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COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY *and* ORAL TRADITION: COMMEMORATING *and* TEACHING CULTURAL AWARENESS *on* MUA ISLAND, TORRES STRAIT

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■ Abstract

Education is about learning. But it is not always about teaching. Nor is it always held in formal educational settings. Here we present an example from Mua Island in Torres Strait, where cultural knowledge was recently communicated and passed down to the younger generation through *community participation* rather than through formal educational institutions. The role that community research and ceremonies play in customary learning is here brought out through recent commemoration of the legendary hero Goba on Mua Island.

■ Introduction

In the 1960s the late Mr Wees Nawia and his son Morris Nawia, both respected men of Islander culture, had a vision that they communicated to their fellow Mua Islanders in Torres Strait. Their dream concerned a continued and heightened awareness of cultural roots and cultural knowledge amongst the Mualgal, the people of Mua. Included in this hope for the future was a wish to erect a memorial at the legendary site of Goba's father's grave, near the spring at Uma (see below for details). The Goba story was well known and commonly retold amongst community members, but during their lifetimes no commemorative celebrations were held at the gravesite. This was a situation they had long wished to redeem, partly for its own sake, but also as part of a larger process of cultural awareness and the passing down of customary knowledge within the community.

Wees and Morris Nawia were not to see the Goba celebrations take place during their own lifetimes, but their vision was seen to fruition as part of a community awareness and education endeavour undertaken in 2002. Here we recount the events leading to this fulfilment of Wees and Morris Nawia's vision and how these events signal the Mualgal's way of communicating and teaching members of the local community and invited guests the importance of cultural awareness, cultural continuity and the retention of cultural identity.

■ Torres Strait

Torres Strait Islanders are sea peoples, skilled fisher-folk and turtle and dugong hunters whose worldviews and spiritscapes generally focus on and reference the marine environment (see Sharp, 1992, 2002). Interregional interactions between Papuans, Islanders and Australian Aborigines were in the past, and still are today, common across the Strait. Historically, forms of amicable interaction involved kinship affinities and extensive exchange networks between islands, involving items such as canoes, spears, drums, ochre and shell ornaments (e.g., Haddon, 1904; Lawrence, 1994), while relations of enmity occurred in the form of religiously,

politically and economically sanctioned headhunting raids (McNiven, 1998). Past alliances are well known from present and recent oral traditions and from the anthropological literature between, on the one hand, the Mualgal (Mua Islanders) and the Kaurareg (Aboriginal people of southern Torres Strait), and on the other between Mua's closest neighbours the Badulgal (Badu Islanders) and the Gumulgal of Mabuia Island (Haddon, 1904, 1935). Despite a mere 2km sea channel between Badu and Mua Islands (Figure 1), during the immediate pre-missionary period - before the 1870s - Badu and Mua Islanders were in an extended state of enmity and on constant watch of headhunting raiding parties.

Yet some oral traditions indicate these relationships may not have always been as they were during the early European contact and immediate pre-contact period (e.g., Lawrie, 1970). Similarly, archaeological research on Mua and other islands of Torres Strait have since the 1970s revealed thousands of years of Indigenous history, including patterns of cultural continuity and change concerning subsistence, occupational and religious practices. The oral traditions are rich in information on named individuals, ancestor heroes, religious beliefs about origins and moral codes, the actions of individuals, worldviews, and generally short-term cultural events at temporal scales experienced by individuals and communities. The archaeology, on the other hand, typically speaks of environmental dynamics, long-term cultural change, colonisation and patterns of island occupation. These differing characteristics of oral traditions and archaeology - oral traditions dealing with short-term events and the experiences of people and their worldviews, the archaeology dealing with time-averaged data and long-term trends concerning periods of time often longer than individual lifespans - do not strictly apply in every instance, but they are overwhelming general tendencies. Unifying oral traditions with archaeology can thus present an enriched Islander history that either kind of historicising - oral traditions or archaeology - cannot do on its own. Here we present an example of such a partnership program of historical research, one that has recently led the Mualgal elders and other community members to commemorate customary knowledge, and in doing so to instruct Mua youths on varied cultural matters. This recent historicising of the Mualgal past through a combination of oral tradition and archaeology is presently being used by the Mualgal elders as an opportunity to enhance and transmit cultural awareness amongst the younger generations at a time of increasing social change.

■ Mua Island and community archaeology

The first professional archaeological research began in Torres Strait in the early 1970s into the mid-1980s, although most investigations were short-term (e.g., Barham & Harris, 1983; Ghaleb, 1990; Rowland, 1985; Vanderwal, 1973). A new generation of archaeological

research has recently emerged in Torres Strait, each representing a community-oriented program geared to the documentation and protection of cultural sites and to the elucidation of specific aspects of Islander history with cultural awareness and education in mind (e.g., Carter, 2002; McNiven et al., 2002; McNiven & Quinnell, in press). These archaeological investigations are the result of Torres Strait communities seeking assistance in identifying and documenting cultural sites and cultural history. This paper reveals the results and outcomes from one archaeological investigation requested by the Mualgal community on Mua Island and the implications it has for Mualgal cultural awareness, identity and the passing down of cultural knowledge to the younger generations.

At 16 x 15km maximum dimensions, Mua is the second-largest island in Torres Strait, and located in the mid-western chain of islands directly opposite Badu (Figure 1). It is home to the Indigenous Mualgal community who today largely reside at Kubin village on the southwest coast of the island, with a smaller Indigenous Mualgal population residing at St Paul's village, once a mission settlement on the east coast.

The present archaeological research began on Mua in 2000 when the Mualgal, through the Kubin Community Council and the Mualgal (Torres Strait Islanders) Corporation, sought the assistance of professional archaeologists to undertake historical research of their past. Bruno David, Ian McNiven and Joe Crouch from Monash University were taken across the island by Islander representatives to record various story places known from oral tradition and to create a culture site documentation program. This documentation continues to this day and has in the past two years identified over 40 cultural sites on the island - artefact scatters, story places, old villages, shell middens, stone arrangements, rock-art sites. Many more sites are still to be recorded.

■ Turao Kula, near Uma

In 2001, representatives of the Mualgal community at Kubin village took the archaeologists to an area of the island called Uma, some 2km from Kubin village. They were directed to a large granite boulder located 35m upslope of an open woodland valley. The Mualgal knew this site contained cultural materials on its surface (stone artefacts, shells, pieces of use-worn ochre, charcoal and items from the European contact period), rock paintings whose images were in the main too faded to distinguish and whose past cultural significance were not distinguish and whose past cultural significance were not distinguish, and, during the 1980s skeletal remains and *bu* shell fragments, now eroded away. These artefacts were taken as evidence of fleeting visits to the site in the recent past, and of the use of the site as a final resting place for at least one individual. The boulder is referred to locally as Turao Kula "Lookout Rock" (*tura* = spy, *ao* = past tense, *kula* = rock). Oral tradition indicates that the Mualgal once used the near-flat top of the boulder as a lookout vantage point to observe their surroundings

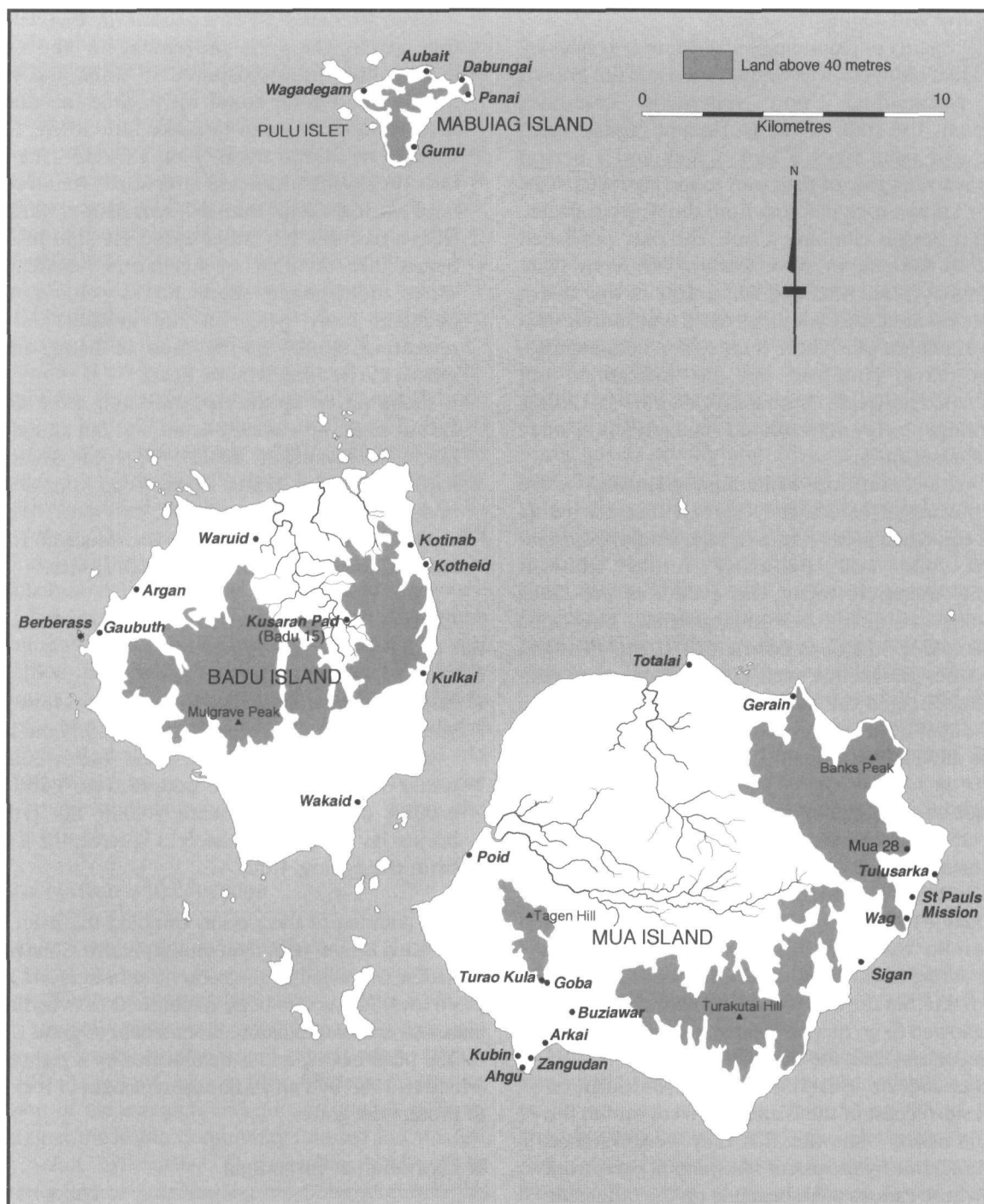


Figure 1. Map of MUA (Banks Island), showing important cultural sites and neighbouring islands.

and search for possible raiding parties coming from other islands.

The rock-art at Turao Kula consists of 44 red figurative and abstract paintings, many deeply faded and therefore now invisible to the naked eye, thus requiring computer enhancement to render them visible again. Some of the notable designs include a canoe and palm tree and several non-figurative and geometric designs.

The main panel of paintings, enclosed on two sides by small adjacent boulders, was deeply faded and not known to the community. Upon systematic computer enhancement the rock paintings became visible again revealing four palm trees, a bird, a rock and a person climbing between two of the palm trees (Figure 2). This is the only known rock painting from the Western Pacific depicting a person climbing a tree. The only published reference to this site we have found so far is by Kylie Tennant, who visited Mua and Turao Kula in the 1940s, and who described the paintings as “a long nosed man climbing a coconut tree. There was a row of coconut trees gracefully drawn and true, not just indications, but verifiable coconut trees” (Tennant, 1959, p. 193). Clearly, the paintings have deteriorated considerably since Tennant’s observations.

When the computer enhanced paintings were shown to Mualgal elders, they agreed that the panel depicted the Goba story – one of Mua’s many rich oral traditions, one still popularly retold amongst community members today. The events of the Goba story took place near Turao Kula at Uma. The Goba story was told to Margaret Lawrie (1970, pp. 45-46) in 1967 by Wees Nawia, the well known Mua elder, who actively encouraged the passing of cultural knowledge to the younger generations of Mualgal to keep cultural traditions alive and strong:

Amongst the Mualgal (people of Mua) who were living on the eastern side of the hill called Gunagan was a man who had a young son named Goba. When this man said to his wife one day, “There’s a good low tide today – I’ll go and spear some fish”, she warned him to be on guard against raiders from the neighbouring island of Badu. He intended to leave his son at home, but the boy pleaded so hard and so long to be allowed to go that he yielded, against his better judgement, and took the boy with him.

Father and son walked to Isumulai [Imusulai] on the western coast of the island and went out on the reef and fished – unaware that they were watched the whole time by members of a warring party from Badu whose canoes were beached on the other side of the nearby point, Karbai Gizu. After they had filled a basket with fish, they picked up some big *bu* shells which were lying on the reef and began their journey back to Gunagan.

Both Goba and his father felt very thirsty by this time. When they reached the spring, Uma, they halted for a drink. Goba then complained of

hunger, so his father lit a fire and roasted some fish, although he knew it was extremely dangerous for him and his son to dally alone in the bush. “Should we be attacked”, he told Goba, “run away and climb a tree. Hide amongst the branches and leaves. Make no movement. Utter no sound.”

Soon after they sat down to eat the cooked fish, the father glimpsed movement in the scrub nearby. “Run!” he whispered to Goba and when the boy had gone stood up to face the men of Badu who were about to strike him down. “Don’t kill me” he said to them, “I am a friend”. The men of Badu clubbed him and afterwards removed his head with a bamboo knife (*upit*). Goba, watching from a tree saw his father killed. He shut his eyes before the moment of his father’s beheading. When he opened them he saw his father’s headless body lying on the ground and the retreating figures of the men of Badu, one of whom carried his father’s head.

Goba stayed up the tree until long after sunset. Late at night he climbed down and ran all the way home to Gunagan, where he told what had happened to his father. “Take us to your father’s body tomorrow”, the men said.

Next morning Goba led the Mualgal to his father’s body. They covered it with stones.

Lawrie (1970, p. 46) remarks that Wees Nawia added this detail to the end of the story:

The events relating to this story happened just prior to the coming of Christianity to Torres Strait in 1871.

Goba was about eight years old when his father was killed by the raiders from Badu. The mound of stones beneath which his father’s bones lie is approximately a quarter of a mile from the spring, Uma.

The painting of the person climbing the palm trees at Turao Kula is now understood to represent Goba hiding as his father was killed by the Badu headhunters and his head taken away; a link has been established between the rock paintings and oral tradition. Goba’s father’s grave is located on the plain nearby and is demarcated by a pile of stones, which in 1988 had an additional rectangle of rocks added to protect the grave.

■ Excavation at Turao Kula

At the request of the Mualgal community an archaeological excavation was undertaken in the area immediately below the Goba paintings to seek further archaeological evidence that might add to the now-established connection between the oral tradition at Uma and the Goba paintings at Turao Kula. The results from the excavation reveal new information on how the site was used in the past, at time

scales not evident from the oral tradition. The radiocarbon dates from the lowest levels of the excavation show that Turao Kula was first occupied about 1,000 years ago, when people camped beneath the rockshelter, manufactured stone tools and ate communal foods – dugong and turtle, and possibly also kangaroo or wallaby. But sometime shortly before 1850 AD – shortly before the arrival of missionaries on the island – people stopped coming to Turao Kula for camping and food consumption, instead fleetingly visiting the site and dropping an occasional small shell on the ground (David et al., in press).

Fine ochre used for painting was found in the excavation, precisely at a level separating the lowermost occupation levels from the uppermost layer where occupation appears to have largely ceased – that is, the ochre dates to shortly before the “Coming of the Light”, as the oral tradition indicates the events surrounding Goba’s father’s death took place. As the archaeological red ochre was found beneath the Goba paintings, they can be taken to relate to and date the painting event itself.

The temporal evidence indicates that at the time the Goba paintings were executed, Turao Kula’s significance and function had altered dramatically. Turao Kula had been attributed a new meaning with the addition of the paintings and its identity had shifted: it was a site that people now identified with the events surrounding Goba and his father. The rock paintings, in association with Mualgal oral traditions, newly signified the landscape: Turao Kula had changed from an often re-used site to one of limited, fleeting visitation. The place and the events surrounding Goba and his father, as represented by the oral tradition and the archaeology, represent a socially constructed and meaningful landscape linking community history with the present. It is this cultural meaningfulness that the current elders, as Wees and Morris Nawia did many years ago, wish to teach the Mualgal youths of today, and to emphasise within the community in general.

■ Cultural heritage and education

The combined oral tradition and archaeological research at Turao Kula-Uma have been spurred by, and resulted in, heightened levels of cultural awareness on Mua, a strong desire to transmit traditionally significant knowledge to younger community members, and aspirations to obtain further details about community history. Following completion of the research and documentation at Turao Kula and Uma, the Kubin Community Council and Mualgal (Torres Strait Islanders) Corporation planned to celebrate the events surrounding the Goba story and the Goba landscape on 4 October 2002. These celebrations were held to commemorate community history through Goba’s father’s gravesite at Uma and the Goba paintings at Turao Kula.

In fulfilment of Wees and Morris Nawia’s wishes, a special plaque – depicting the computer enhancements



Figure 2. Rock-art panel at Turao Kula, depicting Goba climbing between two trees.

of the rock paintings and a narrative of the Goba story – was erected beside Goba’s father’s grave (Figure 3). The unveiling of the plaque at the gravesite is recognised by community elders as symbolic of renewed cultural awareness, including the passing down of knowledge about the cultural significance of Uma as an important cultural place. It also symbolises new opportunities to bring local, community history to the forefront of Islander education by merging traditional methods of story telling with the latest archaeological techniques to historicise the Mualgal past. The plaque is also a symbolic reminder of the events which took place at Uma before the “Coming of the Light” – a mnemonic device to help trigger the memory of custom and of the importance of Uma itself (see Wilson & David, 2002). Moreover, it helps structure Mualgal patterns of thinking regarding the nature of relationships between people and place; the plaque represents a tangible marker indicative of Mualgal cultural heritage, education and belonging. With the addition of the plaque at Goba’s father’s gravesite, the Mualgal community are experiencing a contemporary modification to the cultural landscape at Uma as a means of ensuring continuity between the personal yet culturally meaningful past, present and future: the ability to instruct the younger generations of their local past by experiencing their ancestral landscapes through oral traditions further informed by archaeology is indicative of the educational potentials encountered and followed today on Mua.

Mualgal from Torres Strait and others who now reside westward to Darwin and southward to Townsville – some of whom had not seen their home island before – attended the October 2002 Goba celebrations at Uma and Kubin. Other invited guests included Islanders from other islands, Kaurareg from southern Torres Strait and representatives from organisations such as Torres Strait Regional Authority. These guests were instructed by elders and other community representatives such as Kubin Community Council Chairman Mr Saila Savage, Deputy Chairman Mr Roy Genai, Mr Paul Tom and elder Father John Manas on the significance the Mualgal

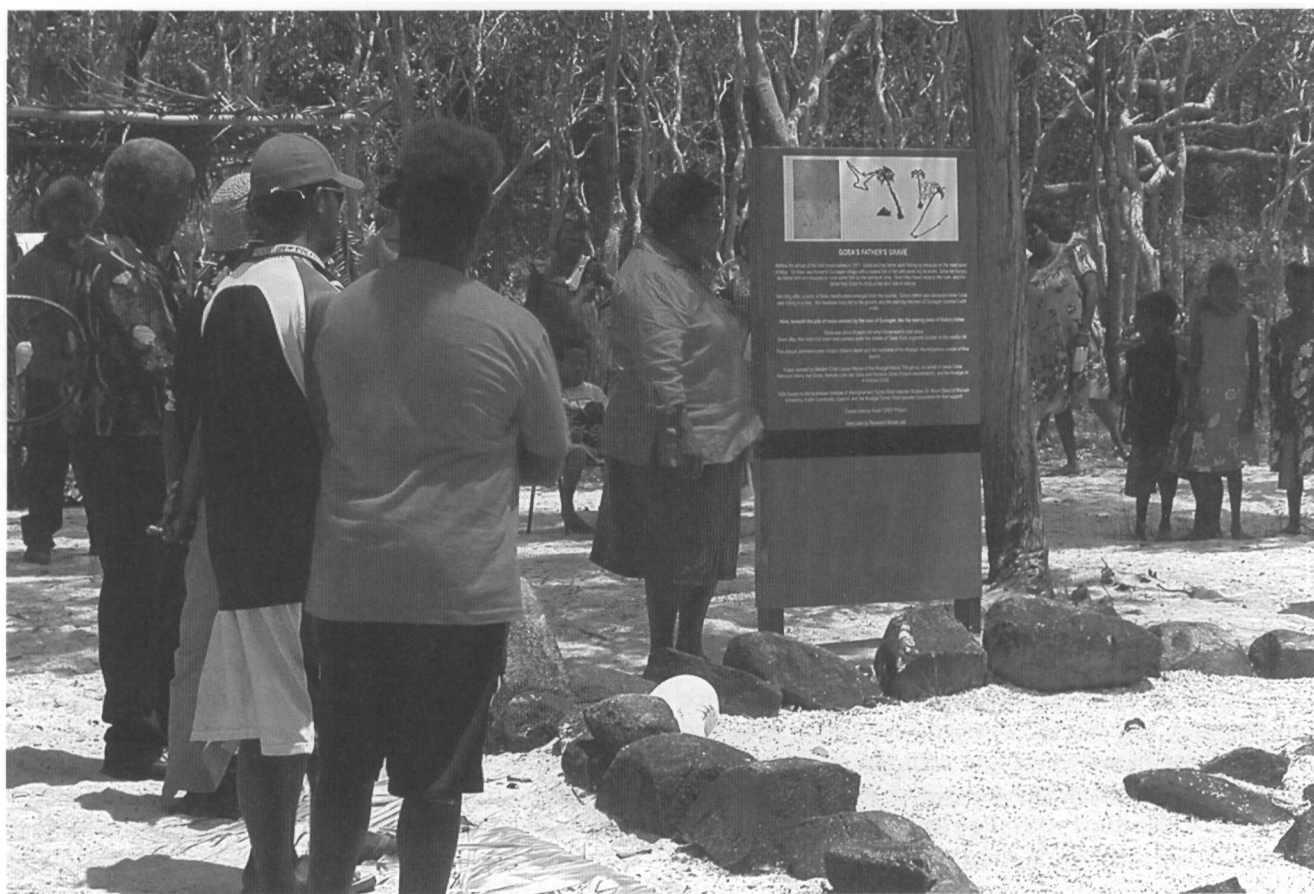


Figure 3. The plaque during the celebrations at Goba's father's grave at Uma.

community attaches to place and the importance of continuing community education on cultural matters, including local history. The celebration at Uma featured speeches, blessing of the plaque and reference to Goba's direct descendants by a detailed and lengthy calling of genealogies. Recognition of Goba's descendants during the ceremony was important because it demonstrated key links to the past, a shared cultural heritage and an avowment of emplacement and belonging.

During the celebrations Mualgal community elders conveyed the significance of using this celebration of cultural awareness and revival as an educational tool for teaching the younger generations about the importance of retaining cultural identity. Kubin Community Council Chairman Saila Savage began with the words "this is an exciting day for the Mualgal" because of the opportunity the Goba traditions and related community history gave for the community to unite in a common cause, an opportunity made possible by a merging of oral tradition and archaeology sanctioned by the elders. Elder Paul Tom subsequently said during his speech before the Islander dancing that the Goba celebrations "are an important occasion that show the true identity of the families" as Mualgal, linking the present generations to the history of the island via the ancestors. "So tonight", Mr Tom continued, "this will be so for Australia to see there is a Mua Island. We family come together. We will never

forget that we are family, and we'll be family forever." The cultural celebrations continued into the evening with a feast involving traditional Islander foods, in particular dugong and turtle. The feast also provided an opportunity for the younger generations of Mualgal to utilise and demonstrate cultural knowledge in the preparation of turtle, cooked in a traditional *kapmauri* earth oven. Islander dances, which had been taught by elders and practiced by the younger generations for months in advance of the ceremony, were performed (Figure 4). The enthusiasm of the young dancers and singers involved signalled a strong appreciation of an important cultural activity.

The rediscovery of the rock paintings at Turao Kula generated keen interest among the Mualgal, and a journey was planned to visit the boulder with the elders, archaeologists and children (Figure 5). Many Mualgal visited Turao Kula for the first time during this occasion. This was also an opportunity for the younger generations to visit the site of an archaeological investigation where cultural history was being researched in novel ways promising to shed new light on the local past. As a result, the Kubin State School, with the participation of elders and other teachers, is now planning programs to help promote cultural knowledge amongst children through activities such as bush Tucker identification and cultural site recognition.

At the request of the Mualgal (Torres Strait Islanders) Corporation, the Goba celebrations were filmed in a



Figure 4. Customary Islander dancing at Zarzar, Kubin, during the Goba celebrations, October 2002.

documentary film. This documentary is symbolic for the local Islander community because it serves to record a cultural rejuvenation process experienced by the Mualgal community. The celebrations at Turao Kula, Goba's father's gravesite and the ensuing feast signal the significance attached to local history and identity. Furthermore, the documentary filming of a major cultural event symbolises for the Mualgal elders the establishment of the Mualgal (Torres Strait Islanders) Corporation and the return of Mua lands to the Mualgal community through the *Native Title Act*, events which had taken place shortly before the Goba celebrations.

■ Conclusion

Community archaeology and oral tradition can be successfully combined towards cultural continuity and to uncover new or revived aspects of community history. The implications from these successful linkages can be manifest in Indigenous celebrations focusing on education and cultural awareness. The Mualgal community has thus embraced a commemoration of Goba's father's gravesite as an opportunity to instruct the younger generations of Mualgal on various customary practices and beliefs, including oral traditions, food, music, dance and social relationships. These opportunities in themselves represent a fulfilment of Wees and Morris Nawia's vision for cultural continuity

through community awareness and transmission of customary history and identity.

■ Acknowledgements

We extend our warmest thanks and *kaima esso* to the descendants of Goba, in particular the families of Genai Goba, Maryann Mairu née Goba, Naika Luta née Goba and Nawarie Goba, the Kubin Community Council, the Mualgal (Torres Strait Islanders) Corporation and Father John Manas, Saila Savage, Roy Genai for all their help and guidance with the research and for inviting the archaeology team (Liam Brady, Bruno David, Ian McNiven and Joe Crouch) to be a part of cultural celebrations. Special thanks also to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and to the Australian Research Council for kindly funding the research presented here; to Gary Swinton (School of Geography and Environmental Science) for drafting Figure 1; and to Ian McNiven, Joe Crouch, Guy Neliman and Ozzie Bosun for being part of the archaeological fieldwork at Turao Kula.

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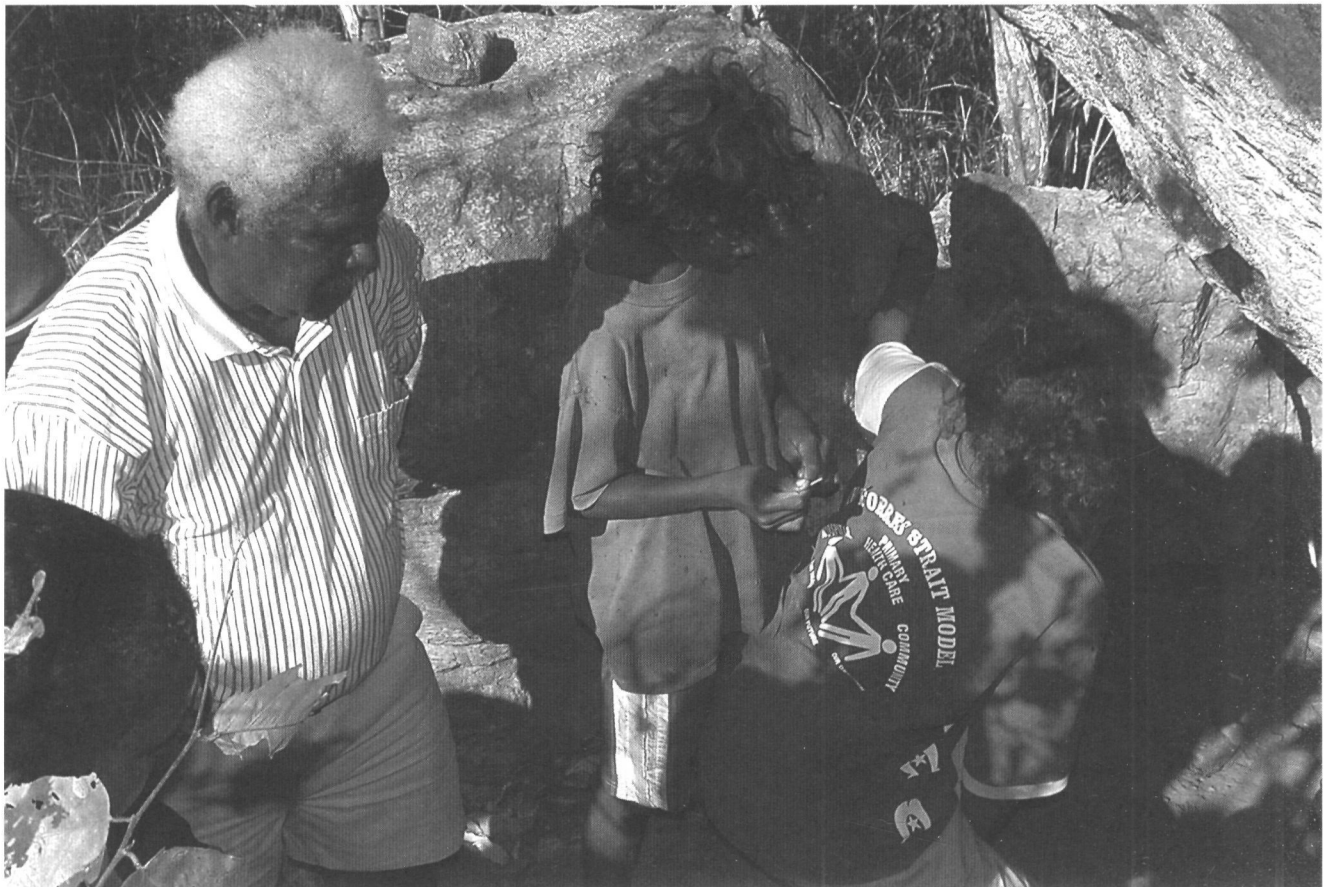


Figure 5. Visit to Turao Kula by Mualgal elders, youths and archaeologists, October 2002.

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Louise Manas is Madam Chair of the Mualgal (Torres Strait Islanders) Corporation, representing the Indigenous people of Mua Island. She received her Diploma of Education from James Cook University and has taught at Kubin and Thursday Island State Schools. She now teaches at the Kubin primary school on Mua Island and, in addition to her roles as educator and mentor for students in the Remote Area Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Studies Program (RAATSICSP), she coordinates various cultural events on the island. Her educational philosophy is to ensure that Torres Strait children receive a quality education with additional instruction in their own cultural tradition. Both are necessary to prepare them for life in a globalised world, while retaining their unique identity. As one of few women given a leadership position by her community, Louise emphasises the importance of following Islander protocol and the need to respect the views of community elders.

