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Parenting Torres

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report on a study that explored the practices of Torres Strait Islander parents in rearing their children, and the beliefs, attitudes and values which underlie these practices

family group discussions, focus group discussions, and interviews with key informants (comprising Islander service providers such as nurses, other health care workers, teachers and social workers).

Participants from the five sites – Boigu, Mabuiag, Warraber, Mer (or Murray Island), and Thursday Island were recruited by the local key informants. Information from three generations of informants was triangulated to develop a portrait of contemporary parenting. On each of the islands, focus group discussions were conducted with individuals and groups representing: key informants; elders who would typically be over the age of 55 years; experienced parents who would typically have children at high school age and be between 35 and 50 years; and young parents who would typically have children at primary school or younger and be up to 35 years old.

In all, 69 participants were involved in the study. This research does not claim to be based

on a representative sample of Islanders because of the voluntary nature of sample recruitment. However, the guidance of a largely indigenous steering committee, the use of a variety of research instruments, the local experience of the fieldworkers, and the extensive amount of data generated support the view that the research has succeeded in its aim of providing a representative spectrum of the views of Torres Strait Islanders on families and parenting.

The major aim of the *Buai Sei Boey Wagel* Project was to explore the practices which Torres Strait Islander parents use in the rearing of their children, and the beliefs, attitudes and values which underlie these practices.

Given the historical context within which the project was undertaken, it inevitably involved examining the impact of change – environmental, economic, social and cultural – on families and parenting in a number of communities in the Torres Strait at the end of the twentieth century.

The study focused on parental accounts of their child rearing practices to examine particular issues such as:

The Buai Sei Boey Wagel Project was part of the Australian Institute of Family Studies *Parenting-21* study, which explored how Australian parents were bringing up children who will live most of their lives in the twenty-first century. *Buai sei boey wagel* is a combination of eastern and western Island languages. *Buai* is a Meriam Mir word which in this context means “family”; *sei boey wagel* is Kala Kawaw Ya, meaning “for the future” (thus, Family for the Future Project).

The Buai Sei Boey Wagel Project was undertaken by the University of Queensland and the Australian Institute of Family Studies under the auspices of a Steering Committee comprising the project directors and four representatives appointed by the Torres and Northern Peninsula Area Health Council. Funding was received from the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care.

Consultations held with the Torres and Northern Peninsula Health Council, as well as across the islands, led to the development of a qualitative research design that included

in the Strait Islands

- how child-rearing practices were informed by beliefs about the nature of childhood;
- how parental practices and beliefs were reflected in day to day activities and exchanges with their children;
- the sources of support and advice that parents drew upon in child rearing; and
- how they were influenced by social, economic and cultural change.

Torres Strait Islander families

The population of the Torres Strait region is nearly 8000 people, inhabiting only 17 of more than 100 islands. It is marked by considerable diversity of racial background; of languages spoken (including Creole, English, and a range of Island languages); of island community size (ranging from 100 to several thousand people); as well as some local variation in cultural values. Despite this diversity, Torres Strait Islanders are recognisably one people who share key cultural values and practices related to families and parenting (Hunter et al. 1999).

The study embraced a diversity of communities and families as well as of parenting values and actions. Although the study was set in contemporary times, the use of retrospective questions allowed some comparisons with Islander families and parenting of an earlier generation. The direct experiences of parenting of the informants in this study covered a period of region-wide change as the statutory controls over the lives and livelihoods of Torres Strait Islanders have been replaced by the emergence of a new social and political order.

The importance of this study lay in the special place of indigenous communities in Australia, the need to differentiate between Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, and the need to focus on the impact of socio-economic changes on families and parenting.

Parenthood in the Torres Strait is a dynamic relationship situated in a complex social setting. Islanders defined family to include not only their parents and children but also “cousins, uncles, brothers, sisters, wife’s family” (Mabuiag young mother)¹. Many households consisted of three generations: grandparents, parents and children (Boigu key informant). Some respondents perceived the whole community as the family: “the whole island’s related” (Warraber young mother). On the smaller islands, such as Warraber, this is very close to the literal truth. While most members of these extended families might live on one island, other family members may be found on other islands as well as “down south”.

The notion of the extended family was basic to an understanding of Islander culture and, in particular, to parenting values and practices: “The strength of Islander families that I see is togetherness, you’re not on your own when you need support” (Mer key informant). For, while the biological parents had particular responsibility for pro-

viding children with a secure and nurturing environment, responsibilities for discipline matters, for transmitting traditional values and skills and other cultural practices, and for ensuring continuity of moral precepts and behaviour, were seen as responsibilities that were shared with grandparents, aunts and uncles from both sides of the family. Indeed, the extended family plays an important role in all aspects of child rearing (Anson 1988).

Parents indicated that when they had problems with their children they would first seek assistance from members of their extended family such as the child’s grandparents, uncles and aunts. While professional assistance was always the second point of reference after members of the extended family, younger parents regarded it as a major contribution to the upbringing of their children: “My mum or dad for advice, or someone who is in the professional arena that deal with students like the school teacher or someone who has a big family” (Mer young father).

However, in seeking out formal support services, Islander parents emphasised approaching people with “experience” – experience being defined by parents according to one’s age, profession (doctors, nurses, teachers), being a community leader versed in “Isan ways”, or to those with an earlier exposure to similar familial circumstances (Soriano, Weston and Kolar 2001).

Parents of all ages gave strong statements about the advantages of belonging to a large extended family. These extensive relationships were highly valued: “We have uncles and aunts and grandfathers all over the place and not only on Mer – in all Torres Strait” (Mer male key informant). Some referred to mutual assistance and support: “You know you got a lot of people there to help you” (Mer experienced mother); “You know you’re not lost” (Mer key informant).

When parents referred to specific forms of support, mothers talked about babysitting and care for children while fathers referred to help with gardening. One of the strengths of Islander families was the sharing of activities between parents and children: “They go fishing together, work in the house together, go to functions in the community together, go to church together” (Warraber key informant). Even the upbringing of children was shared: “My youngest daughter she calls them [sister-in-law and brother-in-law] mum and dad as well – she keeps saying she’s got two mothers and fathers” (Warraber female in family group). A Murray Islander valued the extended family for *okadikes* (advice or role modelling) and for inculcating in young people a sense of right and wrong behaviour.



1 Information in brackets refer to the Island and focus group category of the parent who made the preceding comment.

Thus children in the islands grow up within a support system that is quite dense, with each member in the extended families playing an active, and in some ways, unique role in child development. Family interaction provides children with the opportunity for rich and stimulating life experiences.

The disadvantages of belonging to an extended family were, in many respects, the mirror images of the advantages. They also reflected communities in transition from traditional to contemporary lifestyles. For example, a young mother complained about the housework, the noise and the overcrowding in large families. Another disadvantage of extended families was when conflict occurred across the generations, often about the behaviour of children. In such an instance, an uncle, despite his traditional role in the family, was criticised by the child's mother when he disciplined the child (Thursday Island father). The tradition of sharing within an extended family can also lead to excessive dependence on family members for money to support an alcohol or drug habit: "You got families where . . . someone becomes a victim to alcohol and are then dependent on other family members if you can help them out" (Mer experienced mother).

Role of the community in the "growing up" of children

An important characteristic of life on the islands was a strong sense of community and its contribution to the raising of children. For example, an experienced mother felt that various activities in the community helped in the "growing up" of children: tombstone openings, kai kai (eating) together, church attendance, special ceremonies (Boigu experienced mother). The notion of the whole community playing a teaching role comes across in one young father's comments: "Yourself, family, community, everyone around. They become an object of teaching of . . . parents, aunt and uncle, athe (grandfather) and aka (grandmother), everyone in the community. They don't have to sit and teach, they learn from look" (Warraber young father).

The small size of Islander communities where "everyone knows everyone" also provided assistance in the growing up of children. A young mother felt that her child was safer on the island than "down south" – "you're not worried about your child like people are down south . . . I'm not worried about [name]. She could be running about in the middle of the village but I know she's still safe. Even families that aren't really direct, like blood, related to me, they would look after her" (Boigu young mother). Another young mother, who lived close to the seawall, would always watch over the children who played there to make sure that they didn't get hurt (Boigu young mother). Another mother summed up the matter thus: "It takes a whole community to raise a child. There's always someone in the community to give support" (Mer experienced mother).

The problems of Torres Strait Island communities largely focused on living conditions and services on the islands. A key informant described some of the poor housing: "You know, people are still living in them holes – coconut leaf and crumpled iron and bamboo shack building. And it's not healthy for kids, but they're trying their best to grow up kids in that house" (Mer key informant). This informant went on to complain about the lack of privacy and room for children to study. Other comments focused on a lack of and/or inaccessibility of recreation facilities for the young (Warraber female in family group).

Young mothers, more than any other group, complained about their children's diet and the lack of certain fresh foods. For example, one young mother complained about the lack of water and the problem of having to order some

food directly from Cairns (Mer young mother). Lack of education facilities in the islands, particularly Years 11 and 12, mean that parents have to send their children "down south" to pursue secondary education (Boss, Edwards and Pittman 1995). Thus parents were not available to meet the emotional needs of their children as the children went through major and multiple transitions: from an island to a mainland culture; from childhood to adolescence; and from primary to secondary school (Kolar and Soriano 2001).

Other community problems related to the excessive use of alcohol by some teenagers and adults. A number of parents, particularly experienced mothers with children in their teenage years, mentioned that their children were being enticed by the peer group to experiment with alcohol and drugs. In some cases, drinking by one or both parents was leading to the neglect of children. An experienced mother spoke critically about both parents working, then visiting the canteen for a drink after work and not arriving home until late in the evening: "working and canteen take time off from the children" (Mer experienced mother). A key informant criticised those parents who left their children in the care of grandparents or aunts while they "go out having their social life, having their parties, drink" (Mer key informant). In these situations, the availability of the extended family and community appeared to compensate for a degree of neglect of the children by parents.

Social change and Islander families

Physical environment

The unique physical environment of the Torres Strait represent an important continuity in the lives of Islanders. Most Islanders engage in fishing and gathering of seafood, domestic gardening and hunting as means of supplementing their diet. However, their relationship to the environment is more than an instrumental one, with an emphasis, particularly on the part of the older generation, on the spiritual significance of their attachment to the land and sea. Thus the parents acknowledge the importance of passing down traditional knowledge and skills to their children and grandchildren. This special attachment to the physical environment has taken on a new political and legal significance in the context of land and sea rights following the Supreme Court decision in the Mabo case: "it's important to know this native title stuff . . . they have to know their lands for . . . all customs, tradition" (Boigu experienced mother).

The relationship of Islanders to their physical environment is undergoing change. In earlier generations fishing, hunting, gathering and gardening were the major, if not sole, means of sustenance. While many of these activities are maintained today, they have taken on a more recreational character as well as being used to supplement the Islanders' diet. This has led to a change in the diet of Islanders from one rich in fruits, vegetables and fish, which often required considerable energy to obtain and prepare, to one containing more pre-prepared and energy-dense processed foods. An elder observed that "the young don't eat traditional food when offered among modern ones, like sago and other root crops and pumpkin with coconut milk or grated coconut" (Boigu elder male), the children's diet having changed "from coconuts to cocopops".

The physical environment in which Islander parents live, has also been changed by technological developments in travel and communication. Air travel, outboard motors, radio, television and computers have all contributed to reducing isolation although Islanders always have been aware of the world beyond their island and the Torres Strait. The continual comparisons Islanders made between

life on the islands and life “down south” graphically illustrated the extension of their perspectives: “Much more to offer down south, day care centres, shopping centres, kids get to choose more things, more to occupy themselves” (Mer young mother).

The experience of modern mainstream Australia leads many Islander families to encompass, often uncomfortably, two value systems – traditional Islander values and those of contemporary mainstream Australia. Parents strongly recognise the need to “grow up” their children to live in both worlds. Thus they are faced with the challenging task of passing on island traditions (which are to a large extent orally transmitted) yet at the same time helping their children acquire skills relevant to their future success, especially related to employment (Kolar and Soriano 2001).

Intimate contact with the physical environment is a continuing and integral part of the “growing up” of Islander children. It provides the site for children to be initiated into the historical and spiritual significance of their physical environment, for training in traditional food-gathering activities, and for the enjoyment of physical recreational activities. However, the young sometimes appeared less receptive to the spiritual and historical significance of their environment

This, in turn, produced changes in family role models and in the socialisation of children within families.

A further impact of these labour force changes was the high valuation parents placed on education as a means of ensuring secure employment. They viewed education, and particularly the learning of standard English, as a passport to understanding and achievement within the wider Australian society: “My daughter’s in Grammar School. Everything goes by paper these days – if you don’t have one you don’t get a job” (Boigu key informant). In reality, parents’ aspirations were often circumscribed by the economic and social situations within which they lived: “Down south, you know, kids go to high school. They keep on going until they reach the tertiary and then they’re out on the field, working. But here [in the islands] it is very hard, and the only thing they can do here is CDEP, doing nothing, bludging” (Mer young mother).

The enforced idleness of men, in particular, provided time to engage in traditional activities such as fishing and gardening as a supplement to their government-derived incomes. However, uncertain and minimal incomes, together with the high cost of living on the islands, made for an environment of some material deprivation within which

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than they are to the enjoyment of recreational activities. At the same time, their immediate physical environment was becoming less confining as young people and their families gained experience of life beyond their island.

Island economy and family life

Major economic changes followed the decline in commercial fishing and in the extensive pearl and trochus shell industries, a decline that commenced before World War II and continued in the years immediately following it (Beckett 1987). This deprived many Island men of employment and was a major factor in people migrating “down south” in search of work on the railways and sugar plantations: “When the trochus industry came to a stop . . . lots of families went down south to work on the railways, and established themselves there. Now they find it very hard to come back ‘cause of the kids’ education and other matters” (Mer experienced mother).

Those who stayed were forced into unemployment, Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) work, or casual employment. Today as many as 80 per cent of the labour force on the islands are in receipt of government assistance of one form or another (Doyle and Altman 1997). Another change in labour force participation has been the increase in women’s employment, again in predominantly casual work.

These labour force changes have made a number of impacts on Islander families and parenting. In some cases the unemployment of males has led to changes in the power balance of families as Island women, especially those who were working, have sought greater equality with their husbands. These changes have sometimes led to the separation of family members, including husbands and wives, resulting in family strain and, at times, breakdown.



Picture: Courtesy Thursday Island Child Care Centre

many Islander children were being brought up.

Thus, economic changes are contributing to changes in social roles within families, to their growing dependence on welfare and other government services, and to the families’ valuing of education for their children as a means of overcoming their material deprivation.

Island social life

One of the key changes over time has been the nature and location of authority within Island communities. Traditionally, authority was centred on the older males who held power over sacred and economic domains and over women and children: “Eldest sons have special status in the family . . . if the father couldn’t attend any function inside the community, they always

send the eldest son” (Mer experienced mother). This does not mean, however, that Islander women did not have their own important domains of power. As has been the case in Aboriginal Australia, various stages of contact with white society have challenged this exercise of authority so that the authority of elders over their families and communities has been weakened (Hunter et al. 1999).

Technology has changed the forms of recreation of the young, with increasing popularity of television, computers, electronic games, transistors and other forms of modern entertainment. Islanders reported that this has made an impact on communication within families. For example, “yarning” for earlier generations was not only significant for communication but also for entertainment and conviviality both within and between families. “Yarning” was considered an informal way of “shaping the mind” of children, with the expression of values done indirectly through legends and stories. Grandparents played a vital role in passing on this knowledge.

However, this form of intergenerational communication for traditional purposes is less common today, with the young forming peer groups of cousins and friends to enjoy music, videos and other forms of popular culture: "More disruption came in when we got the computers, and TV. Before we'd go and sit with the grandfathers out on the beach . . . and our grandfathers were telling us stories and myths and legends and all that. That's why we have some [local knowledge] in our heads and the younger generation haven't. They go to watch videos" (Mer key informant).

Likewise, in the past, parents said that the games and toys they played with were largely a product of their imagination. Today, parents bemoan the fact that all this creativity is being eroded with the increasing availability of ready-made toys: "Children before – we used to make our own toys . . . it gives you imagination, you learn to create things" (Mer experienced mother). The evaluation of technology and its impact on life in the islands ranges generally from negative on the part of elders to positive on the part of Islander young people.

Another aspect of contact with the wider society was the introduction of Australian laws and norms on physical punishment of children at home and school. This was seen as hindering Islanders from disciplining their children and thus limiting their capacity to bring them up in the "Island way": "The style of discipline has changed, because of white man's law introduced into our environment. You can no longer belt your kid. This is a change in the life of the young today. If we want to go back to the way we were, we have to go back to the way we disciplined before. If nothing changes, it will get worse and worse" (Warraber young father).

Changes have also taken place in traditional Islander customs and practices. For example, while ceremonies such as tombstone openings and first shave for boys remain important, they are tending to lose their sacred significance, especially for the young, increasingly serving only social functions. An elder male spoke about how activities such as Christmas and Easter were occasions celebrated by the whole community together, but now: "I'm celebrating my Christmas here with my family. It's confined to the house and the immediate family, whereas before at Christmas everyone go to the church ground here, or the public hall here, and we had feasting dance [at] Christmas and Easter. Life has certainly changed in that respect" (Mer elder male).

Traditionally, members of the extended family had clearly defined duties and responsibilities in all family matters, including the "growing up" of children (Cutts 1996). For instance, grandparents served as the font of cultural knowledge, and mediated family conflict, while aunts and uncles had responsibility for initiating girls and boys (respectively) into adulthood. Although Islanders continued to acknowledge these roles, younger parents had the tendency to assume greater control over the upbringing of their children and in the process challenging the traditional roles performed by the extended family. This was also seen in the equivocal attitudes of some parents to the continuing practice of customary adoption, that is, adoption of children by other members of the extended family based on custom and informal agreement rather than legal contract.

While some social changes have led parents to assume major control over their families, other factors have ensured that shared parenting remained a significant feature of Island family life. The small size of communities, the lack of specialised facilities for caring for the young, casual work undertaken by mothers, the ready availability of family members and the capacity of relatively young grandparents to care for children meant continuing dependence on the assistance of grandparents and aunts in caring for the children. In these instances tradition and the demands of contemporary economic and social life

combined to ensure the continuation of diffused parenting responsibilities on the islands (Hunter et al. 1999).

Another impact was the widening gap between the generations as the young come to live in a social world beyond the reach of their grandparents and older parents. Similarly, the traditions which the elders were anxious to hand down to the younger generations were typically neither well understood nor automatically accepted by the young, as reflected in the following comment: "They sing [local song] but they don't know the meaning – they don't know the language . . . very few people know the carving . . . some of them here don't know the family tree" (Warraber elder male). The two social worlds, which different family members inhabited, were proving difficult to reconcile.

In summary, Island children are growing up in a social world marked by changing and at times conflicting values and norms. On the one hand, their elders are seeking to teach them values and behaviour appropriate to their religious, social and family traditions. At the same time, they are experiencing changes to the traditional authority structures within the family and community, to forms of travel, communication and recreation, to an exposure to mainstream "white" values and norms and to an increase in the significance of formal education. It seems that the parenting of Island children needs to reconcile the influences of the two social worlds they inhabit.

Island culture

Another current development in Island life is to be seen in the changing mix of Island cultures. Traditional Island culture was informed by respect for the land and sea as sacred domains; by a range of values emphasising sharing and respect for others, especially one's elders; by the value of kinship; and by the authority of the elder males within families and clans.

The advent of Christianity in the nineteenth century both challenged and contributed to the pre-existing culture. For example, in introducing Christian values, the churches undermined the traditional male warrior role, imposed monogamy and sponsored education, particularly Christian education. The Islanders' ready acceptance of Christianity led to its inclusion as part of the cultural mix, alongside the pre-existing traditional sacred and social values. The more recent arrival and growing popularity of Pentecostal Christian Churches, such as the Assembly of God, are also contributing to Islanders' contemporary cultural mix.

A second marker of cultural identity undergoing change is that of language. Despite the attempts of the elder members of communities, the indigenous languages of the various islands were, in general, no longer the vernacular of the younger generations, having been supplanted by Creole, a form of pidgin English, and by standard English, especially for educational and employment purposes: "I want my child to know all [local] languages so he understands, but also [for him] to learn good English so he can get a job" (Mabuiag young mother).

In many respects this evolution of languages spoken by Islanders represented a symbol of the broader cultural changes and the different responses of groups of Islanders to these changes. For example, while some members of the older generation spoke only "language," other Islanders spoke "language" and Creole, while the younger generations tended to speak English and Creole.

Despite the advances of modernisation and acceptance by the young of mainstream Australian values, many Islander parents were strenuously seeking to maintain and hand down to their children aspects of their traditional culture. Perhaps because of their separation from the mainland and their spread over many islands, Islander parents have

been generally successful in maintaining aspects of their culture. In the words of a young father: "We need the modern life to fit with cultural life. If not, don't know where we are, who we are" (Warraber young father).

Parents were exhibiting something of a cultural assertion as they revealed pride in their culture and sought to assert its value, especially for subsequent generations. In Mer, for instance, the introduction of the Reform Strategy in schools ensured that the curriculum was directly relevant to the life of the students outside the classroom, a

(which also provides enjoyable physical recreation). At the same time, the physical environment is expanding for the young as they travel for schooling or work and make use of modern media for communication and entertainment.

Economic changes are causing an increase in unemployment, especially for males, changes in family authority structures, and greater reliance on government assistance. One outcome is the families' valuation of education as a means of overcoming their material deprivation and ensuring a better future for their children.

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recognition that the students have a unique culture yet at the same time were part of the wider Australian society.

Part of the Strategy called for the involvement of community elders and parents in teaching children traditional language, skills and crafts: "She's [teacher] going to be teaching English from half past eight to half past twelve, and in the afternoon would be culture. Guest people come in to teach them [students] language. They teach them to wrap them banana . . . how to talk totems. This is what the community want. We want our children to be Murray Islanders, with good command of English, so that they can survive, and also knowing their culture, traditions, how to cut turtle" (Mer elder male).

Island children were being brought up in families where there was conflict and instability of norms associated with sex roles. For example, in more traditional families, patriarchy was alive and well whereas in others, especially where women were working, there was a movement towards a more egalitarian family life. Single-parent families headed by women presented yet another role model for Islander children. These different models revealed a society in transition and a degree of uncertainty.

Summary

Islander parents were unanimous in conceiving of "family" as an extended family including not only parents and children but also grandparents, cousins, brothers, sisters, and wife's or husband's family. The advantages they cited of belonging to such an extended family included mutual assistance and support in the rearing of children; sharing of activities between generations; and provision of advice and role modelling for the younger generation. The disadvantages reflected communities in transition from traditional to contemporary lifestyles. These included generational conflict in the upbringing of children; lack of privacy; and conflict over ownership of land, among others.

Island communities were highly valued as sites for the "growing up" of children. Participation in community activities and interacting with a range of adults were seen as important means of raising children in a secure environment. On the other hand, in some communities a lack of facilities and services and excessive use of alcohol and drugs were mentioned as community disadvantages in bringing up children.

Intimate contact with the physical environment was an integral part of the "growing up" of Islander children. Children are initiated into the historical and spiritual significance of the environment and trained in traditional food-gathering



Island children are growing up in a social world marked by changing values and norms. Their elders are seeking to teach them values and behaviour appropriate to their religious, social and family traditions. At the same time, they are experiencing changes to traditional authority structures within family and community. Both parenting and formal education need to integrate the influences of the

different social worlds Islander children inhabit.

Parenting does not occur in a social vacuum. Rather, it is linked with and shaped by changes that occur in the wider social context. The Islander parents of today are presented with a unique opportunity to provide their children with a range of experiences and an outlook in life that covers the broad spectrum of traditional and mainstream ways of living. Islander culture presents a mix of traditional and contemporary values related to nature, religion, community and family. Different families and different family members give expression in their lives to this different cultural mix. The "family for the future" may well be that which recognises and reconciles these different cultural elements so that Island children may be able to live in multiple social worlds.

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