

1.1 Contact History

The Torres Strait was named after the Spanish adventurer Luis Baez de Torres who visited the area in 1606. Prior to Torres' voyage there were indications of Islander contacts with people from the nearby Asian region. In 1770 the Englishman James Cook claimed Australia for the British.

Contact between Europeans and Torres Strait Islanders was infrequent between 1770 and the 1840s. When contact did occur it was sometimes cordial and sometimes violent.

Contact between Europeans and Torres Strait Islanders was put on a more or less permanent footing through Bêche-de-mer fishing and pearl shelling which began in the 1860s. The establishment of both these industries was accompanied by forced labour, violence and abductions.

In 1871 the London Missionary Society (LMS), using teachers from the Loyalty Islands in New Caledonia, set up operations on Darnley and Dauan Islands. The LMS's operations gradually expanded to include the other Torres Strait Islands.

The settlement of Thursday Island was founded in 1876 and in 1879 an Act of the Queensland colonial Parliament made the Torres Strait Islands part of Queensland.

The permanent presence of outsiders meant that Torres Strait Islander culture was exposed to four powerful influences: Christianity; colonialism; capitalism; and foreign cultural and knowledge systems. Inevitably, all four influences created inter-cultural conflicts.

Colonisation of the Torres Strait was not accompanied by wholesale and violent seizure of Islanders' land. Their land tenure systems were relatively undisturbed. Also, the foreign cultural influences to which the Islanders were exposed were as much Polynesian and Asian as they were European.

With regard to the Christian influence, the missionaries attempted to destroy the Islanders' traditional beliefs. Nevertheless, the Islanders did not reject Christianity. The Islanders may have been attracted to Christianity for three reasons. Firstly, Christian doctrine was partially compatible with traditional religion. Secondly, the missionaries provided some protection and guidance to Islanders in their dealings with foreigners in the marine industry. Furthermore, missionaries played a leading role in putting an end to the vicious cycle of warfare, headhunting raids and abductions.

Colonialism in the Torres Strait consisted of three distinct phases. These were indirect rule, paternalist exclusion, and controlled integration.



Indirect rule was the form of European control during the period 1879 to 1904. Under this system the Government Resident on Thursday Island appointed head-men on the inhabited Islands. The nature of Islander society allowed this form of control to be effective. These head-men were able to appoint a number of assistants who were given police powers. The head-men had magisterial powers but in reality were always subordinate to the LMS missionaries in their communities.

In 1904 the Queensland Government decided to take over control of the Island communities from the LMS, and to treat the Islanders in the same way as Aboriginal people. The Island communities were declared Reserves, segregated from the outside world, and virtually every aspect of Islanders' personal, domestic and community affairs was controlled by the local Protector. This phase of colonial policy has been described as paternalist exclusion. Accordingly, Torres Strait Islanders lost their rights as British citizens and became wards of the State.

The third phase of colonial policy was controlled integration which began in the mid 1960s. This amounted to a continuation of the policies and practices of paternalism and segregation, but appropriately adjusted to accommodate the labour needs of capitalist expansion.

of the three phases of colonialism, that is, under conditions determined by others.

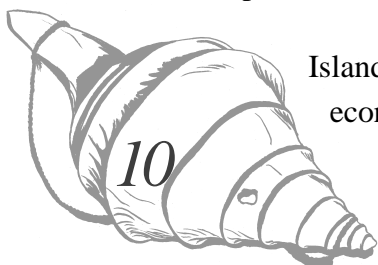
While Islanders had traditionally exploited marine resources, such as mother-of-pearl, for trading and ceremonial purposes, their intimate knowledge of marine resources was not valued by the Europeans. What the latter valued was Islander labour because it was cheap.

The two aspects of the introduced economy most resented by Islanders were forced labour and controls over their earnings. Nevertheless, Islanders remained enthusiastic about participation in the marine export economy (Bêche de mer, trochus and mother-of-pearl) because they saw it as a means of increasing their self-reliance.

Islanders resented government policies which denied their humanity and their desire to control their own livelihoods and futures. Resentment was so intense that on New Year's day 1936 they decided to strike.

The 1936 strike was the first time the Torres Strait Islanders had collectively organised in order to challenge European authority. Islanders had stood up and insisted on being treated with dignity and respect. The significance of the 1936 all-island maritime strike was the emergence of a regional identity. The strike was not primarily about wages and conditions; rather it was about the Islanders' right to control their wages and their own affairs. In other words the strike was about equality and autonomy.

Islander participation in the money economy took place in the context



The Queensland Government did make some concessions. In 1939 they introduced more progressive legislation which provided for elected local government councils. These councils gave the Islanders a greater role in the day-to-day running of their communities. However, the policy of maintaining broad controls over Islanders' lives continued for several decades.

Despite the continuation of these control measures, other events impinged on Torres Strait Islanders' lives and had the effect of strengthening their identity rather than weakening it. These events were the Second World War, the opening up of the mainland labour market, the 1967 Referendum, the 'border issue' of the 1970s, the move for sovereign status in the late 1980s, and the Murray Island Land Case.

Islanders who served in the defence forces during World War II experienced a new comradeship with white men. To some degree this countered the master-servant link that Islanders experienced under Queensland Government policies. Over 700 Islanders joined the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion. Their 'army time' renewed their consciousness of their natural abilities and rights, and gave them new skills and the know-how and confidence to change their situation. Many white soldiers supported the Island soldiers' strike for equal pay in 1943.

The enlistment of most Islander males caused the women left in the communities to take on extra functions and duties. Women became breadwinners and providers as well as assuming greater decision-making roles.

By 1955, when pearl-shell and trochus markets were in the final stages of collapse, a number of Torres Strait Islanders were permitted to migrate to the mainland to search for employment.

Torres Strait Islanders working on the mainland were free of the controls over their movements and earnings exercised by the Queensland Government. Formally, though not in practice, they enjoyed the same civil rights and privileges as other Australians.

The migration of large numbers of Torres Strait Islanders to the towns and cities of the mainland did not cause an irreversible split in Torres Strait Islander society. Those that moved continued to identify themselves as Torres Strait Islanders and maintain close ties with their home communities. The enduring link between the experiences of life on the mainland and the experiences of life in the Islands is kinship. For instance, large numbers of Islanders from the Torres Strait region and various mainland locations still regularly come together for what is called a 'Tombstone Opening' - the formal unveiling of a commemorative stone over the grave of a deceased relative. On these occasions Islanders acclaim family honour and their unity as a distinct people.



The 1967 Referendum gave the Commonwealth Government the power to take national responsibility for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. The Commonwealth's intervention challenged the Queensland Government's monopoly over official access to Torres Strait Islanders and provided a new source of funds which improved the Islanders' bargaining power because they were in a position to play one government off against the other.

The 'Border Issue' of the 1970s was also a unifying experience for Torres Strait Islanders. The Torres Strait Islanders opposed a proposal to cede that part of the Torres Strait above latitude 10° South to an independent Papua New Guinea. The Torres Strait Islanders had stood up as 'one community' for the social, cultural and geographic inseparability of their Island homelands. The 'Border No Change' campaign was strongly supported by the Queensland government which resisted moves by the Australian government to accommodate more fully the wishes of Papua New Guinea. The Treaty settling the border issue between Australia and Papua New Guinea recognised the unity of the whole of the Torres Strait.

On 20 January 1988 sections of the Torres Strait publicly expressed their desire to secede from Australia. This 'Call For Independence' was an expression of a distinctive Torres Strait Islander identity, as well as a response to government policies that had institutionalised inequalities.

It was also seen by some Islanders as a 'theatrical gesture' to attract high level attention to serious Islander concerns.

A further symbol of a distinctive Torres Strait identity emerged in 1992 when the Torres Strait Islanders' flag was first flown.

The year 1992 was significant for another reason. It was the year the High Court handed down its judgement in the Murray Island land case. The High Court's recognition of Islanders' customary land tenure upheld the essential continuity and integrity of Murray Islanders' culture and custom. The Islanders' culture and custom had not been obliterated by contact with an expanding colonialism and capitalism. The Islanders' right to their property and resources had not been extinguished. The past had continued to co-exist with the present.

Over the past 200 years Torres Strait Islanders have coped with many pressures and intrusions from domineering outsiders. They have adjusted their traditional ways in the light of these influences and continue to sustain and renew aspects of their culture. It is important that people working with Torres Strait Islanders are aware of their historical struggles as well as their current and ongoing concerns.

