

8

Hybrid economies as life projects? An example from the Torres Strait

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Introduction

Over the last decade, a number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and activists worldwide have come to embrace the concept of life projects as a holistic, local and dynamic alternative to the dominant paradigm of development (see Blaser et al. 2004). Emerging in the late 1990s, notably through the work of Gow (1997) and Escobar (1998), the notion of life projects is described as 'being about the possibility [of Indigenous peoples] defining the direction they want to take in life, on the basis of their awareness and knowledge of their own place in the world' (Blaser 2004a: 30). These projects, Blaser suggests, are 'always in the making' (2004a: 38), and can be considered as 'a politics and epistemology of resilience that assume relations, flows and openedness as their ontological ground' (2004b: 54).

Bound to local agendas, standpoints and aspirations, these life projects exist in 'relative autonomy' (Morphy & Morphy 2013) from timeframes, objectives, and associated constructions and measures of development. They are independent of attempts by government and non-government organisations to improve abstract and generic socioeconomic indicators and statistical gaps. As relatively autonomous

Indigenous articulations,¹ these life projects reveal the ‘possibility of participating in economic or cultural activities that enable them to engage with aspects of the [wider society] without changing or compromising other aspects of their way of life or their beliefs’ (Morphy & Morphy 2013: 176).

Since the early 2000s, and drawing from empirical research commencing in 1978, Jon Altman has developed the hybrid economy model to make sense of Indigenous Australians’ diverse economies. Altman postulates that Indigenous economies consist of three sectors—the state and the market sectors to which he adds the customary sector, the latter often being overlooked in conventional models and official statistics (Altman 2001). Akin to life projects, hybrid economies are driven by and articulated through local ethos as well as sociocultural, ecological and economic circumstances.

A few authors have referred to the hybrid economy model in the context of today’s Torres Strait, underlining the synergy between commercial and subsistence fishing, government transfer payments and paid work in the private or public sectors (Marsh et al. 2004, Arthur 2005, Grayson et al. 2006, Kwan et al. 2006, Busilacchi et al. 2013).

Busilacchi et al. (2013: 2) write that ‘Even though Australia is a developed nation, indigenous people in Torres Strait *still* rely on what has been defined as a “hybrid economy”’ (emphasis added). While it may not have been the authors’ intention, the word *still* appears to position contemporary Islanders’ economic strategies as an intermediate phase on a continuum progressing from purely ‘traditional’ to fully fledged capitalist economies.

I suggest, in line with Buchanan (2014: 12), that local hybrid economies are ‘more than merely transitional to capitalist incorporation’. Local hybrid economies may be better understood, like Altman argues, as development alternatives (e.g. Altman 2011). They are the upshot of local Indigenous groups’ positions, decisions and conditions

1 I am using the concept of articulation in the sense conveyed by James Clifford and not in reference to the Marxist theory of articulation of the modes of production. In Clifford’s (2001: 473) words, ‘Articulation ... evokes a deeper sense of the “political”—productive processes of consensus, exclusion, alliance, and antagonism that are inherent in the transformative life of all societies’.

about the nature and desired level of adherence to the capitalist system and mainstream norms. As such, Torres Strait Islanders' contemporary hybrid economies may be approached as enacted and emerging individual and collective life projects and as an expression of Islanders' self-determination, relational ontology, resistance, resilience, aspirations, and connections with lands and sea.

This chapter draws on 15 months of doctoral fieldwork conducted in the Torres Strait between 2008 and 2010. I approach Masig Islanders' original and fluid articulations of their participation in the state, market and customary sectors as manifestations of diverse life projects (as well as internal and external constraints and opportunities). In particular, the focus is on Masig's fishery system and its intricate connections with the island's broader economic system. I examine how Masig Islanders orchestrate their involvement with the three aforementioned economic sectors in a manner that reflects their way of life, relational ontology, values, knowledge systems, tenure regimes and circumstances. These life projects, like the community from which they stem, are heterogeneous and ever-changing. They also uphold far-reaching economic and political aspirations.

Amidst the political projects voiced by several Masig Islanders are the strong desire to regain control over their marine territory and resources and the ambition to see these resources used in ways that benefit their community rather than mainly profiting larger non-Islander operators.²

On Masig, as across the Torres Strait, there was a clear association made between the expansion of the Islander sector of the fishing industry and aspirations to achieve greater political and economic autonomy for the region. At the time this fieldwork was conducted, people expressed the desire to improve the efficiency of the local fisheries, partially to attain such goals. There were talks about ways to reduce fuel consumption and bring processing and freezing facilities closer to the fishers in order to reduce overall operating costs. Attempts were made to increase and diversify access to various markets. There were also stated objectives to strengthen their participation in and control

2 This does not necessarily imply the disappearance of non-Islander operators from the local water but a shift in power relations between Islander fisher groups, non-Islander operators and government managers.

over the various commercial fisheries in their marine domains. Such objectives were driven by Masig Islanders' rules and values relating to resource extraction, wealth accumulation and distribution. I return to this point later.

Setting the scene

Geopolitically, Torres Strait is Australia's northernmost frontier and closest international border. Covering approximately 35,000 km², it connects the Coral Sea to the Gulf of Carpentaria, and the tip of Cape York to the southern shores of Papua New Guinea. Torres Strait marine ecosystems are rich but vary greatly across the region—from the mangrove and seagrass meadows of the west to the reef-strewn channels of the east.

The Torres Strait Protected Zone Joint Authority (PZJA) is the institution responsible for the management of the region's commercial and 'traditional' fisheries. This institution is vested with three key mandates: to acknowledge and protect Islanders' traditional way of life and livelihood, to preserve and manage the marine environment within the Protected Zone and to facilitate the 'optimal sustainable utilisation' of the resources.

Masig is part of the Kulkalgal cluster and located in central Torres Strait (see Fig. 8.1 and Fig. 8.2). The teardrop-shaped coral cay measures approximately three kilometres long by 800 metres at its widest point and rises to a mere three metres above sea level. Between mid-2008 and early 2010 there were approximately 265 people living on the island of whom roughly 90 per cent self-identified as Indigenous, according to the 2006 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006).

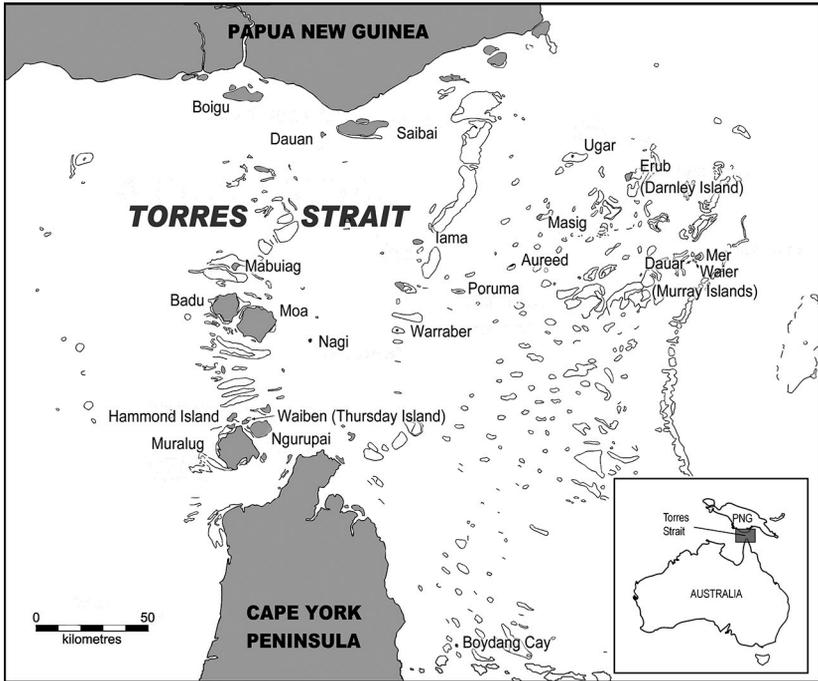


Fig. 8.1 Map of the Torres Strait

Source: Julie Lahn, 2003



Fig. 8.2 Aerial view of Masig and Koedal Islands

Photo: Annick Thomassin, 2009

Living from the land and sea

Masig Islanders describe themselves as seafarers. While anchored in an extensive web of ancestors who dwelled in, traded across, and defended the region for a few thousand years, this contemporary identity is also strongly associated with the lifeways and marine activities of their more recent forebears who were employed in the perilous pearling industry from the mid-1800s to the 1960s.

At least from the early 1900s Masig's fishers and broader community developed a dynamic mixed economy engaging in market, state and customary sector activities.³ As Ganter (1994), Nakata (2004), Mullins (2012) and others have documented for the wider Torres Strait region, Islanders have creatively modulated their participation in the marine industry based on their needs and values and the booms and busts of the regional commercial fisheries. From 1904, schemes sponsored by missionaries, and later by the Australian government, allowed Islanders to buy pearl luggers and cutters and become owner-operators in the regional fisheries. Once owners, Nakata (2004: 161) writes, 'they preferred to use their boats as they wished, for travel and communication, for fishing and other community uses and, when they needed cash, for commercial purposes'. Their livelihood continuously overlapped the state, market and customary sectors of the regional economy.

In 2008–10, Masig Islanders were primarily employed in land-based activities as public servants, as workers for the few private employers, as participants in the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, or a combination of the above.⁴

3 Masig Islanders have developed a mixed economy since *bipotaim* (the precolonial era) engaging in trade, subsistence and ceremonial economic sectors. Their involvement with the market sector began around the mid-1860s while the state sector emerged in the early 1900s.

4 The Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme is a complex program through which members of participating Indigenous communities work part-time in community-led projects for slightly more than regular welfare entitlements. The participants have the possibility of supplementing their income through extra work for 'top up' pay or other sources of employment. CDEP projects are mostly land-based. Since 2013, CDEP has been gradually replaced by the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) and is set to end on 30 June 2015.

Masig Islanders of working age tend to be occupationally mobile. Many hold multiple paid roles and positions—often simultaneously but also over time.⁵ In addition, many earn regular or occasional extra income in commercial fisheries as independent, small owner-operators or fishing partners of Masig boat owners. Between 2008 and 2010, Masig had up to three men who derived their income solely from commercial fishing, despite the island freezer and processing plant not being in operation over this period.

On Masig, being a fisher is not so much a job or a profession. It is defined as a way of life, something that Masig people are socialised into, something they can turn to in times of need, that puts food on the table and can generate extra income. When CDEP was the principal source of government transfer payments in the Torres Strait, many Masig Islanders saw it as paying the bills, but regarded the real money as being in the sea. Land-based paid work (including CDEP), provided people with a certain economic stability which was complemented by a flexible level of engagement with the fishery system. While the community has only a few full-time fishers and a variable number of part-timers, the commercial and customary harvesting of marine resources are activities of economic significance for most, if not all, community members and contribute to the resilience of their whole socioeconomic system.⁶

The Masig fishery system

Masig's small-scale fishery system is characterised by a strong interplay between what are, somewhat artificially, characterised as commercial and customary fishing activities. Most fishing and hunting are conducted from small privately owned multipurpose dinghies (Fig. 8.3). During most, if not all, fishing trips, multiple species are caught simultaneously for commercial and non-commercial purposes using a combination of techniques and gear chosen by changing environmental circumstances and personal preferences. Wages earned

5 Arthur and David-Petero's survey on Torres Strait youth career aspirations has revealed similar patterns from 1999 to 2003 (Arthur & David-Petero 2000).

6 By customary I refer to any non-monetary harvesting for consumption, trading, ceremonial or sociocultural reproduction purposes.

through CDEP or land-based employment also help in supporting local marine activities, notably by providing some of the money needed to purchase the fuel consumed during these fishing excursions.

Fishers involved in commercial activities take seafood for their own sustenance over the course of fishing excursions and will also fish, hunt or collect a variety of species to share with their household.⁷ Depending on the size of the catch, fishers may also share with members of their extended family and neighbours. In other words, market and customary sectors act in synergy with each other. Both are also embedded in a relational ontology which entails a logic of sharing.

Whether for cash, subsistence, or ceremonial purposes, fishing is an activity entangled in social relationships. Gifts of seafood help to create, maintain or strengthen relationships between community members and beyond (cf. Lahn 2006). These gifts are also used by fishers who may have borrowed boats or gear from relatives to reciprocate with their lenders.



Fig. 8.3 Masig Islanders' typical fishing boats

Photo: Annick Thomassin, 2009

⁷ This includes so-called 'commercial' species like tropical rock lobsters or trouts. A variety of fish, crustaceans, and molluscs are taken for subsistence. Masig Islanders' fishing methods do not usually produce by-catch. Thus, species taken for consumption are usually targeted as such.

Often invisible in reports or statistics about Torres Strait fisheries, the family unit and extended family members play a crucial supporting role. The time-consuming processing of trochus shell, for instance, brings family members together to clean and prepare the shells for shipping. The volunteers usually get their share of the prized trochus meat. This illustrates how the local fishery system blends the state, market, and customary sectors of the hybrid economy. It also highlights the social fabric that supports this model.

Masig Islanders' fishing activities do not happen in a sea that is simply 'out there', empty of relationships, open for anyone to access and exploit. Access to, and use of, sea territories and resources are regulated through a local customary marine tenure regime and a system of values which determines who holds rights over given territories and the extraction of marine resources from them.

The Masig marine estate covers an area of approximately 1,580 km²—more than 950 times larger than the island itself (approximately 1.65 km²). This estate includes 12 neighbouring islets and sand cays, the reefs, seagrass beds and the body of water connecting them. Every Masig Islander has the right to access this extensive marine domain and use the common pool of resources. Most fishing activities take place within this territory and the adjacent zones shared with the communities of Poruma, Warraber, Iama, Erub, Mer and Ugar (see Fig. 8.1).⁸ Outsiders who wish to fish in these waters are expected to ask permission from Masig Islanders who will usually accompany the visitors on the fishing grounds.⁹ In principle this rule applies to everybody (including non-Islander commercial operators). Yet, the presence of non-Islander fishing vessels in the area is legitimised through the PZJAs permit regime which ignores the Islanders' sea tenure system.

The quantity of seafood fished and hunted by Masig Islanders is governed by a principle many of them articulate as term 'take only what you need'. Being an appreciation of the shared and finite nature of the resources and a general disapproval of wastage, this principle is neither antithetical to, nor a perfect match with, the principle

8 For discussions about Torres Strait Islander customary marine tenure regimes see, for example, Sharp (1998), Mulrennan and Scott (1999), and Scott and Mulrennan (2010).

9 This rule can be better understood as an expression of mutual respect and respect of territorial boundaries. It is part of what Torres Strait Islanders call *gud pasin* (good ways).

of ecological sustainability as it draws on a different ontological standpoint. Taking more than considered sufficient in given situations, commercially or otherwise, or failing to share when one has more than enough for oneself and one's family, are behaviours associated with greediness. Such conduct may have negative social repercussions for the person or group considered at fault. This principle governs both commercial and customary use of the marine domain.

Masig small-boat fisheries in the hybrid economy

Contrasting with the non-Islander prawn, mackerel and finfish industries operating from larger vessels across Masig's waters, Masig Islanders' multispecies and multipurpose small-boat fisheries are greatly limited by weather conditions, seasonal migrations and market accessibility. Islander fishing efforts have a tendency to fluctuate with the seasons and the presence of buyers. For Masig Islanders the ability to combine or alternate between species or to shift to land-based activities constitutes a way of maximising returns from each excursion and securing a minimum income all year round. This flexible approach allows fishers to make the most of any circumstances—an aspect of their fisheries that is locally considered an advantage. Such an approach reduces reliance on a particular species or single source of income, results in periods of rest and rotation of target species, and increases the resilience of the whole system. This enables fishers to adapt to the vagaries of the markets, fuel prices and availability, family circumstances and obligations, and other socioeconomic factors. The combination of land-based and sea-based work allows fishers to stay close to their family, a desire seen as contrasting with more intensive fisheries models that require fishers to remain at sea for long periods of time.

Participation in the commercial and customary fisheries is also supported by small business grants from the Torres Strait Regional Authority (a statutory authority attached to the Australian Government). These enable Masig Islanders to buy boats and outboard engines.

From its introduction on Masig in 1985, CDEP has played a supporting role for the local fishery system (for discussions about the articulation between CDEP and Torres Strait fisheries see Arthur 2005, Altman et al. 1994, Kwan et al. 2006, Busilacchi et al. 2013). On Masig, a large number of regular commercial fishers combined work on the CDEP scheme and fishing activities.

I have been told on many occasions that ‘CDEP is for the rent and the bills, fishing is for the rest’. For many years, to accommodate fishers, the CDEP schedule was based on two teams working in rotation (one week on, one week off) to allow fishers to go out. Arthur (2005) also suggests that, as a form of income support, CDEP helped relieve pressure on the fisheries. Indeed, the disappearance and reappearance of commercial options can destabilise the local economy. CDEP helped to minimise the impacts of such ebbs and flows and therefore constituted an important dimension of Masig’s hybrid economy.

Debates about CDEP are too complex to detail here. However, it is important to note that perspectives on the scheme were mixed. While there was a sentiment that CDEP had helped to support the local fishery system, there was also a view that the program might have impeded the local fishing effort. Arthur (2005: 11) notes that ‘in part because of CDEP, the Islander fishery may not be (or need to be) as intensive as the non-Islander fishery’.

There was a shared view among Masig Islanders and across the Torres Strait that increasing returns from commercial fisheries was the main way by which they could achieve economic independence and political autonomy. Yet, in spite of the small size of the Masig community, people’s aspirations for future development of the fisheries were diverse. Some Islander politicians and some of the more intensive fishers wished to see participation in commercial fishing increase significantly. Among them, a number hoped to see a small fleet of 8–9 metre boats developed, possibly in collaboration with the other three communities of the Central Strait. Along these lines, one of the island representatives stressed that a ‘new breed of professional fishermen’ was needed for the island’s existing commercial freezer to be cost-effective and to get a better fuel price.

Others supported the existing dinghy model, which gives a lot of independence to each fisher, but wanted to see the island's most able-bodied men taking part in the fisheries in order keep the freezer going. As one of the full-time fishers interviewed mentioned, 'some people only use it when it's Christmas period', emphasising that if they shifted to full-time fishing, they would see the benefits from the freezer.

The schedule of having CDEP participants working alternate weeks was implemented to increase participation in fisheries and make the freezer profitable. Nevertheless, in most cases, aspirations to increase the fishing effort were circumscribed by fishers' positions on suitable levels of extraction and accumulation of capital. In other words, Masig Islanders' fishing behaviour was driven more by variable and finite needs and by the shared nature of the resource than by a desire to use the fisheries to their optimal yield.

Other community members were happy with a combination of part-time or occasional participation in various fisheries with land-based work, as opposed to larger-scale approaches. This model allowed them to be there for their families and participate in community life. It also meant that people could go fishing when money or seafood were needed for various celebrations, funerals and weddings, to send their teenagers to high school on the mainland, and so on.

Hence, the desire to increase individual levels of participation in fishing was not shared evenly among the community's fishers. Given the small size of the population, this diversity of views poses challenges for the development of the fisheries on a larger scale. Yet, as happened during the pearling era, arrangements between custodians of the broader Kulkalgal region may be a way to increase recruitment.

Other avenues for increasing participation are being envisaged. For example, Masig's hybrid economy was deployed to develop locally owned and based aquaculture projects, such as a pilot sponge farm; a project born of a collaboration between marine scientists, Masig project managers, and divers paid through CDEP. It is hoped that such initiatives will bear fruit in the near future in both jobs and profits.

Conclusion

I have necessarily simplified the socioeconomic, political and ontological standpoints of this dynamic island community. Whether the focus is on the local fishery or on the island's broader economic regime, Masig Islanders (as individuals, families or community) modulate the market, state, and customary sectors of their economy in ways that are informed by and foster their social relations and long-standing institutions.

Since the early 1900s, if not earlier, customised juxtapositions and superimpositions of these three economic sectors have allowed Masig Islanders to interact with their land and sea territories and resources on their own terms, that is, in accordance with their values, tenure regime, needs and aspirations. This strategy, to paraphrase a collaborator from another island, reveals their tendency to privilege lifestyle and families over a relentless pursuit of profit and accumulation of wealth. This strategy is also driven by objectives to regain control over their waters and resources, to continue living in and off their maritime domain, and to secure a future for those among their descendants who may wish to live on Masig.

Like several very remote localities in Australia, the island offers very few mainstream employment opportunities. In such circumstances, Masig Islanders' capacity to weave together the customary, state and market sectors of their local economy enables them to deal with the caprices of the weather, fish stocks and markets.

As a vessel for diverse life projects, a way to seize opportunities, and a means to respond to economic, demographic and political challenges, Masig Islanders' flexible hybrid economy can be described as an expression of their self-determination and relative autonomy. Accordingly, it seems wise to approach these economic strategies and underpinning institutions as the foundations and drivers of each island community's particular aspirations for development. External support could focus on recognising and supporting existing and emerging projects, economies and institutions. This would promote engagement with the marine environment that accords with Islanders' *pasin* (ways) and aspirations, rather than blanket solutions aimed either at closing statistical gaps or at the selective protection of Islanders' 'traditional' lifeways.

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