2. Anthropological Knowledge of the Murray Islands Prior to the *Mabo* Case

The role of anthropology in the original *Mabo* decision has been obscured by a number of contradictory contemporary trends. The first is the lionisation of Eddie Mabo as the hero of the case, and that tends to overshadow the role of the other plaintiffs and the anthropologists. Despite the very negative reception of Eddie Mabo’s evidence by Justice Moynihan in the Queensland Supreme Court, the case is associated in the public arena with Eddie Mabo. No doubt this flows from the naming of the case and the wide appeal of the heroic/tragic story of his dogged persistence in pursuing the case over 10 years, ending in his death before the final successful judgment of the High Court. His widow and family have actively promoted this image in numerous ways, including seeking a national Mabo day public holiday. The most detailed account of the case, by one of the lawyers representing the plaintiffs (Keon-Cohen 2000), also evokes the sense of Eddie Mabo and the lawyers together against the whole world. In Keon-Cohen’s account, anthropology seems to be of minor importance.

In order to recover Beckett’s contribution and the choices he made in formulating his expert opinion, it is necessary to review the anthropological archive that he had at his disposal. The chronology of anthropological research on the Murray Islands set out in Table 2.1 demonstrates that there were only a few major contributors to that archive: the members of Haddon’s Cambridge expedition of 1898; Beckett himself, who undertook his initial period of fieldwork in 1959–60; and Nonie Sharp, who commenced her fieldwork in 1978–79. Laade’s and Kitaoji’s less prominent roles will also be mentioned.

The timing of Haddon’s Cambridge expedition—less than 20 years after the assertion of British sovereignty over the Murray Islands—meant that the reports of the expedition were destined to become a critical source of information in the *Mabo* case to prove continuity of traditional land tenure over the period of colonisation. I now turn to examine those reports, under the broad headings that are relevant to native title: traditional title-holding groups and ‘societies’, laws and customs relating to land, and the transformation of traditional land tenure over time.
Table 2.1 Chronology of anthropological research on Torres Strait Islanders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Events</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>London Missionary Society (LMS) begins work</td>
<td>1871</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First annexation of islands by Queensland</td>
<td>1872</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Annexation of more islands (incl. Murray)</td>
<td>1879</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Resident appointed</td>
<td>1886</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haddon’s first visit</td>
<td>1888</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambridge expedition</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected advisory councils introduced</td>
<td>1899</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Head-Hunters</em> published</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Reports</em> Vol. II published</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Reports</em> Vol. V published</td>
<td>1904</td>
<td>Islanders come under the <em>Protection Act</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Papuan Industries established</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Reports</em> Vol. III published</td>
<td>1907</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Reports</em> Vol. VI published</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Reports</em> Vol. IV published</td>
<td>1912</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td></td>
<td>Formal withdrawal of LMS in favour of Anglicans</td>
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<tr>
<td>1914–18</td>
<td></td>
<td>World War I</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ion Idriess’s <em>Drums of Mer</em> published</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Reports</em> Vol. I published</td>
<td>1935</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td></td>
<td>Maritime strike</td>
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<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td></td>
<td>First Inter-Island Councillors Conference</td>
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<tr>
<td>1939-45</td>
<td></td>
<td>World War II</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beckett’s fieldwork</td>
<td>1959–60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beckett’s PhD submitted</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laade’s fieldwork</td>
<td>1963–65</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lawrie’s <em>Myths and Legends</em> published</td>
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<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td></td>
<td>Federal Labor Government, Border Issue</td>
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<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td></td>
<td>ANU Research Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitaoji’s fieldwork</td>
<td>1975–77</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharp’s initial visits</td>
<td>1978–79</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td></td>
<td>First informal meeting of <em>Mabo</em> plaintiffs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td></td>
<td>Filing of <em>Mabo</em> writ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharp’s PhD submitted</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beckett’s <em>Custom and Colonialism</em> published</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1989–90</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Mabo</em> hearing before Justice Moynihan</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td></td>
<td>High Court decision in the <em>Mabo</em> case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharp’s <em>Stars of Tagai</em> published</td>
<td>1993</td>
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Haddon’s ethnology of memory culture

In order to give the reader a substantially accurate idea of the Malu ceremonies, I do not propose to describe exactly only what we saw, but I shall endeavour, as briefly as possible, to resuscitate the past. (Haddon 1901:47–8)

Figure 2.1 Haddon’s painting of an imagined Malo–Bomai ceremony in pre-contact times

Source: Haddon’s Reports Vol. VI (1908:plate XXX).

Haddon’s six-volume Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits (1901–35) (the Reports) are imposing—like a huge artistic monument—impossible to ignore, intricate in detail, exasperating in their sprawling organisation, creating their own world of responses and providing a powerful resource for all subsequent generations of Meriam people, including Eddie Mabo. Parts of them were to play a critical role in the Mabo case. From the living memory of Meriam people who cooperated with Haddon and his fellow researchers during their five-month stay on the Murray Islands in 1889, the Reports document in extraordinary detail the life of the Meriam people about the time of the legal annexation of the Torres Strait Islands to Australia in 1879.

Some of the implicit claims to scientific knowledge in the Reports are to be found in their scholarly framing—notably the choice of authors with sound
academic credentials, the publication under the auspices of Cambridge University, its reference to other scholarly journals in the text, its footnotes and its bibliographies. The claims to knowledge are also evident in the structure of the total work, the division of each volume into parts and in the nature of the exposition. In contrast with the populist, adventure narrative of Haddon's *Head-Hunters: Black, White, and Brown* (1901), with its grisly image of trophy skulls emblazoned in gold on the cover, the *Reports* announce their seriousness in the encyclopedic comprehensiveness under the enumerated topical headings. The impression of comprehensiveness is also reinforced by the exhaustive and unrelenting detail in which the folktales, genealogies, kinship terminology, rites of passage, social organisation, magic, religion and cults are recorded.

For Haddon's broadly comparative purposes, the thematic coherence of divisions was less important than applying the same categories to different populations. Only in this way could he contribute to the broad intellectual frameworks of the day: social evolutionism and diffusionism. Apart from the generally unreflective assertion of the universality of the categories chosen, the main interpretative focus for the whole of the *Reports* is the question of the immediate origin of particular cultural formations and their placement within a social-evolutionist hierarchy that had Australian Aboriginal totemism at the very bottom and European society at the apex. A key point to be made, though, is that there is not much sustained analysis and interpretation in the *Reports*. As James Urry (1998:220) explained: 'First the ethnographic cabinets had to be filled, the ethnographic maps completed and only then could a proper ethnological explanation be attempted. In the meantime, there was always more data to collect; data synthesis had to precede analysis and theory construction.'

The writing strategy adopted in the *Reports*—particularly the volumes dealing with ‘Sociology, Magic and Religion’—is that of assembling the various sources on a given topic, whether from John Bruce, the long-serving teacher on the Murray Islands, their own informants, missionaries’ stories or the meagre scholarly literature, and then, Frankenstein-like, assembling one authoritative account from the parts. This process can be most clearly seen in the recounting of the ‘folktales’. The only exception to the approach of producing a single, authoritative account was the recording of a variation for part of the Malo–Bomi story.

The commitment to comprehensiveness and detail produces a mass of material that evokes an intense, multifaceted universe of myth, ceremony, sacred objects (*zogo*) and cults in this small, rather isolated population of the Murray Islands. The crowded islands are dense with individually named villages, shrines for particular purposes, and place names (both geographical features and the constellations in the night sky)—all of which refer to a rich corpus of myth. The writing strategy, especially in relation to the description of the typical life
cycle and various rites of passage, tends to give the impression of a life highly circumscribed by the need to perform rituals to ward off evil spirits and to ensure success in gardening and fishing.

There is also material that evokes a competitive and intricate localism, with different spells, shrines, dances, songs, myths and associated paraphernalia distributed among the many small villages that were not part of a static tradition, but a humming, social factory, actively seeking out new dances, stories, and mysterious incidents and converting them into their own traditional rituals. It seems to have been a society in which there were many cults, some dwindling over time and others, like the Malo–Bomai cult, becoming dominant.

Most historians of anthropology see the results of the expedition as a sort of proto-anthropology. George Stocking saw the whole multidisciplinary approach as harking back to the great nineteenth-century maritime exploratory expeditions (Stocking 1983:24). James Urry notes Haddon’s conversion from zoology to the emergent anthropology of the time and his preoccupation with asserting the scientific credentials of the new discipline and with the grand evolutionary theories of the time. This assessment leads him to describe Haddon’s work as ‘ethnology’, understood as ‘the reconstruction of the evolutionary and historical relationship between groups located within specific geographical and historical settings, based on evidence drawn from the analysis of “racial” types, languages, customs and material culture’ (Urry 1998:201, footnote 3).

This is a neat summary of the Reports. To emphasise the point about the Reports being proto-anthropology, Urry compared the final volume of the Reports with Malinowski’s Coral Gardens and Their Magic, both published in 1935, finding the Reports ‘strikingly archaic’ (Urry 1998:232).

Yet, there are also some striking continuities with subsequent anthropological practice. These include the genealogical method of kinship analysis, the importance given to understanding the local language, the acknowledgment of the superiority of long-term fieldwork and the trope of the ethnographic present in writing accounts of previous customs. Some of these claims might seem strange given that Haddon and most of his colleagues attempted to communicate with their informants in the local creole, referred to as Jargon English, and that their longest period of fieldwork was only a few months. In relation to language, what I am relying on is the thorough work of the linguist Sidney Ray and the use of his work in explaining key cultural concepts in the ethnography. In Head-Hunters, Haddon described Ray’s near-obsessive application to his task, and the accuracy of his results has also been attested to by subsequent generations of linguists (see Shnukal 1998).
The claim about long-term fieldwork rests on the reliance of Haddon and his colleagues on John Bruce, the schoolteacher-magistrate; he had lived among the Meriam people for many years, had learnt the Meriam language and was intimately engaged with their lives. Direct reference to him as the source of information and adoption of his general assessments are as frequent as they are deferential throughout the *Reports*.

These continuities should make us wary of the broad periodisations of anthropological discourse used by Stocking and Urry, as an assumption of progress creeps in. Thus, especially if one includes the detailed account of his fieldwork experiences in *Head-Hunters*, Haddon provides greater transparency in his methodology, particularly his identification of the sources of his information, than the subsequent generation of anthropologists.

**Groups**

Haddon delegated the investigation of social organisation to Dr W. H. R. Rivers, then a lecturer in physiological and experimental psychology. His work on the expedition resulted in the methodological breakthrough of the genealogical method.

Rivers (1908) reported the results of his painstaking work on kinship terminology and genealogies in the Murray Islands in separate chapters and brought together his conclusions in another chapter entitled ‘Social organisation’. In that chapter he identified four groupings. The first were those belonging to the same village—that is, village identity rather than residence. Typically, the village was also a single, named residential area, although some villages consisted of several named places. What I have called village identity was determined patrilineally and the group of people with the same village identity was exogamous. From the point of view of group exogamy, 22 separate village groups were identified.

The second grouping is a little more mysterious since it seemed to have been socially redundant. It is ‘the district’, which I would gloss as clusters of villages in a two-tier, nested hierarchy. Rivers identified seven districts on Mer, with one district having two subdivisions. Rivers does not assert the ‘district’ as having any particular contemporary social relevance; it is regarded more as a broad, regional identifier used as an alternative to village identity. From the memory of his informants, Rivers (1908:176) was able to assert that, in the past, certain funerary rights and increase ceremonies were confined to certain districts. Different kinds of magic, however, not practised by the community at large, are associated with a particular village or a particular district (1908:174).

Uncertainty at the margins about the constitution of some districts and villages is intriguing and suggests other, more flexible social processes at work. Whatever
these other processes might have been, information about villages and districts is presented graphically in the form of a stable map that, like Tindale's tribal boundaries map, has gained iconic status in the annals of native title practice (see Map 2.1). It proclaims total traditional occupation at a glance.

Map 2.1 Villages and districts on Mer

Source: From Haddon’s Reports Vol. VI (1908:170).
The third grouping was a broad, dual division of all initiated Meriam men based on differing roles in the dominant Malo cult

1. the Beizam le (shark brethren), the leading members of the Malo fraternity
2. the Zagareb le, the singers and drummers in the ritual.

The fourth kind of grouping consisted of men who described themselves by reference to a particular animal—for example, dog men, pigeon men. There is no discussion of the social significance of this fourth group identity except to say that reference was made to it during their participation in the Malo dances.

Rivers’ analysis of the interrelationship between the four identified groupings is preoccupied, and perhaps overwhelmed, by the interest in totemism and the evolution of social systems. Thus he stated: ‘One of the chief interests of the social organisation of the Meriam is the complete disappearance of all traces of a totemic system which it is almost certain must have once existed’ (Rivers 1908:174).

The remainder of his analysis attempts to reconstruct out of the available evidence a simpler, prior social organisation consisting of totemism, dual social organisation and exogamous districts that evolved into the ‘territorial system’ that the researchers observed (1908:174–7).

Rivers addresses island-wide social organisation in a section entitled ‘Law and government’. It reveals an embarrassing gap—he simply forgot to question his informants about governance in the pre-missionary era. Thus, there is a very brief reference to the possibility of government by elders, the missionary Hunt’s suggestion of hereditary chieftainship and the possibility that Hunt was referring to some government-like aspects of the Malo cult. Then the exposition moves quickly to the contemporary situation of 1889, outlining the composition of the court set up by the Queensland Government, the rival church court set up by Finau, the Samoan missionary, and examples of the criminal and civil actions brought before the court.

Other possible social groupings such as a hearth group or an island-wide community group were not explicitly considered by Rivers, although there is material in his chapter on social organisation and in other parts of the *Reports* that seems to assert the existence of such groupings or could be used as evidence of them. The inhabitants of one village on Mer had come from another island and were considered to be Nog le (foreigners), and as having ‘no place in the more important institutions of the Island’ (Rivers 1908:172). This designation would seem to indicate some sense of an island-wide identity. The linguistic research of Ray concluded that the language spoken on Ugar (Stephen Island), Erub (Darnley Island) and the Murray Islands was the same language. This
is suggestive of an even wider Eastern Island identity and is implicit in the organisation of the Reports into a comparison of the Western and the Eastern islands.

Although there is no discussion of the hearth group as such, there is mention of the widespread practice of adoption and the problems it caused in relation to inheritance.

Laws, customs, traditions and practices

In the whole of the description of the Eastern Islanders in Volume VI of the Reports the chapter on ‘Property and inheritance’ contains the most explicit use of legal metaphors. It was written by Anthony Wilkin, a promising undergraduate, whom Haddon enlisted as the expedition’s photographer, based on his published photography of Egypt. Wilkin died of dysentery in Cairo in 1901, seven years before the eventual publication of his chapter. It was to become the focus of much attention in the Mabo hearing. In the chapter, the compiler’s work is evident in the diversity of material collected and in a generalising tendency that looks for and finds rules. The opening paragraph must have delighted Eddie Mabo’s lawyers:

Queensland law has not affected native land tenure which is upheld in the Court of the island. In a few instances it is not impossible that English ideas—especially of inheritance—are making themselves felt. There is no common land, and each makes his own garden on his own land at his own convenience. (Wilkin 1908:163)

What follows includes a series of general, timeless, law-like propositions, sometimes supported by quotes in ‘Jargon English’ from informants, or quotes from Mr Bruce. For example, in relation to inheritance:

‘Suppose brother he stop, girl he no get ’im garden belong ’im’ was the remark of a native. Mr Bruce says ‘The eldest son gets the lion’s share—girls get very little, just enough for a marriage portion…’

On the death of a wife the husband must give back her portion to her relatives—at least as soon as he contemplates remarriage…

If a father is very angry with his children he is competent to disinherit them. Such action is very uncommon. (Wilkin 1908:163–4)

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1 See Haddon’s tribute in Head-Hunters (1901:vii).
Consistent with the tendency towards broad generalisations, the chapter also includes some broad cultural comparisons such as: ‘Unlike the greater part of British New Guinea the Murray Islands are the scene of exchanges, sales, leases and loans of land and house sites’ (Wilkin 1908:165).

But there are also other kinds of statements that tend to relativise the general applicability of the stated rules and their enduring quality. These include

- accounts of ignoring acknowledged rules—for example, moving fences to enlarge gardens in the absence of the neighbouring owner (1908:167), and the statement: ‘Water holes are in theory the property of the finder, but in reality are common to all’ (p. 167)
- accounts of strategic behaviour to use the rules for individual advantage or to circumvent the rules—for example, a self-appointed guardian of a child contriving to adopt the child so that he acquires the child’s inheritance (p. 165), or the planting of vegetables on another’s land as the basis of a future claim to ownership (p. 167)
- an account of the non-enforcement of rules for fear of sorcery (p. 163)
- descriptions of recent changes in land-tenure practice—for example, Finau, the Samoan missionary, stopping the practice of community voting on prospective candidates to be lent the gardening land of others (p. 166).

Overall, the promise of a systematic approach inherent in the title of the chapter gives way to the heterogeneity of the compiler’s art. This is probably true of the Reports as a whole.

The question of laws and customs in the pre-contact situation is further complicated by the quasi-governmental role of the dominant cult of Malo–Bomai. This role has already been mentioned above in relation to the belated discovery of a gap in Rivers’ questioning about traditional institutions of government in the Eastern Islands. In contrast, there is a relatively detailed description of chieftainship in the Western Islands outlining the names and lineage of chiefs and the districts over which they claimed authority.²

The cult of Malo–Bomai included an extensive body of myth describing the travels and activities of the cultural hero Malo. Haddon reveals in the unabashed style of the imperial scientist studying the distant primitive that Bomai was the restricted name for Malo. The main ritual activity of the cult was an elaborate, male initiation ceremony in which male youths were inducted into the secrets of the cult during ritual performances over a number of weeks at different locations on Mer. The ceremony was conducted by particular acknowledged leaders of the cult called zogo le (roughly translated as the sacred people). According to

Haddon’s informants, there were three *zogo le* for the Malo–Bomai cult. The initiation ceremony involved all the families of the island, and there are some indications that its ritual framework provided opportunities for some of the clan groups to perform their own rituals. At one point in the initiation ceremony, the initiates were given severe and extended instruction in the proper conduct of their lives as adults. This instruction included the secrets of successful gardening through the use of particular methods and spells, exhortations against stealing other men’s property and exhortations against bad behaviour in general, including the serious consequences of revealing the secrets of the Malo cult itself. Certain members of the cult adopted a policing role by taking on the identity of the malevolent spirit *Magur*. In taking on this role, they were responsible both for hazing initiates and for frightening non-initiates and women at certain times (Haddon and Myers 1908).

The claims of quasi-government for the Malo–Bomai cult could be justified by its dominance over other cults, the executive powers of its leaders and its specialised enforcement mechanism. The concentration of organisational power in the *zogo le* and their ceremonial status seem to have extended beyond the confines of ceremonial performance so that they could become dominant in other spheres of life and break rules with some impunity. On the other hand, since it was ‘Malo’s Law’ that later became the exclusive reference to the old religion, it should be noted that, while Haddon presents the Malo–Bomai cult as the dominant cult, it was also one cult among others, including *Meket Sarik* and the licentious *Waiet* (Haddon 1908:280).

Elsewhere in Volume VI of the *Reports*, the idea of any specialised mechanism for the enforcement of rules is denied in favour of enforcement via public opinion ‘as far as possible’ (Haddon 1908:250). The qualification ‘as far as possible’ probably referred to the exceptional cases that were referred to the Island Court, then comprising Mr Bruce as assessor and the two Mamooses (or headmen) appointed by the Government: Harry and Passi. Rivers (1908:180–4) includes an account of one case involving a land dispute between adopted and natural kin. One wonders whether this case, and the other sections on adoption in the *Reports*, gave pause to Eddie Mabo’s lawyers in pursuing his land claims based on adoption. For the case illustrated a certain pattern of behaviour: the early adoption of babies who are raised as natural children and not told of their adoptive status; their real adoptive status being revealed during some family squabble in later life; anger at the adoptive family for not telling them; and finally efforts to re-establish links with their natural family, thus leaving unresolved the question of whether these efforts amounted to renouncing any inheritance of land from the adoptive family.
Haddon on change

[T]he people scarcely a generation removed from perfect savagery.  
(Haddon 1901:23)

Consistent with the aversion to theorising in the Reports, there is little sustained reflection about the contemporary processes of change that were observed on Mer and other islands in the Torres Strait. There is, however, a pervasive sense of urgency rooted in a broad, pre-emptory assessment of impending cultural loss based on a perceived vast gap in the detailed knowledge of traditions between generations and the apparent success of the missionaries in displacing traditional practices. Haddon attended a Sunday service on Mer and was almost deafened by the enthusiastic singing of hymns (Haddon 1901:9). He noted that, even at organised social nights, where families performed entertaining songs and dances for each other, the proceedings were concluded with prayers. On the other hand, he also reports a continuity of traditional beliefs. These beliefs contradicted Christian beliefs and caused some of his older informants, who were also leading church members, a degree of awkwardness.

There is a poignant account of Haddon’s visit to Tomog, the site of a divination shrine:

When I first discovered Tomog zogo it was considerably damaged as it had been burned by Jodiah [a South Sea Islander missionary of the London Missionary Society], Mataika’s successor. In 1898 it was in a worse condition, and the encroaching vegetation and rubbish had to be cleared before we could photograph and make a plan of it. It was very suggestive to see the reverent affection the old men displayed for the zogo, and they seemed gratified at the care with which it had been cleaned and mapped. (Haddon 1908:266)

The shells and rocks of the shrine represented the various villages on the Murray Islands and the location of other islands. Divination had been performed by skilled men watching the shrine soon after dawn for the path of small insects across it and interpreting the events these movements foretold for the particular villages crossed. The day after Haddon had mapped the site, Arei, who had accompanied Haddon, performed a re-enactment of a divination ceremony, demonstrating that the old traditions were truly within living memory. The Reports include a photograph of the Islanders in their state of cultural uncertainty seated before the cleared shrine.
Despite their conversion to Christianity, the Murray Islanders initially refused to give Haddon the secret magic phrases of a rainmaking ritual and refused to part with associated secret stone figurines (*doiom*). Although they agreed to make models of the previously destroyed Malo mask, they insisted that it not be shown to women in accordance with previous taboos. There was also a degree of anxiety and divided loyalties provoked by the request for a revival performance of the Malo ceremony.

Haddon was also aware of the manoeuvrings of Finau, the Samoan missionary, against his expedition’s inquiries into the old traditions and the missionary’s fear of a ‘recrudescence of paganism’ (Haddon 1901:35). Some years earlier Finau had led the destruction of various traditional shrines on the island and preached against traditional dancing and charms. Thus, in Haddon’s various descriptions, we find the raw material for an account of the dynamics of the interaction of traditional beliefs and the London Missionary Society’s evangelising project—an account that is never developed by Haddon.
Beckett’s competitive local politics

Beckett’s position within the academy

When I interviewed Beckett in 2002, he had retired from his position of Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Sydney University after a 28-year association, following four years in lecturing positions at other universities. He was still active on the editorial committees of both Oceania and The Australian Journal of Anthropology. In 2001, he had been honoured with an invitation to be the keynote speaker of the Australian Anthropological Society’s conference to address the assembled anthropologists on the state of the discipline (Beckett 2002). He had published widely in academic journals over a long period, published a major book on the Torres Strait, which had been universally well received,3 and he had been midwife to a major ‘oral history’ of the NSW Aboriginal man Myles Lalor (Beckett 1996, 2000). The simple conclusion from this incomplete list of achievements is that Beckett, at the end of his career, occupied a relatively senior position within the field of the academy. Yet his own account of his career emphasises marginalisation, as in the title of his recollection of anthropology in Australia between 1956 in 1970: ‘Against the grain’ (Beckett 2001).

There were two aspects to this perceived marginalisation—both concerning Beckett’s position relative to the emerging structure of the larger regional specialisations: Australianist and Melanesianist anthropology. Beckett’s initial research for his MA was with Aborigines in western New South Wales (see, for example, Beckett 1958, 1959, 1965). This field site placed him in a challenging relationship with the majority of Australianists at the time, who were orientated to recovering pre-contact Aboriginal traditions from Aborigines in remote areas, where the history of colonisation was much shorter. This divide has been one of the enduring features of Australianist anthropology—reflected in entrenched positions, bitter criticism and attempts to overcome it through multi-sited ethnography.

The other regional specialisation in which Beckett felt marginal was Melanesianist anthropology. The opening up of Papua New Guinea, with its exotic, largely unstudied cultures and mysterious cargo cults, made it a magnet for anthropologists worldwide. He was refused access to this country because of, he believed, his brief membership of a communist youth organisation years before (Beckett 2001:90). To his surprise, however, Queensland authorities agreed to his research among Australia’s Melanesian minority in the Torres

3 See Dagmar (1989); Fitzpatrick (1989); Long (1989); Moore (1990); Nachman (1989); Sharp (1989); and Urry (1989).
2. Anthropological Knowledge of the Murray Islands Prior to the Mabo Case

Strait. In retrospect, Beckett felt that the ambiguous position of the Torres Strait Islanders within Australia seems to have been reproduced in his opportunities to publish within the larger regional specialisations: his work not anthologised in either Australianist or Melanesianist collections. As Beckett put it succinctly: ‘one falls in the crack.’

Torres Strait Research

In 1958, 60 years after the Cambridge Expedition, I went to the Torres Straits to investigate the contemporary life of its indigenous inhabitants. (Beckett 1963:1)

In placing himself as successor to Haddon, Beckett wanted to acknowledge his debts to Haddon but not adopt his outlook. Anthropology had changed dramatically in the intervening period. In 1958 it was entering a period of consensus about its distinctive fieldwork methodology and unprecedented institutional security.

What Beckett found were Islanders obsessed by the politics of the local council, particularly who would win the elections for the three positions that comprised the council and doubled as the local court. Like the professional ethnographer who refuses to let the theoretical concerns of the day completely determine the course of his research, Beckett decided that local politics would be his central focus. Using Haddon’s reports as a baseline, he also tried to give an account of the pattern of historical transformation in the intervening period—the decline from pre-missionary autonomy into colonial dependency. This dependency included fairly intimate administrative control over employment, morals, movement of the Islanders and communication with the outside world—most of these controls mediated by the local council. Islander experience of relative equality in fighting alongside Australian soldiers during World War II had the effect of intensifying the Islanders’ sense of grievance at their relative position. The call was for freedom, in the sense of both removal of legal restraints and opening up of economic equality through access to equal wages. Freedom was to be achieved via the local council leaders asserting themselves against, or cooperating with, the existing state authorities.

These themes were explored by Beckett in his doctoral thesis and numerous published articles over the next 25 years, culminating in 1987 in his book *Torres Strait Islanders: Custom and Colonialism* (1987). The core of the book—the comparison of the different course of colonialism on Murray with that on Badu—

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comes more or less directly from his thesis. But it is recontextualised in the light of subsequent studies in historical anthropology, theoretical developments and substantial changes in the lives of the Islanders themselves over the period.

The book commences with a description of a tombstone opening on Murray Island in 1976—a ceremony that, for Beckett, had become the quintessential cultural event of island custom of the now widely dispersed Islanders. This description introduces Beckett’s problematising of island custom and the linking of his work to the research and theorising of other anthropologists of dominated cultures in diverse settings, from Meso-American Indians, Pacific Islanders, and African slaves in America, to African slaves in the Caribbean, the New Guinea Highlanders and Newfoundland fisher folk. It is not only an attempt at a comparative description of his fieldwork location, but also an attempt to refine his own theoretical stance. He embraces Wolf’s critique of anthropology’s tendency to analyse local cultures as isolates (see Wolf 1982), as indeed this was his own original inclination 20 years before Wolf. He also uses the other anthropologists and historians to refine his original generalised assertions about dependent peoples still possessing a degree of cultural autonomy.

One refinement is the move away from explanatory frameworks that have economic exploitation at their centre. Thus the doubts about the general applicability of the theory of internal colonialism that he expressed in his 1977 article on the pearling industry give way to a more explicit adoption of Paine’s terminology to describe the liberal era of statecraft towards indigenous people: welfare colonialism. Despite the adoption of welfare colonialism as an overarching description, it does not determine Beckett’s approach. Paine’s preoccupation in *The White Arctic* (1977) was predominately the contradictions and failures of government policy. Inuit subjectivity was not explored in any detail, but was assumed to exist as a coherent traditional culture waiting to express itself once the colonial restrictions were loosened. Beckett, on the other hand, tries to do much more, by adding a historical account of the Islanders’ own conception of island custom, including the complex processes of interaction with colonial administration. He retains a degree of eclecticism in the explanation of the various conundrums of Torres Strait Islander history.

What is also new in the book is the sense of cultural evanescence. For example, in concluding the description of the tombstone opening ceremony by a returning diaspora, he states that ‘their brief visit recreated for a few days the vital community that had existed up to the early 1960s’ (Beckett 1987:2). More explicitly, in his concluding paragraph in the chapter on the Murray Islanders, he states:
In 1967, when the Commonwealth Film Unit made its documentary The Islanders, Murray was able to master some eighty dancers in a magnificent display of their cultural heritage. Ten years later this would have been possible, if at all, only during the Christmas season when the emigrants made visits home. It is still possible to speak of the Meriam domain. But, as we shall see in later chapters, while Murray has greater bargaining power in external affairs it has reduced its capacity to regulate the lives of its citizens. (Beckett 1987:146)

In contrast, when justifying the focus of the book on his fieldwork between 1958 and 1961, he states: ‘I found Torres Strait beautiful and its people welcoming. I was impressed with the vitality of island custom and captivated by the music and dancing’ (Beckett 1987:21).

To be fair, Beckett, having posed the question of whether the island custom of the 1980s had degenerated into an ‘alienated folkloric consciousness’ or a private ethnicity, reviews the situation of the Islanders in his final chapter and comes to the conclusion that it had not reached that degree of degeneration. He thought island custom would survive, albeit in a different form (Beckett 1987:232).

Groups

Beckett was interested in the formation and dissipation of non-enduring action groups, principally the ones that formed as voting blocs or followings for particular candidates in council elections. This interest and its later development in his journal articles (for example, Beckett 1967) are reminiscent of later work by Sansom (1980) on the labile groups in Darwin fringe camps. These political followings formed around Christian religious affiliation, personal morality and other personal characteristics, political ideology (the radical–conservative divide) and perceived capacity to effectively deal with colonial institutions and administrators.

While his focus on local politicking led him to think about transient groupings, Beckett was always careful to distinguish the issue of the inheritance of land. There he observed that stable kinship groups had more explanatory power (Beckett 1963:195–6).

Less obvious, but equally relevant to the Mabo case, is Beckett’s acceptance of an island-wide grouping based on a common language, custom and face-to-face interaction over a long historical period. Textually it is revealed in the use of the word ‘Murray’ as a shorthand description of a shared character trait or general disposition. While this is essentialising terminology, Beckett does historicise island identity. He sees the persistence of individual island identity,
as opposed to pan-island identity, as partly the result of segmented, hierarchical church and state administration. He also suggests that the Murray Islanders’ consensus about traditional land-tenure principles started to break down with the emergence of a resident versus immigrant cleavage (see below).

**Laws and customs**

Beckett’s fundamental interests in local politicking, the articulation between local and broader systems, and historical transformation all seem antithetical to the description of practices, structures or rules that could be identified in a legal context as laws and customs. Beckett’s adoption of the concept of the Meriam domain, however, provided a basis for arguing for a limited continuity with previous traditional laws and customs, particularly in land tenure. As a result, there always seems to be a tension between stability within this domain and radical transformation of the articulation with the encapsulating society. This is nowhere more evident than in Beckett’s 1983 attempt to focus specifically on land tenure for a national conference on the theme of Indigenous land rights in Australia.

The significance of this article is that it is Beckett’s only attempt to draw together his thoughts on traditional land tenure prior to the commencement of the *Mabo* litigation. With some prescience, he explained one of the probable driving forces behind Islander emigrants (who happened to include Eddie Mabo): ‘Unable to influence local councils from a distance, some emigrants fear that their rights are being overridden by land-hungry stay-at-homes’ (Beckett 1983:203).

Adopting his familiar pattern of analysis, he presents the broad historical sweep from the forms of traditional ownership reported by Haddon to the period of his own fieldwork and up to the recent past when the council on Mer approved the construction of an airstrip on the interior of the island—to the indignation of the traditional owners on the mainland, who were not consulted. Ultimately, his own concluding synthesis appears to emphasise historical transformation rather than continuity within a separate Meriam domain:

While range was primarily a matter of economic use; estate was a matter of social solidarity, one of the means by which the Islanders maintained their ordered anarchy as well as giving social and historical meaning to the physical world. Under colonial conditions, land was used less intensively and for different purposes, while order and—to a degree—meaning were pre-empted by state and church. Estate was now a matter of the micropolitics of communities more isolated and embattled than they had been before contact. With the end of segregation and the move of more than half the population to the mainland, the principles on which the notion of estate has been based have come into question, not
from the emigrants but from those who have stayed at home. Potential use, or actual—as in the case of the Murray airstrip—is now a basis for undermining traditional forms of estate. (Beckett 1983:208)

Change

Because Beckett’s whole Torres Strait oeuvre is about the fluidity of local politics and historical transformation, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the narrative of change and his explanations of the reasons, causes and processes of change. He weaves his analysis into the historical narrative and avoids any extended theorising about his eclectic mixture of approaches. This style of writing is perhaps a product of his general approach to theorising: ‘the way I have done my anthropology is to start with the ethnography first and then to say what helps one to understand this. In a sense, I find my theory in the street.’

Neo-Marxist ideas, ecological adaptation, demographic change and strategic rational choice explanations are not used in a formulaic way, but are presented more as a background commonsense. The Murray Islanders’ relative lack of commitment to the pearling industry is possible because of their fertile soil and the prestige of gardening. Faced with the realisation of the inferiority of their weapons in their early colonial encounters and the relief at the end of headhunting and warfare, the initial quick acceptance of the Christian missionaries was a rational choice. The Islanders chose leaders who could talk to white people because they saw this as the best way to eventually achieve their own objectives of improving their lot.

Some of his explanations of change also bring together ideas of essentialised cultural traits, strategic action and top-down changes in the ideology of the administering bureaucracy. This is particularly so in explaining Murray Island. The Murray Islanders are said to resent any outside interference and constraint on individual autonomy (‘everybody mamoose’). These traits are then exemplified in their fractious and desultory engagement in the pearling industry, the resistance to the Anglican monopoly on Christian denominations, and the general tenor of their engagement in the political process. Beckett’s PhD thesis integrates into this kind of framework individual personalities and their trajectories, including their learning experiences in the smaller organisations on the island.

Explaining the Islanders’ embrace of Christianity, its pervasiveness and its misrecognition of exploitation is one of Beckett’s central preoccupations in Custom and Colonialism, particularly Chapter 4, ‘Reflections in a colonial mirror’. He states:

5 Jeremy Beckett, Interview transcript, 2003, p. 34.
My companions seem to have relegated traditional forms of thinking to the edges of their minds, utilising them only rarely and discreetly for matters of purely local concern. The dominant modes of thought derived from mission Christianity and official teachings concerning the state, together with a work ethic that had its origins in the industrial revolution. What was lacking was a sense of the market or of Realpolitik: the world as the Islanders understood it was governed by a moral economy, and their place in it would finally be determined by their worthiness as Christians, loyal subjects and good workers. (Beckett 1987:88)

In explaining the rise of Christianity to become the dominant mode of thought among the Islanders, Beckett draws on more complex processes. These are described at the level of a generalised, essentialised subjectivity, such as ‘the Murray Islanders’, and include various feedback loops. One is between that generalised subjectivity and individual strategic actions—that is, the diffusion throughout the community of the experience of successful and unsuccessful attempts to alter their conditions. Another is a feedback loop between the everyday practices and the subjectivity in which taken-for-granted aspects of life are either reinforced or exposed to contradiction. Added to this is an analysis of the colonial ideology and potential reasons for its attractiveness in different historical periods. In attempting to draw these ideas together, he describes a transformation from initial pragmatic involvement to it becoming a medium of everyday life and being taken for granted: ‘As Islanders came to live, and even more, think with their work ethic, their loyalty and their Christianity, colonial culture became hegemonic, “a lived dominance” (Williams 1977:108–14)’ (Beckett 1987:91–2).

By the same token, some everyday experiences and practices draw attention to and magnify only faintly perceived contradictions within the hegemonic ideology. Thus the experience of relative equality of interaction with white soldiers during World War II exacerbated the feelings of contradiction between the assumption of equality of the King’s subjects and God’s people, as opposed to their actual inferior economic and juridical status.

The different kinds of explanations Beckett employed in his analysis of change make for a rich account. This brief overview also reinforces, however, the impression that Beckett is overwhelmingly concerned about explaining change rather than seeking instances of continuity. One imagines Eddie Mabo’s lawyers, having read Beckett’s works, wondering whether he would be the right person to help them prove their case, which was essentially asserting traditional continuity.
2. Anthropological Knowledge of the Murray Islands Prior to the Mabo Case

Laade

After Beckett, the next anthropologist to spend a significant amount of time in the Torres Strait was Wolfgang Laade. He was in the Torres Strait between 1963 and 1965, and during that time spent two and a half months on Mer. I have chosen not to describe his work in any detail because his main interest was in ethnomusicology and the recording of myths (see Laade 1971). He also admitted to not doing any systematic ethnographic work during his stay on Mer (see Laade 1969).

Kitaoji

After Laade, the next fieldwork research to be carried out on the Murray Islands was undertaken by Hironobu Kitaoji between 1975 and 1977. It was part of a larger research project initiated principally by Japanese human geographers and funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education. The project, entitled ‘An Ethnological and Geographical Study of Fishing People in South-Western Pacific Islands’, aimed to determine through studies of traditional fishing cultures the role of cultural diffusion and the process of acculturation in the Torres Strait Islands (see Yabuuchi 1977). Kitaoji, a senior lecturer in sociology at La Trobe University at the time, was recommended partly for his fluency in Japanese and was assigned to investigate acculturation in the Murray Islands since the time of Haddon.

For all Kitaoji’s fieldwork on Murray, his published output is frustratingly meagre. It consists of a structural analysis of the Malo–Bomai myth (Kitaoji 1977), and a short article and interview on the theme of regional Torres Strait Islander identity (Kitaoji 1978). This material is also difficult to assess because he presents his conclusions in a summary way without marshalling the evidence that would support them and without a thorough engagement with Haddon’s and Beckett’s work.

Kitaoji’s work seems to reflect a movement among the Islanders in the 1970s, particularly the Murray Islanders, to re-emphasise their cultural distinctiveness by asserting a traditional continuity through the Malo–Bomai myth. This movement coincided with the increasing influence of French structuralist approaches within anthropology, and a heightened awareness of ethical issues and the sometimes fraught relationship between anthropological representations and the political struggles of encapsulated informant groups. Kitaoji did not produce a widely influential body of work. His embrace of structuralism,
broad cultural commonalities and a more politicised stance, which emphasised continuity of traditions, seems, however, to have been adopted by Nonie Sharp, the next anthropological researcher to do fieldwork in the Torres Strait.

**Nonie Sharp’s exemplary Islanders**

Sharp’s academic career commenced at Melbourne University, where she majored in psychology, before there was an anthropology or sociology course offered. She was initially an honorary research fellow in the Sociology Department at La Trobe, then on the teaching staff. She has always identified herself as a sociologist, although some of her intellectual influences—such as Marcel Mauss, Lévi-Strauss and the emancipatory politics of Stanley Diamond—were more clearly associated with anthropology. It was only later in her career that the Torres Strait Islanders themselves would refer to her as an anthropologist.

Sharp’s concerns with the academy, with the impossibility of ‘value-free social science’ (Sharp 1980) and her broadly anti-colonial commitment meant that she struggled with the question of an appropriate theoretical framework and writing strategy for her own research. Inspired by some of Paul Radin’s work (see Radin 1920), she ultimately opted for focusing on autobiographical narratives—the Islanders explaining their culture in their own words. This solution is highly reminiscent of the dialogic ethnography proposed by Dwyer and was the focus of some debate in anthropological circles about the time that Sharp was formulating her preferred approach.

But there is a tension between allowing the narrators to speak for themselves and her project of demonstrating the continuing depth and coherence of Islander traditions against popular assumptions of their complete disappearance. Much oral history is impenetrable and requires background information, context and interpretation in order to effectively communicate its significance to an unfamiliar audience. Sharp attempted to resolve this explaining–speaking-for tension by organising the narratives into broad historical periods and by adding a structuralist interpretation of Islander custom and frame of mind. This approach allowed her to draw on the *Reports* and the historical archive to provide an explanatory context, which was fashioned as a commentary focused on the narratives and reflections of the Islanders.

The 10 exemplary Islanders are “speculative philosophers”, men and women of special knowledge, custodians of cultural traditions and mediators of non-

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6 For a brief overview of the life and work of Stanley Diamond, see Gailey (1992), and for a brief version of Diamond’s own vision for reinventing anthropology, see Diamond (1969).

7 Interview with Nonie Sharp, 11 November 2003, Tape 1, Side A.

8 See Clifford (1986); Dwyer (1979, 1982); and Rabinow (1986).
destructive change, our special Stars of Tagai’ (Sharp 1993:11–12). Most were relatively highly educated people, who had held responsible positions in their working lives and were some of the key political activists, both in the critical actions of the past and in the instigation of the Mabo case during the period of her fieldwork and the writing up of her thesis. Others, however, were more closely aligned with the State Government administration.

Groups

One surprise in Sharp’s account of the Meriam is the prominence given to eight totemic groups that correspond exactly with the eight (or is it seven?) district names that Rivers had described in the Reports and the famous map of Mer. Haddon (1908:254–7) was also explicit that there was no totemism in the Eastern Islands—one of their major distinguishing features compared with the Western Islands. It seems that Meriam totems (lubabat) were reported by Kitaoji (1980) in an unpublished conference paper.

Sharp is aware of the contradiction in the ethnographic record, since she discusses it in an endnote. Rather than pursue the idea of possible transformation since the time of Haddon, she tends to imply that the totemic groups might have been there all along, waiting for ‘Kitaoji’s pioneering work’ (Sharp 1993:269, note 5).

The relationship between the eight ‘tribes’ and observable social organisation is unclear. As explained above, in Rivers’ exposition of social organisation, there were 22 village-identified exogamous patrilineal clans. It was unclear to Rivers just what social function the district groupings performed, apart from being an alternative identifier in a taxonomic hierarchy. During Beckett’s time, he identified ‘families’, small descent groups, as the basic units of social organisation, although he did comment that a ‘number of adjacent clans were grouped into wider units, mainly apparent in ritual, which the Meriam now call by the English word “tribe”’ (Beckett 1983:204). Sharp’s narrators, however, particularly Sam Passi, insist on eight groups sanctioned by tradition: ‘I have seen one seuriseuri [Malo ceremonial club] with eight points; those eight points stand for eight tribes of Murray’ (quoted in Sharp 1993:174).

Sharp herself confusingly writes of ‘eight clans’ and equates the ‘eight peoples’ with clans (1993:30, 41). She might be simply repeating a folk use of the word ‘clan’, but in Rivers’ exposition there was a significant difference between the level most like a clan—Rivers’ ‘village’—and the level of eight-part division of the Meriam: Sharp’s ‘people’ and Rivers’ ‘district’. Unlike the ‘district’, the ‘village’ was exogamous.
The presentation of Haddon's material in her chapter on traditional Meriam culture is intended to suggest clear continuities with the past. Reading against the grain, though, it is also suggestive of the *Reports* possibly being another source of the eightfold ‘tribal’ identity, which was reported to Kitaoji and Sharp. Sharp appears to take the symbolic homologies even further than Sam Passi by implying that the eight tentacles of Bomai in his octopus manifestation represent the eight tribes. Drawings of Bomai in this form appear throughout her book.

![Figure 2.3 Illustration in *Stars of Tagai* of Bomai in octopus form](source: Sharp (1993:47)).

According to Sharp, the link between the eight tentacles of Malo in his octopus manifestation and the eight Meriam ‘tribes’ had not been made by the Islanders during her initial research, but it was at a later time.⁹

**Laws and customs**

The compendious phrase ‘laws, customs, traditions and practices’ used in the Statement of Claim in the *Mabo* case (see next chapter) highlights, in comparison, the abstract quality of Sharp’s account of Meriam culture. She is not necessarily concerned with observable practices, more the content and the interpretation of the Islanders’ autobiographical narratives and the intellectual processes of her narrators in trying to achieve a ‘psychic integration’. ‘Law’ is, however, prominent in her analysis because of the central position given to *Malo ra Gelar*—literally, Malo’s taboos—glossed by her narrators as ‘Malo’s Law’. *Malo ra Gelar* is presented as a ‘sacred code’ or ‘rule’ embodied in a number of key sayings. According to Sharp these are:

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⁹ Nonie Sharp interview, 11 November 2003, Transcript, pp. 15–16.
Malo tag mauki mauki: Malo keeps his hands to himself; he does not touch what is not his.

Teter mauki mauki: He does not permit his feet to carry him towards another man’s property.

Wali aritarit, sem aritarit: Malo plants everywhere—under wali [a creeping vine] and sem, the yellow-flowered hibiscus.

Eburlem, esmaolem: Let it drop and rot on the ground.

(Sharp 1993:50)

How these sayings relate to the Malo myths, chants (‘Malo has bad teeth’) and the ceremonial songs, with their elusive, archaic language, reported by Haddon and Ray, is not something that concerns Sharp beyond a generalised assertion of continuity. It is possible that the sayings had their origin in the period of general instruction given to the initiates in the context of the lengthy initiation ceremony, following the revelation of the ceremonial masks. According to Haddon, that instruction ranged over various matters besides the general admonition against stealing and other disruptive behaviour, and covered specific instruction about gardening, including effective spells and the dire consequences of a breach of the secrecy of the cult. Now, Malo’s Law is presented at a high level of generality with a decidedly moral, religious tone.

This change is probably due to Sharp’s narrators specifically equating Malo’s Law with the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament10 and the Malo–Bomai cult with John the Baptist.11 Thus, the synthesis that Dave Passi and others achieve is by seeing Christianity as the fulfilment of the old religion rather than in opposition to it. Sharp aligns herself closely with this view, which minimises the disruptiveness of the initial period of conversion, and she even goes a little further, summarising the situation as the Christian message ‘rekindling a flame that already burned within the traditional religions’ (1993:101).

Sharp does not explore some obvious alternative interpretations of this synthesis—namely, the selective incorporation of the old cults into Christian orthodoxy and the contradictory use of Christianity to revalue and Christianise the pagan traditions. Again, this is consistent with her approach of supportive commentary. Christianity did not swallow the Malo–Bomai cult. Instead, a pre-existing mythic consciousness—striving towards the joining of natural and cosmic circles—reordered mission Christianity. As this is not the way her

10 Sam Passi, quoted in Sharp (1993:82).
11 This link is made explicitly by Flo Kennedy at p. 254 and by implication in David Passi’s narrative on p. 108: ‘Malo came to prepare Murray Island for Christianity and it makes me very proud as a Zogo le to see Malo playing that role’ (Sharp 1993).
narrators express things, explaining this reordering becomes a rather difficult interpretative task, but one from which Sharp does not shrink. Ultimately, Sharp seeks confirmation of her interpretation in homologies between symbols. She links the Christian crucifix with the Southern Cross in the Tagai constellation and with the four-pronged Malo ceremonial club (1993:125). The stars of Tagai not only point to the new religion, they incorporate it.

Encouraged by her reading of Eliade and the ‘critical phenomenology of comparative religion’, Sharp’s approach continually leads her off into a theologising reverie expressed in generalised dualities. This approach means that the issues that later became central to the Mabo case—such as the nature of Meriam law—are not analysed from any critical distance. It is as if the proposition that Malo’s Law is the basis of traditional land tenure must be accepted because of the force of the sympathetic exposition of the synthesising project of her narrators.

Change

In the introduction to Stars of Tagai, Sharp declared that she wanted to ‘analyse the processes of continuity and transition’ (1993:15). Yet in that same introduction, there are also indications that her approach would be one-sided. Her overall rhetorical stance is that Beckett’s emphasis on radical transformation has gone too far and needs to be brought back into balance. Sharp’s emphasis on continuity is perhaps dictated by her identification with the narrators, who all assert continuity in various ways. It is also present in some of the overarching metaphors in the book, her presentation of historical events and her general approach.

The subtitle of her PhD thesis is ‘After the Storm-Winds the Leafing of the Wongai Tree’. ‘Storm-Winds’ is used consistently by Sharp as a metaphor for the non-reciprocal, disruptive force of the process of colonisation. Thus, traditional Meriam culture—like the living sap in the denuded tree—springs forth after the storm has passed in the late 1970s. She supplemented the idea of hidden reserves of traditional culture by interpreting the widespread reluctance of the Islanders to talk about some of the old traditions as proof of their continued subterranean existence. It is a theme also taken up in her account of the early missionary period up to the London Missionary Society (LMS) handover to the Anglicans (1993:103–6). She represented the first decade of the twentieth century as a period of disillusionment at the failure of the early utopian promises of the LMS missionaries to eventuate and disillusionment with LMS anti-traditionalism. Thus, under the more accommodating Anglican regime of the 1920s, the performance of Malo dances re-emerged. Similarly, the banned traditional mortuary practices re-emerged in the 1930s as the two-stage
tombstone opening ceremony that continues today (1993:110–16). Continuity is also implicitly asserted in her general approach of weaving together material from Haddon and the contemporary narratives.

Sharp’s theme of continuity is only slightly diluted by her reflection on the ‘individuation’ associated with Christianity, as opposed to her assertion of the essence of tradition as reciprocity and group orientation (1993:93). It is somewhat unclear what Sharp seeks to evoke by ‘individuation’. It seems to be the new self-monitoring individual morality implied in the quest for personal salvation and the individual career. What is perhaps questionable is putting ‘individuation’ in such a radical opposition to traditional culture given, for example, the prominence of the three zogo le.

The promised analysis of the processes of change also fails to materialise in any explicit or detailed way. Instead, we have the familiar threading of narratives with material from the archives about segregated protection, working in the pearling industry and cooperatives, the 1936 strike and experience of World War II. Sharp’s inclination is towards broad periodisations and simple polarisations: the decline of Islander autonomy with the coming of the protection era and the strike becoming a grand narrative of oppression and liberation, of ‘becoming even’, and showing the Islanders’ deep-seated commitment to a reciprocity framework. At this level of interpretation, the contradictory figure of Tanu Nona of Badu is difficult to place because he not only cooperated with the authorities but also became a capitalist.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter has been to survey specifically anthropological knowledge of the Murray Islands at the time of the hearing of the *Mabo* case. The restricted focus allows for an exploration of the shaping of academic anthropological knowledge through the microcosm of Meriam studies undertaken at intervals, which could represent proto-anthropology (Haddon), the era of professionalised anthropology (Beckett), and the anti-colonial critique of professionalised anthropology (Sharp). This account challenges any simple notion of consensus about a clearly defined field of study that consistently expands and improves over time. Even the minimal commonality of fieldwork methodology was approached in divergent ways.

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12 Perhaps arbitrarily, this focus means omitting the observations of early European mariners, the novelisation of Haddon’s ethnography in Idriess’s *The Drums of Mer* (1933), Lawrie’s (1970) collection of Torres Strait myths and the work of marine biologist Robert Johannes on customary marine tenure (Johannes and MacFarlane 1984).
Beckett came closest to the ideal of long-term, localised fieldwork in the tradition of post-Malinowski, professionalised anthropology. Haddon was apologetic about his seduction by the prospect of reconstructing savage culture through the living memory of his informants, but he retrieves something of the ideal of long-term fieldwork vicariously through Mr Bruce. Sharp, a sociologist who drew selectively on anthropological theorists, went to various field locations for relatively brief periods. She does not expressly include her observations of people’s behaviour since she is so firmly fixated on the narratives of her select group.

There are also different orientations towards empirical ideals of data description and transparency of exposition. Haddon makes the most straightforward claims for the possibility of objective description. Ray’s systematic diligence in his research on Meriam language has already been mentioned, as has Haddon’s commitment to a single, accurate account of previous traditions. While this kind of methodological rectitude continues to impress, its limitations are also obvious: there is no reflexivity about his role in creating an authoritative account and no investigation of the implications of diverse accounts for the comprehensive description of the social system that allows such diversity. On the other hand, it is Haddon’s detailed description of his methodology that enables this belated critique of mine to be made. Sharp’s critique of the pretensions of objective social science would seem to put her at odds with Haddon, but overall her attitude to Haddon is one of appreciation, perhaps reflecting the appreciation of her narrators, who seem to regard ‘Dr Haddon’ and the Reports very highly. Some of them are students of the Reports, copies of which were made available to them by Beckett during his period of fieldwork. Beckett, while critical of the frustrating gaps in Haddon, is also appreciative. Despite the obvious difficulties of Haddon’s reconstructive enterprise, Beckett takes the Reports as a baseline for his own 1959–60 study that is partly aimed at filling in the 70-year gap since the Cambridge expedition from oral history and the archive.

Beckett’s commitment to empirical methods and openness of presentation is somewhat buried under the generalisations and condensation required to fit his complete narrative of colonisation between the covers of one book. His careful methodology is more apparent in his PhD thesis. The apogee of his empiricism is the table of actual hours spent by individuals on certain activities over the course of a month. But even in Custom and Colonialism he asserts an authority backed by field notes, though actual quotes from informants are infrequent and typically consist of a single phrase confirming a larger narrative or analysis of his own.

Sharp’s lengthy quoting of her narrators could, by itself, be seen as exemplary transparency. This must be weighed, however, against the elusiveness of her reasons for the choice of those narrators who would demonstrate her ‘best of
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Torres Strait culture’, and her style of interpretation, which is unconcerned with any careful comparison of the differences between her own interpretation and what the narrators actually say.

The divergence between Beckett and Sharp should also be seen in the context of the similarity of their political orientations (anti-colonial, anti-paternalistic), and their initial interest in Melanesian cargo cults, their interest in state–local articulations and historical transformation. Both have seen themselves as outsiders in the academy at various stages. One would expect this similarity to magnify the perceived differences in their approaches and intensify academic competition between them. How have they managed this competition in practice? It seems on Sharp’s part by explicit critique and on Beckett’s part, with the exception of one notable dagger to her heart (Beckett 1994), by silence.

How are we to assess the competing interpretations in Sharp and Beckett? I have suggested that there is a gratuitous element in Sharp’s critique of Beckett. She sometimes misrepresents the totality of his work. Moreover, time and the tide of history are on his side. The radical changes in the historical circumstances of the Murray Islanders over 100 years to the time of Sharp’s fieldwork would be expected to result in major changes in any culture. But there is also a personal element here. Both Beckett and Sharp kept in touch with the Islanders after their initial periods of fieldwork, but Beckett has been able to observe the changes from a period well before Sharp’s fieldwork. For example, there is a particular problem for Sharp’s account of the Islander leader Marou Mimi and the 1936 strike. Sharp did not have direct access to Marou Mimi, but he was one of Beckett’s major informants. Beckett rather wryly commented on what he saw as the *ex post facto* revising of history by later generations: ‘The divisions of the post-war years have dissolved. Marou, who died in 1969, has undergone an apotheosis to become the father of Torres Strait freedom, while his old opponents seem to have forgotten that there were ever any differences between them’ (1987:224).

It is not only Beckett’s period of fieldwork that is a problem for Sharp’s argument for continuity, but the much longer period of colonisation in which Christianity became a pervasive influence, as Beckett says, restructuring relations by becoming the basis on which the evaluation of the behaviour of others is made. In this way, Beckett’s authoritative narrative spoils the simplicity of the narratives of Sharp’s chosen informants.

Their respective defences of their informants and their periods of fieldwork are also suggestive of intense bonding between anthropologists and informants. Part of Beckett’s negative reaction to *Stars of Tagai* was that it portrayed his Murray Islander friends in a way that made them unrecognisable to him. Thus, for Beckett, to acquiesce in the contemporary smoothing over of differences
between Marou and his opponents in the current telling of history would be more than inaccurate; it would be a betrayal of his friend Marou. Likewise, Sharp’s questioning of Beckett’s assertion of the demise of the traditional culture keeps faith with her exemplary Islanders and their assertions of strong traditional continuity.

Although the foregoing seems to be suggesting the possibility of an authoritative evaluation of the relative merits of Sharp and Beckett’s account, ultimately any such evaluation confronts the basic problem of interpretative indeterminacy and the oversimplified dualism of a continuity–change dichotomy that both Sharp and Beckett fail to confront explicitly. By interpretative indeterminacy, I mean the ability of the same evidence to support more than one interpretation (for an exposition of the problem, see Bohman 1991). I have already mentioned the divergent interpretations of the 1936 strike: a critical, unifying event according to Sharp, and, according to Beckett, in its isolation, an opportunity to reflect on the relative success of the administration policy of promoting individual island identity despite the many commonalities of all the Torres Strait Islanders.

Two further examples would be the latter-day performance of Malo–Bomai ceremonies and the issue of personal rivalry and competition. Beckett photographed a performance of a Malo ceremony in 1961, describing it as a re-enactment: ‘It was one Island in the Strait where one could see an old cult re-enacted, albeit as entertainment’ (1987:111).

The word ‘re-enactment’ is probably intended to connote the transformation of what is implied by a performance from the pre-missionary period (initiation, gender restrictions, ceremonial leaders) to the 1960s (public performance by church-going Christians). From Kitaoji’s description of the telling of the Malo–Bomai myth as deeply felt, it is possible to imagine that his or Sharp’s interpretation of the performance would probably have been one of strong continuity. And these differing possible interpretations would all be using Haddon as the reference point.

The example of rivalry is more difficult to demonstrate as neither Beckett nor Sharp takes it up as an example of cultural continuity. The point is that they could have. Although not thematised by Haddon, there is material in the Reports and in Head-Hunters of rivalry and competition being pervasive—every new fad, such as top-spinning, quickly resulted in organised competitions that threatened to disrupt the routine of the whole island community (Haddon 1901:40–1). Sharp seems to be uncomfortable with intra-Islander competition and she does not know what to make of long-term council member George Mye’s reflection that one of his own enduring motivations was competition with Tanu Nona, community leader of Badu Island. It is as if admitting to widespread rivalry would undermine her argument for the deep continuity of reciprocity as a guiding principle.
Finding a way out of the limiting dualism of continuity and change has been the project of numerous thinkers in historical anthropology (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Sahlins 1981, 1983; Thomas 1989; Wolf 1982). Merlan has recently sought to bring various approaches together under the rubric of the ‘inter-cultural’—‘inter’ being used in the same sense as in ‘inter-subjectivity’ (see Merlan 2002, 2005). We will have to return to that discussion throughout this book.

To conclude this review, the relevant material in the anthropological archive, which was available to Beckett in preparing his expert report in *Mabo*, could be summarised as in Table 2.2.
Table 2.2 Summary comparison of the *Reports*, Beckett and Sharp

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What use Beckett actually made of this material will be the subject of the next chapter.