

## CHAPTER TWO

# Tidal Flows

An overview of Torres Strait Islander-Asian contact

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### **Torres Strait Islanders**

The Torres Strait Islanders, Australia's second Indigenous minority, come from the islands of the sea passage between Queensland and New Guinea. Estimated to number at most 4,000 people before contact, but reduced by half by disease and depredation by the late-1870s, they now number more than 40,000. Traditional stories recount their arrival in waves of chain migration from various islands and coastal villages of southern New Guinea, possibly as a consequence of environmental change.<sup>1</sup> The Islanders were not traditionally unified, but recognised five major ethno-linguistic groups or 'nations', each specialising in the activities best suited to its environment: the Miriam Le of the fertile, volcanic islands of the east; the Kulkalgal of the sandy coral cays of the centre; the Saibailgal of the low mud-flat islands close to the New Guinea coast; the Maluilgal of the grassy, hilly islands of the centre west; and the Kaurareg of the low west, who for centuries had intermarried with Cape York Aboriginal people. They spoke dialects of two traditional but unrelated languages: in the east, Papuan Meriam Mir; in the west and centre, Australian Kala Lagaw Ya (formerly called Mabuiag); and they used a sophisticated sign language to communicate with other language speakers. Outliers of a broad Melanesian culture area, they lived in small-scale, acephalous, clan-based communities and traded, waged war and intermarried with their neighbours and the peoples of the adjacent northern and southern mainlands. The sea was their chief source

of sustenance, wealth and mythology. Pragmatic, courageous fishermen, hunters, agriculturalists, warriors and long-range traders, whose complex exchange networks extended from the headwaters of the Fly River to the eastern coast of Cape York, they were largely protected from outside incursion by the dangerous currents, submerged reefs and shifting sandbanks of the strait itself, one of the least navigable passages in the world.

### **First Contacts**

Oral accounts narrate the visits of Chinese and possibly Indonesian fishermen, who harvested trepang (*bêche-de-mer*) for the Chinese market long before European arrival in Torres Strait.<sup>2</sup> These men did not interfere with the Islanders nor seek to settle, but came each fishing season, traded peacefully and returned to their homes. The early 17th-century Japanese pirate, Nagamasu Yamada, is said to have visited Torres Strait and buried treasure on Booby Island.<sup>3</sup> British and French interest in the strait was sparked by its navigation in 1606 by Luis Vaez de Torres, after whom it is named, but it was not until the late 18th and early 19th centuries that relatively safe routes began to be mapped by naval surveyors.

Meanwhile, as Pacific stands of sandalwood and trepang became exhausted, European sandalwooders and trepangers moved westward in a search for fresh supplies, making exploratory trading visits from the 1850s and establishing stations on some north-eastern and central Torres Strait islands by the mid-1860s. Crews of ‘coloured men’ or ‘Kanakas’ (Pacific Islanders, Chinese and Malays) — the terms are often used interchangeably — under the nominal control of European boat captains, at times terrorised the Torres Strait Islanders, stealing their garden produce and women, killing those who resisted and burning their houses and canoes. An increasing through-traffic of sailing boats meant an increasing number of wrecks and murdered sailors, whose severed skulls were the preferred regional currency.

Responding to geopolitical and humanitarian concerns, the Queensland Colonial Government established its first (short-lived) official presence in the region in 1863 — a garrison at Port Albany and, a year later, a settlement at Somerset — for reasons of defence, trade and as a seamen’s refuge. Having failed in all of its objectives, Somerset, originally hailed as ‘the Singapore of Australia’, was abandoned in 1877 and the settlement removed to Thursday Island under the supervision of the Police Magistrate, Henry Majoribanks Chester.<sup>4</sup>

The trepangers, while answerable to little but their own commercial interests, had begun to reach accommodation with the Islanders in a bid to

further those interests. Some young men joined the station workforces and their sisters formed alliances with the European and Pacific Islander trepanners, giving birth to children who were usually adopted into the mother's family. This new equilibrium was again disturbed when, in 1869, commercial quantities of pearl shell were taken from the Tudu (Warrior Island) reefs to Sydney.<sup>5</sup> Word of the opportunities spread throughout the ports of Asia and the Pacific and triggered the pearl rush of the 1870s and 1880s, when thousands of men from all parts of the world made their way to Torres Strait, eager to pursue dreams of wealth. By then the Torres Strait Islanders had been 'pacified' and offered only a token resistance to the newcomers, whose arrival affected every aspect of their traditional life and custom. Again, young men from surrounding islands and the northern and southern mainland coasts joined the pearlers, being paid not in money but in food, and women were given as wives. Pearling stations were established throughout the strait, but the majority were located on the islands adjacent to Thursday Island, traditionally Kaurareg territory.<sup>6</sup>

### **Pearling and the Introduction of Asian Marine Workers**

Of all the marine industries, the most lucrative was pearl shell, which, from 1870 until the introduction of the diving dress in 1874, depended almost exclusively on Pacific Islander and local Indigenous 'swimming divers', male and female.<sup>7</sup> Adoption of the diving dress rescued the industry from the consequences of its over-exploitation of island reefs and changed its nature.<sup>8</sup> The dress enabled divers to descend to great depths — up to 15 fathoms — in their search for pearl shell; and led to the importation of lower-paid Asian indentured labour and ethnic specialisation within the industry. The first generation of elite 'dress' divers were Europeans, who are said to have taught Polynesians and Filipinos the art of diving, before being displaced by them. The latter, in turn, were replaced by Japanese divers and tenders. Melanesians and 'Malays' (an omnibus term for the inhabitants of insular South-East Asia and beyond) tended to be less well-paid crewmen, as were Chinese and Sri Lankans. The British owners preferred ethnically mixed crews, despite their tensions, lest a group of disaffected 'countrymen' make off with boat and booty. Few records were kept of the very first Asian seamen to join the fisheries and even fewer have survived. Chinese, Filipinos, Indonesians and later, Japanese, travelled independently or semi-independently to Torres Strait from the early 1870s, lured by the same dreams of wealth and opportunity that had attracted so many others, but the Asian population remained low until the mid-1880s.

Wishing to exercise some control over the marine industries and tax the proceeds, the Queensland Colonial Government sought the approval of the

British Imperial Government to extend Queensland's maritime boundary and bring its offshore islands within the jurisdiction of the Colonial Government. In 1872, the maritime boundary was extended to include islands lying within 60 miles of the Queensland coast, including islands in the Torres Strait; in 1879, it was extended further to incorporate islands outside the 60-mile limit. These annexations extended British sovereignty over the islands (though not the waters) of Torres Strait at a time when Great Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Russia and Spain all sought to extend the boundaries of their existing colonial empires through annexation of islands in the Indian and Pacific Oceans (see Paul Battersby's Chapter One, this volume).

The Pacific Island Labourers Act of 1880 and subsequent amendments foreshadowed the eventual cessation of Pacific Islander labour: the pearlers' response was mass importation of indentured South-East Asian labour, which marked the beginning of a shift in fisheries labour dominance from Pacific Islanders to Asians.<sup>9</sup> It also created the earliest Torres Strait Asian communities, which were to endure for 60 years. Towards the end of 1881, a vast new pearl bed was discovered, later known as 'the Old Ground', extending many kilometres south-west of Mabuiag. Seeing a lucrative business opportunity, James Burns, of Burns Philp & Company imported 50 'Malays' on three-year contracts from Singapore and, shortly afterwards, imported half that number of Sri Lankans as boatmen.<sup>10</sup> Citing the successful Singaporean venture, Burns almost immediately applied to the Colonial Secretary of Ceylon to engage a further 100 Sri Lankans from Galle.<sup>11</sup> According to Sissons, in November of 1883, 'the first group of Japanese recruited under contract for the industry were brought to Thursday Island by the master pearler, Capt. John Miller. There were 37 in this group.'<sup>12</sup> After free immigration was permitted under the Anglo-Japan Treaty of Commerce and Navigation of 1894, the Japanese became the most numerous community, taking virtual control of the industry by the late 1890s and displacing the other groups (see Table 2.1).

The Hon. John Douglas, chief government official from 1885 to 1904, the heyday of the industry, outlined the historical trajectory as follows:

[A]t first the shellers, finding that it was impossible to get sufficient white men who would ship in their boats, had recourse to Malays and Manila men, both of whom were found suitable for the purpose. Then came the Japanese, who appeared to be not only suitable as employees, but who very soon showed that they could not only work for others, but that they could work for themselves. They bought and built boats, and fitted them out, obtaining licences, and winning for themselves a position and a standing which could not be questioned. Would they appropriate the industry? It looked very like it. In numbers they were rapidly increasing, and in co-

operative capacity they proved more than a match for the Europeans or the Manila men. Then it was discovered that the Asiatic Japanese is an alien, and it was scarcely to be expected that we could license aliens to take our profitable pearl shell from our territorial waters. And thus it came about that the licensing of boats, which up to that time had been unlimited, was thenceforth restricted [in 1899 after intense political manoeuvring] to British subjects.<sup>13</sup>

In 1877, Thursday Island had become the new site of the government settlement. The Police Magistrate, H. M. Chester, having overseen the removal of the settlement from Somerset, reported to the Colonial Secretary that on the day he took charge the population comprised about a dozen European government officials, the crew of the government cutter, a Chinese gardener and 17 non-Europeans serving prison sentences for striking work.<sup>14</sup> By about 1885, the first Thursday Island census enumerated a population of 307, the majority of them Asian immigrants: 139 Europeans, 77 Malays, 49 Filipinos, three Chinese, seven Japanese, 20 Sri Lankans, four Arabs and 16 local Indigenous people.<sup>15</sup> This mirrored a general increase in the Asian population of Torres Strait, which by then comprised 'nine tenths of the employees in the fisheries'.<sup>16</sup>

### **Thursday Island, an Asian Port**

The appointment of John Douglas as Government Resident, the highest public official in the strait, began a period of expansion for Thursday Island and its Asian communities, which ended soon after his death in 1904. This was not entirely coincidental: Thursday Island, like the rest of the region, depended for its prosperity on the pearl-shelling industry, the fortunes of the Asian communities rising and falling with the profitability of the fisheries. In 1885 and 1886, several shellers left with their crews for newly discovered beds in Western Australia, not returning until 1889–90. There was another downturn during the depression of the 1890s; in 1905, when most of the fleet moved to Dutch waters; and during the depression of the 1920s. But Douglas deserves the credit for encouraging the social harmony and surprisingly good community relations that prevailed during his period of office. His 'benevolent paternalism' ensured an impartial local court and honest police force and he reinstated previous measures of local government for the Torres Strait Islanders, as well as generally encouraging naturalisation and entrepreneurial activity among the Asian immigrants, some of whom had found profitable niches in the trochus and trepang industries. Undoubtedly, his most significant political victory while Government Resident was in quarantining the Torres

**Table 2.1: Nationalities of men engaged in the marine industry based on Thursday Island, 1885, 1896–1938**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Japanese</i>	<i>Malays</i>	<i>Filipinos</i>	<i>T. S. Islanders</i>	<i>Europeans</i>
1885	132	257	147		30
1896	511	270	212		51
1897	651	268	182	72	54
1898	790	247	251	174	86
1899	707	174	319	206	53
1900	619	217	237	279	65
1901	551	207	253	285	67
1902	624	194	205	289	41
1903	617	197	217	306	67
1904	739	231	188	307	68
1905	539	64	52	201	17
1906	460	51	42	131	7
1907	524	30	59	183	17
1908	498		44	148	9
1909	508		35	253	15
1910	528		18	205	14
1911	533	259	21	215	17
1912	631	115	19	224	22
1913	655	82	22	190	7
1914	427	58	17	161	3
1915	193	40	16	214	3
1916	422	40	18	197	3
1917	358	21	21	312	39
1918	576	32	14	229	8
1919	613	31	13	244	13
1920	600	12	2	147	
1921	377	63		216	
1922	407	67		130	30
1923	492	50		172	21
1924	411	42	2	191	15
1925	488	29	3	136	3
1926	528	36	1	148	6
1927	510	65		137	6
1928	542	59		111	6
1929	580	58		393	7
1930	488	38	1	354	7
1931	293	23	2	419	8
1932	339	20	2	447	6
1933	327	16	2	469	10
1934	352	24	3	742	14
1935	320	27	2	895	15
1936	335	56	3	349	16
1937	412	71	3	362	16
1938	429	55	3	211	5

Sources: Figures for 1885, 1896–97 from Annual Reports of the Government Resident for Thursday Island; for 1898–1938, abbreviated from Schug (1995: 154–7).

Strait Islanders from the restrictions of Queensland's Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897, which confined mainland Aboriginal people to reserves and appointed local 'protectors' with wide powers.<sup>17</sup>

The last years of the 19th century were the height of Thursday Island's influence as the centre of the pearling and associated industries. The island was also home to five flourishing Asian communities, which together constituted the majority of the population (see Table 2.2). Generally speaking, each group filled an ethnically specialised economic niche: Chinese were market gardeners, cooks and small-shopkeepers; Filipinos were divers and trepanners; Indonesians were crewmen and shell-packers; Japanese were divers and tenders; Sri Lankans were boatmen, jewellers and pearl dealers. Despite the strains of poverty and crowded living conditions, reciprocity was the societal norm and interpersonal relations were generally harmonious. This is the thrust of residents' memories and court records and the conclusion of most official reports. Residents came together in their daily activities and recreational pursuits, for special events such as concerts, dances, boxing matches, and to celebrate the Chinese and Malay new years, the Buddhist *Wesak* and the Japanese Festival of Lanterns.

Admittedly, there existed economic and ideological divisions that promoted inter-group rivalries. The structure of the labour system, which was supported ideologically by the 'racial hierarchy' then in vogue, fed tensions that could erupt in assaults, brawls and sometimes murder. Chinese-Japanese and Filipino-Pacific Islander antipathy is well documented, but there were also occasional fights between Filipinos and Malays,<sup>18</sup> Filipinos and Chinese,<sup>19</sup> Malays and Sri Lankans,<sup>20</sup> Malays and Japanese,<sup>21</sup> Japanese and Sri Lankans,<sup>22</sup> and Japanese and Filipinos.<sup>23</sup> Cooperation and conflict, amity and enmity<sup>24</sup> are two sides of the same coin and historians are free to emphasise what best suits their argument.<sup>25</sup> The widely acknowledged hierarchy among the Asian groups was based partly on their specialised status and earnings within the pearling industry,<sup>26</sup> but was also supported ideologically by the supposedly scientifically proven 'hierarchy of races'. The Europeans were at the apex and the mainland Aboriginal people at the base, with Torres Strait Islanders just above them; in between came, in descending order, the Japanese, Chinese, Sri Lankans, Filipinos and Malays. Even the Anglican Bishop of Carpentaria, denouncing changes in Queensland's protection policy in his address to the third Synod of the Diocese of Carpentaria on Thursday Island in July 1935, subscribed to the almost universally held belief in the importance of race as a crucial determinant of individual achievement: not only could its importance 'not be ignored or underrated', he said, but '[t]he inheritance of different races is something given which cannot alter'.<sup>27</sup> The hierarchy and the now-discredited ideas of 'race' it

embodied touched the lives of every inhabitant of Torres Strait. It regulated interpersonal and inter-group relations in almost every domain between the 'Black', 'White' and ethnically mixed 'non-Aboriginal' 'Coloured' inhabitants, the latter a socially and administratively ambiguous category, which might approximate either 'Black' or 'White' according to the dictates of policy. Even children were not exempt. Segregated schooling meant that Chinese and Japanese children generally attended the 'White school', whereas the children of Malays and Filipinos who were not educated at the convent school attended the 'Coloured school' along with children of Indigenous descent. 'Race', along with religious considerations, also came into play when the immigrants (and later their children) came to marry: there could be considerable loss of prestige if Chinese or Japanese chose spouses from Filipino, Malay or Indigenous families.

The racial hierarchy as an idea was so pervasive it was reflected, whether by accident or design, in the spatial location and configuration of the different communities on Thursday Island, where, by the turn of the 20th century, the majority of Torres Strait's Asian-heritage families had made their homes. Most of the Europeans, inheritors of 'Western civilisation', made their homes in spacious bungalows on the hillside above the western corner of the township, then known as Port Kennedy, near the present-day hospital. Most of the immigrants from Asia, 'Eastern peoples', congregated in the small, overcrowded cottages, shops and boarding houses of the Asian quarter, close to shore on the eastern side, up from the Post Office and between Summers and Hargrave Streets, an area commonly known as 'Yokohama'. It was here that a smaller and less distinct 'Malaytown' also emerged, alongside the billiard rooms, gambling dens and brothels that served the island's large itinerant population. The Chinese and Sri Lankan communities proved the exception, positioning themselves — geographically and socially — between the European and Asian quarters (see Figure C). Chinese merchants generally resided behind or above their businesses in the centre of the retail precinct of Port Kennedy, near the corners of Douglas and Blackall Streets, while market gardeners lived on their plots, situated mostly north of the township. Sri Lankans lived in a recognised 'Cingalese quarter' at the eastern end of Victoria Parade. Even the cemetery was racially sectionalised:

The layout of Thursday Island cemetery reads like a social map of Thursday Island, both last century and up to about the 1960s. On the top of the hill are the white 'bush aristocracy', and government officials; next are ordinary European Protestants; coming down the hill over the road are the Roman Catholics, then South Sea Islanders, Japanese, Chinese and Malay, with Torres Strait Islanders again over the road; and right at the bottom the (mostly young) Japanese divers who died in their hundreds working the pearl boats.<sup>28</sup>



*View of Thursday Island, 1900.*

Courtesy of John Oxley Library, Brisbane (Item No. 14339).

Newcomers found Thursday Island ‘to be more like an Asian than an Australian town’.<sup>29</sup> It was the first ‘Asian’ port encountered by outbound passengers from eastern Australia, the last by inbound passengers. It was our ‘gateway to the East’, possibly to become ‘a second Hong Kong’. British colonial architecture, manners, legal and cultural institutions may have dominated the western end of the island, but visitors who ventured into the small shops and alleyways of ‘Malaytown’ and ‘Yokohama’ at the eastern end were both attracted and repelled by the ‘Eastern’ exoticism they found there. ‘There were Japanese divers, barefoot Malays in loose sarongs, Chinese in blue trousers, skull caps and pigtails’,<sup>30</sup> selling ‘turtle steaks, which they carried draped over bamboo poles’,<sup>31</sup> Japanese women in kimonos, a Japanese temple near the Post Office,<sup>32</sup> ‘a tiny tin Buddhist temple and an equally small Chinese Joss house’.<sup>33</sup> At a time when many British-Australians feared the social and economic effects of Asian intrusion into Australian society and when racial prejudice was widely institutionalised and internalised, the Asianness of Thursday Island elicited complex responses from visitors. Frank Hurley in 1920 was amused and affronted:

The populace are a heterogeneous collection from Malay [sic], China, Japan, and natives from neighbouring islands. These intermarry and the offsprings are puzzles of racial complexity and mixture. The shops appear to be mostly controlled by Chinese and Japanese. There is a considerable white population; but these appear to be exclusively traders or lugger owners. The wants of the town being supplied by Asiatics. Thursday Island is a Satire on the White Australia Policy.<sup>34</sup>

Wilkins, in about 1925, was fascinated and condescending:

Thursday Island is in itself a most charming and beautiful spot, but nothing that man has done has tended to improve it. A few straggling shops line the main street, and a few residential houses are scattered here and there. On a low-lying section backed by dilapidated boat-houses are what are known as the Oriental quarters, but the sordid, rusty iron buildings in no way resemble the equally filthy parts of the Orient which, even in spite of the dirt, maintain a picturesqueness that is entirely missing at Thursday Island.<sup>35</sup>

**Table 2.2: Asian and European population of Thursday Island, 1877–1914**

Year	Chinese	Japanese	Filipinos	Malays	Sri Lankans	Europeans
1877*	included in the 700 'natives'	50				
1878*	included in the 683 'natives'	31				
1879*	included in the 720 'natives'	17				
1880*	9	included in the 213 Asians	28			
1883*						c.90
c.1885	3	7	49	77	20	139
1886	included in the 800 'natives'	400				
1890	38	22	25	36	22	270
1892	52	32	61	90	43	582
1893	61	179	207	189	32	362
1894	101	222	98	149	38	651
1895	84	233	119	131	38	626
1896	84	233	119	117	30	626
1897	73	331	92	87	48	571
1898	77	619	70	63	40	608
1899	71	440	103	64	54	574
1900	74	385	79	53	48	614
1901	114	304	83	62	54	705
1902	89	384	90	80	54	686
1903	98	351	82	60	43	740
1904	126	509	110	77	45	880
1906	101	309	81	74	33	734
1907	97	522	48	41	19	639
1909	80	190	49	32	14	663
1910	81	238	53	53	14	662
1911	106	191	36	37	10	559
1912	96	189	32	50	11	630
1913	85	182	33	78	11	613
1914	88	232	31	44	11	662

\*Figure includes total fisheries population.

Sources: for 1877–84, 1886–92, 1894, 1896–1914 from Evans;<sup>36</sup> for c.1885 from Census, Thursday Island;<sup>37</sup> for 1893 from Map of Thursday Island;<sup>38</sup> for 1895 from *Annual Report of the Government Resident, Thursday Island*, 1894–95. Note that official sources are inconsistent and it is not until 1890 that we can compare ethnic groups in Torres Strait with any accuracy.

## From Federation to World War II

Federation of the Australian colonies brought great changes to the circumstances of the Asian communities in their dealings with Europeans. The first Commonwealth legislation passed by the new Parliament was the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, which was overtly discriminatory and deliberately sought to exclude immigrants who were not White and did not speak English. While pearling industry employees were specifically exempted, the import was clear. A number of amendments followed, each more restrictive. In January 1904, the Commonwealth Naturalisation Act of 1903 came into force, giving the Commonwealth responsibility for the naturalisation of 'aliens' (non-British subjects). It replaced the Queensland Aliens Act of 1867, which had excluded Asians (and Africans) only on the grounds of being unmarried and less than three years resident in Queensland. Now Asians (and other non-Europeans) were denied the right to apply for naturalisation and, even if resident in Australia, to bring their wives and children into the country. Typical of the personal difficulties faced by long-term immigrants who had made their homes in the Torres Strait was that of Punchi Hewa Mendis, a Sri Lankan who 'had married a Sinhalese lady, but on account of the White Australia Policy, she had not been permitted to live with her husband in Australia. So each year he had been obliged to visit her in Ceylon.'<sup>39</sup>

These new laws had long been mooted and, allied with the economic effects of the 1890s depression and the heightened emotions of the time, many Asian immigrants feared violence, incarceration or deportation and returned home.<sup>40</sup> Of those who stayed, a significant number accompanied the exodus of the pearling fleets to the Aru Islands in 1905 after shell prices fell sharply and limitations were placed on the hiring of non-White crews. Some returned, but the shelling industry never recovered its former profitability and the region began its economic decline. There were times of apparent recovery: shell brought good prices during the last half of 1919, for example, which encouraged the entry of some small operators; but they fell again in 1920 and prices for all marine produce generally remained low for most of the 1920s.<sup>41</sup> The indenture system continued until the late 1930s; the pearling industry was the only exception to the White Australia Policy, but the success of the Japanese as entrepreneurs led their European rivals to restrict Japanese indenture and access to the ownership of the means of production. Despite this, the Japanese continued to increase their dominance of the industry, which remained substantially in their hands until the outbreak of World War II.

Issues affecting the Torres Strait Islanders also came to impact on the local Asian population. After John Douglas's death in 1904, Brisbane bureaucrats lost no time in pressing for the inclusion of Torres Strait Islanders in

the Protection Acts, largely for reasons of administrative convenience and control, but also influenced by ideological imperatives. In March 1906, the Home Secretary officially transferred all administrative responsibility for Islanders from the Government Resident to the local Protector of Aboriginals.<sup>42</sup> In 1912, most of the outer islands were gazetted 'reserves' and the Protector consolidated his control even further over the lives of local Indigenous people, including their interactions with members of the Asian communities. Torres Strait Islanders could not reside on Thursday Island or travel elsewhere without permission. Asian-Indigenous families residing on the outer islands were given a stark choice: if they remained on reserves, they would be classified as 'Aboriginals' and treated legally as wards of the Protector and fully subject to his authority; if they came to live on Thursday Island or adjacent non-reserve islands, they would be free people but, equally, they would be forced to forgo association with their Indigenous relatives. As 'Coloureds', they were again victims of 'the enframing practices of state and institutions', defined by Rodman and Cooper as 'methods of dividing up and containing space and people in ways that are made to seem natural and neutral but are in effect disciplinary mechanisms of order and control'.<sup>43</sup>

With the decline of the pearling industry, the long-term immigrants from Asia who had married and settled on Thursday and surrounding islands found manual and semi-skilled work in allied industries. While members of the first generation retained their distinctive dress, language and customs within defined communities, and preferred intra-ethnic marriage as far as possible, many of the early distinctions and antagonisms were elided over time through deep friendships, inter-group marriages and adoptions that transcended ethnic and religious differences. Their locally born children, educated together in the Coloured and convent schools, began to identify and refer to themselves as 'Thursday Islanders' or 'Thursday Island half-castes' and to intermarry in their turn. Tom Lowah, born in 1914 to a Solomon Island father and Murray Island mother and brought up on Thursday Island, writes:

We had at least three different races of children with whom I went to school, and the parents were so friendly with mine that it made us feel we were all related ... Two of my Aunts, now deceased, were both married to Javanese [and adopted their husbands' religion of Islam].<sup>44</sup>

Ironically, the official policies of segregation, at their height during the 1920s and 1930s, were (unintentionally) blurring ethnic and religious boundaries among the Asian communities. Unlike most local Europeans, the Asian immigrants were on the whole remarkably tolerant of difference in everyday life: the Japanese diver, Kew Shibasaki, for example, was a Buddhist

who married a Muslim Malay; one of his children became a Christian.<sup>45</sup> This tolerance was even more marked among the second generation of locally born children of Asian-Indigenous descent. This is what one would expect of a culturally rich, but economically and politically oppressed minority living side by side in a small, bounded location. In what was, in retrospect, an unofficial socio-cultural experiment on the part of the Queensland Government, the largely undifferentiated perception, categorisation and treatment of Thursday Island's 'half-caste' population promoted the formation and consolidation of a self-conscious third group identity. The outcome proved a challenge to existing legal classifications, forcing the authorities to proliferate increasingly absurd 'racial' categories (see Regina Ganter's Chapter Nine, this volume).

Also during the inter-war years, the 'half-caste' population began to be affected by the general unrest that had been building up for some time in the region as a reaction to the actions of the local Protector. Resentment came to a head with the passage of the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Acts Amendment Act of 1934*, which redefined the term 'half-caste' to include many of the hitherto 'free' people of Thursday Island of Asian-Indigenous descent. This new act extended the Protector's control to yet another sector of the local population — citizens of Thursday Island of Asian-Indigenous descent, who until then had been exempt from the provisions of the act. The Bishop of Carpentaria was moved to speak out publicly against the Government, calling the restrictions 'a threat to their liberties and the free use of their property'.<sup>46</sup> Possibly encouraged by this unexpectedly overt opposition to official policy, the Islanders working 'company boats' organised their first challenge to European authority. In early 1936, they went on strike, eventually forcing the Government to make a number of concessions. The most significant was the passage of *The Torres Strait Islanders Act 1939*, which, for the first time, legally recognised the Islanders as a separate group of people. While various motivations for the strike are adduced by Beckett,<sup>47</sup> Sharp's definitive accounts demonstrate that at its core was 'a great cultural refusal' to accept the increasingly restrictive conditions imposed on the Islanders by the workings of the Protection Acts.<sup>48</sup> The Asian contribution to the climate of anti-government sentiment on Thursday Island and its role in mobilising that sentiment, which led to the repeal of the Protection Acts and the appointment of a more conciliatory protector, is yet to be documented.

### **The War Years and Their Aftermath**

The intervention of World War II relegated to the background this complex and difficult situation, which had brought State and Church into open conflict

after years of covert antagonism. The war years marked a turning point in Indigenous-European and Indigenous-Asian relations across all of northern Australia. In 1939, the National Security (Aliens Control) Act came into operation, requiring the registration of all aliens over the age of 16 and restricting their movements.<sup>49</sup> Anticipating hostilities with Japan, barbed-wire fencing and other supplies had already been delivered to Thursday Island to secure the Japanese quarter. At the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941, the navy commandeered all vessels and the military authorities on Thursday Island took over the administration of Torres Strait, transforming Yokohama into a temporary internment camp for the Japanese residents. Until they were transferred to the permanent camps on the mainland, daily life continued within the wire fence.<sup>50</sup>

Torres Strait's strategic position and its perceived vulnerability to Japanese attack led to the evacuation in 1942 of the European and 'Coloured' populations from Thursday Island and other non-reserve islands. This effectively destroyed the prewar Asian communities and their distinctive hybrid culture. The majority of evacuees remained on the mainland; only a minority of the prewar Asian families returned to Thursday Island and they were, for the most part, of mixed Asian and Asian-Indigenous heritage. They found their former houses, businesses and community buildings looted, damaged or destroyed by the Australian soldiers stationed there, who also destroyed the houses of the Horn Island Filipino community.<sup>51</sup> In the midst of the destruction, the returnees set about constructing new lives in a radically altered sociopolitical and economic environment. They turned their energies inwards towards rebuilding family businesses, rather than outwards towards reconstructing the prewar Asian communities, even if this had been possible. Yokohama's buildings and Japanese temple had been destroyed by the army and the once-flourishing Japanese Society, Japanese Brethren's Society and Youth Club were never reorganised.<sup>52</sup> The Buddhist temple, located near the present Post Office, had also disappeared, along with the early Sri Lankan community that had sustained it.<sup>53</sup> The old Malay Club premises had been co-opted for other purposes, although there was a token meeting of the club once each month, where members would gather for a while and talk. Malaytown continued to exist after the war as a remnant community in decline, but it too disappeared with the deaths of its original members in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>54</sup> Without the constant infusion of newcomers from Asia, none of the previous demarcated communities could be reconstituted either physically or ideologically, racial segregation was about to be discarded as government policy and it became clear that the future lay in affirmation of a new identity.

The postwar Queensland Government's policy was 'to emphatically oppose any infiltration of Japanese or other Indents to the Queensland Pearling



*View of Thursday Island, 1941.*

Courtesy of John Oxley Library, Brisbane (Item No. 177693).

Industry'.<sup>55</sup> In 1949, only 15 Asian indents were so employed, all of them prewar residents, who were 'permitted to continue in the Pearling Industry after the war only after their circumstances had been fully and carefully investigated by the Government'.<sup>56</sup> The prewar Asian numerical superiority on Thursday Island was further eroded in relative terms by the influx of Torres Strait Islanders, who had previously been barred from residence.

Soon after the war, the Islanders, almost 800 of whom had served in the Australian Defence Forces stationed on Thursday Island, began to call for significant improvements in infrastructure and services, promised to them in return for their involvement in the war effort. Controls on their movement began to be relaxed and many came to live on Thursday Island, beginning the process of re-indigenisation of the island and other former Kaurareg lands. In 1947, a group of Islanders was for the first time given permits to work on the mainland, setting in train the diaspora that today sees the great majority of Islanders living away from the strait. Buoyed by the postwar decolonisation of the Pacific, some prescient leaders of Pacific descent called for measures of self-government and even the creation of a separate and autonomous territory.

Nevertheless, the Queensland Government maintained its paternalistic policies toward Indigenous people, within and outside Torres Strait, until the mid-1980s. By contrast, legislative restrictions on Asian groups were being relaxed gradually as the White Australia Policy became untenable. The postwar rise of communism in China had caused some unease among the authorities

with regard to the Chinese population of Australia and this extended to the strait. Local Whites, however, saw no real threat to their political and economic dominance by the now very diminished Asian presence, especially since the remaining Asians had had little alternative to assimilation with Whites in postwar society. Such sentiment was evident in the relaxed response by the Thursday Island community to the arrival of large numbers of illegal Asian fishermen in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>57</sup>

The Islanders' successful struggle against the Commonwealth Government's decision to change their border with PNG and divide them as a people, which was ratified by treaty in 1978, increased their sense of unity and confidence in political action. In 1981, the Townsville-based Torres United Party argued in the Australian High Court that the 1879 annexation of the outer islands was invalid. Although this move for sovereignty was unsuccessful, it led indirectly to the 1992 'Mabo' decision of the High Court, which recognised traditional Indigenous rights to land. That decision, together with the proposed transition to regional autonomy in Torres Strait, given substance by a 1997 report by the Commonwealth House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, have seen an inversion of previous ethnic power dynamics. Torres Strait Islanders are today far more confident in their Indigenous identity and the older generations have neither forgotten nor forgiven their differential treatment and their personal humiliations 'under the act'. The most recent challenges to locals of Asian descent have arisen from within the strait itself as postwar paternalism has yielded to Indigenous self-determination. Having reclaimed their lands and now preparing to reclaim their seas, some Islanders wish to impose new descent-based boundaries and deny the Asian history of Torres Strait. Once-influential members of the Asian communities now struggle to find a voice, while 'blended' families find empowerment chiefly in their Indigenous ancestry.

## Acknowledgements

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## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> About 700 years ago, the period from which oral tradition dates the settlement of the Torres Strait islands by their present-day inhabitants, there was a transition between a warm dry period, the Little Climatic Optimum, and a cool dry period, the Little Ice Age. This led not only to a cooling of the temperature but, more importantly, a sea-level fall of possibly one metre. This, says Nunn, was 'one of the most profound environmental changes within the last 1,200 years' of Pacific history.

- Its importance lay in the fact that most of the population depended largely on resources, particularly protein, which they gathered from offshore reefs and on their lowland crops. The drop in sea level meant that the most productive parts of the offshore coral reefs were killed off and the crops withered, possibly within 10 to 20 years. Nunn estimates a decline of about 80 per cent in the food resource base of those communities, leading to competition for scarce resources, warfare and abandonment of coastal settlements for areas with greater food resources. Nunn, P. Interview with Robyn Williams, *The Science Show*, ABC Radio National, 12 April, 2003. <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/science/ss/stories/s821596.htm>. Retrieved 15 April, 2003.
- 2 Haddon, A. C. 1935. 'Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait.' *Ethnography*, Vol. 1. Cambridge University Press. p. 88. Based on information from Rev. W. H. MacFarlane, Church of England priest of the Torres Strait Mission, 1917–33.
- 3 Alan Rix, pers. comm. to Anna Shnukal, June 1998.
- 4 In 1865, a government committee reported that it had been led to believe that Somerset 'may not improbably become the centre of a considerable traffic with the Chinese, Malay, and Polynesian traders, provided that it be constituted a "free port", and earnestly invite consideration to the desirability of removing all restrictions which may have the effect of deterring Asiatics from free commercial intercourse with that settlement'. 'Report of the Joint Committee of Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly appointed 11 May 1865 to inquire into and report upon ... steam communication.' 17 August, 1865, *Queensland Votes and Proceedings*. p. 7.
- 5 'Police Magistrate, Somerset, to Colonial Secretary, 6 September, 1870.' Extracts from *Letterbook No. 1 of Police Magistrate, Somerset Settlement, 28 July 1869–1 October 1871*. Typescript B1414, Mitchell Library.
- 6 The various islands of the Prince of Wales Group, which became home to the Asian immigrants and their descendants — Muralag (Prince of Wales Island), Ngarupai (Horn Island), Keriri (Hammond Island) and Waiben (Thursday Island) — form part of traditional Kaurareg territory. The Kaurareg are linked through blood and legend to the Islanders immediately to their north and to the Aboriginal people of Cape York. As owners of the islands which became the hub of European occupation and which were coveted by Europeans for exploitation as sites of pearling stations and as agricultural and grazing land, the Kaurareg suffered most from the effects of colonisation. They were removed from their heartland of Muralag (Prince of Wales Island), first to Keriri (Hammond Island) in about 1892 and from there to Mua (Banks Island) in 1922. In 1947, they began to reclaim their ancestral lands through a process of resettlement (Harris, A. 1996. 'A short recent history of the Kaurareg.' *Land Rights Queensland*, April 1996. p. 12.) and, five years after initiating their claim, were granted Native Title to some of their former territories in 2001. The background negotiations, however, brought into the open still-unresolved tensions between the traditional owners and later settlers.
- 7 'Report on the Fisheries in Torres Strait by Police Magistrate, Thursday Island, to Colonial Secretary, 29 April 1882.' COL/A339, Queensland State Archives (hereafter QSA).
- 8 'Report of The Royal Pearl-shell and Bêche-de-mer Commission.' 1908. *Queensland Parliamentary Papers*. p. xlvii.
- 9 While the importation of Malays was a boon to the chronically labour-starved shellers, it was viewed with disfavour by the Police Magistrate. 'Malays [being Muslims] as a rule do not drink and are apt to use the knife when molested by drunken South Sea islanders. I have heard of several affrays of this nature within the last few weeks, but as Europeans are not employed in the boats it is impossible to get evidence.' 'Police Magistrate, Thursday Island, to Colonial Secretary, 29 September 1882, COL/A347/5304, QSA.
- 10 'Twenty five (25) coolies from Ceylon imported by Burns for shelling boats are they placed on ships articles or kept under original agreement.' 'Police Magistrate, Thursday Island, to Colonial Secretary, 4 September 1882.' In letter 4742 of 31 August, 1882. COL A/346, QSA.
- 11 Weerasooriya, W. S. 1988. *Links Between Sri Lanka and Australia: a book about the Sri Lankans (Ceylonese) in Australia*. Colombo: Government Press. p. 139.

- 12 Sissons, D. C. S. 1977. 'Japanese in the Northern Territory 1884–1902.' *South Australiana*, Vol. 16, No. 1. pp. 3–50, p. 5.
- 13 Douglas, J. 1902. 'Asia and Australasia.' *The Nineteenth Century and After*, No. 52, July–December. pp. 43–54, p. 50.
- 14 'Police Magistrate, Thursday Island, to Colonial Secretary, 25 September 1877.' COL/A246/4892, QSA.
- 15 Thursday Island census of c.1885, A/18963, QSA. Thomas McNulty wrote to the Attorney-General on 13 October, 1883: 'This is a small quite [sic] little place the Government Buildings being the larger portion of which there is six dwellings there is two Hotels one store and four private houses.' COL/A370/5183, QSA.
- 16 'Police Magistrate, Thursday Island, to Under Colonial Secretary, 28 July 1884.' COL/A397/5557, QSA.
- 17 This legislation provided the model for later similar laws in South Australia and the Northern Territory.
- 18 'Charlie vs Joe Reis and Francis for assault, 17 February 1885.' CPS13D/P1. 'Hassan Ah Mat vs Santiago for assault and battery, 29 June 1893.' CPS 13D/S1. 'Santiago vs Hassan Ah Mat for assault grievous bodily harm, 29 June 1893.' CPS 13D/S1. 'Police vs Lucio Del Rosario for wilful murder of one Hassan, 10 February 1904.' CPS13D/P11, QSA.
- 19 'Ah Foo vs Louis Castro for assault, 29 January 1890.' CPS 13D/P3. 'Yee On Wah vs Carlos Gar, Gregorio Geraldino, Pantalcon Asur, Mariano for unlawful assault, 30 July 1902.' CPS 13D/S2. 'Yee On Wah vs Carlos Gar, Gregorio, Pantalcon, Mariano for assault, 30 July 1902.' CPS13D/P10. 'Yee On Wah vs Feliciano for wilfully and unlawfully destroyed panes of glass the property of Yee On Wah, 1 August 1902.' CPS 13D/S2, QSA.
- 20 'Police vs Miskin for disorderly conduct in Victoria Parade, 7 January 1890.' CPS 13D/P3, QSA. Miskin was arrested for fighting with a Malay before a crowd of about 70 men, threatening 'a general engagement between the Cingalese and the Malays'.
- 21 'Awong vs Assa for sureties, 15 August 1902.' CPS13D/P10. See also 'Sergeant Pro Inspector of Aboriginals, Cairns, to Commissioner of Police, Brisbane, 28 May 1912, re Japanese and Malay disturbances'. POL/J36, QSA.
- 22 'Police vs Kicumato for assaulting one Saris Appu, 21 July 1902.' CPS13D/P10, QSA.
- 23 'John Nakashiba vs Fernando Gusman for assault, 25 July 1902.' CPS13D/P10, QSA.
- 24 McNiven, I. J. 1998. 'Enmity and amity: reconsidering stone-headed club (*gabagaba*) procurement and trade in Torres Strait.' *Oceania*, No. 69. pp. 94–115.
- 25 See, for example, the different interpretations of Evans, G. 1972. 'Thursday Island 1878–1914: a plural society.' BA Honours thesis, University of Queensland. p. 114, and Ganter, R. 1994. *The Pearl-Shellers of Torres Strait*. Melbourne University Press, p. 30.
- 26 Sissons, D. C. S., 'Japanese in the Northern Territory 1884–1902', p. 13, quotes a report by K. Watanabe to the Japanese Government on conditions of Japanese abroad in 1893 to the effect that the ordinary Japanese in Darwin and Thursday Island received £3–5 per month and the better divers £7–8; this compared with the £20 per year received by most of the Filipinos. Writing of Broome, Edwards claims that a good diver 'could make a fortune in a few seasons by the standards of the poor fishing villages of Japan or the waterways of Singapore, Koepang, and Manila, which produced the tough, spare little men who had the courage to wear the copper helmet'. Edwards, H. 1983. *Port of Pearls: a history of Broome*. Adelaide: Rigby. p. 72.
- 27 Extract from the published version in *Yearbook of the Diocese of Carpentaria for 1935*. A/58853, QSA.
- 28 Staples, J. and K. O'Shea. 1995. *Thursday Island's Asian Heritage: an oral history*. Unpublished typescript in possession of Anna Shnukal. pp. 10–11.
- 29 Thomas H. Crowe, who drove cattle from Rokeby Station in about 1903. Quoted in Pike, G. 1983. *The Last Frontier*. Mareeba: Pinevale. pp. 97–8.
- 30 Holthouse, H. 1999. *The Australian Geographic Book of Cape York*. Terrey Hills: Australian Geographic Pty Ltd. p. 52, of Thursday Island c.1893.
- 31 Holthouse, H. 1976. *Ships in the Coral*. South Melbourne: Macmillan. p. 119.

- 32 Amira Mendis, pers. comm., April 1999.
- 33 Jones, E. 1921. *Florence Buchanan: the little Deaconess of the South Seas*. Sydney: Australian Board of Missions. p. 18.
- 34 Hurley, J. F. 'Diary entry for 13 December, 1920.' MS 883, Diary A, Item 7, National Library of Australia.
- 35 Wilkins, G. H. 1928. *Undiscovered Australia: being an account of an expedition to tropical Australia to collect specimens of the rarer native fauna for the British Museum, 1923–1925*. London: Benn. p. 126.
- 36 Evans, G, 'Thursday Island 1878–1914', pp. 26a–g.
- 37 A/18963, QSA.
- 38 TR1794/1 Box 25, QSA.
- 39 Lock, A. C. C. 1955. *Destination Barrier Reef*. Melbourne: Georgian House. pp. 131–2.
- 40 'When the White Australia Policy was introduced, the Asians on T. I. were frightened about being sent away. They feared being rounded up and most returned home.' Amira Mendis, pers. comm., April 1999. Weerasooriya, W. S., op. cit., p. 160, states that they left Torres Strait because of fear that they would not be allowed to return home under the new regulations.
- 41 Annual Reports of Department of Harbours and Marine for 1919–29. The marine industries were also severely disrupted by the influenza pandemic, which reached Torres Strait in February 1920.
- 42 'Under Secretary, Home Secretary's Office, Brisbane, to Government Resident, Thursday Island, 21 March 1906.' A/69463, QSA.
- 43 Rodman, M. and M. Cooper. 1996. 'Boundaries of home in Toronto housing cooperatives.' In D. Pellow (ed.), *Setting Boundaries: the anthropology of spatial and social organization*, Westport: Bergin & Garvey. pp. 91–110, p. 95.
- 44 Lowah, T. 1988. *Eded Mer: my life*. Kuranda: Rams Skull Press. p. 65.
- 45 Staples, J. and K. O'Shea, *Thursday Island's Asian Heritage*, p. 10.
- 46 *Yearbook of the Diocese of Carpentaria* for 1935.
- 47 Beckett, J. R. 1987. *Torres Strait Islanders: custom and colonialism*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 52–4.
- 48 Sharp, N. 1980. *Torres Strait Islands: a great cultural refusal: the meaning of the maritime strike of 1936*. Bundoora: Department of Sociology, School of Social Sciences, La Trobe University. See also Sharp, N. 1993. *Stars of Tagai: the Torres Strait Islanders*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- 49 Nagata, Y. 1996. *Unwanted Aliens*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press. p. 41.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 51 Ina Mills Titasey to Monica Walton Gould, pers. comm., 1991.
- 52 Kikkawa, J. 1988. 'Japanese in Queensland.' In Brändle, M. and S. Karas (eds), *Multicultural Queensland: the people and communities of Queensland: a bicentennial publication*. Brisbane: Ethnic Communities Council of Australia and the Queensland Migrant Welcome Association. p. 136–45, p. 137.
- 53 Weerasooriya, W. S., op. cit., p. 155.
- 54 Ali Drummond to Guy Ramsay, pers. comm., November 1999.
- 55 'Under Secretary, Premier and Chief Secretary's Department, Brisbane, to State President, Demobilised Sailors, Soldiers and Airmen's Association of Australia, Brisbane, 15 July 1949.' TRE/A13838/51/11559, QSA.
- 56 *Ibid.*
- 57 The local attitude was in stark contrast with the recent government response to illegal Asian arrivals, which almost led to the exclusion of Torres Strait from the Australian Migration Zone in 2002.



*Chinese boat in Thursday Island Harbour, 1930.*  
Courtesy of John Oxley Library, Brisbane (Item No. 78910).

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