4. From island to mainland: Torres Strait Islanders in the Australian labour force

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Introduction

The Torres Strait Islanders are Australia's other Indigenous minority. Until the 1960s, their homelands were the small islands between Cape York and the Western Province of Papua New Guinea, which their ancestors had occupied since 'time immemorial'. Apart from Thursday Island, which Australian settlers have made an administrative and commercial centre since 1879, the Indigenous inhabitants remained in occupation of their home islands, free to cultivate gardens, fish or hunt turtle and dugong.¹ Finding themselves on the periphery of world capitalism since the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the Islanders had become suppliers of turtle shell and then divers and deckhands in the regional marine industry. This industry was always economically marginal and depended on cheap labour such as the Islanders provided, while providing opportunities for leadership (Ganter 1994:passim).² By the end of World War II, Islanders began to look to opportunities on the mainland, where it was rumoured they could earn 'proper wages, same as white man'. At the beginning of the 1960s, the markets on which the marine industry had depended collapsed, leaving hundreds of men without work. This began an exodus from the strait to the mainland.

The migration was economically viable because the collapse of the Torres Strait economy coincided with a surge in the mainland economy, creating a demand for the kind of work that Islanders could perform, so that more and more came south during the 1960s and 1970s. As wives and even aged parents joined their

1 Thursday Island, or Waiben, was originally part of the domain of the Kaurareg people. About the turn of the century, the Queensland Government sent them to live on neighbouring Hammond Island, but in 1923 relocated them to Moa Island. Kaurareg began returning to Horne Island after World War II.

2 Regina Ganter (1994) has written the definitive account of the Torres Strait pearling industry.

sons, the migration became a resettlement—soon with a generation of mainland-born Islanders. Today, while about 6000 Islanders still live in the strait, some 42 000 live on the mainland—concentrated mainly along the Queensland coast, but also in the Northern Territory and Western Australia; indeed, Torres Strait Islanders are to be found almost everywhere in Australia.

Ethno-history

The Torres Strait Islanders are mainly of Melanesian stock who at some time in the past settled the islands from mainland Papua (McNiven and Quinnet 2004).³ The islands—more than 20 of which were permanently inhabited with yet others either seasonally occupied or visited occasionally—varied widely in the economic resources they provided. Overall, however, the region was richly endowed with marine life, including turtle and dugong, as well as abundant fish and crustaceans. A critical feature of the regional economy was the great seagoing double-outrigger canoe, traded in from Papua and differently rigged, which enabled full exploitation of these resources, and also trading between different ecological micro-environments (Haddon 1912; Lawrence 1994).

The one resource that the region lacked was stone of a kind that could be shaped for cutting. A few iron implements seem to have come into the area—probably from Indonesia—so that when British vessels began passing through the strait just before and in the early years of British colonial settlement, they were pursued by Islander canoes eager to exchange knives and axes for local produce (Haddon 1935). In due course, a regular traffic developed, with turtle shell as the commodity that the Europeans particularly valued (Allen and Corris 1977). In the next phase of Islander involvement in the global economy, it was their labour that they were to sell.

Until about the middle of the nineteenth century, European shipping was mostly in transit to and from the Australian colony. The 1850s saw the beginning of *bêche-de-mer* fisheries and, in 1869, pearl shell was discovered in considerable quantities (Ganter 1994:20). Soon many Islanders were working in the marine industry. Their early need for iron was presently supplemented by the perceived superiority of imported tobacco over local products, and the arrival of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1870 gave rise to a new set of needs, particularly clothing. Flour and rice, supplied on the luggers, became alternatives to yams and bananas. The labour needs of the industry fluctuated from year to year, however, so that the workforce was sustained and reproduced

3 The latter-day Islander population is racially mixed, as a result of intermarriage with Pacific Islanders, Asians and others who came to work in the Torres Strait fisheries during the second half of the nineteenth century.

by a combination of subsistence production and work for wages. Senior men, being less able-bodied, returned to their gardens and fishing, leaving their sons to work on the boats, and taking some of their wages (Beckett 1987). One might say that the Islanders were eased into wage labour, rather than being abruptly taken from their hunting expeditions and their gardens. Presently, however, their need for commodities created demands for cash that the industry could satisfy only in boom times.

The Queensland Government and the marine industry

Queensland annexed the islands between 1872 and 1879, but did not seriously intervene in the Islanders' affairs until the turn of the century, when it began to regulate the payment of 'native' workers in the marine industry (Beckett 1987). In a polyglot labour force, Islanders found themselves positioned in a racial hierarchy, with Malays, Japanese and Pacific Islanders paid more than them, but with Aborigines and Papuans paid less.⁴ In 1904, Queensland placed the Islanders under the *Aboriginals Protection Act*, which meant, among other things, that their movements were now restricted to the islands, and in future the government would receive Islanders' wages on their behalf, allocating small amounts for approved purposes.⁵ It also oversaw a number of Islander-run enterprises known as Company Boats, which provided an alternative to the privately owned 'Master Boats'. This arrangement persisted until the mid-1960s.

Working in the marine industry, combined with conversion to Christianity, reordered the pattern of community life, with lay-off time set aside for the missionaries' festivals, particularly weddings, and Islander festivals, with dancing and feasting the accepted way of celebrating both forms.⁶ Young men were the preferred labour on the boats, while their fathers and uncles eventually retired to subsistence work. Except in the very early years, women did not work in the marine industry. Recognising the increasing dependence on commodities, however, the government allocated parents or families a share of the men's wages.

Learning to labour was an integral part of the Islanders' experience of colonialism. The first generation of boat skippers were Asians or Pacific Islanders—the latter particularly reputed for maintaining harsh discipline onboard the luggers. A

4 See Ganter (1994) for an account of the indentured labour in the industry and the role of Japanese divers.

5 This was the *Aboriginals Protection and Sales of Opium Act*, enacted and periodically revived between 1897 and 1934. In 1939, Queensland replaced it with a *Torres Strait Islanders Act*, which ran until 1965.

6 The LMS began evangelising the islands in 1871, giving way to the Church of England in 1915 (Beckett 1987).

later generation of skippers were often the sons of foreigners who had taken Islander wives and lived in one of the island communities. Among these there was competition for prestige as 'top skipper'—a local incentive combining with the quest for monetary gain. This spirit was passed on to their crews, whose earnings increased in a successful year, with more cash to take home to their families, parents and communities. There were, however, many bad years, due to international manipulation of the markets, so that there was no sure correlation between effort and reward. Discontent over wages was one of the causes of a strike on the government's boats in 1936 (see Beckett 1987; Sharp 1993).

Even in a good year, Islanders' wages were a fraction of what a white worker would earn. It is not clear when Islanders became aware of this difference, but when they were recruited into the military after Japan's entry into World War II, they found themselves serving alongside white soldiers, but receiving a fraction of their wages. This again led to a strike and some increase in their pay (Beckett 1987). Returning to civilian life with a sense of entitlement, they experienced a brief period of prosperity in the marine industry, before the old fluctuations and frustrations returned.

The mainly Chinese market for *bêche-de-mer* had collapsed with the outbreak of war with Japan in 1934 and did not resume until the 1980s. Pearling was also suspended for the period of the war, but it remained the staple of the local economy until about 1960, when the international garment industry, which had bought most of the shell for buttons, turned to plastics as a cheaper alternative. Before this, however, earnings in the industry had declined in real terms—a situation aggravated by Islanders' rising expectations of what they should be paid. Moreover, with a burgeoning population, scores and eventually hundreds of young men could no longer find places on the luggers (Beckett 1987). After a decade or so, the Torres Strait marine economy revived around other kinds of fishing, and somewhat later the demand for pearl shell recovered to a small degree, but in the meantime hundreds of Islanders were left without a source of money, beyond the social service benefits paid to families and to pensioners.⁷ Faced with the prospect of unrest, Queensland and the local government councils no longer opposed Islanders moving to the mainland and, within months, hundreds had gone 'south' (Beckett 1987).

Work opportunities on the mainland

Shortly after the end of World War II, the chairman of Murray Island had requested the government's permission for some of his men to go south for the

⁷ Islander seamen were not at this time eligible for unemployment benefits.

cane-cutting season—an experiment that was repeated for a number of years. Cane cutting was, however, a seasonal occupation, and when Islanders began arriving in the 1960s, they were able to find year-round work on the railways, laying and servicing the lines. This was a period of rapid economic development in Queensland and Australia generally, when new lines were being laid into the interior, particularly to serve the new mines. Fettling, as this occupation was called, was a relatively low-paid occupation, which required men to work in the heat, often on remote sidings, which might take them away from town for the week. In a period of full employment, it was not attractive to white workers. It was, however, an opportunity for Islanders, who could cope with the heat and for whom the wages were several times what they could earn back in the strait, had there been jobs to get. Moreover, they were getting ‘white man’s wages’ and they received the money ‘in the hand’ rather than through the government office (Beckett 1987).

The Islander migration also coincided with the development of new infrastructure in interior Queensland and, presently, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. This also required men who could work in tropical conditions, and Islanders were found to be good and adaptable workers, despite their lack of formal skills and their poor levels of education.⁸

A contractor who had employed Islander workers reported of them favourably in a letter to Conzinc Riotinto (CRA) in 1966: ‘these people are good workers, are happy and should be considered for employment on other CRA operations.’⁹ The report continued, in part: ‘They do not like being rushed and do not appreciate being “bawled out”—in such events they stammer and revert quickly to speaking their native language.’ ‘They are regarded as being superior to European migrants in respect of understanding and learning to handle equipment.’ ‘Their hygiene habits are regarded as superior to the European migrants on the project and are better than a considerable number of Australians on the project.’ (Compare Gibson this volume on Aboriginal concepts of ‘work’.) If they disliked being ‘bawled out’, Islanders would not put up with physically abusive overseers, and bashed one who had pushed them too far. The victim took the contractors to court, arguing that the company was liable in that they should have known that ‘Torres Strait Islanders were likely to indulge in the consumption of such liquor and thereby become argumentative and violent people and given to attacking others with whom they come in contact’.¹⁰ The

8 As Williamson (1994) shows, Islanders had had schooling since the days of the LMS, but of a limited kind. It virtually ceased during the war with Japan, though there were qualified state teachers after 1946.

9 J. S. Davidson to F. F. Espie Esq. and S. Christia Esq., 10 March 1966.

10 *Clive Cedric Moon v Hornibrook (Pty) Limited and others*, Supreme Court of Queensland, February 1964.

judge decided in favour of the plaintiff (despite depositions from myself and the Director of Aboriginal Islander Advancement), but it does not seem that the event had any effect on the employment of Islanders.

As long as these projects lasted, Islanders were able to command good wages, with opportunities for overtime, but they began to slow about 1970. In the long run, it was the state railways that provided the majority of Islander workers in Queensland and elsewhere with their regular occupation, right up to retirement.¹¹ A Northern Territory pearl-culture enterprise was also flying in Islander workers for contract periods. The majority of Islanders remained concentrated along the coast of Queensland, with Cairns, Townsville and Brisbane as the main centres; but others followed the work to Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and beyond. Arthur (2003) notes that Islanders on the mainland live mainly in cities and small towns.

Getting a foothold

The Islanders' entry into the mainland labour market, and life on the mainland generally, was made easier because they already had kinfolk living in northern Queensland (Hodes 1998). These were people of mixed descent, so technically they were not 'under the Act', some of whom had come down before the war; others resettled during the war and failed to return to the islands afterwards. These recognised their Islander kinfolk and showed them hospitality. In the days of pearling, Torres Strait luggers working the Great Barrier Reef came down to Townsville and Cairns to unload their shell, so that these places were not totally unfamiliar when men later decided to come south.

These connections were no doubt helpful in finding jobs for the new arrivals—a role later played by Islander immigrants for their kin as they in turn became established. It also seems that in many cases the work gangs were all or predominantly Islanders, with a senior man as 'ganger'. Some of these gangers had been boat skippers back in the strait and, according to their workers, brought the same ethos of 'hard work' to the railways. In addition, there was the idea that Islanders had to establish their reputation as workers. Thus, one ganger had his boys work longer hours—though they could expect no extra pay—'for name'. If Islander workers did not like being 'rushed', as the CRA report suggested, their own gangers could get them to complete contracts ahead of schedule. Some workers in retrospect thought they were foolish to do so, but others remember those achievements with pride (cf. Beckett 1987:202; Lui-Chivizhe forthcoming).

11 The state railways were organised by the Railway Workers' Union, and the Islander workers came under the same agreements as white employees.

Ganger was as high as Islanders seemed to get in the railway system; some tried to rise higher, but only one succeeded. One who had applied for promotion abandoned the idea, suggesting it was 'too much headache', which I interpreted as meaning that his control of standard English had failed him.

The Islander migration

The first Islanders to go south were single or young married men who left their wives behind. As many told me, earning more money than ever before, they found themselves squandering it on alcohol. This was not the way things were supposed to be in the new life, and not a few turned to the Assembly of God and other Pentecostal churches who forbade drinking and smoking as well. By the 1970s, women, children and even aged parents were also making their way south, re-creating some of the constraints and expectations that had prevailed back home. As families, Islanders were able to rent accommodation built for them by the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement and later the Queensland Department of Housing.

The revival of the Torres Strait economy

After a decade or so of economic decline, the regional economy began to revive, with crayfish (rock lobster)—flown south to mainland restaurants and north to Japan—as a major source of income. Some also harvested reef fish for the same markets. After some years, there were also revivals of the pearling and even *bêche-de-mer* markets. These activities were of course seasonal and they were also vulnerable to overfishing, but by switching from one resource to another, some Islander entrepreneurs were able to prosper as never before—without government interference. As in the days of pearling, now Badu entrepreneurs have proved the most successful, and have the largest population in the strait. Other island enterprises have failed or operate only intermittently.

Probably because of the involvement of Islander men in the military during World War II, Islander families and seniors have been in receipt of social service benefits since 1941. From the late 1970s, benefits, in various forms, became more substantial than previously and, after becoming eligible for the dole, many communities organised work under the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme. Schooling has also improved in the strait over the years, with secondary students attending the high school on Thursday Island and exceptional children sent to high schools on the mainland. There is employment for a small number of high school graduates in several of the numerous government departments based in the strait.

Islanders on the mainland in the new millennium

Bill Arthur, who has been following the situation of Torres Strait Islanders for more than 20 years, produced a profile of their status as revealed in the 2001 Census (Arthur 2003).¹² The statistics suggest that the rate of employment of Islanders on the mainland is 46.8 per cent; their proportion in the labour force is 56.8 per cent. Allowing for regional variations, this places them somewhat higher than the Aboriginal population, but below that of the 'non-Indigenous' population.

As elsewhere in Australia (Gregory 2005), in the areas where Islanders are mostly living, the demand for unskilled workers has declined.¹³ Fettling, like cane cutting, is now mechanised, and when Torres Strait railway employees retire they are not replaced. The rising generation has to find work where they can and it seems that there is no longer one occupation in which Islanders congregate. Some have returned to live in the strait; others go up for the crayfishing season and then return south. I heard of men signing on for mining work in Western Australia on a fly-in-fly-out basis.

Islanders' representation at the higher levels of employment is relatively modest, which can in part be attributed to education. According to Arthur's (2003) analysis of the 2001 Census, 23 per cent of Islanders have completed high school (compared with 39.5 per cent for non-Indigenous Australians); 2.1 per cent have graduate degrees, compared with 10.2 per cent for the non-Indigenous population.

Families living on the mainland no doubt find themselves pressed to meet the demands of day-to-day living, but Islanders also find themselves called on to meet financial obligations—particularly for the post-funerary rites, known to Islanders as the 'tombstone opening' (cf. Beckett 1987). This requires family and friends not only to erect a tombstone, but to provide an island-style feast at some urban venue. In some instances, the relatives return to the strait to conduct the ceremony. The expense can be considerable; one recent affair was rumoured to have cost \$100 000.

Conclusion

The Islander migration to the mainland is a remarkable story. It was the result of a coincidence of several economic and social factors. The decline of the old marine

12 Bill Arthur has worked extensively with Islanders, though mainly those living in the strait. Most of his writings have appeared as Discussion Papers for the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research in Canberra. He conducted a similar analysis of the 1996 Census (Arthur 2000).

13 Here, I have simply selected from Arthur's tables. Readers should refer to his paper for additional detail.

industry in Torres Strait provided the push factor, combined with an awareness that better wages were to be had elsewhere, but the demand for tropical workers on the railways and developing infrastructure for a burgeoning economy provided the pull. The Islanders seized this opportunity with both hands; others might not have responded with the same tenacity, even enthusiasm. The work was hard and the conditions were often rough, particularly in the early days, but the Islanders were receiving 'proper wages', not the meagre pay they received on the luggers, and they were managing their money for themselves. Beyond that, they were justifying their claim to social and moral equality—implicitly if not explicitly denied them while they were 'under the Act'.

Island-born migrants might express nostalgia for 'home' (though there were those who were glad to have escaped for one reason or another) and some returned home after some months or years. For the majority, however, it seemed be enough to have kinfolk living nearby and a regular round of Islander festive and church gatherings. Islander 'culture'—mainly dance and singing—is provided for these gatherings and also for civic affairs in the wider community. As for the mainland-born generation, some have been to the islands only for brief visits. A few of these return to live, usually to take up some government job, but the young urbanites complain that in the islands 'every day the same'.

As previously suggested, the Torres Strait Islander migration to the mainland was a product of a particular time and particular economic conditions. These conditions no longer obtain. In recent years, Islanders have been affected by the disappearance of the occupations in which they used to work and the general falling off in demand for unskilled workers. The younger mainland-born generation is, however, better equipped to compete in the labour market; they have been through a normal school system, as their parents had not, and they can speak standard English as their parents could not. If they have not acquired some skill or educational qualification, they could have difficulty finding jobs, but with the difference that now they 'know their way around'.

Torres Strait Islanders identify as Indigenous, but such land or (now) sea rights that they may claim are in the strait, not on the mainland. Given the importance they attach to the disposal of their dead, however, the handsome tombstones now to be seen in many north Queensland cemeteries suggest another kind of connection.

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