

Memoirs of the Queensland Museum | **culture**

Volume 8  
Part 1

# Goemulgaw Lagal: Natural and Cultural Histories of the Island of Mabuyag, Torres Strait.

Edited by Ian J. McNiven and Garrick Hitchcock

**Minister:** Anastacia Palaszczuk MP, Premier and Minister for the Arts

**CEO:** Suzanne Miller, BSc(Hons), PhD, FGS, FMinSoc, FAIMM, FGSA, FRSSA

**Editor in Chief:** J.N.A. Hooper, PhD

**Editors:** Ian J. McNiven PhD and Garrick Hitchcock, BA (Hons) PhD(QLD) FLS FRGS

**Issue Editors:** Geraldine Mate, PhD

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PO Box 3300, South Brisbane 4101, Australia  
Phone: +61 (0) 7 3840 7555  
Fax: +61 (0) 7 3846 1226  
Web: [qm.qld.gov.au](http://qm.qld.gov.au)

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### COVER

Image on book cover: People tending to a ground oven (*umai*) at Nayedh, Bau village, Mabuyag, 1921.  
Photographed by Frank Hurley (National Library of Australia: [pic-vn3314129-v](http://pic-vn3314129-v)).

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# Introduction: *Goemulgaw Lagal*

Ian J. MCNIVEN and Garrick HITCHCOCK

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Goemulgaw Lagal is an ambitious publishing project that brings together an new range of research and scholarship on the natural and cultural histories of Mabuyag in Torres Strait. For over 130 years, beginning in the 1880s, the Goemulgal (people of Mabuyag) have hosted and collaborated with outside researchers. The two Goemulgaw Lagal volumes shed rare and unprecedented light on historical records and museum collections (objects and images) spanning the past 160 years, and present the results of recent academic and management-focused research on Mabuyag from the past 40 years. The volumes are a major reference on the history and culture of Mabuyag for current and future generations of Goemulgal.

□ *Mabuyag, Mabuia, Torres Strait, culture, history*

Ian J. McNiven  
Monash Indigenous Centre  
Monash University, Clayton, VIC, 3800, Australia  
Email: [ian.mcniven@monash.edu](mailto:ian.mcniven@monash.edu)

Garrick Hitchcock  
School of Culture, History and Language  
The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia

Life without Culture is a life without life.  
Past must exist for Present to create the Future  
(Adhi Ephraim Bani, 1987).

Mabuyag (aka Mabuiag) is a small island situated in the centre of western Torres Strait and home of the Goemulgal people. It is inextricably linked to the story of Kuyam (aka Kwoiam), the wandering culture-hero warrior, whose exploits ended with his death on the summit of the hill on Mabuyag that bears his name. Numerous other places on Mabuyag memorialise Kuyam's exploits, including his house, the grooved rocks he used to straighten his spears, his lookout, pools of water from which he drank, and next to where he was killed are shrubs whose leaves still bear red blotches of his blood. Kuyam's story was first recorded by the English anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon during his initial visit to Mabuyag in 1888. Haddon was clearly enamoured by the Kuyam story and fondly recounted his conversation with 'Nomoa, the then chief of Mabuiag':

I did not take down his very words, but I have accurately preserved their sense. "The fame of Kwoiam caused the name of Mabuiag to be feared for many a long day, and although the island was rocky and comparatively infertile, Kwoiam covered it with honour and glory, thus showing how the deeds of a single man can glorify a place in itself of little worth" (Haddon, 1904: 83).

Mabuyag – also known by its nickname, Besi – has been a source of, and an attractant to, scholarly endeavour since the nineteenth century. The best known and most famous

of these scholars was Alfred Haddon who first visited Mabuyag as a zoologist in 1888. During this visit, Haddon worked closely with Mabuyag people and due to his own expertise in marine zoology soon appreciated the extra-ordinary knowledge of the marine realm held by the people of Mabuyag. Fascinated by the broader cultural context of this knowledge, Haddon turned his scientific skills to the fledgling discipline of anthropology and returned to Mabuyag in 1898 to unite with old friends as head of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits (Herle and Rouse, 1998).

Yet before Haddon visited Mabuyag in 1888, the island had attracted outsiders interested in the people, their culture and environment. They included the famous Russian scientist Nikolai Nikolaevich Miklouho-Maclay in 1880 and the German ethnographer, naturalist and colonial explorer Otto Finsch in 1881. In the early 1920s, Mabuyag was visited by renowned Australian photographer Frank Hurley. In the 1970s, Mabuyag hosted the cultural geographer Bernard (Barney) Nietschmann and anthropologist Judith Fitzpatrick, followed in the mid-1980s by an archaeological program established by David Harris of University College London. The 1990s saw renewed research interests in archaeology and cultural heritage led by Judith Fitzpatrick (formerly The University of Queensland) and Ian McNiven (Monash University), and dugong hunting and sustainability led by Donna Kwan and Helene Marsh of James Cook University.

This long period of over 130 years of scholarly interaction between Goemulgal and outsiders has been mixed and varied, ranging from fleeting visits by dilettantes to deeply committed, long-term projects that have also established bonds of friendship and family. For the most part, research endeavours have been characterised by mutual respect and learning, with outsiders privileged to be treated to the generosity of Goemulgaw<sup>1</sup> hospitality, and instructed in Goemulgaw cultural protocols and cultural knowledge by local cultural experts. As with Islanders everywhere, they have been supportive and actively interested participants and research collaborators (see Beckett, 2004: 4).

The cultural strength and authority of the Goemulgal is expressed in most collaborative research endeavours. Early active participation is clearly evident in the published works of the Cambridge anthropological team where the cultural experts consulted are not only named but different pieces of information are attributed to individuals. Such comprehensive attribution was a first for the world of anthropology. Indeed, such was this active participation that Waria, 'the chief of Mabuiag', posted to Haddon a book-long, 281 page manuscript handwritten in Mabuyag language (Kala Lagaw Ya), detailing Goemulgaw culture (Haddon, 1904: 6). The manuscript is historically significant for a number of reasons, not least of which is that it is the first substantial piece of writing by a Melanesian person in their mother tongue (Beckett, 2004: 4). As Haddon (1904: 6) states: 'This is, so far as I am aware, the first time that a Papuan has written an account of the history and mythology of his people'. Sidney Ray, linguist on the Cambridge Expedition, even described Waria's volume as 'the first literary composition of importance produced by a member of the Papuan race' (Ray, 1907: 190). This manuscript currently resides in an envelope in the Cambridge University Library rare books and archives collection.

In the twentieth century, Mabuyag produced one of its most famous identities, Adhi Ephraim Bani, 7th Tribal Chief of Wagadagam. Mr Bani, who trained formally as a linguist at the University of Calgary and The University of Queensland, was a renowned authority of, and ambassador for, traditional *Ailan Kastom* (Island Custom). He was a regular contributor to the local newspaper *The Torres News* and local Torres Strait radio station 4MW, took centre stage in Frances Calvert's well-known documentary *Cracks in the Mask*, is honoured by the Ephraim Bani Gallery at the Gub Titui Cultural Centre on Thursday Island and recipient of the Order of Australia Medal, and attained a 3rd Dan Black Belt in karate (Alpher, 2005; Anonymous, 2011; Beckett, 2004: 6). As seen by Haddon, and further demonstrated by Mr Bani, there is a sense in the Western Islands that Mabuyag is something of a cultural hearth, much the same as Mer (Murray Island) is for the Meriam Le of the Eastern Islands. As Bani and Loban (n.d.: 7) note in the commemorative booklet on Mr Bani: 'Mabuyag Island is one of the most historical places in the Torres Strait. The people refer to it as '*adhiw laaga*', meaning the place of history. Many Torres Strait Islanders can trace their heritage and ancestry to this place'.

The past 40 years has seen considerable research activity on Mabuyag sponsored by universities (e.g. University College London, Monash University, James Cook University) and more recently environmental and anthropological research commissioned by the Torres Strait Regional Authority, an Australian Government statutory authority (Thursday Island). Much of this research has ended up in unpublished reports ('grey literature') and theses written by researchers who have either moved on to new research topics and places or have retired. As such, a rare window of opportunity existed to invite many of these researchers to formally

write up research results into a single volume as a permanent record to catalogue and celebrate the broad range of scholarship focused on Mabuyag in recent years and to showcase the extraordinary cultural and environmental history of Mabuyag to a wider audience. Such was the response to our invitations that papers expanded to two volumes and over 400,000 words. Most importantly, this permanent record is an opportunity for researchers to say thank you to those Goemulgal, past and present, who have made this research possible, and for the people of Mabuyag to see some of the fruits of their research collaborations with outsiders.

Initial discussions to explore the viability and appropriateness of the volume(s) took place between the editors (Ian McNiven and Garrick Hitchcock) and senior representatives of the Goemulgal community on Mabuyag during a meeting at the community hall on 17 April 2009. At the end of the meeting, the following motion was presented: 'That the community accepts the proposal to assemble a special issue of *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum Cultural Heritage Series* devoted to the natural and cultural history of Pulu and Mabuyag. Moved: Sophie Luffman. Seconded: Cygnet Repu. Motion carried unanimously' (Formal minutes of a Mabuyag Community Meeting to Discuss the Pulu Indigenous Protected Area).

Draft copies of the papers were subsequently examined and read by senior Goemulgal community representatives Cygnet Repu (Chairman, Goemulgaw Kod cultural heritage group), Terrence Whap (Chairman, Goemulgaw (Torres Strait Islanders) Corporation RNTBC), on Mabuyag, and Adhi Dimple Bani (8th Tribal Chief, Koeu Buway Wagadagam, Urpikigupoeyadhras, Lag Mabuyag) and Gabriel Bani on Thursday Island, in March 2012. Following a unanimous favourable response in terms of content of papers, use of historical photographs, and photographs of

museum objects, production of the volumes pushed forward.

A follow-up meeting between the editors and senior Goemulgal representatives Cygnet Repu, Terrence Whap, Sophie Luffman and Crossfeld Manuel took place on Mabuyag in December 2012 (Figure 1). Discussions focused on content of the volumes, cover images and title. Each paper was summarised and discussed. An important point to emerge was proper spellings for place names using the contemporary orthography for the Mabuyag language. As such, place names in all papers were standardised in this regard. It was agreed that a late nineteenth century photograph of the pearlshell station at Panay published in 1897 (photographer unknown) and Frank Hurley's c.1921 photograph of people attending to a ground oven (*amai*) at a place identified as Nayedh within the contemporary settlement of Bau would be most appropriate cover images for the two volumes. The editors were also informed that an appropriate title for the volumes would be *Goemulgaw Lagal*, which freely translates to Goemulgal (people of Mabuyag) and Lagal (whole area or country). An agreed subtitle for the volumes was 'Cultural and Natural Histories of the Island of Mabuyag, Torres Strait', in keeping with a comparable issue of the *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum – Culture* devoted to Mua (David *et al.*, 2008).

The *Goemulgaw Lagal* volumes present 22 papers written by 31 authors of whom six are Goemulgal from Mabuyag. The first volume (MQM-C 8.1) focuses on landscapes and seascapes, and material culture and anthropology. The second volume (MQM-C 8.2) focuses on history and archaeology. Many of the papers contain a great deal of technical detail that represent years of painstaking research in museums, libraries, archives, university laboratories, and on Mabuyag itself. Indeed, it is extraordinary just how much research material has been



FIG 1. Meeting to discuss *Goemulgaw Lagal* volumes in Guesthouse, Mabuyag, 8 December 2012. Terrence Whap, Garrick Hitchcock, Sophie Luffman, Cygnet Repu and Crossfeld Manuel (left to right) (photograph by Ian McNiven).

generated for such a small island. All attempts have been made for papers to be written with a broad readership in mind.

All of the contributions to the *Goemulgaw Lagal* volumes were refereed and peer reviewed by a broad range of 34 scholars. In this regard we extend our gratitude and thanks to Jeremy Ash (Monash University), Brit Asmussen (Queensland Museum), Bryce Barker (University of Southern Queensland), Chris Ballard (Australian National University), Jeremy Beckett (The University of Sydney), John Burton (Australian National University), Noelene Cole (James Cook University), Patrick Couper (Queensland Museum), Patrick Faulkner (The University of Sydney), Paul Forster (Queensland

Herbarium), Regina Ganter (Griffith University), Martin Gibbs (University of New England), Kirsty Gillespie (The University of Queensland), Adrian Horridge (Australian National University), David Hyndman (University of Canberra), Robert King (Narrabundah, ACT), Julie Lahn (Australian National University), David Lawrence (Australian National University), Steve Mullins (University of Central Queensland), John Neldner (Queensland Herbarium), Nicky Piper (James Cook University), Alan Quanchi (The University of the South Pacific), Michael Quinnell (Queensland Museum), June Ross (University of New England), Michael Rowland (James Cook University), Lynette Russell (Monash University), Dermot Smyth (Charles Darwin University),

Mark Staniforth (Monash University), David Stanton (3D environmental), Sean Ulm (James Cook University), Steve van Dyck (Queensland Museum), Tanya Vernes (WWF Australia), Duncan Wright (Australian National University), David Wetherell (Deakin University), and Warwick Willmott (formerly Geological Survey of Queensland).

Special thanks to Geraldine Mate and Tanya Edbrooke (Subject Editors of the *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum – Culture*) for generous support over a number of years as the *Goemulgaw Lagal* volumes were assembled. A number of the papers involved complex formatting and their keen copy-editing eyes and patience are greatly appreciated. More generally, we take this opportunity to thank the Queensland Museum and the Memoirs team for their continued support and sponsorship of a series of volumes devoted to Torres Strait over the past decade: *Torres Strait Archaeology and Material Culture* (McNiven & Quinnell, 2004), *Gelam's Homeland: Cultural and Natural History on the Island of Mua, Torres Strait* (David et al., 2008), and *Goemulgaw Lagal: Natural and Cultural Histories of the Island of Mabuyag, Torres Strait* (McNiven & Hitchcock, 2014). Together, these three volumes have contributed a million words on the culture and history of Torres Strait and provide a major contribution to documenting and understanding Queensland's rich and diverse heritage. Remarkably, such is the rich and complex cultural and natural history of Torres Strait that similar illuminating and ground-breaking volumes could be written on many other islands of the region.

Most importantly, we thank the people of Mabuyag for their kind hospitality, support and friendship over many years in our various capacities undertaking academic, native title and management research. While it is difficult to isolate individuals, we would like to take this opportunity to say *kaima esso* to Cygnet Repu, Terrence Whap, Sophie

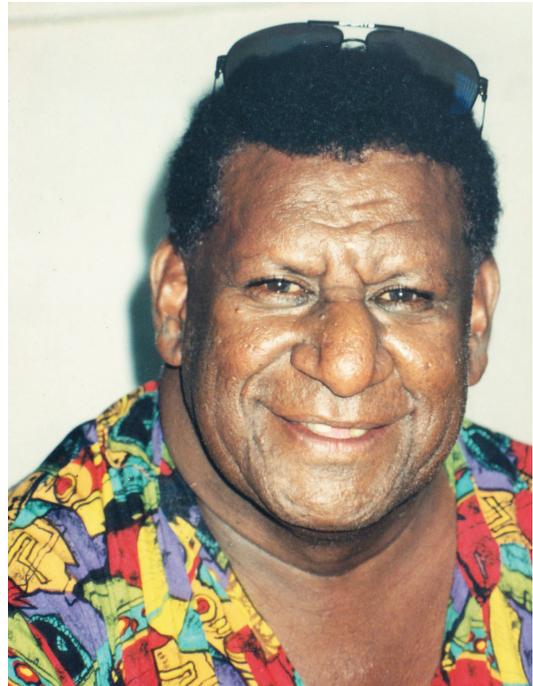


Figure 2. Ephraim Bani (courtesy: Bani family).



FIG 3. Barney Nietschmann (courtesy: Department of Geography, University of California Berkeley).

Luffman and Crossfeld Manuel. Special *kaima esso* to Adhi Dimple Bani for giving his support and blessing to the volumes.

Thanks also to the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) for a generous \$5000 grant to assist with production costs of the volumes.

Three scholars who were leaders in putting the culture and history of Mabuyag on a world stage have sadly passed away in

recent years. They are Adhi Ephraim Bani (1944-2004), Bernard (Barney) Nietschmann (1941-2000), and David Harris (1930-2013) (Figures 2-4). All three scholars were modern research pioneers of Mabuyag in the areas of linguistics and culture, geography and anthropology, and geography and archaeology, respectively. We humbly dedicate the *Goemulgaw Lagal* volumes in their honour and to their memory.



FIG. 4. Ian McNiven, Barbara Ghaleb Kirby, and David Harris (left to right), Institute of Archaeology, University College London, 24 June 2008.

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## □ ENDNOTES

1. Goemulgaw is the possessive form of the noun Goemulgal.