

The people of the Torres Strait are of Melanesian origin with their own distinct identity, history and cultural traditions. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century the rhythm of Islanders' lives, their meaning systems, world view, and social processes were relatively autonomous. However like all cultures, their various cultures were dynamic and accepting of change.

Islanders lived in established communities and village life revolved around hunting, fishing, gardening, and trading relationships, with emphases varying according to local conditions. Material life was interwoven with relationships which were conducted in the language of family, kinship, home island, totemism, and spirituality.

In cultural and religious life the foremost concerns were warfare, headhunting, sorcery and, among some, an obsession with the pursuit of supernatural power. Individual possession of secret magic was believed to be essential to the success of daily pursuits such as gardening, hunting and sailing.

The universal principles sustaining Islander social structure and relationships were kinship and reciprocity. Ritual, celebration and exchange of gifts were a large part of their social and spiritual life.

The economy of the Torres Strait was based on subsistence agriculture and collecting food from the sea. Inter-island trading

in food, weapons, and artefacts was also a key component of group relationships.

Trade also existed between the Torres Strait and the Western Province of Papua New Guinea and between the Near Western Islands and Cape York. The trading relationship with Papua New Guinea was of vital importance, because it was the source of the heavy timber needed to make sailing canoes.

Torres Strait Islander traditional life in the pre-contact period was heavily affected by the Papuan influence in terms of trade, social organisation and language.

Linguistically, the Torres Strait is split with *Meriam Mir* spoken in the Eastern Torres Strait, and *Kala Lagaw Ya* spoken in the Central and Western Torres Strait. In the top Western communities of Saibai, Boigu and Dauan a dialect of *Kala Lagaw Ya* called *Kalaw Kawaw Ya* is also spoken. The *Meriam Mir* language is a member of the Papua New Guinean Eastern Trans-Fly family. *Kala Lagaw Ya* and *Kala Kawaw Ya* have an Aboriginal structure but with Melanesian elements.

Another language known as '*Broken English*' was brought to the Torres Strait by the South Sea Islanders in the latter part of the 19th century. Over time, this language developed into a Creole, which has become the lingua franca of the region.

