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For Zandile and Bruce
and in memory of Dimple Bani.

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INTRODUCTION

Unmasking History

TORRES STRAIT HISTORY is positioned alongside broader histories of Australia's colonial past, as well as Pacific histories that acknowledge our cultural belonging in Oceania.¹ The Torres Strait was apprehended by Britain's colonial remit in the early 1800s and remained so until the introduction of Christianity in 1871. In 1879, Queensland's colonial government annexed the islands of the Torres Strait and imposed foreign religious practices and governance on Islanders. We were variously inscribed as 'murderous savages', 'passive natives' or became absent altogether in historical accounts. From the 1880s to the 1960s, official histories of Australia ignored and suppressed the life stories of Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal peoples, privileging the experiences and accounts of Anglo-Australians.²

Looking to convey the idea of the incompleteness of Australia's history, in 1968 anthropologist WEH Stanner described the exclusion of Aboriginal people from the national narrative as the 'great Australian silence'.³ This was despite the fact, as historian Anna Haebich wrote, that early colonists had 'left a lively archive of accounts of both amicable and violent encounters, exploitative and humanitarian relations, and public debates about Aborigines' fate in newspapers, personal memoirs and professional histories'.⁴ 'Ironically', Haebich continued, the 'silence' was a phenomenon created by twentieth-century academic historians who overlooked the intertwined past reflected in colonial archives, 'in favour of histories of nation and nation building'.⁵ They presented instead 'a vision of a united and uniform White Australia where whiteness bestowed citizenship, status, power and privilege'.⁶

The 'mainstream version of Australian history', wrote Worimi historian John Maynard, 'deliberately left out Aboriginal Australians, except as token or marginal players'.⁷ This exclusion has had far-reaching consequences for how Indigenous peoples of Australia were and are viewed nationally and internationally and, more importantly, for how we came to view ourselves. We had been 'disappeared' from the national narrative, our own histories violently intruded on in the process of colonisation and for 'the first two-thirds of the twentieth century' denied by its machinery.⁸ Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's view of imperialism and colonialism is pertinent here—she calls it 'a process of systematic fragmentation' that 'brought complete disorder to colonised people'. These processes disconnected us from our histories, landscapes, languages, social relations and our own 'ways of thinking, feeling and interacting with the world'.⁹

Stanner's candid assessment of our absence from national history provided the much-needed jolt for the revision of this history throughout the 1970s. The early work of historian Henry Reynolds, who wrote from 'the other side of the frontier', heralded a seismic shift in the way many Australian historians engaged with Aboriginal stories of resistance and survival.¹⁰ Following Reynolds, the work of Ann McGrath, Peter Read and Debbie Rose, among others of the 1980s, broadened the character of Aboriginal historical narratives.¹¹ Their explorations of Aboriginal oral histories, the complexities of regional variations in spheres such as labour and mission life, and notions of belonging, place and connections to Country wrenched Aboriginal-centred views of history out of the shadows. In addition, the burgeoning fields of Indigenous life-writing in autobiographies, family biographies and memoirs provided an important avenue for Aboriginal people to speak about their own experiences, and the searching scholarship of Aboriginal historians and writers soon followed.¹²

The scholarly documentation of Torres Strait Islanders' histories is sparse by comparison. The region's remoteness from the intellectual pulse of metropolitan centres, alongside the uptake of Christianity and decades of government paternalism, provide a partial explanation. Early accounts written by various people who had visited the region on navy survey vessels and as missionaries had invariably constructed us as the 'savage' other, 'violent' and 'stupid', our dark souls in need of white salvation.¹³ Islander scholar and educator Martin Nakata argues that it was not until after 1987 that scholarly works offered politicised readings of the position of Islanders, thereby allowing for 'some reconsideration of Islander agency and perspectives'.¹⁴

To present an Islander perspective of this history, I bring together turtle shell masks, the accounts of early visitors, later multidisciplinary scholarly work and Islanders' own recollections to construct various narratives about Islanders' engagement with turtle and turtle shell. Using this approach, I provide historically and culturally grounded descriptions of the masks and their purpose and significance to Islanders. One of the most useful and—for many Islanders—most disquieting sources came out of the 1898 University of Cambridge anthropological expedition to the region, led by zoologist-turned-ethnologist Alfred Cort Haddon. Haddon and his team of multidisciplinary colleagues believed they had arrived 'just in time to record the memory of a vanished

past'.¹⁵ The findings of what became known as the 'Cambridge Expedition' were disseminated through exhibitions, journal publications and public lectures; between 1901 and 1935, the results of the Expedition were formally published in the six-volume *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits*. Despite criticism of the Expedition for being, among other things, too brief and too closely associated with missionaries and government officials, the published and unpublished works of the Expedition remain the only comprehensive attempt to document the lives of Islanders and the characteristics of Islander society in the late nineteenth century.¹⁶

The Cambridge Reports and associated journals hold the contributions of many named Islanders. In sifting through their content with the goal of unlocking Islanders' histories of turtle shell masks, I remained mindful of Nakata's argument that the Expedition's intent of building scientific knowledge had skewed the collection, interpretation and translation of Islanders' stories in favour of Haddon's intellectual schema.¹⁷ As my interest rests on how the stories recounted by Haddon relate to turtle use, turtle shell mask-making and the associated ceremonies, they are read in concert with the work of linguists and cultural knowledge-holders Ephraim and Dimple Bani, Islanders' stories collected in Margaret Lawrie's *Myths and Legends of Torres Strait* and the masks themselves. In addition, in their combined use of ethnohistorical sources, such as the Cambridge Reports and Islander oral histories, the site interpretation work of archaeologists has been especially helpful in deciphering the historicity of tangible connections between people, events and place.¹⁸

Finally, Islanders' perception of place is imperative for locating this history. We were not separated from our home islands through forced removal. Rather, our islands were turned into reserves for containment and surveillance by colonial governments and became overlaid with the ideas of *markai* or *ad'le* (outsiders). Despite their presence and rules about ownership, we remained physically connected to our ancestral places, and thus more able to continue the cultural and maritime practices of long ago.¹⁹ Across the land and seascapes of the Torres Strait, places are culturally defined, 'blanketed with history and imbued with names, myths and legends'.²⁰ Noting the spatial dimension of Torres Strait cultural history, geographer Bernard Neitschmann wrote:

events in the historical and mythical past occurred at places, not simply at specific dates ... In travelling about their islands, waters and reefs, Torres Strait people pass through their history, which is linked to land and sea environments.²¹

The stories reworked and retold here demonstrate the geography of history—how places are named, owned and evidence continuity with ancestors.

Telling an Islander-Oriented History

As with place, how Islanders conceptualise time is important to the telling of this history. The seasons of *koki*, *sager* and *naiger* are the foundational measures of temporality. Their cyclic rhythm actuated and organised Islanders' relations with the environment. Wind direction and force, the breeding cycles of animals, the migration patterns of birds and the flowering and fruiting of plant foods signalled the right timing for cultural practices, as well as the passing of time. While there is some variation in the region's climatic conditions, *koki* is the time of the north-west monsoon, when some garden foods were harvested and others planted, and fish were plentiful. *Sager* brings strong south-easterly winds and rough seas. It was the time to travel for trade and ceremonies. *Naiger* brings calm seas and turtles return to breed and nest.²² With the arrival of *ad'le* or *markai*, *kerker* (seasonal time) was overlaid with chronological time.

For Islanders, chronological time can be divided into two periods: the long period before Christianity was introduced in 1871 and the time thereafter, referred to respectively as *bipotaim* and *pastaim*.²³ While *kerker* continues to frame Islanders' ongoing engagements with their natural world, the stories related to the activities and beliefs of *bipotaim* reveal the most about the significance of turtle shell masks and masking. The stories of *bipotaim* reach back to mythic time and recall historical events when humans became animals and animals human, and when Islanders believed and shared natural and supernatural explanations of the world they saw and lived in.

The stories Islanders once told, sang and danced continue to reveal our past and are vital elements of my telling of this history. Across the Torres Strait, myths, stories, ceremony, places and objects are principal keepers of Islander history. By the early twentieth century, the large turtle shell masks that connected Islanders to the seas, to the living and the deceased, that held the stories of their making and their uses in ceremony, were all but gone. These important keepers of history had been taken, traded or destroyed.

In drawing out the relationships between stories and history, I follow Maynard's assertion that at 'the heart, core and soul of history are the stories'.²⁴ Similarly, Nerida Blair wrote:

History is story. It is told by people. It is story written by people. It is story filtered through different lenses and perceptions. It is accompanied by different baggage. History is about finding the voices from many different perspectives and identifying the layers.²⁵

Stories connect us with a deeper sense of our past, our belonging to place and to each other. Stories about the lives of mythical culture heroes and ancestors orient Islanders to *bipotaim*. These oral histories of events, places and the actions of culture heroes facilitate Islanders' connections to place and to generations long gone. Germane to my use of Torres Strait stories is Tongan anthropologist Okusitano Mhina's view of oceanic mythology as 'a system of knowledge where people organize themselves in relation to nature and the environment'.²⁶ Turtle shell mask-making and the use of things made from turtle prior to the depredations of colonialism were embedded in Islanders' broader relationships with their natural world. In treating the masks as historical evidence, I am aligning myself with Mhina's view that 'material artifacts and languages can be effective sources of history, capable of holding vital information about the past of a group of people'.²⁷ Using Islanders' myths and stories, and the turtle shell masks themselves, I reanimate the masks with their Islander histories of meaning and purpose.

In writing this history, I was inspired by Greg Denning's desire to tell a history of Oceania in a double-visioned way, from both sides of the beach, and how this gives the world a different place from which to engage with the history of Te Enata (the Marquesas Islands).²⁸ He sees it as giving back to Te Enata 'something of their own identity in how they named themselves and their islands. But more importantly, how they structured their identity in the opposition of native (*enata*) and stranger (*haoe*)'.²⁹ Like the long caravan of students and others who have looked to Denning's words for direction and reassurance, I too have found my way onto his expansive beach to grapple with the history I wish to tell. My interest is less in *ad'le* or *markai* 'biographies' of the masks after they left our beaches, and more in the histories of the masks in their place of origin, and the men, women, animals, places and stories connected to their meaning and use.

In searching for this history, many Islanders stand beside me on Denning's beach. Linguists, scholars and artists, young and old, male and female—we are all inspired and humbled by the beauty and power of the objects, and curious as to what we might learn about who we have become. Unlike Denning, we are bringing an insider view to this history. Important to this view is the work of contemporary visual artists. As powerful physical interpretations of Islanders' cultural practices and belief systems, the works of artists such as Ken Thaiday Snr, Alick Tipoti, Segar Passi, Ricardo Idagi and George Nona are considered for the ways they connect the past with the present and bring to life the stories by which we know our ancient past.

In my research for this history, I employed archival research, fieldwork, site visits and object analysis informed through the recollections and actions of Islanders past and present. Islanders who are artists, school students, linguists, hunters, curators, scientists, teachers, academics, cultural knowledge-holders, elders and family have all contributed to this history.

Exhibiting and Performing Islander History

Further informing this work were two creative projects that engaged the broader public with some of this history in visual and performative contexts.

The first event was the 'Islanders and Turtle' exhibit in the *Stuffed, Stitched and Studied* exhibition at the Macleay Museum, which I curated in 2014–15.³⁰ In presenting the public with a way into this little-known history, a particular *le op* turtle shell mask from Erub (Darnley Island) was the stimulus. When planning this exhibition component, I recognised that understanding the *le op* was impossible without some knowledge of turtle hunting and the histories of Islanders' enduring connections with the broader marine environment, as encapsulated in stories about people and places and in the spiritual lives of those from the past and those in the present. In a very abbreviated way, the exhibition told a story about turtle that brought together: turtle shell masks; Islanders' knowledge, traditions and artistry in mask-making; and Islanders' knowledge of and interactions with their marine environment. In the exhibition catalogue, I related Islanders' use of turtle as both meat and material. It was important for me to make the viewers aware of the various uses of turtle by Islanders, particularly the hunting and consumption of green turtle, and to frame the practice as one of historical and cultural longevity. The exhibit was curated to also draw attention to current challenges—in particular, the impact of environmental changes on human and turtle populations in the Torres Strait region.

The exhibit was presented in two sections. The first included museum specimens and Islanders' hunting materials, which were arranged on a large flat cabinet under perspex boxes, and two turtle shell masks that were hung on an adjacent wall. The second included taxidermy specimens from the Macleay Museum collection, comprising an ancient green turtle alongside a tiny hatchling, a juvenile hawksbill turtle and a suckerfish (*gep/gapu*) or sharksucker, and a jar of hawksbill hatchlings suspended in ethanol. The labels for all specimens and objects were presented in English, Meriam Mir and Kala Lagaw Ya.

Although it was not possible to include detailed information on Islander taxonomic practices in the exhibition text, the mere naming of the two different turtle species in Islander languages recognised Islander knowledge and ways of knowing turtle. The inclusion of the suckerfish was likewise important for showing historical hunting practices and the connections between animal species. This connection is also recognised on turtle shell masks, where chevron or crescent-shaped etchings that are packed with lime reflect the sucker-pads of the suckerfish.³¹ The Erub *le op* mask that featured in the exhibit shows this patterning on the narrow panels of turtle shell on either side of the face. In curating this exhibition, I also wanted to include contemporary material.

As such, *Muieaw Minarr*, made by Badu artist George Nona in 2011, was loaned to show beside the Erub *le op* turtle shell mask (Figure 1). The left side of *Muieaw Minarr* is the *dari/dhoeri* (feather and cane headdress), used generally to symbolise the Torres Strait, while the right half of the mask is made of turtle shell.

The second event that informed this research was held in March 2015, when I performed in The Living Room Theatre production of *She (Still) Cries at Night*. The show began on a University of Sydney street and ended in the Macleay Museum, the audience squeezing in around the cabinets housing the 'Islanders and Turtle' exhibit. The performance brought together musicians, emergency nurses and schoolgirls who—along with several actors—animated the awe and gloom of a script I wrote and narrated about the plight of the green turtle in the northern Great Barrier Reef. The production raised issues of plastic and ghost net pollution, and the anticipated threat that rising sea levels and extreme weather events posed to the future of turtle in the Torres Strait. I also shared with the audience something of the long connection Islanders had and continue to have with turtle. There, next to the cabinet that held a large taxidermy green turtle alongside a tiny hatchling, my narrative braided Islanders' historical practices with the contemporary concerns of endangered species conservation.

Condensed as they were, the 'Islanders and Turtle' exhibit and the performance of *She (Still) Cries at Night* could only hint at the breadth and depth of the Islander relationship with marine turtle. As with Alick Tipoti's actions to introduce himself to the *kodal krar* and my own performance of history with and around the masks, performance remains key to how Islanders narrate our stories.

Structure of the Book

While the turtle shell masks are the key historical sources for what is to follow, textual records were crucial for discerning the pre-colonial significance of the masks to Torres Strait people. These include the logs and journals from British naval and colonial rescue voyages, popular accounts of the time, and ethnographic descriptions and stories of Islanders as recorded by AC Haddon in the late-nineteenth century and Margaret Lawrie in the 1960s and 1970s. The stories are particularly important. They were transmitted from generation to generation, to teach histories of place and place-making, to explain the movement of people, things, ideas and practices, and to eulogise the actions of ancestral spirits and culture heroes. They continue to circulate as part of the body of oral histories that store knowledge of the past and foreshadow the outcomes of taking, or not taking, certain actions. Through my use and retelling of these stories, I re-place the turtle shell masks within an Islander's sense of history, directed through key Islander forms of historical narrative that include story-telling and performance.

Chapter 1 introduces readers to the Islander world of marine turtles, exploring its ubiquity and deep value in the lives of Islanders. Chapter 2 focuses on the arrival of Europeans to the region and how the materials and ideas they brought with them forever altered the material and spiritual lives of Islanders. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 focus on the biography and removal of six masks. The first, as discussed in Chapter 3, was stolen from the central island of Auridh in 1836 and is implicated in a shipwreck, murder and the rescue of two young survivors who had been cared for by a Meriam *le* family. Chapter 4 presents a culturally contextualised object analysis of four turtle shell masks: three taken from Mabuyag and one collected from Tudu in the late-nineteenth century. Chapter 5 retells the story of culture heroes Bomai and Malo and the replica masks that Meriam elder men were cajoled into creating from cardboard. Chapter 6 reflects on how the turtle shell masks of old have inspired new generations of mask-makers and artists to produce exceptional works in turtle shell and other materials. The book ends with an epilogue that captures some of my own journey of learning about turtles and turtle shell masks, and of the role of turtle in mediating Islanders' physical and spiritual engagements with the sea, the land and the sky, with each other and with life and death. While the book is predominantly about masks made from the carapace of turtles in the Torres Strait, it also tells of the enduring history of cultural practices that did not die out when Islanders were colonised.

Use of Language

Throughout the book, I use non-English words deriving from Torres Strait languages. Sometimes these words are followed by (W) or (E). This indicates that the word is from the western Torres Strait language of Kala Lagaw Ya or from the eastern Torres Strait language of Meriam Mir. The style of orthography follows that used by AC Haddon, which he adopted from London Missionary Society translations. Islander linguists Cygnet Repu and Benny Mabo have reviewed the definitions in the general glossary as well as the word lists related to turtle.

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