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

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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).

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Nikolai Nikolaevich Miklouho-Maclay's five days on Mabuyag in 1880

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Nikolai Nikolaevich Miklouho-Maclay (1846-1888), one of the Russia's most revered natural scientists and ethnographers, visited Mabuyag briefly in April 1880 with the Rev. James Chalmers of the London Missionary Society. As a result of that visit, he published the first ethnographic article on traditional custom on Mabuyag and a scientific article on the dugong brain. Unfortunately, only a few pages of his fieldnotes survive and his photographs have been lost.

□ *N.N. Miklouho-Maclay, Anthropology, Mabuyag.*

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INTRODUCTION

Although little known in Australia today, Nikolai Nikolaevich Miklouho-Maclay was one of the most significant of early Russian natural scientists and ethnographers and played an important scientific and cultural role in nineteenth century New Guinea and Australia as ‘scholar, explorer and public figure’ (Anon., 1973, 16: 299). In April 1880, in company with the Rev. James Chalmers of the London Missionary Society (LMS), he paid a brief visit to Mabuyag. This paper¹ introduces the information found in Maclay’s fieldnotes, only a few pages of which have survived, his ethnographic article about cranial deformation on Mabuyag, which predates Haddon’s first ethnographic publication (Haddon, 1889) and his scientific article on the dugong brain. Given that most contemporary historical and ethnographic scholarship on Torres Strait is based on works written in English, it is important that other non-English sources become more widely known (see, for example, Rosenman’s translation of Dumont D’Urville (1987), ‘Sheehan’s (2015) chapter on Desparmet and Howes’ (2015) chapter on Finsch.

NIKOLAI NIKOLAEVICH MIKLOUHO-MACLAY

N.N. Miklouho-Maclay (also known in Australia as Nicholas Maclay), was a ‘pioneer of Pacific anthropology’ (Worsley, 1952). He is probably best remembered today as a humanist scholar, who, on the basis of comparative anatomical research, was the first Russian anthropologist to refute the prevailing view that the different ‘races’ of mankind belonged to different species. Like Alfred Cort Haddon, the leader of the 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits, his early zoological and geographical research interests grew to encompass the anthropological and ethnological.²

Maclay was born on 17 July 1846 in the village of Rozhdestvenskoe, Novgorod Province, into a lately ennobled southern Russian family, the origin of his title ‘Baron’ in official correspondence from Torres Strait. Educated in German and Russian, he was banned from attending Russian universities because of his participation in the student movement but completed his studies in Germany. He then began a research career in marine zoology, travelling to the Canary Islands, North Africa, South America and Oceania. In September 1871, within a few months of the placement of LMS Pacific Islander teachers in Torres Strait, he arrived on the north-east coast of New Guinea, where, as the only European resident, he lived for two and a half years (1871-72, 1876-77, 1883). Captain S.G. Green recalls meeting ‘Baron Maclay’ in 1879, when Maclay ‘was a passenger on the *Somerset* from Singapore to Brisbane. This gentleman had spent many years on the northern coast of New Guinea and could relate strange and interesting experience with the natives’ (Green, 1933). In 1879-1880 Maclay spent ten months among the Melanesian islands, investigating the ‘Kanaka labour trade’, and wrote of these visits that even the briefest personal observation produced ‘truer opinions about the natives of Melanesia than repeated study of all the literature’ (Webster, 1984: 239).³

Maclay lived in Australia from 1878-1882 and 1883-1886, during which time he made significant contributions to Australian science (see Webster, 1984; Paton, 1996). Now largely forgotten here (though not in Russia), he became a prominent figure of nineteenth century Australian science, contributing almost 30 papers to the NSW Linnean Society and designing and founding the first marine biology station in the southern hemisphere at Watsons Bay in 1881. He was also instrumental in establishing the Australasian Biological Association in June 1881. On 27

February 1884 he married Margaret Emma, daughter of Sir John Robertson, a former premier of NSW. She returned to Australia with their two children after Maclay's death in St Petersburg on 14 April 1888.



FIG. 1. Portrait of Nikolai Nikolaevich Miklouho-Maclay. Image from Miklukho-Maklai, N. N., translated by C.L. Sentinella, 1975: cover.

MACLAY IN TORRES STRAIT

On 20 January 1880 Maclay joined the Rev. James Chalmers (Tamate) in the LMS schooner *Ellengowan* on an inspection visit to the southern coast of New Guinea and Torres Strait. Maclay was then on the return leg of

his lengthy voyage through Melanesia and met Chalmers in eastern New Guinea on his way south from Manus and the Trobriands. Chalmers was visiting the mission stations to provision the LMS teachers and report on their progress; he also had the unpleasant task of removing the Loyalty Islander teacher, Saneish, from Mabuyag following official complaints (Chalmers, 1880; see Shnukal, paper on Christianity, this volume). This was their first meeting but they shared similar concerns about uncontrolled European exploitation of New Guinea. They became friends and Maclay, suffering from yet another attack of fever, stayed in Chalmers' house in Port Moresby for over a month (Langmore, 1974: 41-42; Webster, 1984: 236). They were to meet on at least two subsequent occasions: in August 1881 they joined forces to help prevent a British reprisal massacre at Kalo on the southeast coast of New Guinea (Tait Scott, 1881; Sentinella, 1975: 292; Miklouho-Maclay, 1982: 38, 416-424); and in April 1883 Chalmers joined Maclay's ship at Thursday Island, where together they wrote a letter from Cooktown, dated 1 June 1883, to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, appealing for justice for the Pacific and New Guinea peoples and an end to the labour trade (Sentinella, 1975: 309; see Miklouho-Maclay, 1982: 476-477 for the text of the letter).

Despite his personal regard for Chalmers, Maclay was wary of the activities of the missionaries and determined to keep them away from 'his' coast. He believed that their activities led inevitably to

the invasion of traders, with their accessories: the introduction and application of alcohol, firearms, the spread of diseases and prostitution, the exportation of natives by force or deception for slavery and so on (Miklouho-Maclay, 1982: 41).

The dislike was mutual. Thomas (1886:393) heard from the missionaries 'quite another account respecting the doings of a certain Russian scientist, whose passion for skull collecting, and the little respect he paid to social customs of the natives, had caused in the district where he resided a great prejudice against white men'.

Maclay and Chalmers spent most of April in Torres Strait, visiting Erub (Darnley Island) for two days, Mer (Murray Island) for three days, Dauan (Mt Cornwallis Island) for half a day, Saibai for three days, Mabuyag (Jervis Island) for five days and Waiben (Thursday Island) for six days (Miklouho-Maclay, 1950-1954, vol. 2: 566, 568). While on Mer, Maclay was told of the actions of the Loyalty Islander teacher, Josiah, who was said to have severely flogged a number of Murray Islanders. Maclay was concerned enough to write a letter detailing the complaints and present it to the Police Magistrate, Henry Marjoribanks Chester, when he reached Thursday Island. Chester (1880) reacted by

sending the Pearl on a cruise round the islands. Baron Maclay informs me that the native teachers in Murray island have been flogging men and women for certain misdemeanours and I have requested Capt Pennefather to enquire into it.

Maclay presumably discussed the matter with Chalmers, although Chalmers does not mention it in his 1880 LMS correspondence. Maclay's original letter of complaint does not appear to have survived but Captain Charles Pennefather's (1880) report to Chester does: 'On arrival at Murray Isld made enquiries into the reported cases of flogging there, of men and women, according to Baron Maclay's statements, by the teachers of the London Missionary Society'. Pennefather, a former pearlsheller, investigated Maclay's claims and found Josiah guilty of the charges.

The Rev. Samuel McFarlane conducted his own investigation and reported to the society that the charges were untrue but were manufactured by the shellers to get rid of Josiah (Langbridge, 1977: 167):

The charge of flogging is utterly false. Baron Macleay's name has been used to give importance to the charge, whereas he only spent one night here with Mr Chalmers, and had no intercourse with the natives, so knew nothing whatever about the matter except what he heard from others (McFarlane, 1882).⁴

I can find no mention of Maclay's participation in the voyage in LMS correspondence and only eight pages of his fieldnotes from the trip have survived. Written in Russian, German, English and Latin, they record nothing of his personal life or reflections but contain sketches; a population census of Erub; cranial measurements; measurements and observations on skin and eye colour and other physical attributes; and notes on cranial deformation among Mabuyag infants.⁵ From today's standpoint, the measurements and remarks on the physical characteristics of the Islanders are offensive, yet they demonstrate the concerns of physical anthropology as then practised and Maclay's thorough observations:

Often frustrated by impatient or suspicious 'subjects', he had tried to fulfil the latest requirements for more numerous and exact cranial measurements. He was among the first to use standard tables for assessing skin and eye colour. He tirelessly measured the diameter of curls and studied hair in microscopic section. He was also guided by a list of questions on artificially distorted heads and flattened noses, the length of big toes and the size of teeth (Webster, 1984: 344).

CRANIAL DEFORMATION AMONG MABUYAG ISLANDERS

Around the middle of April, Maclay spent five 'very fully occupied' days on Mabuyag (Miklouho-Maclay, 1885: 194) and may have returned during his convalescence in May 1880 (Fischer, 1956: 410). While on the island he engaged in anthropological and biological observation. Webster's account of Maclay's activities during his 1876 voyage to Micronesia is relevant here:

He used the briefest call at any island for routine research – measurements, classification of skin colour, observations on hair texture, facial features, dress and ornament. Where the schooner remained longer at anchor, he lived ashore and sought to enter into native life (Webster, 1984: 181).

His visit to Mabyuag was too short to 'enter into native life' but his observations provided the basis for two scientific papers read to the Linnean Society of NSW. Maclay's last contribution to the society for 1881 was a paper on the many hours of manual pressure Mabuyag Islander mothers applied to the still pliable skulls of their new-born babies in order to shape them to 'a singular idea of beauty', viz. low in the forehead, flat at the back and not too well developed above (Webster, 1984: 246-247). The paper was published as Miklouho-Maclay (1882) and a Russian translation appears in Miklouho-Maclay (1950-1954, vol. 3, 1: 414-415); part of it was reproduced in Haddon (1912: 8-9). It is the first ethnographic article on traditional custom on Mabuyag and predates by almost two decades the far more detailed work by the 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition. Maclay's observations verified a practice first reported by the naturalist MacGillivray but dismissed as fanciful by the Russian biologist, Karl Ernst von Baer.⁶

A peculiar form of head, which both the Kawrarega [Prince of Wales group] and Gudang [Cape York] blacks consider as the *beau ideal* of beauty, is produced by artificial compression during infancy. Pressure is made by the mother with her hands – as I have seen practised on more than one occasion at Cape York – one being applied to the forehead and the other to the occiput, both of which are thereby flattened, while the skull is rendered proportionally broader and longer than it would naturally have been (MacGillivray, 1852, 2: 12).

Mindful of von Baer's criticism of MacGillivray, Maclay carefully examined and measured the heads of Mabuyag babies who had undergone the manipulation. Their sex is not specified in the paper and I had inferred from the reference to 'beauty' and the comparison with New Guinea women that they were female. His fieldnotes specify, however, that both girls and boys underwent the practice, though not every child was subjected to it. The following page of his notebook is headed: "Lueg" or "Nudi" atadukuik', which may be the Russian transliteration of a Kala Lagaw Ya phrase meaning 'broad, flat head'. He continues:

Fronto-occipital compression of the skull among the natives of the island of Mabuyag occurs only through manual pressure, which, however, is practised very frequently (whenever the mother has nothing else to do). This manual compression is, however, quite sufficient to produce a lasting deformation of the skull. The heads of girls as well as boys are deformed; [some mothers – crossed out] but not all children undergo this manipulation (Miklouho-Maclay, 1880, Folio 15).⁷

THE BIOLOGY OF THE DUGONG BRAIN

According to Webster (1984: 240), '[i]n advocating internal anatomy as a better guide in the study of race than mere comparison of outward traits, Maclay gave priority to the brain'. Maclay's biological researches also extended to other mammalian brains. Like Haddon, he began his career as a zoologist and planned to publish a large work on the comparative anatomy of the brain, from fish to mammal (Sentinella, 1975: 7). While at Mabuyag, in exchange for some small gifts, he obtained the head of a freshly killed dugong: 'He removed the brain and packed it carefully, carrying it with him back to Sydney for a quiet and thorough examination' (Greenop, 1944: 172). Five years later he unpacked and dissected it (Greenop, 1944: 237). Miklouho-Maclay (1885) describes in detail the results of this dissection, possibly the first such account – certainly Maclay was not aware of any others.⁸

Maclay does not comment on the way in which the dugong was killed and is unlikely to have accompanied the hunters. Although he notes that dugongs were still plentiful in the Strait and briefly discusses the mode of killing them on the south coast of New Guinea by netting and drowning, he apparently did not observe the more elaborate traditional methods of hunting dugong probably invented by the Torres Strait Islanders. There, according to myth, the edible qualities of the dugong were first revealed to the Badu culture hero, Sesere, by divination through his parents' skulls. Also revealed to him were the methods of constructing both the distinctive dugong harpoon (*wap*) and the raised platform over the seagrass-fields (*nath*), where dugong habitually graze. Dugong-catching magic is invoked and the male hunter harpoons a selected 'fat' animal at night as the tide is rising (Lawrie, 1970: 57-60). A survey of

dugong fishing among the Western Islanders appears in Haddon (1904: 337-342); Done (1987: 50-52) devotes a brief chapter to it; and Landtman (1927: 120-141) discusses the practice among the Kiwai, who had borrowed it from the Torres Strait Islanders.

BELL'S PEARLING STATION

While at Mabuyag, Maclay made a tour of a pearling station (Fischer, 1956: 410), almost certainly John Bell's station at Panay, managed by George Mortimer Pearson. There he bought two female skulls from a Vanuatuan man employed by Pearson, and added further observations. 'A native named Neva sold me the skulls of his two wives: Kadubu and Kavangoi' (Miklouho-Maclay, 1880: Folio 14).⁸ He later wrote a fairly detailed account of the commercial pearling industry for a popular newspaper (Miklouho-Maclay, 1950-1954, 2: 612-615) but on closer examination it proves to be merely a recapitulation and distillation of de Hoghton's (1879) report on the fisheries. This was probably shown to him by Chester, whom de Hoghton thanks for his cooperation and in whose house Maclay was convalescing at the end of April after another bout of fever (Fischer, 1956: 409-410).

Fischer's book contains material I have seen nowhere else, some of which is considered controversial by Maclay scholars (Elena Govor, pers. comm., 1998). It probably comes from the account Maclay wrote for the Russian Geographical Society (Butinov, 1992: 45; Putilov, 1982: 121). The following is from my translation of Fischer (1956: 409-410):

Als der Forscher im Mai 1880 an Bord des Missionsdampfers, 'Ellengowan' die Thursday-, die Donnerstags-Insel, erreichte, war er länger als ein Jahr in dem mörderischen Klima unterwegs gewesen. Die Fieberanfälle hatten ihn

so mitgenommen, dass er kaum noch gehen konnte. Im Hause des britischen Administrators Chester fand er Aufnahme und Pflege. Gerade dieser Chester was es, dem wenige Jahre später die Aufgabe zufallen sollte, die Fahne der Queen in Port Moresby zu hissen und damit den Südostteil Neuguineas dem Britischen Empire anzugliedern. Unter der Pflege von Frau Chester, die befürchtete, ihr Gast werde sich nicht mehr von seinem Krankenlager erheben, erholte sich Maclay überraschend schnell. Bald streifte er wieder zwischen den winzigen Holzhäusern und den hohen, vom Winde gebeugten Palmenstämmen umher, und das glitzernde Wasser unter dem tiefblauen Himmel lockte ihn zu neuen Unternehmungen. Hier war Maclay im Zentrum der Perlenfischerei. Er liess sich auf der Jervis-Insel eine grosse Perlmutter-Ausbeutungsstation zeigen und hielt sich einige Zeit in Somerset auf der Kap York-Halbinsel auf, um Reste der einheimischen Bevölkerung zu untersuchen, die dem Untergang preisgegeben war.

When the scientist reached Thursday Island in May 1880 on board the mission steamer *Ellengowan*, he had spent longer than a year in the deadly climate. Attacks of fever had so exhausted him that he could scarcely still walk. He was received into the house of the British administrator Chester and nursed back to health. This was the same Chester, who, several years later, would be assigned the task of hoisting the Queen's flag in Port Moresby, thereby annexing the southeast part of New Guinea for the British Empire. Under the care of Mrs Chester, who feared that her guest would never again rise

from his sickbed, Maclay recovered surprisingly swiftly. Soon he was again wandering through the tiny wooden houses and among the tall palm trees, swaying in the wind, and the glittering water under the deep blue sky enticed him to new enterprises. Maclay was in the centre of the pearl fishery here. He was shown a large pearling station on Mabuyag and stayed for a while in Somerset on Cape York Peninsula, in order to examine the remnant indigenous population that was facing extinction.

CONCLUSION

Maclay's visit to Torres Strait occurred at the end of the first decade of sustained contact with Europeans and Pacific Islanders as a result of pearlshelling and missionary activity (from 1870 and 1871, respectively) and shortly after full annexation to the Queensland colony (1879). His visit probably confirmed his fears, since ten years of relatively unrestrained contact had left almost no aspect of traditional life and custom unchanged. In a lecture to the Russian Geographical Society on 4 October 1882 he admitted that the missionaries had brought the arts of 'reading, writing and singing psalms' to the peoples of the Pacific but set these 'blessings of civilization' against the subsequent arrival of the 'traders and all kinds of other exploiters', who brought 'the spread of disease, drunkenness and firearms, etc.' (Miklouho-Maclay, 1990-1999, vol. 2: 430).

Maclay's short visit to Mabuyag yielded material for three publications: two scholarly papers and a newspaper article. During the voyage he suffered recurrent bouts of malarial fever and, in truth, the trip was a diversion – to be viewed either as a coda to

the two and a half months spent with the missionaries on the southern New Guinea coast or as a prelude to his second visit to mainland Australia. His main interest lay in the people of the Maclay coast of New Guinea and his visit to the southern coast was for purposes of comparison (Miklouho-Maclay, 1950-1954, vol. 2: 535, 566). Nevertheless, he wrote to the Russian Geographical Society from Thursday Island that he was satisfied with his activities of the previous thirteen months: 'My journey of 1879-1880 has furnished me with quite a lot of important scientific result[s]' (Putilov, 1982: 121).¹⁰

Always a perceptive observer, with a deep concern for, empathy with and interest in the lives of the peoples of the region, Maclay's brief sojourn in Torres Strait yielded some ethnological, historical and biological information. It is a pity that only a few pages of his fieldnotes survive and none of the five photographs referred to, which he presumably took or was given at Mabuyag:¹¹ 'No.1. native Silo (Waiben) [Thursday Island]; No.2. native Mabuyag (Mariget);¹² No.3. Mabuyag native woman Fana [probably Panau] (his sister); No.4. native Badu; No.5. two native women from Badu'. He also includes a sketch of a 'native boy - teacher' (Miklouho-Maclay, 1880, Folio 16 verso). His observations confirm existing material and are interesting for that reason but they are a limited source of information for the contemporary ethnographer of Torres Strait.

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□ ENDNOTES

1. This paper is a revised and condensed version of Shnukal (1998), originally prepared as part of a double major in Russian for a Social Sciences degree at the University of Queensland. Where possible, I have used and acknowledged the English translations by Sentinella (1975) and Tumarkin (Miklouho-Maclay, 1982); otherwise, the translations are my own. A better transliteration of Maclay's surname would be Miklukho-Maklai but I have adopted the spelling used by Maclay when he wrote in English.

Readers interested in Maclay's biography might consult the entries under 'Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay' in the *Australian Encyclopaedia* (1926, vol. 2: 82, 1965, vol 6: 72-73, 1977, vol. 4: 183); his entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography 1851-1890* (1974, vol. 5: 248-250); Thomassen (1882); and Tumarkin (1988).

2. Maclay and Haddon both began their anthropological careers as zoologists who, after studying marine fauna in the remote southern hemisphere, planned interdisciplinary expeditions to the Pacific. Both travelled widely in the New Guinea region and were greatly assisted by local missionaries and administrators. However, Maclay obtained only meagre institutional funding for his research, whereas Haddon persuaded Cambridge University to fund a team of researchers to work for several months in Torres Strait in 1898 (Herle & Rouse, 1998).

3. Maclay made several trips through Torres Strait on boats bound to and from Sydney, which called briefly at Thursday Island. He first sailed through the Strait in July 1878 on his way from Singapore to recuperate in Sydney's more benign climate. While at sea, he recorded at noon each day the water and air temperatures off the eastern Australian coast and repeated the experiment during his voyage from Hong Kong to Sydney via Torres Strait in June-July 1883. Both sets of measurements are compared in a note to the Russian Geographical Society (Miklouho-Maclay, 1990-1999, vol. 4: 237-239). I thank Elena Govor for sending me these pages.
4. McFarlane is sometimes a little inaccurate when defending his teachers to the LMS directors. Maclay spent three days on Mer (Miklouho-Maclay, 1950-1954, vol. 2: 566, 568). On the other hand, this is a very short time. As Webster (1984: 346) points out, despite Maclay's ideal of 'living so close to the natives that he could become "almost one of themselves"', in his island voyages 'he had been perforce the scientific visitor, arriving with a disruptive shipload of strangers, never staying long enough to think of entering into native life'.
5. For actual measurements from his notebook (Miklouho-Maclay, 1880, Folio 13 verso), see Shnukal (1998). Nakata (2007) offers a sustained critique of such practices from a contemporary Torres Strait Islander point of view.
6. Von Baer had written a treatise on the Papuans without ever visiting Papua and encouraged Maclay to go there. One of the founders of Russian anthropology and embryology and a member of the Academy of Science at St Petersburg, von Baer had devised a system for measuring skulls, probably the one used by Maclay.
7. According to Deacon (1934:242-243) skull-binding was once practised on all male infants on the southern coast of Malakula, Vanuatu.
8. A Russian translation appears in Miklouho-Maclay (1950-1954, vol. 3, 2: 227-231). The dugong brain is included in a list of specimens Maclay donated to the Zoological Museum of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Miklouho-Maclay, 1950-1954, 3, 2: 363-364).
9. I am uncertain from the Russian whether 'Neva' was the name of the skull seller, his place of origin or the boat on which he sailed. Elena Govor has pointed out that grammatically it is more likely to be the seller's name. The man himself was probably an Eromangan; his wives were almost certainly either Torres Strait Islanders or Papuans.

Alternatively, the man (or one/both of his wives) may have spent time in the Neva Passage between the mainland of Papua New Guinea and Parem (Parama Island) near the Fly River. The people of Parem have a long association with the eastern Torres Strait Islanders and were employed in pearling in Torres Strait at the time. Alternatively, he may have taken his name from the *Neva*, D'Albertis' steam-launch, which he obtained from the Governor of NSW for his projected second voyage up the Fly River in May 1876. His last trip in the *Neva* ended at Thursday Island on 4 January 1878 (D'Albertis 1880, vol. 2: 360) and it is possible that the man had crewed aboard the vessel.

10. The Australian material housed in the Sydney Exhibition Building was destroyed by fire in 1882. The vast ethnological collections which Maclay sent back to Russia are held in the St Petersburg Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology.
11. I have not been able to trace these photographs. They may have been lost in the fire of 1882, burned by Maclay's widow, or held by the St Petersburg Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology.
12. Rivers' Mabuyag genealogies identify two men named Mariget or Sandy, both married to women named Mogur and with sons named Alis (Haddon, 1904: Tables 2A, 3A). The Mariget referred to by Maclay was apparently the son of Gauri (Shovel-nosed Ray, Turtle and Dog clans) and Maba (Crocodile clan). His youngest sister was Panau [probably Maclay's Fana], who, by 1898, had been married to Geneii and Kanai or Gizu. Writing some sixty years later, Peter Eseli (1998), who was born on Mabuyag in 1886, also identifies Mariget but does not mention a sister. Haddon (1908: 4) reproduces a scaled-down version of Mariget's drawing of the Tagai constellation but it is not clear which Mariget was the artist.