



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

## Section D: Torres Strait

### Torres Strait Islander Women

**Ketrina Barnes**

*The University of Queensland  
Brisbane*



#### Introduction

During some stage in their lives many Torres Strait Islanders, especially women will migrate to Australia in order to further their education, employment and training (Warrior, 1997). This paper focuses on a recent that I carried out among Torres Strait Islander women living on the mainland. The purpose of the survey is to indicate how Torres Strait Islander women are maintaining their identity whilst living on the mainland. To show these results, first the Torres Strait Islanders will be discussed generally to give an overview of their identity, then briefly Torres Strait Islanders on the mainland will be discussed. The paper will then conclude which the results from the survey conducted.

#### Torres Strait Islanders

The Torres Strait Islanders are a Melanesian people, closely related to the people of Papua New

Guinea and other Pacific Islands (Greenwood, 1991). The Islanders occupy the area that lies off the far north-eastern tip of Australia. This region is made up of islands, reef areas, cays and tidal waters. In total there are 14 outer islands which are broken into three distinct groups—the eastern, western and central groups. They are inhabited by the people of the Torres Straits who are identified by the island they come from. However, they all come together as one to be recognised as ‘Torres Strait Islanders’. ‘Each Island community retains “a clear sense” of identity and distinctiveness’ (Beckett, 1963 in Sharp, 1993: 244), with traditions and customs being easy to maintain within the Torres Straits (Wilson, 1993). The Islanders express a unique sea culture, which is a reflection of their broader culture. People of the Torres Straits have close relationships with seas, coasts and reefs, through which their identity and culture is expressed. In the Straits ‘the society of Islanders is composed of a number of separate groups each essentially different from the others with its distinct customs, allegiances and variants of cultural practice’ (Wilson, 1993: 45). Their close relationship with each other also contributes to the uniqueness of their culture, their gardening skills, their myths and their strong seafaring and trading traditions. Significantly the term *Island Kastom* is of great importance to the islanders as it ‘dominates the relationship of Islanders with each other and defines their ties to the ancestral homelands’ (Wilson,

1993: 24). *Island Kastom* reassures Islanders of their identity and provides status in the dominant Western society (Wilson, 1993). Although the Islanders were more or less independent of one another, the Islanders did and still have retained their languages, island homes, seafaring skills, traditions, myths and religion. The sea is their home: '[it] has shaped the way they live' (Greenwood, 1991) and this is seen through their dances and through the stories, which, in turn, shape the way 'they see the world' (Greenwood, 1991). There are four events which strengthen and also give further definition of Torres Strait Islanders: the Second World War; the 'border issue' of the 1970s; a move for sovereign status; and a case for customary rights to land (Sharp, 1993: 219).

### Torres Strait Islanders on the Mainland

Dance, mythology, food preparation, language and artefact manufacture, which all derived from the land and sea, are integrated into the Torres Straits family home. Although many mainlanders have been encouraged to return to the Torres Straits, this is not possible for many Torres Strait Islanders. 'Islander society, as a whole, is significantly acculturated but on the mainland it has also achieved a high level of integration within mainstream society' (Wilson, 1993: 24). It is said, however, 'family ties are hard to maintain because more than half of our 12,000 people live on the mainland' and that it is 'harder for mainland people to bring their children up in the knowledge of traditional ways' (Greenland, 1991). As Warrior (1997) stated in her lecture, more than 80% live on the mainland with 19,543 being women. Of those Islanders that have migrated to the mainland many have migrated at different times, and for various reasons, ranging from employment opportunities, education, and further training (Taylor and Gaminiratne, 1993), thus making identity harder to maintain because of geographical location. As pointed out by Warrior (1997), a lot of Torres Strait Islander women have moved to different geographical locations in order to better their education and employment opportunities.

### Survey results

This survey involved 15 Torres Strait Islander women living on the mainland which focused on their identity. The ages of those surveyed ranged from 17-25 year to 38 and over (refer to Figure 1).

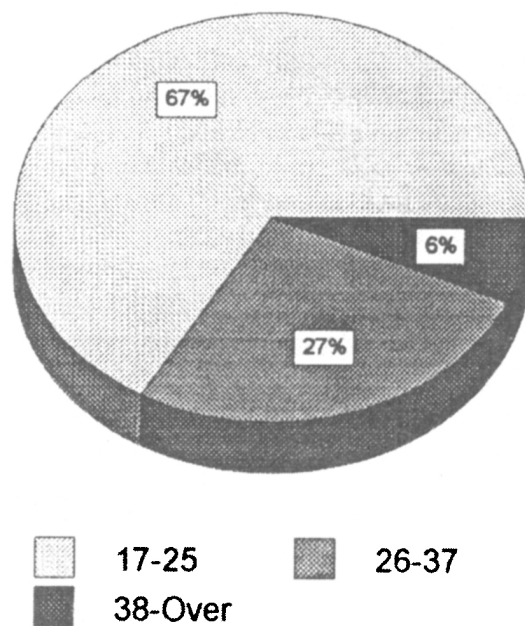


Figure 1: Age

Of the women surveyed, many were born in Australia; however the majority indicated that they preferred to be identified as a Torres Strait Islander rather than a woman (Figures 2 and 3).

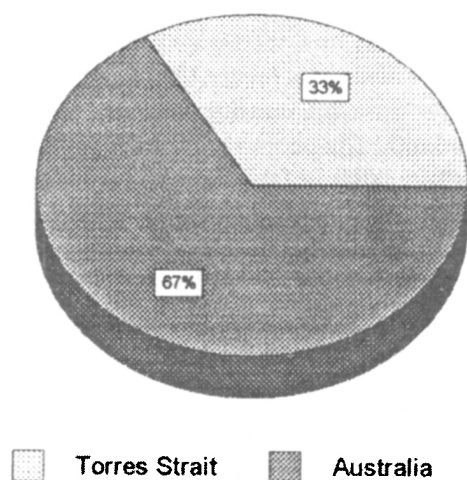


Figure 2: Place of birth

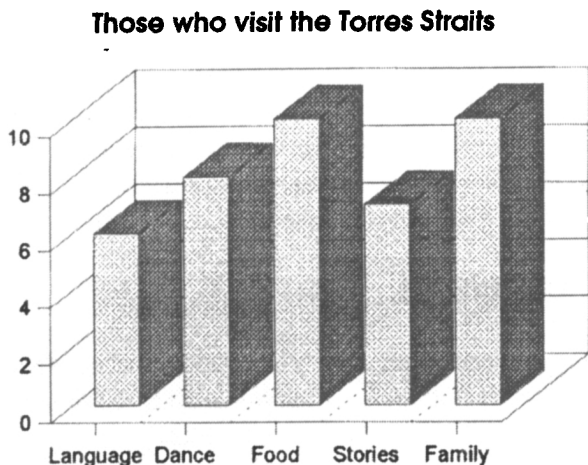


Figure 3: Visits

Whilst many identify themselves as Torres Strait Islander women, the majority do not visit the Torres Straits. However, they indicated that they were able to maintain cultural activities such as language, dance/music, food, legends/stories and family obligations (Figures 4 and 5). Of the women who indicated that they continued traditions, many also indicated that there is a difference between women in the Straits and on the mainland in terms of roles and status. Some of these differences are:

- the role of women as compared to mainland Torres Strait Islanders I feel is more family oriented and influenced by elders
- Torres Strait Islander women on the mainland have more career opportunities, have the desire to move up the workplace and to challenge men. But they lack the cultural and spiritual strength by not connecting with their land in a traditional environment
- Torres Strait Islander women have fewer career opportunities — unlikely to challenge the men — but know their role and status in their communities and know what to expect of them
- more family obligations in the islanders.

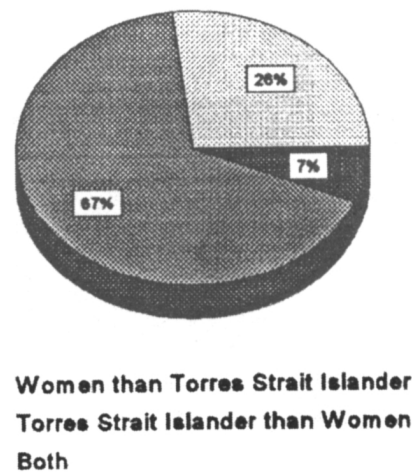


Figure 4: Identification

Torres Strait women: Mainland

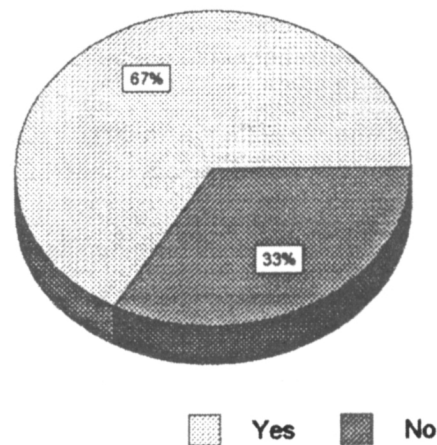


Figure 5: Role, Status

Those who visit the Torres Straits

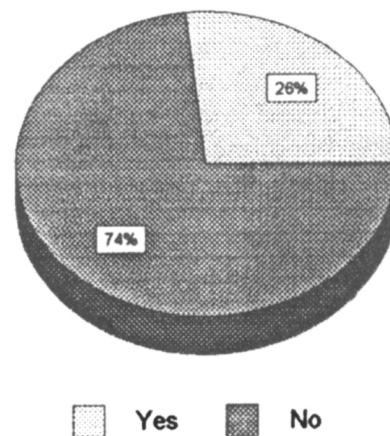
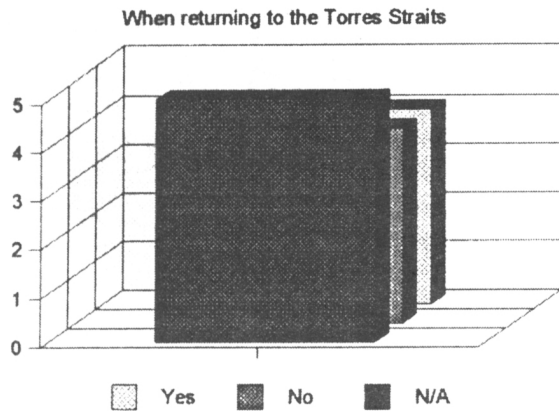


Figure 6: Visits



**Figure 7: Difficulties/Conflicts**

Despite a difference in role or status many of those surveyed have been able to retain their identity as a Torres Strait Islander women living on the mainland. For these women some of the important factors that have helped them to maintain their identity are:

- support from other Torres Strait Islander women in passing down of knowledge, and contact with relatives
- my cultural beliefs and religious beliefs
- continue my culture, i.e. language, dancing, food and family unity
- all cultural activities like dancing, music, language, food, stories and family obligations
- to keep in contact with other Torres Strait Islanders and to maintain our traditions/customs such as dancing, arts and food.

From the survey it is seen that many Torres Strait Islander women on the mainland are continuing in certain ways to retain their identity. Living far from the Torres Straits makes it harder to maintain cultural continuity but many of those surveyed probably have shifted to the mainland to further their education and employment opportunities. There is an old saying in the Torres Straits:

... young people are just like bamboo, like a new shoot of bamboo that is just growing. If you straighten the bamboo when it is very young, it will grow straight. But you can't straighten old bamboo. You can't change an older person's ways of thinking! (Greenwood, 1991)

This statement shows just how important it is to keep Torres Strait Islander identity alive, even if you are not living within the Torres Straits. These women surveyed are the ones who can try to retain their identity, but it is up to those individuals other than themselves on the mainland to make that choice.

**References**

Greenwood, Bob and Vicki (1991) *The Torres Strait Islanders*. Videorecording. Alstonville, NSW: Visual Media Production.

Sharp, N. (1993) *Stars of Tugai — Torres Strait Islands*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.

Warrior, F. (1997) Personal communication, 7 October.

Wilson, L. (1993) *Kerkar Lu — Contemporary Artefacts of The Torres Strait Islanders*. Brisbane: Department of Education. □

**Ketrina Barnes** is an undergraduate student in the Department of Social Work, The University of Queensland.



# Torres Strait Islander Women Identity Survey

Before you partake in this survey, every piece of information you provide is strictly confidential and once the data have been recorded, the survey will be discarded.

1. Age: 17-25  26-37  38- Over

2. Were you born in: Torres Strait  Australia

3. Please indicate the cultural activities that you as a Torres Strait Islander woman still practice:

Language  Dance/Music  Food   
Legends/Stories  Family Obligations

4. How do you prefer to be identified?

Woman rather than Torres Strait Islander   
Torres Strait Islander rather than woman

5. Do you believe that there is a difference between the role and status of women in the Torres Straits and the roles of Torres Strait women on the mainland?

Yes  No

If yes, provide an example:

---

---

---

---

---

---

6. Do you visit the Torres Straits? Yes  No

If yes, approximately how many times per year?

Once  Twice  More

