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Jeremy Beckett

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Plate 1. Marou Mimi, a significant Eastern Islands leader during the Second World War

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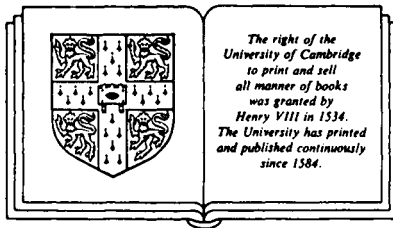
Frontmatter

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Torres Strait Islanders: custom and colonialism

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For Simeon and Sophy,
and in memory of Marou, Solomon, Mota,
John, Napairie, Isau and Francis

Contents

	<i>List of plates and maps</i>	<i>page</i> viii
	<i>Preface</i>	ix
	<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xiii
I	A 'tombstone opening' and the problem of island custom	1
II	Pearlers, pastors and protectors	24
III	Disastrous contact: 'army time' and after	61
IV	Reflections in a colonial mirror	87
V	The Murray Islanders	110
VI	The Baduans	147
VII	Welfare colonialism	171
VIII	The society of Islanders	211
	<i>Bibliography</i>	236
	<i>Index</i>	247

Plates

- | | | |
|-----|---|----------------|
| 1. | Marou Mimi, a significant Eastern Islands leader during the Second World War | <i>page ii</i> |
| 2. | A tombstone is blessed: Father Seriba Sagigi | 3 |
| 3. | The Malu-Bomai rites re-enacted on Murray Island | 30 |
| 4. | Meriam ex-servicemen perform an army dance | 78 |
| 5. | One King, one Flag, one Fleet, one Empire | 90 |
| 6. | Sam Passi, former chairman of Murray Island, displaying an <i>usari</i> yam | 134 |
| 7. | A Badu skipper aboard his lugger, <i>Pilemon Nona</i> | 158 |
| 8. | Butchering a turtle on Badu | 169 |
| 9. | George Mye and Torres Strait ex-service representatives, Etti Pau and Sele Thaiday, with Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Clyde Holding | 197 |
| 10. | Tanu Nona's tombstone and the tombstone of Phillip Nona waiting to be opened | 217 |
- With the exception of Plates 5 and 9, all illustrations are the author's own.

Maps

- | | | |
|----|---|-----|
| 1. | Torres Strait | 27 |
| 2. | Distribution of Torres Strait Islanders in Queensland | 178 |

Preface

Torres Strait has an established place in the history of anthropology because of its association with the Cambridge University expedition of 1898 (Gathercole 1976). Its leader, Alfred Cort Haddon, had acquired his interest in the subject while conducting research in marine zoology there in 1888 and he returned ten years later, with a team that included the anthropologist C.G. Seligman, the linguist Sidney Ray, the psychologist William McDougal and the physical anthropologist C.S. Myers. W.H. Rivers, perhaps the most distinguished of the party, 'discovered' kinship in the course of psychological investigations, and may be said to have begun his career in anthropology at this time (Langham 1981:64–9). The findings of the expedition, including ethno-musicology, dance, colour perception and ethno-astronomy, as well as material culture, social organization and religion, appeared under Haddon's editorship over the next thirty-seven years, in the six large and profusely illustrated volumes of the Cambridge Reports.

Writing in his introduction to the final volume, Haddon summed up what had been for him a lifetime's work:

Since 1888 I have consistently tried to recover the past life of the islanders, not merely in order to give a picture of their former conditions of existence and their social and religious activities, but also to serve as a basis for an appreciation of the changes that have since taken place. It has generally been acknowledged by me that ethnologists should study the existing conditions of backward societies, but to interpret these it is first necessary to know from what they have originated and then to trace the successions of new contacts and their influences on the people. I must leave it to another to describe this metamorphosis. (Haddon 1935:xiv)

Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*x Preface*

When I first went to Torres Strait in 1958, some sixty years after the Cambridge expedition and forty-five years after Haddon's last visit, it was in effect to take up the task that he had left for his successors. He had already reviewed much of the published information on the early years of contact in the final volume (1935), and included passing observations of the contemporary scene here and there through the Cambridge Reports, and in his popular account, *Headhunters, Black, White and Brown* (1901). But of course much had happened since that time. Already by 1898 the Islanders had been in contact with Europeans for more than a century, and had experienced thirty years of Anglo-Australian colonialism. They were now about to come under the more rigorous regime of Queensland's official Protectors of Aborigines. In 1958, although the island communities enjoyed a considerable degree of local autonomy, this regime was still in force. However it was on the verge of fundamental changes that were to see Islanders acquiring the rights of Australian citizens, and settling in considerable numbers on the mainland. Since the early 1970s Australia has both intensified and diversified its intervention in the affairs of Islanders and Aborigines, giving rise to conditions that I term welfare colonialism. Inevitably, with these changes the culture of the Torres Strait Islanders has also changed, to the point where much that Haddon and his colleagues recorded is forgotten. But their sense of identity is sustained by the practice of island custom which, implicitly and at times explicitly, proclaims continuity with the Torres Strait of Haddon's day and beyond.

As my sub-title indicates, this book is the work of an anthropologist with historical inclinations. However it cannot, as in earlier years, be written with only a scholarly or official readership in mind. All Islanders are in some degree literate, secondary education is general among the younger generation, and there is a small but growing number who have tertiary training. Some of these have read the Cambridge Reports, and they will no doubt see what I have written here. Since they tend to be historically minded I think that they may find some value in having information about their past brought together within the covers of one book. At the same time, they may be uneasy about having the affairs of their communities exposed to view. Except for a few leaders well known within Australia, publicity is a novel experience. Entering an island community is more like entering someone's house in Western society; simply by being there one

Cambridge University Press

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Jeremy Beckett

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface**xi*

comes to know things that would not otherwise reach the outside world, and discretion is the duty of one who has accepted hospitality. One solution to this problem would have been to use pseudonyms, but such disguises are transparent and give the impression that the actors have something to hide. I have preferred to identify the individuals and communities described in this book, while striving to achieve a balance between a faithful presentation of the facts as I understand them, and respect for the sensitivities of those concerned. I believe that the Islanders' experiences of the last hundred years and more have a universal quality that makes them worth communicating to others, not least their own descendants. However, I want to emphasize that my intention is to convey understanding of those experiences, not to pass judgement on the actors or what they did.

I went to Torres Strait at the suggestion of Mervyn Meggitt, then a lecturer in anthropology at Sydney University. As a research scholar of the Australian National University I carried out twenty-four months of field research, over the years 1958 to 1961, mainly on Murray, Badu and Saibai Islands. In 1964 I completed a PhD dissertation under the supervision of Professors John Barnes and W.E.H. Stanner (Beckett 1964). Since that time I have made four return visits to Torres Strait, the most recent in 1985, and several short visits to Islander communities on the mainland, all with assistance from the University of Sydney.

The Queensland Sub-Department of Native Affairs, now called the Department of Community Services, gave me the initial permission to conduct research, allowed me to go where I wished, and assisted me with transportation and many other necessities. The Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria also helped on several occasions. On recent visits the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs has been helpful in a number of ways. Although it is probably invidious to single out individuals, I would like to record my particular gratitude to the government teachers, the late P.R. Frith and Mrs Frith, and to Arthur and Vicky Woodward, for their friendship and hospitality. I must also acknowledge an enormous debt to John Scott, Area Officer for the DAA. Though he has been living in Torres Strait for more than twenty years, his interest in the place, the people and their history has remained fresh and lively, and I take his opinions very seriously.

To give adequate acknowledgement to the Islanders who have

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-37862-8 - Torres Strait Islanders: Custom and Colonialism

Jeremy Beckett

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*xii Preface*

helped me in my work would take many pages, and a mere listing of their names would scarcely indicate the gratitude I feel for their kindness and generosity towards a guest whom they had not invited. I must first express my thanks to the councils of Murray, Badu and Saibai, who not only allowed me to live amongst them, but assisted me far beyond the call of duty. I must also record my gratitude to those who took me into their homes, including the Reverend Asai Baruna and the late Ruth Baruna, the late Solomon Nona and Irad Nona, Pilemon Nona and his wife, Wilfred Tapou and his wife, the late Napairie Morseo and Olive Morseo, the Warusam family, and George and Jenny Mye. With George Mye I have enjoyed a friendship extending over twenty-five years, and despite his many official commitments he has not spared himself with advice and knowledge. With Sam Passi too I have passed many hours, exploring the borderlands between Meriam and European culture. Without knowing Sam Passi one cannot understand Murray Island. But I must also recall the friendship of the Mast family, the Tapous, the Isua brothers, Iopili Panuel, Luna Neliman, Joe Mairu, Marriott Mabo, Koiki Mabo, Gobeda Noah, George Passi, Emeni Mundy. Even this list is not complete, and I must ask the pardon of those whom I remember with affection but cannot find space to include.

I began writing this book in 1980, while a visiting fellow at the City University of New York's Graduate Center. The discussions that I had with colleagues there, and at the Columbia University Anthropology colloquium, were of great help in clarifying the problems that confronted me. In the later stages of writing a number of colleagues have helped with comments on chapters or sections of the book, and I must record my thanks to Brian Fegan, Maureen Fuary, Edward Hansen, Margaret Jolly, Mervyn Meggitt and Aram Yengoyan. I am particularly grateful to both Sheila Shaver who, with her understanding of the welfare state, helped me to develop my concept of welfare colonialism, and to John Scott, who has corrected at least some of my errors, and acted as a sounding board for some half-formed ideas.

Last but not least I must acknowledge my thanks to the Secretary of the Anthropology Department at Sydney University, Robyn Wood, for help in many matters, and to Lorraine Howard and Marjorie Fisher for their patience, interest and good humour in typing this manuscript.

Abbreviations

AD	Queensland Aboriginals Department
ADC	Commonwealth Aboriginal Development Commission
<i>Age</i>	<i>Age</i> Newspaper, Melbourne
<i>CM</i>	<i>Courier-Mail</i> , newspaper, Brisbane
CPA	Queensland Chief Protector of Aboriginals
DAA	Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs
DALA	Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement
DCS	Queensland Department of Community Services
DNA	Queensland Sub-Department of Native Affairs
IIB	Queensland Government Island Industries Board
LMS	London Missionary Society
NAC	National Aboriginal Committee, also National Aboriginal Conference
NACC	National Aboriginal Consultative Committee
NADC	Commonwealth Government Northern Australia Development Commission
PS &	Queensland Parliament Royal Commission into the
BMC	Pearl Shell and Beche-de-Mer Industry of 1907
QYB	Queensland Year Book
SMLB	Somerset Magistrate's Letter Book
<i>SMH</i>	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> , newspaper
TSLI	Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion
<i>Tribune</i>	Weekly newspaper published by the Communist Party of Australia in Sydney
TN	<i>Torres News</i> , occasional newspaper Thursday Island