

**SENATE FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE  
REFERENCES COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO PAPUA NEW GUINEA AND THE  
ISLAND STATES OF THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC**

**SUBMISSION**

**Submission No:** 68

**Submittor:** Australian Institute of Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander Studies

**Contact:** Dr Luke Taylor  
Acting Deputy Principal

**Address:** GPO Box 553  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

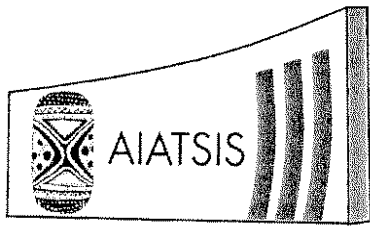
**Tel:** (02) 6246 1157

**Fax:** (02) 6249 7714

**Email:**

**No. of Pages:** 15

**Attachments:** No



**Australian Institute of Aboriginal  
and Torres Strait Islander Studies**



**Research**

Tel: 6246 1157  
Fax: 02 6249 7714

---

*Worldwide knowledge and understanding of Australian Indigenous cultures, past and present*

06/05/2003

The Secretariat

Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee

Inquiry Into Australia's Relationship with Papua New Guinea And Other Pacific Island  
Countries

Suite S1.57

Parliament House

CANBERRA ACT 2600

AUSTRALIA

AIATSIS welcomes the opportunity to offer a submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence And Trade References Committee Inquiry Into Australia's Relationship with Papua New Guinea And Other Pacific Island Countries. We note that Australia's relationship with Papua New Guinea directly impacts on Torres Strait Islanders through the Torres Strait Treaty.

Our submission addresses these impacts and suggests that clear-headed collaborative policy is needed to address future developments in this region.

AIATSIS looks forward to participating in the Inquiry's deliberations.

Yours sincerely,

(Dr) Luke Taylor  
Acting Deputy-Principal

Submission To Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence And Trade References  
Committee

*Inquiry Into Australia's Relationship with Papua New Guinea And Other  
Pacific Island Countries*

Submitted by Dr Richard Davis  
Research Fellow  
Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies  
Acton Peninsula  
Lawson Crescent  
Acton ACT 2601

29 April, 2003

**Issue: Border Relations at Torres Strait and southwestern coastal Western  
Province, Papua New Guinea**

Since 1992 I have undertaken anthropological research in the northwest region of Torres Strait, most often on Saibai Island. The written results of this research are contained in my doctoral thesis, journal publications and native title related research (see attachments). In this submission I will comment on effect of the Torres Strait Treaty to the social and cultural life of the region. While the issues I raise are very specific they are significant because the Treaty area involves the management of issues arising from approximately 50,000 per year crossings.

In this region Australia's relationship with Papua New Guinea is largely governed through the administration of the Treaty. Under the Treaty a range of economic, quarantine, maritime, immigration and security issues are identified within the area known as the Torres Strait Protected Zone (TSPZ). The heart of the Treaty concerns the terms of sovereignty and jurisdiction in the matters it identifies as relevant and in the years subsequent to signing and ratification a number of international measures have been implemented that reflect important interpretations of the Treaty. Other submissions to this Inquiry list various committees and programs that have been implemented over the years by Commonwealth and State governments and their PNG partners.

One of the most significant of these implementations was the confirmation in 2000 of a number of PNG villages with free movement privileges under the Treaty. This was established in reaction to the greater numbers of movement of PNG nationals into Torres Strait, which was perceived to be linked to abuses of what was understood as strictly traditional activities under the Treaty. These perceived abuses include illegal smuggling, seeking higher standards of health care, accessing goods at local stores, and paid domestic labour. However one wishes to judge these activities the fact remains that

limitations have been placed on the points of origin of PNG immigrants and the time allowed to them stay in the TSPZ.

While there is some concern over the Strait being used as a conduit for unauthorised arrivals, drug and arms smuggling, these seem to be small in number and quite manageable. The major issue is the impact of ever-greater numbers of PNG nationals crossing into the region. The various arrangements that have developed to deal with this situation are, in my opinion, evidence of increased mechanisms of governance that place great burdens on those authorities who are charged with implementation. These are at odds with the original intentions of the Treaty, which clearly are to facilitate cross-border social interaction while monitoring quarantine requirements and limiting illegal entries and goods.

The original designers of the Treaty did not seem to have considered the possibility of radically increased numbers of PNG nationals' crossings into the future. The solutions to this are not simple, but to maintain the political, economic, social and cultural health of the region it is important not to cut off the connections between Islanders and PNG nationals in the TSPZ. It is already evident that Islanders and Papuans are increasingly understanding their relationships to be structured according to ethnic and economic differentiation arising from the effects of the Treaty rather than through other social, kin or linguistic distinctions. These factors, combined with economic and service opportunities available in the Strait, act as a magnet for PNG nationals and need to be carefully monitored. While it is desirable to increase regional civic infrastructure and develop stronger mechanisms of regional and national government, in the short term it will be local solutions underwritten by Australian governments that will ensure the social and economic stability of this region.

Historically, Australia has committed itself to good governance in this region. Australia is now faced with a responsibility, by virtue of its wealthy proximity, to contribute to the regional development of Western Province as well as helping Torres Strait Islanders manage what is likely to be a long term trend in increased PNG border crossings. Broadly speaking, the humanist intentions of regional social and cultural interaction embedded in the Treaty should be maintained while increasing Islanders and Papuans capacity to manage the terms of the Treaty. Most importantly, this should be developed in a non-punitive fashion; PNG nationals should not be punished for being drawn to the Strait, rather Australian governments need to be mindful of the economic and service attractions that are exerting a pull on them and encouraging similar conditions in the Western Province.

Attachments:

Davis, Richard. 1995. Looking beyond the borderline: development performance and prospects of Saibai Island, Torres Strait, *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 80*, Centre for Aboriginal and Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

Davis, Richard. 1998. Epochal Bodies and Gendered Time: Engagement and Transformation in Saibaian (Torres Strait) Masculinity. PhD thesis, Department of Archaeology & Anthropology, Australian National University. Pages 299-303.

Canberra  
April 2003

**Epochal Bodies and Gendered Time:  
Engagement and Transformation in Saibaian (Torres Strait) Masculinity**

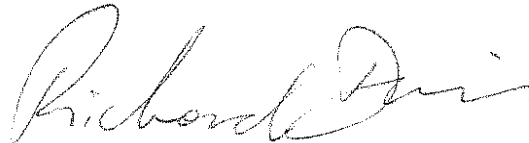
Richard Davis

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Australian National  
University

June 1998

DECLARATION

Except where otherwise acknowledged, this thesis describes my own research and analysis

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Richard Davis". The signature is written in dark ink and is centered on the page.

Richard Davis  
June 1998

Department of Archaeology and Anthropology  
The Faculties  
Australian National University

Residents of Saibai may only number 250 at any one time and may be situated at the margins of Australian territory, but the vast southern mainland, its population and political system are regarded by Islander men as easily penetrated. This is because these things are constituted in terms of Islander notions about how the world is constructed in general, which in turn relates to their conceptions of the body, health, illness and sorcery. The space of Torres Strait is distinguished from the space of the mainland, both of which are conceptually like bodies, which can be entered in malevolent or benevolent ways. Bodies and the space of sorcery are thus conceptually linked to each other.

The projectiles of sorcery beliefs have no specific gendered features about them, as women and men can be accused of sorcery, but when men use them they resonate with a masculine aesthetics of war and sexuality. The congruence between war and sorcery lies at the metaphorical level where projectiles and penetration are common to both. Indeed, sorcery could be said to be a form of warfare as a person beset by illness caused by sorcery regards the person who is causing it as 'firing' or 'putting in' an offending object into their body. Sorcery is also a retrospective construction, one discerns its effects, charts its origins from a future position. That position is always understood to be at the juncture of particular social relations. When a Saibaian has an offending object, which has lodged in their body via sorcerous means, pulled out by a healer, the healer is required to suggest a responsible person to the afflicted.

#### *Opening the body*

It is not my aim here to develop a whole theory of sorcery based on Saibaian conceptions of illness and health. However, it is useful to distinguish some general features of Saibaian sorcery. Evans-Pritchard, in his discussion of Zande witchcraft,



distinguishes between empirical and mystical techniques in the discernment of causation. Using Saibaiian examples to explicate this distinction, pulling the plug on a dinghy causes the dinghy to sink, which would be an empirical relationship, whereas the reasons why a festering sore develops, which came about after stepping on a sharp stick, a mystical relationship, are less easy to discern. Evans-Pritchard argues that the connections between the stepping, the sore, and the eventual attribution of the sore to a person's vengeful act are mystical and can be understood as the actions of souls: "The souls of...drugs go down into the body of a man and there seek out and destroy the 'soul' of the disease which is destroying the 'soul' of an organ" (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 492). At present, no Saibaiian claims to be a sorcerer or healer, even though sorcerers were recognisable individuals in previous times. A sorcerer is only discerned by inference, not practice. How this is done rests on the afflicted person pondering with family members and the healer what the state of their relationships are with others and if there is any action which they can identify that may have caused another to make them ill. Thus, sorcery is a specific expression of relationships, which can be said to be characterised by vengeance. There are two general types of sorcerers and healers, one being Islanders, the other being Papuans. The conceptualisation of Papuans by Islanders is complex including the mutual recognition of shared cultural features, history and kin relationships. Importantly though, Papuans are often regarded by Saibaiians as being of lesser status than themselves. Finer distinctions are made between the different groups of Papuans, but Coastal Papuans are often regarded as being less Christianised and more embedded in beliefs and practices, of which sorcery is a part, which while recognised as common at the time of colonisation, are now looked at as questionable. But, however much Saibaiians deride sorcery and are wary of practising forms of healing

which are associated with sorcery beliefs, they regularly employ Coastal Papuan healers to alleviate serious illness.

Two general points should be made about sorcery here. To characterise Saibaiian beliefs about sorcery as mystical, as opposed to empirically defined acts, would ignore how the post-colonial context of contemporary sorcery beliefs has affected Saibaiians attitudes to their own practices. Sorcery is now a subterfuge, rather than part of a generalised system of agency linked to healing, garden, dugong and cult magic which was present at the time Haddon and his colleagues were in Torres Strait. An example of the empowering ability of sorcery is recorded by Haddon in the Cambridge Reports. He recounts an incident on Saibai where a woman working in her gardens was approached by a man who demanded sex with her. She responded with the threat of sorcery at which the man withdrew his advances (Haddon 1971j: 45). Sorcery has become a subterfuge because it is the iconic Other of Christianity based in a despised person. Linked to this is its intertwining with racism as it has shifted from being part of a widespread cultural system shared along the coastline southern Papua New Guinea and Torres Strait to having a negative status now ascribed by Saibaiians as a distinctive feature of ethnically differentiated Papuans.

Coastal Papuans, but not Saibaiian Papuans, were regularly employed by Saibaiians as domestic workers and labourers at a rate set by the local Island council of \$50 per five working days, with accommodation and meals included. This was one of the few sources of cash income for Coastal Papuans who also relied on trading and more rarely, working in the marine industry. Other sources of cash income for Coastal Papuans came from their being hired as healers. Coastal Papuans were thus part of household dynamics and often a Saibaiian would employ the children of workers who had worked for their parents making for long-term inter-family

connections. Despite the disparity in incomes relationships were often more than simply ones founded on the hiring of labour.<sup>8</sup> Often Saibaians employed Coastal Papuans who belonged to a Papuan clan with the same totem or with whom there were cross-generational links, whether in terms of employment history or for other reasons such as historical kin links. Despite the great disparity in disposable cash incomes Saibaians felt emotionally compelled to hire Coastal Papuans as a form of support for them. As they would often say, "We feel sorry for them", a recognition that the sovereign limits Papua New Guinea and Australia set between each other had fallen in an arbitrary way across northern Torres Strait, so that in cash and service terms Coastal Papuans and Saibaians were in very different circumstances.

As is apparent, there is a good deal of ambiguity about the ethnic location of sorcery. While sorcery is regarded by Saibaians as being a pervasive feature of Coastal Papuan culture, Saibaians attribute sorcery to each other and some Saibaiian families regularly employ Papuan healers to alleviate their ailments. They therefore share beliefs about sorcery which have gained negative racial and religious connotations as a result of colonialism. Sorcery was grievously regarded and frequently prosecuted in the Island courts. It was problematic because it was a form of agency which was outside of institutional power. The prosecution of an alleged sorcerer in the courts depended on the Christian characterisation of it as a vexatious and malicious activity, whereas Haddon's (1971h) accounts of sorcery stressed the privileged position a sorcerer could find themselves in. They were trained in a systematic way and were instrumental in ensuring agricultural success and plentiful

<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to know exactly how much money is sent by the national Papua New Guinean government to Coastal Papuans, but it is unlikely to match the amounts provided to the Saibai community in 1993. In 1993, a total of \$2, 864, 659 arrived into the community from local, state and federal government sources, via welfare, wages, salaries and monies to manage the community. When divided up amongst the approximately 241 members of the community, this figure corresponds to each Saibaiian receiving \$11, 886 from government (Davis 1995: 23). These figures do not include the health and education budgets for that year.

numbers of dugong and turtle in the sea for everybody. As a form of agency, sorcery gained its negative connotations from Christianity. However, it was an aspect of a wider system of beliefs about the construction of bodies and space in which social relationships play a central part.

### *Bodies*

Generally speaking, boundaries between domains, physical or otherwise, are porous. The movement of humans and spirits between corporeal and spiritual domains mirrors the ability of the body to be opened up and entered by a healer. A human consists of a *mari* (spirit) and *gamu* (body, skin, hull). However, the relationship between *mari* and *gamu* is ill-defined and somewhat tenuous: a person's *mari* is subject to constant pressure to separate from the body, especially by sorcery and other spirits, which is believed to result in death. Only especially powerful and gifted agents are able to interrupt such a separation. Persons identified as healers (*guguwawmabayg* - 'looking person') or the more powerful *arkathalgamu*, ('holes in body/skin'), as well as renowned Christian interventionary prayers were often called on. Saibaians say that there has not been an *arkathalgamu* for many years, but despite their demise an examination of the term and practices attributed to *arkathalgamu* reveal a continuation of concepts between them and contemporary healers. Saibaians say that men were most often recognised as *arkathalgamu*, even though the last *arkathalgamu* on Saibai was a woman, suggesting that men and women were both recognised as *arkathalgamu*. However, only Papuan men practise as *guguwawmabayg* at present. Amu remarked of *arkathalgamu* that their special skills lay in their ability to, "see the body in a way unique to them where they can reach into it and can draw something out of it". Like *guguwawmabayg*, *arkathalgamu* were able to minister directly to the metaphysical body, rather than