

'HEATHEN POLYNEE' AND 'NIGGER TEACHERS' Torres Strait and the Pacific Islander Ascendancy

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All too often historians have approached Torres Strait as if the patterns of contact there were little more than extensions of those that occurred on mainland Australia. Rarely have they made sufficient allowance for the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies were fundamentally different from one another, nor have they seemed willing to put aside preconceptions accumulated during their scholarly excursions onto Australia's pastoral frontier. Yet for Torres Strait even the term 'frontier', if it implies one-way movement and a single active force, is to some extent misleading. A number of forces converged in the region to create the cultural and social order we now see, and any explanation which takes as its starting point a simple two-sided frontier is inappropriate.

It is hardly surprising therefore that social scientists, used to making sense of complex patterns of social relationships, and increasingly historically-minded, have written the best accounts of Torres Strait culture contact. The most notable have been the anthropologists Jeremy Beckett and David Moore, and the sociologist Nonie Sharp.¹ More recently the linguist Anna Shnukal also has made a valuable contribution with her accounts of the indigenisation and creolisation of beche-la-mar, or Pacific Pidgin English, by the Torres Strait Islanders. In the course of this work Shnukal detected what I think was the most significant process of culture contact in Torres Strait; that which took place between the Torres Strait Islanders and Pacific Islanders who arrived in the region in the 1860s and 1870s aboard beche-de-mer, pearl-shelling and missionary vessels. Shnukal's analysis of the origins of the language she called Torres Strait Creole, published in this journal in 1983, led her to suggest that, 'the dominant external influence in Torres Strait between 1870 and 1940 was not European. Rather, European influenced South Sea Islanders assumed the role of cultural middle-men, transmitting their own version of European ways and language to the Islanders of Torres Strait'.²

I propose to consider the role of the Pacific Islanders in the Strait, especially in relation to the formation of an elite class on the islands, a class initially composed of Pacific Islander maritime workers and missionary teachers, and subsequently of people of mixed Pacific and Torres Strait Islander descent. Shnukal, in a later article, describes this elite, as

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¹ Beckett 1964, 1977, 1978, 1987; Moore 1979, Sharpe 1982.

² Shnukal 1983:185.

'HEATHEN POLYNEE' AND 'NIGGER TEACHERS'

does the anthropologist Jeremy Beckett in his recent book. They both suggest that it emerged in the twentieth century - Shnukal just after the turn of the century³ and Beckett, if I read him correctly, in the 1920s or 1930s.⁴ However, I think the Pacific Islanders were well and truly in the ascendancy by the late 1870s, and that by the mid-1880s their influence was already beginning to wane.

Pacific Islanders first arrived in the Strait in the mid-1860s aboard Sydney-based beche-de-mer vessels diverted by their owners from the declining Pacific trade. By 1870 there were about seven vessels in Torres Strait waters employing some 150 Pacific Islanders, the vast majority of them men.⁵ They were left to work from beach camps on the north-eastern and central islands while their employers ferried produce and supplies between Sydney and the Strait. The camps had European overseers, but it was also common for Pacific Islanders themselves, generally Polynesians with long experience in the Pacific trade, to be left in charge. Pacific Islanders also skippered the luggers that roamed about the islands in search of new beche-de-mer grounds, and fresh fruit, vegetables and seafood to supplement their rations. The discovery in 1869 of commercial quantities of pearl shell caused a rush of vessels from the Pacific trade, and by 1872 about 500 Pacific Islanders were at work in the fishery.⁶ At the time the Torres Strait Islanders numbered no more than about 3000 altogether.⁷

Then in 1871 the London Missionary Society, literally following in the wake of the trading masters, placed Loyalty Islander evangelists and their families on the islands. The society used these evangelists, or teachers as they were known, to pioneer their mission stations throughout the Pacific. They were generally recent converts who had been given only a few years of secular and religious training, though the first Torres Strait contingent consisted of some more experienced men and women. The Society believed that the teachers were more effective when left to their own devices, and it was not unusual for a year to pass between the missionaries' visits.⁸ These were generally brief, often no more than a day or two.

Thus, almost from the beginning of the colonial occupation of the Strait, which I date from the north-westerly season of 1863-1864, there were Pacific Islanders virtually unsupervised by Europeans living amongst the Torres Strait Islanders. In the space of

³ Shnukal 1985:231-232.

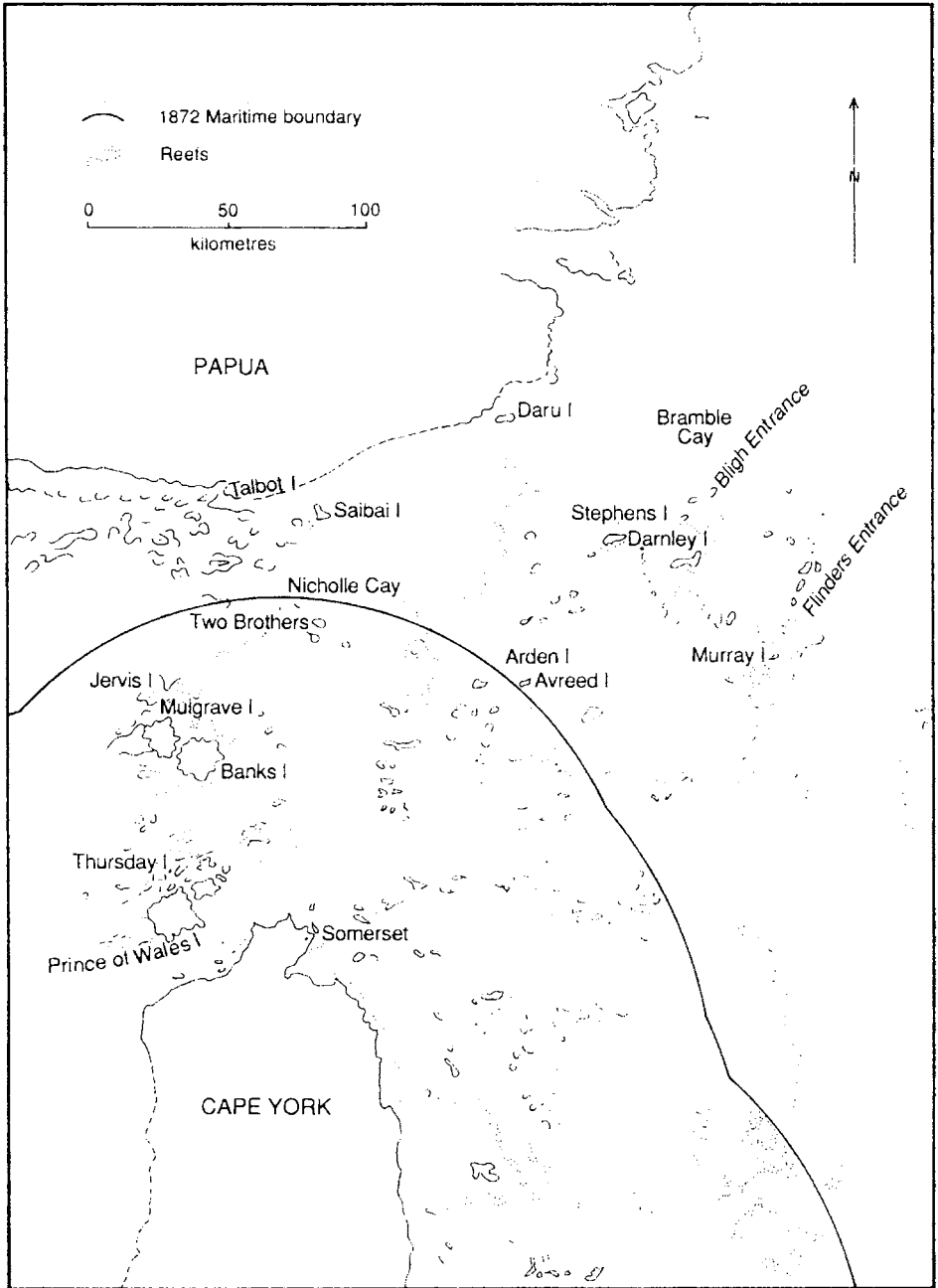
⁴ Beckett came across a 'skipper class-crew class' relationship on Badu (Mulgrave) while undertaking fieldwork there in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In his book he writes that this structure belonged to 'colonial Torres Strait rather to metropolitan Australia', but the fact that he uses the term 'colonial' to denote a relationship rather than an era makes it difficult to grasp his periodisation. In another place he suggests the class structure had its origins in 'the racial stratification of earlier years'. But this also is ambiguous as to time. Beckett 1987:164-170.

⁵ Frank Jardine to Col. Sec., 1 November 1870, Somerset Letter Book, 1869-1871, ML B1414.

⁶ In a private letter to A.H. Palmer dated 15 August 1872, Jardine estimated that there were between 300 and 400 Pacific Islanders in the Strait, but in September the same year he told the governor that there were about 900. The second figure may have included Torres Strait Islanders. Jardine to Palmer, 15 August 1872, Palmer-McIllwraith Papers, OL OM64-14; Normanby to Commodore Stirling, 2 December 1872, QSA, GOV/G2.

⁷ Mullins 1989:518-524.

⁸ Samuel McFarlane, 5th Voyage of the *Ellengowan*, 2 April 1875, Papua Journals, Council for World Mission Archives.



North Queensland Maritime Boundary, 1872, from Colonial Office Minute, 14 January 1878, CO 234/38. AJCP reel 1932, 1878. Map drawn by Ian Heywood, Cartography Unit, RSPacS, ANU.

'HEATHEN POLYNEE' AND 'NIGGER TEACHERS'

twenty years between the mid-1860s and the mid-1880s their presence changed the Torres Strait communities so that they came to resemble those in the Pacific which had been brought under the sway of the Pacific maritime trade and the Christian mission. It was nothing short of a remarkable cultural metamorphosis.

By the mid-1880s most Torres Strait Islanders were at least nominally Christian. But they had been instilled with the teachers' brand of fire and brimstone Protestantism which had been indigenised in the Pacific. The missionaries generally saw no harm in allowing the Torres Strait Islanders to continue to perform their traditional dances and ceremonies, as long as they were of the secular kind and did not promote what they saw as immorality.⁹ But the teachers were adamant that their congregations should cast aside old customs. On many islands traditional dances were forbidden, and new ones, brought from the Pacific and taught by Pacific Islanders, replaced them. When the Islanders gathered for 'May meetings' or to open new churches the day began with volleys of rifle fire, and there were long processions accompanied by the singing of Pacific-style hymns. There were also weddings and baptisms followed by Pacific Islander-style feasts. As the missionary Harry Scott wrote in 1884, 'South Sea teachers bring South Sea fashion'.¹⁰

Pacific Islander skippers introduced other changes. Most importantly they taught young Torres Strait Islanders the work practices of the maritime trade. In his recent book Beckett describes how skippers and teachers together managed to inculcate a work ethic.¹¹ However, it needs to be said that, 'despite the harsh discipline on the boats', Torres Strait Islanders seemed to relish life in the maritime trades. The speed with which they took to the work cannot be adequately explained in any other way. For instance, in a matter of two or three years between 1871 and 1873 practically the whole population of Mabuiag (Jervis) was at work in the fishery. Soon they were dependent on what they earned on the boats, neglected their gardens, and, like the Pacific Islanders before them, took to the vices of other colonial seamen.¹²

Perhaps the most striking outward sign of change was that by the mid-1880s the Torres Strait Islanders had gathered in central villages. In the north-eastern islands they had formerly lived in dozens of small scattered beach communities, each surrounded by a bamboo palisade. By the mid-1880s the palisades were coming down and a few large villages had sprung up near the mission houses and churches. In the south-western, central-western and central islands the change was the more remarkable because in the past the people had moved according to the seasons. They now constructed more substantial dwellings, the teachers showing them how to build in the Loyalty Islander style. Although these houses went up first in the western islands to replace flimsy temporary huts, the practice soon spread to the north and north-eastern islands where the traditional houses had been large and sound. The anthropologist A. C. Haddon wrote after his first visit to the Strait in 1888, that 'a somewhat variable South Sea type house' prevailed everywhere, and that the new type was accepted 'not so much because it was better than the old, as because it was associated with the new order of things'.¹³

⁹ McFarlane, 6th Voyage of the *Ellengowan*, 10 May 1875.

¹⁰ Harry Scott to foreign secretary LMS., 15 August 1884, Papua Letters 1872-1927, B3 F4 Jb.

¹¹ Beckett 1987:105-107.

¹² A.W. Murray to foreign secretary LMS 8 September 1873, Papua Letters 1872-1927, B1 F1 Jc.

¹³ Haddon 1912:105-106.

It is difficult to know when Torres Strait Islanders first began to speak beche-la-mar, but some appear to have adopted it in the very early years of the colonial occupation. When the missionaries arrived at Erub (Darnley) in 1871 an Erubian leader called Dubat communicated with them in a kind of broken English that must have been beche-la-mar.¹⁴ Shnukal maintains that by early in the twentieth century Torres Strait Creole, the indigenised version of beche-la-mar, was the lingua franca of the Strait and the primary language of some communities.¹⁵ While it is easy to see how beche-la-mar allowed for the transmission of new ideas in a society that had previously spoken three languages, its adoption and transformation into Torres Strait Creole also illustrates the process by which a new order came about.

For decades before the colonial occupation, Torres Strait Islanders had traded with the crews of passing ships. They learned key European words; 'knife', 'axe', 'more', 'good', and many others. But the crews and passengers on these ships generally did not speak beche-la-mar. They were Europeans, Lascars and Malays, and they communicated with the Islanders in a haphazard kind of broken English.¹⁶ When beche-la-mar arrived in the Strait the Islanders recognised many of the words and associated the language with Europeans. As Shnukal points out, later in the twentieth century many Torres Strait Islanders believed their Creole to be English. But although beche-la-mar was inextricably associated with European wealth and power, it was introduced to the Torres Strait Islanders by the Pacific Islanders with whom they were in constant contact.

Shnukal also shows that Torres Strait Creole acquired much of its phonology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics from the traditional Torres Strait languages.¹⁷ But there is also evidence which indicates that at a very early stage Pacific Islanders changed the traditional languages. By the mid-1870s the teachers were producing religious texts in the indigenous tongues. They found it difficult to pronounce some Torres Strait words, and in translation these were changed. In 1878, a government official who had been in the Strait since before the teachers arrived, wrote that under their tuition the Torres Strait Islanders were adopting new pronunciations of old words, and introducing new words that were neither English nor traditional Torres Strait.¹⁸ Sidney Ray, the linguist with the 1898 Haddon expedition, agreed that many biblical and Pacific words had become part of the traditional languages, and that the pronunciation of some sounds had become more nasal after the arrival of the teachers.¹⁹ Thus, the dynamic process by which Torres Strait Creole evolved provides a useful analogy for the wider process of change that was going on. The notion of the European in the background encouraged the adoption of beche-la-mar, but interaction between Pacific and Torres Strait Islanders determined how it evolved into something new - Torres Strait Creole.

Shnukal describes the Pacific Islanders of this early period as 'cultural middle-men', and calls them the 'chief lieutenants' of Europeans.²⁰ Beckett writes that they played 'a

14 Murray and McFarlane, Report of a Voyage to New Guinea 1871, Papua Journals.

15 Shnukal 1983:175.

16 Ibid.:178-179.

17 Ibid.:175.

18 Henry Chester to Col. Sec., 15 January 1878, QSA, COL/A252, in-letter 338 of 1878.

19 Haddon vol.3 1907:3-4, 166-169, 187-191.

20 Shnukal 1985:227, 220.

'HEATHEN POLYNEE' AND 'NIGGER TEACHERS'

curious mediating role' between Europeans and Torres Strait Islanders.²¹ But I think this sells them short. True, administrators, traders and missionaries succeeded in establishing a colonial order in the Strait, and the progress of that order was expedited by the emergence of a new cultural order. But the new cultural order came about by a process that had a logic of its own. Pacific Islanders were no more the passive agents of colonial order than Torres Strait Islanders were its simple, uncomprehending victims. For the most part Torres Strait Islanders were willing and able to take advantage of the changing circumstances that confronted them, and the Pacific Islanders were intent on creating an order of their own; one that was familiar to, and convenient for, themselves.

Pacific Islanders working in the Strait were not the innocent victims of unscrupulous sailing masters of popular history books. After 1872 most of them were legally engaged either in Sydney or at one of the Queensland ports.²² Many of them were professional seamen capable of using sophisticated strategies to improve their wages and conditions. The first large-scale strike that we know of occurred in 1872. In August of that year Frank Jardine, the police magistrate at Somerset, Cape York, reported that the crews of the pearl-shelling vessels *Woodbine*, *Melanie*, and *Western Star*, in all about 150 men, had:

struck work altogether, and on the principle of 'might makes right' have ousted the whites and are doing just as they please.²³

Eleven of the ringleaders eventually were brought before the Somerset bench and charged with either 'insubordination' or 'refusal to obey lawful commands', which were infringements of their seaman's articles, and in effect industrial offences.²⁴

The Torres Strait pearl shell fishery was only a few seasons old when the strike occurred. Three years later a Somerset official could write that the Pacific Islanders were showing:

a disposition to strike work in a body, with the hope thereby of obtaining their discharge, so that they may demand better wages in the competition there is here.²⁵

By the late 1870s industrial disputation was endemic in the fishery. In 1877, the first year of the Thursday Island bench, 125 cases were heard concerning infringements of labour agreements made under the provisions of the Merchant Seamen's Act. The next highest number was at Townsville with 31, and the total for Queensland in the same year was 215.²⁶

After the 1872 strike Frank Jardine wrote, with typical facetiousness, that:

The great grievance and thorn [for the masters] is the South Sea Islander who will not remain the heathen Polynee that he was, but keeps pace with the times, and is already becoming too civilized and knowing to give twelve months service for a butcher's knife, a ninepenny tomahawk, and a dab of red ochre quarterly on each cheek, as was the case in the 'old times', but has

21 Beckett 1987:92.

22 Mullins 1989:230-231, 327-340.

23 Jardine to Palmer, 15 August 1872.

24 Somerset Water Police Log, 2 August 1872, RHSQ collection.

25 C. D'Oyley Aplin to Col. Sec., 15 April 1875, Somerset Letter Book, 1872-1877, QSA, CPS 13c/G1.

26 Statistics of Queensland for 1877:160-161, JLCQ vol.XXVII. 1879:67-268.

already learned the love of money, is a good judge of Queensland rum, and uses a toothbrush.²⁷

Clearly the Pacific Islanders had a lively sense of their own interests. But it took more than that to win concessions from tight-fisted pearling masters. Their success, however we judge it, depended for the most part on the fact that they were able to take advantage of a chronic labour shortage brought about by the way in which labour trade regulations were applied in the Strait.

After 1872, when Queensland extended its maritime boundary to 100 km from the coast, the government refused to issue licences under its 1868 Polynesian Labourers Act for newly introduced Pacific Islanders to work in maritime industries.²⁸ For a while it even forbade masters to engage time-expired agricultural labourers at Queensland ports.²⁹ However, in 1875 the regulations were eased and time-expired men, and those who already were experienced seamen, were allowed to be employed as long as they were signed on ship's articles and written permission was obtained from the government.³⁰ In 1876 James Merriman and Co. did manage to get 75 newly introduced Solomon Islanders onto the pearl-shelling grounds by way of a licence issued by the governor of New South Wales, but the Queensland authorities put such impediments in its way that it eventually abandoned the enterprise and never tried it again.³¹ By 1873 there were virtually no 'green hands' going to the Strait.

Queensland's determined stance on the issue can be explained in two ways. Firstly, at the time the policy was being formulated all questions involving the Torres Strait fishery were being referred to either Attorney-General Samuel Griffith or his close colleague Treasurer William Hemmant. They were opponents of the labour trade and did all in their power to ensure that the system was not extended, especially to areas where Pacific Islander employment could not be properly supervised. On the other hand, those in favour of the labour trade thought of it only in terms of the survival of the sugar industry. If the 1868 Act was extended to workers in the Torres Strait fishery, essentially a Sydney-based industry prosecuted in British-registered vessels, any ensuing unfavourable publicity regarding their treatment might provide ammunition for those seeking to have the Act repealed. It simply was not worth the risk, and Griffith and Hemmant were left to impose regulations as they saw fit.

The regulations they came up with ensured that only a particular class of Pacific Islander worked in Torres Strait. Experienced men, many of them missionary educated, they were in fact an elite when they arrived. Attractive rates of pay caused them to continually renew their contracts, though few were willing to sign for the three years

²⁷ Jardine to Palmer, 15 August 1872.

²⁸ W. Hemmant to Col. Sec., NIW, 20 March 1876, QSA, COL/A241, in-letter 3485 of 1876.

²⁹ Telegrams - C. Pennefather to Col. Sec., 8 January 1873, Fred Fahlby to Col. Sec. 1873, QSA COL/A178, in-letter 71 of 1873; Rosengren to Col. Sec., 6 March 1873, COL/A180, in-letter 403 of 1873; Fenwick and Scott to Col. Sec., 24 March 1873, COL/A181, in-letter 575 of 1873; Hunter to Palmer, 28 July 1873, COL/A190, in-letter 2508 of 1873.

³⁰ Proceedings of the executive council re shipping Polynesians as seamen, 2 July 1874, QSA, COL/A215, file 1722 of 1875.

³¹ Col. Sec. NSW to Hemmant, 18 March 1876, QSA, COL/A231, in-letter 3485 of 1876; Henry Chester to Col. Sec., 1 August 1876, Somerset Letter Book 1872-1877; McFarlane to foreign secretary LMS, 13 November 1876, B1 F5 Ja; Chester, Report on the Fisheries of Torres Straits, 24 April 1879 (1-2), QV & P vol.2, 1979:947-949.

normal in the sugar industry. They preferred to renegotiate with their employer at the end of each season, or to offer their services to a more liberal master.³² In the mid-1870s 'apparatus boats' were introduced to the industry and more Torres Strait Islanders were employed to help alleviate the labour shortage, but this only strengthened the Pacific Islanders' hand. They were able to monopolise the better paid positions of 'hard hat' diver and swimming boat skipper, and earn sums far in excess of those paid to other colonial seamen regardless of origin.³³ A competent 'hard hat' diver could bring in £100 a season, while a top hand might make as much as £300.³⁴

By 1872 these relatively affluent Pacific Islanders were living on practically every inhabited central and north-eastern island³⁵ and, as noted above, after 1871 they were joined by the teachers who were equally independent-minded. The missionaries like to depict the teachers as faithful servants and saintly 'Uncle Tom' types. But closer examination reveals them making business arrangements with men in the fishery, both black and white; visiting each other in their own boats to discuss pay increases and other policies to put to the missionaries; moving their stations to places that suited them better and, on the one day of the year the missionaries visited them, playing the one-dimensional role the missionaries wished to see.³⁶

Initially the masters were happy to see the teachers, regarding them as the agents of that essential arm of British civilization, Christianity, which complemented the other two arms, British commerce and law. Indeed it was William Banner, a pioneer of the fishery, who suggested that the London Missionary Society go to the Strait in the first place.³⁷ But the masters soon began to resent the manner in which the teachers exercised their influence over their employees. The government officials at Somerset also thought of them as disruptive of the colonial order. Some of the teachers had sent Frank Jardine a letter asking him to be lenient with the ringleaders who had mobbed and beaten two of their European officers. But Jardine was convinced that the teachers had encouraged those who took part in the 1872 strike. He wrote:

I blame them in a great measure for most of the rows and bother with the men employed in the fisheries, as they are a mischievous, lazy, and psalm singing lot, and make the stones for the others to throw... It is neither wise, nor just, to leave a lot of ignorant nigger teachers (pardon the paradox) to their own

³² Report of J.A. Peterson to Col. Sec., 28 July 1881, QSA, COL/A231, file 4091 of 1881.

³³ The boats were from four to eight tonnes, carvel built with two standing lugs and a jib, and drew about a metre and a half of water. Before 1875 most pearl shell was gathered by free divers from what were known as swimming boats - a swimming boat crew consisted of about ten to fifteen men. The 'Apparatus' boats, that is boats equipped with air compressors and 'hard-hat' diving suits, were manned by a diver who was also the skipper, a tender to watch the compressor, and a few deckhands.

³⁴ Extracts from letters of LCarey of HMS *Conflict* giving account of Pearl Shell Fisheries on the north and north-west coast of Australia, no.3, 28 January 1876, RNAS, Labour Traffic and Pearl Shell Fisheries 1873-1880, reel G698/21; Henry Chester to Col. Sec., 24 April 1879, QV & P vol.2 1879:943-945; Aplin to Col. Sec., 3 March 1879, Somerset Letter Book 1872-1877; Lt. de Hoghton to Commodore Wilson, 22 September 1879; Further Correspondence re Pearl-Shell etc., Fisheries, (3-6), QV & P vol.2 1880:1161-1166.

³⁵ Jardine to Palmer, 25 August 1872.

³⁶ McFarlane to foreign secretary LMS, 2 March 1879, B2 F3 Jb; McFarlane to foreign secretary LMS, 6th Voyage of the *Ellengowan*.

³⁷ King 1909:48.

devices, and the sooner the Rev. Mr. McFarlane returns to look after his flock the better for all concerned.³⁸

Like most other Europeans in the Strait, Jardine did not object to the aims of the mission but its methods. He was clearly prejudiced against the very idea of Pacific Islander teachers, and the attitude was not uncommon. Even the Queensland governor expressed the opinion that it was 'quite preposterous' to think that any good could result from the teachers' presence in Torres Strait unless they were closely controlled by missionaries.³⁹

At first the teachers found it impossible to compete with the more worldly attractions the pearling masters offered both Pacific and Torres Strait Islanders.⁴⁰ However, the situation on the north-eastern islands was unique and it was there that they had their greatest early successes. Although the fishery had begun in the north-east, from 1870 the islands became progressively more remote from the centre of activity. Furthermore the 1872 rectification of the maritime boundary left them beyond Queensland's jurisdiction. This meant that for the purposes of Queensland's 1868 Act, and the Imperial Kidnapping Act of 1872, the north-eastern Torres Strait Islanders were regarded as Pacific Islanders and treated as such. In other words, between 1872 and 1875 the regulations excluded them from work in the pearl-shelling industry, which at the time was carried on within the boundary.

The evidence that this prohibition was being actively policed is sparse, but appears to be conclusive. In August 1874, the schooner *Margaret and Jane* under the command of Henry McAuley was seized by the Somerset water police for carrying Pacific Islanders from Erub (Darnley) in north-eastern Torres Strait, to southern Torres Strait without being licensed under the Kidnapping Act. McAuley was initially charged with two offences; that he carried a Pacific Islander woman without a licence, and that he brought eight Massid (Yorke) Islanders to be signed on at Somerset claiming that they were from southern Torres Strait.⁴¹

McAuley appeared before the vice-admiralty court in Brisbane. He was acquitted on the first charge when the court determined that the woman had stowed away on the vessel. The second charge was also dropped, though the reason for this is not clear.⁴² But the fact that McAuley thought it necessary to pass the Massid (Yorke) Islanders off as southern Torres Strait Islanders indicates that both the authorities at Somerset and the pearl-shelling masters understood that it was illegal to employ northern Torres Strait Islanders in southern Torres Strait.

A letter from Charles Beddome to the Brisbane immigration agent in July 1874 provides more evidence of this. He wrote seeking permission to bring 150 north-eastern Islanders to his pearl-shelling station at Naghir (Mt. Ernest) which was within the 100 km. limit. He claimed that the men were both 'willing and anxious to engage... but cannot be

38 Jardine to Palmer, 15 August 1872.

39 Normanby to Secretary of State, 4 April 1872, despatch 30, CO/234/29, A.J.C.P., reel 1924, 1872.

40 At this time the operators of pearl-shelling stations generally accepted the responsibility of providing for the families of their employees. McFarlane to foreign secretary, L.M.S., 27 July 1874, B1 F1 Jd; McFarlane, Voyage of the *Ellengowan*, 15-26 October 1874, Papua Journals.

41 *The Queen v Margaret and Jane*, QSA, CRS/153, 1874.

42 Ibid.

brought as they come under the Kidnapping Act of 1872'.⁴³ Then in October 1874 Jardine's successor as Somerset police magistrate, Charles D'Oyley Aplin, inquired of the government whether Islanders from northern Torres Strait could be employed in Queensland waters. The opinion of the law officers was that Aplin was 'not bound' to seize vessels that arrived at Somerset with northern Torres Strait Islanders who wished to be entered on ship's articles, and that an officer in his position had a 'large discretionary power'.⁴⁴ Given Aplin's opinion that employment in the fishery was beneficial for the Islanders, it is safe to assume he allowed them to be signed on in the 1875 season.⁴⁵

Thus, for three years, while most central, south-western and central-western communities were tied up in the frenzied activity of the pearl-shelling industry, the north-eastern Islanders were at home with the teachers. Their islands also attracted a population of Pacific Islander deserters and time-expired men who had opted out of the pearl-shelling industry to live beyond Queensland's jurisdiction. The teachers had always relied on the support of other Pacific Islanders, especially their fellow Loyalty Islanders. In 1871 they were elated when Carl Thorngren's *John Knox* arrive at Erub (Darnley) shortly after they had been landed by the missionaries, because many of the crew were friends of theirs from Lifu.⁴⁶ The whole crew of the *John Knox* immediately deserted and some of them helped the teachers establish their stations.⁴⁷ When the teacher Mataika left Erub to begin work amongst the people of Mer (Murray) he took Tom, 'his excellent fellow-countryman', with him.⁴⁸ Gucheng, the principal teacher at Erub, employed another of the *John Knox* deserters, Citania, as his assistant teacher.⁴⁹ Another teacher had his cutter manned and skippered by Loyalty Islanders, and the Somerset officials believed that it was common for Pacific Islander maritime workers to steal from the pearl-shelling stations to assist the teachers when they were short of provisions.⁵⁰

In the north-eastern islands a window of opportunity opened for the teachers and they took advantage of the circumstances to establish a stronghold from which they eventually Christianised the Strait. They probably also were helped in this by a devastating measles epidemic which killed an estimated twenty per cent of the indigenous population in 1875.⁵¹ Torres Strait Islanders did not believe in death by natural causes, and when it occurred they blamed malevolent magic. There is no doubt that they associated the new sickness with the new religion, and for them the epidemic was a massive display of its supernatural power.⁵² It is also possible that the teachers exploited the hysteria caused by

43 Charles Beddome to immigration agent, 9 July 1874, QSA, COL/A196, in-letter 1365 of 1874.

44 Law officers' opinion re Aplin's letter of 29 October 1874, noted 'inform him accordingly', QSA, COL/A200, file 2309, of 1874.

45 Aplin, Report on the Pearl Fisheries of Torres Strait, 3 March 1875, Somerset Letter Book 1872-1877.

46 McFarlane 1888:49-50.

47 Jardine to Col. Sec., 1 October 1871, Somerset Letter Book 1869-1871.

48 W. Wyatt Gill, 1876:215.

49 Murray, 14 May 1873, Papua Journals.

50 Chester to Col. Sec., 7 June 1876, Somerset Letter Book 1872-1877.

51 Chester to Col. Sec., 14 July 1882, QSA, COL/A344, in-letter 4004 of 1882.

52 Haddon, vol.5 1904:298-307; Elia to McFarlane, March 1878, encl. in McFarlane to foreign secretary, LMS, 10 May 1878, B2 F2 Jb.

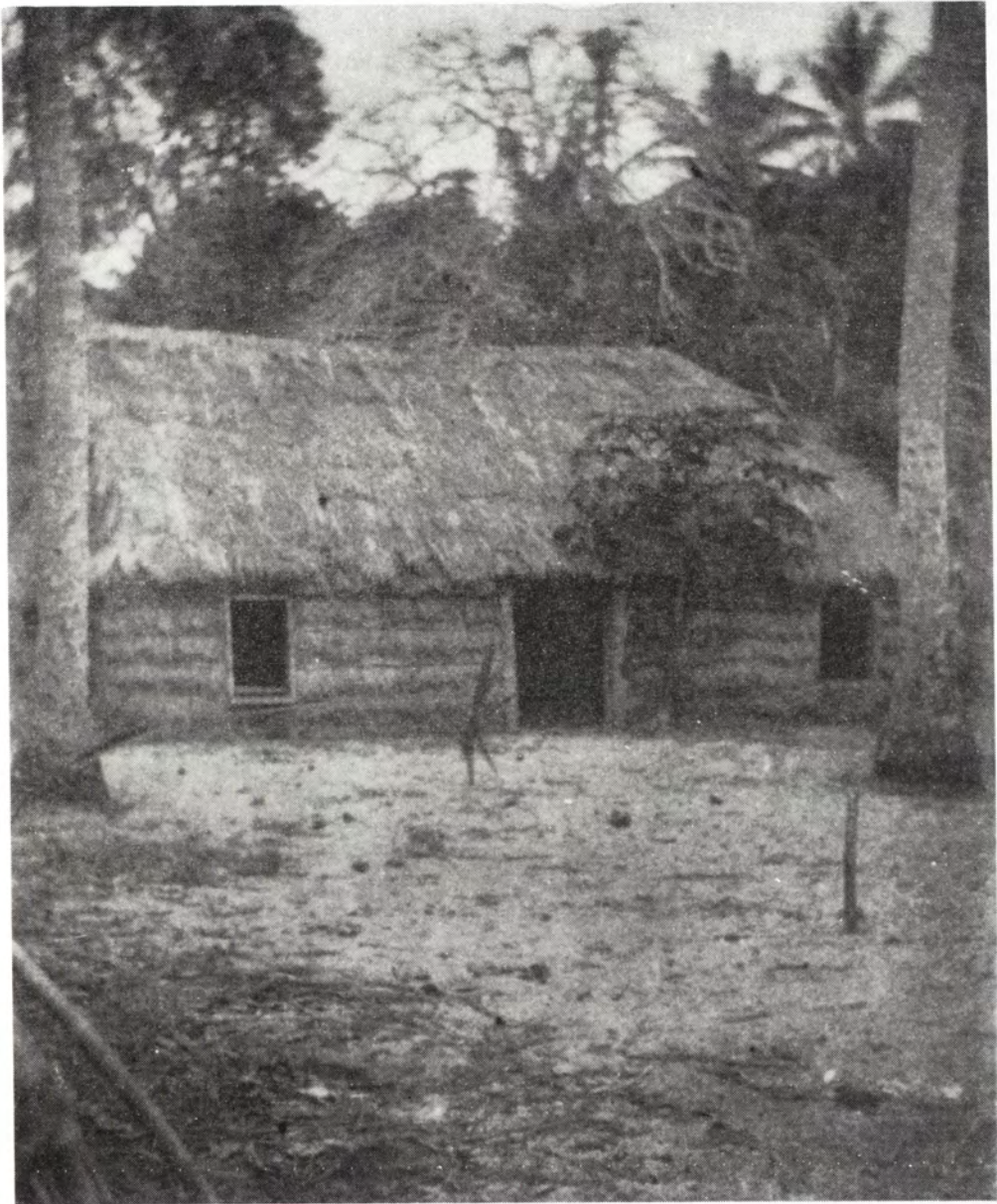


'Joe Rotummah's House on Damley Island, 1898'. Oxley Library no. 65445.



'Damley Island Court House, 1898'. Oxley Library no. 65493.

'HEATHEN POLYNEE' AND 'NIGGER TEACHERS'



'First church on Darnley, 1875'. Onslow photo album, Mitchell Library px A4358 -1.

the epidemic in order to win converts and further entrench their authority.⁵³ Whatever the case, by the late 1870s they were the most influential men in most Torres Strait communities, and in the north-eastern islands they had established what Beckett has described as a 'stern theocracy'.⁵⁴

The critics of the mission wrote disparagingly about the intellectual ability and character of the teachers, but the masters were more concerned about the fact that teachers encouraged both Pacific and Torres Strait Islanders to question their employers' authority. On islands where pearl-shelling and mission stations were in close proximity there was often intense animosity between masters and teachers. On Mabuiag (Jervis) the masters objected to the teachers' practice of taking money from helplessly drunk divers. The teachers answered that it was common on their home islands to fine drunken seamen. The masters regarded the taking of roll-calls at Sunday service as an attempt to intimidate those who did not attend. The teachers considered they had a perfect right to keep check on their congregations. The teachers also kept women at the mission houses while their men were out in the boats. They claimed they did this to protect the women against the unwanted advances of other men. The masters thought they did it to satisfy their own sexual appetites.⁵⁵

On these kinds of issues the masters may have been able to claim the high moral ground, but their criticisms were motivated more by the desire to undermine the growing influence of the teachers amongst their employees. The antagonism was essentially a product of a conflict of authority. Likewise there were Pacific Islander skippers who were not afraid to test the authority of their employers. They were generally old hands with crews to back them up and authority of their own. In normal circumstances the balance of power remained with the masters and they were able to hold the mens' support if a few were being openly defiant. But when the men were well supplied with cash and alcohol was freely available, things were less certain. By the late 1870s the masters were beginning to look for a steadier and more tractable workforce in the ports of south-east Asia.

Between 1872 and 1880 the number of Pacific Islanders in pearl-shelling dropped from about 500 to 320, and by 1885 it was 175. This is despite the fact that by then the overall workforce had increased to somewhere near 1000.⁵⁶ As Pacific Islanders became less willing to accept the role the employers wished to impose upon them many left the European-dominated industry. Some went of their own accord and others were squeezed out.

53 For nearly four years before the epidemic the teachers were under the sole guidance of Archibald Murray. He was a preacher of a 'highly spiritual character', and the highlight of his career was the Tutuila revival 1839-41 at Samoa. The revival followed an influenza epidemic which swept through all Samoa, but it was most dramatic at Tutuila where Murray was stationed. According to Gilson he exploited the hysteria caused by the epidemic to win converts. Given the teachers' habit of calling the wrath of God down on the Torres Strait Islanders it is possible they followed Murray's example in 1875.

54 Beckett 1978:215.

55 Mrs J. Tait Scott, Cruise in Torres Straits in the 'Jessamine', 28 Feb.-2 March 1881, Papua Journals; McFarlane to foreign secretary, LMS, 16 June 1882, B3 F1 Ja; Thomas de Hoghton to Charles Pennefather, 8 September 1879, encl. in Pennefather to Chester, 19 December 1879, encl. in Chester to Col. Sec., 5 January 1880, QSA, COL/A288, file 460 of 1880.

56 Chester to Col. Sec., 3 June 1880, QSA, COL/A295, in-letter 3582 of 1880; John Douglas, Thursday Island (Report of the Government Resident for 1885), (2) QV & P vol.1 1886:489-493.



Traditional beehive huts on Darnley, 1975. Onslow photo album.

Since the earliest years of the fishery they had tended to meld into the local population. This process continued in the 1880s, and probably intensified as the workforce was restructured.

There are no figures to make an exact estimate of the number of Pacific Islanders who joined the island communities. Certainly the total does not account for all who drifted from the pearl-shelling industry. Some of them can be traced to beche-de-mer vessels operating from Cooktown to islands off the New Guinea coast, others went south to the sugar

plantations. But the number who remained in the Strait was nonetheless considerable, probably more than 200. After a tour of the Strait in 1881 a missionary wrote:

I found it extremely difficult to get at the natives for South Sea men, they are quite a plague at some of the [mission] stations.⁵⁷

Some lived by fishing and gardening, some owned their own beche-de-mer boats, others operated beche-de-mer boats owned by Europeans. This last group managed to remain fairly independent, only having to deliver their product to Thursday Island three or four times a year.

The influence of the Pacific Islander elite diminished considerably after the mid-1880s, but as Shnukal and Beckett show it was not extinguished. That the three of us uncovered convincing evidence of it over such a wide span of time indicates that it was deeply rooted in Torres Strait society. Even in recent times people of mixed Pacific and Torres Strait Islander descent continued to dominate the affairs of a few communities, and it might be argued that they still wield the bulk of political and economic power in the Strait. Yet they are, and have long been, an integral part of Torres Strait society, and perhaps that is why it is so difficult to define adequately their role in the early contact period. What we can say is that they were not simply cultural middlemen or mediators. They were forging their own destiny, and in the process they helped create what is now Torres Strait's living culture.

The essential components of this new culture were in place by the mid-1880s, and while it was different from the old, it was not necessarily inferior to it. Certainly it was a culture more suited to the times. The fact that the people were predominantly Christian, were willing and capable workers, lived in village communities, and in many cases could read and write,⁵⁸ encouraged local government officials to view them more sympathetically and to actively work to promote their welfare. However, after the turn of the century officials with long experience in the region were replaced by professional bureaucrats who brought to the Strait ideas about 'native policy' formed on the pastoral frontier. For the next half century Queensland's oppressive protectionist regime denied Torres Strait Islanders, who were Christian and law-abiding Australians, the most basic human rights. The memory of those years has tended to obscure the fact that a century ago, as Shnukal says, Europeans were not the dominant external influence in Torres Strait.

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⁵⁷ J. Tait Scott to foreign secretary LMS, 5 April 1881, B2 F5 Jb.

⁵⁸ Haddon, vol.3 1907:166, 187-250.

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