome, however, the tests of Townsville's civil defences were never more than practice runs.

Within the area of the vital Torres Strait sea lane, the people were excluded altogether from official civil defence planning. Like the government's policy on evacuation, vulnerability alone was not a determining factor: first considerations were given to industrial and heavily populated areas. In February 1942, the Japanese plans were to capture Port Moresby and the Southern Solomons, and 'to isolate Australia' by seizing Fiji, Samoa and New Caledonia. Thus, unbeknown

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<sup>25</sup> over to the enemy' (Morgan, Wanamurraganya, p. 146). Cited in I. Moles, A Majority of One: Tom Aikens and Independent Politics in Townsville (St. Lucia, 1979), pp. 101, 108.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in G. Copeman and D. Vance (eds), "It was a different town": Being some memories of Townsville and District 1942-1945 (Townsville, 1992), p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Darryl McIntyre, Townsville at War 1942: Life in a Garrison City (Townsville, 1992), p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Copeman and Vance, "It was a Different Town", p. 8.

to the allied Chiefs of Staff, Japan had no immediate plan to invade Australia.<sup>29</sup> Japan knew this would have placed excessive demands upon her military resources.<sup>30</sup> As early as August 1939, the Australian Air Board had recognised the vulnerability of the country's thinly defended northern coastline and it recommended that provision be made for an air base on Nurupai (Horn Island), only minutes flying time from the tip of Cape York.<sup>31</sup> It became operational in late 1941. Robert Piper, a R.A.A.F. (Royal Australian Air Force) historian, believed that the:

strategic importance of Horn Island [Nurupai], near Thursday Island in the Torres Strait, quickly became apparent to the Japanese in 1942. The new aerodrome there was a vital link for Allied aircraft flying in and out of New Guinea, maritime reconnaissance and airborne attacks against those northern areas that had already fallen to the enemy.<sup>32</sup>

The construction of this airstrip gave the Japanese an important reason to focus on the Torres Strait area. On 14 March 1942, Japan made its first attack on the strip.

The population of Nurupai in March 1942 comprised army and air force personnel and men working for the Civil Construction Corps.<sup>33</sup> Air-raid protection was in the hands of the military. However, unlike in Darwin and Broome, the Japanese were seen before they arrived and the allied defence was ready. The Kerema coast watchers on the south coast of New Guinea radioed to the navy on Thursday Island at 11.15 a.m. on 14 March that seventeen unidentified bombers and fighters had been sighted minutes earlier headed in a south-easterly direction.<sup>34</sup> The alert was given and all troops were ordered to dispersal areas at 11.45 a.m. The raid commenced at

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<sup>29</sup> Horner, Crisis of Command, p. 46.

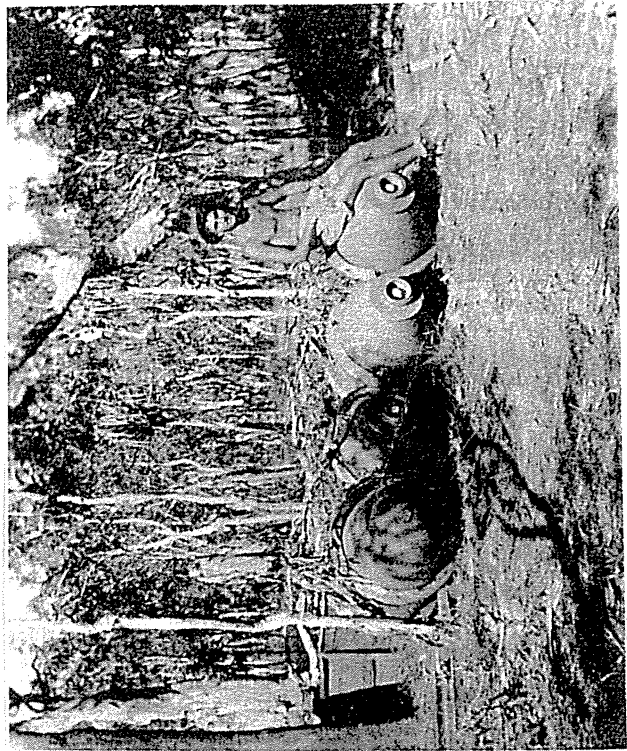
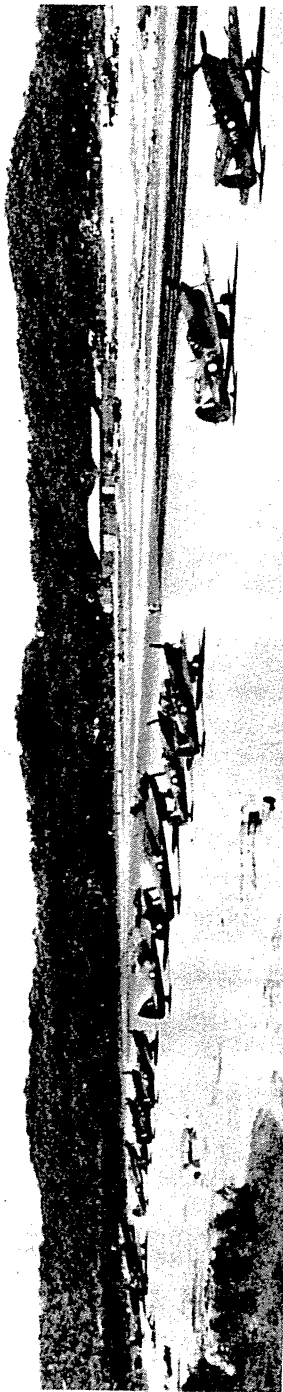
<sup>30</sup> A.J. Barker, Midway: the turning point (London, 1971), p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> Minute Paper: Royal Australian Air Force, 31 August 1939, A816/1, 14/301/153, A.A. (A.C.T.).

<sup>32</sup> R.K. Piper, 'The Forgotten Air Raids on Horn Island', The Canberra Times Saturday Magazine, 3 October 1987, p. B2.

<sup>33</sup> In early 1942, a Civil Construction Corps was formed of men compulsorily enlisted to provide labour for wartime construction being undertaken by the Allied Works Council. They were paid civilian award rates and continued to be members of unions. However, unlike enlisted mainlanders, no dependants' allowances were paid to their families or repatriation benefits to them (Hasluck, Government and the People, p. 117). The Civil Construction Corps on Nurupai were mainly mixed-race Torres Strait Islander and Malay or South Sea men.

<sup>34</sup> Piper, 'Forgotten Air Raids', p. B2.



(Top) Nurupai Air Strip  
 (Left) Kittyhawk Fighter, 76 Squadron  
 (Right) Bombs under camouflage on Nurupai



12.15, by which time Kittyhawk aircraft were already in the air.<sup>35</sup> Simultaneously, two planes carrying sixteen young members of the Citizen Military Forces, who had volunteered for coast watching service in Torres Strait, landed on Nurupai.<sup>36</sup> One recounted that experience: 'We landed in the middle of the raid. They riddled the office with bullets, the toilet got a hiding - they must have thought it was a radio station. There was no hope of going back, [our] planes didn't have enough fuel'.<sup>37</sup> A TSLI man's recollection of that day was:

*I was sent over to [Nurupai] to defend the post over there, me and my mate, I am number one gunner and he is number two, the Japanese come over. When they come close, right up to Nurupai and we were looking after the post, they dropped a bomb - boom, boom. We were frightened, we cried, we never saw a bomb in our life. They fired that machine gun on top of us. They fired one way and came back. Oh, very close up to that post the fighter. I rang to signal to shoot that thing down. They said, "Don't shoot until you get the command". I had the machine gun ready to knock 'em down. Bomber goes up, fighter right down. The white soldiers ran away, went outside trench and leave us. We black boys left. They go in the bush. Me and me coppers were in a clear space just inside the aerodrome. We had no bush, camouflage was all we got. I told them, "Don't lose your brain".<sup>38</sup>*

After the raid the Fortress Commander suggested that the morale of the men was lifted by the Kittyhawk pilots' defensive action which prevented the enemy from 'pushing home his attack'.<sup>39</sup> For some inexplicable reason, however, the eight Japanese raids on Nurupai lacked the ferocity with which Darwin and Broome were bombed.

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<sup>35</sup> Lt-Col. (Staff Corps) R.J.R. Hurst to H.Q. N.Comd., 17 March 1942 cited in TISHSS, Torres Strait at War, pp. 12-14.

<sup>36</sup> Unlike the Second A.I.F. expeditionary force formed in September 1939 of volunteer soldiers who could be sent on overseas service, the Citizen Military Force (or full-time Militia) was a force of conscripted men for home defence. In June 1939, the Defence Act was amended so that these men could serve 'in the mandated territory of New Guinea and in Papua as well as on the mainland of Australia'. When Japan entered the war, the distinction (except for areas of service) between the two forces became blurred and there were transfers from one to the other. In early 1943, Curtin succeeded in extending the area of service beyond Australia and its territories to an area defined as the South-West Pacific Zone which included the Solomons, all of New Guinea, Timor and areas of Java, Borneo and the Celebes (see Hasluck, Government and the People, pp. 326-353 on Conscription Issue).

<sup>37</sup> Signaller 1, Interview, Cairns, April 1989.

<sup>38</sup> Int. 074.

<sup>39</sup> Hurst to H.Q. N. Comd., 17 March 1942 cited in TISHSS, Torres Strait at War, p. 13.

Thursday Island, across the channel, was left unscathed.<sup>40</sup>

Prior to the evacuation of the women, children and old people, the civil population of Thursday Island was about 1 600. The Island had no co-ordinated civil defence.<sup>41</sup> It lacked air-raid shelters, and no practice drills were being conducted: 'They didn't do anything until the women were evacuated and then it was a bit late', a veteran A.I.F. man recalled.<sup>42</sup> On 27 January, two days before the sailing of the first evacuation ship, the Town Clerk made an urgent plea for 'volunteers for all sections of the Local Civil Defence Organization...to assist in the protection of the civil personnel and property of the Island'.<sup>43</sup> Six weeks later, the formation of seventeen planes from the Japanese base at Lae in New Guinea, on its way to and from Nurupai, passed over Thursday Island. A Torres Strait Islander seaman who was on a lugger in Port Kennedy recalled that army men yelled a warning to the crew: 'so we jumped out of the boat and swam ashore to hide ourselves and we got behind the Federal Hotel...inside those drains and hid ourselves'. From their hiding place they saw 'bombs, big smoke and bong...we thought that was the end of it. Calm down. We got out of the holes when the army told us it's all over'.<sup>44</sup>

The army's immediate concern was to assess people's reactions to the alert and the civil defence preparedness. Reports indicated that while the people 'appeared to be steady' the air-raid sirens had been 'somewhat inefficient' because they gave 'a purely local effect'.<sup>45</sup> This was verified by a white soldier who was on Thursday Island during the period of the earliest raids on Nurupai:

We couldn't hear the sirens for the noise of the cordial factory next door so after the first raid we kept an eye on the luggers and if we saw the Islanders jumping into the dinghies and rowing madly for the shore, we knew it was on.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The last of the eight raids on Nurupai was in July 1943. The only casualties from the nine raids were one A.I.F. soldier killed in the third raid and three R.A.A.F. men received injuries in the fifth raid.

<sup>41</sup> Queensland, The Year Book, No. 5, 1941, p. 31; Osborne, Forgotten Evacuation, p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> Premier of Queensland to Prime Minister, 22 December 1941, A1608/1, M41/1/9, A.A. (A.C.T.); Personal communication, Edmonton, March 1993.

<sup>43</sup> 'Notice to Thursday Island Public', The Torres Straits Daily Pilot, 27 January 1942.

<sup>44</sup> Int. 080.

<sup>45</sup> TISHSS, Torres Strait at War, p. 13.

<sup>46</sup> Personal communication, Edmonton, March 1993.

The perception of the military officer who wrote the report was that the 'coloured' civilians 'disappeared for much longer than was necessary' after the alert and he feared that further alerts or air-raids would 'frighten all the coloured men away'.<sup>47</sup> Apart from the Torres Strait Islander who said they emerged from their hiding places when the army gave the okay, the testimony of another 'coloured' man was that when the siren sounded they '*had to run up to the shelter on the hill. When we went up they said, "Hurry". I just said, "If I have to die, I may as well die here", and we saw that first bomb blast on Nurupai*'.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, death may have been the fate of many if Thursday Island had been bombed with or without an effective civil defence force. A few bombs, true to target, would have devastated this tiny Island of one and one-quarter square miles. Furthermore, it would have been difficult for anyone to flee from the Island, as had been the case in Darwin and Broome.<sup>49</sup> However, such a negative attitude was discounted by the military assessors who believed that with an early warning of the enemy's approach there was a good chance that the defensive action of the Kittyhawk pilots would reduce the risks for the people on Thursday Island. There were seven further raids on Nurupai but no attempt was ever made to bomb Thursday Island.

The Japanese had every reason to order the bombing of this militarily strategic island. Moreover, they had the bomb capacity to do so. When the eight T96 Japanese bombers returned to Lae on 14 March they still had bombs in the aircraft holds.<sup>50</sup> Several reasons have been proffered by the Torres Strait Islanders for Japan's

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<sup>47</sup> Hurst to H.Q. N.Comd., 17 March, 1942, cited in TISHSS, Torres Strait at War, p. 14. There was also a white perception that the Darwin Aborigines would panic and run away. This was far from the truth. Lockwood says that they took cover and emerged 'smiling though visibly shaken' when that town was bombed. Aborigines working on the R.A.A.F. base remained and had to be told to go back to their tribal lands or ended up in army camps (Lockwood, Australia's Pearl Harbour, pp. 177-178).

<sup>48</sup> Interview 006, Thursday Island, February 1990.

<sup>49</sup> Many survivors in Darwin, both civilian and military, fearing more raids, quickly turned from the devastated town and made their way south by any means available (David Leser, 'The Aussie Pearl Harbour,' The Bulletin, 18 February 1992, p.36). Most of the locals in Broome and some American troops formed a 'land-convoy' to try to reach Port Hedland but they were turned back when monsoonal rains converted dirt roads into quagmires (Tyler, "Flight of the Diamond", p. 51).

<sup>50</sup> TISHSS, Torres Strait at War, p. 13.

exclusion of Thursday Island from attack. Some believe it was because of the friendships which had existed between Japanese skippers and the Torres Strait Islander seamen.<sup>51</sup> The Japanese did not want to kill any of their own nationals who they thought may have been under guard on the Island; they did not want to destroy the hundreds of Japanese graves in the cemetery; and people still talk about the 'legend' that a Japanese princess was buried on the Island and her countrymen were afraid they would disturb her grave.<sup>52</sup> Others say that the TSLI men were spared by a Divine manipulation of the elements: *'It was too overcast when the Japanese wanted to come in'*.<sup>53</sup>

Civil defence was something that had never before concerned the Australian people. As discussed, it was an enormous and complex problem and the effectiveness or otherwise of this vast and sparsely populated country's preparedness was conjectural. Across the vulnerable North, however, the lives of many Aboriginal women and children, a few very isolated missionaries and the Torres Strait Islander women and children left on their remote communities when so many other people were being compulsorily evacuated, suggested that the lives of some Australians in the remotest parts of Australia were less valuable than those in other parts of the country.

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#### In outer Torres Strait

Torres Strait Islanders were living on eighteen communities at the outbreak of the war but virtually no civil defence was instituted on them until the enemy was at their front doors.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the responsibility for their safety finally came to rest not with any

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<sup>51</sup> Int. 064; Int. 078; Int. 028; Int. 068.

<sup>52</sup> Personal communication, Edmonton, March 1993; J.C.H. Foley, Timeless Isle: An Illustrated History of Thursday Island (Thursday Island, 1986), p. 66.

<sup>53</sup> Interview 125, Dauan, July 1989.

<sup>54</sup> It is not certain how long the people on Mauar (Rennel Island) and Edgor (Nepean Island) remained on these Islands.

civil defence government agency but with the people themselves.<sup>55</sup> And, while there were commonalities in the people's testimonies about the defence strategies they adopted, such as keeping a very low profile and observing black-out procedures, their safety measures were also related to the geographical features of the islands and proximity to Nurupai. Thus, while the inclusion of voices from each island community might suggest to the reader that she or he is on a tour of the outer islands, this is not the intention. To gain the fullest understanding of events in Torres Strait and the Torres Strait Islanders' perceptions of them, the inclusion of material from all islands is essential.

As already indicated, in some quarters it was thought that the enemy might advance through Torres Strait. There would be advantages for the enemy in capturing Thursday Island and if this happened it was suggested that 'the Japanese military authorities [would be] far-sighted enough' to place 'outpost stations' on the hillier islands to prevent a surprise allied counter-attack on Thursday Island.<sup>56</sup> However fanciful this notion seemed to some at the time, members of the Military Board simultaneously expressed the opinion that it was likely Japan might attempt to seize Thursday Island.<sup>57</sup> It was widely believed that the Japanese military authorities had been familiarised with the coastline, ocean currents and landfalls around northern Australia by nationals who had worked in the marine industry before the war.<sup>58</sup> Old Torres Strait Islanders too were convinced that the Japanese knew about the area. One said: *'They made their*

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<sup>55</sup> Ironically, E.M. Hanlon, the State Minister responsible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs was also the Minister responsible for Queensland's civil defence organisation.

<sup>56</sup> F.C. Hodel to the Minister of Defence, 12 September 1938, A816/1, 14/301/153, A.A. (A.C.T.).

<sup>57</sup> Minute Paper: Department of Defence, 26 October 1938, A816/1, 14/301/153, A.A. (A.C.T.).

<sup>58</sup> Brown, 'Australia 1942', p. 9. Kay Saunders suggests that 'well trained and disciplined laymen' in the guise of laundrymen and market gardeners were 'supposedly' active in getting intelligence information about Queensland prior to 1939. However, a police report on internment of Japanese made on 15 December 1941 during a 'period of intense community anxiety' indicated that no Japanese aliens had been heard to 'express any anti-British sentiments' ('Inspired by Patriotic Hysteria? Internment Policy towards Enemy Aliens in Australia during the Second World War', in Panikos Panoyi (ed.), Minorities in Wartime: National and Racial Groupings in Europe, North America and Australia during the Two World Wars (Oxford, 1993), p. 306).

own charts when diving around Torres Strait'.<sup>59</sup> Another believed 'the Japanese knew all about the islands'.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, it would not have surprised some Torres Strait Islanders if the Japanese had landed in the Strait. They recalled Japanese skippers expressing views before the war sympathetic to the people's desire for liberation from the colonial yoke: 'You see this Australia...we are going to fight Australia, we are going to take it back, the land is wasting'. The skipper continued, 'You know we are black, you are black, we are going to chase the white man from Australia and take this for you black people'.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, it might be argued that the people had nothing to fear from the Japanese and that they had no need for any civil defence measures on the islands. Even if this had been the case and the government was aware of such promises, there would have been no excuse for its total lack of civil defence planning in outer Torres Strait particularly when the Military Board was suggesting in 1938 that, in the event of war with Japan, Thursday Island was at risk. Finally, it was left to the army, with few men to spare, along with Curtis, the white storekeeper on Badu, and Turner, the only white teacher to remain in Torres Strait, to give what assistance they could to the women in their efforts to ensure their families' safety after Nurupai was attacked.

Before that attack, the people on the Anglican Mission of St. Paul's were the only ones on the outer islands receiving civil defence instructions. In January 1942, the white priest-in-charge, the Reverend Godfrey Gilbert, instituted air-raid drills. He expressed to his superiors his belief that the people were being well-prepared:

We have been busy on A.R.P. [air raid precautions] and are all proud of our blackout and airraid shelters - in fact I have just come in from a practice raid warning when everything went off very well indeed. The people are taking things quite quietly and in good heart, and they seem prepared "to take it" if the worst does come.<sup>62</sup>

On the communities under the Director's control it was a different story: 'No one came to tell us what to do if there was an air-raid',

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<sup>59</sup> Int. 080.

<sup>60</sup> Int. 064.

<sup>61</sup> Int. 028.

<sup>62</sup> Report: Rev. Godfrey Gilbert, St Paul's, Bishop's letter January 1942, Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria, OM.AV/150/2, St. Paul's School and Hostel, The Carpentaria, Vol. II, No. 165, John Oxley Library (J.O.L.), Brisbane.

an old Masig man recalled.<sup>63</sup> In late January 1942, the army had suggested that the white teachers should act as air-raid wardens on the larger islands of Saibai, Badu, Mabuiag, Mer and Erub and that they should instruct the people in civil defence.<sup>64</sup> However, the departure of four of the five teachers in March 1942 thwarted the military's intentions. Turner was the sole remaining white teacher. An old and revered leader explained why he became so important to them during the height of the danger:

*The people liked him and he could speak the native language. They could talk in Creole...If anybody wanted something, they have to go to somebody who knows how to speak and help them to get over their troubles, and people knew him quite well and they wanted him to speak for them.*<sup>65</sup>

At great risk, Turner sailed from island to island, more often than not in the totally unarmed sail-powered supply vessel, to help the people. An old Torres Strait Islander teacher indicated how dangerous sea travel was: 'You can just imagine what it is like while you are sailing there and the Japanese bombers sailing overhead'.<sup>66</sup> Two Saibai women recalled that in the early days they 'didn't know anything about the war' and when the planes came 'baba [father] Turner was there. We had pegs hanging around our necks. We don't know what to do. This is what baba said, "Everyone wear pegs and if anything happens, bombs fall, you bite on it"'.<sup>67</sup> So, they wore the peg on a string around their necks, 'like a necklace'. A Masig woman also recalled that 'nobody knew what to do, but baba stayed all the time, he looked after us'.<sup>68</sup> Curtis, despite his heavy administrative load, did what he could to encourage and assist the women on Badu. The communities were also given basic information about air-raid precautions by army personnel. The local policemen assumed the roles of wardens for their islands. They passed orders, which came from the military via the chairman or councillors, on to the community and saw that everyone obeyed them. With a bell, a whistle, a drum, blowing a bu sel or even by running through the village calling to the people, they sounded the warning when enemy

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<sup>63</sup> Int. 119.

<sup>64</sup> Statement: K. Grainger Smith, 14 March 1942, p. 1, Education Dept., Mission Schools, Correspondence, etc., A/15997, Q.S.A.

<sup>65</sup> Int. 053.

<sup>66</sup> Interview 111, Mer, January 1989.

<sup>67</sup> Int. 054.

<sup>68</sup> Int. 072.

planes were sighted, and they called the all-clear.<sup>69</sup>

On all of the small outer island communities, the people soon realised that being as inconspicuous as possible to the enemy was the best thing to do. Like their mainland counterparts, Torres Strait Islander women complied with strict black-out rules. The bright light of the pressure lamp was banned, although a Masig woman said that her mother painted the glass of the hurricane lamp black so she could have a little bit of light as she sat huddled with her family in their tiny bush house at night.<sup>70</sup> Most families had only the flickering light from a thin strip of calico fuelled by coconut oil. The women's recollections were that: 'We only sit there at night with that small light and we hide it so nobody can see us'; 'We had to live in the dark'; 'You even had to put that cigarette out'.<sup>71</sup> During daylight hours fires and smoke posed problems: 'We were ordered [by the army] not to make fires, not to make smoke or light a torch [of dry bark] or a lamp'.<sup>72</sup> The women did a lot of their cooking over open fires with a pot resting on 'two irons across two stones' or in their sand ovens (amais). The army banned the use of amais because they made too much smoke, they were hard to camouflage and to extinguish.<sup>73</sup> Cooking was done during daylight hours and 'everyone had tea before it was dark'.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, someone was always watching for planes while the fires were burning and, at the sound or sight of them, the order was swiftly relayed to everyone: 'No fire, no smoke, nothing'.<sup>75</sup> Clothes were washed early in the day, hung under the trees and removed quickly because the 'planes might think we waved at them', a woman from Mer recalled.<sup>76</sup>

The people were also told to discard certain clothing. A Purma woman said that the army told them they could not wear brightly

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<sup>69</sup> A bu sel is a trumpet shell. Bu also refers to the sound made by the trumpet shell when blown (bu de go! There's the sound of the trumpet shell) (Shnukal, Broken, pp. 119-120).

<sup>70</sup> Int. 161.

<sup>71</sup> Interview 092, Badu Island, March 1990; Int. 078; Int. 107; Riza Morrison, TSIMA (Torres Strait Islanders' Media Association) broadcast, Townsville (transcription of audiotape in author's possession), 11 May 1986; Int. 069. Int. 071; Interview 150, Mer, January 1989.

<sup>73</sup> Int. 131; Int. 066; Int. 130; Interview 101, Thursday Island, February 1989; Int. 096.

<sup>74</sup> Int. 069.

<sup>75</sup> Interview 136, Townsville, February 1989; Interview 085, Townsville, March 1989.

<sup>76</sup> Int. 136.



coloured lava lavas and 'Mother Hubbard' dresses because 'to walk on the street or beach in bright colours, something might happen'.<sup>77</sup> The storekeeper shared a role of dark-coloured cloth amongst the women. They quickly made clothes from the 'pale brownish material...something like canvas, really strong but it was hot'.<sup>78</sup> An old Mabuiag woman laughed as she mused about the time she disobeyed the army's orders. One morning she went fishing in the red silk dress that her husband had bought in Daru before the war for the Coming of the Light celebrations.<sup>79</sup> The few other dresses she had were being washed. Soon a plane approached and she 'sat in the lagoon' believing she would not be visible from the air. The plane passed and she resumed fishing until it returned. She went under the water again. It returned a third time: 'Now he came near', she said, 'I was frightened'. However, as she subsequently discovered, the pilot had spotted her and he radioed the signallers. Back at her bush home, she quickly washed the red dress and hung it out to dry under the trees. To her amazement a signaller arrived to tell her father: 'They are not to wear the red dress'.<sup>80</sup> Initially, the women had no idea they could be seen from the sky when they were under the water. In another such incident, two Nagi women saw enemy planes while they were fishing in the lagoon. They dropped their nets and lines and lay on their backs in the water with only their noses protruding thinking they would not be seen.<sup>81</sup> This was no guarantee of their safety. In this instance, perhaps the Japanese did not wish to waste ammunition on pointless targets or they just did not want to kill Torres Strait Islanders. It is an example, however, of what the people called their 'innocence'. The perspective from a plane at that time was impossible for the women to imagine.

In addition to obeying general civil defence instructions, such

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<sup>77</sup> 'Mother Hubbard' dresses were long loose dresses hanging from a yoke with long sleeves. By the late 1930s, the skirts and sleeves were shorter. Some of the younger women wore fitting dresses, more along the lines of dresses worn by mainland young women.

<sup>78</sup> Int. 100.

<sup>79</sup> Every year, on 1 July (referred to as 'July the first' or the 'Coming of the Light'), Torres Strait Islanders celebrate the day the first missionaries arrived in the Strait in 1871. This celebration is still very meaningful to many of the people and the day is a public holiday in Torres Strait. It is also celebrated by many mainland Torres Strait Islanders.

<sup>80</sup> Interview 106, Mabuiag, May 1990.

<sup>81</sup> Int. 069.

as, black-outs, restrictions on fires, bright clothing and taking care when they went to the beaches, each community took whatever other measures were appropriate for their safety. The communities on Moa, Badu, Mabuiag and Nagi, were within hearing or visual distance of the bombing on Nurupai. An employee at the Dogai Store on Badu remembered that, when the bombs fell, they heard the explosions and *'felt that place shake'*.<sup>82</sup> On Nagi, the vibrations were also felt and *'things on the wall, some things on the shelves, fell on the floor'*. The people saw planes fighting in the sky and said to each other: *'This is it. We're going to die'*.<sup>83</sup> From Mabuiag too, allied and enemy planes fighting in the sky between St. Paul's and Nagi were seen: *'We could see them, like white birds everywhere on top, and we can see the smoke when they fired the guns'*.<sup>84</sup> Because of the proximity of these islands to Nurupai, the army ordered all of the people to evacuate into the bush. A Mabuiag woman recalled that they were told: *'Move out from here quick. Make houses in the bush. Evacuate'*.<sup>85</sup> On Nagi the instruction was: *'Don't stay in the village. All Islanders must go into the bush'*. On this Island, the women, children and old people went a long way behind the village, up the hill, and built houses in the bush of plaited mat walls with sheet iron or grass on the rooves. They camouflaged them with branches and leaves. The old people found the disruption to their lives hard to deal with. Two Nagi women recalled what happened when the alert was given:

*Our grandmother was a short little lady and she used to run in between us. She could not keep up. Her daughter said, "Go on, go on, keep up, quick", and we used to shove her in the bush. She said, "Next time they come, leave me. Let that bomb fall on me"*.<sup>86</sup>

Eighty year old James Morrison on St. Paul's spoke for himself and his wife: *'Take these children in the bush, and we will stay. Let the Japanese come and kill us'*.<sup>87</sup> For the old people, it was

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<sup>82</sup> Int. 130.

<sup>83</sup> Int. 114.

<sup>84</sup> Int. 078.

<sup>85</sup> Int. 140.

<sup>86</sup> Int. 069; Int. 114.

<sup>87</sup> Int. 068. James Morrison was the son of a Scotsman, and he was born on the vessel Kay Karri off the coast of New Caledonia on 16 November 1861. His mother was a 'native of Mare' in the Loyalty Islands. He lived there until he came to Australia in 1881 and subsequently joined the New South Wales artillery and went to Egypt. He was naturalised in Maryborough, Queensland in 1885 and arrived in Torres Strait in 1887 where he married a Mabuiag woman in 1892. He died at St. Paul's during the war on 13 November 1944 (information taken from copy of a

particularly hard.

On St. Paul's, Father Gilbert's air-raid drills were abandoned. On the day of the first bombings, the policeman rang the bell and 'screamed' to everyone to move out of the village because 'war had broken out on T.I.'. They ran into the bush, an old woman recalled, 'far, far away' from the village.<sup>88</sup> The women were confused: 'Mum she didn't know about the war and when they said "raid" she thought...like the enemy was there, and she pulled us together and tried to take things with her, everything one time. I tried to help mum, the young ones were too small'.<sup>89</sup> Everyone sat under the trees to rest. They listened, 'Hey, something up!' Then someone came running, whistling, calling, 'Let's go back...go home there's no war, that's lightning'. There was a lot of confusion. On another occasion the people looked up into the sky and saw two planes. They said to one another, 'What are they doing? They are playing!' They did not know that the planes were fighting until the wireless operator came and told them, 'Head into the bush. See those two planes fighting over there, that's the enemy and our plane'.<sup>90</sup> Finally, a soldier came around to all of the houses and told the women to leave the village. One woman recalled: 'Mum took a sheet and put everything in it and we went into the bush. We just slept in the bush, spread a mat out. We had to collect grass and build houses, cut the wood, everything'.<sup>91</sup> Another said: 'Some broke their kitchens up and took them into the bush. We had iron on our house, we pulled the iron off and made a bush house, a sort of shelter'.<sup>92</sup>

Lizzie Nawia, the widow of the wartime chairman of Poid and

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genealogy given to the author by descendant). James Morrison was one of several outsider men who came to Torres Strait in that era, married local women and whose many descendants are still to be found in Torres Strait and on the mainland. The American, Ned Mosby ('Yanky Ned', as he was called) of Masig, Douglas Pit, from the West Indies, were others.

<sup>88</sup> Riza Morrison, TSIMA Broadcast.

<sup>89</sup> Int. 117.

<sup>90</sup> Int. 068.

<sup>91</sup> Int. 117.

<sup>92</sup> Int. 068. At the beginning of the war a few iron houses were appearing in the villages, particularly on Badu where there was more economic viability. A Meriam woman whose mother was the forewoman at the sardine factory on Dauar said that theirs was one of the three iron houses on Mer which number included the white teacher's house (Int. 160).

famous in her own right as a story teller, recounted how the people in her village were ordered by the army on two occasions to relocate in the bush:<sup>93</sup>

*It's been very strong that Second World War. We all moved into the bush. We built these bush houses, some of them grass and bark skins, some of them irons...Terrible, we had to carry everything. Terrible time, and all the planes flew on top.*

However, it was not long before:

*that war became very, very strong, and they sent out a white sergeant and moved us further into the bush. We had a big river on north side of Poid. We used to live inside there, but, when the sergeant came, he said, "This is dangerous. Big river barges can come in". He told the chairman, "Go further in, inside the bush".*

Wherever the people were forced to live in the bush, they were instructed to disperse: *The army told us not to make one camp, make different camps so that if anything happened they might only destroy one village and another camp would be saved*'.<sup>94</sup> On Badu, across the narrow sea channel from Poid, all but a handful of the women, children and old people also evacuated into the bush where they spread out in small villages identified even today by their American names: Bar Twenty, Wild India, Arizona, Blue Mountain, Hollywood, Atlas Bay, Silver Plains, Rocky Mountains.<sup>95</sup> Local names were also used, such as Malay Town, Dobbie Town and Junglewalek (*walek* meaning lizard). Almost half a century later, one woman reminisced about the physical effect evacuation had on her: *'Oh, I can feel the tiredness,*

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<sup>93</sup> This old woman and many of the people in her village in 1990 were descendants of the remnant of the Kaurareg tribe 'an Island people who, inhabited the Prince of Wales group of Islands' until early in the twentieth century when they were removed to Keriri (Hammond Island). See Nonie Sharp, Footprints along the Cape York Sandbeaches (Canberra, 1992), p. 3 for their origins; pp. 29-31 for their decimation; pp. 108-114 for their removal and the reasons. In 1922, they were moved again, this time to Poid (formerly called Adam) on Moa Island. An old man who helped build the Catholic Mission on Hammond Island (Keriri) in the early 1930s, about a decade after the Kaurareg people were removed from there, said in 1990 that the Kaurareg were moved because of pressure from Whites on Thursday Island. They objected to black children sitting in the same classroom with their children. Also the white people objected to the men rowing across Aplin Pass, the narrow channel between Keriri and Thursday Island, to obtain alcohol (Interview 033, Keriri, February 1989, April 1990). Int. 071.

<sup>94</sup>  
<sup>95</sup> These names probably came from cowboy movies the men had seen. They too would have heard American servicemen on Thursday Island talking about their home towns.



(Top) Main Street of Badu (1935)

(Bottom) Ugari Nona's house, Badu - one of the few iron houses on the outer islands before the war - still occupied by her son, Tipoti Nona, in 1990

me with a big bundle and my four small sons. I was really tired that time when that thing happened'.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, many women who were by no means old at the time expressed how hard this time had been for them.

The people on the Top-Western Islands further away from Nurupai, took different measures for their safety. On Boigu, when the siren sounded, the women quickly gathered the children together, picked up the damper they had cooked earlier in the day, a mat for the babies to lie on and ran into the mangroves. Once there was a fire on the Island and everyone thought a bomb had been dropped. The 'people ran with a peg in the mouth to the end of the cemetery - no lights, just run in the dark'. They got a fright when they ran into somebody, but they kept on running to get as far away from the village as possible.<sup>97</sup> Like Boigu, Saibai is a flat, muddy island and yet there the people dug trenches: 'straight ones and ones like the letter L'. Amazingly enough, there were some trenches in the village which had survived from World War One when there was fear the Germans might land on the Island.<sup>98</sup> The trenches were covered and 'emergency supplies of food, water and firewood' were kept in them so that 'when the planes came over, they could just dive inside'. Until they learnt to distinguish between allied and enemy planes, that occurred frequently.<sup>99</sup> Some of the women built 'huts in the bush as a precaution'.<sup>100</sup> Others made grass structures in the mangroves to which they intended to go if the 'worst came to the worst'.<sup>101</sup> If they were working in their gardens, they simply 'crouched down among the plants, the bananas or cassava' when planes were sighted in the hope that they would not be seen.<sup>102</sup> Japanese patrols eventually pushed into areas along the coast of Papua around Merauke. Fortunately, however, they were contained there in December 1943 by allied troops, including some TSLI men, and it was never necessary for the women to evacuate into the swamps for any length of time. Nonetheless, according to one old woman, when the policeman gave the warning: 'everybody must be ready like when there's a cyclone' to move out of the village. Then, she said, 'everybody grabbed the children and grandchildren and went underground [into the trenches], into the grass or mangroves. When the planes go by and no smoke

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<sup>96</sup> Riza Morrison, TSIMA Broadcast.

<sup>97</sup> Int. 058.

<sup>98</sup> Interview 079, Cairns, April 1989.

<sup>99</sup> Int. 115.

<sup>100</sup> Cited in TSIHSS, Torres Strait at War, p. 38.

<sup>101</sup> Int. 054.

<sup>102</sup> Cited in TSIHSS, Torres Strait at War, p. 39.

comes down [no bombs], the policeman told everybody to come back home'.<sup>103</sup> An old woman who lived on the rugged Island of Dauan said that for their protection the people 'scattered in two camps, one each end of the village'.<sup>104</sup>

The small size and the geography of the coral cays necessitated, yet again, different civil defence plans. On Purma, the people spent the daylight hours scattered in the bush and returned to the village when it was dark. Stumbling around in the dark, without lamps resulted in many bumped toes. The boys had to go to the well after sundown to get water and as they 'groped' in the dark, they splashed much of the precious water out of their flour-tin buckets.<sup>105</sup> Purma lies along the Great North East Channel and ships of 'all sizes and shapes' constantly used the route. In this militarily strategic location, the people frequently saw 'dog fights' in the sky and 'everyone ran everywhere' for fear of what might happen.<sup>106</sup> Thus, with the potential for enemy attack always present, the people asked each other: 'Look at us not many trees, how are we going to exist? There's no way we can survive'.<sup>107</sup> While most of the able-bodied men on Masig were still away on the luggers, the elders had organised the digging of 'L' and 'T' shaped trenches at opposite ends of the Island. The plan was to run to them if the bu sel sounded. Within about ten days after the first attack on Nurupai, two army signallers were sent to the Island. The people were, according to one of them, 'pretty well disciplined and quite well prepared' for whatever might happen. It seemed that, after the bombing they were so afraid that they decided not to rely on the trenches for their safety. The signaller recalled that by the time he arrived each family had built 'a fairly basic second house in the low bush...and this was referred to by them as the bush house'. However, unlike on Purma, the Masig people spent the nights in the bush. During daylight hours they remained as inconspicuous as possible while they went about their business in the village. Probably neither the Masig nor the Purma Islanders realised that on small, flat islands like theirs it would have been impossible to hide

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<sup>103</sup> Int. 079.

<sup>104</sup> Int. 137, Dauan, July 1989.

<sup>105</sup> Int. 100.

<sup>106</sup> Lui, History of Coconut Island (Purma), July 1990; Int. 100. Allied warships frequently anchored overnight off Purma but I heard of no enemy warships which might have ventured into the Great North East Channel and I found no written evidence that they did.

<sup>107</sup> Int. 100.



from an invading force or to ensure protection against aerial bombardment if the enemy made a determined attack on them. Nevertheless, the signaller concluded that, in all of the circumstances, the elders had adopted the best possible tactics, probably without an awareness that if the Japanese had dropped 'a couple of good-sized bombs' the Island would have been devastated'.<sup>108</sup>

The hilly nature of Yam afforded the people better cover from enemy planes but no attempt was made to move into the bush until the Island was strafed by the Japanese. Along with the bombing of Nurupai, the experience of the Yam Islanders has been incorporated into each community's oral history of the war years. The majority of people who participated in the inquiry made mention of both events even though many had not had a personal experience of either. The attack on civilian Yam Islanders had been profoundly felt throughout the Strait. The wartime Yam Island storekeeper gave his version of the attack:

*I was in the store, the people were out there and there were the Jap planes coming across to bomb Nurupai. The people said, "I don't know what happened. Maybe some boys on the beach were saying goodbye to the Japanese planes with red lavalavas and then they turned and machine-gunned the village". When I came out, the village was all smoke. I was lucky. There was a big mango tree and I ran straight up to it and hid myself. Lucky it was broader than myself and I got right behind it. When it was over nobody was in the village, everybody was in the bush. Just the older people who could not run, they stayed back.*<sup>109</sup>

A Masig man who had been a seaman on the supply lugger Mulgrave, recalled:

*We jumped out of the boat and swam ashore. So we ran up to a hiding place but there was no time to hide. We could see the bullets whiz. When the bullets hit on the rocks we saw lights, the grass was burning. We ran for our life...So, we stayed in the bush the entire morning. When we ran, when the plane dived we could see a man sitting in the Japanese plane with a gun.*<sup>110</sup>

Another former crew member gave his personal recollection:

*People were screaming on the beach, "Oh, this is enemy plane". We looked up. We saw that enemy plane. We forgot about the dinghy. We swam under the boat. When we came up we heard machine guns, and we dived down*

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<sup>108</sup> Sig. 3.

<sup>109</sup> Int. 053.

<sup>110</sup> Int. 080. He would have been able to see the gunner or even the pilot through the windows of the compartments in which they sat as they came in low over the village.



again. Everybody was running to the mangroves. We were only in our underpants and we sat amongst the women and we saw bullets cutting off mangrove branches. We picked up babies, frightened mothers had thrown them on the ground.<sup>111</sup>

Immediately after the attack, some women moved their families into caves near springs of water. Others built 'thatched huts' in the bush.<sup>112</sup> No one offered any other explanation for the attack than the one given by the storekeeper. Perhaps the pilot or pilots interpreted the boys' actions as 'cheeky' and wanted to teach them a lesson.<sup>113</sup> Perhaps they were not trying to kill or to cause destruction. Nonetheless, the attack was terrifying for the Yam Islanders. The event raises the question of whether the 'clemency' shown to the Yam Islanders as opposed to the ruthless devastation of Darwin and Broome and the slaughter of 300 000 innocent civilians in Nanking, reflected some Torres Strait Islanders' belief that the Japanese did not see them as the enemy.<sup>114</sup> The opportunity and capability of the Japanese airmen to destroy such a small community was certainly there.

When the fighting in New Guinea worsened, the women, children and old people on Ugar were considered to be 'too exposed to planes and ships', and they were evacuated to Erub and St. Paul's.<sup>115</sup> On Erub, the people built trenches near their homes and the school but, when the possibility of landings from enemy submarines was realised, some of the women, like those on islands nearer Nurupai, 'stripped' their houses in the village and carried heavy loads of materials into the bush behind the village and built shelters there.<sup>116</sup> Others trekked across the Island to the opposite shoreline because 'the enemy might walk in that village but they won't know where you are...It was safer'. One woman whose family remained in the village recalled:

*I used to hold my grandmother's hand and she walked all the way up to the back of the Island and we sat there until we got news whether it's enemy boat or Japanese boat before we went back. We did that late at night too. It was dark, we had to run in dark because the enemy*

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<sup>111</sup> Int. 098.

<sup>112</sup> TISHSS, Torres at War, p. 36.

<sup>113</sup> The boys on Saibai acted similarly on more than one occasion, but their Island did not meet the same fate (Int. 076).

<sup>114</sup> Joanne Penglase and David Horner (eds), When the war came to Australia: Memories of the Second World War (St. Leonards, New South Wales, 1992), p. 60.

<sup>115</sup> Int. 111.

<sup>116</sup> Int. 065.

*might see us if we do it with a light.*<sup>117</sup>

Another grand-daughter remembered that her grandmother, like old people on other communities, said to her: 'Don't worry about Ate and me, you go and save yourself. Never mind about us, God will look after us. If it's our time He will take us. Because you are young, you have a lot of years ahead of you'.<sup>118</sup>

On Mer, there was again variation on the basic theme of remaining as inconspicuous as possible. Several of the Meriam people recalled their wartime leader, Marou Mimi, as being very involved with the people's safety when they talked about the measures taken on that Island. He, according to one man, was 'different' from the other Torres Strait Islander chief councillors. When he was a young man he went away from the Island and worked on the mainland cutting cane. There he 'rubbed shoulders' with the Pacific Island men but he never abandoned his own culture, he loved Torres Strait. Indeed he was 'an authority' on the tradition of his people.<sup>119</sup> His experiences made him unusually confident with outsiders. Thus, when the war broke out Marou had no difficulty liaising with military personnel and his home was always open to them.<sup>120</sup> Someone remembered how he personally instructed the women living near the radio shack in the middle of the village to sleep with relations or friends at either end of the Island because the shack would be a prime target in an attack.<sup>121</sup> He also told them that in the event of a surprise raid they must 'move fast, go out and stand in the tree and not move, stand up straight and still near the tree and never move. Let the plane go past before you come out from that tree'.<sup>122</sup> Here the people did not dig trenches or evacuate for any length of time into the bush. Thick vegetation covers Gelam Hill which rises to a height of 230 metres behind the villages from Webok to Babud.<sup>123</sup> If the alarm was sounded, one woman remembered they took cover 'on that high place or in some creek or cave...We just lived in

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<sup>117</sup> Int. 101.

<sup>118</sup> Int. 055. Ate is the Eastern Island word for grandfather (Western Island, athe). Aka is the word used by Western and Eastern island people for grandmother.

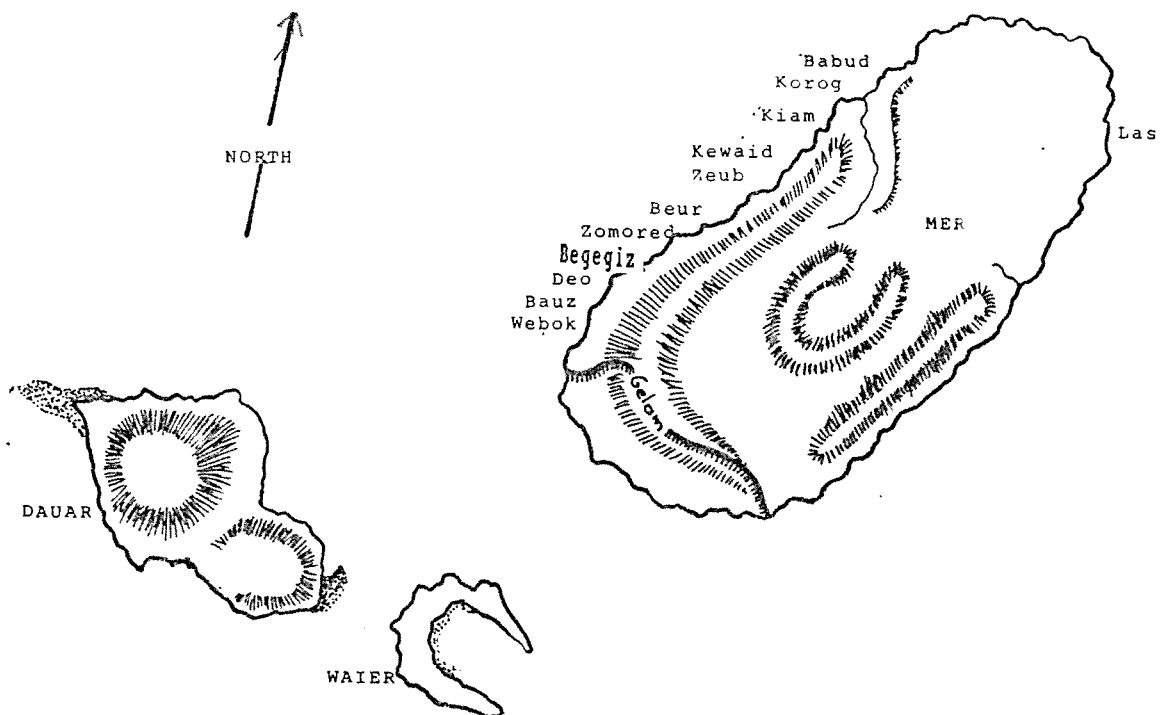
<sup>119</sup> Cited in Sharp, Stars of Tagai, p. 36. Marou went to the mainland as a young man before Torres Strait Islander movements were controlled by the Protector.

<sup>120</sup> Int. 085.

<sup>121</sup> Int. 056.

<sup>122</sup> Int. 112.

<sup>123</sup> Travis Teske (ed.), Murray: Island of Torres Strait (Thursday Island, 1986), p. 2.



Map 6: Mer, Dauar and Waier Islands, Torres Strait

our houses and ran into the bush'.<sup>124</sup> Another said: 'Sometimes we spent one night in the bush. We just took a mat and slept there'<sup>125</sup>. Older sisters helped the little ones to run and hide, but the very old people had to be left behind because Gelam Hill was steep and they 'slowed the others down'.<sup>126</sup> The small population on Dauar moved to Mer at the height of the danger so that 'everyone could watch after one another'.<sup>127</sup>

In this section of the chapter, the civil defence strategies adopted by each community are recorded from the people's perspectives. Generally, there had been a spontaneous response to the dangers based on the realisation that they should remain as inconspicuous as possible to the enemy. There had been no deliberate forward planning such as occurred in many parts of the Australian mainland considered vulnerable. However, the women's roles were not confined to just keeping themselves and their families out of sight - not an easy task when it is remembered that they were responsible for most of the food production and water and fuel cartage. After the news of the strafing of Yam Island spread throughout Torres Strait, the people had reason to doubt that their former friendly relations with Japanese seamen was necessarily a guarantee of their safety. The government had done nothing to guarantee their safety either so that the women's own attempts to preserve their way of life were all the more remarkable. Torres Strait Islander women together with the old people and the children shared the responsibility for guarding their shores from invasion. This chapter concludes with some insights into the roles the people played in the defence of their islands and the dangers they were exposed to.

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#### The coast watchers

The army signallers stationed on the larger communities during 1942 and 1943 were briefly introduced in this chapter. However, for the purposes of the remainder of this chapter and subsequent chapters it is important to recognise that, although their main task was to report any enemy activity around the islands, they filled, to some

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<sup>124</sup> Interview 108, Townsville, July 1989.

<sup>125</sup> Interview 141, Thursday Island, February 1989.

<sup>126</sup> Int. 108; Interview 142, Mer, January 1989.

<sup>127</sup> Int. 085.

extent, the role formerly played by the white teachers. One signaller remembered that the people called him 'tissa Mov', meaning 'teacher Merve' (Merve being his Christian name).<sup>128</sup> Their arrival on six of the larger communities was welcomed by the people. The Masig leaders told the signallers the people were 'proper glad' when they arrived on the Island. One signaller suggested that this was because the people felt 'completely deserted' by the government.<sup>129</sup> The island leader George Mye spoke very highly of them.<sup>130</sup> There was general consensus amongst the people that 'the signallers helped us a lot'.<sup>131</sup>

The signallers were A.I.F. men in a newly-formed Northern Command Area Signals and when things were getting really bad, as one signaller recalled, there were:

calls for coast watchers to watch the coast around Torres Strait and down the Gulf and along the east coast. The navy did not have enough personnel to do the job, the air force did not want to have anything to do with it, so a call was made to provide a number of volunteers from the C.M.F. [Citizen Military Forces] who weren't going overseas, but to tropical islands.<sup>132</sup>

Initially, two signallers were posted on each of the communities of St. Paul's, Mabuiag, Saibai, Masig, Erub and Mer. Curtis was in charge of the radio on Badu so that another responsibility in his already heavy work load was the surveillance of that Island. One signaller recalled they went out with 'very little training':

We had to know morse code...I had been in the scouts and knew morse code and knew compass reading and map orienting. Another signaller had been a key operator in the Post Office and one was a post office worker...we went out...on the old Paluma and it was a rough trip. We had to be roped to the mast on deck. V2 [radio call sign for] the official navy station was only for emergency. If it was desperate we used normal language but normally we would use code. VKP2 was the [radio call sign for the] commercial station taken over by the army and it was the call sign to the main station on Thursday Island. They gave us instructions how to code and decode messages and we had pamphlets to destroy if anybody landed...We asked the island people to look out for anything that floated, for any information.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Sig. 3.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Int. 065.

<sup>131</sup> Interview 135, Cairns, April 1989.

<sup>132</sup> Sig. 3.

<sup>133</sup> Sig. 1. The Department of Native Affairs' radios in Torres Strait were taken over by the army early in 1942 and operated by the signallers, with the exception of the one on Badu which Curtis controlled.

Throughout subsequent chapters, the assistance these signallers gave to the people in various capacities during the worst period of the war will become apparent. In the remainder of this chapter, some wartime incidents in which the people either assisted the signallers or acted on their own initiative are recalled.

The people left on the islands had had no training in the handling of wrecked aircraft and dead crew, but on several occasions the old men were involved in the rescue of allied airmen after their planes crashed. The Dauan men assisted the signallers after they saw a plane come down over Papua New Guinea.<sup>134</sup> They went by canoe to rescue the pilot but he was dead.<sup>135</sup> In another incident an American plane crashed on the New Guinea coast. After sailing from Boigu, the men found the pilot in the mangroves. He was taken back to Boigu from where he was picked up by a naval vessel.<sup>136</sup> One night the lights of a plane were seen by the people in the bush on Moa. They smothered their small lights. The plane circled the Island several times and finally crash landed on the water. At daylight, while the women were told to remain hidden in case it was an enemy plane, Wees Nawia and the local policeman rowed out to the wreck.<sup>137</sup> However, during the night, the six allied airmen had reached the mangroves from where they were eventually picked up.<sup>138</sup> The people's efforts contributed to the men's speedy return to flying again in the allied cause.

Neither were the Torres Strait Islanders given any instructions about the dangers of explosives. Soon after the Battle of the Coral Sea, when a lot of debris was being washed up on the Central and the Eastern Island beaches, an old Masig man and his wife made a find;

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<sup>134</sup> Dauan was one of the communities which did not have army signallers in 1942 and 1943 but the signallers on Saibai were in close proximity. In the latter part of the war, coast watchers, 'older men, some blokes in the V.D.C.' were posted to the smaller islands (Int. 065).

<sup>135</sup> Int. 137.

<sup>136</sup> Int. 150.

<sup>137</sup> Interview 156, Kubin, March 1990.

<sup>138</sup> White army men returned to the wrecked aircraft and took all of the loose equipment. Two island lads subsequently went to the wreck and one 'took an axe and chopped the plane to bits'. The wiring from the plane was used as rigging for their sail boat. The sunken plane lay at the bottom of the sea off the village of Kubin and it became a popular fishing spot. About fifteen years ago Kubin men retrieved and floated one of the propellers back to the village on drums where it is kept as a reminder of the war (Oza Bosun, Early History Workshop, March 1987).

the incident was recalled by a signaller:

Dan Mosby, his eyes weren't very good and he was the only Torres Strait Islander I saw wear sunglasses. He was a great old roamer. He roamed around Kadal. He'd take a stroll with his wife and we'd asked the people to keep their eyes open for us because we were only two and we had a rifle and twenty-five rounds of ammunition each and the enemy were coming down in droves. Danny scouted around all the time. He also liked to sit and yarn. He would say, "Give me a yarn". One day he came up to the house and said he wanted to yarn.

"I want to report", he said, "I find this bomby, bomby".

"Where did you find it?"

"Along Kadal".

"Sure it's a bomby, bomby?"

"Yeah".

I was a bit alarmed.

"I hope you didn't touch it".

"No", he said, "I told that old woman belong me, you poke that bomby, bomby belong that fish spear".

On investigation, we found it was an aluminium crate with partitions to hold anti-aircraft shells or something and it was a floatable thing, and it had washed up on Kadal. If it had been a bomby, she would have gone up all right.<sup>139</sup>

The women on Ugar, located on the Great North East Channel, had excellent boat-handling skills and familiarity with the reefs and currents around their Island. Thus, before their evacuation, they were recruited to work for the civilian pilot service. Prior to the Pacific War, the Channel had been poorly surveyed and charted. Its use was light and irregular, but, with the Japanese southward advance, the Channel became a busy sea lane. The dangers of sea navigation in Torres Strait, with its maze of reefs, necessitates the pilotage of larger vessels. The Torres Strait Pilot Service had its own launch, the Torres. However, independent back-up boats had been necessary to meet even the peacetime shipping needs in the Strait. Thus, after the impressment of all small craft in Torres Strait, the Service was not able to meet the needs of the increased activity. A handful of Ugar women came to the rescue. They volunteered to assist with the task at the northern end of the Channel. The author of the history of the Service, had this to say about the women:

Fortuitously, a completely unofficial, but most welcome, launch service was introduced at Stephens Island [Ugar], operated by a group of Torres Strait Islander women.



Kadal (Kodall) connected to eastern end of Masig by a sandbar.



When a ship arrived off the island and blew its whistle, this was a signal that a pilot was to be disembarked; the women rowed out in their open boat to the waiting vessel and collected the pilot. The fee [was] £2.10.0. Usually the pilot would be returned to T.I. by Torres or by light aircraft, but sometimes he would wait on the island to be eventually put on board a westbound ship by the same female-crewed boat.<sup>140</sup>

It was an awesome task. One of the women explained: 'We did it in a row boat. Sometime we can't pull out to the boat. All depends on the weather, if it's calm the dinghy can go closer to the boat. We were out in the sea in the war and we were frightened'.<sup>141</sup> Frightened indeed! One evening as the women rowed toward their rendezvous the ocean ahead 'boiled' and, to their absolute amazement, a totally alien object, an allied submarine, surfaced and discharged a pilot into their care.<sup>142</sup>

Twenty-four hour daily surveillance in outer Torres Strait was a vital part of the defence of Australia. However, it was an enormous task for the handful of signallers responsible for that operation. They recruited the local people, including women and children to help with coast watching. Wees Nawia and his sergeant of police on Moa kept the channel between Badu and Moa under constant surveillance. If they saw anything suspicious at night, they shone a torch in the direction of Badu, and Curtis radioed Thursday Island. During daylight hours, the signal was made by using a reflective mirror.<sup>143</sup> An old Meriam woman recalled: 'In the afternoon [the school boys] watched the street and some watched out for boats, and some were watching for the planes coming'.<sup>144</sup> 'Masig to Daru', another woman said:

that's only half an hour in a plane and the Japanese might come. You don't know. Any time the Japanese can land. The boys would watch from points on the Island to see if they were coming, even at night. Anything can happen when you are asleep.<sup>145</sup>

In an incident on Mer, women, children and old men responded to an emergency which was recalled by a signaller:

We heard a noise and we could not make out what it was. It sounded like a diesel. It woke all the Island, about 300, and they came up to the house. It was very clear and

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<sup>140</sup> C.H. John, Reef Pilots: the history of the Queensland Coast and Torres Strait Pilot Service (Sydney, 1982), pp. 91-95.

<sup>141</sup> Int. 082.

<sup>142</sup> Interview 162, Mer, January 1989.

<sup>143</sup> Int. 071.

<sup>144</sup> Int. 085.

<sup>145</sup> Int. 072.



Ugar women worked for Torres Strait Pilots in 1942

distinct and it was travelling the length of the Island about four to five knots and we had Islanders, both men, women and boys stationed on the beach and they would report back to one another or send messages to each other reporting on the sound location. It went up and down the Island for an hour or so. I immediately reported it in plain language to V2 and they said to us, "If you can't see it, it's not there. You are going native". We got mad. It had woken the whole village.

A few hours later, just before sunrise, the signallers received a report that an allied ship had been torpedoed by a Japanese submarine north of Mer. The signaller who recalled the incident was convinced that they had been plotting the same submarine off Mer.<sup>146</sup>

In another incident on Mer, old men and boys took up arms in preparation to meet the enemy and to protect the women and children after an old couple reported the sighting of an enemy submarine near Mer:

*[They] were making a sweet potato garden...up the hill and they saw the submarine come this side of Dauar. A Japanese man knew Mer and he brought that submarine from Dauar and it ran out of water and it floated on top [surfaced]...The old man and woman come down to the white signallers...they told them of the Japanese coming up there to get water and they told all the people from Webok to Babud. The people grabbed their little children, called to them swimming in the water, "Come on, Japanese submarine". You should see all the people they carried water, food, billy, clothes and ran into the bush. They thought they were being attacked.*<sup>147</sup>

The captain of the submarine is reputed to have been Otto, a former skipper on a beche-de-mer boat.<sup>148</sup> He had visited the late Geede Williams when she was in charge of the sardine factory on Dauar before the war. So, Otto, once a welcome friend, was believed to have returned as an enemy:

*All of us with mothers and grandmothers we went into the bush and hid ourselves. The old men took tommyhawks, axes. They went and grabbed hold of American coats with the U.S. name and wore those coats, and the old fellow, Marou, went up Gelam with the other men, and hid themselves and waited for Otto, but he goes past.*<sup>149</sup>

A report was made to Thursday Island and American planes were sent out:

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<sup>146</sup> Sig. 1.

<sup>147</sup> Interview 149, Mer, January 1989.

<sup>148</sup> A Meriam woman who knew this man when she was a child said his name was really Ottosun. His abbreviated name might be confused with the German name Otto.

<sup>149</sup> Interview 109, Thursday Island, January 1989. American naval ships visited some of the islands and probably the island men were given these coats by the sailors.

The planes looked around and the submarine was under the coral; that Japanese man knew to go under the shelf, to hide there. The plane ran about looking for them, went back to TI and after that they went out to the Barrier Reef and two planes came back next day and they found them and they bombed them. We heard the boom, boom, boom, and they told the people in the village they killed Otto.

After this incident, the people became supersensitive to the presence of any foreign object in the sea:

News came from village to village, "Japanese submarine". All our parents took us inside the bush and all the old people and middle-age men they were walking around the street carrying axes, knives and spears to protect the women and children. They were marching around to kill the Japanese. They cannot do anything else. We were in the bush hiding and mum was crying, "Keep quiet". All our parents told us, "Don't make any noise because Japanese might come and kill us here". Next day they told us they found that submarine, it was only a log. Those kids were playing and threw a log in the water and the people thought it was a submarine again.<sup>150</sup>

Late one afternoon a radio message was received by Maxie, one of the signallers, that an unidentified boat was nearing Ugar and coming toward Mer. He was feasting at the other end of the Island, some distance from the radio shack. Wearing the blue lavalava that the women had sewn and embroidered for him, he ran to the shack and grabbed his helmet, rifle and ammunition and made for the beach. The mysterious boat dropped anchor off the Island. Maxie wanted someone to row him out to it. George Mye recalled that 'little Tony Dorante from Nepean Island' said that he would do it for his baba (father) and ama (mother): 'I'll row Maxie out,' he said, 'I will do it for Australia too'.<sup>151</sup> Tony's traditional belief in the importance of family and great respect for his elders were undoubtedly welded to his patriotism. Maxie handed George and his mate a rifle and told the people who, by this time, had assembled on the beach, 'If I fire one shot and no more, go for your bloody life. If I fire in

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<sup>150</sup> Int. 149. Sitting babuk (cross-legged) on the beach at Mer listening to two old women telling the story, it was difficult, in that tranquil setting, to conjure up the picture of panic and fear which had gripped the people in this very location so many years before.

<sup>151</sup> The small island of Edgor supported one family, the Dorantes. For a time they moved to the larger community on Mer for greater safety. One daughter lived on Keriri and her parents were there when she was evacuated from Thursday Island in January 1942 but the old people wanted to return to their island home. Their daughter never saw them again (Interview 036, Keriri, February 1989, April 1990).

succession five rounds, it's a friend'. In the fading light, the mysterious boat became barely discernible on the horizon as the dinghy rowed away from the shore. George, who had never handled a gun before, recalled that while he held it pointed out to sea as some sort of protection for the two in the disappearing dinghy he shook so much that he had to rest it on the limb of an old almond tree. He and his mate listened for Maxie's signal: 'We were scared,' George said, 'We didn't know what we'd do if he fired one shot'. The night was very still, and time dragged. Then Maxie's voice rang out over the water, 'Who goes there?' The answer came across the water, 'Launch plom Daloo [Launch from Daru]'. It was subsequently reported that a Japanese submarine had sunk the refugee vessel Mamuta in the Gulf of Papua and the launch from Daru was looking for survivors.<sup>152</sup>

Mer was also visited by a number of men in green uniforms who landed on the beach from a vessel anchored off the Island. Their appearance, from a distance, was suspiciously like that of Japanese soldiers. After consultation, the elders agreed that they would make the initial contact with these men. If they were the enemy it was less likely that they would be hostile to them. Once it was apparent that the visitors were not hostile, the signallers joined the group on the beach. However, the only intelligible word spoken by these men was 'Ambon'. The signallers concluded that the visitors were escapees from there. They left as mysteriously as they had arrived.<sup>153</sup>

Unbeknown to the Eastern Islanders, they were, in one signaller's words, 'sitting in the grandstand' of the historic Battle of the Coral Sea.<sup>154</sup> Japan had planned to strike Port Moresby in early May, which augured badly for Australia. Fortunately, however, the Americans broke the enemy's naval codes and a good deal more was known by the allies about Japanese dispositions and intentions than they suspected. In addition, Australian coast watchers in New Guinea and their British counterparts in the Solomon Islands, at great risk

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<sup>152</sup> Int. 065.

<sup>153</sup> Sig. 3. Ambon in the Dutch East Indies was captured by the Japanese in the early stages of the Pacific War. Because the visitors to Mer had the appearance of Asians and the word Ambon was spoken, it was reasonable for the signallers to conclude that they were evacuees from that Island.

<sup>154</sup> Sig. 3.

to themselves and the local people who assisted them, were 'on the job'. They had the Japanese under constant surveillance. They reported that enemy cargo and transport ships were being massed at Rabaul and that there was a tremendous military build up in the Solomons. Port Moresby was being attacked by air. By 5 May, the Port Moresby invasion force was at sea. So too was the American task force. The American and Japanese forces were converging and it was to be only a matter of time before the planes from one sighted the ships of the other.<sup>155</sup> For three days allied and Japanese planes waged war in the skies over the Coral Sea but the aircraft carriers never met in battle. There were heavy losses in ships, planes and lives on both sides and no outright victory for either.<sup>156</sup> A half a century later a signaller who was on Mer in May 1942 recorded his recollections of these events as they related to the Meriam people:

There must have been a thousand planes. They were just coming over like a storm over the top of Mer. We thought they were Australian. We didn't know. It was dark. We could see flashes of gunfire all night. We didn't have a clue what was happening and about a week later a giant raft, big enough for fifty men, off the U.S. Lexington, was washed up on shore. But we knew at the time that it was something big.<sup>157</sup>

The Meriam people had no way of knowing that, at that time, very close to home the tide of war was turning. In the words of a U.S. Naval Rear-Admiral, the 'foe's drive south had collapsed - just as a wave breaks and falls back from a towering cliff'. Japan's 'aura of invincible power' had been shattered.<sup>158</sup> Nevertheless, it was to be a long time before the outer Torres Strait Islanders' fears of aerial attack or invasion were assuaged.

Meanwhile, the women learned to live with their fears. Their recall of those fears and what they did about them are discussed in the following chapter.

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<sup>155</sup> Edwin R. Hoyt, Blue Skies and Blood: The Battle of the Coral Sea (New York, 1975), pp. 5, 11, 31.

<sup>156</sup> The Japanese lost the light carrier Shoho, a destroyer and three smaller ships. The carrier Shokaku was severely damaged, seventy-seven planes were lost, and a total of 1 074 men were killed or wounded. The American losses were the carrier Lexington, the tanker Neosho and the destroyer Sims. The carrier Yorktown was damaged, sixty-six planes were lost and there were 543 casualties (Barker, Midway: the turning point, pp. 68-69).

<sup>157</sup> Sig. 3.

<sup>158</sup> Cited in Hoyt, Blue Skies and Blood, p. xiii.



Japan reaching for Australia, early 1942

**Chapter Seven**  
**Fear and faith: the past lives in the present**

So, suddenly, a very old Australian nightmare came to life. Throughout their history Australians had been given to bouts of fear that their remote, underpopulated coastline would tempt a foreign aggressor, probably Oriental, but this terror had been kept at bay by the naval supremacy of the British Empire. After December 1941 that supremacy was no more...The year 1942 saw the greatest crisis in the nation's history.<sup>1</sup>

He's coming south

During the period of late colonisation in the South Pacific, White Australians, on their lonely outpost in a profoundly alien region, were suspicious of expansionist Russian and French intentions. Moreover, they feared that their white, British and democratic way of life might come under threat from one of the populous nations of allegedly land-hungry Asiatics, the 'Yellow Peril' of media and political debate. Until 1905, when Japan defeated Russia, particular focus was upon China. After that event the readers of such journals as the Sydney Daily Telegraph were warned that they had been 'slumbering beside a volcano'.<sup>2</sup> With this victory, Japan proved that she was a strong Pacific military and naval power. In the 1930s, the world watched that power directed against the Chinese. Then, in December 1941, her aggressiveness toward America at Pearl Harbour plunged the Pacific area into war. By early 1942, throughout Australia it was thought that the old nightmare was about to come to life: an attack on Australian soil was 'on the agenda'.<sup>3</sup>

Beside Australians' fears of Japan as a strong military and naval force in the Pacific their desire was to retain a white monoculture. From 1901, a White Australia Policy was articulated in immigration laws which had been especially directed at and were most offensive to Japan. The working and business futures for Japanese nationals in Australia were constantly restricted. In 1902, after signing an alliance with Japan, Britain reduced her naval force in the Pacific which caused concern in Australia as she could not afford to build a fleet of the capacity needed to defend the nation's

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<sup>1</sup> Crowley, New History of Australia, p.464.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., cited p. 293.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Penglase and Horner, When War Came to Australia, p. 61.



extensive coastline. Japan contributed to the allied cause in World War One but at the Paris Peace Conference, Billy Hughes, Australia's controversial Nationalist Party Prime Minister, 'gave not an inch' in his opposition to Japan's efforts to have the principle of racial equality incorporated in the League of Nation's Covenant, the denial of which by the white powers humiliated Japan.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Australia continued throughout the twenties to make it difficult for Japanese businessmen to enter the country. During the 1930s, while offering goodwill with one hand, Australia implemented restraints upon Japan with the other.

When Japan annexed Manchuria in 1932, Japanese-Australian relations became uneasy.<sup>5</sup> That annexation demonstrated Japan's determination to use military might to satisfy her need for territory, materials and markets. Manchurians pleaded for food and weapons and reported Japanese atrocities but the Australia Government offered no assistance. It feared antagonising an already aggressive Japan and the loss of important export markets at a time of deep economic recession.<sup>6</sup> J.G. Latham, a senior federal minister, on a goodwill tour of Asia in 1934 assured Japanese ministers that Australia desired to continue trade relations. With 'excessive zeal and optimism', he offered to support Japan's reinstatement as a member of the League of Nations, from which she had resigned in 1931. On his return home, Latham warned parliament that while Asia was the 'Far East' to Europe, it was the 'Near East' to Australia and that Japan was the 'key Asian state' with respect to trade and defence in the Pacific. For these reasons, he concluded, Australia's interests

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<sup>4</sup> T.B. Millar, Australia in Peace and War: External Relations 1788-1977 (Canberra, 1978), pp. 91-95.

<sup>5</sup> After her defeat in 1905, Russia conceded her interest in Manchuria under a lease from China to Japan. Following the Chinese Revolution six years later, Manchuria came under the control of a local Chinese warlord who subsequently granted Japan civil and commercial privileges in return for military support. During the Chinese civil war, Japan exercised a controlling interest in South Manchuria. The Chinese warlord was assassinated in 1928 and his son cast his lot in with the Nationalist Government in Nanking. On 18 September 1931, Japan attacked the city of Shenyang and the next day occupied the city. The Nanking government, inexplicably, directed Manchurian leaders not to resist Japan and within five months the country was occupied. On 9 March 1932, Japan created the puppet state of Manchukuo out of the three ancient Manchurian provinces.

<sup>6</sup> Millar, Australia in Peace and War, fn., p. 99. Japan took 9.5 percent of Australia's exports in 1932-33.

would be best served by doing everything possible to prevent war in the East. Moreover, an Australian observer suggested that if Japan succeeded in her continental policy in Manchukio this would be an encouragement to further territorial expansion. If she failed, he predicted, she would be even more determined to attempt to solve her population, market and raw material problems by occupation of islands in the Pacific and eventually northern Australia.<sup>7</sup>

An Australian trade commissioner was appointed to Tokyo in 1935 but, almost immediately, the Commonwealth parliament introduced a trade diversionary policy which gave preference to imports from Britain over those from Japan. Thus, despite Latham's warning: 'At one blow, the Australian government had offended both the largest trading nation and the largest military power in the Pacific'.<sup>8</sup> There were subsequent moves by the Australian Government to appease Japan economically while simultaneously implementing diplomatic restraints on her. Australia made a proposal at the 1937 Imperial Conference for a non-aggression pact in the Pacific which would include the United States of America and Japan but be independent of the League of Nations.<sup>9</sup> The Conference left resolution of the proposal to the British government which allowed the matter to lapse, probably because it was aware of Japanese hostility to the proposal. By this time too England was preoccupied with events in Europe. In the same year Japan launched a major assault against China which, in the eyes of many Australians, brought Japanese aggression closer to home and enhanced the nation's fears about that country's intentions toward Australia.

Politicians and military strategists were fully aware in the late 1930s that Australia would not be able to defend herself. She would have to rely on the British navy. For that reason, at the Imperial Conference in 1937, Australia urged Britain to improve her relations with Japan to guard against the possibility of being faced simultaneously with the hostility of Germany, Italy and Japan. Subsequent to that conference, the First Lord of the British Admiralty declared that no local defence, army or air force Australia could conceivably maintain would 'save her from invasion and defeat at the hands of the Japanese'. However, on a more optimistic note,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 99-100.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>9</sup> The United States did not join the League of Nations and Japan resigned in 1931.

he added that 'Australia should not be concerned - there was Singapore': the British fleet would take no more than seventy days to reach that destination if the need arose.<sup>10</sup> His optimism was short-lived. Within five years that protection was no longer a viable proposition. The great and impregnable British naval base at Singapore fell to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, only four days before the first air-raid on Australian soil.

The reality of Australia's nightmare hit isolated pockets of people across north and north-west Australia in a very visual way. As discussed earlier, the people in Darwin and Broome witnessed the worst scenario of the war; death and destruction on a scale hitherto unknown in Australia. Not unlike their European counterparts who fled in the wake of the Nazi and Fascist military advances, many of the people in these northern locations became refugees from what they perceived was the beginning of a ruthless Japanese advance. To remain in these towns would be suicidal. There were also thousands of people all around the continent who had no personal visual experience of the carnage of war who also fled away from the coast. Indeed, the Minister for Home Security, Mr. H.P. Lazzarini, contrasted the actions of some Sydneysiders with those of the people in Singapore in a derogatory way when he said:

Singapore remained calm, there was no sign of panic and every man and woman was ready to fight; while in Sydney everybody worried, hundreds were going away to the mountains and country evacuation areas.

He questioned: 'Are the people of Australia more interested in taking cover than in getting on with the job of winning the war?' Townsville's Tom Aikens said that some of the people in that city were 'scared stiff...people just flocked away...some simply gave their homes away'.<sup>11</sup> Such was the pitch of fear on the mainland.

After the bombing of Darwin, The Sydney Morning Herald alerted its readers to an 'inescapable fact': 'We are in the position of living practically alongside a people whose background of life sociologically remains largely at the stage that preceded the Christian era in ancient Europe'. But, even after the tide of war had begun to turn away from Australia, the government kept the image of this enemy, who it was claimed possessed none of the 'refinements

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<sup>10</sup> Cited in Millar, Australia in Peace and War, p. 102.

<sup>11</sup> Moles, Majority of One, pp. 103-104.

of modern civilisation', before the Australian public.<sup>12</sup> War production had to be maintained at full capacity and war loans filled. The people were barraged with propaganda to promote these ends. Captions on posters plastered around cities and towns read: 'He's coming south', and everyone knew who that was.<sup>13</sup> Newspaper cartoons depicted the enemy as a 'grinning monster, with buck teeth'; he was a 'many-legged crab' clawing at Australia; a ferocious ape with a spiked baton 'holding high the body of a white woman'.<sup>14</sup> In addition to such propaganda there were the accounts of refugees who had fled from South-East Asia for the uncertain sanctuary of Australia of 'beheadings, bayonetings, rapes, and other atrocities' committed by the Japanese.<sup>15</sup> Such images kept alive for many Australian women their fear of what they believed would happen to them if they were captured by the Japanese:

When I was old enough to understand, my mother told me what she planned to do when the Japanese invaded. She was going to carry me along the beach until we came to the Barwon Heads bridge, walk out into the middle of it to where the water is deep and fast-flowing and then, with me in her arms, jump off.

The daughter was mystified. Her mother was not 'prone to hysteria'. The mother explained to her daughter: 'They weren't like other people...they look different...they behaved oddly'. She also said that they acted 'inhumanely' to their prisoners: 'Jumping off the bridge was the wisest plan'.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the propaganda, by January 1943 the possibility of Japanese atrocities against mainland Australian women was becoming increasingly remote. The first sign of hope had come with the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942. But it was her losses in carriers and trained pilots at the Battle of Midway, fought in June, which forced a halt to Japan's expansionist program in the South-West Pacific. In New Guinea, where Japanese land forces came within fifty miles of Port Moresby in August 1942, Australian troops, pushed the enemy back along the Kokoda Trail and over the Owen Stanley Range from September 1942 until January 1943. On the mainland, voluntary evacuees began returning to their homes. However, while mainland women's fears of

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<sup>12</sup> I. Mackay, 'Despotism of Japan: Old Way of Life Prevails', Sydney Morning Herald, 13 December 1941, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Crowley, New History of Australia, p. 464

<sup>14</sup> Warner and Seno, Coffin Boats, p. 90.

<sup>15</sup> Crowley, New History of Australia, p. 465.

<sup>16</sup> Kristin Williamson, The Last Bastion (Sydney, 1984), p. 5.

the Japanese were hard to overcome, many also lived with the great fear that they would receive the dreaded War Office telegram which would announce a husband, a son, a father, a brother or even a daughter or sister was missing or dead. Torres Strait Islander women experienced fear of the Japanese in a different way from their mainland counterparts. Nonetheless, they too harboured dreaded thoughts about the fate of their enlisted men.

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### Fear of the outsiders

As discussed in Chapter five, Torres Strait Islanders did not think about the Japanese in the same terms as mainland Australians. Many good relations had been formed between Japanese men in the marine industry and the men and women from the outer islands. Their belief was that the Japanese had no grudge against them: '*Japanese fight white man not island man*'.<sup>17</sup> There was an uncomplicated trust in the Japanese men they knew, men who had shown personal concern for them. The political power structures in Japan were of no consequence in these relationships. Conversely, from their earliest encounters with Whites, the Torres Strait Islanders were demeaned and made fearful of them. In the 1860s many white pearlers and trepangers, some 'about as bad a lot as sail out of any port on earth', came to Torres Strait.<sup>18</sup> As indicated earlier, both Torres Strait Islander men and women were forced to work with these men. To save their women from abduction, the men on Tudu 'buried their women and young girls in the sand with only their noses showing' when vessels were sighted.<sup>19</sup> In 1885, Captain Bruce of the Woodlark went to Mer in quest of women and when the village men resisted, his crew burnt their houses and belongings and 'hacked to pieces or disfigured' those they caught.<sup>20</sup> Fear of white people did not abate when the Torres Strait Islanders came under the internal colonial rule of the Queensland Government.

John Douglas, Government Resident on Thursday Island from 1885 to 1904 once remarked that the Meriam people had 'unquestionably

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<sup>17</sup> Int. 080.

<sup>18</sup> From Somerset Magistrate's Letter Book, 13 March 1877, cited in Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Sharp, Springs of Originality, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Langbridge, Enculturation to Evangelization, p. 24.

risen much in the scale of what [was called] civilization' in the fourteen years after the landing of the first L.M.S. missionaries.<sup>21</sup> As already indicated, he opposed any suggestion that Torres Strait Islanders be administered under the provisions of the Queensland Act designed to segregate and control Aborigines. However, his views were not the views of his successors. Under that Act, Torres Strait Islanders along with the Aborigines became second-class citizens of Australia:

*We been work for J.W. Bleakley you know. He come out all the Island, he said, "Oh, I'm your big mamus (chief), here are two sticks of tobacco, here are two blankets". Oh, so we bend the knee and bow down to him because he's the big mamus."*<sup>22</sup>

From 1911, the government's agents, the white teachers on the outer islands, with minimal supervision, reduced the island councillors to puppet status: 'The teacher had more power than the council'. They were the government's 'right-hand man [sic]'.<sup>23</sup> One old man recalled: 'The way [the teacher] spoke to me made me think that she was a little god'.<sup>24</sup> Another said: 'All the good things we needed we were too frightened of her to ask about'.<sup>25</sup> People from Badu, Mabuiag, Masig and Saibai recalled that 'everyone' was frightened to walk past the teacher's house because 'we weren't allowed to make noises around the house'.<sup>26</sup> In the 1930s, the then teenage Willie Thaiday was banished from Erub not because he had done anything wrong but because, in his presence, a friend had put his arm around an island girl and kissed her at a dance.<sup>27</sup> Any kind of intimate relationship with a white woman, or crossing the 'caste' barrier, was certainly punished. On Badu, a fourteen year old boy was gaoled for three months by the island court when the teacher 'blew the whistle' on him because he walked with a white woman when she asked him to do so and he did not like to say no: 'I was fright from her [frightened of being with her], scared...We had a law about walking with white ladies'.<sup>28</sup> A Boigu man said that it was better for a young man to be out on the boats than on the Island for any length of time: 'Staying on the Island was a bad thing...too many [men were] going around with girls. That's why I go out to sea...They were very, very

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<sup>21</sup> Report: John Douglas on Visit to Murray Island (Mer), 6 August 1885, Q.V.& P. 1885, Vol. 2, p. 1084.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Sharp, Springs of Originality, pp. 189-190.

<sup>23</sup> Int. 098; Sharp, Stars of Tagai, p. 143.

<sup>24</sup> Sharp, Springs of Originality, Vol. 2, p. B63.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. B77.

<sup>26</sup> Int. 092; Int. 072.

<sup>27</sup> Thaiday, Under the Act, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> Sharp, Springs of Originality, Vol. 2, p. B77-B78.

strict D.N.A [Department of Native Affairs]....very strict, one false move and you get about with girls and they say "out"'.<sup>29</sup> Sentences were severe. In the case of Willie Thaiday, his was banishment from Erub. Frequently punishments were humiliating: 'Before time they cut your hair on one side and make you shamed'.<sup>30</sup> Councillors had no option but to go along with the rules on such matters. They were under the teachers' supervision, and, as already indicated, they were seen as 'the law, terrible law'.<sup>31</sup> Even after the 1936 Maritime Strike when the 'New Law' was introduced which purported to restore local autonomy to the councillors, this, according to one person was 'in name only'; most Torres Strait Islanders continued to be 'frightened from the white man'.<sup>32</sup> For the women, however, island custom made it even more difficult to build their confidence about strangers.

Traditionally, the women adopted an unobtrusive role whenever strangers appeared on their islands. In 1847, Jukes recorded instances of this. On Tudu they crawled into the bush when his party approached. On Erub he noticed that the 'younger women and girls kept in the background or hid themselves in the bush', and elsewhere he observed that they joined the men and visitors only after a 'little persuasion'.<sup>33</sup> Understandably, the L.M.S. missionary Gill described the women as 'excessively timid'.<sup>34</sup> An old Saibai man explained the tradition: 'From the time of our way any aliens approach the Island, the women are the first to be hid, the menfolk are there to receive what's coming to them'.<sup>35</sup> A Purma woman said:

It's like a rule, it was passed on; whenever we come across strangers we are not allowed to talk. If the husbands are around, they can talk. When the husbands are not there the women would not talk. If single or they got boyfriend, they still are not allowed to talk.<sup>36</sup>

During the 1930s, the rigidity of the custom was being eroded

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<sup>29</sup> Interview 067, Boigu, February 1990. See Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> Int. 066; Personal communication with Meriam woman, Cairns, December 1994; see Sharp, Stars of Tagai, pp. 148-150 on 'Shaming as Social Control'.

<sup>31</sup> Int. 067.

<sup>32</sup> Interview 120, Masig, January 1989; Int. 080.

<sup>33</sup> Jukes, Narrative of the Surveying Voyage, pp. 160, 166, 172.

<sup>34</sup> Gill, Life in the Southern Isles, p. 207.

<sup>35</sup> Int. 144.

<sup>36</sup> Int. 100.

on some islands and a few women gained a degree of confidence in the presence of white people. On Badu, for instance, there were women who worked with white government officers in the store as clerks, shop assistants and seamstresses, so that they were able to say in the early 1940s: *'We Badu women we were used to white people and we were not frightened of them'*.<sup>37</sup> Other young women from the various communities were sent to the Teachers' Training College on Mabuiag and they were instructed by Philip Frith, Charlie Turner and their wives.<sup>38</sup> They subsequently taught on islands, generally not their own, where they were supervised by other white government teachers. After a while their fears were reduced: *'Coloured people were frightened from white people; when the [white] school teachers came, everybody was frightened until you are friendly'*.<sup>39</sup> However, for a Saibai woman who had worked for Charlie Turner and his wife, going to Brisbane with them for six weeks was a frightening experience: *'There were no Islanders when I went down...no black people only white. I was frightened of that place and when we go out they had to hold my hand'*.<sup>40</sup> From March 1942, the Torres Strait Islander women's fears of white men were compounded by fears associated with the machines of modern warfare.

*'An experience of real fear'*<sup>41</sup>

When Japanese, and even allied aircraft, appeared in the skies over Torres Strait, new and terrifying experiences flooded in upon the women even though they had no understanding of their destructive capacity. A Badu woman remembered that when the bombs were dropped on Nurupai they heard the explosions and everyone was *'very frightened...We don't realise that much that time. We hadn't seen planes. There were no planes around here. We travelled by sailing boats'*.<sup>42</sup> Another woman said: *'All the planes flew on top, they made me frightened and the children cried because we had never seen planes then'*.<sup>43</sup> The Saibai people recalled: *'We never saw that thing before and we were scared too much when we heard the noise'; 'It was war time, you know, we were very frightened. All of us were*

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<sup>37</sup> Int. 131.

<sup>38</sup> The Teachers' Training College on Mabuiag will be discussed in Chapter nine.

<sup>39</sup> Int. 079.

<sup>40</sup> Int. 143. No one else spoke about going to the mainland before the Pacific War.

<sup>41</sup> Int. 084.

<sup>42</sup> Int. 093.

<sup>43</sup> Int. 071.



very frightened from that plane noise'.<sup>44</sup> A Meriam woman's memory of it was that: 'We listened for the noise from the planes...we were frightened from the planes...We don't know if they will bomb our Island'.<sup>45</sup> Even when there were no planes in the sky, the fear persisted: 'We were frightened all the time planes might come'. Mothers were fearful when their children made noises and told them to stay quiet.<sup>46</sup> So, 'fear was the problem', a Saibai woman recalled, 'I can still imagine those planes when they come in formation. We were scared'. Her people asked themselves: 'What's going to happen next?'<sup>47</sup>

Little children 'ran everywhere and cried' when they heard the noise of a plane and, like 'mother fowls', the women 'called all the chickens to come inside'.<sup>48</sup> A Purma woman told her story of fear: 'They said to me, "Don't look up". They took the baby from me and Henry, my two year old, ran along. I was frightened from those planes. I can't carry my baby'.<sup>49</sup> The nights brought no relief from the fear: 'We only sat there with a small light so nobody could see us and no noise, just kept quiet. We were frightened, frightened from the enemy'. Some families felt safer in their own homes: 'The planes went over. Yeah, we were frightened. Everybody liked to stay in their own home at night'.<sup>50</sup> Fear drove other families closer together: 'We could not sleep...we came together in one house and some sleep outside on the verandah. We felt safer together. We were frightened our brothers were away'.<sup>51</sup> The women's fears were certainly accentuated because their able-bodied men were not there to support them through the ordeal.<sup>52</sup> Their men, caught up in the war machine, were a long way from home.

Initially, the women and the old people could not distinguish between allied and Japanese planes and this meant that they ran for safety at the sound of every plane: 'We did not understand where the planes were coming from'. On Mer, very early one morning, a woman was making 'damper dough' to put in her earth oven and the smoke from the fire wafted into the sky. When an Australian plane circled just

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<sup>44</sup> Int. 144; Int. 098.  
<sup>45</sup> Int. 107.  
<sup>46</sup> Int. 157, Thursday Island, November 1988.  
<sup>47</sup> Int. 054.  
<sup>48</sup> Int. 071.  
<sup>49</sup> Int. 123.  
<sup>50</sup> Interview 105, Mabuiag, April 1990.  
<sup>51</sup> Int. 064.  
<sup>52</sup> Int. 066.

above her to see what was happening, she thought it was an enemy plane and ran terrified into the bush.<sup>53</sup> Later, they *'came to understand that the noise was different between the plane from the New Guinea side [enemy planes from Lae] and our planes'*.<sup>54</sup> This was after the enlisted men talked to the women about these things: *'When we have leave'*, one old TSLI man recalled, *'then we explained everything to them through our own language, like what is an Australian plane, an American, Japanese'*. They told the women to look for the *'red dot'*.<sup>55</sup> That was the enemy.

Nevertheless, the women had reason for further apprehension. When the first seaplane landed on the water out from their village, the Saibai women ran away and the policeman called to them, *'Come back, come back. They won't hurt you. Don't be frightened they are friends'*.<sup>56</sup> One Saibai woman, who was a girl at the time, remembered thinking it looked like was a *'big shiny bird on the water: it was something different, a strange thing...We were frightened but curious too...We swam out to touch it'*.<sup>57</sup> A Meriam woman recalled that their curiosity caused them to interrupt an important custom related to the dead: *'One time a woman died and that Catalina flying boat landed and all the people left the dead body and we ran out to see the plane - we had never seen one before'*.<sup>58</sup> Another wartime phenomenon which caused great fear on Moa was when, for the first time, the women saw from their bush shelters the intermittent blast of light from a searchlight on Nurupai. A Kubin man recalled that the women ran everywhere with their children because they thought a demon was causing it.<sup>59</sup> At that time, Christianity was virtually universally accepted by the Torres Strait Islanders. However, with only seventy years of colonial rule, it is not difficult to understand that recourse to old beliefs in evil spirits and magic, which the missionaries had failed to stamp out completely, helped the women to comprehend the incomprehensible.

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<sup>53</sup> Int. 149.

<sup>54</sup> The Japanese planes came from the airstrip at Lae which had been captured during the first Japanese landings on the northern coast of New Guinea.

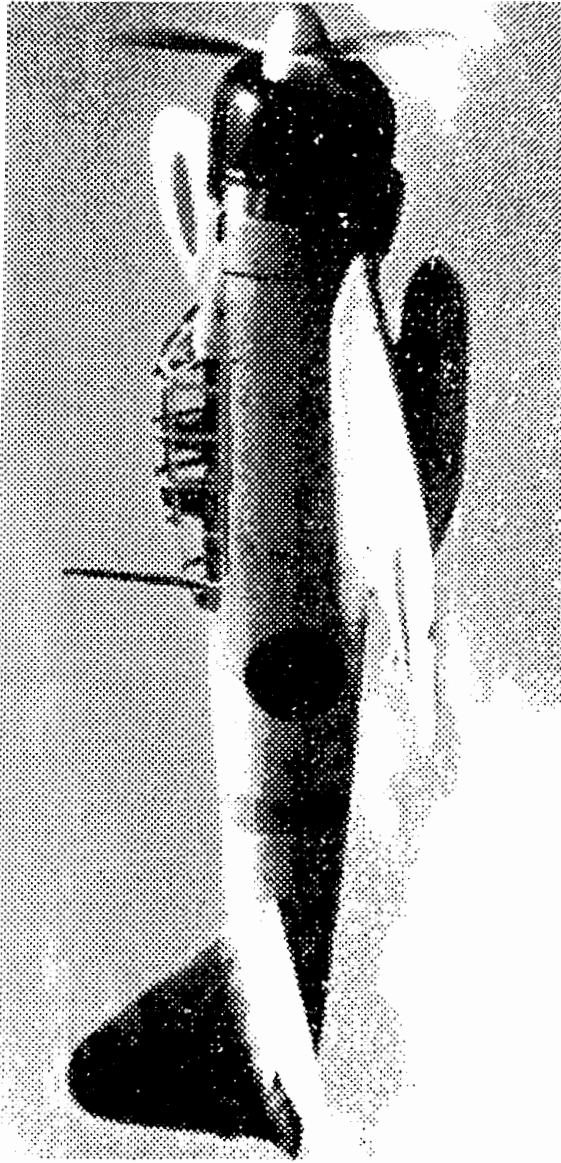
<sup>55</sup> Int. 144. The *'red dot'* was the insignia on the Japanese planes.

<sup>56</sup> Int. 079.

<sup>57</sup> Int. 054.

<sup>58</sup> Int. 056. See Sharp, Stars of Tagai, p. 114 on custom of sitting with the dead.

<sup>59</sup> Bosun, Early History Workshop, March 1987.



Japanese bombers displaying the 'red dot'

After the Japanese pushed into the area around Merauke on the southern coastline of Papua, aerial activity over the Top-Western Islands increased. One man recalled large formations - *'thirty-eight or forty-six bombers and fighters'* - going over Saibai. He said the older boys had very little fear of the Japanese planes. It was an exciting time for them: *'We just enjoyed seeing Jap planes flying over. I was the ring leader,'* he said with a smile on his face:

*We ran and waved to the planes. They were way up, but we could see the red marks on the tail. As children we weren't really aware of the danger. To us, oh God will protect us, we got nothing to fight with them.*

However, the mothers were very aware of the seriousness of their children's actions: *'We got belted for it but a couple of days later I did the same thing again'.<sup>60</sup>* It was an exciting time for the boys on Masig as well. They watched the *'dog fights'* between American and Japanese planes near their Island. One man remembered that when *'everyone fled into the bush he sat down on the beach and looked at the planes fighting, just like a movie'.<sup>61</sup>* There were girls too who threw caution to the wind, much to the old women's horror: *'We kids made big noises',* a Badu woman said, *'We screamed, waved our hands. The old ladies said to us, "Don't make noise, they will come back and shoot you"'.<sup>62</sup>* In these ways, the older children were foolhardy and caused their mothers further consternation.

Bearing in mind that the women had always adopted an unobtrusive role when outsiders, who were generally men, came to their islands, it was not surprising that many of the women described incidents which related to their fears of white soldiers. The women on Mer were frightened of the signallers when they were first posted there. A Meriam woman recalled: *'When the signallers came...we went inside and locked the door. They came around to make friends with us and we went and hid. Our Uncle Bon roused on us, "You are ignorant to run. They are people like us"'.<sup>63</sup>* The old Kubin woman who had worked for Whites on Thursday Island said that she had not been frightened of white people: *'but army white men, they leave us frightened. They looked different, they made us cry...The people ran and cried everywhere'.* She said her husband called to the women when

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<sup>60</sup> Int. 076.

<sup>61</sup> Int. 120. It is highly unlikely that this man had been to the movies when he was a boy. He has related what he did to a subsequent experience.

<sup>62</sup> Interview 128, Thursday Island, February 1989.

<sup>63</sup> Int. 160.

they ran away, *'Come back, they've got our Australian uniform'*.<sup>64</sup> The reactions of the women on Saibai were similar when the signallers hosted several American airmen rescued after their plane ditched into the sea near the Island: *'Everybody ran away in the bush, everybody was frightened'*. One woman said: *'The signallers called to us, "Don't be frightened and ready a cup of tea for the airmen". They introduced me and I was scared'*.<sup>65</sup> A Badu woman, who had also worked for white people before the war said she had lost her fear of white men until she was sent to work as a domestic on Thursday Island late in the war and there were *'army men everywhere'*. One day the officer's wife said to her, *'We've got visitors coming, those head ones they're coming to have a cup of tea. You look for flowers for the table'*. She went out to pick the flowers and men in uniform came along. She dropped her flowers and ran: *'I was frightened from them,'* she said, *'I left the flowers until all the boys go by'*.<sup>66</sup> A Saibai woman who accompanied the old men in the long canoes on the dangerous sea crossing to Daru for trade during those years, explained: *'They got soldiers there too - white and black soldiers - some New Guinea. We were frightened, too many soldiers'*.<sup>67</sup>

Both men and women on the communities had always felt inhibited in their associations with Whites because of their inability to speak what they now term *'proper English'*. In the western group of islands Kalaw Kawaw Ya and Kala Lagaw Ya were spoken and for most families English was only used by the children during school lesson time. Over to the east the language was Meriam and likewise it was spoken almost exclusively of English outside of the school room. Creole had become the primary language on some communities.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the people had little opportunity to practise their English and to feel confident speaking it. A Saibai man who had even attended the Mabuia Teachers' Training College before the war was typical of many

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<sup>64</sup> Int. 071.

<sup>65</sup> Int. 079. A signaller said that in order to confuse the Japanese they were instructed to act like civilians or missionaries on the islands which meant that they did not wear their uniforms (Sig. 1). This made it easier for the women to eventually overcome their fears of the signallers - see discussion Chapter eleven.

<sup>66</sup> Int. 131. The old people still tend to call young men *'boys'*.

<sup>67</sup> Int. 079.

<sup>68</sup> Steve Mullins, *'heathen polynee' and 'nigger teachers': Torres Strait and Pacific Islander Ascendancy*, Paper presented at Peripheral Visions Conference, James Cook University, Townsville, 1989, pp. 5-6.

of his people:

*In 1946 I don't speak English. I read pretty good and write it down but I do not speak English. They taught English to us and they stopped us from speaking language in school - they tried to teach us, but English is just a word, no meaning to me in 1946.*<sup>69</sup>

A Meriam woman said although the women were afraid of the white teachers when they first arrived on their islands, they were 'more afraid because [they] couldn't speak English properly'.<sup>70</sup> Another old Saibai man said: 'The language is a very important thing. We were all frightened, very frightened because it was very hard to speak English...We must be frightened unless we join in and understand. It's understanding that gets rid of fear'.<sup>71</sup> On the beach at Mer, an old woman spoke in language about her fears during the war which had been heightened by an inability to speak English. Her son interpreted for her:

*On their way back home from their gardens they saw some of the navy men on the Island and they went up to the hills and when they saw them they went and hid in the grass...They could not speak English, you know, so they were so scared: "Stop, stop, white man, white man", they said. They had all those yams and bananas in this little basket and they dropped it and the navy went past and they saw the basket, "No women!" They didn't see the women hiding there in bush. As soon as they saw basket they looked everywhere for people, "There's no one here". They just saw the basket.*<sup>72</sup>

Thus, the women's testimonies were punctuated with many descriptions of their fears, some not directly associated with the war but ones which certainly made their experience of the Pacific War all the more terrifying.

In early 1942, the old Australian nightmare became more than an unpleasant dream for mainland women: the dreaded enemy was finally on their doorstep. Torres Strait Islander women did not fear Japanese men because of any preconceived notion of their inhumanity. It was when they returned to Torres Strait in their war machines that the women became afraid of what might happen to them. Theirs were the fears of women who had been drawn into a totally incomprehensible mechanical warfare. Moreover, their fears were aggravated by their enforced isolation, 'innocence' about the world beyond their own and factors peculiar to their relationships with the outsiders, even their language. However, it was a time when finite human beings

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<sup>69</sup> Int. 076.

<sup>70</sup> Int. 160.

<sup>71</sup> Int. 144.

<sup>72</sup> Int. 073.

everywhere were being forced to realise their own powerlessness in the face of terrible danger, no matter its source or perpetrators. On the mainland church leaders were urging congregations to pray that the physical forces of evil would be met by spiritual forces of good. A Mabuiag man, recalling what his mother had told him, said the Torres Strait Islander women's fear went *'hand in hand with their faith'*.<sup>73</sup> An old Torres Strait Islander woman expressed it in these terms: *'Yes, everybody was frightened but our fathers, mothers, they prayed to God to stop the Japanese coming. God is the true God so we prayed until we won that victory'*.<sup>74</sup>

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In prayer...we turn back to that source (of creative power)...Prayer becomes a source of strength and certainty and not a mere sedative and tranquillizer (Lama Anagarika Govinda).<sup>75</sup>

Michael McKernan, who wrote about the attitudes of mainland Australian clergymen to the European war in 1914, suggested they drew on a basic Christian belief to explain why the world hovered on the brink of disaster: 'nothing happened unless permitted by God, who only sanctioned what was ultimately good'. Churchgoers were told: 'It might be that God saw for the welfare of mankind a great destruction was the only means whereby faith in the living God could be kept alive'. One preacher's argument was that war 'should be welcomed and acquiesced in rather than deplored' if its outcome was Christians with a stronger faith in the spiritual as opposed to the material. Carried along by a surge of patriotism, overwhelming numbers of young Australian men enlisted and went to the front while people at home attended church services 'as never before'. They flocked to processions of troops and attended fundraising functions. However, despite the clergy's warnings, religious zeal waned as the war dragged on.<sup>76</sup>

During the 1920s Australians were swept along by a new, fast,

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<sup>73</sup> Personal communication with a Mabuiag man, Cairns, January 1995.

<sup>74</sup> Int. 115.

<sup>75</sup> F.C. Happold, Prayer and Meditation: Their Nature and Practice (Hammondsworth, 1971), p. 43.

<sup>76</sup> Michael McKernan, Australian Churches at War: attitudes and activities of the major churches, 1914-1918 (Canberra, 1980), pp. 24-32.

free and even more materialistic way of life. Young middle-class women were criticised because they preferred the enjoyments of the post-war high to the life of a housewife and a mother. One newspaper editor claimed that progress permitted women to escape from the "monstrosities" of Victorian prudery and false morality'. Another suggested that these women were 'shaking their well-manicured fists in the face of God's immutable laws' and that the war had left behind 'greater horrors than bereaved homes and starving nations'.<sup>77</sup> Within a decade, the Great Depression reversed the fortunes of many Australians and, in the latter years of the 1930s, war clouds gathered once again over Europe and finally over the South-West Pacific. Three days before the first bombs were dropped on Australian soil, one congregation was told that the present war was 'God's retribution for the sins of the world' and that materialism had made tremendous inroads into their spiritual life.<sup>78</sup> Churchgoers elsewhere were exhorted to place themselves and those on active service under the protection of God.<sup>79</sup> By early March 1942 a feeling of doom permeated mainland Australian society. The Catholic Archbishop in Brisbane echoed his 1914 counterparts when he challenged his congregation with the words: 'Might it not be that the danger now so imminent was permitted by God as a punishment and a corrective!'<sup>80</sup> Presbyterians heard their minister tell them that 'prayer is a force just as any of the other forces we know of in nature'. And the Prime Minister appealed to the people to repent and 'seek strength in prayer'.<sup>81</sup> Thus, while history repeated itself and nations went to war, so too did church leaders revive 'simplistic moral judgements' of the people. Congregations became 'somewhat bigger' than before the war.<sup>82</sup> However, as World War Two dragged on, an ethos grew amongst the people which suggested that superiority and strength of arms, rather than prayer, would be the decisive factors in an allied victory.

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<sup>77</sup> Dennis Shoesmith, 'The new woman: The debate on the "new woman" in Melbourne 1919', Australasian Political Studies Association, Vol. 8, 2, November, 1973, p. 317.

<sup>78</sup> 'Archbishops Deplore Apathy to Religion', Courier Mail, 16 February 1942, p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> 'Importance of Faith in Meeting Crisis', Courier Mail, 22 February 1942.

<sup>80</sup> 'Japan's Threat to Church', Courier Mail, 9 March 1942, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> 'Clergy Call to Courage, Faith', Courier Mail, 16 March 1942, p. 5.

<sup>82</sup> McKernan, All In!, pp. 2, 5.



The importance of the Torres Strait Islander women's spirituality during the Pacific War cannot be overlooked. Their testimonies make it clear that their faith and prayers carried them and their men through the war years. Old Torres Strait Islander men said it was the women's prayers that kept them safe and stopped the war.

Before discussing the women's spiritual roles during the war, again it is essential to context this aspect of their wartime experiences. It is widely accepted that when the Pacific War broke out the majority of Torres Strait Islanders were, at least, nominally Anglican. Christianity had been introduced seventy years earlier and the outsider spiritual teachers had done their best to overcome the old spirituality. Nevertheless, elements of it live on. Thus, the testimonies must be read with a sensitivity to a Torres Strait Islander spirituality which incorporates both the old and the new.

#### The old spirituality

Torres Strait Islanders are a Melanesian people cut off from their heartland by the Australian border.<sup>83</sup> Traditionally, religious beliefs and practices permeated the affairs of Melanesian groups and this was no less the case in pre-contact Torres Strait societies.<sup>84</sup> The rhythm of the lives of the Torres Strait Islanders

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<sup>83</sup> The Melanesian Islands form one of the three main groupings of Oceania in the Pacific Ocean; the others being Micronesia and Polynesia. Melanesia consists of those islands north east of Australia and south of the Equator - the Admiralty Islands, the Louisiade Archipelago, New Caledonia, the New Hebrides and the Solomon Islands; New Guinea is sometimes included (Courtlandt Canby and Gorton Carruth (advisory eds), The Encyclopedia of Historic Places, Volume II (New York, 1984), p. 586).

<sup>84</sup> Darrell L. Whiteman pointed out that any 'anthropological analysis' of Melanesian religions was 'bound to be artificial'. This was so because the anthropologists' etic, or objective, categories applied in the analysis are in contrast with the emic, subjective experience of the people. Thus, he doubted that the western concept of 'religion' met the needs of the synthesis of Melanesian life where spirituality was not distinct from other realities (Darrell L. Whiteman, Melanesians and Missionaries: An ethnological study of social and religious change in southwest Pacific (Pasadena, California, 1983), p. 64). This artificiality is brought about by the incommensurability of discourses discussed in Chapter two. However, the findings of early anthropologists are frequently the only sources of

were dictated by the stars, moon, winds, tides and seasons, along with the supernatural powers upon which they called for good and evil purposes. Moreover, Whiteman concluded from his research amongst the Melanesian people that they did not live in the same 'compartmentalized world of secular and spiritual domains' associated with Christianity.<sup>85</sup> Despite regional variations in their religions and rituals, all Melanesian groups had integrated world views: 'physical and spiritual realities dovetailed'.<sup>86</sup> Plants, animals, inorganic matter and spirit beings all belonged to an integrated cosmos.<sup>87</sup> The people relied upon supernatural powers to maintain the balance of their universe and its continued renewal.<sup>88</sup> Torres Strait Islanders saw their world in much the same way and, like other Melanesians, individual groups adopted magico-religious systems and practices to suit their needs.<sup>89</sup> In Torres Strait too the people seem to have adopted or added to their religious systems or practices if they discovered a spiritual order which suited their purposes better. For example, totems on Mer seem to have temporarily lost

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traditions of aural groups who have been colonised, like the Torres Strait Islanders.

<sup>85</sup> Whiteman cited Mantovani to contrast the Melanesian world view with that of western thought: 'In Theism, we have God as the creator and Lord. Man, created in his image participates in his Lordship over other creatures. An abyss divides the creator from the creature and the Lord of all creatures - man - from nature. This attitude is completely lacking in traditional culture. Man feels himself part, not Lord, of creation and as a consequence he cannot exploit nature as a Theist can do' (Cited in Whiteman, Melanesians and Missionaries, p. 65).

<sup>86</sup> The term 'ritual' is ambiguous. It oscillates between 'various poles of anthropological and lay explanations' (Peter McLaren, Schooling as a Ritual Performance: Towards a political economy of education symbols and gestures (London, 1986), p. 37). I use the term to refer to the ceremonies of 'essential significance' in the religious life of traditional groups (Arnold Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago, 1960), p. 191).

<sup>87</sup> Whiteman defined cosmic life and renewal as the 'central value of Melanesian culture...continuation, protection, maintenance and celebration of Life': it was more than 'merely human biological existence' (Melanesians and Missionaries, p. 65); Van Gennep described cosmic conception as a relationship between human existence and plant and animal life. By a sort of pre-scientific divination all are joined to the great rhythms of the universe (Rites of Passage, p. 194).

<sup>88</sup> Whiteman, Melanesians and Missionaries, pp. 65-66.

<sup>89</sup> Whiteman concluded that there was no indigenous distinction between religion and magic. Therefore, he chose to use the anthropological term 'magico-religious' rather than 'pitting one over against the other' (Melanesians and Missionaries, p. 75).

their eminence with the grafting on of new spiritual orders to their existing religious system.<sup>90</sup> In this way, a complex web of traditional spiritual practices had been established throughout Torres Strait by the time of white intervention, the knowledge of which has been reflected through the blurred lenses of white researchers. It is basically from this knowledge that a picture of traditional Torres Strait Islander religion must be extracted.

Torres Strait Islander and other Melanesian societies were kinship-based.<sup>91</sup> Local groups were organised into clans with their own totems. Rites associated with totems assured good crops, plentiful supplies of fish, turtle and dugong. Supernatural power also emanated from inanimate objects. Rituals associated with painted or anointed stones and carved images ensured good fortune in fishing in Torres Strait.<sup>92</sup> On Yam and Tut, stone and carved pumice figures, a bullroarer and a wooden tablet with human bones and cowrie shells attached, when called upon in ritual, ensured an abundance of wongai plums, fertile gardens and increased yields of yams, sweet potatoes and turtle. If a hunter blew a mouthful of tobacco smoke into the skull of his father, dugong or turtle would be led to his canoe.<sup>93</sup> In response to ritual, these inanimate objects unleashed their supernatural powers for the benefit of the people.

Warring was constant in Torres Strait and strength and victory in battle were sought in rituals associated with objects and legendary heroes, or cult heroes as they are frequently called. The fearless Saibai warriors adopted the Adi Buia stone as a means of tapping the supernatural. A young Saibai man, who had been instructed by his elders, said that the warriors were imbued with

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<sup>90</sup> In the Eastern Islands, Haddon suggested that totemism was dealt a 'death blow' with the adoption of hero cults. Thus, he was unable to discover what the totem practices were in these communities. In the Western Islands he thought hero cults were 'grafted on' to totemism (Haddon, Reports, Vol. 5, p. 257). Nevertheless, it should be understood that Eastern Islanders today hold to beliefs in their totems.

<sup>91</sup> Kinship played, and continues to play, an important role in maintaining the structure of Torres Strait Islander society. During the period of change in the early Christianisation of the people, the L.M.S. missionaries avoided interference with the kinship principle and with inheritance and land ownership practices (Langbridge, Enculturation and Evangelization, p. 80).

<sup>92</sup> Haddon, 'Ethnography of the Western Tribes', p. 322.

<sup>93</sup> Fuary, In So Many Words, pp. 190-191.

power when they 'approached the stone naked', rubbed it with coconut oil, danced around it and touched it with their bows and arrows.<sup>94</sup> Warriors on Mabuiag received their strength from the shell ornaments they believed were once worn by their hero, the strong and fearless Kwoiam. The people on Yam and Tut built shrines for their heroes, the brothers Sigay and Mayawin, in the kwods.<sup>95</sup> The figure of the legendary hero, or god, Waiet kept in a cave on the Eastern Island of Waier, a rugged horseshoe-shaped volcanic cone, was only removed from its eerie home for ceremonial purposes.<sup>96</sup>

In Melanesian societies, magico-religious practices were concerned with 'life here and now'; cosmic renewal, rites of passage and strength and victory in battle.<sup>97</sup> These practices were widespread in Torres Strait.<sup>98</sup> However, the magico-religious practice which has been the focus of much attention since white intervention is the Malo-Bomai Order which was established in Eastern Torres Strait.<sup>99</sup> A brief encounter with this Order confirms that the old spirituality in Torres Strait is far from lost. When Bomai

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<sup>94</sup> Int. 062.

<sup>95</sup> The kwod was an open space set apart for ceremonial purposes. It was the 'central spot in the social, political and religious life of the men' (Haddon, Reports, Vol. 6, p. 365).

<sup>96</sup> Singe, Islands, pp. 58-67. In 1925 the white school teacher on Mer, A.O.C. Davies, removed the idol and subsequently gave it to the Queensland Museum. This man did some anthropological work in Torres Strait and he gave information to Haddon (Personal communication with Meriam woman, Cairns, September 1993).

<sup>97</sup> Whiteman, Melanesians and Missionaries, p. 74.

<sup>98</sup> Fuay's research suggests that there were seven brothers who 'during the mythological past journeyed from the eastern side of Cape York through Central and Eastern Torres Strait: Malo settled at Mer, Seu stayed at Masig, Kulka went to Awridh, Pinica went to Nagi and Dideri continued on to Papua'. The cults, or magico-religious orders, which surrounded each 'formed one part of a cultural whole'. The cults revolved around warfare and on Yam the cult 'eclipsed earlier ritual practices' (see Fuay, In So Many Words, p. 97).

<sup>99</sup> The term 'Order' is used in preference to 'cult' because even though the Reverend David Passi, the grandson of the last chief Zogo le ('priest' in the Order) used it in his 1987 work, when I spoke with him in 1990 he made it clear that the magico-religious figure on Mer, Bomai called Malo because Bomai was too sacred to have his name mentioned, was 'not like Kwoiam, a cult hero, he was God' (Interview 155, Thursday Island, April 1990; D. Passi, 'Pagan to Christian Priesthood', p. 45). The term Order was also used by Kitaoji who did field work in Torres Strait from 1975 to 1977 (Kitaoji, 'Culture of the Torres Strait', p. 57).

arrived at Begegiz on Mer in the 'mythological past', he was recognised as a god: 'Keriba agud ged seker em (This is our god and protector)'. He moved on taking the form of different sea creatures until he arrived at Teker on Mer in the form of an octopus.<sup>100</sup> The rituals associated with the Malo-Bomai Order became all-pervasive in Eastern Torres Strait. The laws of Malo, Malo ra Gelar, made possible unity between the eight clans of the islands of Mer and Dauar.<sup>101</sup> So great was the Order that it still influences the beliefs of some Meriam Christians. The Reverend David Passi, explored the theological implications:

Malo was sent to Mer by God. He gave Moses to Israel...God was working through Malo before the Light came to Torres Strait...I am asking is not Malo the same as the Great Spirit of the Red Indian, is not he the same as the One who appeared to Hagar in the Wilderness, is not he the same as the missionaries brought to the Torres Strait, July 1, 1871? The reason for me saying this is that the eternal truths that emerged out of the savagery and heathenism, as we are often referred to, are not something that were created by the mask Malo. They are given by the true Malo. I would like to call the Great Jehovah, Malo. I would like that name to become the name of Jehovah for our people.

Torres Strait Islanders, like the Reverend Passi, speak out about their old spirituality and the need for Christians to continue to have respect for it: 'When I was in Rockhampton studying for the priesthood I did nothing to destroy what your people had developed over a long period. It was years of developing what happened here. I want that for here, not to be destroyed'.<sup>102</sup>

Anthropological and other writings on Torres Strait Islanders in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries do not make it clear whether the women played roles in what might be termed the public religious life of the communities.<sup>103</sup> There are references to the

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<sup>100</sup> See Sharp, Stars of Tagai, p. 29 for a fuller account of Bomai's arrival on Mer by the grandson of the Chief Zogo le (one of the three persons entitled to wear the religious masks belonging to the Order - a person with sacred or divine power).

<sup>101</sup> Sharp, Stars of Tagai, p. 29. Malo ra Gelar was considered by the High Court of Australia in the milestone Mabo land rights case.

<sup>102</sup> Int. 155.

<sup>103</sup> Had female anthropologists been in the field in the late nineteenth century, they may have pursued knowledge of women's roles with an enthusiasm not shown in their male counterparts' writings. Even so, it may have been that the local women did not know about certain things. A young Saibai man explained that special knowledge was withheld from women of child-bearing age in case they

women's exclusion from the kwod (the men's place for religious rituals). Indeed death was the punishment if a woman breached religious taboos, for instance if she recognised a Zogo le and divulged his name.<sup>104</sup> Contemporary anthropologist Maureen Fuary found, however, that women on Purma and Tut sang during rituals associated with the catching of the first turtle for the season.<sup>105</sup> It is known that women had their own totems and they were inherited by their children, although the father's totem was the chief one. Whether the women called upon them to increase their garden produce or catch of fish is also unknown.<sup>106</sup> Haddon described the maidalaig, trained magicians or sorcerers, as a powerful 'professional class' whose entry into the profession was by choice and was accompanied by stringent and physically terrifying instruction.<sup>107</sup> Maid, or magic, it has been suggested, 'permeated every activity of the lives of the [people] from birth until death, and even thereafter'.<sup>108</sup> Again, there seems to be have been no suggestion that Torres Strait Islander women were sorcerers. Indeed, an old Meriam woman said that although sorcery is still used in Torres Strait, 'women don't use it, only men'.<sup>109</sup>

In this traditionally spiritual world of the Torres Strait Islanders, rituals were associated with private aspects of the women's lives, such as to induce conception, ensure the birth of a

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married and went to live in another village. If they did so, that knowledge would become the knowledge of the other village (Personal communication, Townsville, October 1990). Special knowledge was jealously guarded. This was undoubtedly also true even when the men spoke with outsiders.

<sup>104</sup> A.C. Haddon, Head-hunters, Black, White and Brown (London, n.d.), pp. 37-41.

<sup>105</sup> Fuary, In So Many Words, p. 111.

<sup>106</sup> Haddon, Head-hunters, p. 77.

<sup>107</sup> See Haddon, Reports, Vol.5, pp. 321-322.

<sup>108</sup> Moore, Arts and Crafts of Torres Strait, p. 29. Haddon claimed it was difficult to say where magic began or ended in regard to medicine. However, he found that the people in some cases distinguished between maid and lukup, medicine, but that the distinction was not always clear (Haddon, Reports, Vol. 5, p 320). I include sorcery here in the magical sense.

<sup>109</sup> Int. 087. A.O.C. Davies, a white teacher on Mer in the mid-1920s, suggested there was 'woman sorcery' on that Island and it was tabu to men (John Orrell (ed.), Unpublished Dairies of A.O.C. Davies: Pasi - A Story of the Islands (Cairns, 1969), p. 24).

male child, puberty and the care of the corpse of a baby.<sup>110</sup> In societies, like the Torres Strait Islander, where the supernatural and religious rituals are associated with every aspect of their lives, deep spiritual significance also must be attributed to the women's rituals. Such rituals might be described as private and on the periphery of the public spiritual life of the community which was seemingly the men's responsibility. When the new spirituality was introduced in Torres Strait by white men in 1871, the women's spiritual roles continued to be peripheral in the function of the Anglican Church.<sup>111</sup>

'Receive that man from the east'<sup>112</sup>

John Done, the first Anglican priest appointed to the outer islands, made his initial visit to Torres Strait in 1915. The people, he wrote subsequently, were ready to meet him 'more than half way'. He described them as 'religious in every sense'.<sup>113</sup> And, like the L.M.S., the Anglican Church gave the island men public spiritual responsibilities as church wardens and later, after training at a special college on Moa, as priests. Laymen, too, were permitted to preach.<sup>114</sup>

The people on all communities were anxious to have churches which glorified God, and women throughout Torres Strait are remembered as playing important roles in the work of church building. The Saibai women dug coral from the reef and transported it back to the village in their dinghies. On Mabuiag they carried stone, sand and water and they made cement for the foundations from a mixture of crushed ant bed and water.<sup>115</sup> In 1934 Tipoti Nona and fellow church warden Tamwoy wanted to build a new church on Badu and all the villagers agreed.<sup>116</sup> The young women 'swam for stones' and

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<sup>110</sup> Haddon, 'Ethnography of the Western Tribes', pp. 389-390; D.R. Moore, The Torres Strait Collection of A.C. Haddon: A Descriptive Catalogue (London, 1984), p. 19; Haddon, Head-hunters, pp. 77-78; J. Done, 'A Girl's Puberty Custom in Boigu', Man, Vol. 23, No. 94, 1923, p. 150; Jukes, Narrative of the Surveying Voyage, p. 246.

<sup>111</sup> It was not until 2 February 1995 that Mary Eseli was ordained as the first Torres Strait Islander woman deacon in the Anglican Church.

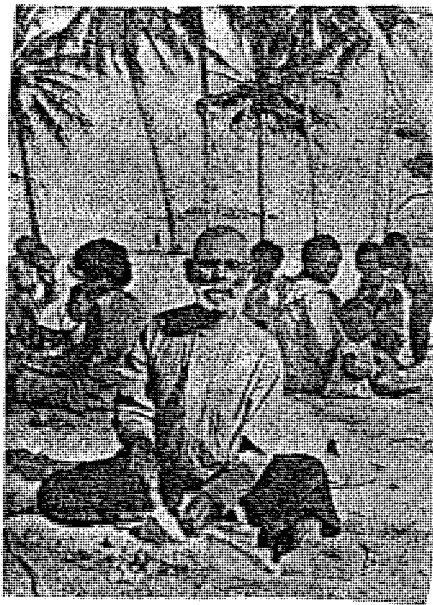
<sup>112</sup> Cited in Sharp, Stars of Tagai, p. 101.

<sup>113</sup> John E. Done (compiled by Barbara Stevenson), Wings Across the Sea (Brisbane, 1987), p. 104.

<sup>114</sup> Beckett, custom and colonialism, pp. 56-57.

<sup>115</sup> Done, Wings Across the Sea, p. 15.

<sup>116</sup> Int. 092.



(Top) Blind man and women smashing coral for construction of Badu Church (c1935)

(Bottom) Women and men mixing cement for the Badu Church (c1935)



collected coral to make lime.<sup>117</sup> The old people broke the stones: everyone worked 'around the clock' to get the job finished.<sup>118</sup> On St. Paul's, the women crushed the stones, carried sand and raised money to buy cement.<sup>119</sup> The women were not lacking in their physical support of the new religion but their hard work as church builders was not rewarded with even administrative or clerical positions.

However, in 1931, a status for married Torres Strait Islander women was recognised by the Anglican Church. The Anglican Mothers' Union was founded in England by Mary Sumner and a group of churchwomen in 1887.<sup>120</sup> In 1911 a branch of the Union was formed by an all-white group of Thursday Island women whose vision was to 'uphold the sanctity of marriage, awaken in mothers...a sense of great responsibility in the training of their boys and girls', and encourage women to unite in prayer.<sup>121</sup> In May 1931, four Torres Strait Islander women were invited to attend a meeting of the Thursday Island branch; three of whom were wives of 'native' priests. Mary Lui (Erub), Alice Passi (Mer) and Sepiama Min (Mabuiag) were elected to office.<sup>122</sup> Within two years Alice Passi had formed a branch on Saibai and Joan Davies, the Bishop's wife, had visited and addressed women on eight islands.<sup>123</sup> By the end of the decade there were fourteen branches and just under 600 members in Torres Strait.<sup>124</sup> Their status in the Church was commented on by several

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<sup>117</sup> Int. 093.

<sup>118</sup> Int. 098.

<sup>119</sup> News from Women Workers 1940, n.d., Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria, OM.AV/66/1, Correspondence Files, 1938-1939, 1940, General Correspondence, Carpentaria News-letter, J.O.L. (Brisbane).

<sup>120</sup> Erna Lee, Mary Sumner and the Mothers' Union: A Brief Account of the Story (Brisbane, 1983), n.p.n.

<sup>121</sup> Objects of Mothers' Union, Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria, OM.AV/12/1, Mothers' Union Diocese Council Minutes 1911-14, 1937, 1940, J.O.L. (Brisbane).

<sup>122</sup> Minutes: Meeting called by the Right Reverend S.D. Davies, 1 May 1931, Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria, OM.AV/12/2, Mothers' Union Diocese Council Minutes 1931-40, J.O.L. (Brisbane).

<sup>123</sup> Report: Mothers' Union, July 1933, Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria, OM.AV/12/2, Mothers' Union Diocese Council Minutes 1931-40, J.O.L. (Brisbane).

<sup>124</sup> Report: Mothers' Union, June 1939, Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria, OM.AV/12/2, Mothers' Union Diocese Council Minutes 1931-40, J.O.L. (Brisbane).



(Top) Re-enactment on Saibai of the Coming of the Light  
(Bottom) The Mothers' Union still an important institution  
in Torres Strait

old men.<sup>125</sup> One said: 'That Mothers' Union they turned out very well, they worship God. Mothers' Union everywhere in Torres Strait they've done a good work'.<sup>126</sup> Another also spoke approvingly:

*The women turned very bold when they formed the Mothers' Union, that's their belief...to women that's where they stand that Mothers' Union is the great thing in their life. It gave them a sense of caring for one another and prayer became bold and very firm in their lives.*<sup>127</sup>

A few old women spoke about their pre-war involvement in this organisation. One recalled: 'the Mothers' Union just talked to the mothers. The men did their job and mothers had the Mothers' Union and everyone worked together, they always cooked and worked for feast days'.<sup>128</sup> A Badu women said that the Mothers' Union was 'a very strong one' and that it was a 'very important thing' in the community.<sup>129</sup> Another said she was 'the messenger' for the Mothers' Union: she went to all the members' houses to tell them to come to the meeting.<sup>130</sup> A former Vice-President explained: 'We had our meetings, we talked to the women about how to live. We did plenty of fundraising and if any mother wanted help, we did it'.<sup>131</sup> Members made and sold mats, baskets and embroidered pillow cases to boost church funds.<sup>132</sup> The Mothers' Union gave some women 'a say' over family life in the communities as well as opportunities to learn about western meeting procedures and accounting. A few women went to meetings on other communities and Thursday Island. This, organisation, it was suggested by a former white Anglican priest in Torres Strait, brought the women together in a 'strong fellowship where they gained experience in leadership and in having a say'.<sup>133</sup> The new leadership, even if it was confined to family matters, also gave the women a status within the hegemonic male Church organisation they could not have previously dreamed of.

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<sup>125</sup> When Torres Strait Islander women were given the vote in island council elections in 1939, it was suggested in the Queensland Parliament that 'women's suffrage was not enthusiastically received by the old men' (Queensland, Legislative Assembly 1939, Debates, Vol. 174, p. 464).

<sup>126</sup> Int. 144.

<sup>127</sup> Int. 076.

<sup>128</sup> Int. 118.

<sup>129</sup> Int. 095; Int. 092.

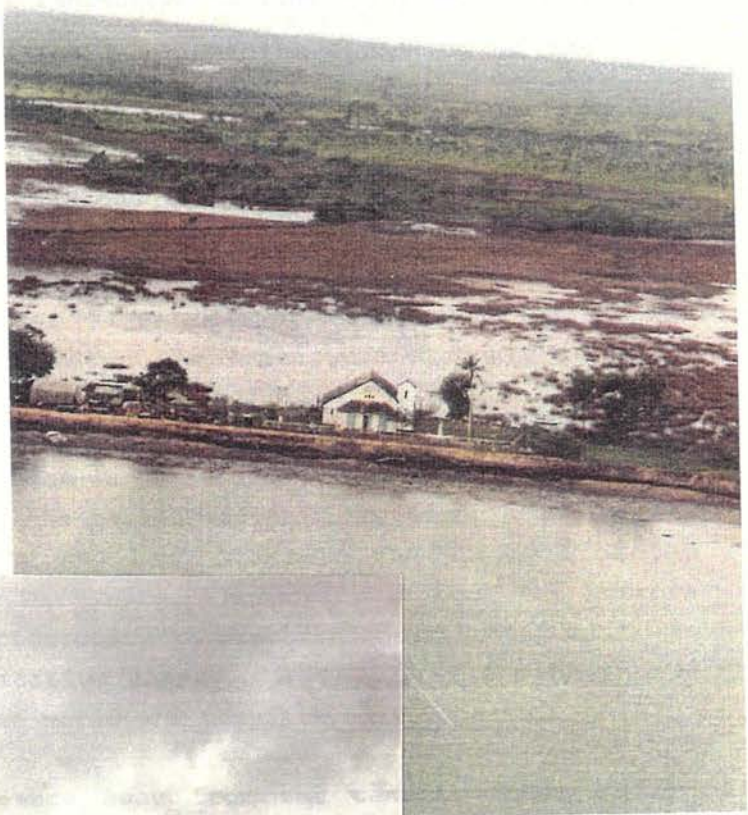
<sup>130</sup> Int. 066.

<sup>131</sup> Int. 071.

<sup>132</sup> Report: Mothers' Union, July 1933, OM.AV/12/2, J.O.L. (Brisbane).

<sup>133</sup> Palmer, Women on Thursday Island during World War Two, 19 March 1991, pp. 7-8.





(Top) Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Saibai, listed with the National Trust of Queensland  
 (Bottom) St. Mark's Anglican Church, Badu - foundation stone laid 1 April 1934

In late 1940, white members of the Thursday Island branch of the Mothers' Union passed a resolution calling for a day of prayer:

This Council feeling the need for the depending on the spiritual life in the Diocese requests the Bishops to sponsor a day of continuous prayer to be held in the Cathedral [on Thursday Island] and in island churches on behalf of peace.<sup>134</sup>

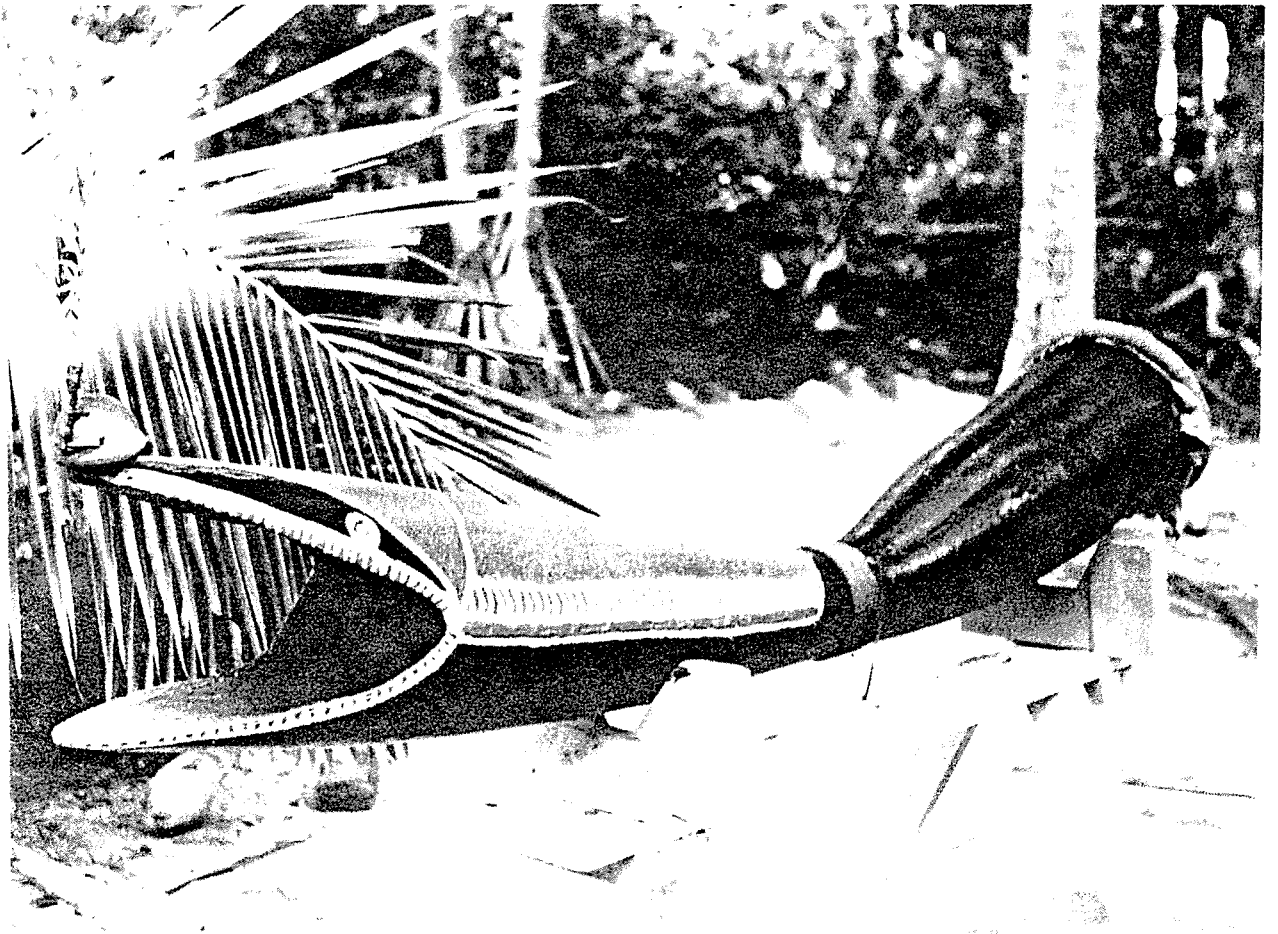
Understandably the Thursday Island members wanted to draw the outer island women into their circle of prayer but Germany's aggression in Europe was far removed from the understanding of Torres Strait Islander women. In another year, however, the tentacles of war reached closer to Torres Strait. The women were suddenly in a war zone and prayer became 'a big part' of their lives. Thus, in their recollections of the war the women were extremely articulate about their prayer life. There can be no doubt, by reference to the old people's testimonies, that the belief was that the women's individual and collective spirituality had been vital to the survival of the people during the Pacific War years. Moreover, it took the horrors of war to give them the opportunity to practise their spirituality in a more public and authoritative manner. They prayed for their own people, they prayed for the world and they prayed for peace.

This further divergence away from the central focus of the thesis highlights the women's peripheral roles in both their traditional and Christian institutions. However, it is important to realise that a connection continued to exist between their traditional spirituality and Christian faith. In 1942 it had only been seventy years since their whole world had been centred upon supernatural powers. Their Christian teachers had not been successful in eradicating the old spirituality: puripuri as an example. Moreover, all around Torres Strait there are carefully preserved reminders of the old - the great warrior Kwoiam's footprint in the rock on Mabuiag; Wasikor, the drum, which belonged to the Zogole and was used in rituals on Mer.<sup>135</sup> But perhaps the most universal and powerful reminder of the old spirituality, is the

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<sup>134</sup> Minutes: Mothers' Union, 25 September 1940, Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria, OM.AV/12/2, Mothers' Union Diocese Council Minutes 1931-40, J.O.L. (Brisbane).

<sup>135</sup> Travis Teske, Mabuiag: Island of Torres Strait (Thursday Island, 1986), p. 34; Teske, Murray, p. 36. Davies claimed the last zogole, Pasi, wanted the rituals preserved in writing (see Orrell (ed.), Diaries of Davies, pp. 171, 120).



The Drum Wasikor, Mer

tombstone opening.<sup>136</sup> The time of its inception is not known. A Masig woman said: *'I can't remember doing this thing when I was a young girl'*.<sup>137</sup> A Meriam man's first memory of it was about 1933.<sup>138</sup> Perhaps it is significant that this ritual was not introduced until the people believed they were being increasingly oppressed by the Local Protector. Underlying the ritual, however, are structures related to the 'old mortuary rites': there must be a separation of the spirits which linger about the living after death. This is effected through rituals at the graveside a year, or even more, after the death, at which a Christian priest officiates.<sup>139</sup> Sharp describes it as a 'sign of cultural healing' of the 'cruel wounds' inflicted when the missionaries forced them to bury their dead in lieu of their own practices.<sup>140</sup> And, on Mer, the Si stones are reputed to still speak 'with the voice of Malu'.<sup>141</sup>

The Torres Strait Islander world was not suddenly converted to a compartmentalised 'rational' white world. The women's prayers then must be seen as those of a people who for thousands of years had relied for the renewal of their cosmos upon an absolute connection between every aspect of their existence and the supernatural. In their minds victory was not related to superior allied military forces and arms: they prayed for a direct supernatural interference in the affairs of human beings. So it was to the Christian God of their new source of all creative power, welcomed into their lives when the missionaries came to Torres Strait, that they prayed for that to happen.

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### The power of prayer

In January 1942, the Anglican Bishop of Carpentaria urged the faithful on Thursday Island to pray for the Church's 'great mission development' in Torres Strait, that those who had been 'won to the Christian faith' would not be lost and that homes and parishes would

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<sup>136</sup> See Beckett, custom and colonialism, pp.1-2; Sharp, Stars of Tagai, pp. 113-117.

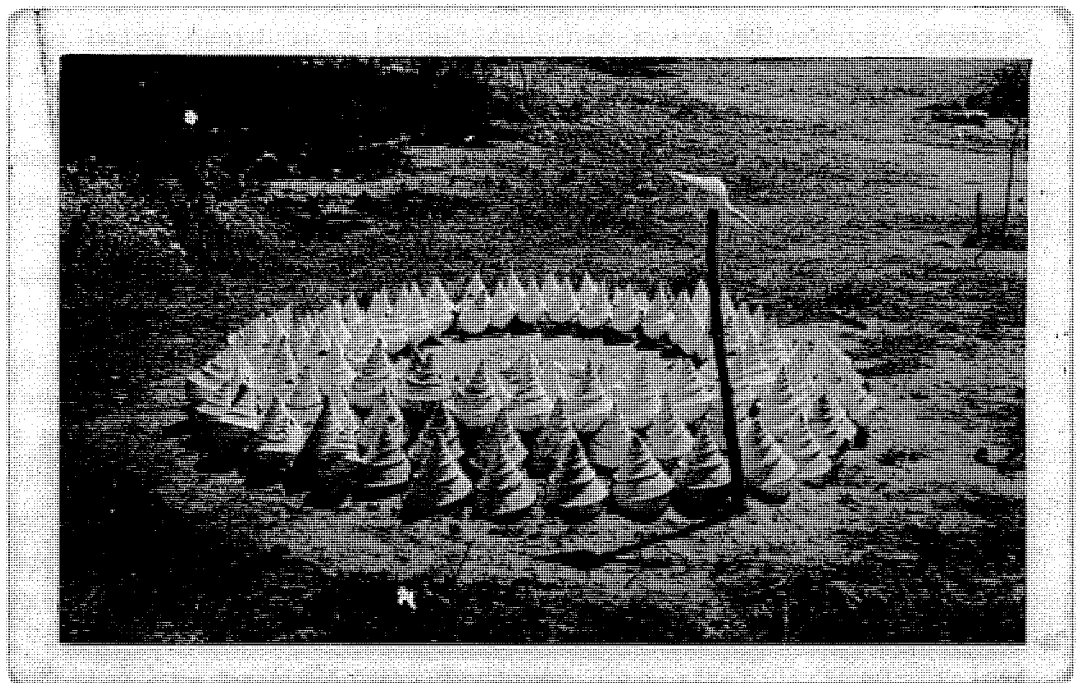
<sup>137</sup> Int. 161.

<sup>138</sup> Sharp, Stars of Tagai, p. 116.

<sup>139</sup> Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 5.

<sup>140</sup> Sharp, Stars of Tagai, p. 116.

<sup>141</sup> James G. Cowan, Messenger of the Gods (New York, 1993), p. 52.



The Zogo of War on Waraber



be spared from bombardment and destruction.<sup>142</sup> J.A. Daniels, the Anglican priest on the Island, reminded parishioners that these were 'anxious times' but that British people generally did not 'become unnecessarily alarmed but [would] maintain their trust in their leaders and faith in God'. He continued: 'We all realise the need more than ever for more work and more prayer if we are to accomplish our task of bringing peace to the distressed nations of the world'. He 'begged' mainland congregations, on behalf of the people of the Torres Strait, to pray for 'this outpost of the Commonwealth, that we may be consistent in things spiritual as well as things temporal'.<sup>143</sup> The priest on St. Paul's, Godfrey Gilbert, did not doubt that right would conquer in the end no matter what anyone had to 'put up with'. Suffering, he assured Christians, would teach them 'all the better' to give Glory to God.<sup>144</sup> There were exhortations for prayer in these words but no hint of the fire and brimstone preaching being heard in mainland churches where adherents' greater love of the temporal was loudly condemned. However, whether this softer line of preaching and calls for more prayer were adopted by the Torres Strait Islander priests is not known. There was no media coverage of their pulpits and Anglican records threw virtually no light on the religious life of the people. Only the women's recollections remained.

A Saibai Anglican nun recalled that, as a child in the late 1940s and early 1950s, she never heard her mother talk about how hard it had been for the women during the war: *'We grew up and we didn't know what the war was about. I didn't hear anything about the war from my parents'*. She only remembered the women's laughter as they sat together plaiting mats and baskets and yarning about the 'funny stories' associated with their wartime experiences. Then, years later, the 'television wars about Vietnam' set her thinking. She realised that the pain of war continued long after it was over and

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<sup>142</sup> Bishop's Letter: Thursday Island, January 1942, p. 74, Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria, OM.AV/150/2, St. Paul's School and Hostel, Series Title, The Carpentaria, Vol. 11, No. 165, J.O.L., Brisbane.

<sup>143</sup> News of the Diocese: Walter J.A. Daniels, Thursday Island, January 1942, pp. 74, 79-80, Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria, OM.AV/150/2, St. Paul's School and Hostel, Series Title, The Carpentaria, Vol. 11, No. 165, J.O.L., Brisbane.

<sup>144</sup> Report: Godfrey Gilbert, St. Paul's Mission, Moa, January 1942, p. 80, Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria, OM.AV/150/2, St. Paul's School and Hostel, Series Title, The Carpentaria, Vol. 11, No. 165, J.O.L., Brisbane.

that many people did not want to look back at that pain.<sup>145</sup> As already noted, it was on Saibai on Anzac Day 1989 that the women spoke publicly for the first time about their wartime experiences. Almost simultaneously, Torres Strait Islander women as well as many men shared, with an outsider, their memories of those 'hard times' in answer to this inquiry.<sup>146</sup>

An old TSLI man believed that God was 'the very important thing' in the lives of the Torres Strait Islander women and when the men joined the army and went away 'all the families...they worshipped, went to church all the time'.<sup>147</sup> Prayer was not confined to Sundays or even prayer meetings. It was frequently spontaneous in those awful early days. The women said 'a small prayer for the Japanese not come' when the noise of a plane was heard, no matter where they were or what they were doing.<sup>148</sup> Children listened to their mothers pray, 'God stop them coming', as they huddled together in the bush, caves, creeks, mangroves, anywhere where the Japanese airmen would not see them as they flew low over the islands.<sup>149</sup> An old woman cried aloud to God in language as she ran for safety when Yam was strafed: 'Ngal mun, ngal mun, augud ngapayae, augud ngapayae, ngal mun, ebo poidan [My God, my God, come on, come on, help us]'.<sup>150</sup> The women's prayers went beyond their own safety. They remembered their husbands, fathers and sons who had enlisted, they asked God to 'help Australia' and prayers were offered for a world about which they knew so little: 'The women prayed very strong prayer for the world to get peace'.<sup>151</sup>

The Mothers' Union members took responsibility for the group prayer life on the communities. They 'kept the church going...they were very strong in prayer', a Masig woman recalled.<sup>152</sup> On Saibai:

*The Mothers' Union women, that was their job to pray all the time for the men on T.I., for the war. That was when T.I. was saved when the Japanese men dropped bombs on Nurupai. They prayed and prayed all the time, proper hard, proper strong, the Mothers' Union and all the big men and women they prayed too, they prayed all the time*

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<sup>145</sup> Int. 084.

<sup>146</sup> Women repeatedly used this term to describe their lives during the war.

<sup>147</sup> Int. 144.

<sup>148</sup> Int. 130.

<sup>149</sup> Int. 115.

<sup>150</sup> Int. 053. Translation by Florence Anderson, Cairns, September 1993.

<sup>151</sup> Int. 056, Int. 144.

<sup>152</sup> Int. 072.

*for the army. The Mothers' Union was strong. Getting the war organised, that's their job.*<sup>153</sup>

Women risked the dangers of leaving their bush homes to pray in the village churches. Prayer rosters were introduced on St. Paul's and women 'prayed around the clock' every Thursday. They prayed 'two at a time'.<sup>154</sup> A Badu woman recalled that they prayed 'very hard at night time' and that certain women were told: 'You go poi piam tonight', which meant that 'you pray night time and change over'.<sup>155</sup> Some of the Purma women went to church at six o'clock in the evening and some were still praying at three or four o'clock the next morning: it was for them 'another thing to help the war'.<sup>156</sup> Meriam women formed prayer groups: 'They got to pray to stop this war', one woman recalled, 'Every night they prayed, they just meet in the church and do it'.<sup>157</sup> The recollections of a man, who was a boy at the time, were that:

*The women were always in the church, In the dusk they don't sleep their head off, they cook our tea but their tiredness doesn't stop them. After that they come in to the church and stay until midnight and they come home again.*<sup>158</sup>

Prayer was certainly 'a big part of their lives'.<sup>159</sup> A Mabuiag man remembered his mother telling him most of the prayer groups gathered at night because 'there were a lot of other activities to be done in the day'.<sup>160</sup> It would have been easy and reasonable for these exceedingly busy women to remain at home with their families at night instead of going out to pray. Moreover, there was always the fear that they might somehow be seen moving about the island at night not only by the enemy but by evil spirits which lurked in the dark outside their homes

Throughout all the islands, even at the height of great danger, the women congregated to worship to the Christian God they had come to accept as the spiritual essence of their being. In the early months of the war, when it was too dangerous for everyone to congregate in the village on Badu, the church warden rang a bell and the people met in the bush in extended family groups.<sup>161</sup> On Kubin

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<sup>153</sup> Int. 143.

<sup>154</sup> Int. 068.

<sup>155</sup> Int. 066.

<sup>156</sup> Int. 100.

<sup>157</sup> Int. 087.

<sup>158</sup> Int. 076.

<sup>159</sup> Int. 142.

<sup>160</sup> Personal communication, Cairns, January 1995.

<sup>161</sup> Int. 131.

the warden went to each bush house to give the women notice and 'everyone came together to make a service in the open air under the trees'.<sup>162</sup> A Mabuiag woman said: 'Come night fall we cannot do anything just sitting praying, we just want this war out quickly so the people can go back to the village'. They were confident that prayer in any location was the ultimate weapon, a spiritual force, to achieve materialistic ends in Western eyes, a dichotomy the Torres Strait Islander women did not feel. Like their ancestors they did not compartmentalise like the Whites. The Mabuiag woman's godfather was crippled and he stayed on in the village. He prayed alone, she said: 'He was a good old man and asked God to finish this war so the people can come back in the village'.<sup>163</sup> Two Masig women remembered that their old grandfather from 'L.M.S. time', who also stayed on in the village, prayed 'day and night'.<sup>164</sup> Another boyhood memory came from a Meriam man:

*Everyone got in there...and they prayed for our islands, for the men on T.I., the sick, the boats...and all those things and they named them specifically and the most important one was that they would be brave from the time the war started until it ceased.*<sup>165</sup>

Everyone prayed for the war to finish.<sup>166</sup> Their prayer life gave them courage in a desperate situation. And, again it was the war which enabled them to take a spiritual responsibility far wider than they had previously known.

The island priests, Francis Bowie, Kabay Pilot and Poey Passi went from island to island to take church services, give communion, baptise babies and officiate at weddings.<sup>167</sup> Whenever and wherever possible, lay preachers and church wardens conducted services in the absence of a priest. There were no confirmations until Bishop Stephen Davies returned to Torres Strait on a visit in September 1943.<sup>168</sup> The surviving wartime registers give no reliable

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<sup>162</sup> Int. 071.

<sup>163</sup> Int. 078.

<sup>164</sup> Interview 146, Masig, January 1989.

<sup>165</sup> Int. 112.

<sup>166</sup> Int. 130.

<sup>167</sup> Joseph Lui, who with Poey Passi, became the first ordained Torres Strait Islander priests in 1925, died on Mer in 1941 (John Bayton, Cross Over Carpentaria: being a history of the Church of England in Northern Australia from 1865-1965 (Brisbane, 1965), p. 106.

<sup>168</sup> Bishop's Day Book: 7-25 September 1943, Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria, OM.AV/126/1, J.O.L., Brisbane.

information on church attendances during the war years but this is understandable in the light of the circumstances which pertained on the outer islands.<sup>169</sup> It is reasonable to suppose that no one thought it was very important to count heads when they were able to congregate for worship. A Badu woman spoke as if there had been a strengthening of religious zeal on her Island: 'Before we don't pray but when it was wartime we prayed', while a Meriam woman's recollection was that: 'Faith was not so strong on Mer'.<sup>170</sup> Another woman from that Island remembered 'a miracle from God' which had been witnessed by the people in the early months of the war. The store was empty and the crops had failed for want of rain so her father, Poey Passi, the island priest, called the women together to repair the fish trap in the hope of getting a big haul of fish. As discussed in Chapter three, it was the custom for some of the women to prepare the food while the remainder of the people worked on the trap. On this occasion there was no flour to make damper so the women made mabus.<sup>171</sup>

*My father started to bless the food and he started to pray just like talking to God and all the people were watching...they want Him to give them food. That night there were fish in the trap right up to the beach from the fence. His prayer was answered. Fish, so many and the women said, "Cargo boat coming", and they came and got the fish and the cargo boat arrived with food.*

She smiled when she added after a pause: 'It was just like the five barley loaves and the two fishes, eh!'<sup>172</sup> Moreover, before the Battle of the Coral Sea, people on Moa reported 'a vision of the Lord in Glory in the sky above Kubin, with His hands outstretched in Blessing and protection'. As the news of the 'Vision' spread, the people 'took it as a special sign to them that their islands would be safeguarded'.<sup>173</sup> The almost universal reference in the testimonies to faith and prayer, the recollection of a 'miracle of God', all after fifty years, and the 'Vision' on Moa indicate the importance the women generally placed on their belief that it was the power of the supernatural that got <sup>them</sup> through the war safely, not the physical

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<sup>169</sup> Register of Services: 1940-1945, Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria, OM.AV/46/1, Moa Is., St. Paul's Mission, J.O.L., Brisbane.

<sup>170</sup> Int. 066; Int. 064.

<sup>171</sup> Mabus in Meriam Mir and Kala Lagaw Ya means mash or mince. In this instance the mabus was made with mashed boiled bananas and mixed with dry coconut and coconut milk.

<sup>172</sup> Int. 056.

<sup>173</sup> The Vision is portrayed on canvas in All Souls' Cathedral, Thursday Island (Bayton, Cross Over Carpentaria, p. 106.).

trappings of modern warfare.

An old man conceptualised succinctly his people's perception of the importance of the women's spiritual strength and prayers during the war: *'so much happened because the women had faith'*.<sup>174</sup> *'Their prayers,'* an island priest concluded, *'were a camouflage for us from danger and it was so great and big that faith stopped the war'*.<sup>175</sup> From the Coming of the Light, a Saibai nun claimed, my people were:

*very very devout to their faith in Jesus Christ and that when the women were expressing their faith when that...unknown thing happened to them, their trust must have been very very strong in God...Their own loved ones had been taken away from them to fight the war and prayer was the only thing left for them to do.*<sup>176</sup>

And, an old woman's memory of it all was that: *'God is a true God, so we prayed to God until we won that victory'*.<sup>177</sup>

Only one Torres Strait Islander challenged the notion that religious zeal was strong amongst the women during the war years. Thus, the strength of the testimonies on this subject, make it difficult to reject an overall perception that *'faith and prayer carried them through that time'*.<sup>178</sup> A signaller who spent time on both Mer and Erub and visited other communities confirmed that *'the church was going all the time'*. Moreover, what is suggested from the testimonies is that the Mothers' Union women were adopting a new public image for themselves in the spiritual life of their communities. The war was drawing them away from the narrower focus on the family to pray for broader issues, such as, helping Australia and the world and the return of peace.

The next chapter explores what *'hard times'* meant to the Torres Strait Islander women as it related to their day to day living.

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<sup>174</sup> Int. 098.  
<sup>175</sup> Int. 076.  
<sup>176</sup> Int. 084.  
<sup>177</sup> Int. 115.  
<sup>178</sup> Int. 112.

## Chapter eight Hard Times

Mainland Australians had become more optimistic after the Battle of the Coral Sea in early May 1942. However, when two Japanese midget submarines slipped through the net into Sydney Harbour on the morning of 31 May, a Melbourne Herald reporter warned his readers that the enemy had not exhausted his potential for surprise.<sup>1</sup> His words were the forerunner to enemy naval action farther south than anyone wanted to believe would happen. Along the east coast of Australia, Japanese submarines sank twenty-two ships and badly damaged seven others.<sup>2</sup> On 14 May 1943, the nation was shocked when the hospital ship Centauro was torpedoed with the loss of 268 lives.<sup>3</sup> However, by July, confidence that Japan was no longer a threat to Australia was strong enough to allow lights in all town and city streets (except in the far north) and on public transport and motor vehicles to come on again.<sup>4</sup> In Torres Strait, the fear of enemy infiltration persisted until early 1944.

In early 1942, Japan had established the headquarters of her South-West Pacific Force at Rabaul, from where she progressively occupied a wide arc of islands to the north of Australia on which sixty-seven airfields were constructed to accommodate 1 500 aircraft. Simultaneously, Japanese land forces were strengthened in these areas. By July 1942, this enemy build up led Prime Minister Curtin and General MacArthur to suspect a Japanese offensive which posed a 'renewed threat to Australia'. In March 1943, MacArthur interpreted Japan's actions as suggesting there was 'clear evidence that the enemy was trying to infiltrate and shove his position nearer to Torres Strait'. Curtin and General Blamey, the Commander of the allied land forces in the South-West Pacific, held fears that the Japanese would attack in force against Merauke (a desolate marshy little port on the southern coast of Dutch New Guinea), only 180 nautical miles from Thursday Island and much closer to the Top-Western Islands. Although there were those who believed that a landing in Torres Strait would be suicidal for the Japanese, others maintained that the enemy had the capacity and the will to slowly

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Warner and Seno, Coffin Boats, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> Gavin Long, The Six Years War (Canberra, 1973), p. 291.

<sup>3</sup> McKernan, All In!, p. 135.

<sup>4</sup> The weather map, prohibited from publication in daily newspapers in December 1941, did not return to those pages until December 1944.

occupy Papua, including Merauke. If this happened, no one could be certain that the Japanese would not take that 'suicidal' step into Torres Strait. To meet such a situation, defence of the Torres Strait area was strengthened. In early 1943, further facilities and forces to defend the Merauke-Horn Island [Nurupai]-Thursday Island-tip of Cape York Peninsula area were augmented.<sup>5</sup> The 7 R.A.A.F. Beaufort Squadron joined the 84 Boomerang Squadron on Nurupai in April 1943. Their instructions were to guard Nurupai, Merauke and the waters of the Torres Strait area. The Torres Strait Force was increased by two brigades which were concentrated in the Horn Island [Nurupai]-Thursday Island area. Thousands of allied troops were stationed throughout northern Cape York Peninsula.<sup>6</sup> These forces provided a garrison against any attempted landing and the R.A.A.F. was ready to meet both sea and land attacks. From 8 May 1943, 84 Squadron was ordered to traverse Torres Strait daily and to maintain 'a standing patrol of two aircraft over Merauke during daylight hours' which continued even after enemy activity in the Merauke-Torres Strait area was reduced in September.<sup>7</sup> The increased number of allied planes over the outer islands during 1943 as a result of concern that Japan had plans to infiltrate the Torres Strait area, gave the women no reason to think they were any safer than in early 1942.

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#### War news relayed to the women

Without their own radios, daily newspapers and magazines or cinemas, how did the women in Torres Strait hear about the war and what did it all mean to them? When the signallers arrived on the larger communities they replaced the vital radio parts, which had been taken away by the white teachers, and contact with the outside world was restored. Torres Strait Islanders had not been permitted to 'go to the radio room' before the war but the signallers on Masig decided that the time was right for a new policy:

The radio room was only small and we would invite several of the councillors to sit in the room and hear news broadcasts mainly from west coast stations in the United States...sometimes other island folk would gather

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<sup>5</sup> George Odgers, Air War Against Japan 1943-1945 (Canberra, 1957), pp. 38-40.

<sup>6</sup> Long, Six Years War, p. 290.

<sup>7</sup> Odgers, Air War Against Japan, p. 116.



outside...It was all very formal and attendance was only when approved by the Island council. Sometimes they'd come to listen to music.

Another way of giving the people some idea of what was happening was to pass old newspapers and magazines on to them:

The only newspapers despatched to the islands were sent by relatives and friends of the coast watchers or some of the other [white] soldiers on T.I. We made our newspapers available to the school teacher/storekeepers...along with magazines that came to hand.

The old Masig men were particularly interested in magazines like The Australian Post. They were astounded when they saw images in them of huge cities like Sydney and New York for the first time.<sup>8</sup> On Mer and Erub the signallers talked with the men in the village about the war:

We got a lot of news from America and we would go down during the day and talk to the storekeeper or church fellow or older people. They would ask, 'How are things going?' There was not much local news to get. The Coral Sea stopped the Japanese for a time. We would tell them we were going into New Guinea. We would tell them we were doing all right. They asked us what their boys were doing but we didn't have a clue.

Daily handwritten news bulletins were posted on the notice boards outside the community stores and news was read aloud in church.<sup>9</sup> In bush locations, other ways of conveying news were devised. The chairman from Poid went to each bush camp on Moa where he gathered the women together and told them what was happening.<sup>10</sup> A Saibai woman recalled that the policeman got word from the signallers about 'what was going on' and he told the women.<sup>11</sup> Another woman said: 'When the men came back from T.I. they talked to us and we listened about the war'.<sup>12</sup> In these ways, outer island villagers heard about the war's progress even if the news was frequently outdated or irrelevant to them. One of the signallers said he:

was never able to gauge just how interested Island folk were in the news. It was more likely that they would have been upset to hear the Prince of Wales had surrendered to the Japanese than Singapore had fallen to the men of Nippon or that Britain had been attacked by

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<sup>8</sup> Sig. 3. A mixed-race Thursday Island woman evacuated in January 1942 said when she saw Cairns for the first time: 'Everything was so big and we got frightened looking at all the two-storeyed buildings and they were like skyscrapers to us and the wharf was so big' (Osborne, *Forgotten Evacuation*, p. 34).

<sup>9</sup> Sig. 1; Major Keith Colwill to C.J. Burge, 10 June 1949, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 425/6/15, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>10</sup> Int. 071.

<sup>11</sup> Int. 054.

<sup>12</sup> Int. 115.

one thousand planes overnight. It was difficult to judge just how concerned even the more enlightened and better informed people were.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, how far the people, and particularly the women, related to any war news they received is difficult to gauge.

The Torres Strait Islander women's window on the world was small because of their enforced low educational standard, their confinement on their islands and lack of opportunities to interact with people from the dominant society. Moreover, their understanding of local politics was limited by custom. They had been given the vote in local elections but did not stand for election. Generally, too, it seemed that the women did not contribute to public political discussion.<sup>14</sup> If they sat with the men while village business was discussed they *'only listened...they did not contribute...[women] did not talk about things men discussed, they talked about gardens, weaving, fishing and baskets, feasting'*, which was natural enough seeing that their lives were fully occupied with such activities.<sup>15</sup> A Saibai man said that in the home, the women *'might be boss altogether, the mother was responsible'* but when she sat with her husband the decisions were *'with the father'*.<sup>16</sup> Another man said that if a woman was told: *'You don't go to that house'*, she would obey him.<sup>17</sup> Some men volunteered their perceptions about whether the women had any sort of political role in the communities. One said that the Mothers' Union was the only outlet for any political thought the women might have had: *'Every woman was on the same boat and had one political mind, it was the Mothers' Union'*.<sup>18</sup> Another comment was that some women on Badu were *'very politically aware'* and

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<sup>13</sup> Sig. 3. The signaller's reference to the Torres Strait Islanders' concern for a member of the royal family reflected Beckett's words: 'Royalty and the flag, indeed, figured largely in the emerging colonial order. The Anglicans made much of being the established Church and routinely offered up prayer for the reigning King or Queen. The government, likewise, proclaimed its connection with the monarch. Before the Second World War it arranged for Islanders to appear before members of the royal family (Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 89).

<sup>14</sup> Interview 088, St. Paul's, March 1990. Ugari Nona on Badu was the only woman mentioned as playing any role in the men's public discussions of politics and that was after the war (Interview 029, Thursday Island, January 1989).

<sup>15</sup> Int. 068; Int. 064

<sup>16</sup> Int. 144.

<sup>17</sup> Interview 152, Brisbane, December 1989.

<sup>18</sup> Interview 148, Brisbane, December 1989.

they had leaders who *'pulled together to get the job done'*.<sup>19</sup> The latter comment was probably made with reference to the Mothers' Union or in recognition that the women had always done much of their village work in groups.<sup>20</sup> The response of a St. Paul's man was: *'On all those islands you cannot say one woman is stronger than the other'*. If the women on Badu had been politically stronger than on other islands, *'Why didn't they have a woman councillor?'* he asked.<sup>21</sup> These perceptions, and that the men were expressing them rather than the women, are not surprising when it is remembered that the women's roles during the Pacific War were still largely determined by the traditional values of the hegemonic, semi-subsistence societies in which they lived. The men's testimonies were reflections of that bygone era.

In the light of these diverse comments and the signaller's observation, it is reasonable to conclude that military strategy in the South-West Pacific was of little interest to the women. Moreover, they had no means in their homes to keep up with war news on a daily basis. What concerned them more was meeting the food and clothing requirements of their families and keeping them safe.

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#### Curtin's season of austerity

The demands of war reached into every home in Australia. In mid-1942, Prime Minister Curtin called the people to observe a season of austerity for the sake of the war effort. Rationing and shortages became commonplace. Petrol had been rationed in 1940 and car tyres

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<sup>19</sup> Int. 098. A younger generation Badu woman said that her impression of all of the *'Nona women'* was that they were *'very wise'*. However, apart from her grandmother, Ugari Nona, she did not recall that these women sat with the men and discussed politics (Int. 029). Palmer's perception of outer island women in 1951 was that they were *'not only housewives, mothers and food producers. Some islands had outstanding leaders and citizens among the women'*. He named Mary Bann and Bakoi Baud: *'They were good thinkers, and worked as guide, philosopher and friend in their island community. I am sure that there were others like them'* (Palmer, *Women on Thursday Island during World War Two*, 19 March 1992). Perhaps their war experiences had developed these qualities in them. It became easier for them to be leaders in a wider sense after the war.

<sup>20</sup> Int. 097.

<sup>21</sup> Int. 152.

and tubes were only available to people classified as 'essential users' but this affected relatively few ordinary wage earners because most did not own a car. Shortages of tobacco and beer were another matter. A Victorian woman remembered that her brothers kept their cigarette butts and 'when they were short they would come up with about two very thin cigarettes'.<sup>22</sup> A Townsville man recalled that the shortage of beer touched soldiers and civilians alike. Home refrigerators were virtually unheard of so there were long queues at the ice works in summer in the hope of getting a block. Tea was brought under the coupon system in July 1942, sugar in August and meat in January 1944.<sup>23</sup> Most items which were not couponed were frequently in short supply or temporarily absent from store shelves - waxed paper for school and work lunches, rubber goods, rice, dried fruits, tinned goods, potatoes, eggs, bacon, milk, materials for house repairs and construction and, at times, milk and Lactogen for babies. In the southern States gas restrictions and shortages of firewood made the winter months bleak: children queued hopefully with carts of all descriptions at wood yards. The shortage of vegetables in the cities prompted suburban gardeners, who had previously concentrated on flower growing, to grow vegetables.<sup>24</sup>

In May 1942, the Prime Minister called all civilians to make do with what they had in the way of clothing and declared: 'The darning needle is a weapon of war'.<sup>25</sup> Clothing quotas were introduced. Women rushed to stores to purchase whatever they could from the day's allocation. Newspapers reported scenes of 'panic and greed...It was an orgy of stupid selfishness and the worst example of lack of national discipline', wrote the editor of The Courier-Mail.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, there were many women who dug into their family wardrobes for discarded clothing. Invisible mending firms reported brisk business.<sup>27</sup> In mid-June 1942, the government introduced what it envisaged was a fairer system, the issue of an equal number of coupons for the linen and clothing requirements of each civilian.

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<sup>22</sup> Cited in D. Connell, War at Home, p. 85.

<sup>23</sup> Hasluck, Government and the People, p. 275.

<sup>24</sup> 'Vegetables Grown in Home Flower Beds', Courier Mail, 18 June 1942, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> 'Rationing of Clothes on Monday', Courier Mail, 9 May 1942, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Editorial, Courier Mail, 11 May 1942, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> 'Old Clothes have new value with rationing', Courier Mail, 29 May 1942, p. 3.

Clothing was manufactured along 'no frills' lines to save material.<sup>28</sup> Old clothes and jumpers were unpicked and remade: velvet and net curtains were sacrificed to make wedding ensembles.<sup>29</sup> A New South Wales woman recalled that they were given hints on the wireless about how to get the print out of unbleached calico flour bags. These were coupon free and, with a bit of floral trimming, she said, made 'quite nice dresses and underwear'.<sup>30</sup> And, although there were complaints about couponing, at the end of the first year some families returned their surplus. One woman with seven children said that she had 'used the sewing needle to keep the children neat' and she returned almost half of her total allocation.<sup>31</sup> Curtin's season of austerity, however, was not a time when mainland people went hungry or were cold. It is probably better described as a time of inconveniences and irritations.

The semi-subsistence lifestyle of the Torres Strait Islanders was a far remove from the consumer society of mainland Australia. Nevertheless, these women, too, had to contend with shortages and the lack of all basic store foods to which they had become accustomed: '*sometimes there was no flour, no rice*'.<sup>32</sup> There had been branch stores on the larger communities from 1932.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, a signaller concluded in 1942, from his own perspective as a mainland consumer, that 'the island folk did little shopping either before or during World War Two'. He gauged this from the sorts of goods he saw in the store on Masig which:

consisted mainly of calico of various colours...cotton threads, white mainly...embroidery cotton...flour, rice, tea, sugar, jam, tinned milk, tinned peas, tinned meat, that sort of thing...some maritime supplies...like

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<sup>28</sup> John Robertson, Australia at War 1939-1945 (Melbourne, 1981), p. 205.

<sup>29</sup> Nancy Keesing (ed.), The Home Front Family Album: Remembering Australia 1939-1945 (Sydney, 1991), p. 159.

<sup>30</sup> D. Connell, War at Home, p. 85.

<sup>31</sup> McKernan, All In!, p. 157.

<sup>32</sup> Int. 161.

<sup>33</sup> Until late in the war when the people from Poid came out of the bush at the present location of Kubin, they had no store and the chairman made trips to the Badu for essential food items. At the end of the war, the only communities without stores were Edgor, Mauar and Waraber.

rowlocks and anchors.<sup>34</sup>

There is no reason to believe that the situation would have been any different on other communities because many were less affluent than Masig. Only one woman indicated that her family had been able to stock up on any essential item before the war:

*We had five brothers. They had been working on the pearling boat for many years...they went to T.I. with shell and they bought everything cheap. They bought material and they got one big roll and gave it to our mother. We had material when the war started.*<sup>35</sup>

Most families had little money to dress well: *'When the war started we did not have much clothing, we were already poor, we had only bad clothing'*.<sup>36</sup>

The women were quite explicit when they talked about wartime shortages. An Erub woman described what it seemed was the content of most wardrobes: *'I had only two dresses in the war, two white dress made out of that calico...they lasted me all the war...we had no shoes, nothing else'*.<sup>37</sup> A woman from Dauan remembered that there was *'no material in the store'*. Her mother made the boys' trousers out of flour bags.<sup>38</sup> Like some of the women on the mainland, they used unbleached calico from flour and rice bags. It was washed white and sometimes coloured with homemade dye.<sup>39</sup> Hessian bags, softened by soaking, were also used for clothing. Women went to their gardens in *'bag dresses'* so that they could keep their one good dress for church. As soon as they returned from church, the bag dress replaced the Sunday dress: *'We had to take very good care to look after that dress'*.<sup>40</sup> Most of the old men were reduced to two calico lavalavas, one they wore while the other was washed and hung on the line for the next day. When these wore out, the women made lavalavas from hessian bags. Singlets could not be bought so the women improvised by making them out of the sleeves of old shirts.<sup>41</sup> Early in the war there was a supply of men's trousers in the store on Mer which the women

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<sup>34</sup> Sig. 3. This list was probably not exhaustive and it is acknowledged that the signaller saw the store when its stocks were at the lowest. Nonetheless, the items parallel the store goods referred to by the women and there was no indication from them that 'luxury' items were stocked, for instance there were Sao biscuits but not sweet biscuits.

<sup>35</sup> Int. 085.

<sup>36</sup> Int. 065.

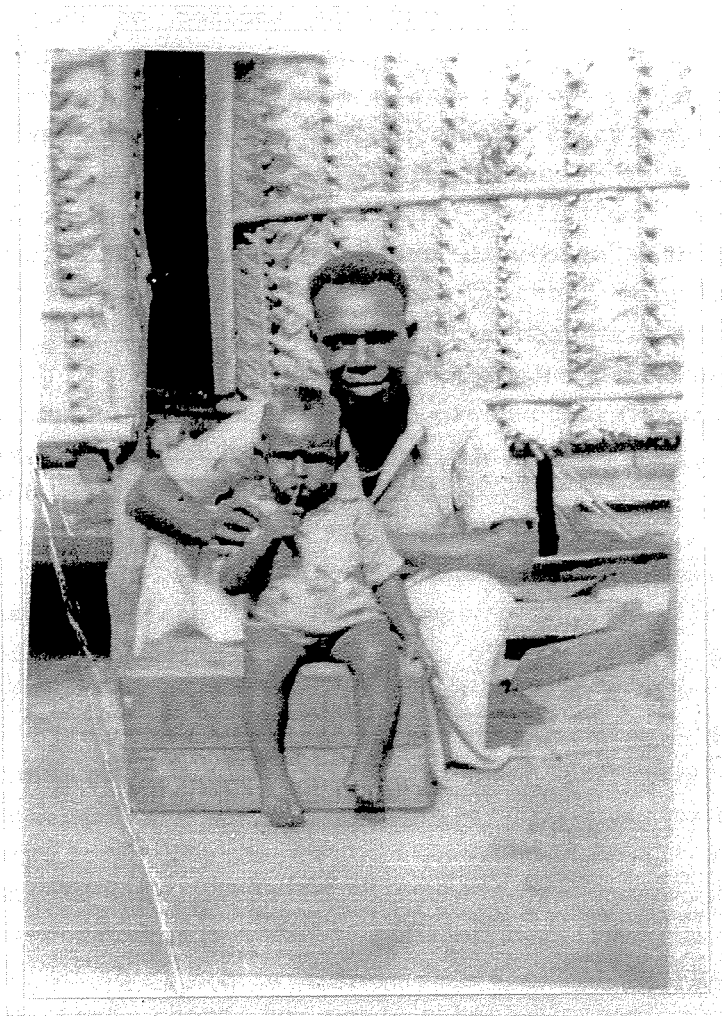
<sup>37</sup> Int. 101.

<sup>38</sup> Int. 125.

<sup>39</sup> Int. 065.

<sup>40</sup> Int. 133.

<sup>41</sup> Int. 071.



(Top) Meriam man and child  
(Bottom) Meriam woman and child

purchased to make skirts from the leg pieces. The skirts were stitched to bodices cut from old singlets.<sup>42</sup> Children's clothes were made from the stronger bits of material in worn-out garments. Those who had old sheets and pillow cases transformed them into 'island drawers'.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, every scrap of old or spare material was used for items of clothing because, as a Saibai woman remarked, reflecting the changed culture: 'Well what can you do? You have to cover up'.<sup>44</sup> The Nagi women disclosed with grins on their faces that they were not so modest in their solution: 'We walked around with skirts and no tops when the men weren't there'.<sup>45</sup> Most of the sewing was done by hand as there were few sewing machines on the islands although a couple of grandmothers insisted on carrying their heavy hand-operated machines into the bush where they sewed and mended for large families.<sup>46</sup>

Dinghy sails were fashioned into garments by these resourceful dressmakers and the cloth was 'good for patching'.<sup>47</sup> The darning needle was certainly a weapon of war in Torres Strait: 'We had to look after those dresses...mend them when they got holes'. On Nagi the afternoons were set aside for mending: 'Every little hole was darned so neat and all by hand' and every bit of material was valuable: 'Now we are so spoilt; our grandmothers would have loved every scrap of the material wasted today', the women reminisced.<sup>48</sup> A Saibai woman recalled that she never had to make clothes from flour bags because she managed to keep her family's clothes mended: 'If I went to the store I looked for a man size shirt and I took it. I used that shirt to mend other clothes'. When darning thread disappeared from the store shelves, she said that a next door neighbour sometimes helped out: 'Bit by bit you fixed it up'.<sup>49</sup> An old storekeeper reminisced:

*No clothes came and the women had to cut down all the old lavalavas to make kids' clothes, and dresses with flour bags. Anything that could be useful you had to use...Everybody had to be a bit clever in your head to*

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<sup>42</sup> Int. 056.

<sup>43</sup> Int. 069.

<sup>44</sup> Int. 054.

<sup>45</sup> Int. 069.

<sup>46</sup> Int. 130.

<sup>47</sup> Torres Strait Islanders had small wooden rowing boats, built at the boat yard on Badu which they called dinghies. They should not be confused with the outrigger canoes, the hulls of which were obtained from the Papuans.

<sup>48</sup> Interview 113, Thursday Island, June 1990; Int. 069.

<sup>49</sup> Int. 115.





Meriam couple - the man is wearing a lavalava (1942)

*look at things, otherwise you go without.*<sup>50</sup>

By sheer hard work and resourcefulness, Torres Strait Islander women kept their families clothed throughout the war.

The women's testimonies overwhelmingly indicated how concerned they were, even in their wartime circumstances, to conform to standards of decency in dress set by their colonisers. For instance, going bare-breasted when the men were absent was really a small concession and yet in the manner of the Nagi women's recollections of this there was a suggestion that they still felt some embarrassment about what they had done almost fifty years ago. Or, perhaps this was one of the times when their recollections were influenced by present sensibilities about decency. The emphasis placed by all of the women on just how they managed to keep their families clothed when there were totally inadequate supplies of clothing or material in the stores for a long period, certainly demonstrated the impact of the cultural change in their dress which took place from the arrival of the missionaries in Torres Strait.

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An immediate reaction on some communities to the attack on Nurupai was to take whatever goods were in the store into the bush for distribution amongst the families.<sup>51</sup> Everyone thought that Torres Strait was about to be invaded and good business procedures seemed superfluous. However, once the people felt reasonably confident that there was to be no immediate enemy invasion the stores resumed business operations in the village. In some cases stores were set up in the bush to service those who had been evacuated there. But, from then on the problem was that supplies came irregularly. One storekeeper recalled:

*the boats just dropped them and off again. They were not very regular and the people had to depend more on their gardens. You did have times when you ran out of food altogether. Then they lived on coconuts.*<sup>52</sup>

In May, when the coupon system was introduced on the mainland, it was not extended to the outer island communities. The storekeepers just monitored the quantities they purchased.<sup>53</sup> A former store worker on Masig said:

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<sup>50</sup> Int. 053.

<sup>51</sup> Int. 066.

<sup>52</sup> Int. 053.

<sup>53</sup> Int. 120.

*We only had a little bit of food. We had to wait a month ...You buy a bag of flour but you have to go steady. Tea was no problem because we had lemon grass [tea]. Sugar and butter were hard and Sunshine or condensed milk. If we had two or three cases every family had to get a tin of milk, so we had to make it go around.*<sup>54</sup>

Storekeepers introduced a 'loose quota system' on all goods received into the store.<sup>55</sup> 'Everything was half', a Saibai woman recalled: 'If you want a bar of soap it was half, tea, small tin jam'.<sup>56</sup> A St. Paul's woman said: 'They rationed us and we had to depend a lot on bush tucker...we don't have much flour and rice'.<sup>57</sup> This was the situation everywhere. Even if there were stocks in the store, frequently the women did not have any money with which to purchase goods.<sup>58</sup> Conversely, if anyone was lucky enough to have 'a bit of money' they could buy 'what was left over', although the general impression was that on most communities with only 'so many bags of flour, rice and tea' it was all measured out to the people.<sup>59</sup> One woman suggested that they only got 'bad food': the flour and rice were mildewed and contained weevils: 'We got to wash the rice and my grandmother picked the bad ones out...we got to sift the bad flour too'.<sup>60</sup> As late as September 1944, Charlie Turner, the one remaining white teacher, said that store goods were still 'none too plentiful' on the islands. He grew tomatoes, cucumbers, melons and lettuces beside the Masig hospital verandah and exchanged them for tinned foods with crew members on launches using the Great North East Channel. And, when the S.S. Kintour, on its way to Port Moresby, ran aground on Tudu eighteen nautical miles from Masig, the captain gave the people permission to salvage it. Their haul of tinned foods was a welcome relief.<sup>61</sup>

Torres Strait Islander women were unaware of the austerity measures which were operating on the mainland. Nevertheless, their exclusion from the coupon system is further confirmation that, not only in theory but also in practice, they were not regarded as full

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<sup>54</sup> Int. 161. Lemon grass tea is popular throughout Torres Strait. The grass is brewed like commercially produced tea.

<sup>55</sup> Int. 101.

<sup>56</sup> Int. 115.

<sup>57</sup> Int. 117.

<sup>58</sup> Int. 101.

<sup>59</sup> Int. 120. See subsequent discussion on women's economic viability in this chapter.

<sup>60</sup> Int. 096.

<sup>61</sup> Director of Native Affairs to the Under Secretary, Department of Health and Home Affairs, 15 May 1946, pp. 1-2, Auditor General's Reports, AUD/W146, Q.S.A.

Australian citizens. Indeed, if they had come under the coupon system and goods to the coupon value and money to buy them had been available, Torres Strait Islander women would have seen that as a luxurious oversupply. However, at times, welcome relief came when commercially packaged goods from other sources were given to the women. American sailors en route to and from Port Moresby were generous towards the women and children on Purma: *'They supplied us with food, milk and even trousers. We were short of water and when the Chairman told the sailors the problem, they supplied us with water'*. A special treat for the children was ice-cream, something they had not previously tasted.<sup>62</sup> The army signallers gave them sweets from comfort parcels from home: the women tinned food from army supplies. Lime juice became a popular item of exchange for work done by the women or for produce from their gardens.<sup>63</sup> The army assisted families when the women were desperate for store goods.<sup>64</sup> All TSLI men were issued with store items when they came home on leave. An old woman from Poid recalled: *'When the army boys come on leave they bring plenty of food. We got something like meat or tinned fish'*. Such items were especially appreciated because these Moan women's wartime gardens struggled under the camouflage of the trees and there was never enough fish even though the boys persistently disobeyed orders not to go to the beach and fish.<sup>65</sup> However, some items, such as brown rice, *'dog biscuits'* and tinned beetroot, were not palatable to people accustomed to a diet which did not include the wide range of commercially produced foods eaten by Europeans. Some women said they would have preferred white flour for dampers to those *'big dry biscuits'* issued to the men.<sup>66</sup> However, the Saibai women devised a way to make them more palatable: *'"What are we going to do for that one?" We scraped the coconut and when the milk boiled we put the biscuit inside the milk and put a little*

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<sup>62</sup> Int. 100. In return for the American sailors' kindness, the Purma women cooked food for them very early in the morning so that the Japanese would not see the smoke from their fires and they left the food in a little house in the village for the sailors to collect.

<sup>63</sup> Interview 159, Thursday Island, February 1989; Sig. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Int. 074.

<sup>65</sup> Int. 071. The Badu and Mabuiag boys also disobeyed the army's order in this respect.

<sup>66</sup> Int. 054.

bit of salt on it. It was a good one'.<sup>67</sup> A Masig woman, in slightly more comfortable circumstances, suggested that tinned food, such as beetroot, was so unpalatable to her family that she had no alternative but to 'open them and throw them out and use the tin for a cup'. Brown rice was not eaten on the islands but it was more acceptable than the beetroot.<sup>68</sup> In most families, however, whatever extra supplies came their way were eaten or modified to make them more palatable. However, no amount of juggling of the commercially produced food from all of the sources described could have ensured that large families would be fed each day. All families were heavily dependent on their own 'bush tucker': 'and that is why the women worked hard in the garden'.<sup>69</sup>

In their stringent wartime circumstances, the semi-subsistence lifestyle in Torres Strait with its heavy dependence on bush tucker, meant more hard work for the women. From 1942, women with big families who had relied on their husbands or fathers to help with their gardening were at a disadvantage. Moreover, the women were hampered by the need to remain as inconspicuous as possible at all times and gardens planted under cover of the bush needed much encouragement. In the early months of the war, the Meriam women were faced with the added problem of a drought: 'There was no rain and all the coconuts were only little coconuts...The people made the gardens but they didn't grow'. Women were forced to make provision for their families by roasting the nuts from the egere tree which became a main source of food during that time.<sup>70</sup> It was explained that this nut was always eaten by the people in 'bad times' and drought and war were 'very bad times [so] when we've got no food, we live on that tree'.<sup>71</sup> In the many circumstances of hardships described by the women, the worry was always to be able to get enough food each day to feed the children: 'During the war it was very hard, very hard to feed all the kids'.<sup>72</sup> The women who evacuated to the bush dug the virgin soil with crowbars: 'oh, very hard work';<sup>73</sup> 'we had to

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<sup>67</sup> Int. 115. The flesh of the coconut is scraped on a metal apparatus to make coconut milk and coconut cream - ingredients in many dishes. A variety of scrapers are used - see Lindsay Wilson, Kerka Lu: Contemporary artefacts of the Torres Strait Islanders (Brisbane, 1993), pp. 74-75.

<sup>68</sup> Int. 072.

<sup>69</sup> Int. 161.

<sup>70</sup> Int. 056.

<sup>71</sup> Int. 087.

<sup>72</sup> Int. 115.

<sup>73</sup> Int. 131.

camouflage everything under the bush, don't leave any clear ground so the Japs couldn't see the gardens'.<sup>74</sup> The women who went to their old gardens had to 'go quick and come back quick again so the planes don't see [you]'.<sup>75</sup> Women on the Top-Western Islands risked exposure to the enemy when they crossed to the southern coast of Papua to get food:

*If the supply boat did not come in, they've got no radio and there's nothing and they are short of food and they have to go. New Guinea people have always got food; they have good gardens. We still got the outrigger and they need people to sit on the outrigger, they had to balance it, so they need women for the crew.*<sup>76</sup>

A Saibai woman explained why the old traditional trading networks could not be abandoned:

*It's hungry time January/February. You cannot get anything. In the Wet Season we could not get to the garden. Cassava is our main food. You can eat it all that time but it went watery in hungry time. What we did was get yams from New Guinea and save them to help us go through hungry time.*

However, filling in as crew members for the old men was not a problem: 'we sailed those canoes, real fast'.<sup>77</sup> A signaller vouched for this:

*In the Reliance coming back from Saibai to Moa, we saw a women's crew in a dugout or cut-out canoe and they raced past us. I think the Reliance was about forty feet and the canoe would have been forty-five feet or longer and it just went past us. They were sailing and singing like mad. There were six, seven, eight women singing away and having a good old time. We had a motorised launch and they just slipped past us.*<sup>78</sup>

The Boigu women were exposed also to the dangers of sea travel in their attempts to obtain food from gardens on the other side of the island: 'I was a small girl...got no susu [breasts]', one woman remembered. One day early in the war, before her father had enlisted, she and her family left the village in their paddle canoe to collect watermelons, about a day's journey. They paddled close to the land for quick access to the mangrove swamps: 'That plane was flying very near the water...It was Japanese with a round dot...we just put the canoe in the sand and leave dad there and we ran into the mangroves...then that plane went behind the other side of the

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<sup>74</sup> Int. 116.

<sup>75</sup> Int. 071.

<sup>76</sup> Int. 058. It is difficult to know what was exchanged for the yams. Before the war they exchanged old clothes and store goods for food but the Torres Strait Islanders were not in a position to make those exchanges during the war.

<sup>77</sup> Int. 054.

<sup>78</sup> Sig. 3.

island'. The plane circled them three times and then disappeared behind nearby islands. Finally, it turned toward the New Guinea coast and went out of sight: *'We were really frightened, we never got those watermelons, we went back home'*.<sup>79</sup> In all sorts of ways the women struggled to obtain sufficient garden produce for their families.

There were also added difficulties in providing ample fish and carting water and wood. The people were ordered to keep away from the shore line and once the army ordered all seacraft to be removed from the islands or beached, it became extremely difficult for the women to obtain sufficient quantities of fish, a very important staple in their diet. However, the women's testimonies suggest they did not always comply with the army's orders. A signaller was told by old Barney Mosby that the women were *'number one for fishing, much better than the men'*. One day the old men *'gave the signal'* to the women to go out in the dinghy to net the silver mullett that had begun to run. To the signaller's amazement, they returned with a *'boat load'* of fish. They were, according to island custom, which during the war extended beyond kin, shared amongst all the households, even the signallers got much more than they could eat. Each family's surplus was cleaned, spread flat, smoked and hung on the rafters of the houses to be eaten when other fish was in short supply. If a big mackerel or black fish was caught, it was filleted, put on a string and hung out in the hot sun to dry, brought inside at night and kept from the rain.<sup>80</sup> A Badu woman explained that all the fish caught were *'really cared for, then no one went hungry'*.<sup>81</sup> The Meriam women fished daily while other members of their families kept a look out for planes. No opportunity to get food was missed. On Saibai when a huge flock of ducks, like a *'big black cloud'*, came toward the lagoon a group of women waded into the water swirling sticks, three to four feet long, above their heads which they let fly across the swamp, killing several ducks with each blow.<sup>82</sup> Women stalked the huge mud crabs in the murky mangrove swamps, home to crocodiles, and searched for edible grubs in these eerie muddy places.<sup>83</sup> The Nagi women went every day to the lagoon for fish and crayfish.<sup>84</sup> The women were frequently forced to ignore orders meant

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<sup>79</sup> Interview 099, Boigu, May 1990.

<sup>80</sup> Sig. 3.

<sup>81</sup> Int. 131.

<sup>82</sup> Sig. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Int. 131.

<sup>84</sup> Int. 069.

for their safety in order to provide enough food for their families.

In some instances water supplies became more difficult to obtain but for at least one group life became a little easier because of closer access to it. The women forced to live in the bush spoke about finding suitable locations near running creeks with 'good stones' for washing.<sup>85</sup> Some dug new wells and kept them free from 'rattlesnakes' and rats that fell in.<sup>86</sup> It was important to maintain the wells: *'we took the sand out every month and when you cleared it out it filled up with nice clean water'*.<sup>87</sup> The Saibai women continued to cross the channel to Dauan for water and the Purma women went to the old well on Waraber. On some islands where the women were relocated in the bush, they had to carry water even longer distances than they had before the war. However, for the Mabuiag women, moving into the bush was a blessing in one sense: *'It was hard because we shifted out from village and stayed in the bush, but it was good for us, easier because we were near the water. We were satisfied because we don't have to carry it so far'*.<sup>88</sup> Ironically, this ancient labour of third and fourth world women was alleviated temporarily for some by the war. Fuel for cooking and washing had to be collected daily even though it might mean going along the beaches where the gatherers were exposed to enemy aircraft. A signaller, on his first expedition to collect wood, recalled seeing a party of a dozen or so women with bundles on their hips: *'They seemed to be checking me out with some sort of expression of disapproval'*, he recalled. Later, the Chief Councillor told him that that *'wasn't the way it should be done'*. It seemed wood gathering was the *'responsibility and duty of Island ladies and they were very good at it'*. From then on the signallers' wood heap was quietly replenished every morning with *'beautifully cut sticks eighteen inches in length'*.<sup>89</sup> Thus, in performing this traditional role, the Masig women exposed themselves to possible Japanese fire for the sake of

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<sup>85</sup> Int. 096; Int. 137; Int. 071.

<sup>86</sup> Int. 096. *'Rattlesnakes'* were so named because when they were frightened their heads reared up and waved from side to side like the American rattlesnake but there was no rattle. This is probably another instance of contemporary reflections on past experiences. Two old women said they also called this island snake the *'whip snake'* because it was long and thin like a whip. They did not know its European name (Personal communications, Cairns, September 1993).

<sup>87</sup> Int. 069.

<sup>88</sup> Int. 078.

<sup>89</sup> Sig. 3.



the outsiders as well as their families.

The comprehensiveness with which the women recalled management of their wartime environment is indicative of the importance they placed on their responsibility to provide for their families even though, as will be disclosed in Chapter ten, some outsiders saw them as neglecting it.

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In this section of the chapter, there is substantial digression away from the women's testimonies. Archival texts are examined in order to gain important insights into the women's circumstances which they either did not talk about or which were beyond their knowledge at the time.

#### Their economic circumstances

An old Masig leader recalled that the 'money line' was very low, especially during the first two years of the war. The cessation of the marine industry and the subsequent impressment of their vessels was tantamount to taking the people's 'bread and butter' from them. Consequently, most families' incomes were reduced early in 1942 to whatever child endowment and allotment moneys the women could access.<sup>90</sup>

Child endowment was the first Commonwealth Government benefit to be extended to indigenous Australians. It was granted in 1941.<sup>91</sup> Prior to the war, the Commonwealth Government had been urged, without success, by people like the anthropologist A.P. Elkin and Protector Bleakley, on the grounds of 'social justice and practicality' to

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<sup>90</sup> Bolton to Director, 12 March 1942, CA753, BP242/1, Q25356, A.A. (Qld).

<sup>91</sup> Some States had introduced old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, widow's pensions and child endowment before the Commonwealth legislated in 1909 for aged pensions, 1910 invalid pensions and 1912 maternity allowances. The widow's pension was introduced in 1942. During the war these Commonwealth pensions were extended to Torres Strait Islanders (see T.H. Kewley, Australia's Welfare State: The Development of Social Security Benefits (South Melbourne, 1969)). Prior to the war they received benefits such as old age and maternity, from their own Island Fund set up in 1912 to which each seaman contributed.

extend old age, invalid and maternity benefits to indigenous people.<sup>92</sup> When the Child Endowment Bill passed through the Commonwealth Parliament it provided that payment would be made to Aborigines if they were living 'under conditions comparable with those of the people generally'.<sup>93</sup> Although Torres Strait Islanders were not specifically named in the Act (which is not surprising considering their lost identity in, among other places, the Commonwealth sphere), they did receive the benefits. But it is difficult to understand how Aborigines' or Torres Strait Islanders' living conditions were comparable to the lifestyle of white mainlanders. Moreover, during the debate on the Bill, Sir Raphael Cilento, a leading doctor in North Queensland, said:

a nation is dying which has not an average family of 3.6 children. It therefore behoves the government to encourage in every way possible those who are bringing families into the world.<sup>94</sup>

It was argued everything possible should be done 'to encourage the peopling of Australia with native-born [emphasis added] persons'. During the 1930s, assimilation of Australia's indigenous people was being mooted by anthropologists and concerned white citizens. But, the opinion was still being espoused that the Aborigines were a dying race: Torres Strait Islanders were the invisible race. It is unlikely that the term 'native-born' referred to either group. Without any clear reference in the Debates on the Child Endowment Bill as to why the Commonwealth Government ultimately decided to pay the benefit to Torres Strait Islanders, it is not unreasonable to suggest that people like Elkin and Bleakley had had some effect on the government's thinking. Furthermore, the Commonwealth government was aware by 1941, as Beckett points out, that there may have been a need to placate disaffected indigenous people living in the weakly defended North, many of whom had had a close working relationships with Japanese divers.<sup>95</sup>

This unexplained 'gift' from the government had a dramatic impact on the Torres Strait Islanders whose aspirations were for Commonwealth Government intervention in their affairs. When the women received their first child endowment in late 1941, there was

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<sup>92</sup> Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 64.

<sup>93</sup> Australia, House of Representatives 1941, Debates, Vol. HR166, p. 620.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 435, 360. Gauging from the Torres Strait Islander women's testimonies, their families were very much larger than 3.6 children.

<sup>95</sup> Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 64.

great joy in the villages. One old man said: 'The women came back and told us, "We got some money, the children are getting money". From that day to this, the people lived happy. We got child endowment'.<sup>96</sup> On St. Paul's the women 'jumped for joy... "Look at all the money we've got"', they said.<sup>97</sup> It was almost inevitable that the people personalised child endowment, seeing it in terms of their traditional gift exchange. Thus, the grant of this first benefit was interpreted by one Torres Strait Islander leader as putting the people in a new relationship with the Commonwealth Government. The Torres Strait Islander economy was based on kinship rights and obligations. This leader interpreted the government's act as putting itself in a similar relationship with his people. Thus, he described the Commonwealth government as his 'friend':<sup>98</sup>

All the councillors talked to this chairman...He said, "When I was a boy I had no friend. When I came to be a man I had many friends". Then these people asked him, "What was that, why you tell us that way?" He said, "When I was born my mother had no child endowment, my father had no pension, but when I came to be a man, the war came and made me sign in the army and they said, "We're going to give you that one that's been coming in the middle of the war, child endowment".<sup>99</sup>

Could the people construe this new relationship to mean full equality with all Australians after the war?

For a month or two, child endowment was paid directly to the women on the basis that it would give them 'a chance to learn how to handle their own business affairs'.<sup>100</sup> By the time the men

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<sup>96</sup> Int. 098.

<sup>97</sup> Int. 088.

<sup>98</sup> See Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 103.

<sup>99</sup> Int. 098.

<sup>100</sup> Bleakley, Aborigines of Australia, p. 305. The first payments at the rate of 5s. 0d. per week for each child in excess of one were made to the women on approximately 13 November 1941, back paid to 1 July 1941 (Account Books: Torres Strait, Ledger Records, Child Endowment 1941-1946, 1132, Q.S.A.). According to a St. Paul's woman: 'We got cheques for child endowment', which were cashed at the store. This method of payment probably ceased when the white priest left the Island. She recalled that for their army allotments: 'We had a passbook from D.N.A.'. The Department had worked closely with the Church on St. Paul's and took over certain of its responsibilities for the people during the war, for instance the government provided a store: 'It was a D.N.A. store during the war...Gaia Ware looked after store during the war, and the tucker came from D.N.A.' (Int. 068). Before the war Farquhars, a private enterprise on Thursday Island, had run a small store on the Island which was managed by Gaia Ware (Int. 118).

enlisted, the system of payment had changed because the white perception was that the husbands took the money and the children received little benefit from it. Subsequent child endowment payments were made through a passbook system over which the Director had absolute control but problems with this method of payment soon arose. Almost three months elapsed before the teacher on Erub was given authority to enter child endowment in the women's passbooks. It was only when he visited Thursday Island, just before his evacuation, that he was given verbal permission to make the entries. Moreover, on the eve of the Department's withdrawal, the women were being told how they should spend their child endowment. The moneys would be withheld, the white teacher warned, if they bought large quantities of materials instead of spending it on the children.<sup>101</sup> As indicated earlier in this chapter, the women had not stockpiled materials and, in retrospect, it may have been in the children's interests if the women had done so. In any event, as the war progressed the women had little money to spend on anything.

Access to and use of all of their wartime entitlements were restricted by factors beyond the women's control. A Badu woman was sure that child endowment did not come regularly in the early period of the war and Meriam women got some child endowment, but according to one, 'not much'.<sup>102</sup> And, even when money did become available, some women had problems spending it because of their lack of experience in handling their own money. A former Yam Island storekeeper said: 'Women sat outside the store and called to people who understood about money, "Would you do this shopping for me?"'.<sup>103</sup> Even on Saibai where there had been a store for a number of years, there were women who asked their children to help them when they went to the store. Some could only put their mark on withdrawal slips.<sup>104</sup> Although this seemed surprising when it is considered that western education had been introduced in Torres Strait many decades prior to the war, a St. Paul's woman clarified the position. Her family left Erub in 1929 because, she said, 'D.N.A. grabbed' all the people's money. During the year, the men bought such items as flour, rice, sugar and kerosene on a credit system called 'slopchest'. Then, when they got their annual pay, there was barely any money left because so much of it had been consumed by

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<sup>101</sup> Statement: Smith, 14 March 1942, A/15997, Q.S.A.  
<sup>102</sup> Int. 093; Int. 127.  
<sup>103</sup> Int. 053.  
<sup>104</sup> Int. 054.

contributions to the Island Fund, boat repairs, seamen's insurance and in repayments to 'slopchest'. When they went to St. Paul's she remembered that her brothers came home with money in their hands and the women were surprised: 'We don't know about money...What's that? Oh, that's money...That's why my father went to St. Paul's. On other islands they don't know anything'.<sup>105</sup> Thus, without the opportunity to gain practical experience in handling their own money, many women entered the war years with little or no working knowledge of how the capitalist monetary exchange system worked.

As late as January 1944, even though transport around Torres Strait had improved, army intelligence officers listened to allegations, particularly those of the more politically aggressive Meriam men, that child endowment payments to their wives were 'irregular and unsatisfactory'.<sup>106</sup> They also complained that if their wives did not withdraw the full amount of any month's child endowment which was entered in their pass books, they could not subsequently use the balance.<sup>107</sup> A Department directive to Turner in April 1943 stated that endowees need not draw their full child endowment if they did not wish to do so 'provided of course that children [did] not suffer through such accumulation'.<sup>108</sup> If this was indeed the basis of the directive, the Director certainly had little understanding of the women's economic situation. Thus, for whatever reason, child endowment moneys accrued in the Department's Child Endowment Account. In July 1942, the audit inspector noted the credit balance and indicated the undrawn balance was likely to

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<sup>105</sup> Int. 068. This family was able to move to St. Paul's because of their South Sea Islander descent.

<sup>106</sup> Murray Islanders went on strike in 1913 and in 1921. After the 1936 Maritime Strike they withdrew their labour from the company boats (See Ganter, Pearl-Shellers, pp. 63, 85, 90-91).

<sup>107</sup> Report: Army Intelligence week ending 9 January 1944, AWM54, 528/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra); Director of Native Affairs to Manager, Island Industries, 28 April 1943, Personal Files, W.C.V. Turner, cited at Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, Brisbane.

<sup>108</sup> During the Debates on the Child Endowment Bill, it was stated that the government had no objection to the accumulation of these moneys for the purpose of 'providing a fund for the higher education of children after primary school' (Australia, House of Representatives 1941, Debates, Vol. HR166, p. 625). The opportunity for Torres Strait Islander children to go to high school in 1941 was not even remotely possible.

increase.<sup>109</sup> And it did. On 11 January 1943 it was £4 325.8s.2d.;<sup>110</sup> by December 1945 the figure had risen to £6 185.7s.2d.;<sup>111</sup> and a year later it was £10 287.16s.1d.<sup>112</sup> A list of credit balances as at 31 December 1945 showed that the Meriam accounts had a total credit of £2 279.13s.6d., by far the largest amount of undrawn child endowment for any community by the end of the war and yet the Meriam men were complaining that there was dissatisfaction amongst the women about the non-receipt of the full amount of their entitlements.<sup>113</sup> Clearly the Department held considerable child endowment funds even though there were times when the women were without money to pay for store food for their children. The Director would have justified any withholding of money on the basis that the women were his wards and like a good father he was protecting their money:<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Memo: HB [H. Beal, Acting Audit Inspector] to Auditor General, 19 July 1942, Auditor General's Reports, AUD/W119, Q.S.A.

<sup>110</sup> Report: Accounts Protector of Islanders and Aborigines for Thursday Island, 30 April 1942 to 11 January 1943, p. 22, Auditor General's Reports, AUD/W129, Q.S.A.

<sup>111</sup> Report: Accounts Director of Native Affairs Brisbane, 1 October 1944 to 31 December 1945, p. 38, Auditor General's Reports, AUD/T141, Q.S.A.

<sup>112</sup> Report: Accounts Director of Native Affairs Brisbane, 1 January 1946 to 4 February 1947, p. 29, Auditor General's Reports, AUD/T151, Q.S.A.

<sup>113</sup> Report: Accounts Director of Native Affairs to 31 December 1945, p. 38, AUD/T141, Q.S.A. Saibai and Badu had the second and third largest credits with £983.2s.6d. and £594.19s.8d. respectively.

<sup>114</sup> The Director had considerable Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal capital to direct as he saw fit. For instance, in 1935, there was £293 549.14s.11d. in 'Aboriginal savings', of which £200 000 was invested in Commonwealth Stock. The interest was used for welfare work amongst 'Aborigines' thus 'relieving the capitalist section and the State of the need to outlay funds for Aboriginal social security' (Cited in Dawn May, Aboriginal Labour in North Queensland Cattle Industry 1897-1968, Ph.D. thesis, Department of History and Politics, James Cook University, Townsville, 1986, pp. 221-226). Prior to 1942, 'welfare' payments were made to Torres Strait Islanders out of their own 'Island Fund' to which all seamen contributed. By 30 June 1946, the sum invested in Stock was £259 000, excluding Torres Strait Islander savings (see Schedule of Transactions, A.R., Director of Native Affairs to 30 June 1946, Q.P.P. 1946, Vol. 2, p. 1039). Aboriginal moneys were applied for Torres Strait Islander purposes on occasions. In 1904, Meriam and Mabuag men acquired boats with loans from the 'Aborigines' Protection Property Fund' (A.R., C.P.A. 1904, Q.P.P. 1905, Vol. 1, p. 771). In 1930 the Department acquired the business of Papuan Industries on Badu (A.R., Aboriginal Department to 31 December 1930,

A close check is made on every individual account to which child endowment is credited to ensure that the expenditure by parents is in keeping with the purpose for which the payment is made.<sup>115</sup>

Such an approach would not have been tolerated by white endowees.

Accessing the women's entitlements during the war was further hindered by the Department's inefficient and poorly-kept accounting system.<sup>116</sup> The April 1942 Auditor General's report indicated that there had been problems with the local Protector's accounts at Thursday Island even before the evacuation:

The fact that so many of the various registers, cards, cash books, and Ledgers had not been posted since September and October 1941 indicates that the work of this office was in arrears before any air raids occurred, the first of which was on 14 March 1942, a week before evacuation was ordered.<sup>117</sup>

In the next report it was maintained that the local Protector's accounts were, 'if anything, in a worse state than any other Protector's accounts...a most unsatisfactory state of affairs'. In his reply, the Director pointed out that it had become necessary in early 1942 to 'throw to the four winds' the accounts and profits and losses in an attempt to help the people, who, he admitted, felt they

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Q.P.P. 1931, Vol. 1, p. 893). It was purchased not with 'Government money but with the aborigines' [sic] and Islanders' money held in Trust funds...Direct economic benefits to the natives were reduced by the diversion of a portion of the profits to developmental projects normally the responsibility of the government and other agencies' (A.H. Campbell, L. Cameron, J.A. Keats, M.W. Poulter and B. Poulter, The Aborigines and Torres Islanders of Queensland (Brisbane, 1958), p. 22). Any attempt to disentangle the indigenous people's moneys could easily form the basis of an independent thesis.

<sup>115</sup> A.R., Director of Native Affairs to 30 June 1946, Q.P.P. 1946, Vol. 2, p. 1040.

<sup>116</sup> Peel remarked in 1946 on the difficulty he had trying to get information on Torres Strait Islander moneys which went through the Board's accounts: 'Anyone who has tried to get to the bottom of this Board can understand the mistrust with which the Islanders view its operations' (Isles of the Torres Strait, p. 114). I related to this with reference to attempts to get information from the Department's financial records. However, Peel's further claim that he could not find any record of the Board's accounts is now unsustainable. The Auditor General's reports on these and the Protector's accounts are presently available in the Queensland State Archives.

<sup>117</sup> Report: Accounts Protector of Islanders and Aborigines, 18 April 1941 to 30 April 1942, p. 15, Auditor General's Reports, AUD/W119, Q.S.A.

had been 'deserted to the enemy'.<sup>118</sup> The situation was made worse by Curtis's inability, due to lack of support staff, to keep his book-keeping up-to-date: his accounts were 'if anything,...in a worse state than the Protector's accounts'. Transactions had not been entered in the cash book for some time: the ledgers were not up-to-date: the accounts had not been balanced nor reconciliations made with the bank statements. Moreover, internal audits had not been carried out on the books of the majority of the branch stores for at least three years.<sup>119</sup> It was through these accounts that the women's entitlements and sales to them on credit were recorded. What must be drawn from the audit inspector's comments was that if the Department and the Board's accounts were not properly kept, no one could be sure what moneys were due to the women at any particular time. The women clearly had good reason to say they did not get child endowment and allotments regularly.

The transmission of money from the soldiers' pay to their dependants until early 1944 was another area of uncertainty which affected the women's monetary viability. Money taken from each soldier's pay and remitted to the women, it seemed, was not done in a consistent or uniform manner. One veteran recalled that he did not have money deducted from his pay because it was 'too little' to send any home.<sup>120</sup> An Erub woman said: 'The allotment - the women never got it...only once and that's it...when the men came back home they gave us money but when they went back, my mother didn't get any allotment'.<sup>121</sup> On Dauan a woman also remembered receiving an allotment but it was 'very small money'.<sup>122</sup> A Meriam woman thought the only money she received was some child endowment.<sup>123</sup> Other recollections were: 'dad sent allotment to mum'; 'the boys used to give little allotment for us' and 'we got allotment, very small money'.<sup>124</sup> A Boigu woman remembered that they had to 'wait for boat to come with child endowment and that money from the army'.<sup>125</sup> These testimonies indicated that some moneys were received although,

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<sup>118</sup> Director to Under Secretary, 30 March 1944, p. 1, AUD/W129, 1944, Q.S.A.

<sup>119</sup> Report: Accounts Island Industries Badu, 1 October 1943 to 31 March 1945, p. 3, Auditor General's Reports, AUD/W146, 1945, Q.S.A.

<sup>120</sup> Int. 067.

<sup>121</sup> Int. 135.

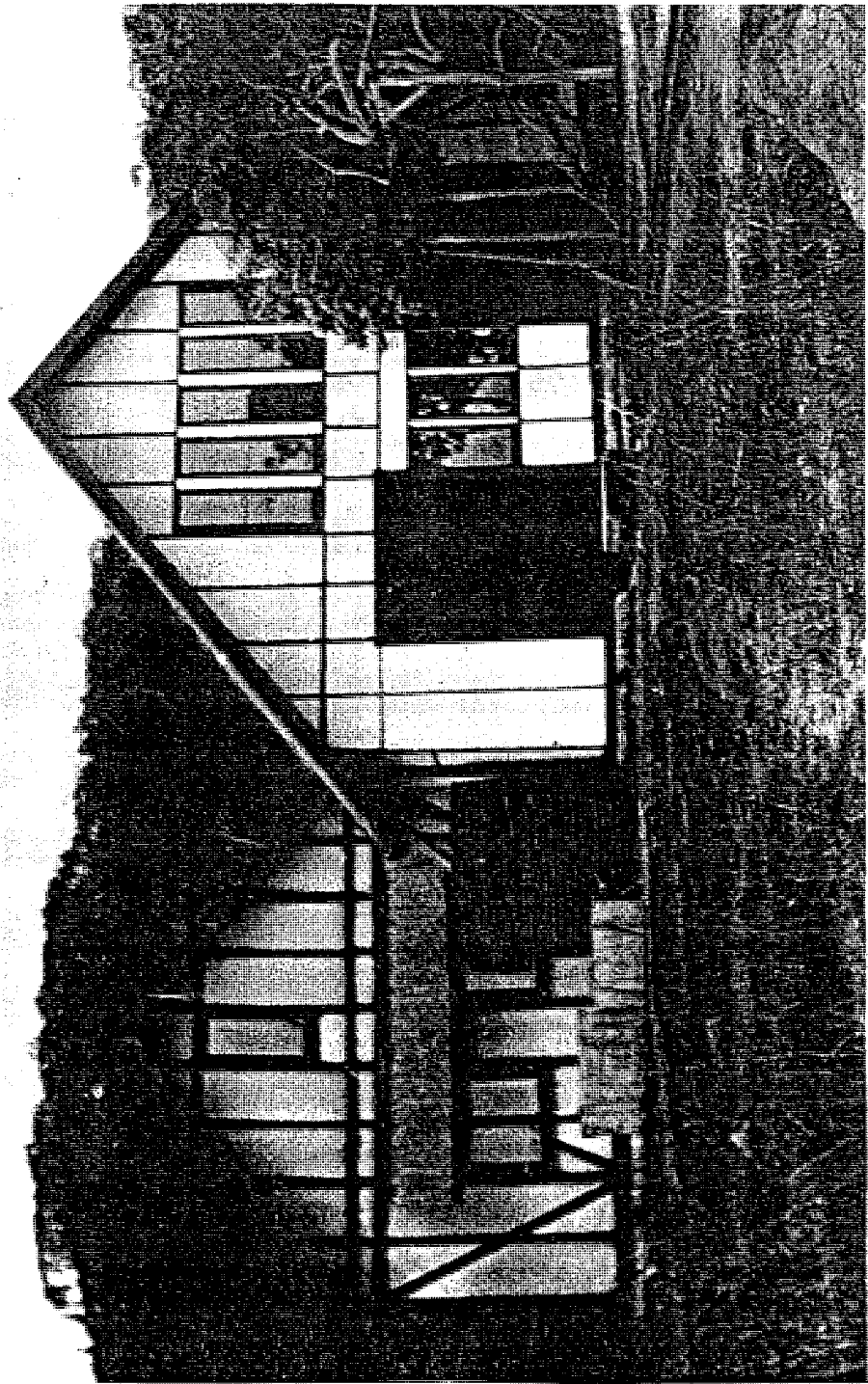
<sup>122</sup> Int. 125.

<sup>123</sup> Int. 073.

<sup>124</sup> Int. 117; Int. 093; Int. 112; Int. 126.

<sup>125</sup> Int. 058. This woman meant the records of payments to be entered in their passbooks came by surface mail.





Island Industries Board Store, Badu

as discussed in Chapter five, until mid-1942 at the earliest, the suggested fortnightly allotments from the men's pay for the support of families, were not remitted regularly. Even when the women became entitled to independent dependants' allowances in 1944, whether they received their full entitlements is conjectural. There had been no reconciliation of the Director's military allotment accounts for most of 1945 and even when this was done 'so many errors were found in postings' the audit inspector could not be certain that a 'true balance of individual accounts' was finally achieved as they entailed 'hundreds of entries...over a number of years [emphasis added]'.<sup>126</sup> Did he include moneys taken from the soldiers' pay prior to 1944 when he used the words 'a number of years'? The audit reports on allotment moneys give no reason to believe that the women received what was due to them even allowing for unavoidable delays in transmission of credits from Brisbane into their island passbooks.

A further consequence of the paternalistic management of the women's money forced them to buy from the government stores on a system of credit known as 'slopchest'. Slopchest had been a source of concern to the people for some time because their history of buying on credit had clearly demonstrated that they were, more often than not, left with no money once the amounts owed were recouped from the men's wages. Thus, its use was discouraged by island leaders. Erub leaders said in early 1942: '*No one here is satisfied about this slopchest; we all want to draw money*'.<sup>127</sup> However, one wartime storekeeper said he was forced to allow the women to use 'slopchest': '*I don't think it was easy for them to turn me this way and that way. I did my own thinking but if the women needed money, I paid them this way and I did it happily to help my people*'.<sup>128</sup> By March 1945, there was an overall debit balance of £3 038 in the account. According to the audit inspector, this was 'very unsatisfactory'. He suggested that 'little control [had been] exercised in past years over the extent of credit allowed to natives...practically no attempt

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<sup>126</sup> Report: Accounts Protector of Islanders and Aborigines, 1 May 1945 to 30 April 1946, pp. 2, 4, Auditor General's Reports, AUD/W153, Q.S.A.

<sup>127</sup> Statement: Darnley Island Councillors, 3 March 1942, p. 2, Education Dept., Mission Schools, Correspondence, etc., A/15997, Q.S.A. Slopchest was discontinued altogether in early 1946.

<sup>128</sup> Int. 111. "'Slopchest", it's a white man's word. I give them something from the store...they sign for it...when they get their money they pay it back'.

was made to endeavour to collect outstandings'.<sup>129</sup> This comment suggested that the inspector too had no appreciation of the economic corner into which the women had been forced.

There were, however, local factors which also contributed to the negative picture of the administration of the Torres Strait Islanders' moneys during the war years. One of the jobs of the local storekeeper was to process all of the monetary transactions on the islands through a system of accounting which was time-consuming and complex, particularly for anyone who had had no training in bookkeeping. A former storekeeper talked about the system:

*In those days we had a double-entry system of bookkeeping. They had books in the branch stores but all records were sent to the Badu store; but the real ledgers were in head office and we had to allow credit sales on slopchest to all of the people on the islands and we had to get them to sign and we kept the books for that too.*<sup>130</sup>

Store work was frequently performed by someone who already had teaching responsibilities which consumed many hours of each day. Another old and experienced island teacher/storekeeper recounted an average day's work for him:

*The head told me to run it like this, eight o'clock and nine I did the store work in the morning and 9.30 I go to school. From that time to three o'clock in the afternoon I closed the store then I went to carry on the store work and I served people until they were all satisfied and then I closed, sometimes at six o'clock, and every day in the week. There were preparations of lessons for school, get ready for the store in the morning and I did my books.*<sup>131</sup>

Other stores were run by people who were totally inexperienced for the job. They were given no training or supervision and internal audits were not carried out for almost the entire war period. The incentive to work hard at the job diminished for some when they found themselves working long hours with no arrangement for payment of their wages for 'a considerable time'.<sup>132</sup> To add to these problems, during the first two years of the Pacific War there were difficulties with mail services, something the Director commented on in June 1943: 'mails are very uncertain and irregular between Brisbane and Thursday Island, even air mail letters on occasions take several weeks to

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<sup>129</sup> Report: Accounts Island Industries Badu to 31 March 1945, pp. 23-24, AUD/W146, Q.S.A.

<sup>130</sup> Int. 065.

<sup>131</sup> Int. 111.

<sup>132</sup> Director to Under Secretary, 5 September 1945, AUD/W146, Q.S.A.



(Top) The late Sam Passi and Rotana Passi, his wife, on Mer -  
wartime schoolteacher/storekeeper  
(Bottom) The Mills Sisters from Nagi (left to right, Cessa, Rita  
and Ina)

arrive'.<sup>133</sup> There is ample evidence to support the contention that the women's money line was low indeed, much lower than it should have been. Moreover, any accusation that storekeepers lacked control when it came to the amount of money the women spent on slopchest was totally unjustified. As one storekeeper's wife commented: 'Yeah, but they had to eat something'.<sup>134</sup>

Added to the problems associated with accessing child endowment and allotments, the full benefit of wages earned by Torres Strait Islander government employees in the latter part of the war was also denied families. From late 1943, some reconstruction had begun on the communities. In mid-1944, the Director recommended to the Home Secretary that the wages of the growing number of people engaged in government positions - school teachers, storekeepers, nurses and police - should be increased to provide a 'decent standard of living' on the communities.<sup>135</sup> Nevertheless, anomalies occurred in the payment of these wages while prices in the stores continued to soar.<sup>136</sup> Thus, the women's buying capacity was further restricted.

There is no doubt that the women's struggles were heightened by

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<sup>133</sup> Director of Native Affairs to Under Secretary, Department of Health and Home Affairs, 22 June 1943, Auditor General's Reports, AUD/W129, Q.S.A.

<sup>134</sup> Int. 111.

<sup>135</sup> Director of Native Affairs to Home Secretary, Department of the Home Office, 28 September 1944, p. 2, Native Affairs General, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>136</sup> Report, Accounts Protector of Islanders and Aborigines, 16 September 1943 to 30 April 1945, pp. 12-13, Auditor General's Reports, AUD/W146, Q.S.A. Examples of some of the anomalies are:

Abui (Police) - Wages shown as increased to £2.10s.0d. when appointed sergeant from 19/6/44, but credited at old rate of £1.5s.0d. to 30/11/44.

Malakan Elu (Teacher) - ex Dauan and Kubin - wages shown as increased to £4.5s.0d. month from 21/6/44, has been credited with only £2.15s.0d. per month to 30/11/44.

Mary Apia (Teacher) - shown from 1/5/43 at £3.5s.0d. month. Also appears on Mabuiag card as from 22/2/44, but has only been credited with wages to 30/9/43.

Aka Mapa (Teacher) - shown as commenced 5/6/44; nothing credited to 30/11/44.

Gana (Police) - shown commenced 26/10/43, but nothing credited to 30/11/44.

Tom Jack (Police) - paid as Constable, but is Sergeant.

Mary Apai and Tataka Bani (Teachers) - shown commenced 22/2/44, but nothing credited to 30/11/44.

Nursing Staff at all Hospitals - Wages increased from £3 to £3.10s.0d. per month from 1/9/44, but credited with only £3 to 30/11/44.

their economic circumstances during the war. In the remainder of this chapter the discussion turns to the women's resumption of paid employment to alleviate their cash flow problems, developing self-interest and council elections.

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Mainland society's pre-war expectations for thousands of middle-class women was that they would marry, leave the paid workforce and become mothers. In tune with the general view of women's roles in the society, the earliest expectations for their participation in the war effort were associated with voluntary caring-type work.<sup>137</sup> However, some women were dissatisfied: they wanted more involvement in the war effort and they formed quasi-military auxiliaries.<sup>138</sup> Their members were ridiculed for 'playing soldiers', and governments did not support their ideals until forced to do so in 1941.<sup>139</sup> The three armed forces formed women's services and women flocked to join. Again they were not without critics. An old man 'with a long beard' remonstrated with a young woman in her 'huge navy overalls...A woman in trousers', he bellowed to the delight of passers-by, 'is an abomination unto the Lord'.<sup>140</sup> By January 1942, human resources in both industry and commerce were totally inadequate for a country on the verge of invasion. Manpower regulations instituted under the Commonwealth National Security Act forced thousands of women out of their domesticity into jobs where they learnt new skills. Many 'lower class' women in poor circumstances who were in employment as domestics, factory workers, shop assistants, kitchen hands and in the clothing industry, took the opportunity to learn new skills.<sup>141</sup> A woman who had worked in a textile factory for 28s.6d. a week retrained as a welder and obtained

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<sup>137</sup> Red Cross work, canteen hostessing, knitting for the soldiers.

<sup>138</sup> Those auxiliaries included Women's Transport Corps, Women's Emergency Signalling Corps, Womens Australian National Service.

<sup>139</sup> McKernan, All In!, pp. 49-51.

<sup>140</sup> Cited in Keesing (ed.), Home Front Family Album, p. 76.

<sup>141</sup> Sol Encel, Norman Mackenzie and Margaret Tebbutt, Women and Society: An Australian Study (Melbourne, 1974), p. 18. These women were overwhelmingly employed in the 'rag trade'. In the 1938-1939 statistical year, there were 17 026 men in the clothing industry as opposed to 60 335 women (E.G. McGrath, 'The Future of Women in Industry', The Australian Quarterly, Vol. 15, No. 23, June 1943, p. 44).

a job in an aircraft factory for £6.18s.0d. a week.<sup>142</sup> Many women coming into the work-force took jobs previously barred them because of their sex and marital status; tram conductresses, taxi drivers, railway porters, ticket sellers and telephonists at police stations. And, to meet the desperate need for rural workers, privately-sponsored land armies emerged. In January 1943, a government charter gave them official status as the Australian Woman's Land Army.<sup>143</sup> One city girl who joined said she increased her skills by learning 'pruning, spraying, ploughing and handling animals'.<sup>144</sup> Munition factories gave work to a variety of women:

young girls and white-haired women and women who had lived sheltered lives, mingled with women who had only known lives of hardship and deprivation and were quite overwhelmed at the contents of their pay packets which, while not overly lucrative, were adequate to pay rent and ordinary daily needs.<sup>145</sup>

And, at all these jobs, the women were judged as 'efficient and as good as any man'. Nonetheless, at the end of the war, working women had little say about their futures. They were simply sent back to domesticity with a new directive: 'Populate or our nation will perish'.<sup>146</sup>

#### Paid employment, self-interest and council elections

Overwhelming numbers of mainland women learnt a variety of new skills and with them contributed to the fight against an enemy which was threatening their more sophisticated and materialistic lifestyle. Torres Strait Islander women needed few new skills in the fight for the survival of their semi-subsistence societies:

*Things were no different for women work-wise in the war as they had always had to do the bulk of the gardening, they had to help with building housing, they did the housework and they could make a feast and sail the dugout canoes.*<sup>147</sup>

However, their poor economic viability, forced many to resume whatever paid employment they could find even if this meant exposing

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<sup>142</sup> Carolyn Allport, 'Left off the Agenda: Women, Reconstruction and New Order Housing', Labour History, Vol. 46, May 1984, p. 18.

<sup>143</sup> Hasluck, Government and the People, p. 269.

<sup>144</sup> Cited in Keesing (ed.), Home Front Family Album, p. 188.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 36. The issue of women's wages, which were generally far below those of men in the same occupations, caused debate throughout the war.

<sup>146</sup> Anne Summers, Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonization of Women in Australia (Hammondsworth, Middlesex, 1977), pp. 414, 420.

<sup>147</sup> Interview 151, Cairns, April 1989.



themselves to enemy aircraft. They resumed collecting trochus shell from the reefs around their islands despite the dangers that posed. The overall monetary value of their wartime yield was £13 290, an impressive sum under the circumstances.<sup>148</sup> A Ugar man, who had lost his main source of income when the marine industry ceased and was forced to evacuate his home, went with his family to the mines on Moa because, as he recalled: 'They said you make a lot of money on wolfram'. It was hard work:

*Six o'clock we drank tea...walked up a big hill and I am not going to make it, and ten o'clock we got to the top of the hill. We started work and left at three o'clock and went down the hill and got home at six. We stayed for two years and the people worked hard every day until Sunday.*<sup>149</sup>

The people were constantly on the alert for enemy aircraft: 'We were working wolfram and we heard the noise of five or six planes, and we ran into the bush'.<sup>150</sup> The miners' wartime yield was 76 000 pounds.<sup>151</sup> Apart from mining and trochusing, women on all islands baked bread, washed clothes, ironed and did housework for the signallers and military visitors. One old woman said, with pride, that she made such 'nice bread' for the army men and that they nicknamed her 'Mrs. Bon Breadmaker'.<sup>152</sup> Some young women were employed as teachers, and in 1943, for the first time, Torres Strait Islander women were employed as 'nurses'.

Income from such employment was complemented by the peoples' own 'social security' system based on an obligation to share with kin. Beside serving to 'validate and maintain social relationships and roles' amongst kin, reciprocity also ensured that with the sharing of food people did not go hungry.<sup>153</sup> In traditional times the young men were instructed by their maternal uncles to work hard

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<sup>148</sup> A.R.: Accounts Director Native Affairs to 30 June 1945, Q.P.P. 1945-1946, Vol. 2, p 1077.

<sup>149</sup> Int. 028.

<sup>150</sup> Interview 070, Kubin, March 1990.

<sup>151</sup> A.R., Accounts Director of Native Affairs to 30 June 1946, Q.P.P. 1946, Vol. 2, p. 1040. A post-war amendment to the Torres Strait Islanders Act allowed for the payment of Board profits to certain sections of the people rather than the whole community of Torres Strait Islanders. As the provision was made retrospective, it resulted in a distribution to the people who had actually mined wolfram during the war of a profit of £1169 (Peel, Isles of the Torres Strait, p. 113).

<sup>152</sup> Int. 107.

<sup>153</sup> B. Nietschmann and J. Nietschmann, 'Good Dugong, Bad Dugong; Bad Turtle, Good Turtle', Natural History, N.Y., Vol. 90, No. 5, 1981, p. 62.



and get plenty of fish for their extended families. After a dugong hunt, the meat was apportioned out to those entitled to receive it.<sup>154</sup> First responsibility was to nearest kin, to mothers and fathers: 'Look after mother and father, never mind if you and your wife have to go without', the young men were told.<sup>155</sup> A Saibai woman described the custom:

*we have got that sharing thing really strong, that is we always distribute little bits to everybody....people just helping each other - everyone put their heads together, stay together, eat together and share.*<sup>156</sup>

This was a world that was not dependent on buying and selling: it was giving and receiving that mattered.<sup>157</sup> During the war, the custom was extended and people shared with other than kin: 'Instead of sharing with [kin] we shared out with all villages, all houses'.<sup>158</sup> Thus, a former Yam Island storekeeper was able to say:

*The only thing that I appreciate about our people at that time they were never greedy. If I had nothing and I asked you for something you always shared. That was one good thing...it helped our people to survive because they were never greedy. Even when they got fish, turtle, they just shared it with everybody. Because we could share we survived. If you shared with somebody that person would share with you.*<sup>159</sup>

Palmer, the white priest who went to Torres Strait after the war, suggested 'no woman would be left to fend for herself if her husband had enlisted [because] the family and clan systems were such that [each island] was a single integrated and inter-dependent community'.<sup>160</sup> However, this did not prove to be the case on St. Paul's and, it was suggested by the army, on other communities in late 1943.

In late 1943, army reports indicated that individualism on St. Paul's was causing distress for the army wives. Information given to an army officer suggested that the TSLI men's families were not being helped by the rest of the community: 'the crops...of the miners and Home men flourish at the expense of those belonging to the soldiers'. Moreover, it was claimed that the wolfram miners were being 'extravagantly privileged' in the distribution of rations from the

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<sup>154</sup> G. Passi, Knowledge, Education and Self-Management, p. 37.

<sup>155</sup> Cited in Haddon, Reports, Vol. 5, p. 210.

<sup>156</sup> Int. 054.

<sup>157</sup> See Sharp, Torres Strait Islands, pp. 38-46.

<sup>158</sup> Int. 056.

<sup>159</sup> Int. 053.

<sup>160</sup> Palmer, Women on Thursday Island during World War Two, 19 March 1991.

village store when a store had been set up at the mine site exclusively for them.<sup>161</sup> A St. Paul's man made it clear that sharing had been practised amongst his people: *'We got fish and what we got we shared...My father was a good turtle spearer and we shared out with the village'*.<sup>162</sup> Therefore, the TSLI men's belief that the men at home would look out for their wives was not without foundation. This self-interest which it was said produced 'a crop of Army Wives [versus] the Councillors and the Rest', was thought to have been imported from Mer and Erub. Thus, it was not confined to St. Paul's.<sup>163</sup> In the light of the people's claims that they survived because they were willing to share, it is difficult to understand what caused the breakdown. Hall suggested that whereas the soldiers normally would have been able to rely on community support for their wives, the removal of the very large number of men from each village for such an unprecedented time, was bound to give rise to more self-interest than was the custom amongst them.<sup>164</sup> Self-interest, or individualism, however, is fostered in the western capitalist system. On the mainland during the war its darker side too was demonstrated by the existence of thriving black-markets. Those who had the money could always get what they wanted. In the latter part of the war, the miners on Moa were earning better money than the TSLI men and they probably wanted to give their families more after the period of severest austerity which had existed during 1942 and most of 1943.<sup>165</sup>

Other social problems were reported to the army. Marou, the Chief Councillor on Mer, was accused of beating woman with whom he had quarrelled over a land boundary when he tried to fence off part of her husband's land. Curtis reported a dispute when a Badu soldier, separated from his wife for fifteen years, refused to let her transfer a house owned by his mother to Yam. Two men from Poid were granted leave to give evidence of their wives' immorality before

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<sup>161</sup> This did not negate the women's claim that there was no store at the mine site. This incident occurred in late 1943 and it is doubtful that a store was established there during the first eighteen months of the war.

<sup>162</sup> Int. 116.

<sup>163</sup> Complaint: Q85066 Pte. N. Namok and Q85076 Pte. C. Ware, 30 October 1943, Written Records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra); Minutes: Conference AAG First Aust. Army and ors., n.d., AWM54, 628/1/1, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>164</sup> Hall, Black Diggers, p. 43.

<sup>165</sup> Minutes: Conference AAG and ors., n.d., AWM54, 628/1/1, A.W.M. (Canberra).

the island court which had previously tried the women with two others but no convictions were recorded because of lack of evidence.<sup>166</sup> Trouble arose on St. Paul's when the community became divided on whether it should remain under the control of the Church or come under the Act, like all of the other outer island communities.<sup>167</sup>

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By late 1943, the TSLI men were concerned about the long-overdue triennial council elections.<sup>168</sup> Some men saw themselves as able to give strong and decisive leadership because of their army discipline. It was time for a new order of things: the civil councillors 'tended to represent the old order, the Protector and the paternalistic Queensland government'. Council elections were important to all Torres Strait Islanders because of their long struggle to regain their local autonomy and they did not want even a war to interrupt their political gains. Earlier, Colonel Langford, who had gained the people's confidence when he 'displaced and discredited' the Protector, had appointed chief councillors on some communities who he believed would be strong wartime leaders of the women. Mareko on Saibai was one. On his appointment, Langford emphasised that the women's gardens had to be maintained at a high level to offset their dependence upon store goods.<sup>169</sup> However, in December 1943 army observers reported that the gardens were being neglected and the women were almost entirely dependent on the store for their supplies.<sup>170</sup> Grievances had mounted amongst the women against Mareko and when the men came home on leave they wanted an election so that Mareko could be ousted.<sup>171</sup> Conversely, on Dauan, another Langford appointee, Private Wellington Aragu, had the people

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<sup>166</sup> Notes for leave recommendations, 22 November 1943, Written Records 1939-1945 war, AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>167</sup> Report: St. Paul's Mission, Moa Island, n.d., Written Records 1939-45 war, AWM54, Report on Saibai Island, Leave Personnel, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>168</sup> Island elections were held triennially (Sec. (10)(i) of the Torres Strait Islanders Act). An election had been held in 1939 which meant the next election should have taken place in 1942.

<sup>169</sup> Hall, Black Diggers, p. 43.

<sup>170</sup> Report: Army intelligence for week ending 5 December 1943, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>171</sup> Report: Sibai [sic] Island Leave Personnels [sic] Request for Replacement of Chief Councillor, 3 November 1943, pp. 1-2, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra); Hall, Black Diggers, p. 44.

'working well in the gardens and building houses of enlisted Islanders': the men, the report continued, were 'content to return to Camp, knowing full well that their interests [were] being looked after'.<sup>172</sup> However, by December 1943, the TSLI men from all communities saw the situation as desperate.<sup>173</sup> They persistently enquired when the elections would take place. Would they be eligible to vote? Were they going to be allowed to nominate for office? Because the latter two questions were not answered when early elections were held on the Anglican Mission of St. Paul's, the TSLI men from there had no opportunity to vote or to stand for office. This had concerned them greatly because there was a faction in the community which tended 'to swing toward government control'. The soldiers were totally opposed to a change which would bring their community under the control of the Director of Native Affairs.<sup>174</sup> They would have known that many of the TSLI men from communities under the Department's control had enlisted in anticipation of an end to that control after the war.

Langford finally realised he would lose the confidence of the people if he did not set a date for the elections. When elections were finally held on 24 July 1944, the TSLI men were allowed to vote and stand for office.<sup>175</sup> Marou, the man respected by so many for his strong leadership on Mer, his vision for the freedom of Torres Strait Islander people and his ability to liaise with Langford and his officers, was not amongst the newly-elected councillors. He had been dismissed from office shortly before because of the violent quarrel previously mentioned.<sup>176</sup> Mareko lost his place as Chief Councillor on Saibai. Loss of the women's support undoubtedly influenced that result. Nevertheless, Langford, probably felt satisfied with the overall results as many of the new councillors were men with army discipline and he thought it was men of this calibre who would see that the women worked harder in their gardens.

Langford, who the people had welcomed as the Protector's

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<sup>172</sup> Report: Army Intelligence for week ending 5 December 1943, AWM54, 528/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>173</sup> Report: Army Intelligence for week ending 26 December 1943, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>174</sup> Report: St. Paul's Mission, Moa Island, n.d., AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>175</sup> Hall, Black Diggers, p. 53.

<sup>176</sup> Notes for leave recommendations, 22 November 1943, AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra).

replacement, proved to be no less paternalistic particularly of the women whom he judged on the basis of his officers' observations after brief visits to the communities. None of the outsiders had a realistic understanding of what gardening on the outer island communities entailed nor could they adequately comprehend the problems associated with the women's total environment during the war years. Moreover, the comments of the white officers who reported on the newly elected councillors, reflected their own officer-class mentality, which was also rampantly paternalistic. The new councillors on Saibai were said to be 'a good young team, imbued with a desire to take back to the Island all the useful knowledge they...acquired in the army'. Aragu retained the chairmanship on Dauan. He and the other two members of the council were seen as having 'drive and initiative...very health conscious'. Three soldiers, 'an extremely professional triumvirate' with 'good army training' were elected on Ugar. On only two communities were the elected councillors, some TSLI men, seen by the outsiders in a negative light.<sup>177</sup> Most of the newly elected councillors were younger TSLI men. In that respect the 1944 elections broke from the custom in Torres Strait Islander politics whereby older men took the leadership positions.

Unfortunately, many of the foregoing events and circumstances, as important as they were to the women then, were not recalled by them. By recourse to archival texts, paradoxes in the historical insights became apparent. However, as discussed in Chapter two, these must be seen as unavoidable in the writing of any history: they are what make history what it is - representations of the past.<sup>178</sup> They demonstrate the ways in which the world is viewed through the discourses of the different groups.

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An outcome of the Pacific War for the Torres Strait Islanders was that they began to understand even more clearly the extent of change necessary in western institutions on the island communities, particularly education and health care, if they were to come anywhere

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<sup>177</sup> Reports: Compiled by army survey teams on all communities, 12-30 August 1944, Native Affairs, Thursday Island, TR1227, Health Conditions Torres Strait District, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>178</sup> Ankersmit, 'Historiography and Postmodernism', pp. 142-143.

near equality with Whites after the war. In the next two chapters a review of the history of these institutions and the women's wartime roles in them are discussed.

## Chapter nine Toward a proper education

Schools reflect society's intention to maintain the present unequal distribution of status and power.<sup>1</sup>

In previous chapters, the inquiry looked at how Torres Strait Islander women perceived their situation as it directly related to the war. They told of the adjustments they made once it had become apparent that they would not be evacuated, how they reacted to the men's enlistment, of their fears and faith, the hardships they encountered day to day and their economic situation. Early in 1942, the women were also faced with the problem of how to continue the children's schooling. However, without some understanding of the history of schooling in Torres Strait, the war's impact on the people's long struggle for a better educational standard and the women's attempts to continue some sort of schooling for their children cannot be appreciated.

In the hierarchical capitalist system of schooling which had evolved on mainland Australia before World War Two, 'social inequality was hardly a problem: it was built into the system from the start'.<sup>2</sup> Education promoted the aspirations of the advantaged while ensuring that large numbers of working-class people were available to meet the needs of a developing industrial society.<sup>3</sup> A school syllabus for Aboriginal children was also designed to 'meet the needs of the Industrial classes'.<sup>4</sup> The education curriculum for Torres Strait Islander children was similarly politically and economically oriented. A large pool of low-paid labour was essential

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<sup>1</sup> T.R. Fitzgerald from his report on the investigation of poverty and education on mainland Australia cited in R.W. Connell, V.M. White and K.M. Johnston (eds), 'Running Twice as Hard': The Disadvantaged Schools Program in Australia (Geelong, 1991), p. 274.

<sup>2</sup> R.W. Connell, D.J. Ashenden, S. Kessler and G.W. Dowsett (eds), Making the Difference: Schools, Families and Social Division (Sydney, 1982), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> An elderly Townsville woman, whose working-class parents were educated to what was 'equivalent to grade four', said that a tertiary education was 'not something you thought about...it was purely economics, our parents couldn't afford it' (Viv Robson, Audiotaped interview, Townsville, 1989). A South Australian woman recalled that 'you had to come from moneyed families to go to university' (Audrey Elliot, Audiotaped interview, Townsville, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Attwood, A Life Together, p. 7.

to work the pearl-shell and beche-de-mer beds in Torres Strait, both lucrative industries for white entrepreneurs and the Queensland government. Thus, for fifty years prior to the Pacific War, the low standard of education received by Torres Strait Islanders was one means of guaranteeing a substantial labour force for those industries.

Increasingly, however, the people realised that their low standard of education was frustrating their growing aspirations for more equality with the white Australian society. The 1936 Maritime Strike was the Torres Strait Islanders' first attempt, as a cohesive group, to bring their grievances before an outside audience. The Pacific War gave them the next opportunity. One of their grievances on both occasions was their desire for better education for their children. However, it was probably not until the TSLI men rubbed shoulders with white soldiers that they began to understand more fully what that better education entailed. Consequently, in 1944 the councillors 'pressed [the government] strongly for [an] increased standard of education in their schools, with a minimum standard at passing out of Leaving Certificate or State Senior Public Examination'.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the women left on their isolated communities in early 1942 would have had no understanding of these standards. Nevertheless, they knew from their own lives, and their men's, the limitations their schooling had placed on them as a group of people, and their aspirations were for something better after the war.

#### Island children in the school room

By the time the Pacific War broke out, western education was seen as the pivotal point in the Torres Strait Islanders' quest for equality with white Australians.<sup>6</sup> They had progressed to this way of thinking over a period of about fifty years. Traditional education had been very different. Children then were taught their cultural heritage by parents, older relatives and other members of the tribe. The future of the community depended on the 'perpetuation and

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<sup>5</sup> Minutes: Conference AAG and others, n.d., AWM54, 628/1/1, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>6</sup> Torres Strait Islanders clung to much of their traditional learning. It contributed to their identity and it meant survival for them even after their colonisation.



understanding of the laws and values inherited from the past'.<sup>7</sup> By observation, participation, experimentation and verbal explanation, in informal and formal settings, the old people's uses of and respect for the environment were passed down to the children.<sup>8</sup> A Badu man recalled that *'by learning from the environment...in time [the child] would give in return his learning back to his community in the sense of building up the Torres Strait Islands'*.<sup>9</sup> However, after 1871 until the Pacific War broke out, traditional education of the children co-existed with the western system first introduced by the L.M.S. missionary teachers.

As already discussed, traditional Torres Strait Islanders adopted new ways if they saw them as beneficial. After 1871, community after community relatively rapidly accepted the Christian religion.<sup>10</sup> Beckett suggests that the Torres Strait Islanders initially may have seen Christianity as just another cult but one which promised 'unprecedented power and wealth'.<sup>11</sup> The new, however, was associated with the social and economic standards of the British progressive way of life. A western education was integral to that way of life. Thus, by their initial acceptance of Christianity, the Torres Strait Islanders also accepted the outsiders' system of education. Once their children were drawn into the school system, the people no longer had absolute control over what they were taught.

Initially, it seemed parents were reticent to allow any interference with their children's traditional ways of learning.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the new knowledge was probably seen as more appropriately repositied with the males. The L.M.S. phase of western education included the establishment of a religious seminary on Mer in 1879. An old man recalled that his father who had attended the institution *'read the Bible, Language Bible, English one...They had good training...many things he could do I can't'*.<sup>13</sup> The young men in this institution were trained for missionary service in Torres Strait

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<sup>7</sup> Langbridge, *Enculturation to Evangelization*, p. 8.  
<sup>8</sup> G. Passi, *Knowledge, Education and Self-Management*, pp. 61-62.  
<sup>9</sup> Badu Islander, *Early History Workshop*, March 1987.  
<sup>10</sup> Langbridge, *Enculturation to Evangelization*, p. 59.  
<sup>11</sup> Beckett, *custom and colonialism*, p. 40.  
<sup>12</sup> Langbridge, *Enculturation to Evangelization*, pp. 123, 72.  
<sup>13</sup> Sharp, *Springs of Originality*, Vol. 2, p. B28. Parts of the Bible were translated by the South Sea missionary teachers into the vernacular.

and also Papua.<sup>14</sup> Some other young men and their wives or fiances took secular and religious subjects at an Industrial School, also on Mer, established in 1883. Both institutions closed in 1889 and within three years the Queensland government began to take responsibility for the growing number of school children in Torres Strait. The first stage of western education had had its roots in religious ideals. It was seen by the L.M.S. missionaries as vital for the development of 'civilised' Christian societies. The second phase had a very different focus. It was under State Government control and was concerned with educating the Torres Strait Islanders to a standard commensurate with their employment in the marine industry and segregated village life.

By 1890, many outer island children were receiving a western education. Indeed, John Douglas was so impressed with the children on Mer that he called for the Queensland government to provide the school with an English-speaking teacher.<sup>15</sup> The appointment of the first white teacher, John Bruce, in 1892, heralded the demise of the missionary teachers' control over secular education.<sup>16</sup> By 1899, there were government schools on Badu, Erub, Mabuia, Saibai and Masig.<sup>17</sup> School attendance was made compulsory for children between the ages of five and sixteen years.<sup>18</sup> Fines and imprisonment of parents and guardians were provided where children did not attend.

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<sup>14</sup> From the outset, Torres Strait was a stepping stone into Papua for the L.M.S. (Langbridge, *Enculturation to Evangelization*, p. 31).

<sup>15</sup> Report: Government Resident Thursday Island, June 1891, Q.V.& P. 1891, Vol. 4, pp. 1421-1422. While Meriam children were subsequently compared favourably with children in 'Provisional Schools' in Queensland, these children too suffered from their isolation. Their schools were funded by parents: 'the standard of teaching was low...Teachers were...unclassified... required only a fourth grade...and six weeks' practical training' (cited in Williamson, *Schooling the Torres Strait Islander*, p. 123).

<sup>16</sup> John Bruce came to Mer with his father and brothers in 1881 to work in the marine industry. He had been a 'pupil teacher' for one term only in Scotland. Nevertheless, Douglas was satisfied that Bruce could do the job. He taught on Mer for almost thirty years and after his death his ashes were returned to the Island (Haddon, Reports, Vol. 1, p. 100).

<sup>17</sup> Langbridge, *Enculturation to Evangelization*, p. 46.

<sup>18</sup> In the early 1890s, Douglas made education compulsory for children from six to twelve years (Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 89).

'Wilful truants' could be whipped.<sup>19</sup> Thus began five decades of a paternalistic system of government schooling in Torres Strait. However, as will be shown, by the time of the Pacific War the people had become thoroughly disgruntled with the educational standards their children could achieve.

Much of this discontent can be attributed to the thinking of the Protector's succession of higher officers in Brisbane. Most of these government men believed that indigenous Australians were inferior to Whites and incapable of managing their own affairs. They certainly had no vision for Torres Strait Islanders beyond their home islands. With these attitudes it was easy to conclude after Douglas's death in 1904 that the island people could not profit from 'higher learning'.<sup>20</sup> Chief Protector J.W. Bleakley described them as a 'race apart' which should develop separately from the white Australian community. Moreover, he was convinced that it would be futile to try to extend their employment opportunities beyond 'boat' and 'shore' work.<sup>21</sup> There is little doubt that his thinking was directed toward the need for a large pool of cheap labour in Torres Strait. Moreover, in line with the nation's White Australia Policy, still firmly in place in the 1930s, the maintenance of a white Australian monoculture on the mainland was further assured.<sup>22</sup> One school inspector who had been forewarned that there was a difference between the 'Aboriginal [Torres Strait Islander]' and European mentality and that the curriculum had been designed for their 'native circumstances', was disturbed by what he saw. His reaction was that the children were being taught to a grade three level only in State schools and that no serious attempt was being made to educate them.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the politics of education in Torres Strait did not change, nor did the standard of education.

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<sup>19</sup> Williamson, *Schooling the Torres Strait Islander*, pp. 147-148.

<sup>20</sup> A.R., C.P.A. 1912, Q.P.P. 1913, Vol. 3, p. 1091; see also Barry Osborne, 'Education in Torres Strait: Past, Present and Future', in Loos and Osanai (eds), Indigenous Minorities, pp. 222-236.

<sup>21</sup> Bleakley, Aborigines of Australia, p. 299.

<sup>22</sup> The Aborigines on the mainland were also kept as invisible as possible to the majority of white Australians.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Williamson, *Schooling the Torres Strait Islander*, pp. 124, 154.

'The mark'

The curriculum was basically the 3Rs. Depending on the teacher's motivation geography, history, drawing or singing might be taught. A Badu woman recalled that Mrs. Zahl taught the girls to 'dressmake' and 'count money', with which skills they might gain employment in the store: 'She was concerned and she taught us good'.<sup>24</sup> Several women remembered that they learnt lace-making. Boys did woodwork and gardening. A Badu man recalled that his father taught gardening.<sup>25</sup> Apart from gardening, none of the content in subjects like history and geography, if they were taught, related to the children's own culture and area. For a few years after 1928, there was an attempt to capture the children's interest in reading by the introduction of a more culturally relevant reader.<sup>26</sup> However, all instruction was in English, which was a second, or even third language, for island children. While the L.M.S. missionary teachers had had limited abilities with which to give the children a broad western education, they did, whether by chance or not, realise the futility of teaching them in English.<sup>27</sup> With their white government teachers Torres Strait Islander children had to acquire the new knowledge through a foreign filter. This also mitigated against their chances of a better grasp of even a basic western education.

Torres Strait Islanders had no way of knowing what standards of education were taught to mainland children. Nonetheless, they became aware that 'the mark', or a ceiling, had been put on the level of their schooling:

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<sup>24</sup> Int. 066.

<sup>25</sup> Int. 097. By 1934, there were school gardens on all islands (A.R., Aboriginals Department for year ended 31 December 1934, Q.P.P. 1935, Vol. 1, p. 987).

<sup>26</sup> The Torres Strait Reader was published which 'modified personal and place names', for example, 'the three billy goats gruff lived on Waiben [Thursday] Island'. It contained island legends. The reader was subsequently replaced by the standard Queensland reader (see Kenneth Orr and Alan Williamson, Education in the Torres Strait: Perspectives for Development (Canberra, 1973), pp. 11-12).

<sup>27</sup> In 1948, a controlled experiment in the use of the vernacular was undertaken in the Philippines and there were positive results. Bilingual education was also proved successful in the 1960s in Mexico. In 1970, a Queensland Government inspector found that children on St. Paul's who were taught in Pidgin (Torres Strait Creole) were the best readers in the islands by grade four (Orr and Williamson, Education in Torres Strait, pp. 20-21).

well we follow the rule of the book - the syllabus. Now we got to stop there - can't go over. Whoever made that syllabus knows the reason why we stop then. Baba [father/teacher] he said that they don't want to give you a good education. They don't want you to become like white people. But baba said we got the mark in every school in Torres Strait. We can only learn that much.<sup>28</sup>

A Badu man's interpretation of that time was:

The teaching was very bad because we only went up to grade five and we didn't know that the teachers only taught up to grade five because the government said they couldn't go over grade five and if they do they will be sacked, so when we reached grade five we would have to leave school.<sup>29</sup>

A ceiling on education also existed for primary education on St. Paul's, even though the teachers there were Anglican missionaries and not answerable to the Protector in a direct way.<sup>30</sup> A former pupil recalled: 'You got no proper school. When you come to grade four when you are fifteen or sixteen you leave school and go on the boats or in the garden'.<sup>31</sup> Another remembered: 'We went to school as far as grade seven but not a lot was taught to us....Most of the time we'd spend doing work for the priest. Our parents always had bad feelings, but they couldn't do anything about it'.<sup>32</sup> The educational standard for the children from the Catholic community of Nagi was the same. Until the end of 1941, they were boarders at the Convent School on Thursday Island. According to a former student: 'We came out of school in fifth grade. That was all, that was the end of our school'.<sup>33</sup> Racist thinking about education was certainly not confined to Torres Strait Islanders on the outer islands or the Anglican and Catholic Churches. As a consequence of white agitation on Thursday Island, a separate school was set up in 1913 for mixed-race children of Torres Strait Islander descent. Here they were also 'only allowed to go to grade four'. They were told they did not have 'the brains' to go further: 'That was it, you had to leave school

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<sup>28</sup> Cited in Williamson, Schooling the Torres Strait Islander, pp. 197-198,

<sup>29</sup> Badu Islander, Early History Workshop, March 1987.

<sup>30</sup> According to a Torres Strait Islander leader, the government put money into the community and therefore it had a say in its operation (Int. 065).

<sup>31</sup> Int. 117.

<sup>32</sup> St. Paul's man, Early History Workshop, March 1987. In the testimonies it was suggested that grade five and even grade seven levels were reached but as will be discussed it was, more realistically, a grade four or even three level in State primary schools.

<sup>33</sup> Int. 069.

because of your colour. We weren't allowed to sit for scholarship'.<sup>34</sup> It is difficult to conclude from the evidence exactly what grade level could be reached by all of these children before the war. In both the written texts in the 1920s and the contemporary testimonies, the evidence is contradictory. There is no doubt, however, that the level of education was far below that taught in mainland primary schools. However, even more important than the precise grade levels reached were the people's present recollections of a system which did not give their children the opportunity to attain greater educational equality with white Australian children.

Some attention was paid to the problems of education in Torres Strait in the late 1920s, of which The Torres Strait Reader was an example. But, these reforms were still based on the old premise that there was no need to prepare Torres Strait Islander children for a life away from Torres Strait. However, the testimonies of a few old people indicated there were white government teachers who tried to lift the standards for some pupils and also adults who wanted more education. An old leader, known around the Strait as 'McIntosh Murray's boy', recalled:

*I went to fifth grade. I did training with the white teacher, McIntosh Murray. I learnt good English from that principal...and I grew up most of the time living with him. That's the way I get all my knowledge and understanding from him and he taught me how to go about school and business.*<sup>35</sup>

A. Cairns and G. Agnew gave night classes on Mer and Mabuiag.<sup>36</sup> A Meriam man remembered that that was the start of his career in teaching: 'I went to night lessons and the teacher gave me a few questions from the Bible, asked me what I knew. Then Mr. Agnew...called me in to teach'.<sup>37</sup>

From the mid-1930s, Charlie Turner, P.J. Frith and A.O.C.

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<sup>34</sup> Osborne, *Forgotten Evacuation*, p. 16. Japanese children were allowed to complete their primary education at the school for white children on Thursday Island (Interview 027, Thursday Island, April 1990). They were seen as higher on the 'scale of civilisation' by Whites (Interview 003, Thursday Island, February 1990).

<sup>35</sup> Int. 053.

<sup>36</sup> None of the women mentioned going to these night classes but that is understandable as it was unlikely parents would let their girls out at night.

<sup>37</sup> Int. 107.

Davies refused to be bound by 'the mark'.<sup>38</sup> On Erub, Turner discarded the syllabus, which he described as 'simple as A B C', and he taught subjects 'the same as in white schools down south'. Philip Frith raised the standard of arithmetic and English in his classes.<sup>39</sup> Amongst a people who were anxious to gain equality with the Whites, there was great respect for Turner and Frith: '*These two gentlemen were working very, very hard trying to get children educated...get the same sort of knowledge that the white children get*'.<sup>40</sup> The Anglican Church made an attempt to redress, for brighter students, the low standard of education delivered in Torres Strait. A high school was opened in 1931 on St. Paul's for boys and girls from any community. However, many parents were unable to afford the 7s.6d. a week for their girls to stay in the Church hostel, and private accommodation for the boys was difficult to arrange. Especially promising children might receive bursaries from the supporters of the Anglican Australian Board of Missions.<sup>41</sup> A Meriam woman recalled that in 1941, beside herself, there were '*two girls from Saibai, two from Poid, one from Mabuiag*' in the high school.<sup>42</sup> Apart from the cost of the hostel, mothers did not like to let their girls go away. They were important helpers in the home and garden. Mothers also feared what might happen to their girls. A Meriam woman recalled: '*I finished schooling...eighth grade doing fourth grade work. I was going to go to St. Paul's but mum wouldn't let me. She thought I might run away with boys. She wouldn't sign the papers*'.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, students considered by the people to have been educationally privileged, had little hope of reaching even the primary school standard of working-class children on the mainland.

### The teachers

Another factor which contributed to the lower standard of schooling in outer Torres Strait was the type of teachers recruited by the government officers in Brisbane. These officers had no

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<sup>38</sup> A.O.C. Davies was named in a personal communication with a Meriam woman in Cairns in December 1994.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Williamson, *Schooling the Torres Strait Islander*, p. 201.

<sup>40</sup> Ben Nona, Audiotape, Oral History Unit, History Department, James Cook University, Townsville.

<sup>41</sup> C. Coral, 'Educational Progress in Torres Strait', *The Queensland Annual*, No. 7, 7 November 1932, p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> Int. 085.

<sup>43</sup> Int. 160.

expertise for selecting teachers.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, well-qualified teachers rarely opted to teach in Torres Strait. On the Department's inadequate budget as a sub-department of the Department of Health and Home Affairs, or its predecessors (see Appendix 1), teacher wages were low and bi-annual leave was minimally funded. Few teachers wanted to go to such a remote location. So, appointments of poorly-qualified teachers and frequently those totally unsuited to the Torres Strait lifestyle were not uncommon. The people measured the effectiveness of teachers not by their academic achievements but by their longevity in Torres Strait, extra help and what they saw as a teacher's vision for Torres Strait education. Authoritarian discipline, too, seemed to be an attribute of a good teacher.<sup>45</sup> Thus Ethel Zahl, who taught for thirty years in Torres Strait, still commands the respect of former pupils:<sup>46</sup> *'She lived here forever...we called her aka tissa, grandmother teacher'*.<sup>47</sup> She was a *'real good teacher, but hard too...She got a bamboo and she put our head against the wall and belt us'*.<sup>48</sup> Charlie Turner did not go to Torres Strait in 1936 highly recommended. He had been under threat of dismissal on the mainland. Yet recollections of him were that he was a *'good teacher who carried out the discipline...He tried to put us in a good position'*.<sup>49</sup> Philip Frith is remembered as a visionary because of his work at the Mabuiag Teachers' Training College.<sup>50</sup> He gave his students new visual experiences:

*We did one year's training. Mr. Frith was the only teacher. There was one big room,...he made little tables*

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<sup>44</sup> White children's education was under the Queensland Department of Public Instruction.

<sup>45</sup> Torres Strait Islanders had no way of knowing that corporal punishment was also used in mainland schools. Indeed, it is only in recent years that it has been abolished in some schools. However, there is no suggestion that the outer island people were opposed to the use of discipline; they seemed to see white people's discipline as important. During the war, army discipline was a topic for discussion: *'The discipline of the army, we really need that to understand'* (Int. 144); *'When we join the army we don't know anything...the army taught us discipline'* (Int. 073); *'It was the talk of the islands, about the army life of discipline...that's one word that rings out loud and clear to Torres Strait, army discipline...when the men talked about it everyone listened'* (Int. 065).

<sup>46</sup> Ethel Zahl was past retirement age when she was evacuated in 1942 and she did not return to Torres Strait.

<sup>47</sup> Int. 098.

<sup>48</sup> Int. 066.

<sup>49</sup> Int. 078.

<sup>50</sup> See subsequent discussion of the Mabuiag Teachers' Training College.





(Top) Mrs. Ethel Zahl, school teacher in Torres Strait for thirty years  
(Bottom) Mrs. Zahl's house on Badu

and put everything there and he showed us things like animals, trains, boats. He had little models of them.<sup>51</sup>

The present recollections of the old people gave no indication that they blamed any of their white teachers for the imposition of 'the mark' on the standard set for their education.

The number of white teachers recruited for Torres Strait was inadequate to staff all of the community schools. Schooling in Torres Strait became increasingly dependent upon the assistance of young untrained island people with the standard of education just described. In spite of such minimal education some of these teachers were acknowledged by the government as good teachers. In 1916, Aragu, the teacher on Purma who conducted the school without supervision for a year, was singled out by the Protector as 'worthy of praise'.<sup>52</sup> In 1934, Jomen Tamwoy 'earned great praise' from the inspector for his conduct of the school on Mabuiag.<sup>53</sup> Until 1934, however, these island teachers were virtually thrown unprepared into the classroom:

*Mr. Agnew told me to be a teacher...I was twelve years old when I became a teacher [1926]. I had a class of big boys. I had finished grade seven. I was top scholar so he gave me a class...The boys were older than me. Oh yes, they were naughty. I reported it to Mr. Agnew and he gave them a hiding.*<sup>54</sup>

White teachers generally gave their island teachers some on-the-job training: 'How you did it', Jomen Tamwoy's daughter said, 'was like my father, you got experience'. The white teacher taught him 'how to do books and everything and had him as a monitor and he became the assistant teacher and when he got married he was appointed as the teacher'.<sup>55</sup> Sometimes students were asked to help other students: 'I was top kid in class from the day I went to school...I showed all the kids in lesser grades how to write'.<sup>56</sup> There were, however, different perceptions amongst the people about these teachers:

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<sup>51</sup> Int. 093. In 1911, the teacher on Saibai commented: 'As we are so isolated, and very rarely see people...the children have not a fair opportunity to gain much knowledge of facts beyond their own island affairs, what knowledge they possess is gained by hearsay and not by direct contact of things concerned' (A.R., C.P.A. 1911, Q.P.P. 1912, Vol. 3, p. 1011).

<sup>52</sup> A.R., C.P.A. 1916, Q.P.P. 1917, Vol. 3, p. 1003.

<sup>53</sup> A.R., Aboriginals Department for year ended 30 June 1934, Q.P.P. 1935, Vol. 1, p. 987.

<sup>54</sup> Int. 106. In the context of the inspector's report for 1924, she may have reached about a third grade standard for a State school.

<sup>55</sup> Interview 158, Townsville, June 1991.

<sup>56</sup> Int. 065.

'sometimes they talked to us in broken English, they made us understand better and we came to the knowledge'.<sup>57</sup> Conversely, they were seen as 'gammon' [fake]:

*All these little islands had all coloured teachers, they had only a little bit to teach you. I was in school with coloured teachers. We had 35/40 children and taught us only how to write 1,2,3,4 and to read books like a monkey.*<sup>58</sup>

By 1930, the government was forced to do something about lifting the standards of the rapidly increasing number of untrained Torres Strait Islander monitors and teachers in the schools. The Mabuiag Teachers' Training College was instituted in response to this situation. Initially, the people had inhibitions about this higher training because it meant young people who probably had never been far from their home islands would have to go to Mabuiag: 'No island woman will let her kids out of her sight, or go a long way away at such a young age', a Meriam man explained. Moreover, there was 'talk of sorcery' on Mabuiag.<sup>59</sup> However, for those who did go to the college, it was an enriching experience: Mr. Frith 'showed us where we can get knowledge because we don't realise that much at that time'.<sup>60</sup> The college also offered in-service training. An old woman recalled:

*We once went to a seminar on Mabuiag in Mr. Frith's time, that was everybody from all the islands, all the teachers. We had to go out the front and we had to talk and tell the other teachers where we were from and that, and I liked that.*<sup>61</sup>

Under Frith's instruction, and later Turner's, those who went to the Mabuiag college were certainly better equipped to teach than before. However, what these island teachers did not understand was that their knowledge was being deprecated by the omission of Torres Strait Islander culture from the curriculum. If it had been included in a meaningful way and the children had been taught in their first language, some children would undoubtedly have achieved higher standards and a greater confidence in their own identity when they

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<sup>57</sup> Cited in Sharp, *Springs of Originality*, Vol. 2, p. B76. On inspection in 1941, the teaching abilities of eight teachers on Saibai and six on Badu ranged from fair to very fair (Reports: Inspector of Schools 1941, Mission Schools, A/15999, 30648, 30656, Q.S.A.).

<sup>58</sup> Int. 028.

<sup>59</sup> Sharp, *Springs of Originality*, Vol. 2, p. B116.

<sup>60</sup> Int. 093. Charlie Turner took over from Philip Frith just before the Pacific War broke out.

<sup>61</sup> Int. 096.

interacted with white Australians.<sup>62</sup>

The archival evidence and present testimonies of the people clearly indicate that by the outbreak of the Pacific War they were completely dissatisfied with the standard of education their children were receiving. However, what their opportunities in the wider Australian society may have been if they had had a more equivalent education to that taught in mainland schools can only be speculated upon. A white working-class man who went to a mainland school in the 1920s recalled: 'The schools of those days didn't educate children. They merely existed to keep kids of the workers occupied and not stealing from the barons of industry...state school education...was no sort of education at all'.<sup>63</sup> Class, like race, generally determined how far a child progressed at school and her or his employment opportunities.

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#### The effects of 'the mark'

A big issue in the 1936 Maritime Strike had been the government's control of the people's money and their lack of understanding of book-keeping. For years they had wanted an education which would enable them to know *'how much they could get for trochus shell so that the Protector wouldn't be able to bluff them'*.<sup>64</sup> They attributed their inability to challenge the Protector, or any white person for that matter, to their low standard of education: *'We had no education to check the scales, we knew no arithmetic, subtraction, addition. If we brought up 5 or 7 tons and the price was, say £155 per ton, we might get, oh, £5 or £6? Just pocket money'*.<sup>65</sup> These things led the Torres Strait Islanders at the time of the Maritime Strike to make it clear to their colonial masters they wanted their children educated 'to the stage at which

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<sup>62</sup> See M.F.P. Young, 'An approach to the study of curricula as socially organised knowledge', in M.F.D. Young (ed.), Knowledge and Control: New Directions for the Sociology of Education (London, 1971), pp. 19-46 for a critical examination of curricula content.

<sup>63</sup> Cited in Wendy Lowenstein, Weevils in the Flour: An oral record of the 1930s depression in Australia (Melbourne, 1978), p. 114.

<sup>64</sup> Int. 065.

<sup>65</sup> Cited in Ganter, Pearl-Shellers, p. 72.

they could check over their earnings with their employers'.<sup>66</sup> Government policies which had brought about the people's inability to do this were not made by malevolent or even unsympathetic politicians and administrators. Indeed, they were made by men under the leadership of a Protector regarded as in the forefront of the administration of Australia's indigenous people. Thus, Bleakley, a man of his time, held the firm conviction that there was no need to prepare indigenous peoples for membership in the wider Australian society: for the Torres Strait Islanders he believed Europeanisation might ruin them as a 'virile race'.<sup>67</sup> He was convinced that schooling on the outer islands met the needs of the 'simple village life' of the people.<sup>68</sup> Any education grounded in such paternalism was bound to disadvantage the people in dealings with outsiders. Little wonder that they could not calculate wages due to them or even know whether they had received the full amount of any moneys they earned. They were 'easily defrauded by the scheming or dishonest', a situation which had existed throughout two generations of government and church rule.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, even though they lived in what might have been termed the unsophisticated frontier society of Torres Strait, they were aware of the crippling effects of their education.

After the 1936 Strike the government made a more serious attempt to raise the standard of education in Torres Strait. A new Scheme of Work was introduced which aimed at lifting 'the mark' closer to the level of mainland schools. But, even though higher standards were set for reading and arithmetic in the late 1930s, these still did not compare favourably with mainland schools, arithmetic being an example, with students still attaining only a fourth class level in a mainland school.<sup>70</sup> The syllabus was directed toward 'improved natives' only.<sup>71</sup> It certainly did not meet the people's aspiration for knowledge to 'go anywhere from

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<sup>66</sup> Queensland, Legislative Assembly 1939, Debates, Vol. 174, p. 499.

<sup>67</sup> A.R., Aboriginals Department for year ended 30 June 1931, Q.P.P. 1932, Vol. 1, p. 848.

<sup>68</sup> Bleakley, Aborigines of Australia, p. 289; see also Jonathan Cornford, The Queensland Aboriginals Department 1914-1939: Influences on the Development of the Protectionist Agenda, B.A. (Hons) thesis, Department of History and Politics, James Cook University of North Queensland, 1994.

<sup>69</sup> Cited in Williamson, Schooling the Torres Strait Islander, p. 151.

<sup>70</sup> Williamson, Schooling the Torres Strait Islander, pp. 158, 206-207.

<sup>71</sup> Bleakley, Aborigines of Australia, p. 187; Int 065.

school outside'.<sup>72</sup> The government was still unwilling to release them from its paternal control. Moreover, factors peculiar to Torres Strait hindered learning about the outside world: the people's continued forced isolation, culturally inappropriate curriculum, instruction in a second or third language and the increasing predominance of their own teachers with qualifications still far below those of most mainland teachers. Despite these obstacles, the people's desire for what they now refer to as a 'proper education' was strong when the Pacific War broke out.

Soon after the implementation of the new Scheme of Work, community life on the outer islands was severely disrupted and for at least two years the people lived in great fear of their lives. However, in none of the testimonies was there a hint that during their ordeal they ever abandoned their hopes for participatory equality in the wider Australian society. Moreover, during the Pacific War they became increasingly aware that a 'proper education' was basic to their inclusion in that society. And, in their abandoned and desperate state the women did whatever they could to ensure a continuance of their children's schooling.

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We must maintain our education services despite war conditions and that such maintenance is an integral part of our national life.<sup>73</sup>

During 1942, in North Queensland towns, such as Cairns, complaints were made that children were 'running around the streets' and 'losing all opportunities of education...so vital to their upbringing'.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, the army argued against the reimposition of compulsory school attendance because it feared that that would lull the public's appreciation of the danger and give the people a 'spirit of complacency and a false sense of security'.<sup>75</sup> Torres Strait Islander mothers were unaware of the dispensation on school attendance in North Queensland. Cut off from the Department's

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<sup>72</sup> Cited in Williamson, *Schooling the Torres Strait Islander*, p. 165; Int. 065.

<sup>73</sup> C.R. Evatt, New South Wales Minister for Education, January 1943, cited in Spaul, Australian Education, p. 9.

<sup>74</sup> Minutes: Ordinary Meeting Cairns City Council, January 1942, Cairns Council Archives.

<sup>75</sup> Cited in Spaul, Australian Education, p. 12.

gaze and in their wartime circumstances, it would have been easy for these mothers to put their children's schooling on hold.

#### Schooling in wartime outer Torres Strait

Government rhetoric on the mainland called for increased education services because it was envisaged that after the war there would be a New Order in which white children would grow up to play more important roles.<sup>76</sup> Torres Strait Islanders too hoped for a post-war order in which their children would be employed in a wider range of skilled jobs and be free to go to the mainland, if they so desired, for which better standards of education and training would be needed. Thus, during the worst months of the war mothers, siblings and the few men left on the outer islands, totally unsupported by the Queensland government, quite astonishingly took up the challenge to maintain some semblance of western education for the children in the hope that after the war they would go back into 'proper schools':

*When the war started everything broke off because we cannot do anything. [Then] some of these parents they tried to teach their children...they wanted to get rid of this war and put the kids back into a proper school and carry on their education.<sup>77</sup>*

The women were responsible for large families, the production of the bulk of their food, the daily cartage of water and fuel, and house maintenance. Some were also employed in trochusing, mining or other paid work. It was, therefore, extremely difficult for many to assume this added responsibility. However, just as many assumed greater spiritual responsibilities during the Pacific War, so too did many make every effort possible to prevent the cessation of schooling for their children because of the war. Several women's testimonies suggested that women with big families found it extremely hard in every way. Nonetheless, most mothers wanted to keep their children in touch with the idea that western education was an important aspect of island culture. They found the time and energy to help their children, although women with some older children seemed better off. The older siblings could teach the younger ones.

It was difficult to discover just when the children's education was resumed on each island. Moreover, the situation was met in a variety of ways. It seemed that the Masig people got organised

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<sup>76</sup> Evatt, cited in Spaul, Australian Education, p. 9.  
<sup>77</sup> Int. 078.

relatively rapidly. A signaller recalled that the school was 'up and running' on their Island when he arrived in March 1942. Ned Mosby, who had been the assistant to the white teacher, was in charge of the school, helped by Bugun Mosby. They taught the children the 3Rs and a little history and geography.<sup>78</sup> Formal schooling was not resumed quite so quickly everywhere and the curriculum on some communities was even more basic. On Mer, for instance, although mothers gave their children some school work, the school was closed until August 1942.<sup>79</sup> When classes did resume, they were not without many interruptions. One woman recalled: 'I was schooling at that time when the planes came over and we just dropped everything and rushed to our home and into the bush to hide'.<sup>80</sup> On Badu, too, schooling was intermittent:

*We came from the bush to school and when we saw a plane our parents made us stay home. There were lots and lots of planes. We just stayed there in our bush houses, we don't go further, stayed close, just played underneath the trees.*<sup>81</sup>

However, when the war was not 'too strong', the children had more regular schooling. A wartime student estimated that they had to walk several kilometres to school. For an outsider, this would have been considered an impossible distance to go on foot every day, but the man recalling that time commented philosophically: 'it was not far when you knew the Island; when you don't know the Island it seems a long way'.<sup>82</sup>

Although Masig Islanders returned to their bush houses at night, they were around the village during the day and this made it easier for children to attend school. It was a very different story for the people from Poid who were widely dispersed in the bush. Mothers were afraid to let their children out of their sight for long. One mother said:

*We cannot teach the children, we had no school. We cannot come out because the army won't let us come out...We had a very hard time...We cannot school them because we are frightened and we had different camps in the bush.*

Nevertheless, some mothers and older sisters gave the children school work to do. Late in the war when they were able to leave the bush, the women set up shelters on the beach at Kubin while they built a

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78 Sig. 3.  
79 Int. 065.  
80 Interview 110, Thursday Island, April, 1990.  
81 Int. 096.  
82 Interview 129, Badu, March 1990.



new village.<sup>83</sup> It was then that the children resumed regular lessons but, because the school house was in the old village at Poid, they had to make a long journey on foot through the swamps and bush: *'It was a long way and we had to run to get to school on time. We walked and played coming back, there was plenty of time then',* a former student reminisced.<sup>84</sup> On the Top-Western Islands of Saibai, Dauan and Boigu, the children attended classes in the school houses for the entire war period. However, because of their close proximity to the southern coastline of Papua into which area the Japanese eventually infiltrated, lessons were often interrupted by the warning that an aircraft had been sighted. They were evacuated to the trenches or into the swamps. According to a former student, while the older boys did not mind the disruption, *'the younger kids were not sort of interested in school, they were frightened'*.<sup>85</sup> Some St. Paul's mothers were too afraid to let their children go to the village and family members assumed responsibility for the children's schooling. One man recalled:

*We stopped in different patches in the bush and somebody in the family would teach the children. What we had was a slate for something to write on and we had only a few books to read. They took books from the school and used them.*<sup>86</sup>

Someone else remembered: *'Our parents they taught us what they knew'*.<sup>87</sup> Later these children too walked long distances to classes: *'school was in the village. An Island girl taught school. She had never trained. She was there to help the white teacher before; and when she went away the Island girl ran the classes'*.<sup>88</sup>

There were recollections about what happened to the children's schooling on Mabuiag. One woman recalled:

*We were just outside in the bush now and we cannot come over to the village, we don't because of the war. There was no schooling. Some of the parents...got little experience in their heads but they just taught them what they knew.*<sup>89</sup>

Another Mabuiag woman said that in her family *'no one gave the kids any school'*.<sup>90</sup> However, a wartime teacher recalled:

Baba Turner he sent me to Yam Island 1939, 1940...I go to

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<sup>83</sup> Int. 071.  
<sup>84</sup> Int. 070.  
<sup>85</sup> Int. 054.  
<sup>86</sup> Int. 116.  
<sup>87</sup> Int. 117.  
<sup>88</sup> Int. 068.  
<sup>89</sup> Int. 078.  
<sup>90</sup> Int. 140.

*Purma 1941, 1942. Then that same time the war started and I came back here to Mabuia and I taught in the bush. Later we came out of the bush in the day time and came to the primary school.*<sup>91</sup>

These testimonies indicate the women on Mabuia did respond differently to schooling the children during the early wartime period when there was unprecedented fear for everyone's safety and futures. Undoubtedly, there were mixed responses on other communities. On Naga, it fell to the eldest girl in a family of ten children who had attended the Convent School on Thursday Island until the Pacific War broke out, to teach her younger siblings: *'They got me to teach out there. I taught what I knew, I made these kids know how to write the letters A B C and count'*.<sup>92</sup>

It is important to understand that while the women did not make it clear in their testimonies that their efforts at schooling the children were politically motivated, this was indeed the case. They had every reason and opportunity to abandon schooling in that early period of fear and uncertainty. By continuing to teach the children whatever they could, they were clinging to the thread which it was hoped would lead them to a better life after the war. They, too, were overtly demonstrating they had accepted western education as an important part of Torres Strait Islander culture.

Before the war, the island community stores had been conducted by the white teachers on the larger islands and the island teachers on the smaller ones. In early 1942, the government realised that storekeepers would be needed on the islands. The storekeeper on Yam recalled that he was told by the Protector: *'You stay, don't be enlisted. You tell them you are here to supply food for the people. We will supply the food and you can look after it'*.<sup>93</sup> Other storekeepers who went to Thursday Island with the first group of recruits were soon sent back to their islands. These men did what they could to see that the children's schooling was continued. On Purma, because *'the planes just kept on coming night and day'*, the women were too afraid to let their children go far from them. There was so little protection from enemy aircraft even in the bush on this tiny coral cay, that it was unthinkable to let the children go to the school house in the village in broad daylight. Consequently, the school remained closed and the storekeeper supplied the women with

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<sup>91</sup> Int. 105.

<sup>92</sup> Int. 069.

<sup>93</sup> Int. 053.

*'paper and pencils and things like that...and they just helped the children during the day'.<sup>94</sup> With no school supplies being shipped to outer Torres Strait, the Purma women were lucky to have these materials.<sup>95</sup> A Meriam woman recalled that all they had were 'slates and they got their pencils from the sea - a piece of coral'.<sup>96</sup> On Ugar, the population was no more than thirty-five in 1942. Sam Passi, the storekeeper/teacher there, continued to teach for a while after the war started, but, because of the Island's extremely vulnerable location, most of the people were evacuated to other islands and the school closed.<sup>97</sup> Along with the women, the storekeepers on each island maintained, as best they could, some link with western education. In this they were unsupported by the Queensland government during the worst period of the war. Only Charlie Turner, the one white government teacher who opted to remain in Torres Strait in early 1942, was there to support whatever efforts the people were making to continue the children's schooling. He visited the islands at great personal risk, as often as possible. A Nagi woman recalled: *'He used to come around and stay there to help the Island teacher'.<sup>98</sup> He was to the people: 'Mr. Everything. He was school teacher, nurse, helping out in everything and he was the medical man'.<sup>99</sup>**

The army had instructed the signallers to assist the people in any way they could even though for two men to keep a day and night surveillance of their area demanded a great deal of their time. Nevertheless, the Mabuiag signallers recruited young people who had trained at the Teachers' Training College and re-opened the school in August 1942. On Saibai and Erub, too, they initiated the re-opening of the schools: *'We recruited senior girls who had a few grades at school and the Islander priest helped'.<sup>100</sup> The signallers were drawn quickly into the Torres Strait Islanders' system of sharing,*

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<sup>94</sup> Int. 100.

<sup>95</sup> A search of the relevant files in the Queensland Archives in Brisbane disclosed that applications for school requisites from the various communities were received by the Department in December 1941. There were no records to suggest that these were completed in 1942 or 1943 (File references: Education - Department of Health and Home Affairs, A/15844-15860; Education - Mission Schools, A/15996-15999 Q.S.A.).

<sup>96</sup> Int. 108.

<sup>97</sup> Int. 111.

<sup>98</sup> Int. 069.

<sup>99</sup> Int. 065.

<sup>100</sup> Sig. 3.



(Top) On Mer - Front row: Emily Ahmat (Agale), Geede Williams, Mrs. Smith the white teacher's wife, Edna Agale, Bakoi Baud  
Back Row: Mr. Hargraves (Mrs. Smith's brother), island man not identified

(Bottom) W.C.V. Turner (Charlie), 'Mr. Everything', and his wife

and assisting the communities in this way was another means of being active members in that system. Even so, it was the women and the few Torres Strait Islander teacher/storekeepers who bore the brunt of responsibility until late in the war. Years later, Bleakley acknowledged this: 'All credit must be given to them for the able way in which they "held the fort", ensuring that...the children's education carried on as well as could be expected'.<sup>101</sup>

#### A time to look forward

In September 1944, P.R. Frith returned to supervise the children's schooling on the three Top-Western Islands. His return boosted the morale of the people on these islands. Hope spread to the other islands as word of his return was passed on. It seemed that the war must be coming to an end and the children would finally get a 'proper' schooling. This had been the Torres Strait Islanders' dream for a long time. They saw it as tantamount to their liberation from generations of paternalism and entry into a better life. However, until late 1944, the Queensland government gave them no indication that they would be able to participate in the State's economy and society other than as a lower caste. The Protector's objections to the TSLI men receiving equal pay with white soldiers was indicative of his intention to retain a cheap labour pool in Torres Strait to meet the demands of the shelling industry.

While the TSLI men saw their participation in the war as a further opportunity to make their grievances heard beyond Torres Strait, councillors on the islands took every opportunity to press claims for a better life. A group from several island communities spoke with the Governor about 'higher education both Secondary and Rural, including Domestic Science' when he went to Badu in 1943.<sup>102</sup> In late 1944, the Governor was petitioned for 'university education' for their young people.<sup>103</sup> This was undoubtedly in response to the further understanding the people had gained about higher education from the white soldiers with whom they served or who came to the

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<sup>101</sup> Bleakley, Aborigines of Australia, p. 288.

<sup>102</sup> Report: Governor of Queensland, 28 April 1943, p. 4, Gov/93, Q.S.A.

<sup>103</sup> Petition: To Governor, 13 April 1944, TR12257, Bundle 140, Q.S.A. This only became possible in 1976 with the development of the Aboriginal and Islander Teacher Education Program at Townsville College of Advanced Education. This institution amalgamated with the James Cook University in 1982.

islands.<sup>104</sup> George Mye, a teenager at the time, recalled that his talks with signallers about university education had a lasting effect on him.<sup>105</sup> In August 1944, newly-elected councillors who had been in the army discussed education with the Director when he attended at the Inter-Island Conference of Councillors held on Masig. Subsequently, a unanimous resolution calling for a 'higher standard of education than previously applied', was passed.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, they wanted the implementation of a scheme for the secondary education of at least an elite group of children to be set up immediately after the war. This, it was hoped, would open the door to university education for some and eventually they would have their own qualified people to administer island affairs.<sup>107</sup> By late 1944 the Director himself had to concede that wartime events in Torres Strait had brought about an 'unprecedented psychological change in [the Torres Strait Islanders'] outlook and demeanour generally'.<sup>108</sup> Their 'growing experience of civilised life beyond their own borders', Bleakley subsequently wrote, had made the 'rudimentary instruction' they had received 'while content with simple village life' obsolete:

Higher education [was] the natural request of a race desiring to progress. The primary education hitherto provided was too limited and dependent on the availability of teachers applying for the positions. Experience showed that such teachers were often unsuitable.<sup>109</sup>

Bleakley was wrong in his assessment of the people's satisfaction.

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<sup>104</sup> Although the men were gaining new insights into higher education, they probably had no idea of the incredibly high standards required for entry into universities and they would have had no comprehension of the support their young people would have needed in such an institution.

<sup>105</sup> Int. 065. I recall George Mye, in the late 1960s, poring over correspondence lessons in very basic accommodation above a shop in the main street on Thursday Island.

<sup>106</sup> Minutes: Councillors' Conference, Yorke Island, 19 August 1944, p. 3, Native Affairs Thursday Island, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>107</sup> A woman of Torres Strait Islander descent who lived on Thursday Island and was also educated under the same racist philosophy said in 1988: 'If we had done scholarship it might have brightened up our education, our outlook on things...Probably we would have had our own doctors and lawyers and things like that...this is why our people are still not like the New Guineans, they've got their own lawyers and doctors...We weren't given the opportunity. I don't know whose fault it was' (Int. 003).

<sup>108</sup> Summary: Director of Native Affairs to Minutes of Councillors' Conference, 11 September 1944, Native Affairs, Thursday Island, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>109</sup> Bleakley, Aborigines of Australia, p. 289.

Moreover, he was obviously unconscious of the irony in his use of the term 'civilised life' when Australia was a nation engaged in a vicious war of survival. In late 1944, the then Director proffered his solution to the low standard of education. It was that 'selected children should be given secondary education in schools willing to accept them'.<sup>110</sup> But, in a dominantly white Australian society still grappling with the place of indigenous people in Australian society, how realistic was this solution?

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While island women kept their children in touch with schooling, the TSLI men gained a greater understanding of the sort of schooling their children would need to participate in the post-war society to which they aspired. All knew their children would continue to be welded to 'boat' and 'shore' work until the '*the mark*' was abolished. But, with a thorough wetting of their appetites for '*proper*' schools by late 1944, at an all-island councillors' meeting a resolution stating the standard of teaching they wanted in the post-war order of things was passed. By the end of the war, however, the only solution proffered by the government was one which was highly unlikely to be implemented in the late 1940s. The war did not automatically change white Australian's attitudes on racial issues. Indeed, it was 1964 before 'coloured' children could attend the Thursday Island State Primary School.<sup>111</sup> The Thursday Island State High School opened on 24 January 1966 for all children in the Strait.<sup>112</sup> The Pacific War had not been the catalyst for change in educational policies that the Torres Strait Islanders had hoped it would be. Moreover, the continuance of a low standard of schooling after the war made it difficult for outer island children to achieve when they went to the Thursday Island and southern schools.

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<sup>110</sup> Director to Secretary, 28 September 1944, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>111</sup> History of Foundation of School for Coloured Children on T.I., supplied to the author by Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, December 1988.

<sup>112</sup> See Osborne, 'Education in Torres Strait', p. 229.

## Chapter ten

### Toward a revolutionary health care scheme

As with the schooling of the Torres Strait Islander children, a vacuum in the health care of the people was created when the government's white officers evacuated to the mainland in March 1942. During the seventy years of their colonisation, the people increasingly became dependent on western medicine although they continued to use their own outlawed bush remedies. Indeed, for at least the first eighteen months of the war, the women were forced to rely heavily on these medicines. Moreover, just as the women did their best to give the children at least a semblance of schooling, so, too, did some of the younger women take responsibility for and distribute whatever supplies of western medicines became available. Later in the war, young women grasped the opportunity to gain basic training as nurses in the two hospitals established in outer Torres Strait. At the end of the war there was every reason to believe that western health care on the outer island communities would be raised to a level more equivalent to that available to white mainlanders.

Again, to make intelligible to the outsider the Torres Strait Islander women's wartime approach to health care it is important to discuss briefly the people's traditional beliefs about life and death and follow the development of their acceptance of western health care until 1942.

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#### Island medicine

Like other traditional Melanesian people in the South Pacific, the health of the Torres Strait Islanders was tied to their supernatural beliefs. These beliefs gave them a sense of security in a world with the usual human share of illness, accident and death, and made them confident they could control individual and community health. They believed all sickness and death, save that of the very old, could be attributed to the maidelag, sorcerer or medicine man.<sup>1</sup> The Anglican missionaries in the Melanesian islands of the South Pacific saw such beliefs as 'ignorant superstitions' and tried to

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<sup>1</sup> Haddon, 'Ethnography of the Western Tribes', p. 306.



eradicate them because they were an affront to Christianity. However, the pervasiveness of the people's magico-religious traditions were difficult to overcome: 'We call ourselves Christians but we serve two masters', a Melanesian Anglican church leader told Whiteman in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> In Torres Strait, the missionaries also failed to eradicate many traditional beliefs. Sorcerers throughout Torres Strait retreated to the shadows and passed their knowledge on. The people continued to be susceptible to magic.<sup>3</sup>

The white government teachers who went to Torres Strait early this century concluded that to the Torres Strait Islanders death, particularly during epidemics, was the result of sorcery rather than the disease: the influence of 'the old men still dominates...and fatalities are...attributed...to puri-puri [sic]'.<sup>4</sup> An old Erub man recalled a time when 'other islands were a closed book [nothing was known about them]' so that if a Meriam man in his red lavalava was seen on another island, the children would be afraid: 'We were frightened of Meriam men. They had the reputation of being maid men [sorcerers]'.<sup>5</sup> But, it was not only Meriam men who used sorcery: 'Puripuri talk, sorcery, was rife in the Strait...And they'd say, "Oh that Badu man he can change to an alligator. He can fly like an eagle". All that sort of thing'.<sup>6</sup> In 1989, a Meriam woman vouched that evil magic was still being practised during the war:

People died from island sorcery - maid men. These ones worked hypnotism, they killed a lot of people during the war. Sometimes they killed babies. They can kill you and they can tell you you are going to die. You get sick and die.

She knew about these things from her own experience:

My big mother, father's eldest sister, she had twins, two girls, and the maid men killed my auntie and one girl died, one was still alive. The trouble was the lump [the afterbirth] wouldn't come out and my big mother she cried and cried with the pain. My father and my mother knew who the maid men were, but they didn't talk about it. My

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<sup>2</sup> Whiteman, Melanesians and Missionaries, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> Beckett, custom and colonialism, pp. 31, 96. Beckett described sorcery as the 'Achilles heel of Island Christianity, for while white people seemed not to be vulnerable to it, Islanders were'.

<sup>4</sup> A.R., C.P.A. 1915-1916, O.P.P., Vol. 3, p. 1687.

<sup>5</sup> Int. 065. Red was the regular colour for lavalavas on Mer. In 1938, a Meriam man was charged in the island court with 'acting to practise sorcery'. He was banished from the Island for two years (Court Reports, Murray Island, 1938, Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, Brisbane).

<sup>6</sup> Sharp, Springs of Originality, Vol. 2, p. B116.

*grandfather told them. Very bad eh! My mother, she died before the war on Dauan by maid men too.*<sup>7</sup>

These testimonies confirm the missionaries and white teachers failed to eradicate the belief in the malevolent magic of sorcerers in Torres Strait Islander communities by the time of the Pacific War. Indeed, in 1993, a Torres Strait Islander woman said: 'You know we still believe in puripuri'.<sup>8</sup>

In the South Pacific islands of Melanesia, including Torres Strait Islander societies, the sorcerers' practices were not all malevolent. They could also heal the sick. They were medicine men in the most positive sense of the term. In both societies, however, there were also lay people who had their own practices to deal with sickness. 'Ordinary villagers' in other Melanesian islands treated sickness with 'custom medicine', although Whiteman suggested that one person did not possess a comprehensive knowledge of the treatments; individuals were 'specialists' rather than 'general practitioners'.<sup>9</sup> From traditional times, Torres Strait Islanders too have had bush or island medicines which are used by the villagers, seemingly, without special supernatural powers. These medicines, according to Haddon, were 'known to all', which suggests that individual Torres Strait Islanders were not specialists in any one type of bush medicine. For instance, blood-letting, which seems to have been used for various complaints, was practised by women and 'island doctors'.<sup>10</sup> Barbara Thompson, said the 'old women' used blood-letting to heal her.<sup>11</sup> An old Ugar man recalled that, as a child, his mother cut his back with glass and blood came out: 'Next day there was no back ache'.<sup>12</sup> As late as 1950, a Badu woman said that her father was going to take her to an 'island doctor' to bleed her head because she was vomiting.<sup>13</sup> A Badu man recalled that all sorts of bush medicines had been used for generations within family groups: 'older people told us what to do when we were sick'.<sup>14</sup> The recollection of an old Erub woman was: 'At that time we had no hospital and our parents looked after us with bush medicine'.<sup>15</sup> These testimonies verify that bush medicines were important in the maintenance of the every day health of Torres Strait

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<sup>7</sup> Int. 087.

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication, Cairns, November 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Whiteman, Melanesians and Missionaries, p. 353.

<sup>10</sup> Haddon, 'Ethnography of the Western Tribes', p. 306.

<sup>11</sup> Moore, Islanders and Aborigines, p. 176.

<sup>12</sup> Int. 028.

<sup>13</sup> Int. 029.

<sup>14</sup> Nona, Oral History Unit, James Cook University.

<sup>15</sup> Interview 134, Thursday Island, April 1990.

Islander families. Nonetheless, as will be explained, attempts were made by their colonial masters to outlaw the use of even the people's simplest remedies.

For three decades before the war, the white government teachers on the communities in Torres Strait complained that the villagers were 'superstitious' and prejudiced against 'white man's medicine'. These teachers reported that the people concealed sicknesses and used their own treatments.<sup>16</sup> Many of the treatments recalled by the Torres Strait Islanders seemed harmless enough, even practical. Milk from the frangipani tree healed wounds and the juice from a certain leaf was 'number one for ears'. It was inserted in the ear through a funnel made by rolling up a leaf from the almond tree.<sup>17</sup> Stings from stone fish, stingrays and star fish were treated with juice from a beach vine: 'It was washed and cut and let drip onto the wound'. Coconut oil was good for 'pain in the body and muscle stiffness and swelling'.<sup>18</sup> A drawing ointment was obtained from the warkar tree: 'It gets the stuff out and dries the skin together - it was nice and cool'.<sup>19</sup> A problem on all islands was the number of cuts to people's bare feet from walking over rocks and coral. These frequently became septic in the tropical heat. Whether or not they were influenced by Europeans about contagion, the people had devised methods of protection for their wounds:

*When we hear that stomping we know it's a kid with a sore foot...the stomping is the coconut shell they strap over the sore...because that bloomin' sore is watery. We reckon it's contagious so we have to put that coconut shell under the foot.*<sup>20</sup>

These were just some of the bush remedies the Torres Strait Islanders used to deal with common medical problems, and they had faith in them: 'We use bush medicine...it's better for sores, heals real quick'.<sup>21</sup> Again in health matters, the Torres Strait Islanders were not averse to adopting outsider knowledge. A Badu man explained that starfish stings made you feel 'bloody terrible, just like stone fish'. The frangipani juice was good but he learnt a more convenient

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<sup>16</sup> A.R., C.P.A. 1911, Q.P.P. 1912, Vol. 3, p. 1008; A.R., C.P.A. 1912, Q.P.P. 1913, Vol. 3, p. 1094; A.R., C.P.A. 1915, Q.P.P. 1916-1917, Vol. 3, p. 1731; A.R., C.P.A. 1916, Q.P.P. 1917, Vol. 3, p. 1002.

<sup>17</sup> Int. 028. The reference here was to the mekei tree, or island almond which grows in Torres Strait.

<sup>18</sup> Int. 069.

<sup>19</sup> Int. 121.

<sup>20</sup> Int. 065.

<sup>21</sup> Int. 118.

remedy from the men on St. Paul's where there was a strong South Sea Islander influence: *'One that I proved was real good was baking powder...an instant cure on your leg, whatever part of the body got stung by stone fish or stingray...you can walk next day without any swelling'*.<sup>22</sup> The Nagi women said the Japanese men told them that Condy's Crystals (potassium permanganate, a disinfectant) relieved stone fish and stingray stings so they adopted that treatment.<sup>23</sup> In this way outsider cures were integrated into their own health care practices.

In all Melanesian groups outsiders attempted to eradicate the use of such practices. The missionaries in other Melanesian groups saw education as the answer whereas in Torres Strait the government outlawed them: *'It was a crime to use bush medicines. That was forced on them by the Protector'*, a Torres Strait Islander leader recalled.<sup>24</sup> However, while the colonisers were unable to stop the passing on of this knowledge there was no total rejection of the new. Other Melanesians wanted both kinds of medicine - *'custom and white man's...they can work together'*.<sup>25</sup> In Torres Strait, an old woman recalled: *'We got medicines from the government teacher but we still use island medicine - still using it now, they do you good'*.<sup>26</sup> The Torres Strait Islander perception that the government was unable to meet their medical needs may have contributed to the continued use of their own bush medicine. In 1920, many people died in an influenza epidemic. Medicines were unprocurable and the doctors and nurses arrived only after the worst was over:<sup>27</sup> *'People died, they were so sick...Doctors sometimes came around, but they can't do much'*;<sup>28</sup> *'When people got that flu they died like nothing, no help, nothing'*.<sup>29</sup> In a malaria epidemic on Saibai in 1934, supplies of quinine ran out and the people turned to blood-letting to release the

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<sup>22</sup> Nona, Oral History Unit, James Cook University.

<sup>23</sup> Int. 069.

<sup>24</sup> Whiteman, Melanesians and Missionaries, p. 355; Int. 065.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 351

<sup>26</sup> Int. 092.

<sup>27</sup> A.R., Aboriginals Department for year ended 31 December 1920, Q.P.P. 1921, Vol. 2, p. 561. The epidemic was not confined to Torres Strait: it was world wide. As a result of this 'influenza pandemic', the Commonwealth Department of Health was set up and the quarantine service constituted its main function (Ronald Mendelsohn, The Condition of the People: Social Welfare in Australia 1900-1975 (Sydney 1979), p. 45).

<sup>28</sup> Pearson, Early History Workshop, March 1987.

<sup>29</sup> Int. 051.

'pain and heat' from their bodies.<sup>30</sup> So, the dilemma was: 'When the law said not to use bush medicine what will happen if they take away that medicine, we the people won't know what to do'.<sup>31</sup> The Torres Strait Islanders' faith in the old ways was reinforced when western medicines and help were inadequate or not available.

About a decade before the war, the government took more positive steps to keep patients away from their families and the medicine men in the hope that island treatments would be more effectively checked.<sup>32</sup> Small cottage hospitals were set up on Erub, Mer and Saibai and a few men and women were given some basic instruction as 'nursing attendants'.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, the people remained unwilling to throw away entirely an institution which they believed still worked for them: 'bush medicine was one of the things that kept our people'.<sup>34</sup> Both the missionaries in the other Melanesian groups and the Protector in Queensland had been loath to bow to the people's faith in their own traditional methods.

An old Torres Strait Islander claimed that his people also used common sense when it came to a choice of medicines for sick family members and this was very much how mainland mothers approached the health care of their families. Working-class white mothers sought professional help only as a 'last resort'.<sup>35</sup> They treated cuts, burns, sore throats and high fevers with such things as Arum lily leaves, soap, bread and starch poultices, Golden Syrup and many other items found in or about the home. Cobwebs, for instance, were placed over wounds to assist the healing process: 'You would think it would go septic, but it didn't', an old white woman remarked as she recalled how she used to crawl under the house to get the cobwebs for her mother to dress the children's sores.<sup>36</sup> Hot saline solutions relieved sore throats and high fevers were treated by 'sweating it out' under a pile of blankets.<sup>37</sup> These and many other home remedies were practised openly by white mothers and even visiting nurses.

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<sup>30</sup> A.R., *Aboriginals Department for year ended 31 December 1934, Q.P.P. 1935, Vol. 1, p. 986.*

<sup>31</sup> Int. 064.

<sup>32</sup> A.R., *Aboriginals Department for year ended 31 December 1934, Q.P.P. 1935, Vol. 1, p. 986.*

<sup>33</sup> Bleakley, *Aborigines of Australia*, p. 279.

<sup>34</sup> Int. 053.

<sup>35</sup> Interview Dan Gleeson, Townsville, July 1992, pp. 2-4.

<sup>36</sup> Interview Dolly McKay, Edmonton, November 1989.

<sup>37</sup> Treatments used by author's mother.

Moreover, everyone was free to share such knowledge.<sup>38</sup> It was not outlawed.

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#### Western health care

By the time the Pacific War broke out, a western health care system, under the umbrella of the Department of Native Affairs, was operating in Torres Strait.<sup>39</sup> Torres Strait Islander students had been introduced to hands-on 'basic [westernised] medical work' at the L.M.S. Institute on Mer by the Reverend Harry Scott in the early 1880s. However, because the missionary teachers were frequently forced to rely on sympathetic shellers for whatever supplies they could get, it is doubtful that western medicine was widely practised on the islands prior to government intervention on the communities.<sup>40</sup> By the turn of the century, the white teachers appointed to the larger communities were expected to do the work of 'local medicos'.<sup>41</sup> They treated infectious diseases with 'simple remedies from a medicine chest'. However, their medical knowledge was inadequate for many of the sicknesses they encountered.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See Narelle O'Rourke, A Country Nurse and Midwife: The life, career and times of Mary O'Rourke/Bowers, M.B.E. in the Queanbeyan District of New South Wales 1889-1973 (Queanbeyan, 1989), pp. 128-147.

<sup>39</sup> Like education, the Department was in charge of the health of the Torres Strait Islanders and not the Department of Health which was responsible for the health of Queensland's white mainlanders. This situation pertained until 1990.

<sup>40</sup> Langbridge, Enculturation to Evangelization, pp. 150, 53.

<sup>41</sup> The white teachers were also the clerks and treasurers of the island courts (A.R., C.P.A. 1907, Q.P.P. 1908, Vol. 3, p. 937). Conscientious teachers supervised improvements around the villages, including building roads and bridges. Under the supervision of the teacher on Mabuiag, the women reclaimed the swamps and planted coconuts (A.R., C.P.A. 1911, Q.P.P. 1912, Vol. 3, p. 1011). The teacher on Erub was responsible for the drainage of the swamps which assisted the eradication of the malarial mosquito (A.R., Aboriginal Department for year ended 31 December 1934, Q.P.P. 1935, Vol. 1, p. 985).

<sup>42</sup> A.R., C.P.A. 1914, Q.P.P. 1915-1916, Vol. 3, p. 1686. Some communities had the services of a trained nurse if the white teachers' wife had these qualifications. However, it was unlikely that male teachers had any more training than that received by teachers' wives just after the war. A former matron of the Thursday Island Hospital recalled: 'Some poor women [the wives of the male

People who were seriously ill could be sent to the hospital on Thursday Island, although it seemed that as late as 1932 the number who actually went was small.<sup>43</sup> The women, in particular, were, in all probability, apprehensive about leaving their communities to go to an alien environment like a white hospital, especially as the government had never allowed them to move freely away from their own communities and become more familiar with the outside world. Transport too would have been a problem. Generally, patients had to be transported to Thursday Island in their own sail-powered vessels. If the community boats were available, the journey might still cost the patient's life:

*Sometimes you steadied the patient and got there all right. Sometimes they got worse and when the wind dropped you had to float along, follow the tide. When the tide was going to that island because you follow it, okay, but when it came from that island you have to anchor and wait for the tide to turn.*<sup>44</sup>

Until the late 1930s, the hospitalisation of a patient was also dependent upon the diagnosis of a minimally trained white teacher without even radio contact with the Thursday Island hospital.<sup>45</sup> People on the smaller communities relied upon the white teachers on the larger islands in cases of serious sickness. An old Torres Strait Islander recalled how the people on these small communities perceived the situation:

*In those days we had no store, no school, no medicine, they lived without really any assistance. Doctors never came round in the early days in the government patrol boat, never for medical...My father and mother never got medical treatment.*<sup>46</sup>

When their luggers were at sea, the hazardous journey to the nearest larger community was made in row boats. Thus, until the 1930s, health care under the umbrella of the Department of Native Affairs was inadequate from the people's perspective and they were obliged to use their own bush medicines.

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teachers] were given about forty-eight hours' training at the hospital...shown how to give injections and shown how to put bandages on and that was it' (Interview 090, Cairns, July 1990).

<sup>43</sup> A.R., C.P.A. 1907, Q.P.P. 1908, Vol. 3, p. 938; A.R., C.P.A. 1911, Q.P.P. 1912, Vol. 3, p. 1006. In 1932 the number of patients treated at the Thursday Island Hospital was 'comparatively small when compared with the population' (A.R., Aboriginal Department for year ended 31 December 1932, Q.P.P. 1933, Vol. 1, p. 891).

<sup>44</sup> Int. 098.

<sup>45</sup> A.R., C.P.A. 1911, Q.P.P. 1912, Vol. 3, p. 1006; A.R., C.P.A. 1918, Q.P.P. 1919-1920, Vol. 2, p. 541.

<sup>46</sup> Int. 064.

At the beginning of the 1930s, there was some improvement in health care on the communities. Increased quantities of medical supplies were sent to the islands, doctors made more regular visits and a system of monthly reports from all islands kept the medical officer on Thursday Island informed about the people's health. A new patrol vessel, the Melbidir, was commissioned which overcame the local Protector's problems of access to the islands. Even so, the ability to take seriously ill patients to Thursday Island was still frequently dependent upon the people's own sail-powered vessels: 'We travelled [from Boigu] by sail and it was one and one half days. If there's no wind, you don't go. It was very sad, people died'.<sup>47</sup> Yet, at this time, hospitalisation was becoming more acceptable to the people. Indeed, where birthing complications were anticipated, mothers might be confined on Thursday Island. Other improvements related to health were the building of houses off the ground with better ventilation and the introduction of more efficient sanitary services.<sup>48</sup>

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By 1942, the developing aspirations of the Torres Strait Islanders for fuller Australian citizenship, attested to in 1936 by the Maritime Strike, also included better accessibility to western health care. However, with the evacuation of the white teachers in March 1942, a vacuum in the health care of the people was created. None of the island people had been trained in the distribution of western medical supplies. Nevertheless, young island women filled the vacuum as best they could while mothers relied more heavily on their own bush medicines to keep their families healthy. However, in late 1943, as a result of the desperate war situation, the people's aspirations for better medical services were partly met. Two hospitals were established in outer Torres Strait and young island women were given basic training in them. On other communities, medical aid posts were set up. Finally, an army doctor proposed a revolutionary scheme for post-war health in Torres Strait.

#### Assuming new responsibilities

As indicated above, in March 1942, the western health care

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<sup>47</sup> Int. 063.

<sup>48</sup> A.R., Aboriginal Department for year ended 31 December 1929, Q.P.P. 1930, Vol. 1, p. 952.



structure in Torres Strait toppled with the sudden evacuation of the white teachers. Only a few Torres Strait Islanders had a basic knowledge of western medicines from first aid lessons taught at the Mabuiag Teachers' Training College and work in the cottage hospitals on three islands. Occasionally, a young woman had been asked to help the white teacher and she was given a shallow insight into the practice of western medicine. An old Kubin woman recalled working for Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong: *'They did the medicine. I was working in the house and when people came from the village and they were away, I did it'*.<sup>49</sup> Thus, it was realised by the people, after the departure of the Whites, that the western health care system upon which they had been made increasingly dependent would have to be staffed by young island women with very little or no training for the job.

At the time of the evacuation of the Director's twenty-three white officers in Torres Strait, the government's stock of medical supplies on Thursday Island was hastily transferred to Badu for distribution among the outer island communities.<sup>50</sup> Curtis, along with Turner, worked against almost impossible odds to get supplies to the communities. However, the ongoing problem was to get further supplies from Brisbane. Not only did civil communications between islands become almost impossible because of the continuous air activity and the lack of cargo boats in outer Torres Strait, there were also enormous problems with the flow of cargo from Brisbane. Along with basic store goods, medical supplies to outer Torres Strait were irregular and inadequate. Ironically, this situation enabled the women to practice their outlawed health care methods without fear of reprisals.<sup>51</sup> This was the status of health care in Torres Strait for at least two years after the white teachers left the islands.

The immediate response on the communities was for young island women, without any training, to take charge of and distribute such basic medicines as pain-killers, cough mixtures, disinfectants and bandages: *'When the white people left, we looked after the medicine'*.<sup>52</sup> Bakoi Baud, the teacher on Mer, combined her role as teacher with that of the island 'nurse'. She took charge of medical

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<sup>49</sup> Int. 071.

<sup>50</sup> Director of Native Affairs to Under Secretary, Department of Health and Home Affairs, 15 October 1943, pp. 16-17, Auditor General's Reports, AUD/W129, 43/7749, Q.S.A.

<sup>51</sup> Int. 134; Int. 078; Int. 092; Int. 028; Int. 100; Int. 118.

<sup>52</sup> Int. 105.

supplies and held a sick parade before school every morning.<sup>53</sup> On other islands, checking the people's health meant going long distances into the bush. A Badu woman recalled: *'I was the nurse and had to go round with medicine to those villages here in the bush. I went all day and they gave me something to eat'*.<sup>54</sup> Someone remembered that the old teacher on Poid went from *'this camp to another camp'* in the bush, supplying medicine to the sick.<sup>55</sup>

Once again assistance came from other quarters. Although the army had few men to spare for at least the first two desperate years of the war, because of their intermittent assistance during that time, the Torres Strait Islanders came to see the army as replacing the discredited Protector who had *'run out on them'*.<sup>56</sup> The military personnel who went to the islands were seen as taking over some of the roles filled by the white teachers before the war. The army signallers made themselves available to help with medical problems: *'On arrival we advised the council that we had medicines, basic medical skills and that we were available to supply medicine, bandages and some help'*. However, their knowledge was minimal also:

We did a two hour crash course in medicine and surgery and all those associated matters and I can recall the senior army medical officer telling me that we could probably handle most emergencies and thinking to myself, "Well, I'm aged nineteen and no medical skill". To demonstrate the point he said to me, "Just take a sample by opening your comprehensive book [on medical matters] at random and we'll see what it's all about". This I did, and the chapter was "Complications of Childbirth". "Try another", said the S.M.O. [Senior Medical Officer], and this turned out to be something like "Surgery following major shark bite".

They went to the islands with their book on basic medicine, Dettol, castor oil, acriflavine, cascara, aspirins, a generous supply of bandages and adhesive plasters as well as scalpels and sutures and *'a bottle of Tolly's Three Star Brandy'*. On some communities, they organised daily sick parades.<sup>57</sup> In cases of extreme emergency, radio contact was made with army doctors on Thursday Island who assisted with diagnoses and treatments. A Mabuiag woman had her arm bitten off by a shark and while one signaller received instructions over the radio the other attended the women's injuries.<sup>58</sup> On

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<sup>53</sup> Sig. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Int. 093.

<sup>55</sup> Int. 102.

<sup>56</sup> See Hall, Black Diggers, pp. 36, 43.

<sup>57</sup> Sig. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Colwill to Burge, 19 June 1949, p. 2, AWM54, 425/6/15, A.W.M. (Canberra).

another occasion, a signaller treated an old man with a bladder obstruction while he received radio instructions.<sup>59</sup> A child's wrists were reset with splints made from the wood of a butter box, and a boy's scalp was stitched. Despite their youthfulness and inexperience, the signallers were called to handle many such emergencies.

Other calls for help surprised them, such as when the Chief Councillor on Mer requested them to exhume and examine the body of a woman for a dry sore on the thigh. This was apparently to discover whether she had been poisoned. No sore was found and everyone was satisfied that there had been no 'foul play'.<sup>60</sup> Emergency cases were transported to the military hospital on Thursday Island.<sup>61</sup> The smaller communities were again disadvantaged because they had no signallers and no radios. They had to row their small dinghies to the larger islands for help although the people on Purma received some assistance from the medical personnel on an American warship which frequently anchored off the Island: *'They had doctors and people on board. If we had to be treated they told us to go down to the Challenger and get treated'*.<sup>62</sup> In addition to the help given by the signallers, Charlie Turner, moving from island to island, did what he could to help the women. He too had very little medical knowledge, even though he eventually became almost totally involved with the people's health.<sup>63</sup>

Army officers listened to the TSLI men's various concerns for their families: *'They worried about everything, even if they didn't have cotton in the store'*.<sup>64</sup> Their health was of great concern. A St. Paul's man reported that his pregnant wife had written she was having premature pains. She was subsequently visited by an army doctor. The woman recalled his diagnosis: *'When you've got a big*

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<sup>59</sup> Sig. 3.

<sup>60</sup> Sig. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Sig. 1. During March, April and May 1942, a handful of patients were admitted with dengue fever and in August eleven people with dysentery were treated. One died. In January, February and March 1943, isolated cases of hookworm, beri-beri, septicemia, granuloma, malaria and yaws were admitted. One tuberculosis patient died in March. The records petered out from March 1944 (Thursday Island Hospital Registers, 1942-1944, Historical Society Museum, Thursday Island).

<sup>62</sup> Int. 100.

<sup>63</sup> Int. 065.

<sup>64</sup> Int. 100.

Dadsw  
3/8/43

Permission is granted to Parisia  
Mawie, Sergeant of Island Police, of Poidi,  
to proceed to Thursday Island by bulgarian  
for the purpose of escorting Elipanna Mawie,  
a hospital case suffering from Beri Beri.  
He is to return by the first boat.

Rev. L. Stephen  
Act. Manager

History to Accompany Patient from Poidi Island.

1.—Name:

ELIPANNA MAWIE.

2.—Age:

38 YEARS.

3.—Describe what patient complained of and date  
report made to Teacher:

This woman was an inmate of No. 6. Camp Hospital in  
1942, under the attention of B. Russell. Government Doctor advised that  
she is suffering from Beri Beri & has become mental.

4.—State complaint for which patient was treated and  
remedies adopted:

Beri Beri. Remedies not possible Poidi. Quinine etc. in  
very small supply.

5.—How long was patient ill before reporting?

Patient has been under observation of A. G. Jones for 1 month (of illness)

6.—Has patient previously suffered from similar  
complaint or other serious illness?

UNKNOWN.

7.—Are patient's parents healthy? If dead, what  
was the cause of death?

Both parents died natural death. I have been informed.

Date 3. 8. 43.

HOSPITAL MEMORANDA.

Protector of Aborigines.

This Form should be presented to the Protector of Aborigines prior to Patient being admitted to Hospital.

Govt. Printer, Brisbane.

(Top) Authority for admission to Thursday Island Hospital, 1943  
(Bottom) History of Patient

stomach you need a corset, but we haven't got a corset here'. The alternative was to tie her stomach up with a sulu or lavalava.<sup>65</sup> While he was there, the doctor saw the ageing James Morrison and told him: 'See that you rub your damper and sweeten your tea with Vegemite to keep you strong'.<sup>66</sup> The doctor was obviously unaware of what the people could obtain from the store. In any event, as one old woman recalled, Torres Strait Islanders had never heard of Vegemite before the war.<sup>67</sup> Another soldier applied for leave to help his pregnant wife who was not well enough to cut firewood, wash clothes, work in the garden, cook food, look after two young children and walk long distances each day to get water and firewood.<sup>68</sup> The military supported the women with regard to health as best they could. However, when they had their babies, they looked first to their old midwives.

#### Babies born in a war zone

Childbirth had always been women's business in Torres Strait.<sup>69</sup> This custom was respected by the government until about 1935. The women explained that their midwives were locally trained: 'The old women said to me, "You must try to deliver babies", and I went to learn. We sat near the old one and trained from her'.<sup>70</sup> A Saibai woman recalled how she watched her grandmother at work, but she could not become a midwife: 'My fingers were too fat. You have to have long thin hands to get the baby out'.<sup>71</sup> Midwives had their own bush medicines. For instance, a poultice of Wongai tree leaves would be placed on the woman's stomach to give relief during labour; or

*if the baby was cleared but that lump [the afterbirth] was still inside...we always used the bush medicine. You*

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<sup>65</sup> This solution was not as strange as might appear today. A special maternity corset was worn by many white women at that time.

<sup>66</sup> Int. 068.

<sup>67</sup> Int. 161.

<sup>68</sup> Notes for leave recommendations, 22 November 1943, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>69</sup> Haddon, Reports, Vol. 1, p. 107; Int. 079. A nun who was on the Catholic Mission on Keriri (Hammond Island) in 1941 said the women's childbirth practices were a private affair: 'I don't think they went to hospital...they helped one another. We didn't ask those things...Maybe they went to T.I. if there were complications' (Interview 034, Sydney, December 1989).

<sup>70</sup> Int. 123.

<sup>71</sup> Int. 079.

*break this grass, smash it well, and put it in a banana leaf, put it in the ashes and wait for one hour and take it out and the midwife tied it over the tummy to smash that lump.*<sup>72</sup>

*'That's all the medicine they had. Nothing from T.I.'*<sup>73</sup> If a midwife was not available, the woman might deliver her own baby: *'Some women were lucky, some were unlucky like when it was time for the birth and she was in pain, lucky if she had a midwife close and if no one was there, she just cleared it herself'.* As mentioned previously, about 1935, the government decided that when it might be anticipated a woman would have a difficult birth, she was to be brought to the Thursday Island Hospital. This too was fraught with danger:

*There were no medical doctors [on the communities] and boats had to get them in. From Erub and Mer we lost a lot of our people, the women gave birth half way. There were just sailing boats. Sometimes it was calm and they had to row the dinghy and tow the boat and the women just died. I saw how we lost our people. It was so sad to sit there and know what was going to happen.*<sup>74</sup>

In their wartime circumstances, the risks associated with childbirth were even greater for the women.

Confinements frequently took place in bush huts. The midwife, who had to come on foot, might not get there in time. There is also no evidence in the Thursday Island hospital's records that any of the women were taken there to have their babies from 1942.<sup>75</sup> Some women on St. Paul's, and undoubtedly other communities, risked the danger of leaving the bush and returning to their village houses to have their babies.<sup>76</sup> People talked about women dying in childbirth:

*I remember my brother's wife...during the war...she gave birth and she was there all day and the women were there trying to do what they could to help her. She was just there all day, until four or five in the afternoon. The baby was delivered and the mother died.*<sup>77</sup>

A woman on Nagi gave birth prematurely in the bush without a midwife. While it was extremely dangerous to do so, the mother and baby were transported to Badu in a dinghy to get Mrs. Curtis's help. The mother died but the baby survived on milk collected every day from

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<sup>72</sup> Int. 087.

<sup>73</sup> Int. 064.

<sup>74</sup> Int. 053.

<sup>75</sup> See Thursday Island Hospital Registers, 1942-1944, Thursday Island.

<sup>76</sup> Int. 118.

<sup>77</sup> Int. 053.

nursing mothers in the different bush villages.<sup>78</sup> A Ugar man took no chances. He rowed a dinghy to Masig about a month before his wife was due to have her baby and returned with the midwife.<sup>79</sup>

The signallers and Turner were sometimes called to help with deliveries.<sup>80</sup> No reason was given for these breaches of the tradition that childbirth was women's business, perhaps because these men were white and therefore were not seen as bound by the usual cultural expectations, particularly in the women's desperate wartime circumstances. Such breaches would have been unacceptable in previous decades: 'definitely no men were present'.<sup>81</sup> The government's intervention a few years earlier paved the way for the women to feel freer about accepting these men's help when there was no midwife to do the job. Indeed, it seems that there was a shortage of island trained women during the war. The Protector had suggested in 1935:

as the women get more European ideas childbirth is becoming increasingly difficult. When the birth is normal, the native midwife is good; when complications arise, she does not know what to do and is afraid to do anything on her own initiative, for if her treatment fails she is blamed for everything that has gone wrong.<sup>82</sup>

The women's testimonies certainly did not indicate this was the case.

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<sup>78</sup> Int. 095. Mothers acted as wet nurses for other women who could not feed their babies and babies were left with wet nurses while mothers worked in their gardens and the mothers would give the wet nurses a share of their produce (Personal communication with St. Paul's woman, Thursday Island, December 1988).

<sup>79</sup> Int. 028. Untrained women also helped with deliveries. Peel reported that army nurses who went to St. Paul's in 1945 were astonished to learn that two girls of about twenty had delivered a woman's twins (Peel, Isles of the Torres Strait, p. 120).

<sup>80</sup> Colwill to Burge, 10 June 1949, AWM54, 428/6/15, A.W.M. (Canberra); Int. 106.

<sup>81</sup> Int. 079.

<sup>82</sup> A.R., Aboriginals Department for year ended 31 December 1935, Q.P.P. 1936, Vol. 1, p. 1036. About this time, the medical officer on Thursday Island called for a 'scheme of training' for Torres Strait Islander midwives, although I found no evidence that any training was given. The women made it very clear that the knowledge was passed down by the old midwives to their trainees.

Their recollections were that their midwives were very capable women.<sup>83</sup> However, their white colonisers had persistently denigrated the people's knowledge. With their interference in the women's childbirth practices, how else were potential trainees to interpret the worth of their knowledge in this area? Thus, it is understandable that an army officer reported there was only one old midwife practising on Badu in 1944, and that she was finding it difficult to 'secure a good learner'.<sup>84</sup>

For almost two years, island women along with a handful of unqualified outsiders were responsible for the health care of those left on the outer islands in March 1942. Island midwives carried on their work as best they could considering the wartime environment and depleted numbers. However, after this period of very basic health care, hospitals were established in outer Torres Strait and young island women worked in these western institutions for the first time. The future for better health care in Torres Strait began to look brighter.

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#### The Badu and Masig hospitals

The army gave the Director assurances that its personnel would 'watch the interests of the Department in caring for and protecting the civilian Islanders'. This would have been a difficult undertaking to fulfil in the desperate and chaotic circumstances which pertained in Torres Strait during 1942 and most of 1943.<sup>85</sup> The army could not afford to release personnel solely for that purpose and their help during the period was intermittent. In early

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<sup>83</sup> Island midwives were described as 'very smart'; 'wonderful and very understanding too' (Int. 143; Interview 104, Mabuiag, May 1990). A signaller remembered Barney Mosby telling him: 'Those old women bring those small babies out proper nice' (Sig. 3). An army officer who did a health survey on Badu had the opportunity of seeing a midwife at work and his comment was that she did 'a good clean job' (Reports: Compiled by army survey teams for all communities, 12-30 August 1944, Native Affairs, Thursday Island, TR1227, Health conditions Torres Strait District, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.)

<sup>84</sup> Reports: Army survey teams, Survey Badu, 12-13 August 1944, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>85</sup> Director of Native Affairs to Under Secretary, Department of Health and Home Affairs, 15 June 1944, p. 1, Native Affairs Thursday Island, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.



1943, island councillors had their first opportunity to express to the Governor their concerns: the people were 'without proper medical help of any sort, and...several on Badu had died for lack of that help'.<sup>86</sup> Then when the Queensland Public Service Commissioner and the Director visited Badu, they too were made aware of the health problems of the people and the difficulties experienced getting even medical supplies to the outer islands because of a drastic shortage of staff at the Board's store.<sup>87</sup> In response, two officers were sent from Brisbane in July to assist Curtis in the administrative work. However, it was not until November 1944 that there was 'sufficient' staff on Badu to do the work with reasonable efficiency. Meanwhile, transmission of medical supplies through the Badu store to the outer islands remained unreliable.<sup>88</sup>

After the Director's visit in May, Mrs. Curtis, a qualified nurse, expressed her professional opinion that there had been a deterioration in the health of the people and called for a determination of the situation.<sup>89</sup> The Prime Minister was requested on 29 September 1943 to make a team of army doctors available to survey the health of the outer island people. The subsequent reports were not completed until May 1944.<sup>90</sup> In the interim, the appalling lack of medical help on the outer islands forced the Queensland Government to authorise the establishment of two hospitals in Torres Strait to be supervised by army personnel.

A sixteen-bed hospital was set up on Badu to serve the Western Islanders in September 1943. Mrs. Curtis was appointed matron.<sup>91</sup> Then, in October, a 'dressing station' was established on Masig in readiness for the opening of a hospital to serve the Central and Eastern Islanders. It was opened in December. The army freed sail-

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<sup>86</sup> Report: Government of Queensland, 28 April 1943, p. 3, Gov/93, Q.S.A.

<sup>87</sup> Director to Under Secretary, 15 June 1944, p. 1, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A. The Dogai store, as it was known, on Badu was the main store in outer Torres Strait and all goods to the other community stores were relayed through Badu. The skeleton staff which had been left there in 1942 was totally inadequate to do the work involved.

<sup>88</sup> Director of Native Affairs to Under Secretary, Department of Health and Home Affairs, 22 September 1943, Native Affairs Thursday Island, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>89</sup> Director to Under Secretary, 22 September 1943, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>90</sup> Director to Under Secretary, 15 June 1944, p. 1, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

powered vessels to carry people from other islands to Masig for this momentous occasion. One woman said that there was so much excitement about the opening that those travelling to Masig *'didn't even think about the Japanese shooting at the boat'*.<sup>92</sup> A TSLI man recalled: *'We were happy...there was turtle and fish for feasting and island dancing'*.<sup>93</sup> What the hospital meant to mothers was expressed in a letter written by a mother to her son in the TSLI telling him that sick children could now receive hospital attention and dental care.<sup>94</sup> Torres Strait Islanders had good reason to be happy about the opening of the two hospitals in Torres Strait. While they had not lost faith in many of their island remedies, they realised that they would now have easier access to the western medicines and treatments they had come increasingly to rely upon in their changing lifestyle.

Having their own hospitals also meant that for the first time some young women could receive training in a western health care institution. It too, would become another avenue of paid employment on the islands. An old Masig woman recalled that she was only seventeen when the hospital was opened. She took a job there as a cook until she realised that perhaps there were benefits in learning about western health care: *'I joined to be a nurse because I might learn something for my children'*.<sup>95</sup> However, because a white matron could not be recruited for the Masig Hospital, trainee island nurses were sent to Badu: *'Nurses from every island came to train. They learnt from Mrs. Curtis...then they chose whether to be a nurse'*.<sup>96</sup> The training was basic: *'She did all the injections but she taught them how to make beds and bath people'*.<sup>97</sup> A Badu woman recalled that *'every fortnight when the doctor came out he gave us lectures'*.<sup>98</sup> The old Masig woman also recalled that she found some aspects of the work embarrassing to perform. Young white servicemen were dropped off at Masig from naval convoys transporting troops to

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<sup>92</sup> Int. 149.

<sup>93</sup> Int. 080.

<sup>94</sup> Report: Army Intelligence week ending 12 December 1943, Written records 1939-45 War, AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>95</sup> Int. 072. This woman's experience in the hospital helped her conquer some of her inhibitions about the western society. She moved to Thursday Island after the war and she has given her children and grandchildren a positive approach to that world without forsaking her own culture.

<sup>96</sup> Int. 093.

<sup>97</sup> Int. 095.

<sup>98</sup> Int. 093.



(Top) View of the old Badu Hospital across the water (1990)  
 (Bottom) Badu Hospital housing Papuan families in 1990

New Guinea: 'They passed through, they felt sick mostly when they got lumps in the groin [a symptom of a septic wound]'. She was the youngest nurse and Turner told her to bath them: 'I was scared', she said, 'they were big tall men. They said, "Miss...when you come just pull the pants down and do your job"'. She thought Turner gave her the job because he 'had that silly idea that the older ones have this dirty thought, so I had to bath those fellas'.<sup>99</sup> What Turner had in mind is not certain. Did Turner think that a seventeen year old was too naive to get 'dirty thoughts'? If the older ones were more likely to be provocative, did he think that the men would respond and miscegenation might occur, something white Australia was strongly opposed to?<sup>100</sup> Despite these inhibitions, most of the young women adapted well to their new work environment. Bugun Mosby took charge of the hospital on Masig during Turner's absence on leave in early 1945, in recognition for which her wages were raised from £3.10s.0d. to £10 a month.<sup>101</sup> From these basic beginnings, Torres Strait Islander women, like Bugun, Timena Tamwoy, also on Badu, and Bakoi Baud on Mer might have expected that after the war they would be able to further their nursing careers.<sup>102</sup>

The hospitals' staff worked under difficult conditions and improvisation was often the name of the game. Delays in deliveries of drugs from the Health Department in Brisbane continued and frequently Matron Curtis was forced to look to the army for supplies.<sup>103</sup> When the Masig pantry was down to a 'few Red Cross

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<sup>99</sup> Int. 072.

<sup>100</sup> Noel Loos, 'Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Australian Society', in Loos and Osanai (eds), Indigenous Minorities, p. 17.

<sup>101</sup> Reports: Army survey teams, Survey Badu 12-13 August 1944, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.; Report: Protector 30 April 1945, p. 13, AUD/W146, Q.S.A.; Acting Protector at Badu to Director of Native Affairs, 27 January 1945, Personal Files, W.C.V. Turner, Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, Brisbane.

<sup>102</sup> Even though Major G.R. Beattie, the army 'physician specialist', thought that some of the young women would have been 'quite satisfactory' as matrons after appropriate nursing training, his vision for fully-equipped post-war hospitals in Torres Strait (see subsequent discussion) did not come to fruition. Timena, Bugun and Bakoi did not get the opportunity to become qualified nursing sisters. Bakoi and Bugun went to the Palm Island Hospital for a period in 1950.

<sup>103</sup> Report: Medical Conditions by Col. G.N. Robinson, 22 May 1944, p. 2, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

supplies', Turner bartered for food with passing American warships.<sup>104</sup> Overcrowding in the hospitals was frequent: for instance in January 1944 there were thirty-nine patients in the fifteen-bed Badu hospital. Basic equipment, such as sterilisers, was lacking increasing the potential for the spread of disease. The communities without hospitals also had desperate medical needs. Finally, the Director conceded that something had to be done for these people: 'they [could] not be left indefinitely to their own resources'. Medical aid centres (MACs, pronounced M.A.C.s), medical aid posts (MAPs, pronounced M.A.P.s) as they became known after the war, were set up on Erub and Mer. They were subsequently expanded into 'cottage hospitals' with beds for two or three in-patients. Late in 1944, when Philip Frith and his wife were sent to Saibai, they opened a small hospital with Mrs. Frith as matron. It served the three Top-Western Islands.<sup>105</sup> However, when it proved impossible to recruit white nursing sisters for the two other cottage hospitals, Bakoi Baud on Mer and John Pau on Erub were placed in charge.<sup>106</sup> On the remaining communities, medicines were dispensed by untrained Torres Strait Islander teachers.<sup>107</sup> These were non-prescriptive type medicines but their distribution was not without risk. For instance an adult dose might be prescribed for a child or no warning given that aspirin be taken strictly in accordance with instructions given. Reflecting on this, an old leader said:

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3. Craft goods made by the women were probably items of barter.

<sup>105</sup> Director to Under Secretary, 15 June 1944, p. 2, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>106</sup> A few males did some work in western health care in cottage hospitals just before the war (see p. 261). An old Meriam woman remembered that she first became interested in nursing when she saw Bakoi Baud stitch a little boy's head. When the white teachers returned to the outer islands after the war, they resumed control of health care, although they were sometimes assisted by Torres Strait Islander 'nurses' (including at least one man who had done medical training in the army). The Meriam woman had three months' training in the hospital on Thursday Island and nursed on various communities in Torres Strait as well as the Aboriginal hospital at Lockhart River, but it was not until 1979 that she was given full charge of nursing on Mer: 'Mrs. Anderson was my friend. She told me, "I am the last government nurse here. Next year you will be on your own. You can have the job and you can put the drugs in your own frig in the MAP."' (Int. 056).

<sup>107</sup> Reports: Army survey teams for all communities, 12-30 August 1944, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A. Very small communities like Nagi and Mauar continued to rely heavily on their own bush medicines.

*It's bad enough to pick up someone from the road to teach my kid, but when you take someone from the road, not trained, and put him in charge of medicine, you are playing with the lives of my people.*

It was not until the last stages of the war that someone was sent to the islands to instruct those who dispensed seemingly harmless medicines.<sup>108</sup>

The Pacific War again was the catalyst which gave young Torres Strait Islander women opportunities to take new responsibilities, in this instance in a western health care institution. In the final section of this chapter, the discussion turns to some of the wartime health problems, the army's perceptions of them and the revolutionary health scheme formulated by an army doctor who suggested it as the minimum requirement in post-war Torres Strait.

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#### Health problems

When Mrs. Curtis called for a determination of the people's health in mid-1943, she expressed the opinion that the people left on the outer islands were suffering from diseases, such as tuberculosis, anaemia, scabies and hookworm, to a 'greater degree than before the war'.<sup>109</sup> In the first army medical reports completed in May 1944, tuberculosis, malaria and deficiency diseases were stated to be the 'outstanding prevalent diseases'.<sup>110</sup>

Tuberculosis, was first introduced into mainland Australia by Europeans. It was believed that 'consumption', or tuberculosis, had accounted for up to half the deaths in London when the First Fleet left Portsmouth. The disease was transported to Australia with the convicts. By the 1840s, it had had a major impact on Aborigines in Victoria. In 1879, Victoria's chief medical officer expressed the opinion that the disease was due to 'climate, inadequate diet, clothing and medical care'. However, using data from Victoria and Queensland, a subsequent investigation posited that 'contagion' was the cause of the spread of the disease and the lack of segregated

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<sup>108</sup> Int. 065.

<sup>109</sup> Director to Under Secretary, 22 September 1943, p. 1, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>110</sup> Report: Medical Conditions, Robinson, 22 May 1944, p. 5, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

accommodation for the sick was deplored.<sup>111</sup> Torres Strait Islanders too contracted the disease from the outsiders. It became an ongoing problem for the Protector's Department. In Torres Strait, the problem was also seen to be contagion. The disease was aggravated, it was suggested by white doctors, by the peoples' lifestyle. Large families lived in small houses, all sleeping in close proximity to one another. Almost a decade before the war the white teachers recognised that segregation of tuberculosis patients from their families was the only way to reduce the incidence of the disease on the island communities. Even so, nothing was done.<sup>112</sup> The problem was attacked simply by issuing dugong oil free to tuberculosis sufferers and school children. A Masig woman recalled that, as children, they *'had to line up every morning and get a cup of that oil'*.<sup>113</sup> After the medical surveys in 1944, the army, too, became concerned about non-segregation of tuberculosis patients. However, when it proved impossible to secure building materials and suitable equipment from the South to provide such accommodation, the patients were housed in a separate ward in the Badu hospital: *'Mrs. Curtis treated that T.B. with dugong oil, rubbed them with dugong oil and*

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<sup>111</sup> A.J. Proust (ed.), History of Tuberculosis in Australia New Zealand and Papua New Guinea (Canberra, 1991), pp. 63-64.

<sup>112</sup> A.R., Aboriginals Department for year ended 31 December 1933, Q.P.P. 1934, Vol. 1, p. 889. A former matron of the Thursday Island Hospital recalled that tuberculosis got so bad after the Pacific War that the government took over the former Waiben army camp and turned it into a tuberculosis hospital. It had ninety beds which were nearly always full. A doctor came from England to oversee the treatment which was *'long term...six months flat on your back and the foot of the bed elevated'* (Int. 090). At a Premiers' Conference on the mainland in 1944, a Commonwealth proposal for assisting a campaign for the prevention and treatment of tuberculosis was approved (Australia, Senate 1944, Debates, Vol. S180, p. 569). The Commonwealth Parliament subsequently passed the Tuberculosis Act 1945-1946 which made provision for State subsidies to maintain diagnostic facilities (clinics), dispensaries and x-ray equipment. All mainland Australians were required to have chest x-rays. The service was extended to the outer islands in Torres Strait (Int. 065).

<sup>113</sup> Personal communication Masig woman, Cairns, December 1993. It was believed dugong oil contained properties which prevented and remedied tuberculosis.



made them sit in the sun and let it get in. Some survived'.<sup>114</sup> A Badu Islander recalled: 'A lot of people from Central Islands, from Poid, came there, a lot of people died of T.B. Plenty of people were buried there from various islands'.<sup>115</sup>

Malaria too had been an ongoing problem in pre-war Torres Strait. It prevailed during the north-west monsoon especially on Mer, Erub, Boigu and Saibai but how much more serious the incidence of it was when the army made its medical survey in 1944 is difficult to know. Dr. Elkington, the Commissioner of Public Health, surveyed the islands in 1912 but no further report on malaria was made until the army survey team went to outer Torres Strait in 1944.<sup>116</sup> Insecticide campaigns to eradicate the anopheles mosquito which bore the disease had been carried out on these islands. However, on Saibai, described as a 'hot-bed of malaria', the problem of mosquito control presented greater difficulties than on communities like Erub where there were fewer swampy areas and drainage works were carried out with more success.<sup>117</sup> During the war, insecticides and labour to drain swamps were unprocurable and how available drugs like quinine and atebrin were for at least the first eighteen months, is impossible to know. It would be reasonable to conclude that although teachers in Torres Strait, with no medical qualifications, were permitted to distribute them before the war, it was highly unlikely that island 'nurses' would have been allowed to carry supplies and

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<sup>114</sup> Int. 097. Tuberculosis sufferers early this century were 'not expected to recover...All that was available in treating a patient was to provide a constant supply of fresh flowing air, cleanliness and nourishing food. The open air treatment kept the patient out of doors all day and even at night, if a sheltered place was available. The patient was protected from draughts and kept warm' (O'Rourke, A Country Nurse, p. 142).

<sup>115</sup> Interview 094, Badu, March 1990.

<sup>116</sup> M.J. Mackerras and D.F. Sanders, Malaria in the Torres Strait Islands, South Pacific Commission Technical Paper No. 68, p. 4, Anton Brienl Centre, Townsville, 1954. Helen Duncan researching socio-economic conditions in Torres Strait in 1974 stated: 'malaria is unusual in the Strait despite close proximity to Papuan coastal areas where the disease is common' (Helen Duncan, Socio-Economic Conditions in the Torres Strait: A Survey of Four Reserve Islands (Canberra, 1974), p. 28).

<sup>117</sup> A.R., Aboriginals Department for year ended 31 December 1933, Q.P.P. 1934, Vol. 1, p. 889.



distribute them.<sup>118</sup> Thus, an increase in the incidence of malaria was possible and likely but it was something that was beyond the control of the women.

Another health problem which alarmed Mrs. Curtis and the army medical men was malnutrition in the form of such 'deficiency diseases' as beriberi, pellagra, scurvy and gingivitis. The army reports suggested that these deficiency diseases were related to a diet imbalance brought about by the women's 'neglect' of their gardens and lack of protein foods (fish, dugong and turtle). The reports stated that the average diet consisted of 'rice, white flour and canned foods', 'little fishing' was done and the women's gardens 'seem[ed] to be few'. Thus, it was concluded 'instead of the natives living on fish, turtle, dugong, cocoanut [sic], taro, potato, an attempt was made to procure everything from the store'.<sup>119</sup> This was an outsider perspective, one framed by military men with their own white, middle-class values, undoubtedly affected by racist notions of the day, and little or no understanding of the Torres Strait Islanders' beliefs about the causes of sickness and death or even their methods of gardening.<sup>120</sup> The Torres Strait Islanders were certainly unaware of the connection between diet and health until much later:

*These yaws and all that, it was common...I was talking in council and said, "What's happened? We don't get these things any more...sores on the kids' legs and heads". Yes, vitamin deficiency may be. As soon as we drank from that milk scheme, all these things disappeared'.<sup>121</sup>*

The army teams, too, would have had no idea of the women's stringent economic status during at least the first two years of the war.

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<sup>118</sup> The matter of the distribution of atebirin was raised in Commonwealth Debates in 1946 when it was stated: 'medical opinion is that it would be dangerous to allow the distribution to be effected in any haphazard manner, because atebirin must be administered under medical supervision' (Australia, House of Representatives 1946, Debates, Vol. HR188, p. 3090).

<sup>119</sup> Report: Medical Conditions, Robinson, 22 May 1944, pp. 2-4, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>120</sup> Fuary, working with the Yam Islanders as late as the 1980s, stated: 'Generally the vicissitude of death, illness, accident, misfortune or failure are explained by a more comprehensive belief system'. Details of the system were not discussed with outsiders. However, Fuary concluded: 'The Yam Island people feel relatively confident at being able to satisfy misfortune, illness and death by behaviour in certain culturally appropriate ways' (Fuary, *In So Many Words*, p. 280).

<sup>121</sup> Int. 065.

Furthermore, the army men did not take into consideration that, under the prolonged wartime conditions, it had been very difficult for the women to maintain their gardens at the same level of productivity as had been the case before the war. On the Central and Western Islands too gardening had never been a major occupation of the women as it had always been for those on the Eastern Islands. Moreover, during the worst period of the war when the women were told to keep away from the shoreline and with their boats beached or impressed, they had found it hard to keep up their families' intake of the protein obtained from sea foods. Perhaps what was even more damaging to the credibility of the outsider perception was that the army admitted it had been impossible, in the time allotted and with the men available, to do a proper health survey of all of the islands. Colonel Robinson, in concluding his summary of the medical reports, stated that a complete survey of the people's health would have been a 'huge task' requiring several medical men over a period of twelve months, something beyond the army's medical capabilities and manpower resources. He further stated that it would be 'dangerous to draw conclusions from the evidence available'. Yet the army did, and damning ones too.<sup>122</sup>

The argument is not that the army was wrong in its assessment or that the women were right when they said that they worked hard in their gardens and that they bought little from the store: *'We were eating mostly bush tucker and we were healthy'; 'That's why we were so healthy, we never had anything sweet to eat or drink'*.<sup>123</sup> Nor would it be reasonable to suggest that the inclusion of European foods into the people's diet had not affected their health.<sup>124</sup> This contradictory evidence comes from two defensible positions, in Ankersmit's terms, two incommensurable language games.<sup>125</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>122</sup> Report: Medical Conditions, Robinson, 22 May 1944, p. 2-3, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>123</sup> Int. 069; Int. 087; Int. 102.

<sup>124</sup> In the 1930s, there had been concern about malnutrition among mainland children. A Commonwealth Health report, made in 1935, suggested that 'widespread' malnutrition in industrial areas had been caused by 'the lack of balance in...diet, due perhaps in the practice of appeasing the hunger in growing children with excesses of carbohydrates'. The children needed a pint of milk each day, but 'poverty, not ignorance' was the reason for its omission in their diet (Australia, House of Representatives Debates 1940, Vol. HR165, pp. 710-711). Poverty was no less a problem for Torres Strait Islander families prior to and during the Pacific War.

<sup>125</sup> See Chapter two - Cultural interchange.

if the women had a simplistic view of their situation, so too did the white observers. The matter was too complex to lay the blame for the health of the Torres Strait Islanders during the war at anyone's feet. And, how much it had deteriorated was impossible to say with any accuracy in the absence of thorough prior and wartime surveys. Nevertheless, the Torres Strait Islanders' aspirations for better health care had been recognised by the army.

#### The revolutionary health care scheme

It was still a year before the Japanese surrender when an Inter-Island Councillors' Conference was held on Masig in August 1944 at which a scheme for post-war medical services, designed by Major G.R. Beattie, the army's most senior medical officer on Thursday Island, was presented for approval. It was a comprehensive, and revolutionary, scheme, one which Major Beattie stated he was prepared to recommenced as 'essential [emphasis added] for the Torres Strait District'. It envisaged fifty-bed, fully equipped hospitals on both Badu and Masig with midwifery wards, labour rooms and special wards for infectious diseases; nurses' quarters and doctors' residences. Young Torres Strait Islander women would be trained in these hospitals to double certificate level to provide a pool of qualified nurses for the main hospitals, cottage hospitals and MACs. It was envisaged that Torres Strait Islanders would also train as doctors on the mainland and then return to the islands. To meet the needs of tuberculosis patients, a separate sanatorium would be provided with annual radiological surveys of everyone. A dental unit would be set up within each hospital complex. The scheme provided for improved housing because Beattie, like the white teachers before the war, was concerned that the incidence of disease, particularly tuberculosis, could not be reduced if the 'present habit' of sleeping huddled together, with all doors and windows closed because of their continued fear of puripuri, persisted. Beattie believed 'appropriate education' would dispel these fears. Swamp drainage, larval destruction, the use of nets and repellents were recommended aids to malarial control. He also prepared 'notes on diet insufficiency' and proposed an awareness campaign on the importance of vitamin rich foods, such as wholemeal flour and brown rice, and that tinned foods be kept in 'scarce supply'. There was a need for more fresh green vegetables, such as spinach, and new crops like peanuts, rich in vitamin B: 'Education again [was] the key to this problem', it was

suggested, as it was for better hygiene and sanitation.<sup>126</sup>

The Torres Strait Islander councillors expressed their unanimous approval of the scheme and in their enthusiasm to have it come to fruition agreed to the imposition of a tax on all wage earners to help defray the cost.<sup>127</sup> Thus, after two generations of Queensland Government administration, it was left to an army doctor to take the health of the Torres Strait Islanders seriously enough to commit himself to design and recommend a scheme which would meet the health needs of the island communities. Moreover, he saw his scheme as the minimal level acceptable to maintain these communities in a healthy state.

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From March 1942 until 1945, Torres Strait Islander women played major roles in health care on their communities. When the Department's officers and the white teachers were suddenly withdrawn in 1942, young women took responsibility for the medical work the white teachers had performed and island outlawed bush medicine was widely practised. As the war progressed, new opportunities opened up for young women in hospitals, MAPs and cottage hospitals. Major Beattie's revolutionary scheme of health was enthusiastically received and confirmed the people's desire for better health care. At the end of the war these developments in health care gave the people even more reason to be optimistic about a better life after the war.<sup>128</sup> However, in reality, almost insurmountable barriers were in place for decades to come which prevented island women gaining full nursing qualifications, and an appropriate health scheme was not instituted in Torres Strait until 1991.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Suggested Scheme: for Organisation of Medical Services in Torres Strait Area, Major G.R. Beattie, 31 August 1944, pp. 1-4, Native Affairs Thursday Island, TR1227, Bundle 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>128</sup> Today, sixty per cent of Torres Strait Islanders over fifty suffer from diabetes (Personal communication with Sister in Charge of Tuberculosis Clinic, Calvary Hospital, Cairns, January 1994). The modern-day concern is for diabetic foods at affordable prices on the outer island communities.

<sup>129</sup> See Gaffney, Somebody Now, p. 27; Torres News, 28 June-4 July 1991, p. 13.

## Chapter eleven

### Breaking down barriers

With their heavy wartime responsibilities in providing for large families, it was surprising to learn that Torres Strait Islander women found time to carry on many of their customs, to feast and dance and to socialise with the white soldiers who came to the communities. In this chapter, the focus is on the sorts of social outlets they had. Finally, a few old people recall what happened when the bells rang out to announce that peace had returned.

Rationing and shortages were only the beginning of the season of austerity which had descended upon all mainland Australians by mid-1942. In August, Prime Minister Curtin sounded the warning that, although the threat of imminent attack no longer existed, the enemy was, nonetheless, 'waging a war to the death' and the allied forces had the gigantic task of pushing him all the way back to Japan.<sup>1</sup> To further finance the allied cause, Curtin launched his £100 million Austerity Loan campaign and called the nation to support it to the fullest. To do so, he declared, 'every selfish, comfortable habit, every luxurious impulse' had to go.<sup>2</sup> His government introduced initiatives toward this end. Suburban housewives with large families were immediate victims. Already juggling food and clothing coupons under difficult shopping conditions, and perhaps holding down a job as well, they were further inconvenienced when meat, grocery, milk, greengrocery and bread deliveries were prohibited. It was a common sight to see them, like 'tired packhorses', lugging home the family supplies stretching to the limit that wartime invention, the string bag.<sup>3</sup> Curtin was a man with a 'selfless sense of duty' and with this attitude he led Australia through the greatest crisis in its history.<sup>4</sup> However, the call for mainland civilians to follow his leadership and adopt the most stringent lifestyle possible, proved more difficult to implement than he must have imagined. Many people ignored Curtin's impassioned plea for individual self-sacrifice and a thriving black market emerged. Taxes were placed on entertainments and one meeting in every four was cut from the racing calendar, a sacrifice only a nation of gamblers would appreciate. However, it proved easier to stop delivery carts than deter crowds and

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in McKernan, All In!, p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Hasluck, Government and the People, pp. 270-271.

<sup>3</sup> Long, Six Years War, p. 114; Patsy Adam-Smith, Australian Women at War (Melbourne, 1984), p. 335.

<sup>4</sup> Crowley, New History of Australia, p. 464.



1943 - Sending the Japanese home

investments at the race tracks: where records in both were recorded.<sup>5</sup> Many mainland Australians saw no need to follow Curtin's lead to be self-sacrificial. Indeed, some relief from the oppressive wartime environment was generally considered imperative.

They were heady days for young mainland women. Wartime demands on labour enabled many to break away from the controlling influence of home. They had none of the worries associated with the housewife's lot and fun and excitement was not hard to find. Australian and American troops constantly passed through cities and towns on their way to the front and they looked for female company.<sup>6</sup> The influx of thousands of American servicemen impacted quite dramatically upon the more conservative Australian society. Entertainment in America was a seven-day phenomenon so that Australian cities and towns were dreary places for United States servicemen on Sunday leave: there was nothing to do but 'mooch about the streets'.<sup>7</sup> The idea of introducing Sunday entertainment was strenuously opposed by the Australian Council of Churches: to 'scrap' Sunday, the President declared, would be to damage the soul of the country.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the government finally allowed Sunday dances, theatres, films, concerts and sports for the entertainment of troops and their friends only.<sup>9</sup> In the North, many young women found Townsville a particularly exciting place to be. There were dances every night: 'the Americans had a lot of dances...and we'd get...invited', a woman from that city recalled. In Sydney too: 'It was dance, dance, dance all the time...There was a lot of laughter, a lot of talk. Everybody seemed in a hurry to live'.<sup>10</sup> Young women who went out with the Americans found them 'different from the Aussie boys [who] didn't know how to flatter girls...the Yanks used to say lovely things and buy you candy and all sorts of things...[it] was

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Hasluck, Government and the People, pp. 270-271.

<sup>6</sup> In April 1942, there were 38 000 American troops in Australia. By June 1943, it was estimated that the figure was 120 000 (Penglase and Horner, When War Came to Australia, pp. 102, 169).

<sup>7</sup> 'Service Men Advocate Sunday Films', Courier Mail, 11 May 1942, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> 'Protest by Churches on Sunday Sport', Courier Mail, 22 May 1942, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Rosemary Campbell, Heroes and Lovers: A question of national identity (Sydney, 1989), pp. 172, 180. Curtin suggested that if the Americans did not enjoy 'high teas and community singing' on Sundays, they should have the entertainments they were used to at home.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Copeman and Vance (eds), "It was a different town", pp. 52-53.

terribly exciting in those days [and] we weren't used to hearing other accents'.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the inevitable happened, some Australian women fell in love and married American men although the happiness of the event was marred for some families by the thought of their daughters' emigration. As one bride recalled: 'My mother felt that if I went to America she'd never see me again'.<sup>12</sup> America was a long way away. The majority of Australians had not even travelled interstate so that they had gained their impressions of other places, especially America, from films and magazines. Rural mothers were less likely to have to face this scenario. Young men were 'a rare sight' in the country and at dances women were partnered by teenage boys or older men.<sup>13</sup>

The social life of many mainland women, however, was not so exciting. Mothers, wives and fiances of absent servicemen put their lives on hold. Those with children had respite only if grandparents or friends assisted. Child-minding centres were not the respectable option they are today.<sup>14</sup> Older women found companionship amongst peers with whom they did voluntary work to aid the war effort or, if in paid employment, they looked to female workmates and friends: 'We had staff parties...We'd get group bookings at His Majesty's Theatre...We also had our sport'.<sup>15</sup> But, there were women all around the country for whom social life had lost much of its meaning. They had loved ones in prisoner of war camps, listed missing or lying wounded in a foreign hospital. Other women's lives were devastated by news of a death.

In diverse ways, mainland women handled their need to find temporary relief from the oppressive wartime environment. Something of this has just been sketched. The testimonies of the Torres Strait Islander women, indicate what relief they had from the fear and uncertainty with which they lived from 1942 until 1945.

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<sup>11</sup> Audrey Elliot, Audiotaped Interview.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Penglase and Horner, When the War Came to Australia, p. 115.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in D. Connell, War at Home, p. 121.

<sup>14</sup> The government subsidised a few kindergartens for the children of women working in wartime industries but the subsidies came to an abrupt end when peace returned. There was strong opposition to them, primarily from the churches: '[kindergartens] undermined the family' (see Allport, 'Left Off the Agenda', pp. 13-15).

<sup>15</sup> Cited in D. Connell, War at Home, p. 114.



### The island work/play ethic

Remote from the mainland, Torres Strait Islander societies had no sophisticated entertainment facilities, such as dance halls, theatres, sports grounds and race tracks. Indeed, Torres Strait Islander institutions of work and play were not as compartmentalised as those of the white mainlanders.<sup>16</sup> Play was totally compatible with the working lives of the island people. It was, according to one old man, 'a life of doing something, work and play together - we laugh and sing while we work'.<sup>17</sup> There were council, or public, days set aside for work in the communities. It was done without wages: 'All the village worked together, men and women, not one would stay away', the late Jerry Anau wrote. On the completion of large village projects:

*The women always prepared food; it is also an important custom that those who come together to work should eat together afterwards. Along with that custom went the dancing, a brief celebration to share joy at the achievements of the day. In the same way house builders were not paid in cash, they helped each other in their turn. When a house was complete it was a time of great rejoicing, a feast would be held.*<sup>18</sup>

Rod Kennedy, the linguist who has spent many years on Saibai, described the way people on the communities did much of their work: 'In Torres Strait culture, work appears to be socially motivated. Rather than working mainly to get money, Islander people work mainly because of the way they are related to those around them in the work situation'. Groups, under the 'fatherly oversight of an older "relative"', had a sort of football team spirit and anyone who did not keep up was given a 'light-hearted ribbing'.<sup>19</sup> Women did much of their work with the same team spirit - on public days, preparing for feasts, building fish traps or plaiting matting walls for houses, generally under the motherly oversight of the older women. During

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<sup>16</sup> Dawn May indicated that the Aboriginal notion of work also 'defied capitalist penetration'. Those on cattle stations in the North did not 'compartmentalise their activities into work and leisure' (Aboriginal Labour, p. 87).

<sup>17</sup> Int. 064. These words in no way diminish the women's claims that their lives had always been 'a lot of hard work'.

<sup>18</sup> Jerry Anau, 'Working Together, Helping each other', in Kennedy et al., Adha Gar Tidi, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Rod Kennedy, 'Islanders: A Different Work Ethic', in Kennedy et al., Adha Gar Tidi, pp. 14-15.

the war, the signallers observed the women when they worked in groups and described the gatherings as 'sort of social occasions'.<sup>20</sup> The co-operative and joyful spirit associated with this work ethic was in contrast to the industrialised western work ethic their colonisers sought to impose on them. Nonetheless, colonisation made inroads into this custom.

Jerry Anau suggested that all the people freely attended public days and that the work concluded with rejoicing. What effect time had had on his memory lenses is unknown. Nevertheless, the custom did lose its voluntariness when attendance on work days was made obligatory by government regulated island by-laws.<sup>21</sup> Penalties were introduced and imposed on those who failed to attend: '*Then you have to clean the street...public day, everybody work...[if not] they give you hard punishment*'.<sup>22</sup> Despite the women's extenuating circumstances during the war, the Meriam court reports reveal examples of this. On 19 June 1942, five women on Mer were charged with '*not being present on a public day*'. They were found guilty and given two days' imprisonment during which time they cleaned weeds from the village square. On 29 October 1943, another ten women were charged with '*not cleaning their street*'. They were discharged with a warning from the council.<sup>23</sup> A Meriam woman recalled that she and

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<sup>20</sup> Sig. 3; see also Sig. 2 and Sig. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Under the Torres Strait Islanders Act, the island councils formulated their own by-laws but they had to be approved by the Director (sections 8(a) and 18(a) of the Act). The people referred to restrictive by-laws, such as the curfew and who could be in someone else's house after dark. The present general perception of these by-laws was that they were oppressive and unnecessary. In 1990, I tried to locate copies of the by-laws but found no trace of them in the Queensland State Archives and enquiries in the then Department of Community Services were in vain. An old Torres Strait Islander said he too had been unable to find copies of them (Personal communication, Thursday Island, May 1990). An old Yam Islander believed that all of the written records of the island councils had been removed and stored in the Cooktown Council's attic in 1942 (Int.053). A senior officer in the Department had the same impression and he rang the Cooktown Council in my presence only to be told there were no such records there (Personal communication with the late Jerry Langevad, Brisbane, November 1988). Int. 066.

<sup>22</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Court Reports: Murray Island 1938-1945, Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, Brisbane. These reports were prepared as exhibits in the Mabo Land Case. For an outline of this ten-year court struggle brought by Torres Strait Islander plaintiffs see Keon-Cohen, Eddie Mabo, High Court of Australia, pp. 2-3.

her friend failed to attend a public day because they had been asked to clean the signallers' house. No reason for their absence was disclosed to the court. Their punishment was 'several days' work in the village'. It was only when the signallers subsequently spoke to Marou that the punishment was waived: 'After that we didn't have to do the work', she said.<sup>24</sup> The humiliating punishment of having the hair cut on one side to 'make you shame' might also be imposed.<sup>25</sup> However, as already suggested, by 1942 a few women saw themselves differently - they were no longer 'working class'. They were full-time store workers which meant they did not have to attend work days. One of these former store workers reminisced: 'Out from school there's no job, you clean the road. When I grew up seeing those women doing the work I said, "I'm not going to do that. I'm going to get a job"'.<sup>26</sup> However, this work was available to only a small number of women. But, with all the talk of freedom before the war, there may have been a general unwillingness on the part of some young women to be forced to do street cleaning.

#### Feasting and dancing

Feasting and dancing generally accompanied all religious and social events on the outer islands.<sup>27</sup> Traditionally, the people's 'religious' dances were performed only on special occasions. For instance, the men danced at death and initiation ceremonies or to celebrate the seasons and turtle harvest time. Secular dances were held on less formal occasions and women could participate in these.<sup>28</sup> These dances, however, were offensive to the Christian sensibilities of the L.M.S. missionary teachers although they had no objection to the people adopting South Sea Island dances. They were

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<sup>24</sup> Personal communication with Meriam woman, Cairns, November 1993.

<sup>25</sup> Int. 066.

<sup>26</sup> Personal communication with Masig woman, Cairns, December 1994.

<sup>27</sup> Beckett, custom and colonialism, pp. 42, 97. No one mentioned that a tombstone opening had been held during the war.

<sup>28</sup> Haddon, 'Ethnography of the Western Tribes', pp. 362, 365.



(Top) Women dancers on Saibia  
 (Bottom) Women dancing at the Cultural Festival on Thursday Island  
 (c1991)

integrated into the Torres Strait Islander culture.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, with their love of dance and song, Torres Strait Islanders might perform at any gathering, whether religious or secular. Unlike their traditional dances, feasting was not considered offensive and it too was incorporated into celebrations on the Christian calendar.<sup>30</sup>

The women made it quite clear that there were many occasions during the war, both religious and purely social, when feasting occurred despite their stringent economic circumstances and fear of Japanese attack. Traditionally, men and women worked together to prepare feasts. The men did the harder manual work, like building the earth ovens, or kapmauri. Nevertheless, the women's self-reliance was expressed proudly by one woman: *'I can dig the kapmauri like a man. I can climb coconut trees to get the leaves for the kapmauri food'*.<sup>31</sup> They carried heavy loads of fruit and vegetables from their gardens, caught fish, crabs and crayfish. A mother turtle might be captured on the beach and eggs collected from nests. These are the basic foods needed for feasting. On the Top-Western Islands, the women sailed in the long canoes with the old men to get dugong. On Nagi and Badu, the women hunted wild pigs and dressed them: *'We butchered them, stabbed them in the throat and get the blood out...We get the hot water and peel the pigs clean, open them up and cut all those things out that are bad and burn them'*.<sup>32</sup> Pig was kapmauried whole, or a Filipino dish, called dinaguan, was made with selected portions cooked in the animal's blood. The night before the feast the younger women prepared the food for cooking under the watchful eyes of the older women whose softly spoken words or facial expressions ensured the job was well done. Kapmauried foods included turtle, dugong, fish, pig, yams, sweet potatoes, pumpkin, sop sop and

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<sup>29</sup> Beckett, custom and colonialism, p. 43. The introduction of European dancing was opposed by the elders because it was seen as bringing persons of the opposite sex into unacceptable proximity. Even when opposition was relaxed after the war, married women were not permitted to dance in this way - an example of rejection of something which did not suit their purposes.

<sup>30</sup> See Judy Kennedy, 'Feasts: Celebration or Obligation?', in Kennedy et al., Adha Gar Tidi, pp. 48-49.

<sup>31</sup> Int. 068. Great quantities of leaves had to be obtained from the tall coconut palms to encase the food cooked in the amais, for making mats for laying out the food and sitting on.

<sup>32</sup> Int. 113.





The earth oven, amai, or kupmauri

damper.<sup>33</sup> It might be wondered how such feasts were prepared by the women in the desperate economic circumstances discussed in Chapter eight. Torres Strait Islanders had little money even before the war but large feasts were either community or family efforts. Every household shared whatever store goods they might have on hand. However, most of the food was locally produced. A former signaller described the first feast he attended:

The food was set out on a very long coconut leaf mat with Barney Mosby at the head of the mat, myself in the place of honour first on the right and Max [the other signaller] on the left. Island councillors and elders were near the head of the table...together with the police sergeant and police constable. The older ladies stayed in the background keeping an eye on the proceedings and supervising. The younger ladies had the job of making sure there was plenty to eat and drink...The men at the VIP end of the table seemed to have a personal serving lady...The males ate for quite a long time. The ladies busied themselves and hovered in the background...Prayers were said. After the males adjourned to the beach under the big almond tree...and once out of the way, I fancy the ladies and children got stuck into the good things to eat.

This feast was not in celebration of a religious or any ordinary social occasion. It was occasioned by a very stressful wartime event. The Island's cutter, the Masiq, was three months' overdue from a trochusing trip. Everyone knew that boats in Torres Strait were no longer safe because enemy planes were in the vicinity. Perhaps Japanese gunners had seen the little cutter and had strafed it. The village lads kept a constant watch for the boat from a large sprawling almond tree which overhung the water at high tide. One day cries of 'sail ho, sail ho' resounded throughout the village. The boys were pointing out to sea. The women ran to the beach, plunged into the sea and waded out until the water was up to their armpits. They waited for the cutter to come closer. Everyone was crying for

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<sup>33</sup>

Kapmauri damper is made by sifting plain flour into a basin, then adding water or milk to make a firm dough which is shaped in a long loaf. The loaf is encased in plaited coconut leaves. Like all food cooked in this manner, the damper is placed on the hot rocks which heat the amai or earth oven. The food is covered with mats, sand and leaves. It is left in the ground for about an hour. A simple recipe for sop sop is: 'crack [a] coconut open and scrape the inside, mix the scraped coconut with water and serve it with cooked pumpkin and cassava' (Thursday Island State High School Students, Our Torres Strait Islands: a cultural adventure (Thursday Island, 1988), p. 27). A more popular recipe for feasts is to wrap the vegetables, flavoured with the scraped coconut cream, in plaited coconut leaves and cook it in the amai.

joy. It was then that the women declared their intention to make a feast in celebration of the safe return of the men.<sup>34</sup> On another occasion, the women on Mer decided to make a feast to celebrate the arrival of the army vessel Reliance carrying Major Keith Colwill, the officer in charge of army signals. However, the occasion was delayed because Colwill mysteriously left the island. Allied aircraft kept flying over the Island and there was a lot of tension among the women. Despite their distress and the potential danger, the women continued to prepare the food and when the Reliance returned everyone feasted.<sup>35</sup>

Welcome home feasts were held when the men returned to the communities on annual leave for two weeks each year. When the boats appeared on the horizon, the women ran to the shore and waited as the men drew nearer.<sup>36</sup> At first, there was weeping: *'The men were glad to be back with their family and the family was glad to receive their sons. Everyone came and cried...that war had never happened before, it was a very bad day when it started'*.<sup>37</sup> The soldiers paraded to the village square before going home to be with their families: *'We stayed with our mothers, fathers and sisters...all the boys were here now and we were happy'*.<sup>38</sup> Shortly, everyone was feasting: *'mothers, wives, sisters, brothers, grandmas and grandpas'*. Men and women danced until dawn.<sup>39</sup> But, their happiness was short-lived: *'We had leave for two weeks...it was a happy time. When we went back it was a hard time'*.<sup>40</sup> These uncertain separations were yet another price paid for the freedom they hoped for when peace returned. The sadness of these occasions lives on in the memories of the old people.

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<sup>34</sup> Very soon after this celebration the little cutter was ordered to leave Masig. The signaller had not forgotten the moving scene on its departure: 'I can remember the picture of Elda [the skipper] leaning out from the transom of the Masig as he sailed the vessel away from [the] Island. The tide was full and I can still see the island ladies and girls up to their necks in the sea waving to the crew as they left for the appointed safe destination, which was Palm Island' (Sig. 3).

<sup>35</sup> Sig. 3. It was subsequently revealed that the Reliance had been called to join the search for survivors from a ship sunk by the Japanese north-west of Mer.

<sup>36</sup> Int. 053.

<sup>37</sup> Int. 064.

<sup>38</sup> Int. 119.

<sup>39</sup> Int. 051.

<sup>40</sup> Int. 127.



Wartime weddings were clearly special times. The old women reminisced, at length, about them. The smallest detail lingered in their minds and they seemed to welcome the opportunity to tell even an outsider about them. One woman recalled that her parents negotiated the wedding with the young man's parents when he came home on leave: *'The families agreed together that we were going to be married. We were there when they talked about it'*. They were engaged at ten o'clock and married at three in the church. Despite these hasty arrangements, the old woman said that they all wore wedding regalia and that a big feast was prepared *'enough to feed the whole village'*.<sup>41</sup> Dancing was not permitted because it was Lent, although the present giving custom was maintained: *'the people came around, they gathered and shook hands with the couple and gave...presents, money or whatever. All the island did this - everyone on the island'*.<sup>42</sup> On some communities church weddings were impossible and many were conducted with less formality:

*The men wore army uniform. The girls only wore ordinary dresses. We could only use one lamp and we were holding it near the wedding couple and the rest walked behind. They had a small feast and six o'clock in the morning they went back to camp. There was no dancing.*<sup>43</sup>

Women from Poid married in the bush at the height of the danger and later on the beach at Kubin where they were setting up a new village. Relations did their best to attend: *'They came from the bush...some came by dinghy or you walked...Another family cannot come...because they were frightened of the enemy'*.<sup>44</sup> Late in the war, guests at one wedding went in dinghies or walked, an hour or so, from Kubin to St. Peter's Church in the old village at Poid so that the couple could have a church wedding.<sup>45</sup> Those couples on St. Paul's who wanted a *'proper wedding'*, risked the danger of leaving the bush to come to the Church in the village.<sup>46</sup> Such testimonies indicate the

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<sup>41</sup> Wedding regalia is frequently borrowed on the outer islands.

<sup>42</sup> Interview 085, Townsville, August 1989. Most of the presents would have been baskets, mats and other craft work. The woman said: *'We went straight to my husband's place - the girl went to live with the husband's parents, you finished with our parents now'*. This *'trend of living with parents'* began to break down after the war. With their military repatriation money, the men were in a better position to provide separate housing for their brides. Some bought army houses at auctions on Nurupai which they transported back to their own islands (Int. 161; Int. 063).

<sup>43</sup> Int. 100.

<sup>44</sup> Int. 071.

<sup>45</sup> Int. 138.

<sup>46</sup> Int. 118.



(Top) Gathering on Mer, turtles in the foreground - woman on the left between the men wearing a Mother Hubbard dress (1942)  
 (Bottom) A bridal procession on Mer (1942)

importance of a Christian Church wedding. Another bride, who with her attendants borrowed their wedding dresses for a formal wedding, said: *'The wedding was very nice...I wore a white dress and I had a bridesmaid, my cousin-sister [daughter of her mother's sister]. My husband wore his army uniform...we feasted and danced until dawn'*.<sup>47</sup> Western wedding regalia was important too. In December 1943, a Masig couple celebrated their wedding a day or so after the opening of the hospital on the Island: *'It was a big wedding. All the people stayed to celebrate with the newlyweds'*.<sup>48</sup> Just as on the mainland, young island couples felt an urgency about their lives. But, as a Purma woman remembered, weddings were *'really sad times, people were crying'*.<sup>49</sup> Everyone knew that the time the couples would have together would be short but marriages brought families together and babies were born. In their fearful wartime circumstances, marriage was a sign of hope for the future.

Feasting not only added richness to island culture it also maintained a sense of social cohesion. It is little wonder that the women made every effort to maintain feasting throughout the war when the continued existence of their culture was very much under threat.

#### Socialising with the outsider

Wartime feasting also helped to break down barriers between the women and the white soldiers who came to the communities. Invitations to feasts had always been extended to white visitors before the war but it was the men who, generally, had hosted the guests. The war gave the women greater responsibility in this respect. A Mabuig woman recalled that when a navy boat anchored off the Island one July 1, the women told her old father: *'We want to invite all the sailors'*. The captain agreed. She said the sailors spent all day on the Island; they feasted and danced and slept there that night: *'It was a happy day'*.<sup>50</sup> The Badu women were just as hospitable to the Air Force men who operated the radar station on Mount Kamat: *'We always invite them when we have a feast'*.<sup>51</sup> Years after the war, Major Keith Colwill recalled the hospitality he received from the Mabuig women and said: *'I can remember a very*

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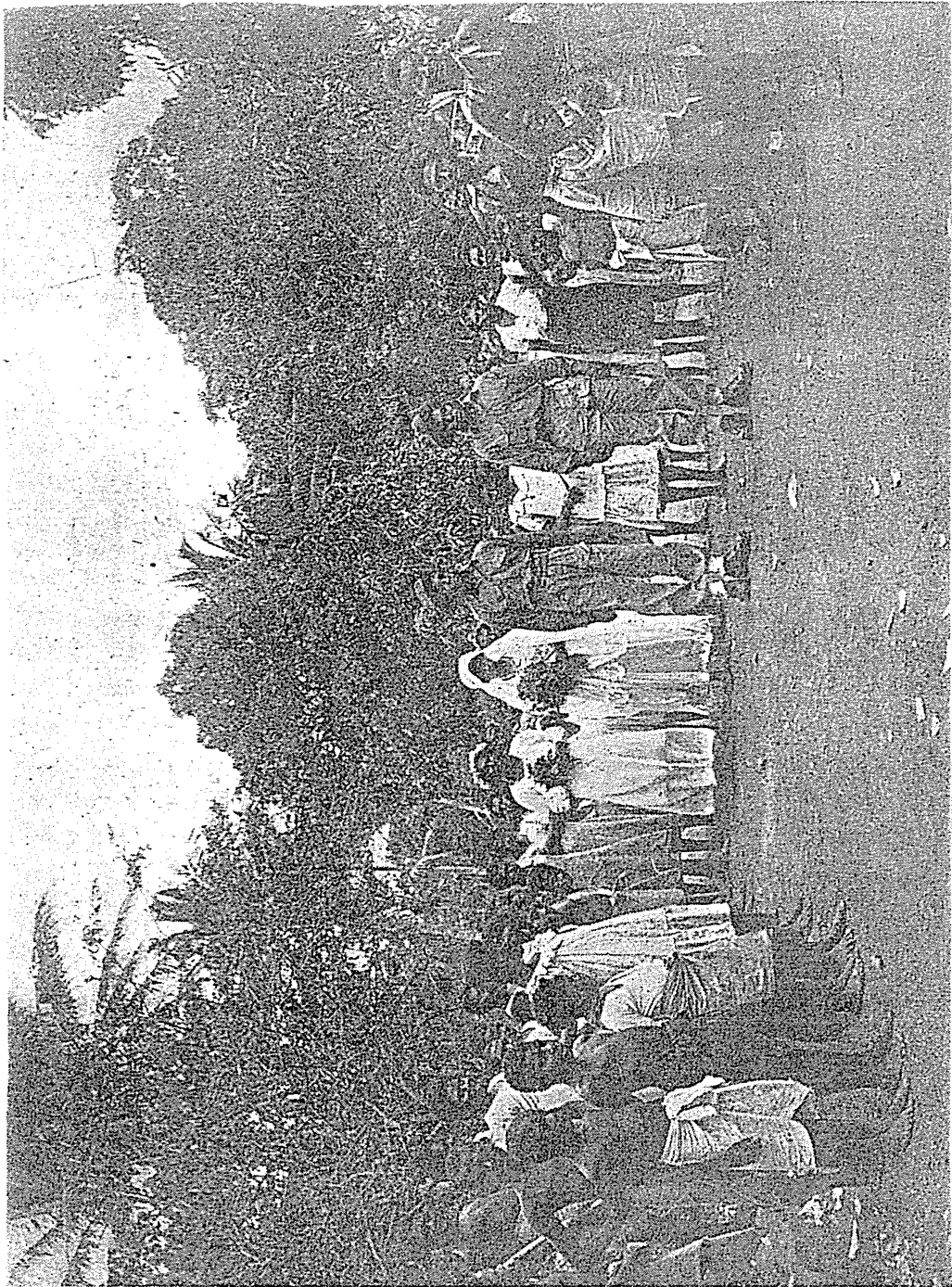
<sup>47</sup> Int. 095.

<sup>48</sup> Int. 080.

<sup>49</sup> Int. 100.

<sup>50</sup> Int. 106.

<sup>51</sup> Int. 131.



A wartime wedding

cordial welcome...the farewell we were given was one to be well remembered. The cries of "Ya-wah [goodbye]" across the water to our ketch were very impressive'.<sup>52</sup> Some of the older men on the communities invited servicemen into their homes for meals. Marou was one. However, his wife refused to depart from her customary role in the presence of strangers: when she was invited to eat with her husband and his military guests, she replied: 'I can't eat with them'.<sup>53</sup>

Some of younger women who, as discussed earlier, had begun to see their life in a new light, probably found it easier to discard that role. A Meriam woman, in her late teens at the time, said she felt quite comfortable about her father inviting signallers to their home for supper:

*They played the guitar and I cooked a cake and...put the tablecloth on the mat [in readiness for a meal]...They taught us games in the moonlight, like, hide the handkerchief...card games, coon-can, five hundred, twos and threes.*<sup>54</sup>

Young Badu women learnt to play 'hookey' from the radar operators.<sup>55</sup> They taught the men island dancing. The signallers were very young in 1942, when they were suddenly torn from families, jobs and education. Older women played special roles in the lives of some of these men. One recalled that he was made to feel very comfortable in his new environment because of the status he was given in one family.<sup>56</sup>

Barney and his wife became my adopted father and mother. It was a fairly disorganised arrangement but they kept a weather eye on me and used to make sure when there was a feast I would sit at the top of the table and ladies were

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<sup>52</sup> Colwill to Burge, 10 June 1949, p. 2, AWM54, 425/6/15, Q.S.A.

<sup>53</sup> Int. 085.

<sup>54</sup> Int. 056.

<sup>55</sup> Int. 131. Hookey was a game played by throwing rings on to a vertical board on a wall.

<sup>56</sup> Island custom was that a husband might give a child to his wife's family as an act of reciprocity for the gift of his wife. A child might be given to a couple with few children and 'especially a male child [was] given to a couple without a male heir' (see Rod and Judy Kennedy, 'Adoption and Marriage', in Kennedy et al., Adha Gar Tidi, pp. 37-44). Island adoptions are still widespread in Torres Strait communities. When an outsider is adopted, she or he shares in the responsibilities and privileges associated with the reciprocal kinship system. In the case of the signaller, he assisted the people and shared his food parcels with them while they gave him food and wood.



(Top) Two signallers on Mer (1942)

(Bottom) Two young Meriam women, Elsie Smith, left, Margaret  
Abednego, right (1942)

elected to look after and serve me.<sup>57</sup>

His adoption into this island family reflected an old custom in Torres Strait, one which was extended to outsiders who were well respected by the adoptive family.<sup>58</sup> There is no suggestion that all of the women socialised to these extents with the white servicemen: some '*had nothing to do with them*'.<sup>59</sup> Why this was so, they did not say. Perhaps some women, because of their fathers' status in the villages, were in a better position to get to know the white men. However, those who socialised with these men obviously gained in confidence in their presence. The stereotype of the white colonial masters who maintained their social distance and superior caste status was being broken down by Torres Strait Islander women and ordinary young mainlanders thrown together by the accident of war.

#### No absolute freedom

Many changes were occurring in the lives of the outer island women which a short time earlier would have been inconceivable. Nonetheless, there was no disruption to the very strict observance of the Sabbath on the outer islands. The people were, by their own designation, '*very religious...With people Sunday is a day of rest, do nothing, no fishing, gardening*'.<sup>60</sup> They had made Christianity their religion and they were complying with the teachings of the new spirituality. Unlike on the mainland, white soldiers who went to the islands did not press for Sunday entertainments. They were content to attend church with the women, children and old people: '*Every Sunday they came to church with us and they made friends with us and mixed up with us and we got to know each other*'.<sup>61</sup> This gave the women another avenue of socialisation with the outsiders.

On their small wartime communities, young Torres Strait Islander women could not break free of parental supervision to the extent that many of their mainland counterparts did. Two Masig women

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<sup>57</sup> Sig. 3.

<sup>58</sup> See Rod Kennedy, 'A Brief Introduction to Torres Strait Culture', in Kennedy et al., Adha Gar Tidi, p. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Int. 075.

<sup>60</sup> Int. 088; Int. 076. A signaller was told by the old men on Masig that even when they were at sea the men were called to worship with a blast from a bu sel on the Masig cutter, the Nancy, and all the vessels in the vicinity gathered for the men to worship. Jim Mosby was the fleet chaplain (Sig. 3).

<sup>61</sup> Int. 097.

explained that they had 'a very tough mother' who kept them from getting into trouble: 'We never had boyfriends...our parents don't like us to run around, we must be where the father and mother are'.<sup>62</sup> Parents knew the consequences of even a hint of an act of immorality by their children. The possibility of this was not avoided because of the war:

*For a breach of any by-law you would go before the courts...Young soldiers came home and there is immorality. They come home in uniform and the bloke thinks he can do what he likes. He says, "I'm in government uniform": but not here you can't.*<sup>63</sup>

An old woman recalled:

*During army time there were problems and the island courts still continued. You must be careful about getting into that trouble because when you get into trouble you are finished for couple of months. They punished you by hard work, put you in jail on the island. They were hard those councillors. They made everything straight...and they kept us from trouble.*<sup>64</sup>

However, even with the strictest island parents, any socialisation between the white servicemen and their daughters carried with it the potential for romantic attachments. But these young women were not free to marry the white men: 'That time we were not allowed to marry or love a white man; that was not allowed - we cannot like a white man', an old woman explained.<sup>65</sup> Marriage between a Torres Strait Islander woman and a white man, indeed with any outsider, was subject

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<sup>62</sup> Int. 146. Parents were obligated to constrain their girls because they could be punished also for their daughters' 'misdemeanours'. Between 1942 and 1945 several charges were laid against both females and males for 'immorality'. Penalties ranged from three to four months' hard labour to fines of from £1 to £2. One charge of immorality was settled in the following manner: 'Request to person to agree for marriage, so they agree to marry' (Court Reports, Murray Island 1938-1945, Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, Brisbane).

<sup>63</sup> Int. 065.

<sup>64</sup> Int. 078. While the people's testimonies indicated that they chafed under the government's paternalistic control as expressed in some of the by-laws, there seems to have been respect for others. Indeed, the old women frequently compared their behaviour as young people under the by-laws with what they saw as the less desirable behaviour of their grandchildren who seemed to them to have a lot of freedom.

<sup>65</sup> Int. 131.



to the Director's approval and this was unlikely to be given.<sup>66</sup> Before the war a Meriam woman was refused that permission when she wanted to marry a Japanese man she loved.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, the law did not stop some young women from seeking romance with the soldiers: 'Some of the girls styled [presented themselves attractively] for the white boys', the old woman continued, but she told them: 'You cannot marry the white ones'.<sup>68</sup> Late in the war, a white employee at the Board's store wanted to marry a young Badu woman. She recalled: 'One white man he liked me because I cooked for him. He asked me to marry him. Mr. O'Leary was the Protector and he said, "She's no half-caste, she's full native". I am full native, so he said, "No"'.<sup>69</sup> As she told her story with a half grin, she gave no indication she thought it had been unfair of him to refuse permission. It is doubtful that women of that generation would have expressed a political opinion on such a matter, especially to an outsider. They accepted the paternalistic decisions of the Director because that was the way they knew things had to be in the hegemonic environment in which they lived. They were powerless to change such things. It was the same for Aborigines on the mainland.<sup>70</sup> Thus, while Torres Strait Islander women were breaking away from some of their restrictive customs, parental control and paternalistic legal constraints still determined who they married.

The social outlets and pressures experienced by some of the younger women did not concern older women and wives of TSLI men.

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<sup>66</sup> See Section 21 of the Torres Strait Islanders Act and Section 19, subsection (1) paragraph (a) of The Aborigines Preservation and Protection Act of 1939 (Qld): No marriage between Islander with any person other than an Islander shall be celebrated without the permission in writing of the Director or of a protector especially authorised by the Director to give such permission.

<sup>67</sup> Int. 160.

<sup>68</sup> Int. 131. With so few men of their own left on the islands, it is understandable that young women might seek the company of the army men. Perhaps they saw marriage to a white man as giving them a new status or as an escape from the restrictive life on the communities. Or, as the old woman said: 'There's only gardening, fishing and love on the islands'. A Meriam woman became engaged to a signaller but she died before any approach was made to the Protector for permission to marry (Sig. 3).

<sup>69</sup> Int. 131.

<sup>70</sup> 'As for us blackfellas, we just accepted that that was the way of it. There was nothing we could do, and who were we going to complain to...?' (Morgan, Wanamurraganyah, p. 103).

They had husbands or sons in the army and for them, as for their mainland counterparts, the men's safety was a constant concern. Moreover, they were obviously busy women with all that had to be done to maintain their families. It seemed it was the old women who kept alive the island custom of story telling. An old priest explained: *'This is the thing that we should do...sit in the one place on mats drawing our children and grandchildren to us for the evening chat where you might tell them a story'*.<sup>71</sup> A Saibai man recalled childhood memories of his father telling stories:

*Story telling is usually done at night time. We have mats set outside on one side and whichever way the wind is blowing we have the fire in front of the wind. The fire is also used to light the father's smoke, twisted black tobacco wrapped in banana leaf. The mother is at one end of the mat, could be weaving a mat, and I will be in the middle of the mat rolling around or listening to father telling the story and of course we will have people from other houses, other relatives, to take part in the story telling.*<sup>72</sup>

During the war, the nights were full of fear. Nonetheless, the custom was not abandoned. An old woman said that *'plenty of old ladies told the children stories all around Torres Strait'*.<sup>73</sup> At night, as everyone huddled together in their stuffy overcrowded bush and village homes by the gentlest flicker of light from a burning strip of calico, the children listened to the old women's stories. Lizzie Nawia, famous for her story telling, told two of her stories.<sup>74</sup> They were scary stories, ones which undoubtedly would have kept the children transfixed. This was another reason for story telling during the dark period of the war: *'We told them stories to make them quiet'*.<sup>75</sup> Thus, story telling, which reflected happier times, also kept the children quiet so that if the Japanese landed at night they would not be attracted to the houses by their noise.

In this chapter, some of the social outlets Torres Strait

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<sup>71</sup> Father John Peter, 'Sitting on the Mat of an Evening', in Kennedy et al., Adha Gar Tidi, p. 32.

<sup>72</sup> Int. 062.

<sup>73</sup> Int. 071. She did not say that the old men played a part in story telling during the war. Perhaps in the absence of so many of the young men, at night the old men were more concerned to be alert for any sign that the enemy had landed on their islands. Traditionally, as warriors, it had been their role to protect the women and children from any attack on their communities.

<sup>74</sup> See Appendix 4 - Stories told by Lizzie Nawia. These stories are incorporated in this thesis as examples of the 'scary' stories told to the children to keep them quiet.

<sup>75</sup> Int. 071.

Islander women had during the Pacific War have been discussed. Despite their circumstances, and to the extent possible, the women maintained many of their social customs. Moreover, in wartime Torres Strait as on the mainland, two cultures were meeting and influencing one another. Each gained a greater awareness of the other and social barriers were breaking down. The impact, of course, was much greater on the island societies because of the small number of Whites who had this experience. Within a few years after peace was declared barriers between Torres Strait Islander women and other members of the outside world would be broken down even further when some of these women left their island communities to live on Thursday Island and later on mainland Australia where interaction with Whites was unavoidable.

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#### Peace returned

On 5 July 1945, John Curtin, the man who had led Australia through the darkest days of its history, died. It was his successor Ben Chifley who proclaimed to the nation on 15 August 1945 the advent of peace. People in cities, towns, hamlets, isolated farms and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, wherever they were, rejoiced. A Newcastle teacher recollected the morning peace was declared: 'We knew it had happened when we heard all the industrial sirens blowing'. A Grafton man remembered that the train went up the mountain, blowing its whistle continuously: 'We could hear the whistle blowing for over an hour...We were very jubilant I can tell you'. 'They hugged in the street and kissed people they had never seen', a New South Wales woman recalled, 'They just went wild...it was wonderful, and sad of course, terribly sad'.<sup>76</sup>

In Torres Strait, peace was announced, appropriately enough by the ringing of church bells. An old woman recalled that on Badu:

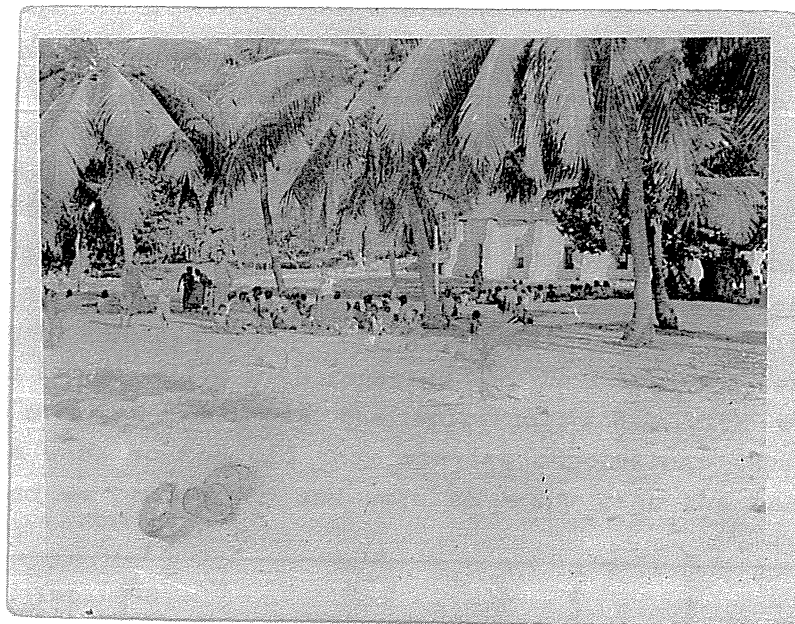
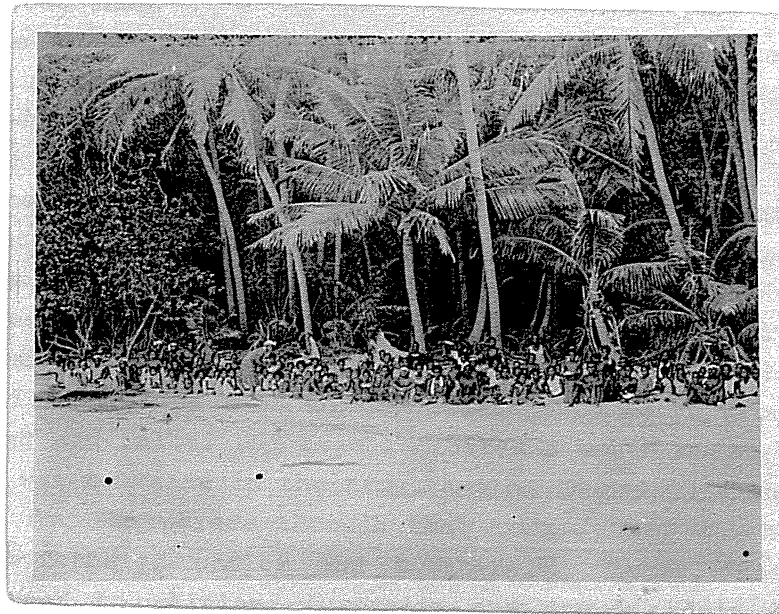
*When peace came they heard the bell. Nobody knew who rang the bell and they [returned to] the village and that was the end of the war, the bell rang. When the bell rang the message came and it was peace.*<sup>77</sup>

For those still in the bush, it was time to go home:

*The noise of the bell went into the bush. When it came to peace and the war was finished everybody in the bush*

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<sup>76</sup> D. Connell, War at Home, p. 133.  
<sup>77</sup> Int. 093.



(Top) Children at a feast on Mer (1942)

(Bottom) A gathering on Mer (church in the background) (1942)

said, "What's that bell ringing at twelve o'clock for?" After that we had to carry things coming out from our bush houses, taking planks and making floors. People came out then.<sup>78</sup>

It was time to feast: 'When the war was finished they told all the people and the people started coming back to the village. We had a big feast when the war was over'.<sup>79</sup>

In the cities and towns there were the victory marches. People crowded into the streets, hung from windows, climbed trees and scaffolding, and children sat on older family members' shoulders to watch the columns of marching men and women and to shower them with confetti and streamers. Uniformed men of the TSLIB marched proudly with their compatriots on Thursday Island. A small group of boys from Mabuiag and Saibai had been recruited a month or so before the end of the war to train in the army camp on Thursday Island as bugle boys, just for the parade through that town. They marched proudly with their fathers, uncles and brothers.<sup>80</sup> Later, the hospital ships returned to mainland Australia and crowds again lined city streets, this time more subdued, to welcome home bus loads of wounded servicemen and women on their way to army hospitals and rehabilitation centres. There was indescribable pain for the women left mourning.

At the end of the war, no Torres Strait Islander woman was left to mourn a loved one killed in action.<sup>81</sup> They did not see their men march for victory: they just waited for the day of their return to the islands. A veteran remembered how glad the men were to be back with their families and that: 'Everyone came and they cried. Nothing like the war happened to them before - it was a very bad time'.<sup>82</sup> But it was all behind them. They were happy now and the feasting and dancing began: 'What a joy it was when families were reunited again. The islands became alive with feasting and dancing. The terrible war days were over'.<sup>83</sup> And, in the spiritual sense with which they entered the war, so too did they see its conclusion: 'When the War was finished we praise God and were so happy that the tears rolled

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<sup>78</sup> Int. 098.

<sup>79</sup> Int. 105.

<sup>80</sup> Interview 139, Mabuiag, May 1990.

<sup>81</sup> Both Kapiu Gagai (who died a few months after his discharge from the TSLI in 1946) and Bunai Marama were wounded while on reconnaissance patrol in the Merauke area in December 1943.

<sup>82</sup> Int. 064.

<sup>83</sup> Lui, History of Coconut Island (Purma), July 1990.

down our faces'.<sup>84</sup>

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In this and the preceding seven chapters, the experiences of Torres Strait Islander women during the Pacific War were pieced together from the historical 'scraps' gleaned from old women and men and a few outsiders, all of whom had experienced the war in Torres Strait. This history was based on the perceptions and representations of a reality recalled after almost half a century. These perceptions do not represent events just as they were; the thesis establishes they are, nonetheless, historically important. This history makes possible a more meaningful interpretation of the Pacific War by including Torres Strait Islander perceptions and experiences and by establishing the way the dominant society took them into consideration at a time of national stress. They were obviously expendable. Moreover, old Torres Strait Islander women have, for the first time, had their say to an outsider audience. Their hitherto devalued and subjugated knowledge can no longer be regarded as such.

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<sup>84</sup>

Cited in Sharp, *Springs of Originality*, p. 245.

## Chapter twelve Reflections and Reflexions<sup>1</sup>

It is not difference that immobilises us, but silence, and there are many silences to be broken.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter I reflect on the textual presentation of the Torres Strait Islander women's present interpretations of their experiences during the Pacific War, 1942-1945. My reflexions on the method of presentation of the oral testimonies are also discussed.

Perhaps initially I was naive enough to believe I could draw definitive conclusions from the scraps of data, or in Ankersmit's words 'our so-called evidence', that supported this inquiry.<sup>3</sup> The further I moved into the work the more it became clear that my privileged position as collector, selector and organiser of the oral histories did not give me authority to be so bold.<sup>4</sup> The cross-cultural nature of the evidence posed problems. The different language games of the Torres Strait Islanders and myself barred me from knowing the world of the island women with sufficient confidence to draw such definitive conclusions from their interpretations. To do so would reflect adversely upon the intention in this thesis to achieve a partial inversion of the historical perspective of the episode. To a certain extent, the oral historians were to speak for themselves. Moreover, it would be another outsider attempt to define the Torres Strait Islander, more particularly the women. The women told of their experiences as they recalled them after almost fifty years: they did not analyse those recollections nor draw conclusions from them. Thus, to attempt to definitively explain what they made of their wartime experiences was to take too big a step into their world of esoteric knowledge. My task was to think about the evidence and construct a meaningful and intelligible textual interpretation of

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<sup>1</sup> Reflexions - a form of self-awareness, a turning back on oneself - in this instance on the text I produced (Sarup, An Introductory Guide, p. 49).

<sup>2</sup> Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (Freedom, Calif., 1984), p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Ankersmit, 'Historiography and Postmodernism', p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, there is in the text an intertextuality of the women's and my experiences of the world, the discourses through which they were spoken and the social structures in which both were embedded. This enabled the 'old boundaries' around the women's knowledge to fall (Bronwyn Davies, Master of Education SP5152: Feminist Poststructuralist Methodology Student Guide 1995, James Cook University of North Queensland, pp. 6-7).

the women's wartime experience. Thus, the sorts of conclusions that normally would be expected in an academic study are not drawn. What follows are merely reflections on what the women made of those experiences almost fifty years after the war and my own reflexions on the text.

### Reflections

The first reflection must be on the Torres Strait Islander women's fears because of the breadth and strength of emphasis they placed on this aspect of their wartime experience. There was a repetitiveness in the almost universal references in the women's testimonies about their fears - fear of the war, aeroplanes, submarines, about what would happen to them, white men, uniforms, guns, the recruiters and fears for their absent men. It was as if these fears had been indelibly written on their memories fifty years before: *'I can still remember those planes...we were scared'*.<sup>5</sup> Torres Strait Islanders described themselves as *'innocent'* when the Pacific War broke out: *'We were still learning before the war'*.<sup>6</sup> Innocence of the outside world, the evacuation of the Whites and the method of recruitment of the able-bodied men were other factors which contributed to that period of unprecedented fear. The women talked about their prayer life. Individually they prayed for the Japanese not to come: *'God stop them'*; they prayed for their fathers and sons.<sup>7</sup> The Mothers' Union women extended their spirituality from concerns for family life to much broader issues associated with the war - that they would all be brave; for the world: *'Getting the war organised, that's their job'*.<sup>8</sup> These women *'prayed around the clock'*; their prayers were *'strong...for the world to get peace'*. It was the women's prayers that *'camouflaged'* the people from danger; their prayers *'stopped the war'*.<sup>9</sup> When the women started to talk about the Pacific War, almost without exception, fear and faith were the thoughts which immediately flooded into their minds, and poignant descriptions of their experiences gushed from their lips.

There were many gaps in the women's recall. One glaring omission was that they did not talk about their reactions to the Protector's edict to *'leave [the women] where they are'*, and their

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<sup>5</sup> Int. 054.  
<sup>6</sup> Int. 144.  
<sup>7</sup> Int. 115.  
<sup>8</sup> Int. 143.  
<sup>9</sup> Int. 144.



abandonment by the white teachers and priests.<sup>10</sup> However, silences often say something about those recalling the events. It was the custom for the men to negotiate with outsiders. Thus, even though it is probable that the women knew about the negotiations which took place with the army, it was unlikely, even if they had expressed opposition, that it would have affected the decision. Even if an order to evacuate had been made, would the outer island women have reacted any differently from their sisters on Thursday Island? They ran away into the bush so that the army could not carry out the order. Removal from their homes to an alien mainland was unthinkable.<sup>11</sup> It seems that most of the Meriam women did not want to leave even after submarines were sighted off their Island and they heard bombs exploding out to sea and everyone was very frightened. The one woman who left with her mother and cousin said the *'the others didn't want to go'*.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the decision left the men with great concern about what would happen to the women: *'How they going to get out? No ammunition, nothing'*.<sup>13</sup>

The island men also felt strongly about the Whites' desertion of the women. They told the Governor: *'[the women] were left as a precious bait for the enemy'*.<sup>14</sup> They saw the women's situation in this way: *'everybody left'* and they had to *'do it themselves'*.<sup>15</sup> Torres Strait Islander women had always been able to do most of what was necessary to physically maintain their societies and they were accustomed to their men's absences for long periods each year so that the initial impact of the evacuation of the Whites may not have been so traumatic that it left lasting memories for them. The women's desertion was brought home more forcefully to them with the removal of so many of the able-bodied men to Thursday Island.

The women's recollections of recruitment were vivid and scathing: *'They took all those men and never warn them...they never talked with their wives'*.<sup>16</sup> The thrust of the recollections were of guns and powerlessness: they recruited *'at gun point'*;<sup>17</sup> *'They*

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<sup>10</sup> Bolton to Director, 12 March 1942, CA753, BP242/1, Q26356, A.A. (Qld.).

<sup>11</sup> See Osborne, *Forgotten Evacuation*, pp. 19-21.

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication with Meriam woman, Cairns, February 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Int. 063.

<sup>14</sup> Petition, To Governor, 13 April 1944, TR12257, Bundle, 140, Q.S.A.

<sup>15</sup> Int. 063; Int. 074.

<sup>16</sup> Int. 072.

<sup>17</sup> Int. 124.

pointed the gun, "You got to go, you got to go" - reminders of their colonial status! Little wonder that they wanted to hide with their children: *'[they] ran away with the kids into the bush, everybody ran, all day and night they stayed in the bush'*<sup>18</sup> It was not that the men did not want to join: *'They quick joined because they might get help from the army'*. It was the manner in which recruitment was carried out that angered and frightened everyone. The stream of consciousness expressed in the testimonies about recruitment indicated how personally that experience had impacted on the women. The loss of their ablest men meant they would be left to face whatever it was that they had to face with only a few old men to protect many women and children. They *'didn't know anything about the war'*. They would be *'like the blind [leading] the blind'*.<sup>19</sup> Their *'innocence'* about modern warfare also meant that they had no conception of what their men might be doing on Thursday Island. Not even the signallers could ease their minds on this issue: *'They asked us what their boys were doing but we didn't have a clue'*, a signaller recalled.<sup>20</sup>

In reflecting on the civil defence measures the women took, it was again the things that touched them in personal ways which seemed to be the easiest to recall. Sometimes they recalled the smallest detail - wearing a peg around their necks *'like a necklace'* or a personal experience, such as the Mabuiag woman's story about the red dress.<sup>21</sup> These instances loomed larger in their minds than their consequences may have warranted relative to events of greater moment not recalled - the gun fire from the Battle of the Coral Sea seen from Mer. Women who were forced to relocate with their families in the bush had clear memories of this: *'We leave the village and home...go inside the bush and make camp there...every woman had to struggle to make...the grass house'*; <sup>22</sup> *'We built these bush houses, some of them grass and bark skins, some of them irons...Terrible, we had to carry everything'*.<sup>23</sup> Other women recalled digging air-raid shelters: *'straight ones and ones like the letter L'*; <sup>24</sup> or running to caves, creeks and mangrove swamps for safety when Japanese planes were sighted. They talked about the measures they took to remain as

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18 Int. 072.  
 19 Int. 073.  
 20 Sig. 1.  
 21 Int. 072; Int. 106.  
 22 Int. 131.  
 23 Int. 071.  
 24 Int. 079.

inconspicuous as possible: recollections that they were not allowed to wear brightly coloured clothes; the calico strip fuelled by coconut oil which gave them only the tiniest flicker of light at night. Indeed, again what were not mentioned were events not so closely related to their personal lives - monitoring a submarine off Mer; hiding while the old men went to investigate whether a crashed aircraft was allied or enemy. The Meriam women did not recall planes coming over Mer 'like a storm' during the Battle of the Coral Sea or the sudden appearance of the men from Ambon on their beach.<sup>25</sup> All of these events must have been very frightening for the women. Other events recalled, but which were not directly associated with their civil defence participation, were the strafing of Yam, almost universally spoken of throughout Torres Strait as if it was a legend; the submarine episodes on Mer, in which Otto featured, recalled by several people in ways that demonstrated their ongoing importance in the Meriam experience.

In talking about how they fed and clothed their families during the war, the women's recollections again flooded back with all sorts of remarkable detail - they only got 'bad food' in the store;<sup>26</sup> how they prepared the army 'dog biscuits' to make them palatable.<sup>27</sup> There were accounts of how the 'loose quota system' introduced in the stores worked; irregularity of supplies from the south so that they had to 'depend more on their gardens';<sup>28</sup> recollections of extra sources of commercial foodstuffs and expressions of disgust with unpalatable food supplied by the army to the men coming home on leave.<sup>29</sup> These supplies were supplementary to their main source of food, their own bush tucker, production of which was hampered by the danger of exposure to the enemy or trying to grow vegetables under camouflage of the bush: 'it was very, very hard to feed all the kids'.<sup>30</sup> What the women said was the worst chore of all, carrying water, was made even more onerous for some who had to evacuate into the bush. They still had to go long distances to get water and in some cases wells had to be dug and kept clean.<sup>31</sup> Only the Mabuiag women expressed their delight at being closer to a good water supply.<sup>32</sup> The Top-Western Island women talked about hungry time

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<sup>25</sup> Sig. 3.  
<sup>26</sup> Int. 096.  
<sup>27</sup> Int. 115.  
<sup>28</sup> Int. 053.  
<sup>29</sup> Int. 115; Int. 072.  
<sup>30</sup> Int. 093; Int. 143; Int. 115.  
<sup>31</sup> Int. 096; Int. 069.  
<sup>32</sup> Int. 078.

when they were *'short of food'*;<sup>33</sup> how they made the dangerous crossing to New Guinea in the long canoes with the old men to get yams from their trading partners. The women explained that every fish that was caught was looked after so that no one would go hungry. The surplus was dried and smoked for when they could not get fresh fish. There, too, were the recollections of the struggles to keep their families clothed: *'no material in the store'*;<sup>34</sup> going to their gardens in *'bag dresses'*;<sup>35</sup> *'Every little hole was darned'*.<sup>36</sup> There was reference to their custom of reciprocity which an old storekeeper claimed was a reason for the people's survival: *'Because we could share we survived'*.<sup>37</sup> The extent of the women's financial situation was difficult to gauge: most recalled they had *'very small money'* with which to buy store goods.<sup>38</sup> The government's accounting records certainly indicated there was foundation for the women's present recollections. To ease the situation storekeepers allowed the women to use slopchest: *'Yeah, they had to eat something'*.<sup>39</sup> The women also returned to whatever paid employment they could find to supplement their small incomes, even putting their lives at risk to go trochusing and mining.<sup>40</sup>

Two western institutions which had become an integral part of the Torres Strait Islander culture were education and western health care. The people's aspirations for more equality with white Australians were tied up with much-needed improvements in both of these institutions. In early 1942, whatever improvements had been mooted by the government in the late 1930s were put on hold. With the evacuation of the white teachers, the women had to decide what should be done about their children's schooling and how the communities' health problems would be met. For the first two years of the war, each community, and in some cases each family, devised plans for the continuance of at least a semblance of schooling for the children. Women and older siblings in families, whether in the villages or the bush, taught them to the level they were able: *'I taught what I knew...how to write the letters A B C and count'*.<sup>41</sup>: *'We were just out in the bush...some of the parents...got little*

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<sup>33</sup> Int. 058.  
<sup>34</sup> Int. 125.  
<sup>35</sup> Int. 133.  
<sup>36</sup> Int. 069.  
<sup>37</sup> Int. 053.  
<sup>38</sup> Int. 125.  
<sup>39</sup> Int. 111.  
<sup>40</sup> Int. 070; Int. 067.  
<sup>41</sup> Int. 069.

experience in their heads...taught them what they knew'.<sup>42</sup> Those who attended the village schools were constantly on guard: 'When the planes came over...we just dropped everything and rushed to our home and into the bush to hide'.<sup>43</sup> At least, the children were reminded that school was important enough to be continued despite the danger, even if the standard of teaching had to be dropped below 'the mark'. Mothers just 'wanted to get rid of this war and put the kids back into a proper school and carry on the education'.<sup>44</sup>

Young women stepped into the gap left by the white teachers in caring for the sick: 'When the white people left, we looked after the medicine'.<sup>45</sup> However, for the first two years, the women's own bush medicines were essential to the health of their families. They had retained faith in these medicines, despite the government's opposition to their use, which was just as well with the difficulties which were experienced in getting supplies of western medicines from Brisbane. The perception of an old island couple about the people's colonial experience was just as pertinent during the war: 'if they take away the [bush] medicine, we the people won't know what to do'.<sup>46</sup> There were recollections of babies being delivered in the bush by island midwives and the dangers to which mothers were exposed - no midwife on the island, the improbability of hospitalisation for emergency cases. The women who had been trained by Mrs. Curtis to work in the first hospitals established in outer Torres Strait recalled their new experience: 'she taught them how to make beds and bath people'.<sup>47</sup> There was little reference by the women to specific health problems in their families. One man explained how Mrs. Curtis treated tuberculosis patients with dugong oil; another said 'a lot of people died of TB'.<sup>48</sup> However, I was interested in the suggestion in the army survey reports that the women had neglected their gardens and were too dependent on store goods which resulted in serious illnesses. I asked the women to respond to this allegation: 'We were eating mostly bush tucker and we were healthy', was the reply.<sup>49</sup> Although there was archival evidence of crowded hospitals and serious illnesses, the women's silence about such health matters is understandable. They may have been aware of but consciously avoided

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<sup>42</sup> Int. 078.  
<sup>43</sup> Int. 110.  
<sup>44</sup> Int. 078.  
<sup>45</sup> Int. 105.  
<sup>46</sup> Int. 064.  
<sup>47</sup> Int. 095.  
<sup>48</sup> Int. 097; Int. 094.  
<sup>49</sup> Int. 069; Int. 087; Int. 102.

the topic because they were blamed for their families' health problems by the outsiders. They may not have wanted to tell an outsider these things. Their present recollections were that they kept their families healthy; there was nothing more to add.

In both health care and education, while there was evidence that improvements in both were mooted for the post-war reconstruction period in Torres Strait, the women did not mention these. Nevertheless, there is every likelihood they were aware of these things at the time. What hopes they had had at the end of the war, such as better opportunities for schooling on the mainland for some children and nursing training to double-certificate level, had been dashed long ago. The people waited for decades after the war before improvements in these institutions gave them any hope of even the smallest step toward more equality with white Australians. There was little point in discussing these things at such a late date with an outsider.

My reflections on the women's social outlets during the war, brought to mind the reminiscence of a signaller: 'the women went on as if there was no war on'.<sup>50</sup> Public days were not abandoned for those in the villages; customary feasting and dancing continued; impromptu feasts were held; weddings celebrated. Some of the women talked about socialising with the white soldiers in ways not possible before the war: *'They taught us games in the moonlight'*.<sup>51</sup> Their fears of white men were being broken down: *'Some of the girls styled for the white boys'*. However, the war did not change some things: *'You cannot marry the white ones'*;<sup>52</sup> and Sabbath observance was maintained: *'Every Sunday [the soldiers] came to church with us'*.<sup>53</sup> Finally, the women recalled the bells ringing on the communities to herald the return of peace and the tears, the joy and the feasting.

Throughout the inquiry the voices of women over thirty years of age in the war are missing. It was too late in 1988 when the oral history collection phase began to get their testimonies. Occasionally someone spoke about these old women. A wartime grandmother insisted upon carrying her sewing machine into the bush: another patiently picked the weevils out of the rice. Under very

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<sup>50</sup> Sig. 3.  
<sup>51</sup> Int. 056.  
<sup>52</sup> Int. 131.  
<sup>53</sup> Int. 097.

different circumstances from the relaxed pre-war conditions of story telling, the old women carried on the tradition during the war: *'Plenty old ladies told the children stories all around Torres Strait'*.<sup>54</sup> Old people found it hard to run into the bush when Japanese planes came over the islands. Not all had the strength or the will to worry about their own safety: *'Never mind about us, God will look after us'*.<sup>55</sup>

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This text is a representation of an episode based on the oral interpretations of the people who were still alive during the period when I collected the oral testimonies, almost fifty years after the war. Although extensive in scope, it is by no means a comprehensive account of the women's experiences. As previously discussed, there were many gaps in the testimonies. However, Ankersmit contends that no amount of historical evidence constitutes a magnifying glass on the past - picking up all the detail. The available evidence 'bears more resemblance to the brushstrokes used by the painter to achieve a certain effect. Evidence does not send us back to the past, but gives rise to the question of what an historian here and now can or cannot do with it'.<sup>56</sup> That was my challenge. After being satisfied that the scraps of data collected from 1988 to 1990 were the best available, I did what I could with them. I had virtually no archival or secondary sources about the women's activities on the outer islands during the war. No one had bothered to record in any systematic way what had happened to these women. The oral testimonies of the old people were virtually all that were left to form the brushstrokes which would produce the best representation possible.

Do the reflections I have made, and indeed the women's interpretations, present an idealised picture of their wartime experiences? The archival traces disclosed negative aspects in the women's wartime experiences which they did not mention.<sup>57</sup> The TSLI men approached their white officers about the lack of support for sick wives, accusations of violence against a woman in a land boundary dispute, charges of immorality against several wives, a

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<sup>54</sup> Int. 071.

<sup>55</sup> Int. 071.

<sup>56</sup> Ankersmit, 'Historiography and Postmodernism', p. 146.

<sup>57</sup> See Martin, 'Objectivity and Meaning', p. 29.

husband/wife dispute over a house property.<sup>58</sup> On Saibai the Chief Councillor offended the women and the TSLI wives on St. Paul's were deprived of store goods by miners.<sup>59</sup> There were also divisions on St. Paul's between those who wanted to come under the Act after the war and those who wanted to remain under the Church's control.<sup>60</sup> As noted above, army survey teams reported the women neglected their gardens which it was suggested resulted in serious illnesses.

These negative aspects present another reality or 'truth'. Wendy Lowenstein sees 'history...as complex as life itself'. There is no such thing as 'truth...there are truths, and people recognise this when they talk about giving sides of a question'.<sup>61</sup> Thus, the women's testimonies were one side of the question: the archival traces the other. The women must have been aware of these negative aspects at the time. They may simply have forgotten them. Perhaps they thought that I would not be interested in these unhappy details. Were recollections of these events unconsciously repressed a long time ago or did the women consciously avoid telling me for whatever reasons, perhaps because I was an outsider and it was not my business to know these things? There were many possibilities. This was an instance where I felt I should ask about these omissions. A Saibai woman who was only a baby during the war, but had thought a lot about what the women had gone through, responded spontaneously:

Probably it was very sad for them to think about their troubles and their failures to look after the family while the men were away. It is a natural way for a human being to do that. They don't want to look back and talk about things that were unpleasant to them.<sup>62</sup>

A simple but telling answer. Moreover, these old Torres Strait Islander women had been given no reason to believe their knowledge was worth any attention from outsiders. They, too, were totally inexperienced as participators in an academic research project and for the first time they were asked to speak to an outsider about a very poignant time in their lives.

Adding these factors to their apprehension about looking back

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<sup>58</sup> Notes for leave recommendations, 22 November 1943, AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>59</sup> Complaint: Q85066 Pte. N. Namok and Q85076 Pte. C. Ware, 30 October 1943, AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>60</sup> Report: St. Paul's Mission, Moa Island, n.d., AWM54, 628/4/5, A.W.M. (Canberra).

<sup>61</sup> Wendy Lowenstein, 'Foreword', in Watson (ed.), Boots and All, p. iii.

<sup>62</sup> Int. 084.



at what they might have seen as their failures during that time, the Torres Strait Islander women's present recollections constituted as broad a representation of their experiences as they were able to give. As Ankersmit says, there is no one historical reality 'hidden behind the sources': all historical evidence is only partial, as it was in this inquiry. Nonetheless, there is in any historical perspective the potential for reinterpretation.<sup>63</sup> This thesis does not constitute a last word. A Torres Strait Islander's historical textualisation of the women's testimonies would undoubtedly produce a more culturally attuned interpretation of their wartime experiences.

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### Reflexions<sup>64</sup>

This section contains brief reflexions on my textual representation of what the Torres Strait Islander women made of their wartime experiences.

The first reflexion relates to the mechanics of the organisation of the data. The topics for the text, as suggested in Chapter one, emerged from the women's accounts. The sequence of the chapters, however, is not in order of emphasis the women placed on the topics they raised. For instance, while fear and faith dominated their recollections, it would have been incongruous to set the chapter on fear and faith before those on evacuation, recruitment and civil defence. In these chapters the reasons for the women's terrifying circumstances are made clear and build up to their fear and faith. The chapters which follow the discussion on fear and faith relate to the way they organised their lives after the traumatic events of early 1942.

Initially, I had thought the best method of presentation of the oral histories, particularly as I wanted the people's voices to emerge strongly and clearly in the text, would be to textualise them as a series of oral histories. However, the themes in the testimonies were so compelling that the thematic approach seemed more appropriate. A further reflexion is on what might appear to be a repetitious use of testimonies in some of the chapters, for example the many recollections of the civil defence measures taken by the

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<sup>63</sup> Ankersmit, 'Historiography and Postmodernism', p. 145.  
<sup>64</sup> See fn. 1 in this chapter.

women or those which described how the women fed and clothed their families. In civil defence matters, it was necessary to demonstrate the measures adopted for different physical environments. There were also a variety of ways in which the women coped with wartime shortages which were important to them or which they considered important. This necessitated a comprehensive picture of the women's struggles in this important area of their wartime experience.

The remainder of the reflexions are on theoretical positionings. The aim was to achieve a partial inversion of the historical perspective. In this way, the Torres Strait Islander women would retain some ownership over their own knowledge. Thus, I incorporated extensive oral testimony and italicised it for emphasis. Traditional names were used for the communities. Anyone working with people in a post-colonial environment, must be conscious that there is growing opposition to outsider definitions of them. How this will be avoided in the future is a matter for conjecture only at this stage. It is hoped that the partially inverted historical approach in this written text lessens the possibility of that outcome. Another problem which faces academics when they work with oral historians is the relationships of power which can result. I sought to reduce this by using an unstructured approach to interviewing and being conscious throughout the interviews that I had come to learn from the women. However, a power relationship was more difficult to avoid while sitting at my desk selecting the testimonies for use in the written text from the many hundreds of pages of transcripts.<sup>65</sup> In this privileged position the researcher has power over the oral historians' knowledge. I had to constantly remind myself that I must speak of and not for the women.

In the text there are many divergences away from the present perspectives of the Torres Strait Islander women of their wartime experience, the focus of the inquiry. Are they distracting? Martin contends a 'larger perspective' on any historical episode makes it more intelligible to a wider audience. The audience for this thesis must include both black and white Australians. Thus, the movement away from the local and particular in this inquiry linked the women's experiences in Torres Strait to the wider Pacific War picture and the

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<sup>65</sup> Margaret Somerville points out: 'When the way of talking is translated into written form it is subject to all the power relations of written discourse' (The Sun Dancin', p. 14).

mainland scene. Detours through earlier Torres Strait Islander history clarified the women's wartime status and conditions. Martin suggests as well that the historian needs to tie the episode to its 'consequential' nature or to any 'recurring pattern of general significance'.<sup>66</sup> Chapter two explains how these criteria are also satisfied by situating the episode in a larger picture.

How relevant were the contemporary social theories of Foucault, Lyotard and Ankersmit to this inquiry? Foucault talked about a world of a 'multiplicity of discursive elements' and the value of 'unsuspected knowledges', such as the Torres Strait Islander women's.<sup>67</sup> Lyotard's universe is made up of a multiplicity of incommensurable 'language games'.<sup>68</sup> The acceptance of their theories on the multiplicity of knowledges promotes respect for differences which do not fit into the inevitable essentialism of the Enlightenment model. Moreover, both thinkers oppose totalising discourses which hierarchise knowledges, the effect of which has been the subjugation of those considered low down on the ladder by the dominant forces in a society, in this case the Torres Strait Islander women's. Ankersmit frees the historian from the scientifically reconstructed past associated with the discourse of the modern world which has as its ideal 'a rational person leading a rational life in a rational universe'.<sup>69</sup> He calls the historian to think about the 'scraps' of data which are available, and present not the past but an interpretation of the past: 'the goal is no longer [the] integration, synthesis, and totality' of the modern world.<sup>70</sup> There are historical episodes which do not fit neatly into a unified world of rationality which are just as historically important as those that do.

There were contradictions between the women's and the outsiders' perspectives, more particularly on the health issue. In the rational modern world 'contradictions must always be eliminated' or at least accounted for.<sup>71</sup> However, Ankersmit contends: 'Every

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<sup>66</sup> Martin, 'Objectivity and Meaning', pp.42-50.

<sup>67</sup> Ramazanoglu (ed.), Foucault, p. 449; Docherty, 'Criticism', p. 365.

<sup>68</sup> Lyotard, Postmodern Condition, p. xxiv.

<sup>69</sup> Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harre, 'Contradiction in lives and told narratives', Research on Language and Social Interaction, Vol. 25, 1991/1992, p. 6.

<sup>70</sup> Ankersmit, 'Historiography and Postmodernism', p. 149.

<sup>71</sup> Davies and Harre, 'Contradiction in lives and told narratives', p. 6.

historical insight...intrinsically has a paradoxical nature': indeed Davies and Harré state difference is an 'inherent feature of human life'.<sup>72</sup> Differences were not going to be a stumbling block to this inquiry. In instances where the oral histories and the sketchy archival data presented contradictions, I accepted them as inevitable because of the discursive practices of the authors of the oral and written texts. Chris Weedon in her analysis of Foucault's use of the term 'discourse' suggests that discourses are ways of 'thinking and producing meaning'.<sup>73</sup> In this inquiry there can be no suggestion that the discourse of the members of the dominant society, for instance the white army medical officers, was superior to the island women's (as it would have been not so long ago) thus overriding the women's present perspectives about certain areas of their experience. The women's thinking determined the meanings they gave to their experience and must be respected. In a world of many discourses which constitute the minds of individuals it is understandable that the outsiders who came to the communities in 1942 would interpret the Torres Strait Islander women's world differently - there is no one truth because of where people come from discursively.

A final reflexion relates to the subjectivities that come into play in this inquiry. Paulo Freire, says that the task of discovering a past reality is the task of men and women. An approach to any reality cannot be solely objective, the subjectivity of the author is not dismissible: neither can exist without the other, nor can they be dichotomised.<sup>74</sup> Robert Connell also stressed the non-dichotomous nature of the objective and subjective in any approach to gain knowledge. Objectivity does not mean abstracted as the rhetoric of positivism proposes: in social science, abstracted knowledge is likely to distort findings unless 'fuelled by subjectivity'.<sup>75</sup> The oral historians in this study had no other way to relate their experiences than from their own value positions - what was important to them. The archival data were the texts of men whose positions could not be totally neutral. And, I was certainly unable to abandon

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<sup>72</sup> Ankersmit, 'Historiography and Postmodernism', pp. 142-143; Davies and Harré, 'Contradiction in lives and told narratives', p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> Cited in Davies and Harré, 'Contradiction in lives and told narratives', p. 5.

<sup>74</sup> Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (Hammondsworth, Middlesex, 1977), p. 27.

<sup>75</sup> R. Connell, 'Curriculum politics, hegemony, and strategies of Social Change', in Henry A. Giroux and Roger I. Simons (eds), Popular Culture, Schooling and Everyday Life (Boston, 1989), p. 124.

absolutely my own cultural baggage any more than any historian can. Thus, on the basis of Freire and Connell's theories and Lyotard's contention that knowledge 'cannot be reduced to science', '"good" evaluative utterances' are also necessary, this inquiry has been textualised for inclusion in the historiography of Australia's indigenous people.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, contexting the episode in the wider scene demonstrates Hasluck's claim that there were 'marked differences' in the Australian people's experiences of the Pacific War.<sup>77</sup>

\* \* \*

I have made it clear how and why I have presented the scraps of data in the way that I did. Perhaps my approach to the writing of the text has gone beyond modernist thinking on what is history and how it should be written. Nonetheless, my method and presentation were compatible with the available data, the cross-cultural nature of the study, relevant contemporary social theories and my own convictions about the collection and use of other people's knowledge. The final consideration is whether the inquiry expands the knowledge about Torres Strait Islanders. Not only does it do so, but it expands the knowledge of the Pacific War as it affected Australia. And, for the first time, Torres Strait Islander women's knowledge has been recorded in the annals of history. Their voices have broken the silence to which they were confined for so long. Like the Delany sisters', the Torres Strait Islander women's history cannot belong solely to Black history. It is a history for all Australians. As such it can only help to break down the barriers which have kept White Australians' ignorant of not only Black Australians' experiences but also their own.

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<sup>76</sup> Lyotard, Postmodern Condition, pp.18-19.

<sup>77</sup> Hasluck, Government and the People, p. 132.

## Epilogue

The focus of this inquiry was to discover the Torres Strait Islander women's present perceptions of their experiences of the Pacific War from 1942 until 1945. It was only a brief period in their history, but one which ushered in, not the new order the Torres Strait Islanders had aspired to, but certainly a different world. It gave most women a new window on their world and some new opportunities. With their men, the women enjoyed a somewhat freer and more lucrative lifestyle. Many men skippered their own boats and were the hard-hat divers on them so that they brought home more money to support their families. No longer could the people be confined to their own communities, or indeed Torres Strait. This new freedom resulted in movements of people between communities, to Thursday Island and eventually to the mainland. Nonetheless, the women continued to live in a male hegemonic world so that, to a large extent, their lives were determined by what their men decided or achieved. In this Epilogue, from the recollections of both Torres Strait Islander women and men, something of the different world the women inhabited for a decade or so after the war, is glimpsed.

### New opportunities

*After the war everything changed. We could come down to Cairns. Our children...can go to high school. In the middle of 1943 I got a job at a laundry. I was shy...We washed for American soldiers at home...Then I went housekeeping for Alec Mellick after that (The Meriam woman who left Torres Strait in December 1942).<sup>1</sup>*

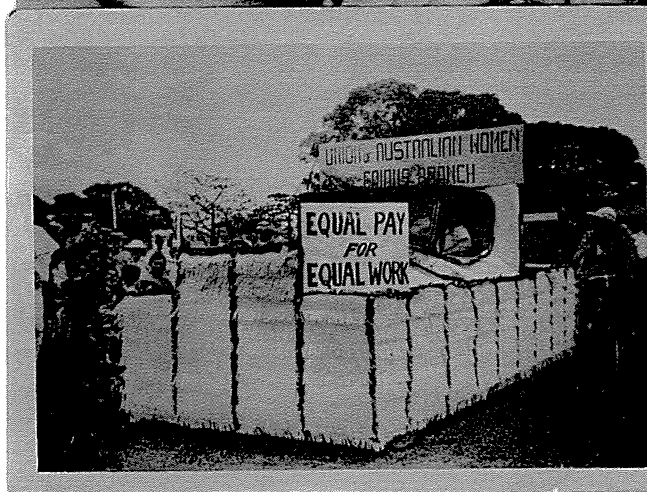
*It was just like changing our life after the war...people seem to know, little by little bit, they know everything. It seemed to open up the women's minds...some of the island women went right down south - they beat me. When I come to think of some of the families...people used to cast them low families, but they ended up going down south (Badu woman).<sup>2</sup>*

*When I see my children I think it better to take them to T.I. ...a daughter died on Mer. She could not have proper medical attention and when we came to T.I. we stayed there and they went to school. Then my husband got a job down on the mainland cutting cane*

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<sup>1</sup> Int. 160.

<sup>2</sup> Int. 113.



(Top) Meriam woman, Elsie Smith (Williams) left Mer for Cairns in December 1942.

(Bottom) Labor Day floats (c1954) - Elsie attended parades with her white husband - her small son is left forefront in float, bottom right.

and from there he got work with the railway. Then he called us down in 1960 (Meriam woman).<sup>3</sup>

I made up my mind to come in to T.I. when I had two children. It was because of my kids (Masig woman).<sup>4</sup>

We moved from St. Paul's to T.I. in 1948. Well that was all right then, I enjoyed myself. It was good for me, no more carrying buckets of water or drums. Praise the Lord. Yeah, it was good...Everything was easy. The husband was now with the boat and was a skipper...diving for pearl shell. It made a good business. We got everything then...and parents got the pension and mothers got the child endowment. It was real good. My brother went out to work on the boat. One year outside and came back home with everything for Christmas. Everything all right now. All that tiredness was over. Now we live properly...before it was very bad. These days now very good, no more worries (St. Paul's woman).<sup>5</sup>

I went back to Mer for twelve days after the war. The Department called me back to T.I. to work. Mr. O'Leary asked me to come into the office. I wanted to find a job...with all my mind and heart I did not want to stay at home. I looked forward in my life when I got a job here on T.I. 1952 we got a house. Mrs. Bon went to see Mr. Killoran [the Local Protector on Thursday Island] and talked to him...she said, "I worry. I speak now. I worry, I want to ask you please..give me a good home". We had to come a long way. We were one of the first to go to T.I. (Meriam man).<sup>6</sup>

#### **Work opportunities**

When they came back from south, the white people had girls up to work for them. It was hard work and the money was only small one (Kubin woman).<sup>7</sup>

I went nursing at Badu for six months and my mother...died and we [she and her sister, Ina] came in to T.I. to work. Ina and I were staying in the Convent and I was working at BPs and then Farquhars.

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<sup>3</sup> Int. 085.

<sup>4</sup> Int. 072.

<sup>5</sup> Riza Morrison, TSIMA Broadcast.

<sup>6</sup> Int. 107.

<sup>7</sup> Int. 071.





(Front left) Florence Anderson (Mosby) left Masig in 1948, married on Thursday Island 1951, went to Cairns with her family in 1968 (other island woman and island man not identified)

Ina came to do a course for Store Manager. At the store she was assistant storekeeper to our father (Nagi women).<sup>8</sup>

I left school after the war in 1947. I went to grade seven, that was as far as I could go. Our time we could not go any further. I went home and worked with my mother. I applied for a nursing job but my trip was cancelled because of my father. I had to look after him. My father died in 1963 and in 1964 I left Mer and found work on T.I. as a domestic. I had no education. After nursing training the girls generally didn't come back to the islands (Meriam woman).<sup>9</sup>

After the war, I started work as a nurse. I worked at the MAP at Kubin. The matron at Badu came over every week. Sometimes she took me over to Badu hospital to teach me how to do needles and things like that, take pulses. I was first one to do that (Kubin woman).<sup>10</sup>

On St. Paul's we got this white sister, Mrs. Hill. She looked after the medicine. She trained some of the island girls (St. Paul's woman).<sup>11</sup>

After the war, the white teachers came back and they were responsible for the medical (Meriam woman).<sup>12</sup>

After the war, the school principal, Manai Pabai, controlled the medical and Joman Tom (Gibuma), she was a nurse then, and Stella Tom senior. We had radio then (Boigu woman).<sup>13</sup>

After the war, I was the medical man on Mer. When I came back out of the army Bakoi [Baud] went to T.I. and I looked after Mer. While I was working I picked girls to help me on the medical aid force. I got £5 a month and I kept all my family on this small money (Meriam man).<sup>14</sup>

In early 1952, Bakoi Baud and Bugun Mosby went to Palm Island

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<sup>8</sup> Int. 069.  
<sup>9</sup> Int. 110.  
<sup>10</sup> Int. 071.  
<sup>11</sup> Int. 118.  
<sup>12</sup> Int. 056.  
<sup>13</sup> Int. 058.  
<sup>14</sup> Int. 126.



(Top left) Eselina Nawia, A Kaurareg woman, born on Muralag, removed to Kereri, then Adam (renamed Poid), returned to her tribal area on Nurupai after the war - wearing the hessian dress adapted as traditional for celebratory occasions.  
 (Middle right) Margaret Billy (Mosby) went to Thursday Island after the war for the benefit of her children.  
 (Bottom left) Angela Morrison (Ware) born on Darnley, moved with her family to St. Paul's 1929; 1960 she moved with her husband and children to Cairns.

for experience in nursing (Meriam man).<sup>15</sup>

After the war everything got good. I worked in the hospital on T.I. until they shifted me to the TB hospital at Waiben. It started after the war...when that doctor found TB sickness on the islands. He sent them to the General Hospital and to Waiben and when you get there you don't know when you will get home. When you finish from Waiben then you go to Aplin [recuperation hospital] to build you up (Ugar man).<sup>16</sup>

I was fifteen years when I went nursing at the TB hospital. There was no training...they just showed us the anatomy, the body structure, and how to take temperatures, how to make beds, that was all we were allowed to do. I remember just a couple of times Dr. Holt talked to us about TB. We had accommodation at the hospital. They were very strict. When I went [nursing] you are not allowed to go anywhere. If you go out you sign the book, if you don't...they keep you in, you're not allowed to go anywhere...We had green uniforms and a brown one for working. When I started about 1953 it was £4 a fortnight...I love nursing very much and [my auntie] she wanted me to come and do it at Innisfail. My family didn't want me to come away and D.N.A. didn't want me to do it. I gave up nursing and worked at the drug store with Mrs. Turner (Erub woman).<sup>17</sup>

#### **The extension of medical services**

Not long after the war and the midwife finished. We came in luggers to T.I. It was all sailing boat. It was three, four days on the boat on a good run. If it was stormy we still came in. There's a law after the war to come into hospital at six months (Erub woman).<sup>18</sup>

They started taking them in to T.I. to have their babies. The government said, 'You get child endowment so your baby has to be born on T.I.' (Boigu woman).<sup>19</sup>

I feel frightened when I came to T.I. to have my baby in 1948.

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<sup>15</sup> Int. 107.  
<sup>16</sup> Int. 028.  
<sup>17</sup> Int. 055.  
<sup>18</sup> Int. 134.  
<sup>19</sup> Int. 057.

I had only been on T.I. about three times. We came here when I was a girl and another time I came in here with our school teacher Mrs. Zahl, me and another girl, to help her (Badu woman).<sup>20</sup>

On Badu, the hospital still continued like may be for a year or so, then it was transferred to Thursday Island (Badu man).<sup>21</sup>

#### Post-war schooling

After the war coloured teachers worked under white teachers (Erub woman).<sup>22</sup>

After the war...a white person, baba Turner was one, they came round and stayed one week or month working on the island with the island teacher. There were a couple of European people doing that (Purma woman).<sup>23</sup>

After the war, we have a limit on school. We don't go up to grade twelve. If we do something really bad at home [the parents] come through the teachers and we get into big trouble, call the policeman to give us a flogging. We did English at school but not allowed to talk language at school. After school we can talk to our parents...come out and talk language at home...Sometimes we talk English (Meriam woman).<sup>24</sup>

I went to Badu secondary school [to] seventh grade. I had prep, then from prep jump over to five, six, seven. Then one year at Torres Strait Secondary School at Badu. It was higher education than other schools. It was separate from the primary school. Secondary school students came from all islands (Kubin man).<sup>25</sup>

My brother came from Erub to go into school at St.Paul's. I started in the 1950s...he graduated at the end of 1953. It went past grade seven level (Meriam man).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Int. 113.  
<sup>21</sup> Int. 097.  
<sup>22</sup> Int. 134.  
<sup>23</sup> Int. 100.  
<sup>24</sup> Int. 108.  
<sup>25</sup> Int. 070.  
<sup>26</sup> Int. 065.

## Life was easier

After the war, it was little bit easier life...our husbands got a bit more money. The medical was here and the store was here (Boigu woman).<sup>27</sup>

Army time was good because we got a store on every island (Masig woman).<sup>28</sup>

After the war, I built a house before I was married. It was corrugated roof and tongue and groove floor. I got experience from the army. The walls were iron. I got this galvanised iron from the army and we had glass windows (Boigu man).<sup>29</sup>

My dad was a carpenter. He shifted some of those houses, better houses...from Nurupai when the war was over. Those houses belonged to the Americans and they left them (Badu woman).<sup>30</sup>

They spent deferred pay to start up work on the boats again, to put the men back on their feet in the industry (Erub man).<sup>31</sup>

After the war, we bought our own boats...Boys get money from the army and instead of getting a dinghy they put money into boats. After the war everything got good (Ugar man).<sup>32</sup>

We get more money after the war because we get our own boat...We buy that with our soldier money, me and my mate. That boat, government can't do anything about it...that was a big change. All the time we worked for the government before the pay got worse (Boigu man).<sup>33</sup>

After the war, we were allowed to work as divers on the boats. We weren't allowed to be divers - they were all Japanese men before the war. We were only deck hands then. Those days we work for £3 a month. After the war we work for ourselves (Badu man).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Int. 058.  
<sup>28</sup> Int. 072.  
<sup>29</sup> Int. 063.  
<sup>30</sup> Int. 093.  
<sup>31</sup> Int. 065.  
<sup>32</sup> Int. 028.  
<sup>33</sup> Int. 063.  
<sup>34</sup> Int. 098.





(Top) Iron house built on Badu during the war by an old man who refused to evacuate to the bush in 1942.  
 (Bottom) House constructed by Americans on Nurupai and transported by island men on their boats to Badu after the war.

## Learning from the Whites

After the war, I thought it was a good life because we don't know anything before. We don't know much of white man's world, the way of life (Saibai man).<sup>35</sup>

There was a little bit of change for the women but the menfolk learn when they fight with white brothers, they learn their lives. The women were back in Torres Strait and they still feel that their traditional way of living is what they are (Saibai man).<sup>36</sup>

When we get in the army we learnt from the Whites. After the war then everything changed. Badu men came and told their wives about new ideas. Families went to Thursday Island. The husband goes first and works there and gets a home and the wife and children follow. After the war a lot of changes happened...things were coming easier. Before the war it was really tough...but we'd been away and we learnt a bit. We know what's going on so we go back to Whites, we challenge them. We learn the white man's game (Badu man).<sup>37</sup>

## Relocations

After the war, some went from Purma to Waraber because for a very long, long time we were short of water (Purma man).<sup>38</sup>

Through the experience of the army, we started to get the understanding and we want to find the good life. We learn everything in the army. When we went back to the Island we tried to think of the future life. It was very hard life on Saibai, no water. We went in sail boats to get water from Dauan. Bamaga, he was like the chief, he tried to organise for the future generation. When the TSLI men returned, his son and all the brothers, a big family, they sit together to find a good place, safe place, more favourable for their family, their children and their children. The time when we were in the army we saw all these places on Cape York. We worked on master boats under Japanese control before the war. Everywhere we travelled we cut firewood on the mainland and we got to know all the places in this area. About 200 to 300 people moved away from Saibai. We took

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<sup>35</sup> Int. 144.

<sup>36</sup> Int. 076.

<sup>37</sup> Int. 097.

<sup>38</sup> Int. 064.



them by sailing boat...we go, free now, everything changed, and the army gave us good experience about what is the right way to control the life of the person. The man would tell his wife about it (Saibai man).<sup>39</sup>

When that war came slack, then we got word to come out here to Kubin. This is the new village now. The army said, 'You can go out', and there was no houses. We came out on the beach and made a small shade and we lived together down on the beach and different families made small huts. This place was all bush and everyone made a village. We cut the bush down then burnt it...That's another big struggle. We had no trucks, nothing, just manpower [sic]. We still don't have our men back. It took a good while, another year, before these men and boys come out of the army. The women started clearing the land. My sister and I we lived together. We made a small hut for our children. My sister had four or five children and they were small too. Good thing the women could do these things. Good thing the women could weave. We cut all the grasses for the roof too (Kubin woman).<sup>40</sup>

They shifted the people from Poid to Kubin...I remember when Father Palmer came here and...took my father [Poey Passi] and Father Pilot from Erub and went round the islands to visit and when we got to Kubin...my father, Father Palmer and Father Pilot they blessed that land and a few houses that were there (Meriam woman).<sup>41</sup>

Back in 1948 Elikin Tom made the first move to come back to Keriri [Hammond Island] from Poid. When he did that, Father came up to him and said, 'This is a Catholic Reserve here and if you want to come here by all means but you have to be Catholic. I will baptise you'. He didn't like that because he didn't understand so we went to Nurupai...there were Malayan settlers there so the people slept on the wharf before they moved out to another place and that was when other people from Poid were encouraged to move back (Nurupai woman).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Int. 144.

<sup>40</sup> Int. 071.

<sup>41</sup> Int. 056.

<sup>42</sup> Int. 102.

## Appendix 1

**A history of the structure and changing names of the Queensland Government department which administered Torres Strait Islander Affairs to 1945.**

John Douglas was appointed Government Resident on Thursday Island in 1885. Prior to that date, Henry Chester, who was the Police Magistrate in Torres Strait, had been answerable to the Colonial Secretary in Brisbane for Torres Strait island affairs, as was Douglas. Douglas died in 1904. The Aborigines Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act had been passed in 1897. The Act provided for a Northern Protector and a Southern Protector and District or Local Protectors, the title taken by Douglas's successors, who were then responsible to the Home Secretary.

In 1903, the administration of the Act in Brisbane was transferred from the Home Secretary to the Secretary for Public Lands and the Northern Protector was appointed Chief Protector. However, in 1905, the administration was returned to the Home Secretary and the Chief Protector reported to the government through the Under Secretary of the Home Secretary's Department.

In 1935, the Department of Home Secretary became the Department of Health and Home Affairs. The sub-department of Aborigines then occupied the same position relative to the department as it had under the previous title. Under The Aborigines Preservation and Protection Act of 1939, the title of Chief Protector was changed to Director of Native Affairs and the word 'Protector' was defined to include the Director of Native Affairs, the Assistant Director of Native Affairs or any person authorised to act in the absence of the Director. The Minister responsible for the administration of the Act was the Secretary for Health and Home Affairs.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the Office of the Chief Protector, renamed under the 1939 Act the Department of Native Affairs, remained a sub-department within the Department of Health and Home Affairs.

During the Pacific War E.M. Hanlon was the Minister. John William Bleakley, who had been Chief Protector and then Director of

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<sup>1</sup> Information taken from 'Aboriginal Affairs: Brief Administrative History' compiled by the Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, Brisbane, supplied to the author in December 1989.

the Department from 1914, retired on 30 June 1942. Cornelius (Con) O'Leary who was Deputy Director, succeeded Bleakley as Director. O'Leary had had a long association with Torres Strait Islander affairs, having also been Local Protector on Thursday Island for about eight years. T.R. Pryor was Local Protector on Thursday Island until he enlisted in late 1941. R.W. Stephenson succeeded him as Acting Local Protector. He was evacuated in March 1942 and joined the Royal Australian Air Force in June 1942. W.C. (Wally) Curtis, the Manager of the Island Industries Board on Badu was officially appointed Acting Local Protector of Islanders on 9 July 1943 although he had been performing the duties of Local Protector from early 1942. Curtis was replaced by C.R. Foote in December 1944.

## Appendix 2

### Brief history of Island Industries Board, Badu.

On 1 July 1930, the Chief Protector of Islanders at Brisbane acquired, 'on behalf of the native fishing fleets', the trading business carried on by Papuan Industries Ltd. at Dogai, as the location was named, on Badu.<sup>1</sup> Papuan Industries was a company incorporated in about 1904 by the Reverend F.W. Walker, an L.M.S. missionary, to assist the Torres Strait Islanders to raise money to buy and work their own boats in the marine industry in Torres Strait.<sup>2</sup>

After the government's purchase of the enterprise, it operated under the title of Aboriginal Industries Board (A.I.B.). The business was conducted by a Board composed of the Protector, the Manager of the Store at Badu and the white government teacher. A Sales Store was acquired on Thursday Island, and an officer of the Protector's staff was appointed Secretary there.<sup>3</sup> With the passing of The Torres Strait Islanders Act in 1939, the Board's name was changed to the Island Industries Board (I.I.B.). Its members were three people appointed by the Governor in Council, one of whom was the Protector.

The store on Thursday Island was closed from 1942 until 1946 during which time the Board's operations in Torres Strait were conducted from Badu. During the war branch stores were set up on the smaller communities which did not have them and all branch stores were serviced from the Dogai store by sailing vessels, the Mulgrave, the Department's boat, and the Nancy, owned by the Mosby Brothers from Masig. The Board paid rent for the vessels.

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<sup>1</sup> A.R., Aboriginal Department for year ended 31 December 1930, Q.P.P. 1931, Vol. 1, p. 893.

<sup>2</sup> See F.W. Walker, The Papuan Industries Ltd.: Its origins and purpose, (Sheffield, 1904).

<sup>3</sup> A.R., Aboriginal Department for year ended 31 December 1930, Q.P.P. 1931, Vol. 1, p. 893.

### Appendix 3

#### Japanese submarines in the Torres Strait area.

The presence of Japanese submarines in the waters off the east coast of Australia during 1942 and 1943 was discussed by George Odgers in his history of Australia's war against Japan. In May 1943, the Fitzroy Island radar station, off the coast near Cairns and within the Great Barrier Reef, made contact with a Japanese submarine in the vicinity but the station signal was jammed by a more powerful transmitter.<sup>1</sup>

An American vessel had reported a torpedo attack off Cairns and inside the Great Barrier Reef in March 1943. Apart from these instances, no other evidence that submarines penetrated the Reef are included in the official war histories, which all lack any detailed analysis of events in the Torres Strait war zone. Nevertheless, as Wilson suggested in a history of World War Two in North Queensland, 'it cannot be established beyond doubt that submarines did not penetrate the Reef'.<sup>2</sup>

Several Torres Strait Islanders who participated in this inquiry spoke about sightings of submarines in the Torres Strait area.<sup>3</sup> One man, who was a crew member on the Mulgrave, recalled:

We took supplies to the islands and while we were travelling we had no gun on that boat. That was cruel. We had no gun or ammunition to protect us. One time we were near Rennel, we come near that island and we were sitting on the stern of the boat. We talked. It was good calm water. Then one of those boys said, "Look, a stick come out of the water". It was about fifty yards from us. We look. "What's this?" We look and up came a Japanese submarine with a red ball. When we look, it was the Japanese and we were frightened...We wake the skipper and say, "Submarine, Japanese submarine". We can see the sailors, the Japanese navy and we said, "Well, that's the end of it". The skipper told us to sit quiet and wait for the end of our life about fifty yards from us...A big American destroyer followed that submarine. We look now...nobody wanted to take the tiller and the skipper told us to jump and run for our life. We climbed the coconut palm. The destroyer fired. They fight and we can see the destroyer lift that submarine out of the water...all the navy men were dead, swim everywhere. We were too close.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Odgers, Air War Against Japan, pp. 143, 149.  
<sup>2</sup> Wilson, North Queensland: World War II, p. 9.  
<sup>3</sup> Int. 149; Int. 109; Int. 065; Int. 119.  
<sup>4</sup> Int. 080.

A signaller remembered the occasion when he reported to his superiors on Thursday Island that a submarine had been sighted off Mer. The response was: 'You have been on the grog'.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, this signaller and two others who were on Erub and Mer in 1942 mentioned other sightings. One signaller said that 'a Jap sub surfaced and was recharging its batteries off Erub...We informed the navy at T.I. The dawn saw the R.A.A.F. bomb the sub with success'.<sup>6</sup> Another signaller recalled that, with the help of the people, the signallers 'plotted' the sound of a submarine engine off Mer for 'an hour or more'.<sup>7</sup> The third signaller said that 'there had been a lot of submarines moving about the area'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sig. 3.  
<sup>6</sup> Sig. 2.  
<sup>7</sup> Sig. 1.  
<sup>8</sup> Sig. 3.

#### Appendix 4

Stories told by Lizzie Nawia to the children during the war.

##### The banana tree and the old woman's children

This story is about a mother. She had no husband and her brother had no wife. They lived in the bush but they don't live in one hut: sister is in one hut, brother in another hut not very close, a bit far. This mother she's got children. I don't know how she got those children because she lived all by herself. Every day that mother went out to work in the garden. She had a big banana tree growing near her hut. Before she went to the garden she always swept up around her house. All those children she put underneath the banana tree and told them not to come out. They had to stay there till mum came home.

This brother, he didn't know she had these children. One day he listened when the mother came home. He heard children shouting and playing around the yard: 'I think my sister's got some children. I think I must find out', he said to himself. When she came out every morning she raked her place all round and covered the footprints so nobody could find out that the children were hiding in the banana tree.

One day the brother said, 'I'm going to ask her now if she's got any children'. So he went to see the sister but she knows he's coming and she told the kids to go under the banana tree.

He said, 'I just came to see you and say hello'. They sat on the mat.

He said, 'I just came to ask you this question. You got any kids, any children?'

She said, 'No. I got no children'.

He said, 'Well I can hear someone howling, children playing when I sit at my place. I think you have got children'.

'No, no my brother, I got no children'.

He said, 'If you have got any children can you give me one or two just to make my home a bit noisy. I would love to have one of them'.

She said, 'Sorry my brother, I am so sorry, I got no children'. 'All right. I'll go back again', he said to himself.

So he went home. He heard the children again so he sneaked up to his sister's house to find out. He hid in the bush. He could see the kids playing round the house.

He said, 'Oh, you got kids, all right my sister. She didn't tell me the truth. She got kids all right', and he watched them.

After that, when he came out from the bush, the mother knew someone was watching.

She told the children, 'Go inside the banana tree', but he saw them first.

He said, 'Oh, that's the place where you hide your children. Oh, all right, I'll get you some day'.

The next day the mother went to the garden and forgot to clean up her yard. When her brother came, the children knew someone was there and they jumped inside the banana tree - one, another one, another one. He saw the footprints.

He said, 'Oh, that's where the kids are, all right'.

So he went home and didn't do anything.

He thought, 'I know your mother will go out again'.

Next morning she went away and again forgot to sweep up. She just left the home like that.

When the uncle came he said, 'Oh, yes'.

The uncle had his bow and arrow.

He said, 'Your mother's been telling me lies and I know where you kids are and when she comes home she'll find no kids'.

So he shot his arrows - one down, another down. He can hear the cries inside the tree when he shot them. Everyone then finished.

'All right, I won't pull this arrow out', he said.

He went home. The mother when she was working she used a digging stick. We use hoes and rakes now and things like that but before we used digging sticks. This mother had been digging some yams, then she made some holes to plant bananas and that digging stick broke in half while she was doing it.

She said, 'Oh dear, something is wrong. I have to go home'.

She took her basket and she went home. When she got home she could see an arrow. Her brother didn't pull them out and he forgot to wipe away his footprints. The mother saw the arrow and she cried and cried. Then she saw the footprints.

'This is my brother's footprint'.

All right, she didn't go that same day to see her brother. She just



kept quiet. She was very, very sad to lose all her children.

'All right, I'll get you some day'.

Two, three days passed and she went to his place. She took a fire stick and she went to his home. When she looked she saw the hut only had one door. She can see her brother asleep, snoring.

She said, 'You killed all my children'.

She took some dry grass and put it in front of that door and she let go with the fire. This brother he cannot get out.

'Please, who's doing this to me, burning my house down'.

She said, 'Well my brother, you killed all my children, you have to die'.

So when you look at these banana trees, what can you see? The trees are the safe house for the children. You see some suckers, that's her children. And when you want to plant the banana you have to take the sucker out from the banana. You are taking it out from the safe place and you can't pull it up, it's stuck. That's the children they put their hands round and hold on to the tree, just like a mother, just to be safe. So when you have to dig and pull them out, it's a very hard thing to do.

\* \* \*

#### **The story of the Sorbi plum**

An old woman she lived in the bush in a small cottage. She had no husband, lived only by herself. At the cottage a big tree grew near by, a big shady tree. This woman was like a witch lady, something like that. Anyway there were twelve sisters in the village and these sisters they liked to climb up trees. They cannot play on the ground, they must climb on the trees.

One day the girls went for a walk inside the bush, a long way from their home. They saw this little cottage.

They said, 'There's a cottage here. We will try and see if anybody's inside'.

They knocked but the old lady was not at home. She had gone somewhere.

When the girls saw the tree they said, 'Ah, lovely tree, let's climb up'.

They all climbed up and jumped from limb to limb, breaking leaves which fell on the ground. This lady she always kept her place clean

and tidy, she always swept up before she went out.

'This is a nice tree. We will come tonight', the girls said. They went home. In the night they came back and played and climbed up the tree. The old lady was tired and she didn't hear them. They just played and dirtied the yard and when it was nearly daylight they jumped down and went home again.

When this lady got up in the morning she saw plenty of leaves, 'Why these leaves here. Someone must have been here I think'. She raked the leaves again and went out. The next night these girls came again. They played in the tree and pulled the leaves down.

Next day the old lady said, 'I'll watch out tonight. There must be someone coming round here'. In the middle of the night the girls came again and climbed up the tree and broke the leaves and limbs. They sang and had a good time. The old lady saw them.

She said to herself, 'Oh, you're the ones that came on the first night and make my yard dirty. Hey, you girls I find you out now. You girls came again and made my yard dirty'. She called to the girls, 'You think you're going to get home tonight. Look here girls come down from the tree, I have to do something to you'.

So they started to come down and said nothing. One came down but the old lady told her to stop before she got to the ground.

'You stay there against the tree', the old lady said. The girl stayed there. Second one came down, same thing, against the tree above the ground. All of them came down and clung to the tree above the ground.

When the last one came down the old woman said, 'All right, you won't get home. I will turn you into fruit'. This old witch lady she turned all the girls into fruit, the Sorbi plum.<sup>1</sup> You see that fruit, it's not on the branch but on the body of that tree. The old lady told the girls, 'That's right, I'll make you turn into those fruits and we will eat you up when you get ripe'.

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<sup>1</sup> Sorbi, (Eastern Island language or uzu Western Island language) is the name for a deep red fruit of an evergreen tree which is a native of Torres Strait. It is an 'island plum' which is eaten whole or made into a drink (Shnukal, Broken, p. 203).

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