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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO GELAM'S HOMELAND

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Much professional archaeological research around the world aims at aspects of history that are of international rather than of local significance, and text-based historical research has long been complicit in nation-building agendas. This paper introduces the present monograph by outlining why and how the authors of this volume have come to write a *local* history, with *local* issues in mind. It is the first professional and multi-disciplinary history to be written in book form for any single island in Torres Strait, with community history in mind. □ *Mua, Torres Strait, archaeology, historicism, local versus global, identity, oral traditions.*

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For the late *baba* Whap ('Gelam') Charlie, with many thanks for guidance.

The late *aka* Lizzie Nawia, for her inspiration and leadership.

And to all the Mualgal Elders who have impacted our lives.

This monograph is a joint effort between members of the Mualgal (Indigenous Mua Islanders) community on Mua island and researchers who have been working with us, in some cases since the 1980s, over many years. The editors are Louise Manas, appointed to be co-editor on behalf of the Mualgal, as determined by the Mualgal Elders and the Mualgal (Torres Strait Islanders) Corporation Committee; Bruno David from Monash University who co-ordinated the university side of this project on behalf of the Elders and Mualgal Corporation Committee; and Michael Quinnell on behalf of the Queensland Museum. The entire project was overseen by the Mualgal Elders and Corporation Committee, and at all times the research that has gone to producing this monograph has strictly followed community protocols, as guided by the Mualgal Elders and Corporation Committee, and the Kubin Community Council.

SETTING THE SCENE: SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND INSPIRATIONS

Across the world archaeology and history books abound. Those that employ professional

archaeological methods usually revolve around questions of broad interest and international applicability to specialists in those fields. On the other hand, history books that use texts rather than archaeology for information often target local history, but such books have tended to emerge in complicity with the nation-state to serve nation-building purposes. Recently, Australian historians have begun to call for transnational histories that transcend national boundaries and concerns. This is perhaps not too surprising given that funding for professional research usually needs to demonstrate broad applicability of results and international significance. Yet such approaches to history – whether text-based or archaeological – bring with them a tension: on the one hand, historical research is undertaken in specific places whose meaningfulness touches most immediately and significantly *local* communities, while on the other hand professional researchers typically work in those same places to generate more general statements or theories about geographically broader historical trends or processes. Such latter frameworks of research may not necessarily be – and often are not – of great interest to local communities. Rather, of

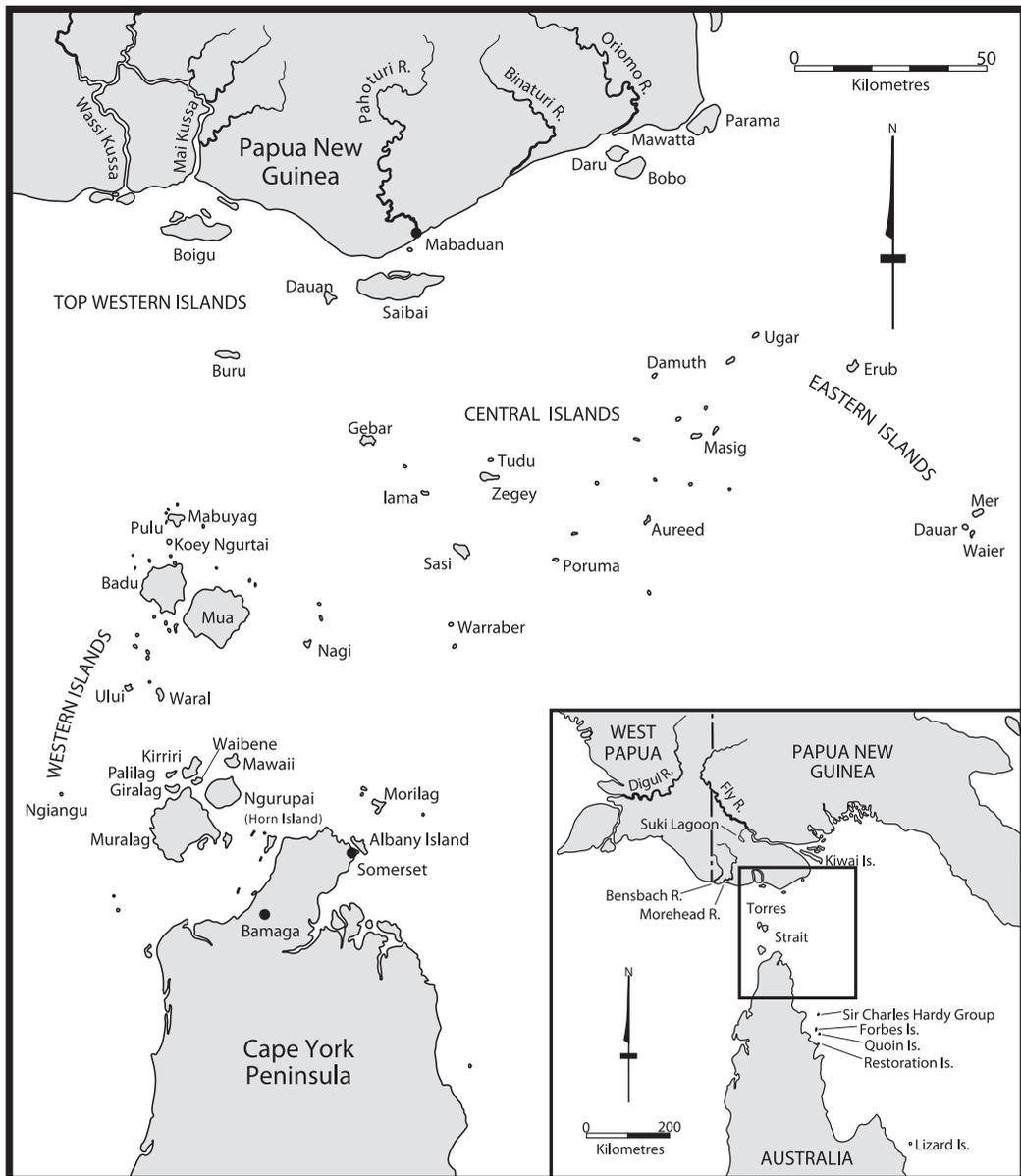


FIG. 1. Torres Strait, showing locations mentioned in this volume.

greater concern or curiosity are usually issues to do with one's own community history. The popular saying 'think globally, act locally' is in this context left wanting: here 'global history' does not simply take priority, for local histories, for their own sake, are often what is most meaningful for people trying to trace their own pasts. This is the approach we have taken in this volume: after

thousands of years of continuous local history, and more than 130 years of intensive interactions with Europeans – interactions that involved major cultural innovations and novel influences (including colonial processes) – many Mualgal and other Torres Strait Islanders have come to ask questions about their own pasts that are not so easy to answer. 'How long have we been here?'

local knowledge and the various specialist tools at our disposal.

HISTORY AND THE ANCESTORS

This monograph represents the fruits of such research. Bringing together a broad range of professional skills at the invitation of the Mualgal Corporation and the Kubin Community Council since 2000, the authors of this volume have been investigating the languages, oral traditions, published and unpublished historical records, archaeology, landscape history, and plant and animal life of Mua to enable a compilation of what is known of Mua's cultural and environmental history. Some of the individual authors – elderly Mualgal themselves – have lived on the island all their lives; others have worked on Mua, on and off, for some 30 years; for others yet research has only just begun. The information brought together in each chapter represents a wealth of knowledge greater than the work of any single author, for in all cases the outcome is the product of collaborations between individuals and groups from Mua working with historians and scientists, bringing a conjunction of perspectives that has enriched each of the book's chapters. Taken as a whole, the multi-disciplinary nature of this book is more than the sum of its parts, for it reveals the Mualgal landscape and history as the history of a place that is meaningful to the people who live there. This is not just an island with hills, plants and animals; it is the homeland of the people of Mua and of the ancestors who forever continue to be with us, spiritually and through the historical foundations they have laid for all future generations.

The knowledge compiled in this volume is a team achievement, one that would not have been possible without the kinds of collaboration – particularly between residents from Kubin, St Paul's and Mualgal living further afield and scientists – that make historical research so pleasant and worthwhile, always a special, communal endeavour. As the people of Mua well recognise, it is the team work between the different, clan-based families that has made this historical research possible, and such historical research is not just about the past, for it enables a revival or strengthening of community-based life styles founded on Mualgal historical practices and culture. In this sense this monograph, and the historical research that has gone into it, is a celebration of knowledge, of cultural survival, and of sharing. The title of this monograph reflects

such connections: Gelam was a legendary hero who during his travels across a wide stretch of Torres Strait seeded many islands with rich soils and plants, connecting each in a journey of discovery that gave birth to fertile histories forever onwards located in ancestral connections. And it is Mua, the island of Gelam's homeland, that represents this point of departure and connection: if history makes us who we are, it is incumbent on us all to remember our pasts and to respect others'. But we can only do this by acknowledging our ancestors. On behalf of the present Elders and community members, we thus acknowledge those who have come before us in this journey of Mua's history. This monograph is itself part of this historical process because it gives today's Elders a chance to witness the writing of Mua's history, *their* history as a foundation for future generations. This history is passed on by the Elders for us, for the people of Mua island, and it is done so in a non-threatening way, in an informal way, through a non-colonial process that recognises and respects the people themselves.

The research presented in this monograph unites oral traditions with scientific archaeology and professional historical research, but it is community-driven; it is a community initiative. For so long we, the people of Mua, have asked ourselves questions about our history. And identity comes from history; the pride of culture comes in part with our songs, our dances, our oral traditions, our art works. In short, it comes with *our* history in all its varied manifestations. The historical struggles of both pre-colonial and colonial times are also part of our community experience, and this book for the first time expresses these identity-building experiences. This monograph represents, therefore, an opportunity for us to share essential parts of ourselves with the broader world, and to pass-on historical knowledge to our children so that they will never forget, and indeed so that they learn things that had been forgotten but that have been found again. In all these ways, our history is our opportunity.

Throughout this monograph, we have followed preferred local spellings for place names – e.g. Mua rather than Moa, Mabayag rather than Mabuig, Kirriri rather than Keriri, Ngurupai rather than Ngarupai, and so on. For those places whose preferred local spellings are multiple or not known, we have followed generally accepted conventions. We have in all cases tried to use local Indigenous place names rather than later European names, unless the latter are generally

recognised and accepted by local communities (see Figs 1-2 for maps showing place names used throughout this monograph). In the chapters concerned with the history of Mua, for reasons of historical accuracy we have also cited the terms used at the times, marking these terms in inverted commas – e.g., ‘Aboriginals’ to refer both to mainland Aboriginal peoples and to Torres Strait Islanders under the Act. We recognise that in many cases the terms used by government officials and others were inappropriate, but these have been cited when a historical statement is being made.

The research presented in this monograph has been guided by the Mualgal Elders from the onset. All the fieldwork undertaken since 2000 has been undertaken with the participation of local people, who took part in the fieldwork not as ‘assistants’, nor as unpaid volunteers, but as key, paid members of the research team, contributing their knowledge to the process. The university researchers themselves did this work at the invitation of the Mualgal Corporation Committee and Kubin Community Council. Fundamentally, the Elders and Committee members at all times directed the process, and annual community meetings at the Kubin Community Hall communicated this research to the broader Mualgal community. In this spirit also, the chapters in this monograph were checked and approved for publication during the early months of 2007 by the Mualgal Corporation

Committee, as befits a community history. The editors take this opportunity to warmly thank the Mualgal Elders and Committee, the Kubin Community Council, and the people of Mua generally for the opportunity and privilege to be involved in this project. *Kaima eso*.

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