

# introduction

*Mina Mir Lo Ailan Mun* has been written as a guide for government officers and others working within the Torres Strait region.

The first section of the booklet deals with traditional Islander society and contact history. The information in this section provides the essential historical, cultural, social, economic, religious and political background necessary to understanding the nature of contemporary Islander and non-Islander interaction.

The second section of the paper deals with cross-cultural communication. In this section we have tried to alert officers to the barriers and delights in cross-cultural communication, as well as indicate ways in which these barriers may be dealt with.

Inter-cultural communication is about the exchange of meanings between people of different cultural and social systems. Our own version of meaning is derived from our own cultural background and institutions. Therefore, when Islanders and Europeans exchange meanings, neither side passively absorbs the other side's meanings. Rather, each side reconstructs them to make them fit into their own ways of looking at the world.

Obviously, in this exchange, there is always the risk of an idea from one culture losing all or some of its significance when it is being considered by another's culture. Hence officers working in the Torres Strait need to adopt a more considered approach to their interaction with Islanders. They can do this by developing interpersonal skills,

communication techniques and consultation strategies.

Consultation is not done on an issue-by-issue basis, but rather it is an *ongoing* process grounded on respect for Islander culture, flexibility, the building and nurturing of relationships, information sharing and accountability.

An important aspect of accountability towards Islanders is that it is an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of their desire to negotiate the terms of the policies and programs that directly affect them.

In the past, consultation with Islanders was either non-existent or conducted in a shallow and ineffectual way. Unfortunately, we wear the legacy of past mistakes. The way forward is to ensure that our contacts with Islanders are carried out in a way that their views and aspirations are heard, understood and taken into account.

It is also important to bear in mind that Torres Strait Islanders have a distinctive regional identity. However, be aware that there are also differences between the various Islander communities.

