



lesu ra mir giz

From the beginning

ge o:maida

when the Gospel came

Mer ge baziarda

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igiare Torres Strait

**and branched out to the whole
of the Torres Strait**



Front and back cover image: Sylvia Nakachi, *Bi Akarida*, 2017, screen print on fabric.

Inside cover image: Cast of *Bi Akarida* (Coming of the light), 2017. Photography by EJ Garret



Logan Art Gallery is pleased and honoured to present *lesu ra mir giz (from the beginning) ge omaida (when the Gospel came), Mer ge baziarda (it took root in Erub) igiare Torres Strait (and branched out to the whole of the Torres Strait).*

In her first major curatorial project, Sylvia Nakachi has investigated ways to visually interpret and illustrate oral histories of Torres Strait Islander culture. Through this exhibition Nakachi maps the transformation and adaptations of Torres Strait Islander culture from Emeret Tonar (Long time culture) to the arrival of the London Missionary Society and contemporary interpretations of culture today.

In curating the exhibition, Nakachi has aimed to present a different way of telling history and displaying Torres Strait Islander culture. Nakachi has interwoven a range of mediums from film, traditional basket weaving, printing, installation and street art to tell a story of culture's ability to adapt across many generations.

I would like to thank artist and curator Sylvia Nakachi and Logan Art Gallery Exhibitions Officer, Sophie Chapman, for all their work in developing this exhibition.

Michael Wardell
Art Gallery Coordinator, Logan Art Gallery

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this catalogue contains images of people who have died.

Image: Trochus shells on Masig island (York island), 2014. Photography by Margaret Cowley

Emeret Tonar (Long time culture)

Life for Torres Strait Islander people before the arrival of London Missionary Society (LMS) was unique and distinct. The Torres Strait Island way of life reflected a culture of people who collected their resources from their Islands, their surrounding sea boundaries and trades from their nearby neighbours from Papua New Guinea and Melan (mainland), the Australian Aboriginal people.

Nowadays our society perceives items made during this time long ago as rare forms of art, priceless and unique, only to be showcased in museums or cultural centres behind glass displays. It should be understood that these rare artefacts capture the Emeret Tonar life of my people, a term used frequently by Torres Strait Islanders when they refer to the ancient days of our ancestors. Emeret Tonar can be understood as 'untouched', signifying Torres Strait Island culture and identity in its authentic natural form, having never been influenced or altered.

Every aspect contained within this civilization was unrefined, everything made or produced served to function in everyday life. These items would range from cookware, home contents, weaponries, customary rituals, effigies, even including the practices of dark magic and other forms of wizardry. This was the life of all Torres Strait Islanders in Emeret Tonar. These items were an integral part of their livelihood, representing a more sincere form of culture and identity that was never reformed.



Image: Women on Darnley Island, 1899. Image courtesy of the State Library of Queensland



Image: Mission Church on Darnley Island, 1934. Image courtesy of the State Library of Queensland



Image: Students at Darnley Island, 1908. Image courtesy of the State Library of Queensland



Image: Native house being constructed on Darnley Island, Torres Strait, 1899. Image courtesy of the State Library of Queensland

My interpretations as an artist, responding to the Emeret Tonar, I consider as true 'grassroots' work of Torres Strait Islanders. Well known Torres Strait Islander elder and basket weaver Aunty Betha Stewart (nee Gela) in her beautiful work of coconut leaf artistry represents that grassroots. For many years her practice has used techniques like my ancestors to capture the true essence of the ancient days. Throughout many years as a master of this special craft Aunty Betha has only used pure coconut materials, creating many beautiful baskets of different sizes and shapes. Other work consists of grasshoppers, windmills and hats. Large leaf frames are also woven to construct walls or used for roofing for buildings at feastings and social gatherings.

Aunty Betha has always captured this special method, and has only used the purity of the coconut leaf in its natural form. Her work is woven intricately and skilfully into an invention of its own and that has been passed on by many generations before her.

If we are to examine the work produced by my ancestors and those who have lived long ago in the Torres Strait Islands, we can see that their work was crafted by natural resources from their environments. These works hold the beauty, rarity and symbolic form of their origin, placing a more sentimental significance on the work that cannot be reproduced in artwork created today.



Image: Aunty Betha Stewart, *Coconut leaf basket*, c.2000, coconut leaves. Photography by Carl Warner



Image: Aunty Betha Stewart, *Coconut leaf basket and collection of weaved objects*, c. 2000, coconut leaves. Photography by Carl Warner



Image: Aunty Betha Stewart, *Coconut leaf basket*, c. 2000, coconut leaves. Photography by Carl Warner



Image: Aunty Betha Stewart,
Coconut leaf basket, c. 2000,
coconut leaves. Photography by
Carl Warner

Bi Akarida (Coming of the Light)

On the 1st of July 1871 at midday the Island of Erub came visible to the crew and members of an approaching ship HMS Surprise. At dusk Captain Paget, his fellow English crew, eight native missionaries Tepeso, Elia, Mataika, Gucheng, Kerisidui, Waunded, Sivene, Josaia and their wives, along with Reverend Samuel McFarlane and Reverend Archibald Murray anchored out of Kemus also known as Treacherous Bay. As the ship anchored, a lone Islander appeared on the beach of Kemus. The native Islander was called Dabad, he was to become the first Torres Strait Islander to make contact with the two London missionaries, taking into history being the first man who leads the way for all Torres Strait Islanders to receive and embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Dabad is my ancestor and I am the seventh generation since Dabad first encountered the London missionaries. Through my bloodline and family connections to this acclaimed man, our oral history narrates that our ancestor Dabad had already envisioned through prophetic dreams the arrival of strange men that would one day come to his Island. He prophesised that these strange people would bring about new ideas to his people, a different way of life, something that was different to their world and culture.

These premonitions prior to the arrival of the missionaries would prepare my ancestor's heart and spirit to accept those who brought the gospel. This is contrary to the commonly told story that Dabad had reacted in a warrior stance to attack and behead those who came with the London Missionary Society. Torres Strait Islanders were renowned for this highly practiced behaviour of head hunting, and of being a race of people who were highly skilled in their weaponries and dark magic. It would have been impossible for missionaries to conquer their quest if my ancestor Dabad was not prepared prior to boarding HMS Surprise.

On the first of July each year Torres Strait Islanders across Australia celebrate in remembrance of the arrival of the London Missionary Society. Torres Strait Islanders have always heralded this historical event with great significance, reflecting upon the conversion to Western civilization, abolishment of ancient practices and rituals in cannibalism, infant genocide and human sacrifices. This momentous landmark in Torres Strait history has significantly impacted on the lives of all Torres Strait Islander people.



Image: Modiuo-Sakai Nakachi as *Armani* in *Bi Akarida* (Coming of the Light) film, 2017. Photography by EJ Garret

Erub was the first island to be subjected to the new beliefs imposed by the Church of England, which resulted in the near annihilation of the spoken native language Meriam Mir. A broken English dialect was introduced, initially facilitated through eight native missionaries from the Pacific who arrived with Reverend Samuel McFarlane and Reverend Archibald Murray. However as the gospel was dispersed throughout Erub, the native language became more commonly used in church hymns composed by the Islanders. For instance, augadh translates as God the Father, lama zogo as the Holy Spirit and lesu, God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

Gospel hymns were mainly composed in Meriam Mir by Island elders and others who miraculously experienced the divine power of what the new zogo (religious practice) brought. This notion of the trinity continues to be an integral part of any Torres Strait Island gospel music composed by our modern musicians, whether lyrics composed in the native dialect, Yompla Tok or English, there is always an acknowledgement of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The introduction of the English language and native culture, blended together with native cultural practises, created a new cultural identity for the Islander of Erub. The introduction of didactic systems of education

and theology was now a fundamental aspect imposing new knowledge which would eventually lead the Erub people to develop behaviours and habits of an Englishman or woman. This transformation would not only affect the people of Erub, but would also be the beginning of a change that would filter out to the entire Islands of the Torres Strait.

These practices created a new formality for my people to carry out rituals introduced by the Church of England, such as using applications of blessing water as sacred elements to heal the sick, the consecration of a new home, baptism of a new child, or curing those afflicted by the dark magic called Maidth. Practices in applying blessing water still exist in our present society and in the lifestyle of many Torres Strait Islander families in the Torres Strait Islands, and throughout remote, regional and urban environments in Australia. This was the new beginning for a race of people and cultural practices, social structure, and way of life was now a transformed blend of Torres Strait Island culture and English adaptation.

The arrival of the London Missionary society in 1871 was not the first contact with Europeans or outsiders.



Image top: Kebi koskir (small girl) and Au bala (Big brother) looking out to the horizon, 2017. Photography by Tamara Whyte
Image left: Sylvia Nakachi as Adude koskir (the sorceress) in *Bi Akarida* (The Coming of the Light) film, 2017. Photography by EJ Garret
Image right: Torres Strait Islander performs 'Mark time' on solwata (salt water) edge, 2017. Photo by Tamara Whyte

Prior to the arrival of the London Missionaries, history accounts documented evidence produced in 1592 of a map by Abraham Ortelius (Wilson, 1988) highlighting a wide passage separating Papua New Guinea and Australia. Wilson also suggests the possibility of Chinese, Egyptian, Malay and Indonesian adventurers may have all endeavoured along the long strait route of the Torres Strait Islands. These intercultural exchanges are especially noted throughout our oral history which are passed throughout our generations. Some of these encounters have not been documented but are often told orally, of those who came and made contact with our ancestors from foreign shores around the world, from mainland Australia and Papua New Guinea.

My family oral history speaks of those who have come to my Island waters and shore, but have mercilessly been slaughtered at the hands of our forefathers and have met their fate through the enchantments and zogo of sacred spells and chants. They now lay within their watery graves in the deep eastern waters of the Torres Straits. Some have been buried in sacred rituals conducted by the zogo le (high priest) and his followers, those treasures or riches found on these unfortunate ones are guarded by sacredness of our spiritual ancestors, while their ships have never been retrieved because of the depths of our waters.

However when Reverend Samuel McFarlane and Reverend Archibald Murray met with Dabad they had no trouble in communicating and to make Dabad understand why they came to Erub. Dabad, being familiar with the English language and having been previously exposed to outsiders living among his Island community, made it easy for the London Missionaries to discuss their arrival and to ask Dabad to go back to HMS Surprise.

Dabad informed the missionaries that he was one of the chiefs on Erub and requested Reverend McFarlane and the others to walk across the Island to one of the villages. Early the next morning on the 2nd of July 1871, Captain Paiget and several members of his crew set out on foot across the Island to all three villages. After several hours Captain Paiget and his crew came back with the whiteman called Thorngreen, head chief of Erub called Armani, a lesser ranking chief called Ive and a large group of Erubians. All the Islanders were brought on board HMS Surprise to meet Reverend McFarlane and all the London Missionaries. After some discussion Reverend Samuel McFarlane conducted the first recorded act of Christian worship in the Torres Strait Islands on board the ship. McFarlane held the service in the Lifu language and the missionaries sang the hymn Jesus shall reign. Being that the day the Lord 's Day and the Sabbath, the missionary party along with all the Islanders on the ship went ashore to conduct a formal meeting with the chiefs.



Image: Re-enactment of Bible and shell exchange, 2017
Photography by Tamara Whyte



Image: Re-enactment of Bible and shell exchange, 2017 Photography
by Tamara Whyte



Image: Re-enactment of an Anglican priest sharing insights from the Bible
with a Torres Strait Islander man, 2017 Photography by Tamara Whyte



Image: Billy Campbell as Reverend Samuel McFarlane in *Bi Akarida*
(Coming of the light) film, 2017. Photography by EJ Garret

Able Gerger ira Tonar (Today/Now life and culture)

As the London Missionary Society settled in and began their conversions, so began the introduction of education, western attire and grooming, child baptism, home decorating, child naming, tombstone unveilings and funerals that no longer required human preservation, but loved ones were now buried in coffins and in burial plots known as gravesites.

My late mother who raised me was baptised Beatrice Lela Sebasio, her first two names being traditional English names. Similar to my late father whose name was Jimmy, which too resembled those English traits. My mother Beatrice holds fondest memories of how I was raised throughout my upbringing and how our household was managed. Fine English cutlery and crockery, from plates, glasses, serving spoons to serving food bowls were displayed in our cupboards, while the best was set aside for special occasions and displayed in our glass cabinets. Our home always had huge amounts of draped laced curtains in our living and dining room.

Beautiful old fashioned glassed cabinets would be displayed in front of the curtains to showcase ornaments, cups and saucers, along with memorabilia of Prince Charles and Lady Diana or anything that represented the monarchy. My mother seemed like a true Englishwoman who cooked old fashioned English meals, baked puddings and fruit cakes. She also created print work on pillowcases that reflected her Torres Strait Islander heritage.

My mother was also known for her fine and neat sewing of the *Au gem wali*: the Torres Strait Island dress. My father Jimmy wore such attire under his calico which is known as the *ilan dross*. I would iron drapes and rolls of beautiful fabric preparing them for her sewing. Beatrice would keep all sorts of beautiful fabric in two large green trunk boxes. The Church of England played an enormous part in my mother's life. I too was christened under the Anglican Parish there as Sylvia Margarette. My mother was the head mother's union leader. I remember polishing all those silver communion cups and plates with a silver polish that had a very distinct smell.



Image: Sylvia Nakachi, *Banana leaf basket*, 2016 , banana leaves and coloured string. Photography by Sylvia Nakachi

My parents were dedicated and were good stewards of the house of God in their Anglican faith. They followed in the footsteps of their parents and those ancestors who walked life before them. Yet my parents could also walk in the realm of their Erub culture. My father was a master fisherman, who could read the weather and tell the tide of the ocean, always out hunting on weekends. Both parents were great gardeners who would plant plants that reflected their Eastern Islander heritage: our home was a forest of lush greenery. Both my parents were walking archives, full of history and family genealogies and could tell you how some of our ancestors from different parts of the world came to be on Erub before the London Missionary Society embarked on Erub on 1 July 1871.

All artwork made by Torres Strait Islanders in Emeret Tonar was produced and perceived as a natural part of their way of life. The techniques used in producing artwork represented an era where knowledge was not taught through manuals or educational institutions, knowledge was an integral part of the Islanders lives, it was a life lived through intuition, where their work was never graded or ranked, and their knowledge was taught and practiced over and over until mastered.

One was never left to feel incompetent, yet every aspect of knowledge about land, sea and sky are reflected through each art work and those resources used to create them.

Torres Strait Islanders have adapted to new ways of expressing their culture and identify through new art forms. In a society that is forever changing and reforming, Torres Strait Islanders have found new ways to keep their culture alive and to pass on traditional knowledge and maintain their history. These new ways have been through a continuous process of years of adapting to societal changes since 1871. Despite the many influences that have come into the Torres Strait Islands it has never ceased the practice or preservation of Torres Strait Island culture. Torres Strait Islanders have learnt to always adapt and keep their culture alive in a society that is forever affected by change.

By Sylvia Nakachi, Curator.



Image top: Sylvia Nakachi, *Able Gerger ira Tonar*, 2017, screen print on fabric

Image left: A display of Victorian style ornaments and drapery, as often seen though out many Torres Strait Islander homes, 2017. Photograph by Logan Art Gallery.

Image right: Victorian style dress with two *Au Gem Wali* dresses. Photo by Carl Warner 2017.

Acknowledgements

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**Queensland
Government**



Exhibition curated by artist Sylvia Nakachi

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Image: *Fish weaving*, Aunty Betha Stewart, coconut leaves, c. 2000. Photo by Carl Warner. 2017



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