

The Eastern Islands of Torres Strait

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The Eastern Islands of Torres Strait include Erub or Darnley, Ugar or Stephen Island, and the three islands, Mer, Dauar and Waier, collectively known as Murray Island. There is also Nepean, which was inhabited within living memory, and other small islands and cays which, while never inhabited, have been regularly used over many years. The most important of these is Bramble Cay, near Erub.

The Eastern Islands lie within sight of one another, and together they constitute a distinct section of the Torres Strait Islands. This is not just because of their proximity, but also because of their physical character and the culture of their inhabitants.

Unlike the other islands in the strait, they are of recent volcanic origin, each set within coral reefs and surrounded by beaches, from which they rise steeply, in the case of the highest, Mer, to some 250 metres. Originally they were densely forested. This is still the case with Ugar and Dauar, and also with a large part of Mer. Grassy slopes situated at the west end of Mer have increased in area after repeated burning in historic times, and the same is true for a much larger area of interior Erub.

The inhabited islands are small, compared with the western group, but they are very fertile, being covered with rich volcanic soil, and since agriculture was traditionally practised, they could support relatively dense populations. Thus the Murray group, with an area of around six square kilometres, may have supported as many as 800 people in the first half of last century. Erub has an area of about 4.5 square kilometres

, but we have no estimates of population at contact. Ugar is much smaller and its inhabitants seem to have been fewer than 100.

All the Eastern Islanders spoke variants of the same language, known as Meriam, which is related to certain languages on neighbouring Papua New Guinea. The culture was also generally similar to that of the neighbouring mainland, particularly in the practice of agriculture. Using swidden techniques, with the land left fallow for several years after cultivation, they grew yams and a variety of other root crops, as well as bananas. These staple foods were supplemented by coconuts, which have always grown in profusion, and other fruit and nut bearing trees.

It seems that pigs were not kept until historic times. Protein came from the sea. Although the waters were too deep for dugong, there were turtles in profusion. The people hunted them in long sailing canoes, imported from Papua New Guinea. But around November and December they could be captured on sandbanks as they climbed up to lay their eggs. They also used the beaches of the Murray group for this purpose, when the people could catch them without even getting their feet wet, simply by rolling them on their backs.

Canoes were also used for deep water fishing, but at certain seasons shoals of small fish lay just off the beaches, where they could be caught with scoops or spears. These 'sardines' also attracted larger fish which could be caught with spear or line. During the north-west monsoon, when vegetable foods were short and other kinds of fishing were difficult, the people resorted to their large stone fish traps. High tide carried fish over the walls, and low tide left them stranded.

Although there were seasons of scarcity and occasional years of famine, the environment was sufficiently rich, and the exploitation of it efficient enough to enable the development of a rich ceremonial culture, involving use of song, dance and paraphernalia such as masks. Singing and dancing also figured largely in recreational activities enjoyed during harvest time and when turtle was plentiful.

The Eastern Islanders derived their identities from their kinsfolk, from the land and seascape, and from particular relationships with various spiritual beings. One identified oneself with a named section of the foreshore, around which the houses were situated; also with particular tracts of land in the interior, sea frontages, fish traps and reefs. Notionally also, one was identified with particular natural species, stars and winds, though the right was to use these things symbolically rather than economically. Further one was identified with certain religious cults and the spiritual beings and sacred objects – particularly masks – associated with them.

Underlying this was the kinship system, which organized the membership of territorial and cult groups, and the inheritance of rights over land, sea, sky and other things.

The Eastern Islanders maintained regular contact among themselves, for trade and religious purposes, and there was some inter-marriage. There were also similar contacts with islands to the west, particularly Masig (Yorke), and with coastal Papua and Australia. The myths and legends suggest an openness to new things, as one would expect of a society that depended crucially on the importation of canoes from

Fly River. European accounts from the first half of the nineteenth century describe the Islanders' eagerness to barter for iron and their readiness to engage in friendly exchanges with the strangers. Unfortunately, the foreigners were not always caring of local interests and sensitivities, giving rise to violent exchanges in which the Islanders finally came off worse.

Contact and Colonization

From the end of the eighteenth century to the 1850s, Europeans used the Strait simply as a seaway, and – apart from a few castaways – their contacts with the Islanders were fleeting. From the 1860s, however, they established a permanent presence. This was partly to provide government protection for passing vessels and a means of monitoring the ships of foreign powers, and it was presently followed by annexation of the islands. However, this decade also saw the emergence of a marine industry, exploiting the plentiful supplies of pearl shell and trepang (*beche-de-mer*). Finally the London Missionary Society came from Lifu and on July 1st 1871, landed missionaries on Erub to begin the work of evangelization.

These events were not the catastrophe for the Islanders that they were for the Aborigines. As elsewhere in the colonized world, while there was a drastic population decline, probably by more than half, no community was actually extinguished. And although some small communities were displaced or persuaded to move, the majority remained in occupation of their islands. The result was nevertheless a profound transformation.

Firstly, the Eastern Islanders had to accommodate considerable numbers of foreigners, including missionaries, pearlers and trepangers. Only a few Europeans were resident and none settled permanently, but considerable number of Pacific Islanders and Asians married local women and stayed, founding families. The government evicted most of the foreigners from Murray in the 1890s, but allowed them to remain on the other islands, whose indigenous populations were smaller. In recent times, Ugar has been dominated by the descendants of a local woman and a Filipino. In Erub too, most families trace their ancestry back to Loyalty Islanders, Solomon Islanders, Rotumans, Niueans or Jamaicans.

The most striking result of this settlement has been that, while Meriam language persists on Mer – and until recently the first language – it has been replaced on the other islands by a pidgin English which has become the vernacular. However, although this creole, known locally as Broken, is more developed on these islands, it has been the second language of Islanders throughout the Strait for more than a century.

This linguistic change is indicative of the complex process of cultural change that was taking place throughout the Strait. Although there were conflicts between foreigners and local people, there was also a degree of integration. Most of the foreigners came from cultures and environments that were broadly similar to those in the Strait, and just as they could be assimilated into the communities through marriage, so the communities could comfortably absorb the innovations they introduced, for example to house styles, cuisine, music and dance. The foreigners also introduced new varieties of the plants already cultivated in the Eastern Islands, and new crops such as corn and

sweet potato, which could be readily absorbed into local agriculture and brought a greater diversity to subsistence system.

No more foreigners were allowed to settle after the turn of the century, so that the communities were allowed to stabilize. At the same time they were all undergoing change and increasing control under the impact of the mission, the marine industry and the Queensland Government, which took over administration of the islands towards the end of last century.

The missionaries broke up or drove underground the old cults and within a generation created sabbatarian communities, which were regulated by a strict code of Christian morality. What was remarkable was that this regime secured the active collaboration of the local population. At the turn of the century, the Queensland government added local government councils which complemented the congregational system of church government. Although these communities were regulated from outside, they gradually assumed a significant degree of local self-management.

From the beginning, Islanders had provided labour for the marine industry, mainly as skin divers and deckhands. For the next hundred years, almost every able-bodied male experienced periods of boat work, particularly during his younger years, and some went on to become renowned skippers. They quickly became adept in sailing the luggers through the complex system of reefs, even by night and in rough seas. These all-male groups, might be seen as replacing the all-male war or trading parties and initiations. Certainly they provided a new context in which boys received discipline and instruction from their elders. However, the absences were much more extended, running into weeks and months, and they were much more disruptive of the island economy.

The marine industry was volatile, and even in the best of times wages were insufficient to support the communities. Thus a section of the population, usually the women, children and older men, continued to garden and fish. During times of unemployment, the younger men joined them.

Life was not easy in the Eastern Islands during these years, but at certain seasons there was time for festivities. The old missionaries had been puritanical. The Church of England which replaced them in 1915 was less repressive, and it gave rise to a calendar of religious holidays which were to be celebrated. In addition, personal events such as weddings and the 'tombstone opening' which marked the end of a period of mourning, provided further occasion for celebration. The Islander communities developed out of their tradition and from what they had adopted from foreigners, a distinctive feasting complex, involving dancing and the consumption of special foods. Significantly, these are mainly local foods, including banana and cassava puddings, cooked in coconut cream, fish and turtle meat.

The Queensland Government strictly segregated the Islanders up to the outbreak of war in the Pacific, and under conditions of considerable stability, the communities had the opportunity to reach a new internal equilibrium, and to work out their relations with those who controlled their lives. The war created an interregnum, during which the bulk of able bodied men were drafted into the Torres Strait Infantry,

based alongside white troops, in and around Thursday Island. During this period, those left behind on the islands had to look after themselves as best they could.

The Eastern Islands and Australia

The wartime experience left the Torres Strait Islanders eager for advancement towards the freedoms and economic well-being enjoyed by white Australians. The authorities attempted to restore the status quo with only slight modifications. Among these modifications, however, was permission for work parties to go to the mainland for the cane cutting season. And when some stayed on, finding work on the railways, the government made no attempt to repatriate them. The Eastern Islanders, who for various reasons found work in the marine industry unattractive, pioneered the move south. When in the early 1960s, the pearl shell market collapsed while the mainland demand for Islander labour boomed, the trickle became a flood. Whereas during the 1950s the emigrants had been males, many of them single, by 1970 whole families were moving to North Queensland, notably Townsville, Ayr and Mackay. Within a decade, the eastern island populations had fallen by more than 50%.

A study conducted for the Federal and Queensland governments by an Australian National University team in 1972 presented a gloomy forecast for the Torres Strait Islands, particularly the eastern group. Given the continuing economic stagnation at home, they anticipated a continuing flow of population to the mainland, and a minimal return back. Moreover, they presented the urban population as both atomized and disconnected from the home communities. The prognosis for the home islands was as a place for parents, wives and children, abandoned or not yet rescued by their kin on the mainland. Though not explicitly suggested, the eclipse of whole communities seemed to be on the horizon.

There are reasons to believe that this picture was overdrawn. However, to the extent that it was true, the factors that contributed to it changed again over the next twenty years. In particular, employment prospects for Islanders on the mainland deteriorated steadily through the 1960s; at the same time, some emigrants found that their high hopes for themselves and their children were disappointed. Simultaneously, as the island leaders took advantage of Federal intervention in indigenous affairs, living conditions in the Strait improved markedly. And while employment opportunities have scarcely improved in the Eastern Islands, it is now possible to live from a combination of welfare payments, including the dole. Increasing numbers of emigrants are returning home, even after living twenty and more years down South. The demographic profile of these communities is no longer distorted by migration as it used to be, but broadly what one would expect of a community reproducing itself in a fairly stable fashion.

Young people continue to go out of the communities, but the decision is no longer so irrevocable as it used to be. Whereas during the 1970s, it was extremely difficult to return to the home islands, there are now regular air services. Likewise, whereas before there was no way other than letter of communicating between island and mainland, there are now telephone hookups. The two populations are now in regular contact, and intervisiting by young and old is frequent, particularly during the holiday season.

Eastern Islands in 1990

The communities have changed over the last thirty years. Although religion remains important, it has become a matter of individual or family choice. There is no longer the strict sabbatarianism and the councils no longer attempt to enforce morality with imprisonment and fines. People expect much the same individual freedom that they experience on the mainland. Politics is now about obtaining and administering government funds.

The communities are now more prosperous than they were twenty years ago. Most of the housing is from manufactured materials; some have electrical appliances such as washing machines and videos, and the generators to run them. Vehicles carry people around the village. Fishing and hunting are now from aluminium dinghies with outboard motors. There are stores with a range of foodstuffs, including frozen meat and fish, in place of the old flour, sugar and tinned beef.

This material well-being is due in part to remittances from the mainland and the wages of those few in government employment, but largely to the welfare economy. Attempts to engage in commercial fishing have failed, for a variety of reasons, and the recent attempt to profit from the reviving prices for trochus shell remain uncertain. Nevertheless, some kind of marine industry provides virtually the only possibility of economic independence.

Meanwhile, the appearance of prosperity is superficial, and any reduction in social service payments could be disastrous. Freedom from the need to pay urban rents is offset by the extraordinarily high prices of retail goods, due to freight costs and periodic profiteering from shortages. Alcohol prices are exorbitant. Gardening has been curtailed and is largely confined to bananas, but fishing and turtle catching remain important supplements to income, as well as providing fresh food. They also remain activities which are valued in themselves.

Traditional foods also remain at the heart of the festive complex, which flourishes unabated. Indeed, with the opening up of air transportation, these occasions, particularly tombstone openings, provide opportunities for kinsfolk to assemble, renewing their family ties, and introducing the younger generation to the world from which their parents came.

Despite so many changes and so much outside contact, the communities retain their old integrity. The inhabitants are almost exclusively birth members of the community, or rather of longstanding families associated with the community. They own and jealously guard residential and garden land, which they have inherited in the traditional way, and they regard themselves as entitled to gather the fruits of the sea, and to follow ancestral pursuits.

A deterioration in the supply of marine foods, such as might follow from pollution of the sea, would impoverish the Islanders' diet as well as placing further strains on their meagre cash income. It would also terminate activities which people value as part of their cultural heritage as well as for their own sake. Finally, a termination of the supply of marine foods, and particularly of turtle, would seriously undermine the feasting complex which is central to community life and provides a focus for Islander identity.

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