

**Report on the Cultural Significance of Torres Strait Islander Ancestral Remains
Held By the British Museum**

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Executive Summary

1. In 1888 the marine biologist Alfred Cort Haddon obtained two skulls from the islands of Naghir (Near Western cluster) and Mer (Eastern Islands cluster). These skulls are the subject of this Report.
2. Haddon's interest in skulls was driven by evolutionist inspired ideas regarding races and peoples.
3. At the time Haddon received these skulls, skulls were used and traded by Islanders between each other and Papuans to the north.
4. Skulls were two different types of media; one being communication and the other representation. Depending on whether they were the skulls of family or an enemy killed in battle they were used for divination, trade and exchange, memorial portraiture, personal, clan and family status enhancement, improvement of masculine qualities, and conferral of ancestral beneficence on descendants.
5. Skulls gained these uses and capacities as a consequence of mortuary rituals that took place over a few months that were largely concerned with recreating a new person of a deceased person. During the rituals the skull was cleaned and decorated to mimic the deceased person's face.
6. None of the above capacities and uses of skulls are in contemporary operation.
7. Changes brought about through colonialism, including adoption of Christianity, legislation of dead body laws, and development of public cemeteries contributed to the decline of interest in skulls.
8. Contemporary mortuary rituals are similarly concerned with the recreation of a new person after death but the head of the deceased plays no part in any of the rituals.
9. Skulls have symbolic influence in contemporary Islander art.
10. The presence of the skulls in the in the British Museum would be a reminder to Torres Strait Islanders that they were once colonised subjects.
11. Torres Strait Islanders are likely to be concerned about the skulls continued location in the Museum for at least three reasons: they have not received a Christian burial; they are out-of-place; they are not anyplace where their descendants can easily communicate with them.
12. While skull-divination plays no part in contemporary Islander relationships with their deceased, the skulls of ancestors still have the power to mediate between living people (such as between Islanders, Museum staff and Australian government officials) and between local organisations and institutions (such as between the Torres Strait Islander Repatriation Working Group, the British Museum and Australian Commonwealth Government).
13. The request for the repatriation of the two skulls can be seen as part of the larger process of decolonisation and Torres Strait Islander autonomy.
14. Islanders would no doubt regard their return as a gesture of respect and recognition of equality on the part of the British Museum towards all Torres Strait Islanders,

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Report Background

On 29 July, 2011 Mr Andrew Burnett, Deputy Director of the British Museum wrote to me by email asking if I would write a report for the Museum on the cultural significance of two skulls held by the Museum, provenanced from the Torres Strait by Alfred Cort Haddon in 1888. Haddon was in Torres Strait at this time to study coral reefs and marine zoology and while there he became interested in the society and culture of Torres Strait Islanders. He became an avid collector of local material objects, including the two skulls. The two skulls are the subject of a repatriation claim made by Torres Strait Islanders. After email correspondence it was made clear that the Museum sought opinion on two issues:

- a) the current cultural significance of the remains Torres Strait Islanders are claiming, and,
- b) whether this significance is different to the significance the remains might have held in the 19th century for Islanders.

This following is my report on the cultural significance of the remains. It is divided into two sections. The first section deals with the significance of the remains at the time Haddon procured the skulls, and the second section deals with their current significance and the relationships there might be between earlier and contemporary significances.

Throughout I have made reference to two Torres Strait Islander languages. They are *Kalaw Lagaw Ya* (KLY) and its four dialectical variants and *Meriam Mir* (MM). At the time Haddon was in Torres Strait *Kala Lagaw Ya* was predominantly spoken by western and central Torres Strait Islanders and *Meriam Mir* by eastern Torres Strait Islanders. On some Islands both of these languages have been replaced by Brokan, a English-based Torres Strait Creole language. There is no agreed orthography for these languages so I have chosen an orthography developed around the late 1970s by linguistics students from the top Western island group.

Section One

Overview of Torres Strait Islander Use and Beliefs around Skulls

In order to understand what place skulls have had and now have in Islanders beliefs and practices it is important to recognise that at the time Haddon encountered Islanders skulls held more than one set of meanings or uses for them. Depending on their status and intended usage Torres Strait Islanders referred to skulls in a variety of ways. Common terms used to refer to skulls were *kuik* (KLY) and *kerem lid* (head bone, MM). *Kuik* is still used by speakers of *Kalaw Lagaw Ya* but I am unsure of whether contemporary speakers of *Meriam Mir* speak of skulls as *kerem lid*. *Kalaw Lagaw Ya* speakers talked of decorated skulls as *natiam* and *Meriam Mir* speakers called their divinatory skulls *lamar marik* (terms taken from Ray 1907 dictionaries). If we take Haddon's many descriptions of what was expected of skulls and what they were used for it might seem that Islanders held contradictory views about skulls. At some points they were treated as intimate mementos, at other points traded, at other points they were used as divinatory objects, at other points hoarded, at other points they seem to be iconically related to the person of the deceased, at other points indexically related. There doesn't seem to be a clear sense of what skulls were because their use, value and significance seemed to shift around. Much of what Islanders were doing with skulls makes sense though if we understand Islanders sense of what a person was, *after death*.

Across the two language groups of Torres Strait, mortuary rituals took place over a few months and what emerges in Haddon's accounts is that they were largely concerned with recreating a new person of the now deceased. It seems that at death the obligations and responsibilities that were at the heart of kin-relationships were annulled and the person of the deceased had to be recreated through ritual in such a way that they held similar existential integrity as the living. Early on, this new person, referred to as *mari* (KLY), often translated in English as 'spirit', was an ambiguous entity, unknown to kin, unclear as to their intentions towards others, potentially threatening and needing release from their physical body and care as to their personal development. After going through the necessary mortuary rituals *mari* became *markay* (KLY), an entity that was treated for all intents and purposes as a person, albeit of a different existential quality to the living. The details of the mortuary rituals indicate that the critically important facilitation of the change from *mari* to *markay* also created new relationships between living Islanders and *markay*. Much as living Torres Strait Islander persons were created across a lifetime through relationships with others, *markay* Torres Strait Islanders were created anew through their ritualistic shepherding by living kin into new relationships with others and new capacities to express independent will and intent.

The treatment of skulls mirrored these changes in the existential status of the deceased and their efficacy derived from their iconic or indexical connection to their *markay*, an independent intentional person whose proximity to other entities

and forces in the spirit world were regarded as granting them special insight into local affairs. The materiality of skulls link them to their *markay* and to this spirit world more generally, but there is no evidence that *markay* were bound to the location of their skull. It seems that trading a skull would not have diminished that locative flexibility. *Markay* are relatives properly dealt with, with independent existences of their own. As for relationships between living persons, relationships between *markay* and living persons were open to ongoing interpretation and evaluation. If we take this interpretation to have merit then we can understand why Islanders would feel comfortable trading skulls and why Islanders felt comfortable (if Haddon's written accounts are accurate) in allowing Haddon to purchase the skulls that are currently in the Christy Collection. Not all skulls held the same value. The Badu Island artist Dennis Nona mentions how skulls were valued; the skulls of close family members and powerful enemies were kept, the skulls of less important relations exchanged (Nona 2009). In a similar manner to relationships formed through marriage, adoption or fosterage (as common practices now as in the late 19th century), skull trade was a relational activity that strengthened relationships between trade/exchange partners. Creating relationships through skull trade was probably an important factor in Islanders trading skulls to Haddon. We do not have a picture of exactly how Islanders would have viewed Haddon *in situ*, but by 1888 the colonial order was well on the way to being established and he was likely viewed as part of that order. Trading skulls to him was likely as much an issue of maintaining relations with a potentially powerful white man, as it was a matter of personal aggrandisement.

Another way to understand what skulls were for Islanders is to think of them as a two different types of media; one being communication and the other representation. Where they were treated as devices for communication between two different sorts of persons, which we might otherwise call the living and the dead, they gave insight into who caused illness, hurt or death in the living and could also anticipate future events. As skulls were connected to individuals they were also used to confer power on their descendants by being placed around their houses or, if they were successful sea-hunters, by being placed next to piles of dugong and turtle bones. Alternatively, they could be collected and placed in and around what Haddon called 'skull-houses or 'head-houses' (Haddon 1901, 98; 1904, 39, 306, 307) that look like they may have been organised along clan or moiety principles.

When a deceased person had gone through the necessary mortuary rituals a skull could be made into the likeness of the person in life. Haddon calls these representations 'mementos', and they can be thought of as portraits, an interpretation that gains weight when Islanders compared decorated skulls with photographs. When Haddon returned to Torres Strait in 1898, the relationship between photos and skulls was remarked on by Waria, a Mabuyag Islander, when he stated that skulls were "all same photograph", a

reference to how Islanders had decorated skulls to remind them of their deceased loved ones, much as white people had photos to remind them (Haddon, Seligman and Wilkin 1904: 364).

Historical Background

Registration material accompanying the two skulls states that Haddon procured them during his visit to Torres Strait in 1888 and handed them to the British Museum in 1889 where they currently form part of the Christy Collection.

At the time Haddon arrived in Torres Strait, first in 1888 and then in 1898, the region was undergoing profound change. Broadly speaking, three interlocking colonial processes were underway. These were the development of a dive-based marine industry, Christianity and colonial government. From the earliest part of the 19th century diving boats were drawn to the region from parts of the Pacific in search of *bêche-de-mer* and pearls. In the first half of the century there were few boats and they had sporadic, rather than region wide, impact on the societies of the region. From the 1860s onwards the numbers of boats increased, being crewed largely by Pacific Islander men and then increasingly by Torres Strait Islander men from the eastern, central and southern parts of the Strait. In 1871 Protestant Christianity arrived, carried by the London Missionary Society, which had an immediate and lasting impact. In 1770 Captain James Cook claimed eastern Australia for the British Crown although it was not until 1864 that an administrative outpost was established to attend to the region. In 1872, and then again in 1879, successive parts of Torres Strait were annexed to Queensland, then a British colony. In brief, from the 1860s dive boats from the Pacific, and Australian government, established themselves and from 1871 onwards Christianity became a pervasive religious influence.

These processes interacted with complex regional dynamics in ways that are still being debated today. Islanders understood themselves to belong to clusters of Island groups and for some purposes distinguished themselves from Aborigines to the south and Papuans to the north. However, longstanding relationships established through migration, trade, war, and marriage bound these three broad groups together beyond identity categories. The two skulls come from two different language communities in the Strait. Naghir was populated by speakers of *Kalaw Lagaw Ya*, a language that linguists regard as belonging to both the Australian Pama-Nyungan and Papuan language families, while Mer, (referred to as 'Murray Island' in the Cambridge Expedition volumes) was populated by speakers of *Meriam Mir*, a language linguists group with the Papuan Eastern Trans-Fly family (Mitchell 1995; Dixon 2002; Ross 2005).

Haddon's interest in skulls came from two sources; Islanders themselves and general European interest in Islanders own skull practices as indicative of ideas of savagery, race and primitivism that were extant at the time (Beckett, 1998, 24; Nakata 2007).

In a play on words indicating that he was aware that the two were not mutually exclusive, Haddon titles his memoir describing his research trips to Torres Strait and Sarawak, *Head-hunters Black White and Brown* (1901). The association of European interest with Indigenous practices towards the heads of the deceased continued into Quiggin's biography of Haddon, published in 1942 and titled *Haddon, the headhunter: a short sketch of the life of A. C. Haddon*.

These literary puns highlight two important issues when evaluating early European reports and interpretations of Islander beliefs and practices around skulls; understanding European ideas about social and racial development and understanding how these skulls would be used in European representations of Islanders to other Europeans. The Torres Strait Islander historian Martin Nakata (2007, 117-120) notes that Haddon's interest in skulls was framed in terms of what religious, and hence moral, system could be imputed from Islanders beliefs about heads. To Haddon, skulls were indicative of ancestor, or hero, worship, itself interpreted as a lesser religious sensibility than European adherence to a single God. This led Haddon to speculate that a singular moral code that emanated from a source higher than oneself or the social group was absent for Islanders. Not only were Europeans fascinated by Islander beliefs and practices but they more often than not interpreted Islanders procurement of skulls through fighting as indicative of high levels of violence, and then attributing to Islanders a lack of appropriate emotion and reverence for where it appeared Islanders were prepared to trade or exchange the heads of deceased relations. The issue this raises, as argued by the historian Steve Mullins, is whether or not European desire to buy heads actually initiated trade in heads, leading to subsequent negative characterisations of Islanders dealings with remains of the dead (Mullins 1994, 28-29).

Notwithstanding these concerns there is still much that can be said about skulls and their significance to Islanders. On death heads were separated from their bodies and then were available to be used for a variety of purposes. These were many, including enhancing male status, divination, a device for communicating with the dead, as portraiture, and as an element in individual and group aggrandisement. The literature indicates that skulls were grouped into two categories; those of enemies and those of kin. Warfare between Islanders and between Islanders and Papuans was frequent and the heads of foes added status to a warrior who had collected them. Haddon describes the collecting of heads between northwest Islanders and Papuans as the main purpose of raiding in that region of Torres Strait (Haddon 1904, 298). He cites the writings of W. Wyatt Gill (Gill 1876), a missionary who was instrumental in establishing Christianity in Torres Strait who observed that men of the southwestern New Guinea coast and upper Torres Strait region sought to accumulate heads through trade.

There is some argument as to whether Islanders actually engaged in the trade of heads, or at least the extent to which they did. Mullins argues that anthropologists

have distorted the historical record when they claim that Islanders traded heads to others (Mullins 1994, 28). In this regard the most important source is from the missionaries W.H. MacFarlane and Gill and Haddon's reliance on their observations about skull trade. Thirty-four years after he first made that reliance, Haddon was to criticise Gill for being lax with his ethnographic observations (Haddon 1904, 3; Haddon 1935, xi). However, it is worth noting that Haddon's criticisms did not contain a withdrawal of his support for Gill's observation about skull trade, if we can take his silence as such an indication.

Mullins further draws a distinction between trade, the selling or bartering of heads to a potentially wide array of others, and exchange, an activity limited to people with close ties to one another (Mullins 1994, 27). It is a distinction the Torres Strait Islander artist Dennis Nona also maintains and explores in his some of his etchings and sculptures (Nona 2009). This distinction is important to the extent that it allows Mullins to argue that European barter for skulls was interpreted as evidence of how common trade in skulls was between Islanders, rather than evidence of Europeans own interest in skulls, primitiveness and the like. I interpret Mullins concern in two ways; one is to establish exactly what the historical record allows one to say and the second is to correct misperceptions about Islanders as being excessively violent and morbid in their preoccupation with heads.

I do not propose to adjudicate this debate here but I mention it because it draws attention to understanding what kinds of relationships were being entered into by Islanders when they kept and appropriated heads and then exchanged them. The skulls of slain enemies were more than trophies of war. The keeping of skulls was limited to men and the rituals surrounding their separation from bodies mentions how important it was for men to consume the person that the head was part of. When Haddon writes of this he says that it is to develop 'manly qualities', particularly in young warriors (Haddon 1904, 305). This was done by separating the head; by eating specific parts of the face; by appropriating their name (the name of a man killed in battle could be used by the victor for his own or kin-related children); and by decorating the skull. The eating of parts of the face should be seen in the context of a wider system of exchange, in which the fluids of the body (such as during sex, or during the decomposition of a corpse) were regarded as containing something of the person they issued from so that their consumption was an act of incorporation and appropriation. Anthropologists (Knauff 1993, 173; Harrison 2002, 221-22) have noted that in the northern Torres Strait - Oriomo Bituri region of the Western Province parts of bodies, and representations of persons, are fused with the person they are associated with and to physically assimilate others is to incorporate them into the appropriating person. I have written elsewhere that these acts for men are parturitive, that is they help 'make' men anew and in the ongoing making of men, skull acquisition was important (Davis 2004, 39).

Mortuary Rituals

The skulls of kin were the other major category of skulls that were dealt with by Islanders. At death a complex series of mortuary rituals were enacted, some of which included the separation of the head from the body. Anthropologists tend to treat these rituals as largely being concerned with assuring the right passage of the spirit away from the formerly living person and their kin to a place or state that is separate and distinct to the world of the living. Haddon's accounts indicate that the mortuary rituals are doing something more than this and some explanation of these rituals is needed in order to make sense of Islanders focus on heads in funerals.

Haddon often refers to a particular set of mortuary rituals in his publications, which comes from an explanation provided to him in 1888 on Naghir (Haddon 1893, 154-156; Haddon 1904, 258; Haddon 1935, 69). Haddon seems to have arrived on Naghir with the explicit wish to gather a skull as he mentions a Dr Coppinger having collected two on a previous occasion (cf, Nakata 2007, 117-120). Haddon's repetition of this account across his publications seemed to have been verified in his attendance at parts of other mortuary rituals and other accounts by Islanders and so I will reproduce it here.

Haddon writes that shortly after death the people of Naghir placed the corpse on a wooden or bamboo frame wrapped or laid on a mat. When decomposition was evident, the body was buried and, depending on the age of the deceased, the head removed and decorated. Haddon says that the head of an old person went into the ground with the body while the head of a young person was kept 'as a memento' (Haddon 1893, 155). They thoroughly cleansed the skull, applied beeswax, wood, calico, beads, and pearlshell and then painted parts of it red. The intent of this decoration can be gleaned when Haddon says that after the necessary rituals and feasts were held for the deceased person the decorated skull became part of the family sleeping arrangements, being kept in a basket by a pillow.

Haddon bases his description of Naghir ritual treatment of the dead on explanations provided to him by a man named [REDACTED], the uncle of a deceased young unmarried man named [REDACTED]. Haddon says that he asked his informant [REDACTED] if he could get him a skull, [REDACTED] put him on to [REDACTED] who brought out the skull of [REDACTED]. Haddon bought [REDACTED]'s skull from [REDACTED] (who was related to [REDACTED]) for a tomahawk and three fathoms (about 5.5 metres) of calico-print. This is one of the skulls that Haddon lodged in the Christy Collection. From [REDACTED], and another man named [REDACTED], Haddon learns three important points about skulls that he sees repeated in similar ways wherever he encounters them in Torres Strait. One is that they were more than keepsakes, and were treated with great care and intimacy, the second is that a deceased person went through a series of ceremonially marked changes in their spiritual status of which the skull plays an important part, and the third point is that decorated skulls were efficacious.

The Naghir account is similar to other descriptions relating to other island communities in Torres Strait. Two chapters were exclusively devoted to funeral rituals in the Expedition volumes. One covering Western islands (Haddon 1904 248-262), the other covering Eastern islands (Myers and Haddon 1908, 126-162). There were numerous other places in the volumes that funerals and skulls were mentioned and Haddon also wrote about them in other publications. When taken together a basic threefold ritual mortuary structure, acknowledging variations, can be discerned across Torres Strait:

1. Body buried or put on a corpse platform known as *sara* (KLY), *paier* (MM). Depending on the island there may be extensive accompanying ritual performances.
2. Three days later the body was exhumed or taken from the platform. At exhumation or removal from the platform the body was ritually treated and *mari* was released. Sometimes the body was prepared for mummification or buried around the house of close kin, and the skull decorated.
3. Three months later a large dance and feast occurred with many kin participating where *mari* became *markay* and the skull was slept with or kept close to the family

While it is customary to interpret *mari* as the spirit of a deceased person who is insufficiently separated from the living (Beckett 1989: 5; Fitzpatrick-Nietschmann 1980), a more complete understanding would interpret *mari* as the person of the deceased whose existential state has placed them in an uncertain set of relationships. It seems that the point of many of the rituals surrounding the dead is to re-establish these relationships and so provide existential certainty to the new person.

I understand *markay* to be the term that applies to the person categorically referred to as *mari* after that person has gone through the appropriate rituals that re-establish their existential integrity and relationships to others. We can see this in the Naghir account of the final death-dance ritual where particular male and female kin mimic *markay*, then a person dressed as *mari* appears, to meet them. A feast ensues, the skull is given pride of place, then it goes to immediate family who then sleep with it. At this point the deceased is no longer referred to as *mari* but as *markay*, a re-established person, indexed by the skull being reincorporated into the family hearth. Depending on how living kin feel about their relationship to their kin-*markay*, they may choose to keep the skull around the domicile, trade it, or put it alongside the skulls of other kin in skull-houses. Haddon quotes somebody, presumably [REDACTED], as saying the point of this dance and feast was to “made him merkai” (*markay* – KLY, Haddon 1893, 155).

Divination

Haddon writes that divination was extremely common and that relatives' skulls were preferred over strangers (Haddon 1904, 362). After the skull was properly prepared it would be spoken to, then slept with so that the skull could communicate to the sleeper in their dreams. Divination-skulls were also placed on the prow of sailing canoes. On Mer (Murray Island), in eastern Torres Strait, clan or ritual seniority dictated the use of special divination skulls called *lamar-marik* ('ghost-sends' MM, Haddon 1908, 226-269)

Skull-Houses

In volume 5 of the Expedition volumes, the volume devoted to a broad overview of the Western Islands, Haddon makes mention of skull houses (Haddon 1904, 306, 309, 314). He does not mention these in volume 6 devoted to the Eastern Islands. It seems that skull houses were constructions that were associated with clans or moieties. Skulls of group members were kept there as well as the prepared skulls of enemies and they were male-only spaces. Skull-houses were not only an accumulation of possible divinatory skulls but a monument to the efficacy of the group.

Section Two

Current Significance of Torres Strait Islander Skulls

The mortuary rituals that Haddon described at the turn of the 19th century no longer exist due to a combination of disposal of dead body laws with the development of public cemeteries and Christian burial practices. Around the turn of the 20th century cemeteries started to be used to bury the dead and the keeping of skulls stopped altogether. Contemporary mortuary rituals tend to take place over a number of years. The initial burial takes place soon after death, and then around three years later, sometimes longer, a second ceremony called the Tombstone Unveiling takes place. Tombstone Unveilings tend to involve many dozens of people, commonly over 100, and are very costly. The family of the deceased need time to save for tombstones, accompanying stonemason work and associated feasting and hosting costs, and this can take as long as a decade. In the past thirty years, as Tombstone Unveilings have become large social events, the surface of the tombstones have become important sites for Islanders to express aspects of their history and identity with epigraphs running to many hundreds of words (Davis 2008).

According to Sharp (1993, 113-115) Tombstone Unveilings became common around the 1930s in Torres Strait. While the handling of the body, the cleansing and decoration of the skull or mummification no longer plays any part in contemporary rituals, there are nevertheless many similarities between contemporary mortuary rituals, attitudes, expectations and relationships with the dead, and, in rare instances, keeping the dead person in close proximity to living kin. The division of ritual labour, shepherding of the spirit of the deceased away from the living, and feasting and singing are still important aspects of contemporary rituals (Nietschmann 1980).

At present, most Torres Strait Islanders reside outside of Torres Strait on the Australian mainland. According to the 2006 Census, 53, 300 persons identified as Torres Strait Islander. Of these 7, 995 live in Torres Strait (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008, 162). As these numbers make clear the ratio of mainland Islanders to Islanders living in Torres Strait is around 6:1. While there has been no systematic study done of the mortuary rituals of mainland Islanders, Beckett maintains that Tombstone Unveilings are likely performed in urban centres throughout Australia (Beckett 1989: 4). Some support for this claim is found in Youtube clips of parts of Tombstone Unveilings that took place in Brisbane and Cairns in the last decade (xtassy1 2011; tmosby 2011). I am also aware that in the major urban centres of Queensland, at least, Tombstone Unveilings are common.

Like earlier mortuary rituals, the transition from *mari* to *markay* is the central concern of the contemporary rituals. In the earlier rituals the body was sometimes placed on a corpse platform known as *sara* or *paier*. In contemporary rituals

Islanders build a small wooden house over the grave known by the same name or *shadehouse* in Brokan. Shadehouses are temporary dwellings for the dead indicating that the final rituals have yet to take place and that *mari* has yet to transition to *markay*. Unlike the earlier rituals there is no exhumation and ritual treatment of the body or head. The Tombstone Unveiling is the secondary burial and *marigetel* play a similar managerial role as they did in the earlier rituals, making sure it is widely publicised, appropriate people are notified, food is arranged and making sure that ritual responsibilities are properly organised.

While skulls are no longer kept close to living kin or treated as a divinatory objects contemporary Islanders relate to their kin-dead in similar ways to their 19th century ancestors. Most Islander dead are buried in cemeteries. Occasionally, in Torres Strait, the grave will be in the grounds of the house of the spouse of the deceased. In a similar manner to 19th century practices of keeping skulls around the domicile the dead person is kept physically close to family. Also, it is common practice to consult with kin-dead at their grave. Sometimes deceased kin are beseeched to intervene on behalf of the living to God, who they are felt to be closer to (Davis 2008, 185). Sometimes blessing in a dugong or turtle hunt is sought. When Islanders in Torres Strait leave their island for an extended period or for an important event the dead may be spoken to at their grave, where they are informed of their impending absence.

On those rare occasions when the skulls of ancestors still exist, or are thought to still exist, their influence can still be strongly felt. In 1992 I was part of a group, made of up of about a dozen Saibai Islanders, that journeyed across Saibai Island to a remote uninhabited area in search of a skull that was said to sit on the ground. This skull belonged to a man named Maigi who lived around the turn of the 20th century who, it is said, willingly received a death-blow so that a feud that he was thought to have started, would end. The feud started because the recipient of a cut of dugong meat that Magi gave this person felt aggrieved at the quality of the meat. The meat came from a part of the dugong that the recipient regarded as of poor quality and so the recipient felt Magai did not hold him in sufficient esteem. Fighting ensued between kin and Maigi felt that as he had started the feud it fell to him to resolve it. After declaring that he was prepared to die to end the feud he told those around him that he wanted his head to sit on the ground as a visible reminder of how he had to die to resolve the problem of estranged kin. There is a parallel in the way Maigi died and one of the uses of skulls. As I have already indicated, skulls could mediate relationships between trade and exchange partners. Maigi's death, and the public display of his skull, also mediated relationships; in Maigi's case estranged ones. Saibai Islanders talked of his skull in a way others might describe a religious statue or painting as indicating a moral or spiritual virtue. Maigi allowed himself to be killed in order to bring about peace and his skull was meant to be a permanent reminder of the sacrifice that is sometimes needed to bring about radical change.

We did not find Maigi's skull on that trip but Maigi and his fate is never far from conversations and actions where rifts between people and parties have occurred. Even if Maigi's skull has perished, the memory of the skull itself is regarded as an exceptionally powerful symbol of the danger of feuding and the perils of disagreement. In a sense Maigi's skull is part of a moral economy of ideal sociality and indicates how skulls, including the ones in the Christy Collection (otherwise they would not be the subject of an Islander initiated repatriation claim), can continue to hold powerful meaning to current social relationships.

Skulls in Art

In recent years the Badu Island artist Denis Nona has used skulls as an important motif in his etchings and sculptures. In 2007 Nona won the prestigious Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award. In 2009 and 2010 a traveling exhibition of Nona's work titled *Muluka Pyban* (Passing Down) was exhibited throughout Australia. Skulls were featured in several works and in the accompanying catalogue Nona always mentions how skulls, particularly those taken from enemies slain in battle, were traded to Papuans to the north. He also mentions that the skulls of parents and revered warriors were not traded, being too valuable to the owner. It is possible, I think, to see contemporary significance in Nona's skull works. Nona's repeated claim about the importance of skulls in trade points to how important relationships between Islanders and Papuans were, and still are (Nona 2009). At the time skulls were traded travel was unrestricted throughout the Torres Strait - Oriomo Bituri region of the Western Province. This unrestricted movement is no longer the case as an international treaty between Australia and PNG governs movement and trade in this region (Torres Strait Treaty). In recent years relationships between Islanders and Papua New Guineans in this border region have become particularly complicated and tense, leading to a Commonwealth Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee Inquiry into 'The Torres Strait: Bridge and Border' (2010). In this highly charged context Nona's skull-works and his emphasis on older importance of skulls in facilitating relationships can be interpreted as recognition of the importance of Papuan-Islander relationships.

Ancestor's Skulls in Overseas Collections

In this report I have suggested that Torres Strait Islanders 19th trade and exchange of skulls to Westerners took place within already existing local exchange systems. To Islanders skulls were relational and efficacious objects. The skulls of important kin were kept close to the domicile of a person. Less important kin and others, such as enemies killed in battle, might be hoarded in group specific skull houses or become valuable trade items. In all cases we can see that skulls enabled relationships. When used as divinatory media they allowed the dead and the living to communicate; when used as trade items they were a vital currency in developing trade relationships. The trade of the two skulls in the Christy Collection took place within this environment and was likely a way of fostering relationships with an

influential British man perceived to be part of, or associated with, the developing colonial order in Torres Strait. There is no suggestion of coercion in Haddon's accounts of the circumstances of this trade but we can speculate that Haddon was perceived as an influential white man. It would not be a stretch to claim that few Europeans were in Torres Strait at in the late 1880s for reasons of curiosity, as Haddon was, however scientific he regarded his own interests.

The colonial circumstances that informed those early skull-transactions are no longer. In order to get purchase on the current significance of museum-held skulls for Islanders it is important to dig more deeply into colonisation in Torres Strait. The experience and actuality of colonisation has been far more entangled than a simple matter of the powerless overtaken by the powerful. From the moment colonial institutions and influences impacted on Torres Strait Islanders in the mid 19th century, Islanders had engaged in active processes of accommodation and resistance. Islander men had joined the dive boats as crew so much so that Islands were bereft of working-age men for several months of the year. Some migrating Pacific Islanders stayed in Torres Strait and their influence was to have profound effects across all areas of Islander life. In 1900 the London Missionary Society handed over religious responsibilities to the Anglican Church and by the end of WW1 almost all clergy in Torres Strait were Islander. In parallel counter-colonising movements, by the end of the 1920s office bearers in the all-female church-affiliated organizations, The Mother's Union and The Girl's Friendly Society, were filled by Islander women. In 1901 the Queensland Government granted Torres Strait communities, excepting the main administrative and port town of Thursday Island, limited self-government powers.

I make this thumbnail sketch of early Islanders entanglements with colonialism to draw attention to how, only after fifty years of sustained colonialism, Islanders had counter-colonised many of the very institutions and ideologies that sought to control and manage their lives. In regards to Christianity, the mortuary rituals that Haddon described were not practised in the same way and an emphasis on the mediatory and divinatory qualities of skulls were no longer of importance. But the very institution that was so important to initiating these changes, the Church, was largely managed, at a local level at least, by Islanders. To extrapolate a larger point. Islanders have long had experience of dealing with imported institutions and their accompanying ideologies, in some cases making them their own. Beckett describes the many instances and occasions that Islanders have done so over the years (Beckett 1987). In my own experience of working with Islanders in regards to self-government and native title claims, this long experience always manifests as a part of a process of reclaiming whatever it is of their own that they do not have control over. The list is long in this regard and what follows is by no means exhaustive. In regards to government, in 1977 Islanders in Torres Strait established a representative statutory body covering the 15 inhabited islands called the Island Co-Ordinating Council that derived from Queensland legislation. In 2008 the Torres Strait Region

Council replaced this body. In 1994 Islanders in Torres Strait gained an additional form of self-government that derived from Commonwealth legislation called the Torres Strait Regional Authority. The ratification in 1985 of the Torres Strait Treaty made space for Islanders to negotiate with local and senior PNG and Australian government officials. In regards to Christianity, Islanders have been ministers and leaders of their own congregations, no matter the denomination, for the best part of the 20th century, and continuing this trend, in 1996 Islanders left the Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria *en masse* and in 1997 joined the Traditional Anglican Communion. In regards to ownership of lands and seas, some 20 years after the 1992 Mabo vs Queensland (No 2) decision was delivered in the Australian High Court in regards to Mer (Murray Island) native title has been recognised in all Island communities and the whole of the sea of the region¹. In research matters, protocols have been established that make clear the necessity of collaborative research with local communities (Jones and Barnett 2006). It is clear from these processes that Islanders have been moving from an ideology of accommodation to an ideology of autonomy, and this extends also to matters of heritage. The request for the repatriation of the two skulls can be seen as part of the larger process of decolonisation and autonomy.

When Islanders engage with institutions, they do so with the purpose of gaining rights to govern that which is important and valuable to them. In regards to the skulls held in the Christy Collection the question is, then, what is important about the skulls to Islanders now? They may well have been traded to Haddon in a transparent way but their meaning and value has changed. The short answer to the above question is that the skulls are a removed part of their heritage and part of the politics of autonomy is the gathering and control of heritage. The longer answer requires some unpacking.

The first point to make is that Haddon's account of how he came to get the skulls indicates that the trade was a personal transaction between himself, ██████████ and ██████████; it was not done between ██████████, ██████████ and Haddon as a proxy for the British Museum. It is hard to know what ██████████ and ██████████ would have done if they had known the skulls would have ended up in a collection, possibly used for research and to be publicly displayed. Indeed, it is not clear that Haddon bought the skulls with their eventual Museum deposit in mind. Nevertheless, the fact that they are in a Museum that validated much of British imperialism is a reminder to Islanders that a part of themselves is in the hands of those that played a large part in radically transforming and colonising them. I say 'part of themselves' because one of the skulls is named, a known ancestor of the claimants. The fact it is named makes it a social and genealogical entity. Even though one skull is not named, it is still an ancestor and still located in a genealogical web. These webs have four

¹ See the following weblink for details: http://www.nntt.gov.au/Applications-And-Determinations/Search-Determinations/Pages/QLD-Native_title_determination_summary-Torres_Strait_Regional_Sea_Claim.aspx

qualities that were either not present, or not as important, at the time they were received. Firstly, they have not received a Christian burial, secondly, they are out-of-place, thirdly, they are not anyplace where their descendants can easily communicate with them, and fourthly, that in repatriating human remains Islanders achieve equality, and potentially may form new social relationships, with the British Museum.

To return to the relationship between repatriation and decolonisation, there is perhaps no one moment that can be said to inaugurate a process of Islander decolonisation in Torres Strait, but the replacement in 1965 of the *Queensland Aboriginal Preservation and Protection Act 1939 (Qld)* with the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Act 1965 (Qld)* can be said to be one of the more important events in this history. The older Act gave the State government enormous powers over Queensland's Indigenous peoples, including in Torres Strait. Its abolishment opened up a substantive space for Torres Strait Islanders to develop their own political and identity concerns. Struggles over self-government, land and sea rights, and control over cultural heritage have been important components of this. In recent years Islanders have engaged in a sustained and difficult debate amongst themselves about their relationships to material culture objects and human remains taken from them in the 19th century and stored in European collections. These have taken at conferences, privately, on email listservers, Facebook, in documentary movies (Calvert 1997) and Yahoo Group Pages. Where these discussions have touched on material culture I have observed a range of opinions, from bringing them back to Australia, to keeping them where they are with the host institutions facilitating access to Islanders. Where discussions have touched on human remains I have only ever observed the single desire of return.

Concluding Remarks

The keeping of ancestors skulls for any reason is no longer practised by Islanders. The exact mortuary rituals surrounding the separation and preparation of skulls are also no longer extant. However, in contemporary mortuary rituals it is possible to see a similar structure to the older mortuary rituals, albeit taking place over a number of years rather than months. Contemporary mortuary rituals also have similar concerns about the successful shepherding and transformation of the spirit of the deceased into a new person.

The fact that skulls are no longer kept by Islanders means that they are no longer traded or exchanged. As obvious as this seems it hides an important point. Skulls divinatory qualities once mediated relationships between the living and the dead, and when they were traded or exchanged they also mediated relationships between the trade and exchange partners. While skull-divination plays no part in contemporary Islander relationships with their deceased, the skulls of ancestors still have the power to mediate between living people (such as between Islanders, Museum staff and Australian government officials) and between local organisations and institutions (such as between the Torres Strait Islander Repatriation Working Group, the British Museum and Australian Commonwealth Government).

As my recounting of a trip to view the skull of Maigi on Saibai Island indicates, the skulls of ancestors are of great importance to contemporary Islanders. They are social entities that compel descendants to reconsider their relationships to them in an era where Islanders are achieving autonomy and ownership of those things that were taken from them; the right to govern themselves, the right to be treated with as the owners of lands and seas and the right to be recognised as the custodians of their own heritage and research knowledge. The making of the claim for the two skulls is not just a means to the end of returning the remains of ancestors, it is the very process of that autonomy and ownership. Exchanging and trading skulls may once have been a way of forming relationships to others but to contemporary Islanders the presence of the skulls of kindred in overseas collections are a demeaning reminder of the evolutionarily informed social hierarchies and cultural imperialisms that once permeated their lives. Islanders would no doubt regard their return as a gesture of respect and recognition of equality on the part of the British Museum towards all Torres Strait Islanders.

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