

## **Maza: A Legend about Culture and the Sea**

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### **Abstract**

*A Western Torres Strait myth is used to illustrate the connection between sea territories and culture; the social links among people; and the value of the seascape. It is a story about Aukum, a legendary woman, who symbolises the fertility of the reef. Her abundant, daily fish catch is shared with relatives and while she traverses the numerous marine zones – deep water passages, platform reefs and the fringing home-island reefs – she stocks many reefs of Western Torres Strait with fish. This paper documents how peoples' lives are dependent upon the vitality of the local seascape and in particular the reef, maza. It is argued that cultural identity is based upon historical, symbolic and social associations with the sea and interminable use of the marine environment by Western Torres Strait Islanders.*

### **Introduction**

We have been confronted with the issue of rhetoric here at this conference. At the onset I want to point out the obvious: knowledge is power. Much of science is expressed within a very technically based vocabulary. We should be asking ourselves if this is absolutely necessary and realize that the ability to explain and communicate one's scientific work to a diversified audience is a skill and in a setting like this, enhances the exchange of ideas and is a key to equitable relationships. In deference to this I have decided to delete as much jargon as possible so that you will not hear words like epistemology, discourse, deconstructionist, postmodern polyphonic analysis, amibilineal descent system, or fictive kinship – all in common usage among anthropologists. There is one activity however that anthropologists do; it is very

much a part of the jargon. It is something we call ethnography; we do ethnography by learning from the people we live and work among. Later we use the observations, interviews and quantitative data collected during the ethnographic fieldwork as a basis for description and analysis of culture and society. This is our data base. Crucial to its integrity is local knowledge – information placed with a cultural context.

I would like to commend the Chairman of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, Graeme Kelleher for pointing out the relevance of considering the cultural factors among inhabitants of the Torres Strait in the Baseline Study; and I am honored to be invited to speak about Western Torres Strait Island culture.

### **Maza: A Legend about Culture and the Sea**

Cultural themes endure even in a changing economic and political world. The historical context of culture exists in folk legends; these mythical stories from the past help to understand better the present and explain people's ideals, symbolic representations. At the same time these myths provide insights into the pragmatic side of life, that is the hows and whys of actual behavior. The retelling of a legend or myth reinforces cultural values for the listener just as it communicates knowledge about the real world. I want to use part of a legend from Western Torres Strait<sup>1</sup> to illustrate the historical context of the contemporary connection between culture and the sea, social links between people in the vast marine-based environment, and the symbolic and economic value of the seascape for the inhabitants of the Torres Strait region. Extensive trading networks in the past connected the Eastern and Western islands which were distinguished through differences in ecological setting and the resulting subsistence base of the human populations. A distinct linguistic identity has also differentiated the two locales. Today however all Torres Strait Islanders speak "broken", a creole which provides a lingua franca for the political region (Shnukal 1988). The next speaker, Jeremy Beckett, who has published widely on the Torres Strait (Beckett 1965, 1977a, 1977b, 1987), will provide an overview of the local economic and political history.

The focus of my presentation is a legend about Aukum – a woman who fishes on the reef every day and shares the plentiful catch with her brothers. Common in many local myths, the theme of sharing is a strong one, but the folktale goes on to also provide glimpses of greedy, self-serving behavior. Thus, in the end disclosing the universal contradiction of sharing and selfishness; of altruism and economic gain. Aukum's lazy brother repeatedly takes many more fish from her than he can possibly eat while another brother, feeling cheated by what his sister gives to him, kills his nephew, Tiai, Aukum's baby son. This act, as others throughout the legend, reflect cultural contradictions<sup>2</sup> (many I cannot discuss more fully in this paper). Instead the focus is on those themes specifically related to Islander interaction with the sea.

Among Islanders the sharing ethic particularly associated with kinship, remains strong even within the contemporary competitive and escalating entrepreneurial setting of the Torres Strait region. Often through extended kinship ties and friendships more and more outsiders are allowed to fish on local home reef shared fishing grounds. This altruistic behaviour could in the future undermine the viability of the marine habitat. The current dilemma over access in the cray fishing industry is a poignant example which I will return to later; and one which needs to be addressed in any discussion of the international protected zone.

In the myth that I have been relating to you, the story transforms into a tale about the supernatural after Aukum's brother kills his baby nephew. This transition is appropriate for there are two worlds within which people operate in Torres Strait. In the story the fishing woman Aukum moves into the supernatural world and embarks upon a long journey in search of her dead son. Her journey may be traced on the map of the Torres Strait Region (Figure 1); she starts at her home on the west side of Moa progressing to Mabuiag, Dauan, Saibai and finally Boigu<sup>3</sup>.

In between the islands Aukum travels along the sea bottom encountering a myriad of reefs along her way. At each *maza*, or reef, she distributes baskets of various species of fish. Thus, in both worlds Aukum personifies fertility and reflects abundance – she provides food for her kin and she stocks the reef with a plentiful supply of fish. This motif of plenty with regard to the reef is a prevalent cultural theme. Abundance in the sea territories must be mediated, or needs to be negotiated, in the natural world through knowledge about the ecological setting: the seasons; the winds; the tides; and specific local conditions and species behaviour, and acknowledgement of the spirit world. Today's discussion about the reef, about *maza* in the Western Torres Strait environment, focusses on the telling of Aukum's trip in order to emphasize the significance of a cultural perspective in understanding the traditional inhabitants view of their marine environment.

We can look upon mythical Aukum's travel as an underwater topographic narrative map for the case of Mabuiag Island home reefs (Figure 2). Each home reef for Mabuiag Island is explicitly described by name and number of baskets of fish distributed. Before going further north on her search, Aukum's last distribution stop is at Buru, or Turnagain Island, still a sacred place today for Mabuiag Islanders.

Each island in Western Torres Strait – Badu, Moa, Duan, Boigu and Saibai – has a range of marine habitats which are defined within the framework of home island sea territories. Legends and myths passed on from generation to generation and now written down, provide history of use and ownership. The narratives inform about the location, names and uses of home island reefs and sea territory.

I first heard the story of Aukum in 1976 from Gib and Kauwi Gaulai on Mabuiag Island where I lived for over one year. The first documentation in print of the legend was by Haddon (1890a; 1890b; 1904, v:56-62) who in 1888 recorded it from Tom and Gizu of Mabuiag and Kirer of Badu (and another version from the Eastern Islanders). Papi during the same time period drew the sketch map shown in Figure 3 to accompany the written form of the tale (Haddon 1904, v:60). As pointed out by another researcher in Western Torres Strait, we need to keep in mind that people conceptually produce the environment they use, delimit and defend (Nietschmann 1988:60).

Haddon, a marine zoologist turned ethnographer, twice visited Mabuiag Island in 1888 and 1898 studying and documenting Western Island culture and society (1890c; 1901-1935). He and his multidisciplinary team from England were fearful the culture would disappear as more and more European ways predominated. This paradigm, underlying what is now referred to as "salvage" ethnography, assumes the inert nature of culture. Historically, cultures have been depicted as static and viewed in terms of traditional pasts, rather than "as negotiated, present processes" (Clifford 1988:273).

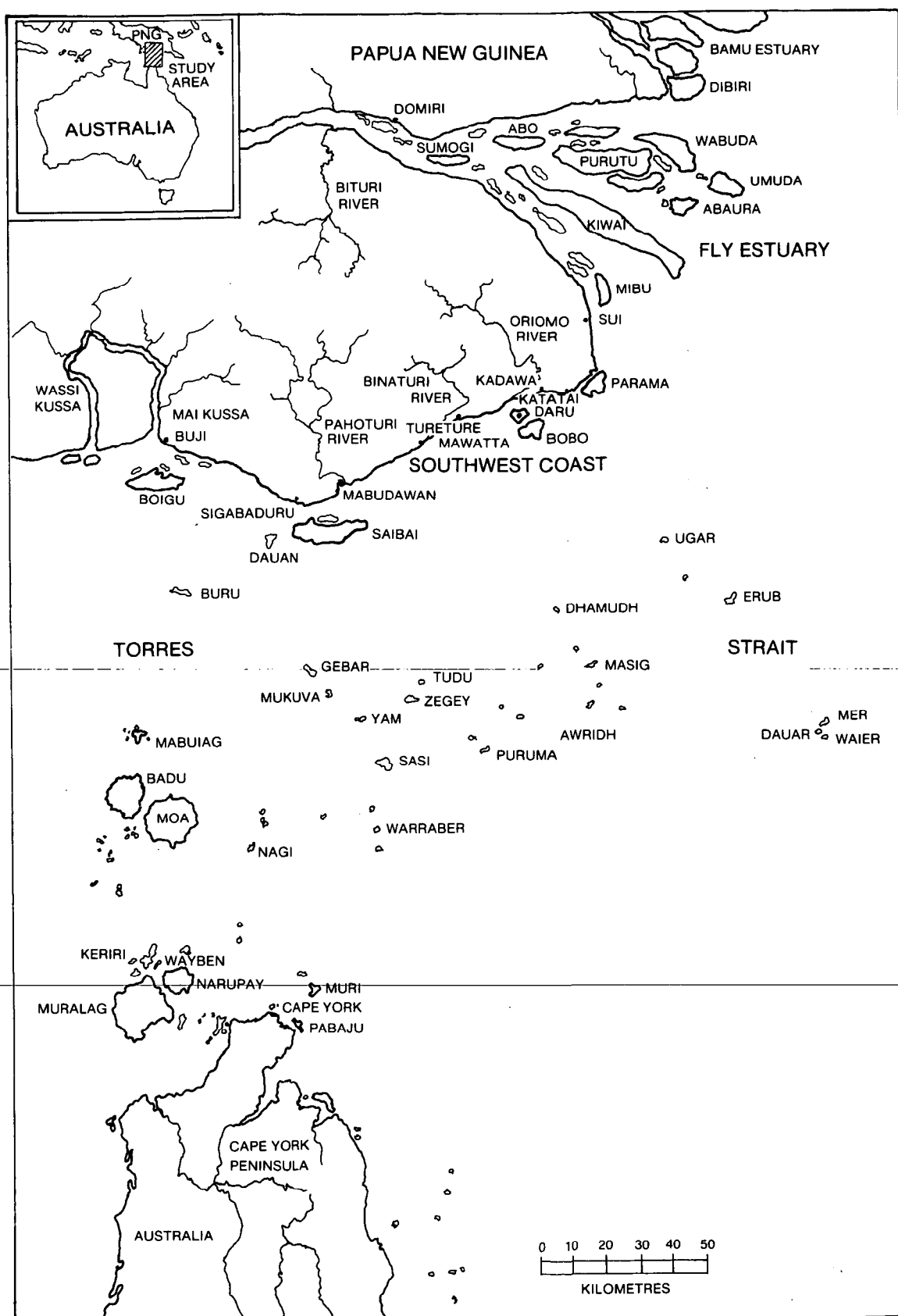


Figure 1. Map of the Torres Strait Region

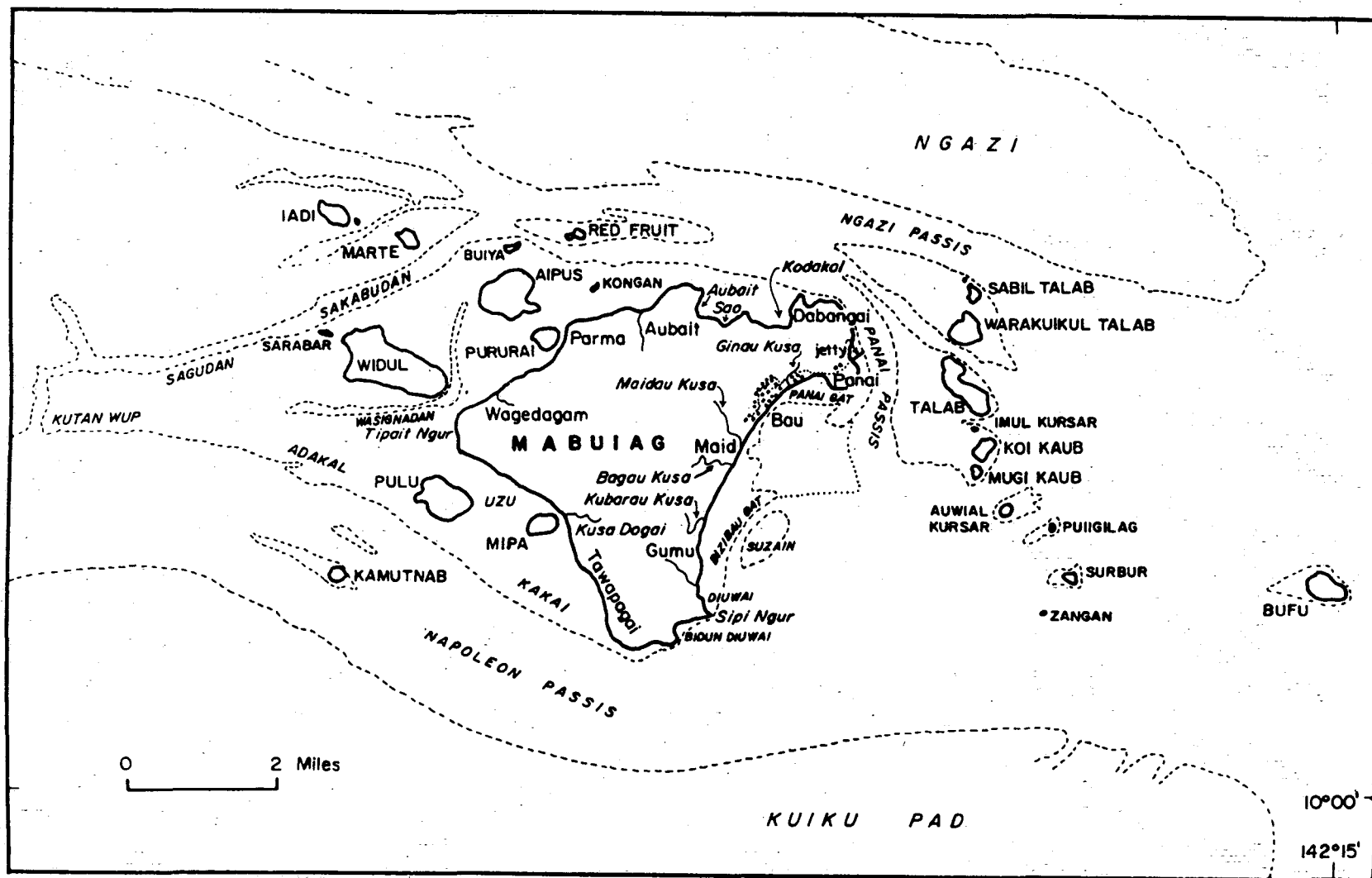


Figure 2. Map of Mabuiag Island home reefs

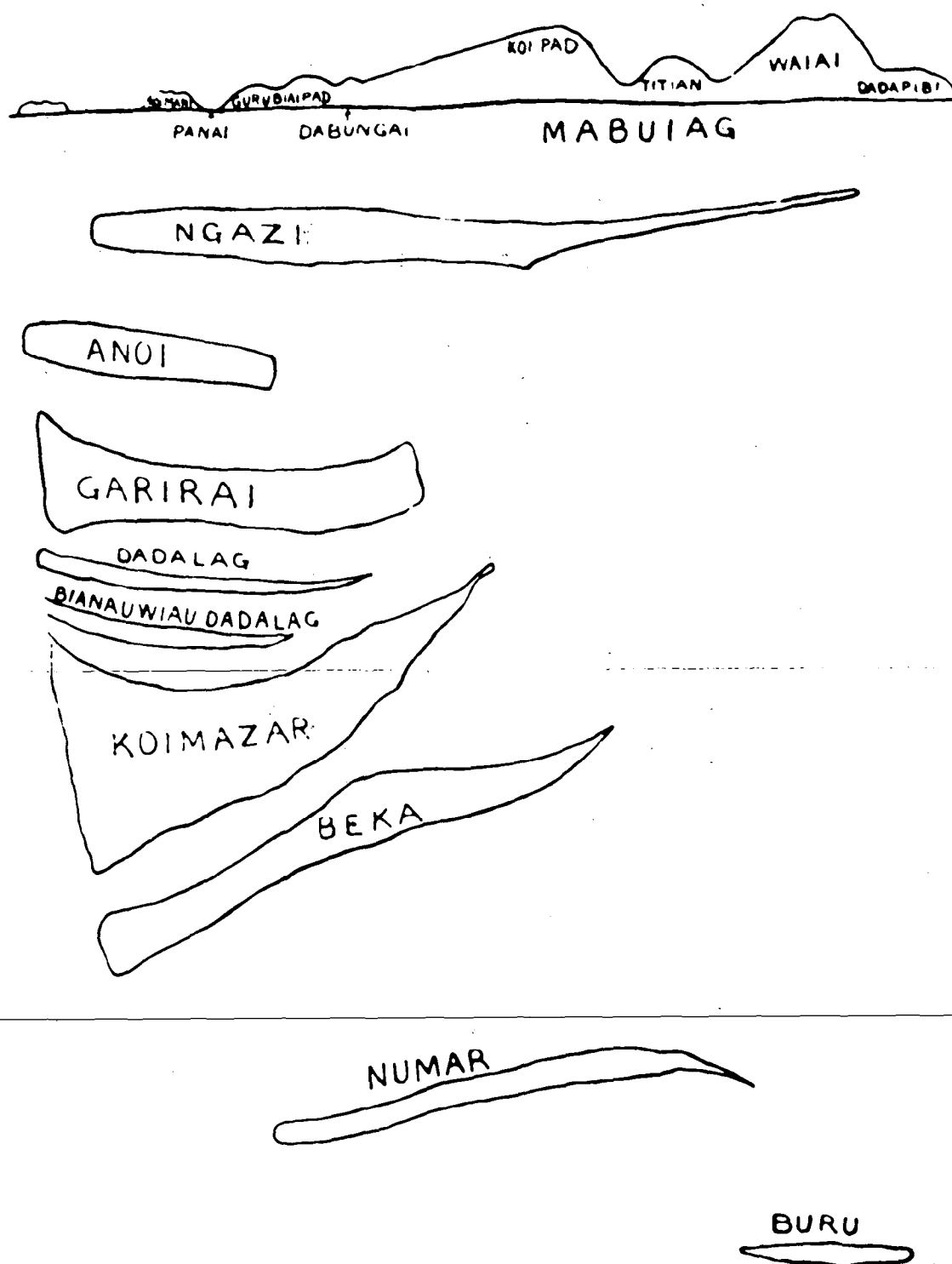


Figure 3. Sketch map of the coral reefs between Mabuiag and Buru (Drawn by Papi).

Now, almost 100 years later, Torres Strait Islanders from the Western Islands talk about cultural revival. Young, educated Islanders are returning home to marry, to live and to create a present day culture on their home islands.

Within anthropology it is commonly accepted that cultures grow, expand, contract, create and re-invent (Keesing 1989). This process of change is universal and inevitable. Much research, inspired by the rapid emergence of so many nation states in the island Pacific since World War II, focuses specifically on the topic of culture as a constantly negotiated and dynamic entity (cf. Keesing and Tonkinson 1982).

The struggle for a separate cultural identity vis-a-vis other black Australians by Torres Strait Islanders is a major concern as pointed out by Guitano Lui Jnr. earlier in the conference. This is part of a larger, pan-Pacific movement and like culture, cultural identity must be understood as creative, dynamic, and processual. We must keep in mind then that a symbolic concept of culture as proposed by Linnekin (1990:252) is necessary.

In addition to rock paintings and sacred sites, myths and legends are one way to perpetuate moral and cultural knowledge and guidelines. Connection to and knowledge about specific places on the land and the sea provides symbols of identity. It should seem obvious then that recognition of local traditions and knowledge is a high priority in any policy and management plans in Torres Strait.

Those threads of what we might consider traditional may disappear but very often identifiable cultural motifs do remain and are discernable as may be evidenced in narrative literature and may be observed in ritual performances today.

As I have documented elsewhere (Fitzpatrick-Nietschmann 1980; 1991; Nietschmann and Nietschmann (Fitzpatrick) 1981; and Cordell and Fitzpatrick 1987) cultural themes on Mabuiag Island predominate most social activity, including subsistence and economic endeavors especially within the marine environment. The threads of the story about Aukum's trip and the *maza* provide a symbolic representation of Islander concepts regarding the use, the access and characteristics of the reef.

People in Western Torres Strait today still know the story of Aukum. In Mabuiag sea territory all of the reefs named in the legend are still being used. Some however are being exploited in different ways. In particular, the rock lobster fisheries are creating new patterns of exploitation on the northern reefs, referred to generally as the Orman Reef complex.

As we heard earlier this week there are two types of harvesting in the rock lobster fishery: free diving and hooka rig. The study by Arthur and McGrath (1989) shows that Mabuiag Island has no freezer or large vessel with a hooka diving setup. Most rock lobster fishing is conducted from dinghies in areas fairly close to the island except in cases when non-Islander entrepreneurs with large vessels provide towing of dinghies to outer reefs and freezer facilities on board for the catch. In monitoring exploitation, an important distinction should be made with regard to type of vessel and technology used. We heard yesterday that during 1989 in the rock lobster industry Islanders used 200 vessels while non-Islanders used 30 vessels. We did not hear a

definition of the various types of vessels or their capabilities. These types of comparisons without adequate definitions with regard to quality of gear and availability of facilities misrepresents the actual situation and contributes to misunderstandings.

Islanders have expressed their concerns about possible pollution from the north, the use of Turnagain Island, or Buru, which has always been a place of historical spiritual importance, and the anticipated over-exploitation of the nearby reefs by non-Islanders.

Whether or not current harvesting of these reefs fits within the 'Free Movement' clause contained in Article 22 of the Treaty for the Protected Zone is not clear. What is clear is that Western Torres Strait Islanders are culturally restricted from landing or visiting at Buru while non-Islanders freely utilize the space for camping and as a depot for catches of crayfish. Even though this is recognized as sea territory of Mabuiag Island, subsistence use of the space is not an issue. As Helene Marsh noted Boigu hunters obtain 10% of their dugong take on the sea grass flats south of Buru (this volume). Western Islanders continue to share marine hunting and fishing zones; the concern that has been voiced to me is the commercial use of the area by non-Torres Strait Islanders.

On Mabuiag Island, the western most of the inhabited islands in the Torres Strait, men, women, and children all utilize their local marine habitat and sea territory for food. Bob Johannes (this volume) reports in detail on the consumption patterns of Torres Strait Islanders. Historically, evidence suggests that the marine environment was of much greater importance to Mabuiag and Badu than for the Eastern Islanders who were intensive horticulturalists. Today, on Mabuiag very few year-round gardens are kept; although kitchen gardens exist, coconut and fruit trees are harvested, and a variety of terrestrial gathered foods are still sought after. The primary subsistence focus however is the marine environment. As a result social activities are dominated by the sea.

Much has been written about the marine herbivores, *dangal* (dugong) and *waru*, (turtle) which as I have noted elsewhere are the most prestigious sources of protein for Western Islanders (Fitzpatrick 1980; Nietschmann and Nietschmann (Fitzpatrick) 1981). In the past, both species were totems for the dominant clan groupings<sup>4</sup>.

Today, men hunt for these subsistence foods on sea grass beds on Kuiku Pad and in the back of the island. They utilize many generations of accumulated knowledge and skill about the local territory. Especially important are the tides: *kulis* (current with wind, smooth and rolling) in contrast to *gutut* (current against wind with a choppy surface). These wind-current relationships define access and availability of species in the seascape of Mabuiag sea territory. Much time, labor and cash output are involved in marine hunting yet the meat is still shared and not sold (and not just because of outside laws) within the community through kin-based distribution networks. The symbolic and social significance of these species for Western Torres Strait Islanders is unrefutable.

Less prestigious but more common and critical to nutritional needs, is daily fishing in the local seascape. Availability of store-bought foods has improved significantly on the outer islands in the last five years yet fresh fish is a highly sought after food.



Generally, someone from every household on Mabuiag Island is involved daily in a subsistence fishing activity which provides fresh seafood for the group. Some men, but primarily women and older children utilize a range of the reef zones to catch a variety of marine species. Fishing is also determined by the tides and young and old women watch the four daily tides in order to select the appropriate time to go fishing. Often they are after a particular species or a favorite type of fish; or the season and tide may signal the abundance of a particular species and individuals will embark on trips to known sites of past successful takes. Technology is simple: hand line with hook and weight with either flour ball or *kiar* head bait and a bucket. Young girls and boys also do hand line fishing with their mothers, aunties or grandmothers. Sometimes a seine is used, particularly at creek mouths during the wet season. Fishing in groups provides not only security in returning with some food but is a highly desired social activity. This is the time stories are told; information passed on about good fishing spots, tidal ranges and species availability; and skills shared and learned by the young.

Boys and adolescents, as well as men, use a three prong spear, to fish along the shore or on the shallow reef. Squid, a favorite species is available according to the specific tide and season. Younger boys spear squid and gar fish. These favorites are readily caught in shallow water. Older men walk on the reef and spear any edible species.

Everyone has a favorite fish to eat. Women often go off fishing with this in mind. If a deeper water reef fish is desired the options available for women include: taking a dinghy out to a nearby special spot, waiting for a very low tide (*koi gat*) and walking out to the edge of the *maza* and fishing off the reef ledge, or fishing off the jetty constructed at Panai on the northeast corner of the island.

Even though people fish for favorite species, much of the fishing is determined by season and the timing of the tides, similar to strategies used in turtle and dugong hunting. Thus, at a specific time of year there is a specific fish available. Fishing is not a random activity. It is based upon known sets of information. Environmental signs – wind, season, tide, phase of the moon – trigger people's knowledge about what is available to obtain at any specific time of the year. People's knowledge about local fisheries often extends beyond their specific capabilities, defined by gender, age, skill, technology, and time. Much of this information is stored and recalled in songs, dances, stories and legends.

Like Aukum, people who fish share with their relatives. The amounts may be small and prestige is minimal when compared with dugong and turtle distribution, but everyone wants fresh fish. It is not spoken of in the same way as *dangal* or *waru* but it is critical for a good meal.

Fishing for commercial purposes has had a boom and bust history in the Western Torres Strait. The major problem for a viable rock lobster industry on some of the Western Islands at present is the lack of an adequate economic infrastructure. Individual fishermen just do not have the capital to purchase new technology or large vessels to improve the fishery. Any future development of the industry needs to look at local requirements, local knowledge, and must take into account cultural beliefs about the use of different zones within the proposed harvesting area.

Knowledge about the sea territories is extensive. This information could be tapped prior to the development of more elaborate research designs or policy plans. Local people's information, based upon years of accumulated experience in an ecosystem, often provides unknown and useful data about species feeding behaviour and seasonally defined geographic location. Local people can, as well, assist in monitoring programs. Besides the telling of legends and myths, specific information about particular family resource zones is passed from uncles to nephews; this tradition persists. Young people are learning about both systems: they hear about the natural and supernatural in their local environment through such stories as Aukum's underwater topographic narrative map; through exploration on their home island and reef; and through formal education in the State-run school where they also learn about the commercial aspects of the larger political regional system of Torres Strait.

I have told you about the *Maza* and Aukum, a folktale about the fertility of the reef and the social obligations of sharing in order to illustrate how origins, ownership and knowledge of a cultural group and its environment may be embedded within oral traditions. We need to always keep in mind that Torres Strait Western Island sea territories are social and cultural space as much as they are an economic resource or a subsistence space. Torres Strait Islander knowledge and connection to the sea territories are an asset and one we need to not only consider in the Baseline Study but respect, utilize and incorporate into any sustainable development plan in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> The folktale has a version in the Eastern Islands and is recounted in Haddon (Volume 6) 1901-1935.

<sup>2</sup> Numerous cultural themes dominate myths in Western Torres Strait legends. The *wadwam* or *audi* relationship between a child and their mother's brother (maternal uncle) is one such theme (eg. the myth of Kwiom, the culture hero). Today *audi*, that is individuals who refer to each other by the term continues to be a crucial social relationship. A maternal uncle is the teacher of cultural knowledge generally and specifically about environmental information needed for fishing, hunting and gathering. Mother's brothers also are helpful during family disputes, especially those between parents and children.

<sup>3</sup> On each island she encounters groups of men performing rituals. She inquires if they have seen her son, Tiai. She apparently is not aware that she is in the spirit world and that her son is dead; or conversely, it may be that she does know she has moved into the spirit world in search of her dead son. Much of the belief system in Western Torres Strait cosmology was built upon belief in a Land of the Dead. An elaborate secondary mortuary ritual was a key event representing an intricate, obligatory exchange system among living relatives. Their prescribed actions guarantee the transference of the deceased to the proper world of the dead (cf. Fitzpatrick 1981). This cultural theme is yet another focus in the myth being discussed in the paper.

<sup>4</sup> People on Mabuiag today know their totem identity and their ancestral land and sea areas. However, the clan system of organization is not operative on a daily functioning basis.

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