

Introduction

The significance of the Torres Strait Collection

Torres Strait Islanders made an important mark on Australian cultural, social and legal history. In 1992, the High Court of Australia recognized that Mer (Murray Island) people had owned their land prior to annexation by Queensland, thereby establishing the legal fact of native title in Australia. This legal fact has had far-reaching implications for re-defining the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. This recognition of land title, known as the Mabo Case, however, had not sprung up in a vacuum; it grew in a specific social and political context. The Mer (Murray Island) community nurtured a strong sense of identity and, through self-government in early colonial times, acquired experience in political activism. Through western education, they developed skills and aspirations that made the successful land claim possible (Sharp, 1993, 1996), although the Islanders' legacy is much wider in the rich spectrum of Australia's cultural diversity.

Through a combination of factors, Torres Strait Islanders experienced the colonial impact differently to other indigenous peoples in Australia. Most importantly, they were never, by and large, forcibly removed from the islands. This contributed hugely to their successful transition from European contact to colonial realities. In spite of many adversities brought about by colonialism, some Islanders succeeded in maintaining their language, and many maintained their culture and identity. Such success must have its roots in the geographical, historical and political circumstances of contact and early colonial times; but these circumstances also formed a large part of their cultural condition. This cultural condition must be explored, to better understand the Islanders themselves and their artefacts. The artefacts collected from Islanders in the early colonial period were taken at face value and treated as such by the Australian Museum. These objects reflect, however, extraordinary events in the Islanders history and when considered in such historical and cultural contexts, are far more revealing.

This study highlights the need for more comprehensive research into museum collections. Such research fosters not only better understanding of indigenous cultures but uncovers cultural exchange and dialogue between Western tradition and the variety of indigenous views and experiences. The Torres Strait collection held at the Australian Museum is significant in many respects. Most importantly, however, it demonstrates that there is nothing self evident and obvious about the culture it reflects. A collection of objects cannot be taken at face value, silently implying that it represents an indigenous culture in its positivist, optimistic, "matter of fact" manner. In the post-modern era of Western scientific endeavour it must be at least acknowledged that there are multiple meanings and interpretations embedded in culture. Following this thought, the main thesis of the current study is that a large part of the Torres Strait collection held at the Australian Museum demonstrates a re-interpretation of Islanders' culture, by the Islanders themselves, for Westerners, as well as re-invention of the post-contact cultural traditions (Herle & Philp, 2000:157).