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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](http://pic-vn3314129-v)).

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# Between wealth and poverty: Otto Finsch on Mabuyag, 1881

Hilary HOWES

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The late nineteenth-century German traveller-naturalist Otto Finsch (1839-1917) visited Torres Strait from October 1881 to January 1882 as part of a far longer Pacific voyage, which lasted from April 1879 to November 1882. I discuss his impressions and experiences of Mabuyag (Mabuiag Island, also known as Jervis Island), particularly its natural history and the cultural and social life of its inhabitants.

□ *Mabuyag, Mabuiag Island, Otto Finsch*

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The late nineteenth-century German traveller-naturalist Otto Finsch (1839-1917) visited Torres Strait from October 1881 to January 1882 as part of a far longer Pacific voyage, which lasted from April 1879 to January 1882 and took him from Hawai'i to the Marshall, Gilbert and Caroline Islands, New Britain, New Zealand, Sydney, Cape York Peninsula, south-east New Guinea and Java (Figure 1). He did not publish extensively on his experiences in Torres Strait: his departure in 1884 on a second voyage to the Pacific, this time as leader of an expedition seeking land for German colonial acquisition in north-east

New Guinea, interrupted the preparation of several ambitious works on the peoples of the South Seas. At least three of these works subsequently reached the stage of print-ready manuscripts, but were never published (Finsch, 1899: 71, 73). His major monographs later in life were devoted to the anthropology and material culture of New Guinea (and, to a lesser extent, Micronesia) (Finsch, 1893, 1914). The observations in this paper are drawn principally from an article which appeared on 8 October 1882 in the twice-daily regional newspaper *Hamburger Nachrichten* under the title 'Aus dem Pacific.



FIG. 1. Map of the Pacific, showing locations visited by Otto Finsch. Courtesy of Karina Pelling, The Australian National University, College of Asia and the Pacific, CartoGIS.

XII. Torres-Straße' ('From the Pacific. XII. Torres Strait') (Finsch, 1882a). Despite the misleading numbering of its title, this was in fact the tenth in a series of thirteen articles which, in Finsch's own words, were 'written under the immediate impression of what [he had] experienced and seen' and consequently provided 'a continuous depiction' of his travels in the years 1879-82 (Finsch, 1899: 70-71).

Further details, particularly those relating to local practices of hunting dugong, come from a later article, 'Der Dujong. Zoologisch-ethnologische Skizze einer untergehenden Sirene' ('The Dugong. Zoological-ethnological portrait of a vanishing siren'), published in 1900 as part of the public interest series *Sammlung gemeinverständlicher wissenschaftlicher Vorträge* ('Collection of generally comprehensible scientific lectures') (Finsch, 1900). In addition, I refer to unpublished correspondence between Finsch and his colleagues in the metropole, together with further materials and insights drawn from research conducted for my doctoral thesis (Howes, 2013). Precise dates are taken from a transcription of Finsch's journal No. 13, recording his observations in Torres Strait and Cape York between 30 September 1881 and 22 January 1882 (Finsch, 1881-82). I retain Finsch's original spellings of place names – e.g. 'Mabiak' for Mabuyag, 'Morilug' for Muralag – in direct quotes only. Problematic terms such as 'native' and 'Kanaka' should be understood in their historical context. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

Finsch (Figure 2) was essentially an autodidact. Born in Warmbrunn, Silesia (now Cieplice Zdrój, south-eastern Poland), he had attended only the local elementary school as a child, but had also demonstrated an early interest in observing, sketching and collecting the natural world and its products, particularly birds. In 1857 he broke off an apprenticeship to his father, a



FIG. 2. Portrait of Otto Finsch, Anon (c.1870). Duplicate of photograph from unidentified source, part of G.M. Mathews collection of portraits of ornithologists, vn3798240. Reproduction courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

glass painter and trader, and travelled to Pest (now Budapest, Hungary). Here he studied briefly at the university, supporting himself through the production and sale of natural historical specimens, before travelling onward to Rustchuk (Ruse, Bulgaria). Following his return to Germany in 1859, he first pursued his interest in ornithology as an assistant at the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie ('Imperial Museum of Natural History') in Leiden, Netherlands, then joined the Gesellschaft Museum ('Museum Society') in Bremen, Germany, as curator of the collections of ethnology and natural history (Abel, 1938: 318, 1970: 22, 26-28, 32, 37). In 1868, in recognition of

his contributions to ornithology, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Bonn (Abel, 1938: 318; Cunze, 1917: 23; Finsch, 1868). In 1876 he became Director of the *Städtische Sammlungen für Naturgeschichte und Ethnographie* ('Municipal Collections of Natural History and Ethnography') in Bremen, resigning in 1879 in order to commence his voyage to the Pacific. His previous research trips included six months (July – December 1872) in the United States and nine months (March – November 1876) in Western Siberia (Finsch, 1899: 11-14).

Finsch's travels in the Pacific were supported by a grant from the Humboldt-Stiftung für Naturforschung und Reisen ('Humboldt Foundation for Natural History Research and Travel'), issued by the members of the *Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* ('Royal Academy of Sciences in Berlin'). His aims, as listed in somewhat idiosyncratic English in a letter of introduction given to him by the Secretaries of the Academy of Sciences, were 'to make observations on, and to form collections of, all sorts of natural objects; to inquire into the present state of the *Aborigenes* [sic] of [the Micronesian Islands] ... and to gather relics of that fast out-dying race' (Secretaries of the Royal Academy of Sciences in Berlin, 1878; Anon., 1880). As this letter suggests, the initial grant was envisaged both by Finsch and by the Academy of Sciences as relating primarily to Micronesia: Australia, New Zealand and Torres Strait do not feature in Finsch's early proposals (Finsch, 1878, 1899: 14, 124). Surprisingly, New Guinea is also not mentioned, even though one of Finsch's major works prior to his departure had been the 1865 monograph *Neu-Guinea und seine Bewohner* ('New Guinea and its inhabitants'), the first full-length work on this topic to be published in the German language (Finsch, 1865).

In return for the funding provided by the grant, which amounted to 30,000 German marks over three and a half years, Finsch was expected to make detailed observations and assemble extensive collections of natural historical, physical anthropological and ethnographic interest. In accordance with his contract, the bulk of these collections, which in total filled approximately 157 crates, became the property of the Royal Museums (including the Zoological, Anatomical, Botanical, Mineralogical and Ethnographic Museums) in Berlin. However, as Finsch's travel expenses had required him to supplement the grant with considerable personal funds, he was permitted to keep any items considered 'duplicates'. The majority of these, together with collections assembled during his later voyage to New Guinea in 1884-85, were subsequently incorporated into the holdings of several European and North American museums, including the *Kaiserlich-Königliches Naturhistorisches Hofmuseum* ('Royal and Imperial Museum of Natural History', now the *Weltmuseum*) in Vienna; the *Museo Preistorico, Etnografico e Kircheriano* ('Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography / Museum Kircherianum') in Rome; the *Museum der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften* ('Museum of the Imperial Academy of Sciences') in St Petersburg; the *Field Columbian Museum* in Chicago; and the *American Museum of Natural History* in New York (Finsch, 1899: 15, 29, 124). The extensive holdings of the *Museum für Völkerkunde* ('Ethnographic Museum') in Vienna, including diaries, field notes, vocabulary lists, sketches, photographs and artefacts, were showcased in the exhibition '*Aus dem Pazifik: Ein Sammler aus Leidenschaft – F. H. Otto Finsch (1839-1917)*', open from 16 May – 8 October 2012 (Weiss & Cazan-Simányi, 2012).

**'THIS JUMBLE OF HUMAN RACES':  
ENCOUNTERS EN ROUTE TO MABUYAG**

Following an extended period in present-day Micronesia and shorter visits to New Zealand, Sydney and Cape York Peninsula, Finsch arrived in Torres Strait from Brisbane in early October 1881 on board the small steamer *Corea*. He initially based himself on Thursday Island (Waiben), assisted by the local Police Magistrate, Henry Marjoribanks Chester (1832-1914), to whose care he had been commended by the Queensland Government (Finsch, 1882a; Bolton, 1969). Finding, however, that Thursday Island had 'practically nothing to offer for the naturalist', he travelled next to Muralag, 'principally because I had heard that the natives from Hammond Island [Kiriri] had now relocated here'. Unfortunately for Finsch, the locals were already occupied with other visitors: 'two Malays from a pearl fishery were spending three months' holiday here, in order to live with native women ... [and] had brought an ample supply of provisions with them', including 'flour, rice and salted meat in abundance', as well as 'finer things, such as sardines, salmon and condensed milk'. In consequence, the locals displayed little interest in assisting Finsch, who grumpily recalled that he had had great difficulty even in coaxing them to haul his luggage 'a couple of hours' distance inland to a waterhole' where he then set up camp. He was equally dissatisfied with Muralag's natural environment, describing it as 'a miserable island, the ground littered with stones, which makes walking very difficult'. Although it was 'an interesting locality for the botanist, as a number of extremely rare orchids occur here', there was no sign of these during his visit. A large fire had recently swept across the island: Finsch had 'seen its powerful glow several evenings in a row from Thursday Island' and found it 'still smouldering in various places'. The fauna

'correspond[ed] entirely to that found in Somerset [Cape York Peninsula]' but was 'far more impoverished and represented only by a few species'. Apart from a great number of 'massive termite mounds' and a handful of birds, Finsch found little to hold his interest (Finsch, 1882a, 1881-82: 49-76).

Despite this unpromising beginning, Finsch 'gladly accepted a friendly invitation from Captain Pearson, the manager of Mr Bell's pearl fishery on Mabiak (Jervis Island)'. Though he claimed that the remaining islands in Torres Strait 'did not particularly attract [him]', since he 'could extrapolate the poverty [of their flora and fauna] ... sufficiently from Morilug and Thursday Island', he reasoned that he could expect 'mildly interesting forms of animal life' from Mabuyag: 'not only is this island the most heavily populated, it is also the most northerly and only around 36 sea miles from New Guinea' (Finsch, 1882a). As it happened, the voyage itself, which departed Thursday Island for Mabuyag on 4 November 1881, was to leave a lasting impression on him (Finsch, 1881-82: 81-83):

We therefore set sail in the "Lord Loftus", an exceptionally trim schooner of 21 tons. As the Captain had signed on divers and other seamen, the little ship was very lively and I would have liked to see an anthropologist find his bearings in this jumble of human races. The people had all provided themselves with new clothes; they were, as one says, "all spruced up", and in view of this all the wisdom of claiming to be able to identify these people's home countries from their faces came to an end. Physiognomies which I would have sworn I had seen in New Britain belonged to natives from Maré, Lifu, Tanna, Aoba [Ambae], the Murray Islands. One man with very light

skin I would have taken for a Maori: he is from Rotumah. That man with an aquiline nose, moustache and pointed beard is referred to as being from Tahiti: he comes from northern India. Another fairly brown fellow, with straight black hair and a full beard, is as like a Gilbert Islander as two peas in a pod: he comes from Alexandria and describes himself as an "Arab". Thus clothing changes people, and the more one sees of races, the more one is convinced that neither hair nor skin colouring, neither a broader nose nor thicker lips nor any of the other things that are described as determinative characteristics provide a firm basis for differentiating [between races] (Finsch, 1882a).

Finsch's struggles to reconcile the clear-cut racial classifications proposed by metropolitan theorists with his own complex and contradictory encounter experiences exemplify the 'recurrent tension between systems and facts' frequently confronted by anthropologists in the field (Douglas, 2008: 134). He had previously recounted the same experience in very similar but more forceful terms in a letter to Rudolf Ludwig Karl Virchow, the celebrated cellular pathologist, left-liberal politician, public health reformer and first President of the Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte ('Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory'). Virchow, who exercised a quite extraordinary influence over the development of physical anthropology in late nineteenth-century Germany, took a decisive interest in the collection and analysis of human remains and 'animated, guided and directed' numerous 'potential collectors' (Creutz & Wustmann, 1984: 291).<sup>1</sup> Prior to Finsch's departure, the two men 'discuss[ed]

at length' the 'anthropological responsibilities' of the voyage and Virchow entrusted to Finsch various tasks of anthropological interest, including 'classifications of colour [and] body measurements' (Virchow, 1884: vii).

In his letter, dated 5 January 1882 and published in the *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* shortly afterwards under the title 'Die Rassenfrage in Oceanien' ('The race question in Oceania'), Finsch concluded that 'all these characteristics – height, colouring, mouth, nose, expression and so forth – are so variable, that I can base no racial characteristics upon them, no matter how prettily [such things] may read in Waitz, Meinicke or Peschel' (Finsch, 1881a, 1882b: 163-166). This was a bold swipe at some of the most respected works in the German anthropological canon: the monumental six-volume *Anthropologie der Naturvölker* ('Anthropology of primitive peoples') by the German philosopher, psychologist and ethnologist Theodor Waitz; the geographer Oscar Peschel's extremely popular *Völkerkunde* ('Ethnology'), which was first published in 1874 and by 1897 had already reached its seventh edition; and the prolific publications of another geographer, Carl Eduard Meinicke, including several considered the first geographical standard works on Australia and the Pacific Islands, namely *Das Festland Australien* ('The continent of Australia'), *Die Südseevölker und das Christentum, eine ethnographische Untersuchung* ('The peoples of the South Seas and Christianity, an ethnographic investigation') and *Die Inseln des Stillen Ozeans* ('The islands of the Pacific Ocean') (Waitz, 1859-72; Peschel, 1874; Meinicke, 1837, 1844, 1875-76). Although these writers were far less rigidly deterministic in their understandings of physical variability than some of their contemporaries, Finsch nevertheless took exception to what he considered their excessive faith in the existence of clear and constant distinctions

between races. Above all, he asserted that neat racial categories, constructed from the comfort of a metropolitan armchair, were simply inadequate to comprehend the vast and bewildering human variety he had experienced:

I would wish the[se] anthropological gentlemen ... on a pearl [fishing] station in the Torres Strait, where one finds natives from almost all islands, from Hawaii and New Zealand to Singapore and the Philippines ... I have compared the characteristics of these races, book in hand, and found that everything, by and large, is incorrect: it is not so! (Finsch, 1882b: 164).<sup>2</sup>

#### **'MABIAK LAY BEFORE US': FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND THE PEARL FISHING INDUSTRY**

After a night spent 'at anchor in front of Banks Island [Moa], since sailing in the pitch dark ... did not seem advisable in view of the countless coral reefs', the *Lord Loftus* reached its destination on the morning of 5 November 1881 (Finsch, 1882a, 1881-82: 84-88). Finsch recorded his first impressions of Mabuyag:

The following morning Mabiak lay before us, an island that differs in no way from others in Torres Strait, except that as one approaches one catches sight of a small grove of coconut palms, which reminded me again that I was in the tropics. We sailed along the east coast, which consists of a broad white sand beach, adjoined by a mostly forested foreshore, bordered by a chain of hills set with trees.

On the seashore one perceives a village, consisting of a few poor huts,

beside them a couple of whitewashed houses: the mission of the London Missionary Society. When we turned around the south-east tip of the island, the ultimate object of our voyage, the pearl fishing station, lay before us in a small sheltered bay. Before it the entire diving fleet, consisting of 10 boats, lay at anchor, as they had not been able to go out on account of bad weather. In consequence, a lively activity prevailed in the harbour as well as on land.

The station consists of a wooden house with a roof made of zinc and pandanus for the caretaker, together with a warehouse and boatsheds. Behind the main house lie another 6 to 8 houses and huts for the divers and boat crew, for the station employs over 100 men, who for the most part are married temporarily to native women from the island, so that 45 women and a number of children alone are to be counted as permanent inhabitants of the station. Besides divers with apparatus, the station also possesses boats which go out with swimming divers, for whom the meagre depth of the Orman Reef nevertheless affords good opportunities and rich pickings (Finsch, 1882a).

Swimming divers, Finsch explained, 'are those who dive naked, without any apparatus, and, if they are successful, come up with a shell ... These people are for the most part natives of Mabiak itself'. In the past, he added, women had also been 'employed as divers' and 'often dived far better than the men', but by the time of his visit this had been 'prohibited', for reasons that he was unable to establish. He observed that the boats with swimming divers were 'in the habit of going out on Mondays and

coming in on Saturdays' and had '10 to 12 people on board, who are under the orders of a native captain, in most cases a man from Tanna'. In contrast, the boats with diving apparatus 'usually stay out for fourteen days, and probably longer; they then receive provisions from the tenders, which at the same time take charge of the gains already obtained'. The occupation was both seasonal and subject to the vagaries of the weather: '[Pearl] fishing can only be undertaken at all during the so-called "slack tide", so that the boats often have nothing to do for days on end ... During the north-west monsoon, the boats with swimming divers have to take a complete holiday and their crews then receive three months' leave' (Finsch, 1882a).

Finsch had evidently hoped to profit from the activities of the divers to obtain items of natural historical interest from the sea floor, but was forced to report that, 'despite the seemingly favourable opportunity', he had 'nevertheless gained nothing ... for my collection'. He explained that it was in the divers' interest 'to devote their entire time and attention only to the pearl shells, and anything they bring up with them in the nature of corals and sponges, the caretakers of the stations keep for themselves'. Nevertheless, he was convinced that 'Torres Strait harbours an enormous wealth of sea products which would be easy to obtain by diving' and had 'no doubt that the time will soon come when boats will be equipped in the service of science itself' (Finsch, 1882a).<sup>3</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising that Finsch found the island's terrestrial flora and fauna disappointing in comparison to these inaccessible underwater riches. Mabuyag, he reported,

has exactly the character of the rest of the islands in Torres Strait: littered with stones, mountainous, covered with a poor growth of trees, with

mangrove thickets along its margins ... I roamed the entire island in the sweat of my brow, clambered up hill and down dale and found nothing which could halfway satisfy me. The birdlife is even more impoverished than on Thursday Island and is restricted to a few species, all of which are Australian. On the rocky islands facing the station, of which Florence Island [Talab] is the largest, Australian pelicans (*Pelecanus perspicillatus*)<sup>4</sup> reside; I went on a hunting tour after them, but even in a whaleboat we could not reach the island, as the current constantly threw us back. There are also crocodiles, both on Mabiak and everywhere else in Torres Strait, but I did not glimpse any (Finsch, 1882a).

#### **'EAGER, SKILFUL AND SUCCESSFUL ... HUNTERS': CATCHING TURTLES AND DUGONG**

Turtles and dugong stood out amongst this relative paucity of local fauna as being of particular novelty and interest. Finsch recorded their significance to the local diet, observing that 'the people on Mabiak cultivate yams, sweet potatoes and bananas on a limited scale, but on account of the prevailing drought the plantations do not particularly thrive ... they find adequate nourishment in dugong, turtles and fish'. He devoted a substantial proportion of the column inches in his *Hamburger Nachrichten* article to describing these creatures and local methods of hunting them. Both hawksbill and green turtles, he observed, occurred on and around Mabuyag, though green turtles were found 'in greater numbers' and included 'colossal specimens'. They were hunted both on the sandbanks where they laid their eggs and while they were 'drifting asleep on the sea'. In the latter case, two

men would approach the turtle, 'skilfully swimming, and loop a rope around one of the flippers'. This process, Finsch remarked, was 'not free of hazards, for the turtle thrashes about violently ... and is capable of inflicting considerable wounds' (Finsch, 1882a).

In addition to these practices, Finsch was particularly intrigued to discover on Mabuyag, 'as well as in Torres Strait generally', the existence of 'another, highly original method of catching turtles, namely with the assistance of a suckerfish (*Echmeis*), that remarkable fish which is equipped with an adhesive device on the upper surface of its head' (Finsch, 1882a).

The natives catch these suckerfish and keep them ready in the canoe in a vessel full of seawater. A long, sturdy line is attached to the tail of the fish. The canoe paddles carefully and a sharp lookout is kept for turtles. If one is spotted, the suckerfish is thrown overboard. At first it does not know where to turn, but it soon swims in a straight line towards the turtle, to which it attaches itself. The line with the suckerfish is then carefully hauled in, and with it the turtle. In this way specimens of up to a hundred pounds in weight are caught, certainly an astonishing proof of the strength of adhesion of which this fish is capable, and I believe the only case in which man has been able to turn even the services of a fish to his advantage (Finsch, 1882a).

During his time on Mabuyag Finsch 'saw six large turtles brought in which had been caught in this way'. The locals 'tied their front flippers firmly together with vines, laid them on their back and immediately began to slaughter them, or rather to cut out their flesh while they were still alive ... During this process the unhappy victim thrashed about fiercely with its hind flippers'. This

procedure, Finsch mused, would doubtless have 'appall[ed] the members of an animal welfare organisation', but in his view the locals could well have countered such objections with the question: 'Tell us how turtles can be killed quickly and painlessly?' From his own experience he could 'testify ... that this is not easy, for I have never yet encountered a tenacity of life comparable to that of a turtle. Cut off its head, and the legs will still be in motion for half an hour; even the heart, when cut out and laid in a dish, continues to beat for at least a quarter of an hour' (Finsch, 1882a).

Dugong, however, were in Finsch's eyes the region's 'most interesting animal' and the focus of his most detailed descriptions. Although he was aware that they were not hunted only by Torres Strait Islanders – he knew, for example, of a company in Brisbane 'that systematically practises dugong hunting and sells its meat in long air-dried strips, as well as "potted dugong" as a delicacy' – he was more interested in traditional hunting implements and practices, as well as the spiritual beliefs associated with dugong (Finsch, 1882a, 1900: 908). Both 'the natives of Mabiak' and 'the pearl fishers' in general were 'eager, skilful and successful dugong hunters', no great surprise in view of the fact that dugong were especially common around Mabuyag, 'where the Orman Reef in particular offers [them] rich pastures' (Finsch, 1882a: n.p.). In Finsch's view, however, the inhabitants of Mabuyag 'rank[ed] amongst the best catchers of dugong'. He located them within a larger geographical, cultural and linguistic area, identifying their traditional hunting practices with those found both on other islands in Torres Strait and 'on the south coast of New Guinea, from the Fly westwards to around the Morehead River', and noting that the dugong was known 'in this entire area' by the name '*dungal* or *dangal*' (Finsch, 1900: 898, 902).

Finsch also recorded local names for some of the implements used in hunting dugong. The traditional harpoon, for example,

consists of a round shaft, *wap*, 4 to 5 metres long, of hardwood ... In the thinner upper end a slit is cut, in order to allow ornaments to be tied on, which consist of bunches of cassowary feathers and sometimes also a few rattling nuts. At the blunt lower end a hole is bored through the middle ... for the insertion of the actual harpoon (*kwoioro*). The latter, formerly of bone or hardwood, has for several decades now been made of iron. As a general rule a three-sided file 18 to 22 centimetres long is used; this is softened by annealing, so as to allow numerous barbs to be filed out, each pointing upwards at a slant. The point of the harpoon ... sits only loosely in the shaft and is attached to a line 20 to 25 mm thick and 80 to 100 m long, made of local material (from the fibres of a creeper, probably a species of *Pueraria*). *Wap* are principally produced on Morilug ... but also on Mabiak and Badu, and form one of the most valuable items of exchange amongst the inhabitants of the [various] islands and between them and those of the south coast of New Guinea. An active process of bartering with the latter takes place, mediated by the inhabitants of Saibai Island; most of the islanders' weapons (including bows and arrows), ornamental items and all large canoes actually come from New Guinea (*Daudai*). Even in 1883, a *wap* would [still] be exchanged for a large canoe or regarded as bride price for a girl ... this high value explains why the *wap* is unfortunately missing from my collection (Finsch, 1900: 898-899).

Dugong, Finsch continued, were hunted both 'by day from a canoe' and 'at night ... from a special framework' (Figures 3, 4).<sup>5</sup> When hunting from a canoe, 'the harpooner stands at the front, in the prow of the vessel, in order to keep a lookout, and the natives have a marvellous knack of allowing themselves to drift towards a dugong when it is surfacing or submerging'. The framework used for night hunting, '*nät*, is roughly constructed from six poles or bamboos arranged crosswise, over which a board is laid, usually the plank of an old canoe'. Great care was taken beforehand to identify a promising location for the *nät*, the hunters 'meticulously examin[ing]' the reef at low tide for signs that would indicate the presence of dugong, including 'grazed-off seagrass, churned-up ground, and the impression left behind by the animals' bodies'. Care was also necessary in the construction and orientation of the *nät*: the plank for the hunter to stand on, 'one-and-a-half to three metres above high-tide level', had to be arranged 'with its long axis [facing] in the direction of the wind, for even a gentle headwind could cause the scaffolding to creak and frighten the dugong away' (Finsch, 1900: 899-900).

As is self-evident, hunting from a *nät* is only possible on moonlit nights with still water, so that the sharp eye of the native can detect the prey ... The approach of the animals, usually in small groups ... can be perceived from a distance by their puffing and snorting. With his harpoon at the ready, the hunter stands motionless on his scaffolding ... beside him the carefully-rolled line, which is fastened at one end to the point of the harpoon, at the other to the scaffolding. At the very moment when a dugong comes to the surface of the water within throwing distance in order to breathe, the man leaps into

the water and thrusts the harpoon into the animal's body, though its effect is lethal only if it fortuitously strikes the spinal column, given the thickness of the [dugong's] skin. Alerted by a shout, the companions, who have been waiting in the canoe, hurry over and throw themselves into the water. The animal has dived into the depths; they wait to loop a rope around its tail when it comes up again, and by means of this they hold the dugong under water until it suffocates, which happens within a short space of time. The harpoon-thrower himself must pay attention

to the line to ensure that it does not become tangled ... and to bring the shaft of the harpoon (*wap*), which has become detached from the point, safely into the canoe (Finsch, 1900: 900-901).

Writing in 1900, nearly twenty years after his visit to Torres Strait, Finsch suggested that the method of hunting he had so vividly described 'may well now be a thing of the past'. At the time of his visit in 1881-82, 'the hunting of dugongs was to a great extent being conducted from the splendid, swift-sailing boats of the pearl fishers', who were themselves 'eager' participants in the hunt.

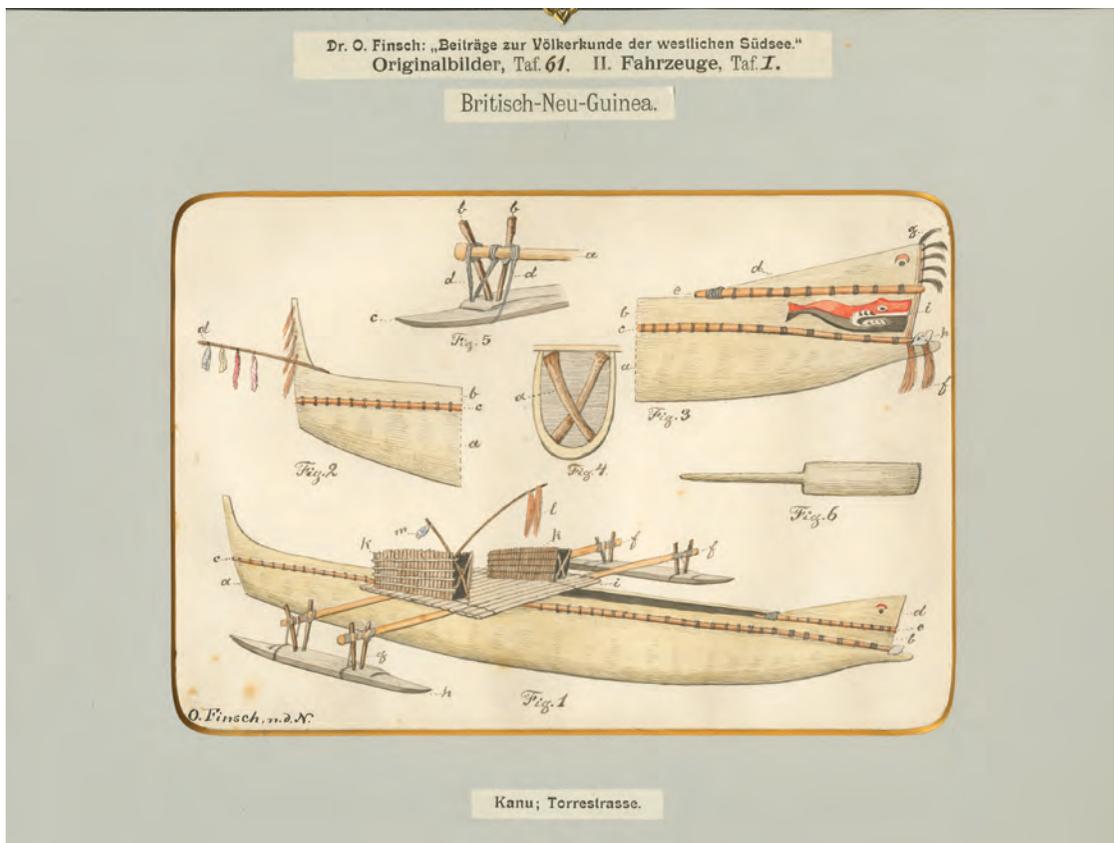


FIG. 3. Watercolour by Otto Finsch (undated) New Guinea. Large sailing canoe with details. Morilug Isl. (Prince of Wales Isl.) Torres Strait. From O. Finsch, 'Beiträge zur Völkerkunde der westlichen Südsee', original images, Pl. 61. II. Vessels, Pl. I. Reproduction courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History.

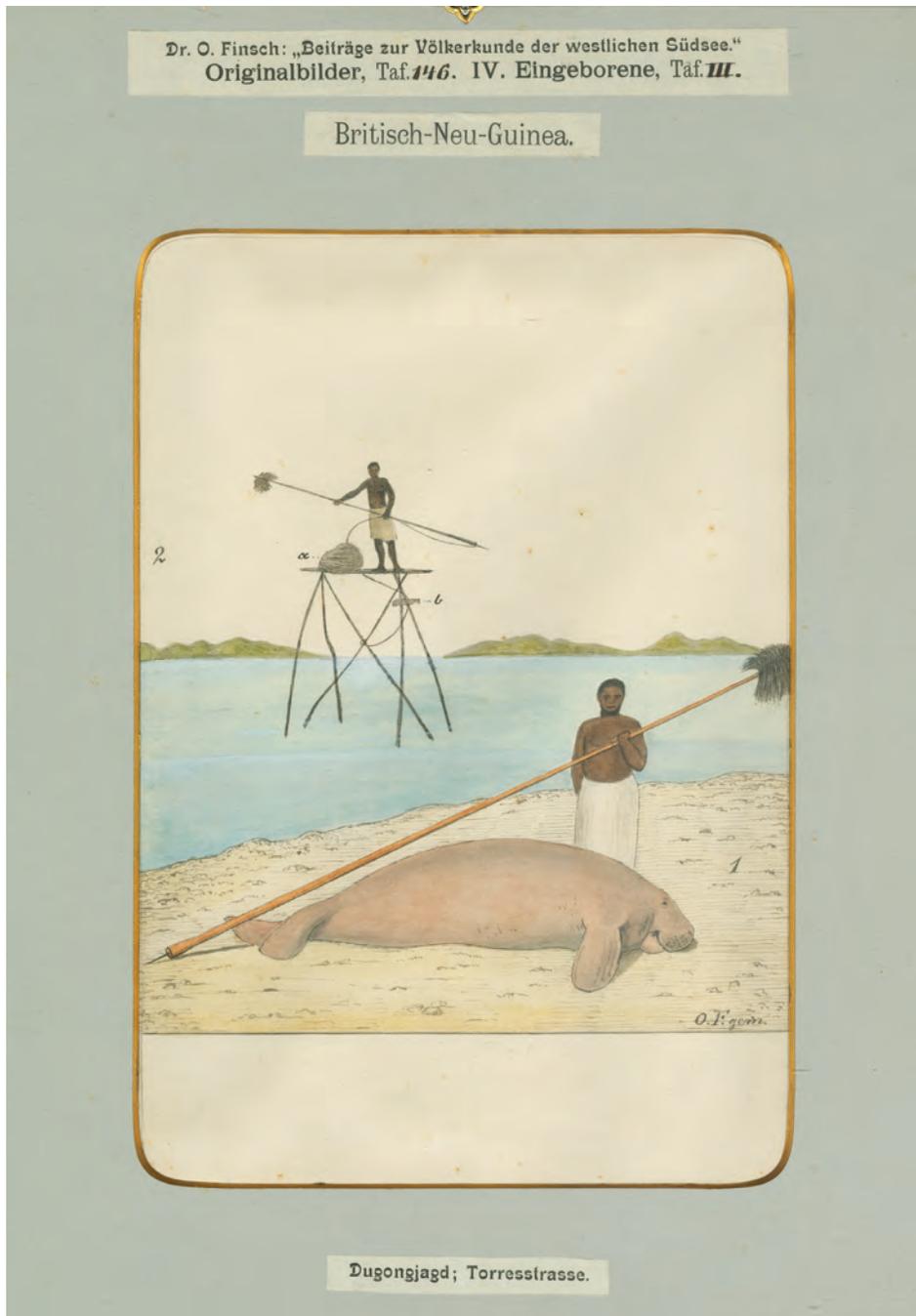


FIG. 4. Watercolour by Otto Finsch, after a photograph by A.C. Haddon (undated) Dugong hunt; Mabiak (Jervis Isl.), Torres Str. 1. Man with harpoon and slain dugong. 2. Man with harpoon on platform. From O. Finsch, 'Beiträge zur Völkerkunde der westlichen Südsee', original images, Pl. 146. IV. Natives, Pl. III. Reproduction courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History.

In 1888, he added, Alfred Cort Haddon, who ten years later became leader of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits, had reported that ‘this new method of hunting had already as good as completely suppressed the practice of hunting from the *nāt*’ (Finsch, 1900: 901).<sup>6</sup> Finsch was evidently familiar with Haddon’s work and based several of the watercolours in his unpublished manuscript ‘Beiträge zur Völkerkunde der westlichen Südsee’ (‘Contributions to the ethnology of the western Pacific’) on photographs taken by Haddon in Torres Strait (see, for example, Figure 3 above and Figure 13 below). Conversely, as Jude Philp notes, Haddon ‘collected photographs others’, including Finsch, ‘had taken in the Strait to complete his [own] photographic record’ (Philp, 2004: 30). Cambridge University’s Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology (MAA) holds several photographs and sketches completed by Finsch in Torres Strait and deposited by Haddon (see, for example, Figures 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 below).

Although he claimed that ‘festivities ... in celebration of the dugong hunt do not occur amongst the inhabitants of Torres Strait’, Finsch was aware of the significance of dugong in local belief systems. ‘In earlier times’, he noted, Torres Strait Islanders had been ‘accustomed to store [the skulls of dugong] ordered in series, or to pile them up around the trunk of a tree, with the result that over time entire pyramids of skulls come into being’. A particularly large pyramid of this kind had been observed on Tudu (Warrior Island) in June 1840 during a round-the-world voyage by the French ships *Astrolabe* and *Zélée*, but by the early 1870s ‘there was nothing of it to be seen’ (Finsch, 1900: 902-903; Dumont d’Urville, 1846a: 237, 1846b: Pl. 189). Similarly, a tree on Mabuyag decorated with dugong skulls and ribs, described by the missionary William Wyatt

Gill in his 1876 work *Life in the Southern Isles*, ‘no longer existed’ when Finsch visited the island in 1881 (Finsch, 1900: 901-903; Gill, 1876: 203, 302). Noting that ‘the front teeth and ribs’ of the dugong yielded ‘a bone mass harder than ivory’ and that in the 1870s this ‘Torres Straits ivory’ had fetched prices in Sydney of ‘up to 500 [German] marks per tonne’, Finsch voiced the suspicion that the collections of dugong bones observed on Mabuyag and other islands by earlier European visitors might have fallen victim to commercial interests (Finsch, 1900: 908). Despite these changes, dugong retained a significant place in local life, particularly in relation to burial practices. In addition to the ‘veritable knacker’s yard of dugong bones’ behind the main village on Mabuyag, Finsch noted, ‘[t]he natives also love to decorate their graves with the skulls of dugong. I counted on one such grave no fewer than sixty skulls’ (Finsch, 1882a, 1900: 903).

#### **‘THE MANNER OF BURYING THE DEAD’: FUNERAL PRACTICES ON MABUYAG**

Finsch was interested in local burial practices more generally and was sensitive to changes and continuities in these. ‘Nowadays’, he assured his readers in 1882, ‘the natives bury their dead as we do’ (Finsch, 1882a). He explained this as a result of the influence of Christian missionaries, adding that ‘on Mabiak there are scarcely 150 natives still living, who judging by their names are all Christianised and in any case bury their dead’ (Finsch, 1909a). Nevertheless, ‘echoes from heathen times’ were still preserved in the adornment of the graves: ‘a rough fence of poles is erected around the burial mound, and these, like the grave itself, are decorated with red-painted shells (*Cymbium*, *Fusus*), but also, as a sign of the new era, with empty tins and gin bottles, as I observed on Mabiak’ (Finsch, 1900: 903).

In earlier times, however, 'the manner of burying the dead' had been 'very peculiar'. Corpses 'were laid on a shallow framework of poles, which was erected on a rocky hill near the coast, and either they dried out into mummies or the flesh rotted off' (Finsch, 1882a). Once this process had been completed, 'the skull was then carefully stored as a protection for the family, but the remaining bones were buried', and a 'monument' erected above them similar to the one observed on Muralag in 1844 by the naturalist Joseph Beete Jukes: 'a hill (8 feet long, 4 feet wide and 3 feet high) ... decorated with dugong skulls and ribs and large shells (*Cymbium*, *Nautilus*), all painted with red pigment' (Finsch, 1900: 903; Jukes, 1847, I: 149-150). On some islands in Torres Strait, Finsch added, 'corpses were formerly dried out into mummies in huts erected especially for this purpose, in which a fire was kept going constantly'. This practice persisted at the time of his visit, though not, apparently, on Mabuyag: 'several enterprising trepang fishers ... continue the artificial production of mummies, for which their smoking houses for trepang offer an excellent opportunity' (Finsch, 1882a). Although Finsch saw 'three specimens' of traditionally mummified ancestral remains in 'the museum in Brisbane', he discovered that such mummies were 'no longer obtainable, the skulls likewise scarcely any more, as the graves are very close to the village and are kept under rigorous surveillance' (Finsch, 1882a).

Nevertheless, in the course of his 'wanderings' across the island, Finsch 'more than once' came across 'burial frameworks' of the kind described above. Although, in general, 'wind and weather and in particular the large yearly bushfires which spread across the whole island destroy these skeletons very quickly', in some cases 'a number of bones' could still be found lying beside the framework (Finsch, 1909a).

Finsch took advantage of these discoveries to assemble collections of ancestral remains for his German patrons. His handwritten records of his seventh shipment to the Royal Ethnographic Museum in Berlin, which list physical anthropological and ethnographic items collected in Torres Strait and the Cape York Peninsula between October and December 1881, catalogue a total of 14 skulls and two collections of skeletal material from Mabuyag (Finsch, 1909a). These remains were sent from Thursday Island to Sydney in January 1882 on board the *Corea* and were then shipped from Sydney to Bremen. Adolf Bastian, the Ethnographic Museum's first director, assigned to Virchow the scientific redaction of Finsch's collections of ancestral remains (Finsch, 1899: 94-95).

Following Virchow's death in 1902, Finsch's repeated inquiries elicited from Felix von Luschan, at that time Director of the Africa-Oceania Division at the Ethnographic Museum, the advice that the skulls he had assembled during his voyage of 1879-82 were 'probably located in the so-called "Rudolf Virchow Collection"', then that 'the entire material [had] passed into the possession of the Berlin Anthropological Society' (Finsch, 1909a). During the Second World War, the majority of the "Rudolf Virchow Collection of the Berlin Anthropological Society" was committed to the custody of the Anthropological Division of the Museum for Natural History at the Humboldt University in Berlin (Creutz & Wustmann, 1984: 289). This collection is now housed at the Medical History Museum of the Charité University Hospital in Berlin, which has committed to repatriate all Australian Indigenous ancestral remains in its holdings once consultations with the relevant communities have been completed (UMAC Worldwide Database of University Museums & Collections, 2012; Endele, 2008; Winkelmann, 2014).

### **'NOT PRECISELY [A] PLEASANT PROCESS': ANTHROPOMETRICAL EXAMINATIONS**

In addition to collecting ancestral remains, Finsch also prepared plaster casts (moulages) of the faces of local people on Mabuyag, as he had done at virtually every previous location visited during his travels. By the end of his voyage he had assembled a total of 155 plaster casts of 'native' faces, representing '5 human races from 31 major islands or groups and 61 different localities' (Finsch, 1882c: 564, 1884: ix-x, 78, 1899: 15-17). In the preface to Finsch's 'descriptive catalogue' of his collection of plaster casts from Oceania, published in 1884 under the title 'Anthropologische Ergebnisse einer Reise in der Südsee' ('Anthropological results of a journey in the South Seas') (Finsch, 1884), Virchow praised Finsch's 'skill' and 'stamina' in preparing the casts, noting that few travellers before him had possessed sufficient patience or ability to 'prevail upon people of foreign race' to submit to anthropometrical examinations (Virchow, 1884: v-vi). Given the lengthy and difficult nature of the processes involved, this was hardly surprising. Such casts required the subject to lie still for 40 minutes or more during the application and drying of the plaster. Eyebrows, eyelashes and facial hair, if present, had to be well greased to prevent the plaster from sticking. Even pure plaster emitted heat while drying, causing discomfort to the subject; plaster adulterated with lime could result in serious burns (von Luschan, 1906: 6-7; Zimmerman, 2001: 165-166, 2003: 164-166). Finsch himself confessed that he 'sometimes wonder[ed]' how it had been possible to convince 'so-called savages, of whose language I did not understand a word', to undergo what he acknowledged was 'not precisely [a] pleasant process' (Finsch, 1884: xi).

Finsch meticulously recorded the name, gender, and approximate age of each person whose face he cast in plaster, together with the colour of their skin according to Broca's chromatic table (a graduated series of skin and eye colours designed for use by anthropologists in the field, created in 1865 by the leading French anatomist Paul Broca) and the longitudinal axis of their skull in millimeters (Broca, 1865). While on Mabuyag he produced plaster casts of a total of eight locals. Seven were men: Gauri, around 30 years old; Mau and Gagai, both approximately 35 years old; Karúm, around 28 years of age; Uami, between 30 and 35 years of age; and two younger men, Au-ub, 'known as Bell', and Kabissu, 'known as Porker', whose ages Finsch estimated at 17 and 14 respectively. The eighth cast was of a young woman, Gaiba, aged around 20 (Finsch, 1909a). These casts, however, were not fated to join those listed in Finsch's descriptive catalogue: all eight of them, together with those depicting people from Cape York Peninsula, were 'irretrievably lost' as a result of the 'negligence' of Finsch's agent on Thursday Island. Instead of shipping the crates containing these casts to Sydney immediately, as he had promised, the unfortunate agent had stowed them aboard a ship serving as a warehouse, which subsequently sank, to Finsch's great regret and considerable chagrin (Finsch, 1884: vii, x, 25, 42, 66, 1883a, 1883b).

In addition to the ill-fated plaster casts, Finsch took photographs of Gauri, Mau, Gagai, Au-ub and Gaiba, and obtained hair samples from each of them. Although the hair samples, unlike the casts, reached Berlin safely, they subsequently went missing: Bastian 'privilege[d] collecting over everything else, including the itemizing, cataloging, and ordering of artefacts', and the Museum's collections soon outgrew its physical and material limits to a chaotic

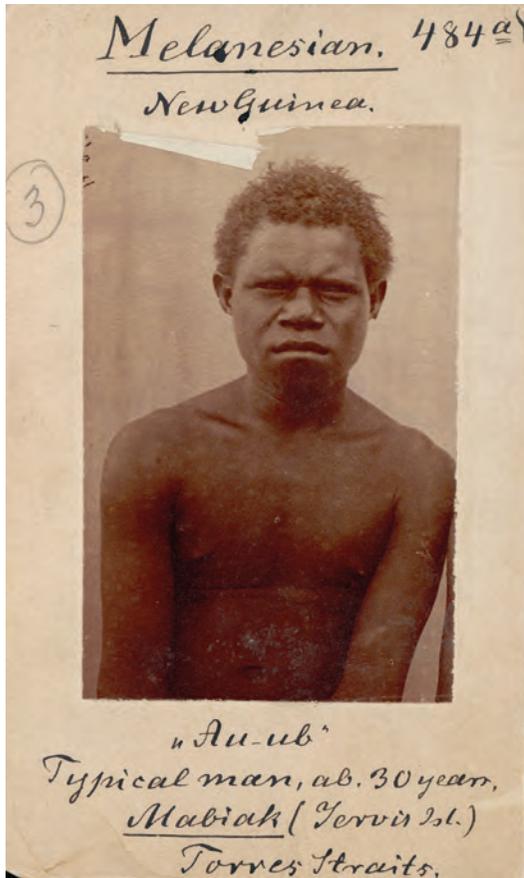


FIG. 5. Photograph by Otto Finsch (c.1881) Melanesian. New Guinea. "Au-ub", typical man, ab. 30 years. Mabiak (Jervis Isl.) Torres Straits. DOE Oceania: Melanesia: New Guinea: Papua: NM 27204 05083200. Reproduction courtesy of the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

degree, forcing Berlin's ethnologists to combine or remove various collections (Penny, 2002: 163-214, 2003: 102-110). Finsch's complete collection of hair samples, 232 in total, was mislaid permanently in the resulting confusion (see Finsch, 1899: 15, 1908; Virchow *et al.*, 1908-09).<sup>7</sup>

Following his return to Germany, Finsch prepared an 'Album of types of peoples from the South Seas', containing 250 original photographs with explanatory text, but



FIG. 6. Photograph by Otto Finsch (c.1881) Man, side. Gaigai [sic], Dugoi, Bagub (tabu) Mabiuiag, married Damat, Kubi, (Kaigan) Mabiuiag. Checked by A.C.H. [Haddon] 1898. N.22993.ACH2. Reproduction courtesy of the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

its imminent publication was interrupted by his departure for New Guinea in 1884. A further manuscript of 'Anthropological observations from the western South Seas', which 'endeavour[ed] to represent the physical habit, physiognomy, hair formation and skin colouring of the various races and tribes, with particular consideration of individual variations', also languished unpublished (Finsch, 1899: 71, 73). Nevertheless, copies of some of his photographs from Torres Strait survive in the National Anthropological Archives of the Smithsonian Museum and the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology of the University of Cambridge (Figures 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10).

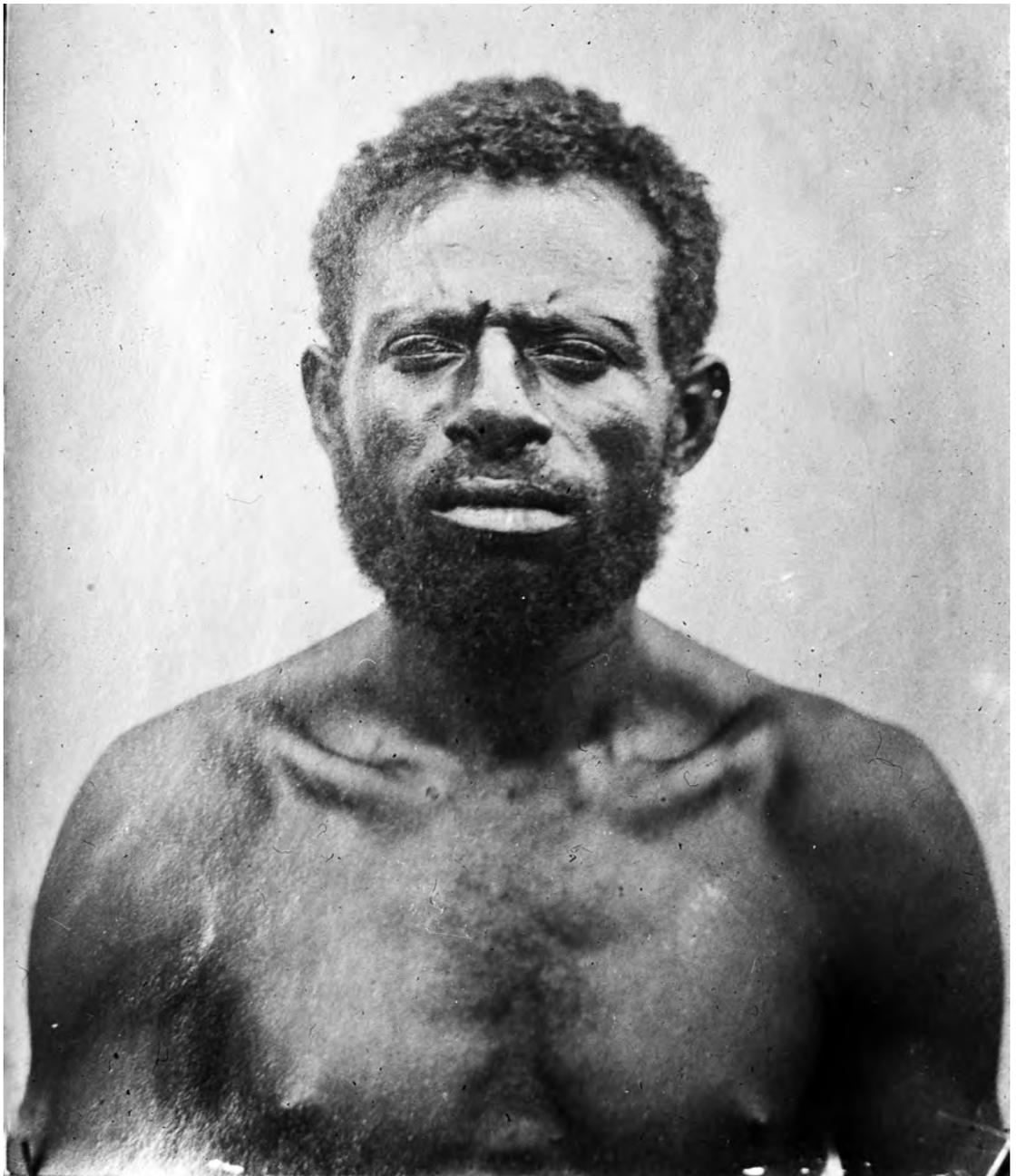


FIG. 7. Photograph by Otto Finsch (c.1881) Man, full. Gaigai [sic], Dugoi, Bagub (tabu) Mabuiag, married Damat, Kubi, (Kaigan) Mabuiag. Checked by A.C.H. [Haddon] 1898. N.22992.ACH2. Reproduction courtesy of the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

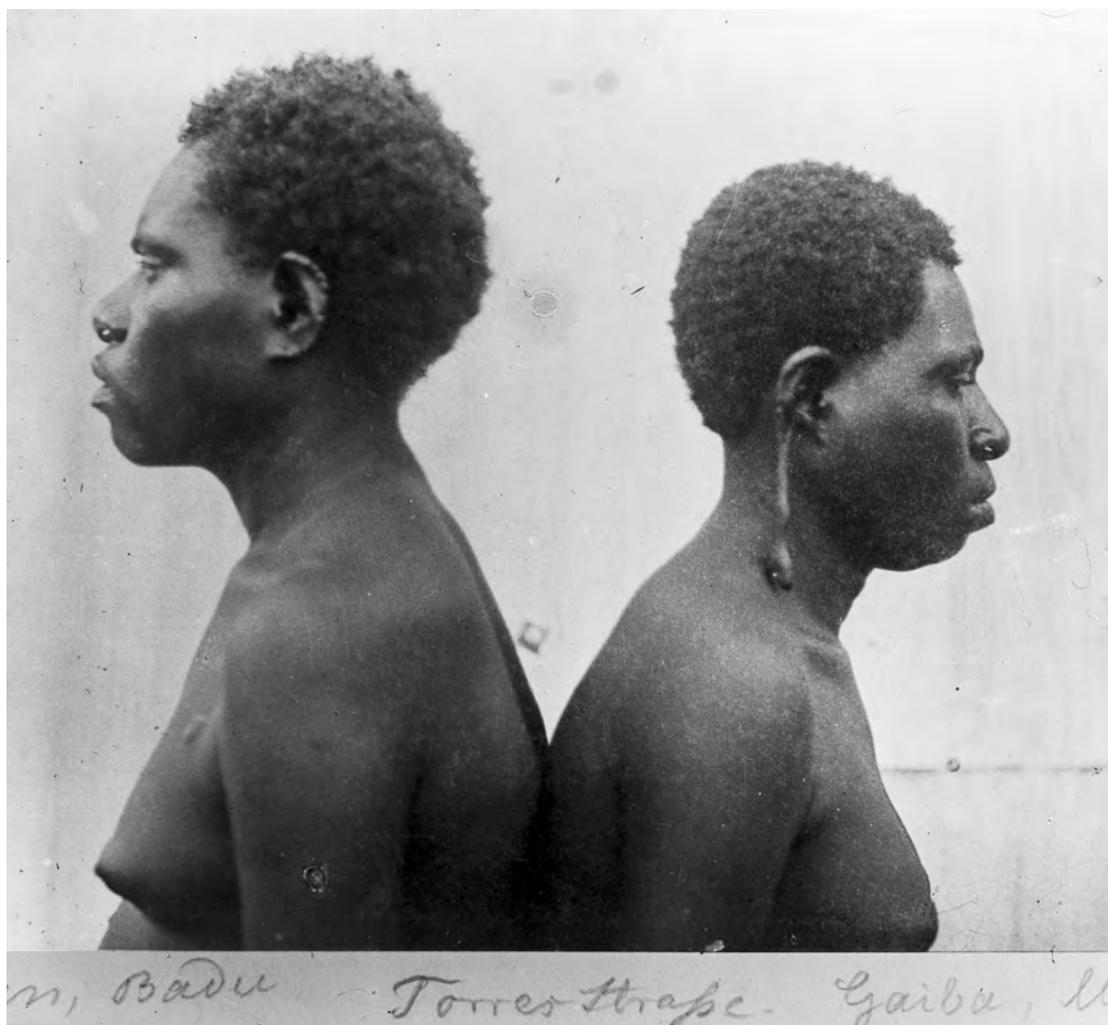


FIG. 8. Photograph by Otto Finsch (c.1881) Portrait of two women back to back. Left: Alan (Alalan) from Badu, right: Gaiba (Gawada) from Mabuyag. Reproduced in Haddon (1912: PI II fig. 1). N.22996.ACH2. Reproduction courtesy of the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

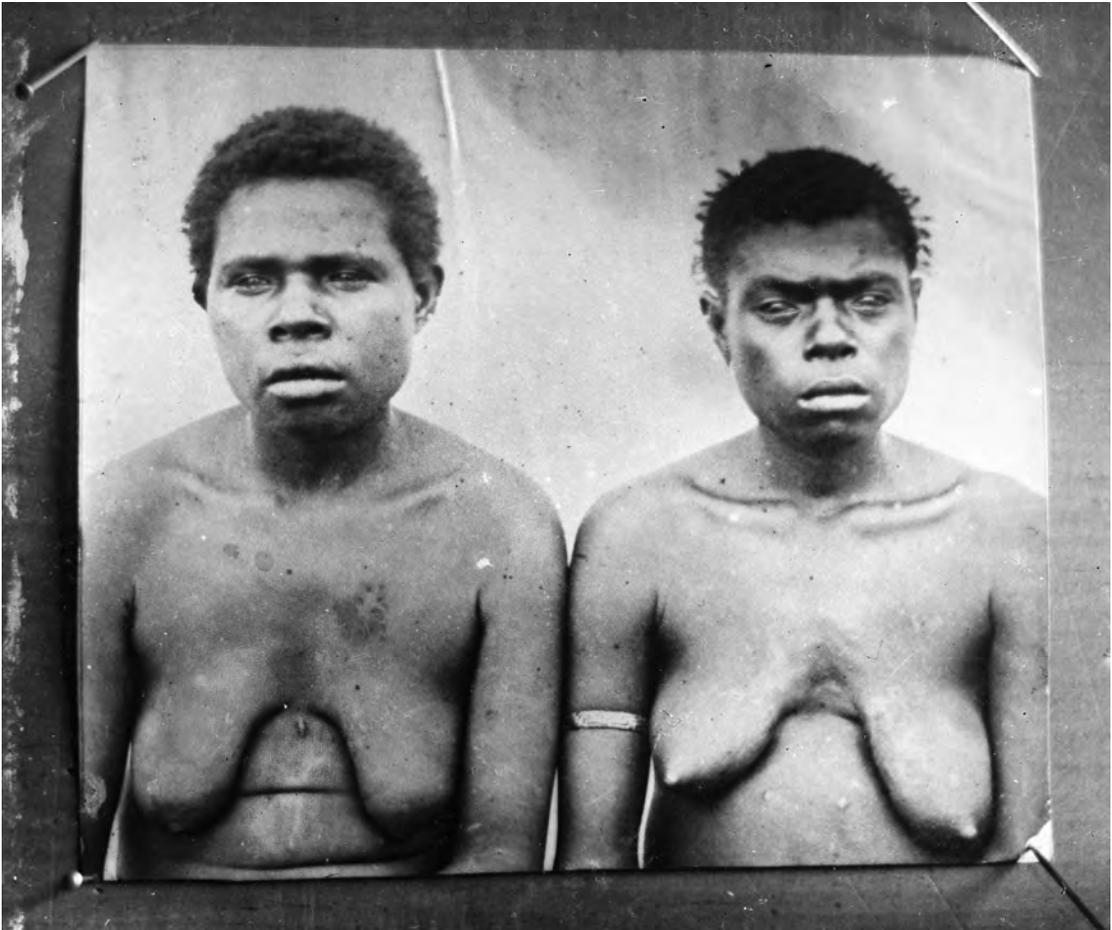


FIG. 9. Photograph by Otto Finsch (c.1881) Portrait of two women, full face. [Left:] Iadaku (Sam), wife of Waimi or Mariget (Kodal) both of Badu, [right:] Aiaga or Kote (dungal), wife of Mam (kodal), both of Mabuia [Haddon's annotation]. The woman on the right is reproduced in Haddon (1912: Pl. II fig. 3) with the caption 'Aigaga, Mabuia'. N.51463.ACH2. Reproduction courtesy of the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

**'VERY REMARKABLE ... FORMS':  
ANTHROPOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS ON  
MABUYAG**

Despite the glaring 'mismatch of theory and praxis' he had identified on board the *Lord Loftus* and his personal experience of the unreliability of physical features such as skin colour, hair type, or head shape as racial diagnostics, Finsch was reluctant to abandon existing racial categories completely

(Douglas, 2008: 134). 'The natives of Mabiak', he declared,

like their island, do not differ in any way from their tribal companions in other parts of Torres Strait and are genuine Melanesians. Nevertheless, there are already more light-coloured individuals [here] than elsewhere, and the[ir] densely curling wavy hair is most surprising on account of



FIG. 10. Photograph by Otto Finsch (c.1881) Portrait of two women, side view. The woman on the right is reproduced in Haddon (1912: Pl. II fig. 4) with the caption 'Aigaga, Mabuiag': N.51464.ACH2. Reproduction courtesy of the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

its tawny colouring. This, however, is artificially produced; the hair is powdered with corrosive wood ash, a process that begins when they are still children (Finsch, 1882a).

While some 'artificially produced' modifications to a person's external appearance – the distinctive tattoos of New Zealand Maori, for example, or the stretched earlobes of Marshall Islanders – could be

of assistance in correctly identifying their origins, others substantially complicated anthropologists' attempts to classify groups of people into 'neat racial pigeonholes' on the basis of their physical features (Finsch, 1882b: 164; Douglas, 2008: 134). The inhabitants of Mabuyag, Finsch discovered, did not only modify the appearance of their hair; on the contrary, he was fascinated to establish the existence of a practice used to alter the form of the head itself. The

comparison of cranial forms had been privileged in studies of human difference in Europe and North America since at least the late eighteenth century, when the influential German comparative anatomist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach declared in the first volume of his *Decades Craniorum*, an illustrated series of detailed descriptions of his collection of crania, that ‘no part of the human body’ appeared ‘more suitable for the purpose of distinguishing and defining national varieties’ than the skull. Besides ‘constituting the foundation and support of the entire physiognomy’ and thus acting as the ‘interpreter’ of the soul, the skull combined ‘stability’ with ‘the utmost variety of shape and of the relative proportion of its parts’, qualities which allowed the natural historian to select from it ‘the most reliable characters of nations’ (Blumenbachii [Blumenbach], 1820 [1790]: 5).<sup>8</sup> Cultural practices which artificially altered the form of the skull were therefore of particular interest to physical anthropologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Finsch recorded his observations of this practice on Mabuyag in both written and visual form (Figures 11, 12):

One custom which ... is found on almost all islands of Torres Strait is the practice of pressing flat the heads of infants. From birth onwards, throughout the entire first year of its life, the head of the infant is pushed backwards and pressed in the flats of both hands and one frequently sees the child being passed around the circle of women in order to be treated in this way. The children, by the bye, remain perfectly quiet during this procedure, so evidently they do not experience any pain. In the heads of adults ... little of this deformation can be observed, in consequence of the thick growth of their hair, but it is all the more evident in skulls ... [which] often display significant displacements and distorted sutures (Finsch, 1882a).



FIG. 11. Photograph by A.C. Haddon, from an original drawing by Otto Finsch (1898) Artificial deformation of infant’s head by a Mabuyag woman. N.23001. ACH2. Reproduction courtesy of the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Cambridge.



FIG. 12. Photograph by A.C. Haddon, from an original drawing by Otto Finsch (1898) Infant’s head artificially deformed. Mabuyag. N.23002.ACH2. Reproduction courtesy of the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

As a result of this procedure, most of the skulls Finsch collected on Mabuyag displayed 'very remarkable, irregular forms': his annotations describe two of them specifically as 'very flat' and a third simply as 'very peculiar'. He further recorded that the procedure 'is called "Kuiku" and is done for the sake of beauty, because flat-headed people are considered particularly beautiful' (Finsch, 1909a).

### **'THE MISSION AND ... THE FISHERIES': CHRISTIANITY AND COMMERCE IN TORRES STRAIT**

Although the mission on Mabuyag had 'not yet been able to suppress' the practice of skull modification, other customs, such as the mummification of the dead, had been 'completely abandoned'. Finsch noted regretfully that 'the life of the natives has lost something of its originality in consequence of the influence of the mission and of the fisheries' (Finsch, 1882a). This remark echoed similar observations he had made previously in other parts of the Pacific, ranging from the impacts of introduced species on native flora and fauna (and, in consequence, on traditional culture) in Maui, Hawai'i, to the adoption of double-barrelled shotguns in preference to greenstone and whalebone *mere* (clubs) by warriors in the retinue of King Tāwhiao in Hamilton, New Zealand (Finsch, 1879a, 1879b: 326-327, 1881b: 335). Although a concern with cultural originality was already implicit in his pre-voyage work *Neu-Guinea und seine Bewohner*, it is clear that Finsch's experiences in the field made him increasingly aware of the transformations in indigenous cultures that followed European contact, and that he perceived such transformations not as cultural adaptation but as cultural loss (Finsch, 1865: 40).

Although Finsch attributed the abandonment of certain traditional practices on Mabuyag to both missionary and commercial influences,

he differed in his assessment of the positive results of these influences. He admitted that locals employed in the pearl fishing industry learned 'quite a few things ... which are not good, above all the drinking of schnaps', but argued that they were nevertheless given the opportunity to acquire and develop useful skills:

it cannot be denied that the [pearl fishing] stations train up generally useful people and in a way civilise their wards far more than the mission. The native of the fishery learns to handle oar and sails and what is more, his acquisitive impulse becomes active, because he sees that through diligence he can obtain something for himself. Needs are awakened in him, which after all is an improvement. In addition, he becomes more or less familiar with the English language and can therefore continue to better himself: the world stands open to him as a diligent worker. He thus finds his way onto other islands, onto ships, on which he makes the acquaintance of big cities and of life and in this way becomes a generally useful individual, elevated far above the social status of his countrymen (Finsch, 1882a).

This paternalistic assessment of the civilising effects, on supposedly idle 'natives', of incorporation into the colonial capitalist system, though it existed in tension with Finsch's regretful recognition of the changes to indigenous cultures following European contact, was entirely consistent with his subsequent intimate involvement in Germany's colonial project. Shortly after returning from his first Pacific voyage, he became involved with the *Konsortium zur Vorbereitung und Errichtung einer Südsee-Insel-Compagnie* ('Consortium for the

Preparation and Establishment of a South Sea Island Company'), later the Neu Guinea Compagnie ('New Guinea Company') – a small group of influential men chaired by the banker and entrepreneur Adolph von Hansemann and interested in creating German colonies in Oceania – and was made leader of an expedition sent out 'to locate harbours, establish friendly contacts with the natives, and acquire land to the greatest [possible] extent' (Finsch, 1888: 7, 1909b: 469).<sup>9</sup> This expedition's travels in the steamer *Samoa* between October 1884 and May 1885, including several visits to New Britain and five explorations of mainland New Guinea between East Cape and Humboldt Bay, led to the declaration of north-east New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago as German protectorates (Finsch, 1902, 1905; Firth, 1982: 17-20, 21-43; Jacobs, 1951: 14-26).

In contrast, Finsch was uniformly dismissive of the influence of missionaries. He noted that the 'missionary establishment' on Mabuyag, which had been in place 'for many years', was 'under the management of a so-called teacher, a man from Lifu' (Finsch, 1882a).<sup>10</sup> He also paid a visit to the local mission school,

which was attended by around 25 boys and the same number of girls, and remained for the lesson, which is held in the Mabiak language; a hymnbook is also printed in this language. The children could spell, a few had even reached the stage of being able to draw their own names, for one could hardly call it writing. Apart from this they learn how to sing numerous hymns, that is pretty much all, for they do not learn a word of English; the teacher himself has no knowledge of it. What benefit this has and can have for the natives is not entirely evident to me, for even if one of them should reach the stage

of being able to read and write his native language, of what use is that to him? None at all! is the answer to that (Finsch, 1882a).

Once again, there is a curious tension between Finsch's repeatedly expressed regret for the loss of cultural originality on Mabuyag and his failure to recognise the potential importance of the missionaries' efforts to foster literacy in the local language. He admitted that 'the pupils of the mission mostly look more civilised than the wildlings', 'on account of their varying degrees of clothing', but added that 'as they are brought up within the narrow confines of the mission house and only assist the missionary with his limited cultivation of the soil, they lose precisely those skills which the native requires for the preservation of his existence'. His final assessment was

that the work in the fisheries, despite various drawbacks, civilises the natives more and makes them more human than the one-sided education of the mission, which aspires to great things but does not achieve anything further than the thoughtless parroting of a few prayers and hymns ... If the native cannot be taught English, the ordeal of instructing him in his own language, written and spoken, remains a useless endeavour and it's a pity about the time that is frittered away in this manner (Finsch, 1882a).

It is fair to say that Finsch's assessment of the influence of missionary activity on the inhabitants of Mabuyag was, in his own words, noticeably more 'one-sided' than his analysis of the effects of the pearl fishing industry. However, it is also important to note that this evident antipathy to missions was based in part on his personal knowledge of violent contacts elsewhere in the Pacific between missionaries and indigenous people.

In April 1878 the British Wesleyan Methodist missionary George Brown had responded to the killings of four Fijian mission teachers by leading a retaliatory raid against villagers in the Gazelle Peninsula, an event described by Brown's biographer, Helen Gardner (2006: 65), as being 'without precedence in the modern missionary movement'. Shortly after his own arrival in New Britain in July 1880, Finsch recounted the story in a letter to Virchow. He depicted the raid as a brutal and disproportionate response to a problem of Brown's own making – the teachers had been killed because, 'contrary to the warnings of the coast-dwellers', they 'had ventured too far into the interior amongst hostile communities' – and unequivocally condemned Brown for having 'shot dead ... more than 200 innocent savages' (Finsch, 1880, 1883c: 445).<sup>11</sup> Finsch's vehement and repeated condemnations of this raid, which represent a marked departure from the generically supportive attitude to Christianity evident in his pre-voyage writings, suggest that the negative impressions it left substantially coloured his subsequent perceptions of missionary endeavour on Mabuyag (Finsch, 1865: 44-46, 1888; 24-25).

#### **'NOTHING IN THE WAY OF ORNAMENTS': ETHNOGRAPHICA FROM MABUYAG**

In comparison to his anthropological collections from Mabuyag, including ancestral remains, hair samples, moulages and photographs, Finsch's collections of traditional artefacts appear to have been very limited. His handwritten list of ethnographica from Cape York Peninsula and Torres Strait includes a handful of items from Somerset and Muralag – principally bark containers and carrying baskets made of woven grass – but only one entry from Mabuyag: '2 large *Cymbium* shells, a very serviceable vessel for water etc' (Finsch, 1909a). He does not appear to have collected any items of clothing: 'the people',

he claimed, 'possess almost nothing in the way of ornaments' (Finsch, 1882a). Nor does he appear to have acquired any weapons. His description of the *wap* (dugong harpoon) indicates that he had hoped to obtain one as a specimen, but could not afford the price demanded for it. In addition, he noted that the inhabitants of Mabuyag possessed wooden clubs, spears, bows and arrows, but all of these were obtained from New Guinea.

I also found amongst the natives an additional kind of short club, a bludgeon with a thickened, knob-like end, which is hurled by means of a throwing stick in such a way that it ricochets repeatedly, but was unable to make out whether this weapon is unique or whether it is modelled on the Australian throwing spear (Finsch, 1882a).

Apart from these items (Figure 13), Finsch claimed, 'the people of Mabiak have little originality left and with the exception of the dugong harpoons, which they make themselves, they obtain everything from New Guinea. In this way, canoes and other equipment make their way via further bartering as far as Prince of Wales Island [Muralag]'. He further noted the existence of 'a yearly traffic' between Mabuyag and 'New Guinea, namely ... Saibai and Tauan [Dauan] Islands', and indicated that he 'might have decided to go with the canoes to New Guinea', had there arisen an opportunity to do so. Unfortunately, however, during his stay on Mabuyag 'no [such] voyages took place' (Finsch, 1882a).



FIG. 13. Watercolour by Otto Finsch, after a photograph by A.C. Haddon (undated) Handling the throwing stick. 1. Holding the stick; Cape York (Australia). 2. Throwing the stick; Badu (Torres Strait). From O. Finsch, 'Beiträge zur Völkerkunde der westlichen Südsee', original images, Pl. 145. IV. Natives, Pl. II. Reproduction courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History.

## CONCLUSION

Finsch departed Mabuyag on 15 November 1881, reaching Thursday Island the following day. He spent 20 November – 22 December 1881 in Somerset, far north Queensland, returning to Thursday Island just before Christmas, and in January 1882 departed Torres Strait for south-east New Guinea (Finsch, 1881-82: 118-150). His written observations and collections from Mabuyag, although relatively minor in comparison to his total opus, capture elements of the island's distinctive natural, social and cultural landscape during a period of considerable upheaval and rapid transformation. His publications – notably the article in *Hamburger Nachrichten*, Hamburg's most widely-read newspaper prior to World War II – were amongst the earliest to introduce Torres Strait and its inhabitants to a broader German-speaking public. Although an earlier German-language work by the geographer Karl Andree (1854) did discuss the natural history and European exploration of Torres Strait, together with that of New Guinea and the Louisiade Archipelago, it was based on French and English accounts rather than on the author's personal experience and made virtually no mention of Torres Strait's indigenous inhabitants. Finsch was intrigued by some of the distinctive cultural practices he encountered on Mabuyag and recorded his admiration for the diving and hunting prowess of its inhabitants; moreover, his experiences on board the *Lord Loftus* challenged his prior assumptions about human difference and significantly shaped his later writings. More detailed examinations of Finsch's correspondence with Haddon and of relevant collections in European and North American museums would likely shed further light on the impact of his visit to Mabuyag: on Finsch himself, on later visitors, on his fellow

anthropologists and ethnographers in the European metropolises, and on Mabuyag's indigenous inhabitants.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## □ ENDNOTES

1. For a thorough discussion of Virchow's influence on German physical anthropology, see Massin (1996).
2. For an extended discussion of the ways in which Finsch's personal encounters with Pacific peoples challenged his pre-voyage assumptions about 'race' and human difference, see Howes (2011).
3. Finsch apparently was not aware that HMS *Challenger* had passed through Torres Strait in 1874 engaged in precisely such a scientific venture. See Corfield (2004); Thomson and Murray (1890-95).
4. Now *Pelecanus conspicillatus*.
5. Much of the material in the Finsch Pacific Expeditions Archive of the American Museum of Natural History has been digitised and can be viewed online: [http://anthro.amnh.org/finsch\\_archive](http://anthro.amnh.org/finsch_archive).
6. On the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits, see Herle and Rouse (1998).
7. The original file of correspondence between Hans Virchow, Karl von den Steinen, Felix von Luschan, Otto Finsch, Wilhelm von Bode and Generalverwaltung der Königlichen Museen Berlin has been lost since 2005, but the electronic records of the archive of the Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte contain a detailed summary of its contents.
8. Thanks to John Howes for help in translating the following phrase: 'stabilitati suae maximam conformationis et partium relatiuae proportionis varietatem iunctam habeat'.
9. The Konsortium zur Vorbereitung und Errichtung einer Südsee-Insel-Compagnie was renamed the Neu Guinea Compagnie by an imperial writ of protection issued on 17 May 1885.
10. On the activities of the London Missionary Society in Torres Strait, see Beckett (1987: 39-44, 44-57, 88-100); Mullins and Wetherell (1996); Williamson (1991).
11. Gardner (2006: 65, 69) notes that 'counts' of villagers killed as a result of the raid 'ranged from ten to one hundred', though the precise death toll 'remains unsubstantiated', and that Brown had been warned prior to his teachers' inland venture 'that such a trip would be dangerous'.