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Reviews

Boigu: Our History and Culture

Boigu Island Community Council

Aboriginal Studies Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1991, xvi + 151 pp. Maps, line drawings, b/w photographs. \$16.95 p.b.

Reviewed by Anna Shnukal

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This collection of writings by the elders of Boigu, the most remote of the islands of Torres Strait, constitutes both a partial record of the history and culture of the Boigu people and a lament for the passing of traditional knowledge and custom. Intended primarily for the younger members of the community, the language is correspondingly direct and clear. It would be a mistake, however, to equate simplicity of language with simplicity of content.

The stories are grouped into eight sections, each of which represents a significant aspect of Boigu custom. However, because so much of island custom is shared, the book will resonate for all Islanders and others familiar with the Strait: 'The tribal ties extend beyond the Boigu community to other islands and so there is a wider sense of belonging as well' (p. 60).

'People of long ago' recounts three traditional tales of the settling of Boigu and the naming of significant places; they also illustrate elements of 'old-time fashion' and morality. Most striking to me was the symbolic representation in two of the stories of the oppositional relationship between sea and land, which I consider to be one of the fundamental organising principles of the Islander worldview.

'Traditional skills' continue to be transmitted through the school's cultural program: techniques of rope making, fishing, weaving, housebuilding, gardening and astronomy. Traditional magic is now practised only by some of the older men: Ganadi Toby relates how he prepares the dugong stone to call the dugong in for hunting and in a later section there is a description of the rainstones and rainmaking ceremony. Some reference is made to the post-contact transformation of traditional practices, influenced by Christian observance and immigrant Pacific culture. The Boigu

Islanders, who were not as affected by the Pacific presence as were the Eastern and Central Islanders, still distinguish between the traditional and imported elements of what is today a synthetic culture: 'Culture is like a tree. Its roots reach into traditional life; its branches spread towards new horizons' (p. 56).

'Island custom' includes several short pieces on traditional customs and ceremonies associated with initiation, weddings and marriage and newer customs, such as the Mothers' Union gatherings, which are also celebrated by feasting and dancing. Describing custom which is no longer followed, one storyteller says: 'To us, it's just like water — we have no full understanding, just a little knowledge' (p. 51).

'Water' has always been a problem for the people of Boigu. The last true rainmaker was Auda, who was already an old man when today's older generation was young. Before the building of the new dam, the Boigu people had to seek fresh water from neighbouring islands or from the northern mainland. One of the earliest myths tell of Kiba's creation of the island's major river and first two wells, both of which were filled to build the new airstrip.

'Warriors and soldiers' celebrates the warrior heroes and explains the making of traditional weapons, the precautions taken and the battle preparations made during the long period when Boigu was raided by the Tugeri. The section includes an exciting story by Jerry Anau about his World War II service (when over seven hundred islanders joined the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion) in then Dutch New Guinea, as part of an operation hunting Japanese soldiers near Merauke. My father, who also served there at the time, had mentioned this operation but this version was new to me.

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'Trading and transport' focuses on the establishment and maintenance of trading relationships between individual families on Boigu and in the coastal villages of Papua New Guinea. Formal recognition of this historically vital trade was accorded by the Torres Strait Treaty between Australia and PNG, ratified in 1985. I had not been aware that the inhabitants of five PNG villages had been persuaded to relocate to the coast this century to profit from increased trade opportunities with Boigu. Today, store goods and second-hand clothes are exchanged for garden produce, but in the past the major trade item was the large canoe, necessary for hunting and gathering food and for inter-island transport, which could not be built on Boigu.

'The Coming of the Light' refers to the most important event in modern Islander consciousness, the arrival of London Missionary Society (LMS) missionaries and teachers in 1871. Today this also symbolises rejection of the traditional 'dark' past and acceptance of the 'light' of contemporary civilisation. By the mid-1880s every community had converted at least nominally and every island passes on the story of the LMS landing first at Erub (Darnley Island) and subsequently on their own island. The arrival of the teachers on Boigu almost proved fatal. What saved them was the gift for the day of the wife of a Dauan man who had accompanied them, although the storyteller delicately does not specify the nature of the serve the women performed. The Boigu people initially rejected the Christian message but began to convert after the arrival of Pinu from Mabuiag; 'Pinu's peace mission' recounts the last major skirmish between the Boigu people and the Tugeri. The church imposed changes on village life, a major change being the provision of schooling, though Boigu did not undergo the extensive relocation that occurred on more populous islands.

'Work and school' leads us into the early decades of this century. From the discovery of pearlshell in the late 1860s, the marine industries were, until fairly recently, the primary source of earnings. Outsider control of the industries was challenged to some degree, when Papuan Industries Ltd lent money to communities to enable them to buy their own boats, but low wages and continued government control led to the 1936 maritime strike. Certain concessions were gained at the 1937 Councillors' Conference at

Masig (Yorke Island) but the Islanders remained under the control of the Queensland Department of Native Affairs for several decades.

The book reads as a series of personal voices, the reflective writings balanced by several vivid adventure yarns. Familiar themes of Islander discourse occur: lack of true equality with whites; the hard times on the boats; concern with population drift to the mainland; the world-wide movement of indigenous people to control their own affairs; the necessity for Islanders to take control of their future.

The book fulfils very well its aim of transmitting culturally and historically important information from the old to the young people of Boigu: 'If they lose this [the culture of their forefathers] the knowledge is lost forever' (p. 150). Perhaps best categorised as community history, by analogy with community art, it articulates what of the past has touched the lives of, or is of current concern to, the people of Boigu. Thus, for example, there is no mention of the eastern or central islands and only a brief reference to Thursday Island, the administrative centre. The writings are given coherence through the Boigu connection and through the book's thematic and chronological organisation. Although we are told, for example, the names of the original LMS teachers (p. 118), of priests appointed to Boigu (p. 126), of members of the first Church Council (p. 126) and of cutter skippers (p. 134), the focus is cultural rather than historical and important white officials, like Rev. John Done, Con O'Leary and Paddy Killoran, are mentioned in passing in terms of their relationships with individual storytellers. I am not sure whether the brief introductory notes to some of the stories are sufficient to enable the general reader to place them in context.

Most of the stories were recorded in the top western language Kala Kawaw Ya (KKY), and translated into English. The spelling of KKY words uses Rod Kennedy's phonemic orthography, but I would have liked to see a brief pronunciation guide for those unfamiliar with the language. (A minor quibble is that in the second story there are two spellings of 'wild fowl', *surkar* and *surka*, possibly two pronunciation variants or careless editing.) I was fascinated to see so many lexical similarities between KKY, an Australian language, and the unrelated Papuan language of the east, despite apparently very limited pre-contact relations between the two peoples.

Visually, the book is a delight: the maps, line drawings and historical and contemporary photographs are aptly chosen; it is well designed and printed in large type on good paper. I would recommend it as an excellent introduction for young people to an

exceedingly complex and dynamic culture and a fine addition to any secondary or introductory tertiary course on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Education: Your Choice. Secondary Schooling Choices

Commonwealth Department of Employment Education and Training
Central Office, GPO Box 9880, Canberra City, ACT 2601.

Reviewed by Peter Renshaw

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The information package, *Education: Your Choice. Secondary Schooling Choices* was funded by DEET through the Projects of National Significance Program. The package contains two videotapes, a booklet, pamphlets and posters that describe diverse options for the secondary education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. There is an optimistic tone throughout the videotapes, and a multitude of images showing young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students participating in various secondary education options.

The first videotape focuses on the options that are available to students who have chosen to study in their local community. Students have the option of studying through a Distance Education Program either at home under the guidance of a parent, or at a local primary school where the resident teacher and Distance Education teacher cooperate to provide the lessons for secondary students, or at a Community Education Centre where high school students and young adults can be taught in small groups. Further options include travelling to nearby secondary schools which offer mainstream curriculum to Year 10. Where the local community has taken the initiative to organise a community school, students have the option of studying a curriculum adapted to their needs, and can be taught traditional cultures and languages by local community members.

The second video focuses on the options that are available to students who move away from the local community for their secondary education. Students

from the bush can attend boarding schools often run by the churches or organised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In addition, students have the option of boarding in hostels. The videos are designed to allay the fears of parents about the safety, supervision, health and welfare of their children. Throughout the video, students are shown realistically — engaging in study, playing sport, socialising with their peers, calling home and actually going back to their home communities.

This package was produced as an information resource for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It could be used productively in community meetings where parents and students come together to consider options for secondary education. It would be a valuable resource for Guidance and Career Counsellors in remote regions of Australia. In addition, it provides a positive and realistic image of young Indigenous Australians making plans for their future. Too often, they are depicted in the media in negative stereotypes, and too often the mainstream white community are fed a television and radio diet of negative comment and biased opinions.

This package refuses to even acknowledge that destructive discourse. Rather, it concentrates on the real lives, real options and realistic possibilities that are available, and identifies pathways to success in secondary education for the diversity of needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.