

The marine realm and the Papua New Guinean inhabitants of the Torres Strait

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This article is adapted by the author from his recently completed Ph. D. dissertation: 'The marine realm and a sense of place amongst the Papua New Guinean Communities of the Torres Strait,' University of Hawaii at Manoa.

Abstract

Field research reveals that the sense of place the Papua New Guinean communities of the Torres Strait hold with respect to the offshore seas and reefs has many spatial, temporal and social facets. The feeling of connectedness that people have toward the marine realm is not limited to village-or clan-held marine territories; it encompasses the entire Torres Strait and all within it. Local communities perceive a continuity from the past to the present. Their concept of tradition incorporates their long involvement in commercial fishing, both as contract laborers and independent producers, as well as local perceptions of pre-colonial patterns of marine use. The marine environment represents a multiple reality for the various island, coastal and inland social groups that comprise the indigenous population of the Torres Strait region. Community-based marine resource management will succeed only after opportunities are created for communities to communicate to each other their different values, goals and aspirations with regard to the Strait and its resources.

Introduction

The Torres Strait is a gap approximately 150 km wide between the Australian Continent and the island of New Guinea through which the Coral and Arafura Seas meet. The Strait is home to several thousand people residing on both sides of the international border separating Australia and Papua New Guinea.

While the close relationship of the Torres Strait Islanders, the Australian indigenous inhabitants of the Strait, to the region's islands, cays, reefs and seagrass meadows is well documented (e.g., Johannes & MacFarlane, 1992; Nietschmann, 1989), much less has been written about the ways in which the various Papua New Guinean communities along the northern shore of the Strait relate to their marine environment.

In 1993, field research was conducted to try to capture the subjective understandings and emotional attachments the Papua New Guineans of the Torres Strait region possess with regard to the marine realm. This paper provides an overview of the study findings and places them in broader debates among social scientists in Oceania regarding the spatial aspects of customary marine tenure, conceptions of tradition and representations



of the indigenous viewpoint. Specifically, the discussion centres on the advantages of adopting a broad spatial, temporal and social perspective when defining and clarifying a people's relations to the natural environment.

Defining a people's relations to the sea

Through an examination of local accounts of key historical events and experiences, the study revealed that the sense of place that the inhabitants of the northern coast of the Torres Strait hold with respect to the offshore seas and reefs has many spatial, temporal and social facets.

For the majority of communities a sense of place is ultimately rooted in shared notions about the origins of distant ancestors and their deeds. Oral histories, songs and place names preserve and celebrate the memory of these forebears and maintain the bond between people and their ancestral domains from generation to generation.

The reefs and other natural features of the Strait represent for some social groups the handwork of their earliest ancestors. They stand as a testament to the great power and knowledge possessed by these individuals.

Today, the sea and its life forms continue to play an essential role in the spiritual lives of local residents. Although many ceremonies and rituals associated with the sea were abandoned following the arrival of

Christian missionaries and colonial officials, the marine realm remains an important medium through which people connect with the metaphysical.

The traditional ceremonies and rituals conducted by island and coastal communities during the hunting of dugong and turtle have been recorded in detail by Haddon (1935), Landtman (1927), Parer-Cook & Parer (1990) and others.

The present field study revealed that the sea also holds much spiritual and symbolic meaning for members of inland villages within the Torres Strait region. The oral histories of inland groups are replete with tales of extensive sea journeys made by distant ancestors. Moreover, inland groups have long used particular marine products such as dried dugong skin in agricultural ceremonies and healing rituals. The residents of villages more than 50 km inland regularly obtain pieces of dugong skin through trade links with coastal villages.

For both inland and coastal communities the reefs and shoals of the Torres Strait are also a tangible memorial to the deeds and travails of more recent ancestors, including those who were involved in the early pearl-shell and bêche-de-mer fisheries.

The many local young men who worked as contract labourers aboard luggers owned by Anglo-Australians, beginning in the late-nineteenth century, are revered for their courage and the hardships they endured. As with more distant ancestors, the memory of these individuals and their experiences is embodied in songs, place names and spoken narratives as well as in the landscape itself.

From an economic perspective, the marine resources of the Strait are viewed by local residents as a vital source of sustenance. In pre-European contact times the sea provided items for personal use and for trade within and between communities. After the arrival of Europeans the sea assumed



an added economic dimension. It provided the means of acquiring a totally new array of goods including iron tools, cloth and tobacco. The cash-earning activities involved in procuring these goods were integrated into pre-colonial social relations and patterns of resource use.

For more than a century local residents have been involved in commercial fishing, and the act of earning a livelihood in the marine industry is regarded today as an integral part of their heritage; it is the trade of their ancestors. Today, many communities remain almost completely dependent on the harvest of marine products for cash income and long-term economic security.

The assertion of customary rights over marine areas and resources continues to take place within a particular, localised cultural framework. In some cases, groups claim customary rights on the premise that their ancestors were the original inhabitants and/or users of particular land and sea areas. They reaffirm their relationship to these areas by invoking myths and songs that tell of journeys made by ancestors across the landscape and by routinely visiting the areas for economic and ceremonial purposes.

The matrix of social relations among island, coastal and inland communities in the region and a mutual sense of reciprocity and sharing also continue to be important factors underlying access to and use of marine resources. The collections of meanings that clans and communities attach to the Torres Strait landscape define the distinctive historical relationships that various social groups have to the marine realm and thereby contribute to the separate identities of these groups. At the same time, however, a network of social ties binds groups together and creates a web of obligations to share territories and resources.

The spatial character of customary marine tenure

Since the late 1970s, there has been a growing literature describing various systems of customary marine tenure in Oceania (e.g., Ruddle, 1994). Much of the literature concerns cases in which a social group exercises a set of exclusive rights to harvest the resources contained within defined marine boundaries (see, for example, the review by

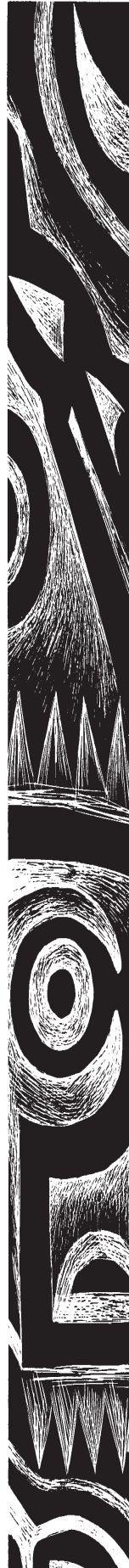
Ruddle, 1988). The lateral boundaries of marine territories claimed by individuals, families, clans or villages are often seaward extensions of the borders of land holdings, but in some instances marine boundaries are influenced by the location of physical marine features, such as patch reefs, reef holes and reef passages, that could be used for demarcation purposes (Iwakiri, 1983; Ruddle, 1988).

The spatial aspect of customary marine tenure is of specific interest to researchers because of the important role well-defined boundaries are reported to play in the creation or maintenance of local property institutions that encourage sustainable resource use (Ostrom, 1990). Pomeroy (1994), for example, states that boundaries enhance fishers' sense of control over a shared resource and the likelihood that they will work to sustain its use over the long term.

While this may be true, the present study found that the relationship between communities and the marine environment may not necessarily be confined to clearly demarcated areas over which groups attempt to exercise exclusive fishing rights.

To be sure, the residents of several coastal communities within the study area have long claimed exclusive use rights over specific reef areas, and the rights holders regard their marine territories as a fundamental element of their relationship to the sea. But the feeling of connectedness that people have toward the marine realm is not limited to these seaward extensions of village or clan estates; one could argue that it encompasses the entire Torres Strait and all within it.

This sense of holistic attachment to the sea may be neglected if researchers concentrate solely on the importance to local residents of marine territories with clearly demarcated boundaries. In short, the study find-



ings suggest that customary marine tenure should be defined in broader spatial terms.

Among the examples uncovered in the field study of attachments to the Torres Strait which extend beyond clan or village-held marine territories is the sacred quality with which social groups imbue the marine landscape. Particular marine sites in the Strait have special religious significance, but local oral histories suggest that the spiritual essence of ancestral figures is diffused over a much broader area that has indefinite boundaries. In effect, the power and personality of distant ancestors pervades the entire Torres Strait as a result of their acts of creation and maritime odysseys.

The study also demonstrates that residents' feelings of connectedness to the Torres Strait are related to the complex network of social ties that link members of widely-dispersed coastal, inland and island communities. This geographically and socially broad web of interpersonal relations fosters a feeling of identity with the entire region. The sense of social unity and regional identity has been reinforced by centuries of trade exchange, intermarriage, sharing of land and marine territories and other forms of social interaction among communities.

Today, some of these interactions exist mainly as nostalgic memories, but they continue to exert an important influence over the way in which the inhabitants of the northern border of the Torres Strait perceive their relation to the Strait as a whole. An informant from one coastal village, for example, remarked that he had become a Papua New Guinean by an act of international politics, but he still considered himself first and foremost to be a 'Torres Strait man'.

A third facet of local residents' relations to the Torres Strait that encompasses an area greater than exclusively-held marine areas is centered on the assortment of marine-related activities residents pursue. Particularly significant is the long tradition of extended voyages to outlying areas for fishing, both commercial and subsistence, and for trade.

These voyages have always had an importance apart from their utilitarian value. They present an opportunity for individuals to demonstrate their skill, courage and endurance as they earn a livelihood in what at times is a

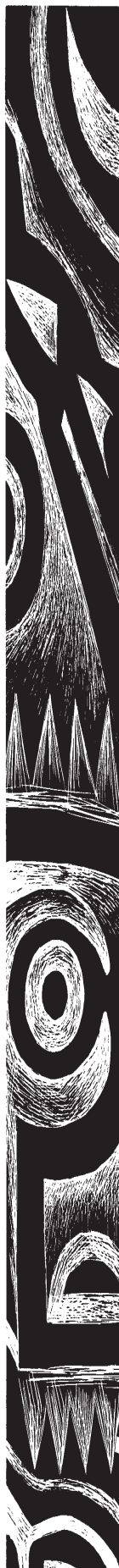
dangerous environment. While much fishing activity is confined to particular marine territories, an important part of the allure of 'wresting a living' from the sea is the freedom to range over the length and breadth of the Torres Strait. This attraction is apparent in reminiscences of trips aboard large double-outrigger canoes and pearling luggers prior to the Second World War and to some extent in anecdotes of contemporary fishing and voyaging activities.

Finally, a fourth dimension of the relationship between people and the Torres Strait that is not limited to territories with well-defined borders concerns local perceptions of certain marine species indigenous to the Strait.

Many social groups regard animals such as dugong and turtle not just as economic resources, but as beings to whom they are spiritually related. These far-ranging animals are viewed as an integral and inseparable part of the marine landscape and a fundamental element of local culture. As symbols of the region the indigenous fauna extends and deepens the emotional attachment local residents feel toward the entire marine sphere of the Torres Strait.

In summary, the interests of maritime communities in their marine environment may extend far beyond the boundaries of 'home reefs' or even distant fishing grounds. These aspects of cultural connections to the sea may be overlooked or under-emphasised by researchers, as they cannot be easily delimited, mapped and displayed. Yet, these connections may be essential elements of a people's relations to the marine realm, and their inclusion in field studies can enrich investigations of customary marine tenure.

As competition for the Torres Strait's commercially valuable marine resources increases, it is likely that individuals and groups will invoke various spatially-broad connections to the region to justify and legitimise their claims of marine resource use rights



in distant areas. Catch data indicate that most of the harvesting effort in the crayfish fishery already occurs outside village-held marine territories. This trend suggests that a marine resource management regime that endeavours to provide for the full and direct participation of local communities must encompass an equally broad geographical area.

Conceptions of tradition

The concept of tradition in contemporary Pacific island societies has lately been the subject of much scholarly interest and discussion. In a recent issue of *Oceania* devoted to the topic, Linnekin (1992: 251) states that the view that tradition is a 'passively and unreflectively inherited legacy' is being challenged by scholars who define tradition as a 'selective representation of the past, fashioned in the present, responsive to contemporary priorities and agendas, and politically instrumental.'

In a discussion of the relationship of Torres Strait Islanders to the marine environment, Nietschmann (1989: 91) argues in favor of defining tradition in relativistic terms by quoting the Samoan author Albert Wendt (1978: 1):

Is there such a creature as '*traditional culture*'? If there is, what period in the growth of a culture is to be called 'traditional'? If 'traditional cultures' do exist in Oceania, to what extent are they colonial creations? What is authentic culture? ... Should there be *one* sanctified/official/sacred interpretation of one's culture? And who should do the interpreting?

Tradition, concludes Nietschmann (1989: 91), should be taken 'to mean what is self-referentially identifying, not necessarily just what once was.'

As stated earlier, members of the Papua New Guinean communities of the Torres Strait regard their long and continuous involvement in commercial fishing, both as wage labourers and as independent producers, as part of their cultural heritage.

To substantiate their claim that commercial fishing is a traditional activity, local residents point to the fact that for more than five generations they have used introduced vessel

types and fishing gear to harvest marine products for international and local markets. Indeed, historical documentary material suggests that these communities were involved in commercial fishing prior to the annexation of the fishing grounds of the northern Torres Strait by Queensland in 1879.

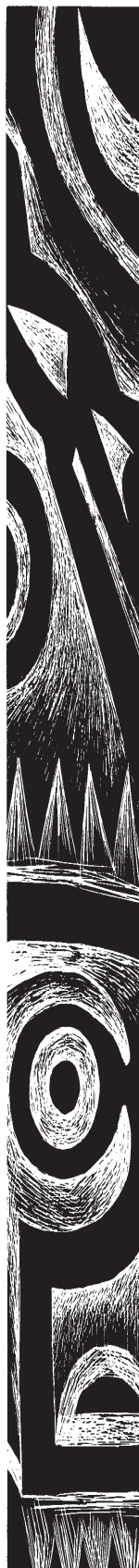
The local belief that fishing for cash income may be traditional conflicts with the way in which the 1976 Torres Strait Treaty defining the border between Australia and Papua New Guinea chose to define what is and is not traditional.

Under Article 11(1) of the Treaty, the Strait's Australian and Papua New Guinean indigenous inhabitants are allowed to continue to exercise customary rights of access to and usage of land and marine areas in the region for the purpose of pursuing traditional activities.

The Treaty stipulates that 'traditional' is to be interpreted broadly and in accordance with prevailing custom *except* in relation to activities of a commercial nature (Article 1(k)). In effect, the Treaty employs the word 'traditional' as a synonym for non-commercial and suggests that an economic state that existed in the pre-colonial past has been sustained by the indigenous inhabitants of the Strait.

For the Papua New Guinean communities of the Torres Strait, acceptance of the term 'traditional' as it has been defined by the Torres Strait Treaty would mean forfeiting their claim to rights to fish commercially in the Strait south of the fisheries jurisdiction line.¹

The line was not conceived through consultation with the indigenous inhabitants of the Torres Strait and has no basis in customary demarcations of marine territory. Given the economic dependency of local communities on commercial fishing, it is likely that this aspect of the Treaty will remain a contentious issue.



By stopping short of considering even the sale of marine products between customary exchange partners as 'traditional' the Treaty has created an unstable situation. As Mfodwo and Tsamenyi (1993: 25) note:

The tendency of separating traditional fishing in the core sense from commercial fishing under the *Torres Strait Treaty* framework is unsatisfactory. Whilst for purposes of analysis traditional fishing may be separated from commercial fishing, in practice, there is no such easy separation. It is increasingly difficult to identify what is traditional in some pure sense as opposed to what is non-traditional or commercial. The whole project of protecting traditional interests in some pure sense will thus probably become more and more difficult to achieve.

In other situations, members of local communities have also made selective use of the term 'traditional' to further their own economic and political agendas. For example, in the mid-1970s the Papua New Guinea government declared dugong a 'national animal', which meant that they could be hunted and used in traditional ways but could neither be sold nor hunted by modern methods.

Some residents of coastal villages in the Strait objected to the ban on commercial hunting of dugong on the grounds that they had been selling dugong meat in local markets for decades and they now regarded it as a traditional practice.

Hudson (1986) notes that most of the individuals who were involved in the lucrative netting of dugong were comparatively wealthy and of high social status. At a time when money earned from selling dugong was a particularly important source of income, these politically influential individuals argued successfully that the government should grant the coastal villages an exemption from the ban.

One of the merits of applying a historical approach to the study of human-environment relations is that it provides for a

¹ Under the elaborate catch-sharing arrangements provided for in Article 23 of the Torres Strait Treaty, Papua New Guineans may fish commercially in the part of the Strait under Australian jurisdiction provided they have an Australian endorsement of their commercial fishing licences and *vice versa*. To date, the catch-sharing arrangements have conferred direct economic benefits only on the few indigenous inhabitants with sufficient capital and management expertise to operate large-scale fishing enterprises.

clearer understanding of the basis for present-day patterns of resource use in communities. The Papua New Guineans of the Torres Strait perceive a continuity from the past to the present. Their sense of tradition is flexible and dynamic and achieves a blend of indigenous and European ways of life.

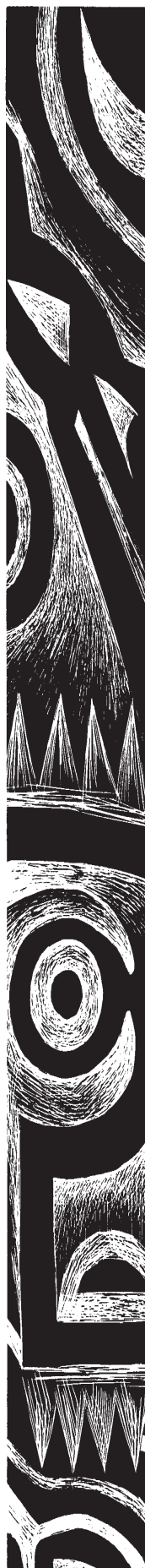
These findings suggest that any effort to fashion a community-based marine resource management program for the Torres Strait must proceed on the premise that local residents are fully integrated into a monetary economy. The harvesting pressure on marine resources is likely to continue to intensify as demands for cash for local infrastructure, customary exchange, church, education and commodities increase.

The indigenous viewpoint

Since the late 1960s, the plight of self-proclaimed indigenous people has developed into a major international human rights issue (Bodley, 1990). Among the key concerns of indigenous populations in the post-colonial era is the recovery of the subjective meanings that geographical areas hold for them. As Jacobs (1993: 104) notes: 'For the colonized, loss of local place is a consequence of imperialism and part of the insurgent act of reclaiming rights is the search and restoration of place lost.'

Efforts to 'return control over the meanings of place to the rightful producers', to use Rodman's (1992: 644) phrase, often presume that the indigenous inhabitants of a particular region share a common set of perspectives and values regarding their environment. But as Rodman (1992) herself notes, a single physical landscape may shape and express different meanings for different users. Linnekin (1992: 258) states that the fact that 'indigenous' may not be an undifferentiated category poses a dilemma for researchers:

... 'native advocacy' is a problematic strategy when scholars may have to choose which indigenous group or faction to champion By assuming 'a' single indigenous perspective and voice the native



advocacy position risks lapsing into a patronizing and unthinking brand of Orientalism that simply replicates colonial categories ...

The 1976 Torres Strait Treaty reflects a concern for the rights of indigenous people by recognising 'the importance of protecting the traditional way of life and livelihood' of the Torres Strait's indigenous inhabitants (Preamble).

Article 12 of the Treaty explicitly requires the parties to preserve the traditional customary rights of access to and usage of land and marine areas held by the various communities in the Strait, provided that those rights are acknowledged by other communities within the region to be in accordance with local tradition.

However, at the time the Treaty was drafted there was no reliable account of what such rights, if any, might exist (Anderson 1981: 67). More, little attention was paid to the differences in the way separate island, coastal and inland communities relate to the Torres Strait and its resources and the various economic and political circumstances that have created conflict among these communities.

Despite the long-standing cultural and kinship affiliations among the different social groups in the Torres Strait region, it is likely that communities have been engaged in disputes over the ownership of territory and resources for centuries.

Recent regional events, such as the political sovereignty movement of the Torres Strait Islanders and the migration of people from the Fly River estuary to the Provincial capital of Daru in search of employment, have brought these conflicts into sharper focus. Ethnic differences, intensified by decades of exposure to different levels and types of external social forces, have come to the forefront as various groups attempt to extend their economic and political control over a limited resource base.

While the Torres Strait Treaty goes a long way toward protecting the rights of indigenous inhabitants as a whole, it does not go far enough in providing for the

resolution of disputes between different segments of the indigenous population (Rentin, 1991).²

Commentary by outside scholars, acting as indigenous rights advocates, may, in some cases, have had the unintended effect of exacerbating the divisions between the indigenous inhabitants of the Torres Strait. For example, a recent study of the customary sea rights of Torres Strait Islanders by Smyth (1993) neglects to mention the points of view of the Papua New Guinean indigenous inhabitants of the Strait.

Discussions (e.g., Lawrence, 1991) which have dealt with the concerns of Papua New Guineans in the context of the 1976 Torres Strait Treaty and other regional issues have tended to centre on the interests of the coastal villages. Yet, as shown in the present field study, various inland groups also claim a relationship to the Torres Strait that is complex and extensive.

By championing the causes of only certain segments of the indigenous population, researchers may inadvertently perpetuate economic and political inequalities in the region.

The findings of the field study suggest that policy makers and scholars should exercise caution in treating the indigenous population of the Torres Strait as a homogeneous entity. A more effective and equitable course is to actively seek out multiple perspectives on the use, value and meaning of the landscape (see Rocheleau et al., 1995).

The finding of the field study that the marine environment represents a multiple reality for the diverse social groups that comprise the region's indigenous inhabitants demonstrates the importance of reinforcing a level of mutual understanding and trust among groups.

Unless avenues for transcending local rivalries and disputes are established it is



unlikely that a community-based marine resource management strategy could succeed. As Hough (1988: 132) notes with specific regard to reconciling the divergent interests that are often represented in the management of a conservation area:

In order to resolve conflicts effectively, it is normally necessary to bring all the stakeholders, or their representatives, together with a view of promoting a joint understanding of the various perspectives and positions of each. If some involved parties are inadvertently left out of consideration or otherwise excluded from this process, their later actions may destroy the accords that have been reached.

In short, conservation on a regional scale can begin in the Torres Strait only after opportunities are created for communities to communicate to each other their different values, goals and aspirations with regard to the Strait and its resources.

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² The administrative apparatus of the Torres Strait Treaty provides for periodic consultations with the indigenous inhabitants, but as Mfodwo and Tsamenyi (1993) note, the approach to protection of traditional rights taken by Australia and Papua New Guinea requires that Treaty objectives be achieved through the two national governments rather than through the local communities themselves. The authors conclude that 'the traditional inhabitants have a subordinate if not marginal position within the Treaty regime' (Mfodwo and Tsamenyi, 1993: 3).

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