

[For Project Gallery]

The Waiat archaeology Project in Torres Strait, far north Australia

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At the time of European contact, Torres Strait, New Guinea and northern Australia were home to highly restricted fraternities focused on warfare, head-hunting and mortuary rituals. Masked dancers, representing spirits of the dead, initiated the next generation into secrets reputedly brought by a pantheon of wandering heroes, such as Waiat. A new project explores the deep history of Islander traditions, excavating initiation places associated with Waiat. In so doing, it demonstrates the advantages of collaborative history-building using archaeology and traditional knowledge.

Keywords: Australia, European contact, Islander tradition, initiation, collaborative histories

Introduction

This project focuses on mythologies associated with the ‘Culture Hero’ Waiat. Our definition of mythologies follows that of the Oxford English Dictionary as “A body or collection of myths, esp. those relating to a particular person or thing, or belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition” (OED Online 2020). Waiat, also named ‘Wayath’, ‘Uiat’ or ‘Naga’ in Central Torres Strait (CTS) and Western Torres Strait (WTS) and ‘Waiet’ in Eastern Torres Strait (ETS), brought new sacred knowledge to communities he visited along a 230km pathway from Woeydhul (Widul) in WTS to Waier in ETS (Cygnet Repu pers. comm. 2017; Figure 1). This information was shared during restricted male only initiation and mortuary ceremonies (*tai*, *terai* or *markai*), still practiced during the mid-nineteenth century (Haddon 1904; Figure 2).

[Figure 1]

[Figure 2]

The Waiat Project exemplifies ways in which archaeologists and Indigenous communities may work together to achieve individual and common goals. The project was initiated in 2014 when one of the authors (Cygnet Repu) approached the Meriam community through Doug Passi and archaeologist Duncan Wright. A meeting was organised at Queensland Museum in Brisbane. For the safety of participants, it was important to introduce the project and its personnel to Waiat. The effigy of Waiat, represented by a turtle shell, was stolen by a government official from Waier in 1924. This formidable turtle shell effigy stands five feet tall and is strung with human rib and jawbones. The latter represent sacrifices and/or headhunting that occurred within annual initiation ceremonies (Pasi in Haddon 1904).

Project direction was negotiated between 2014–2017 with discussion involving Elders from Murray and Lag Mabuyag islands. By the end of this period, decisions had been made about how best to historicise the Waiat mythology. Specifically, the team would: 1) source and collate archival and material information about Waiat, most now located in Australian and European institutions; 2) complete archaeological excavations at initiation grounds in WTS and ETS; and 3) provide a forum in which stories and songs about Waiat might be shared, thereby uniting Islander communities in the ‘proper way’, following Culture Hero pathways (Cygnet Repu pers. comm. 2014).

Method and Methodology

Levi Strauss (1966: 257; see also Whitely 2002) suggested that all narratives about the past (whether historic or mythic) involve human subjectivities, interests and power relations. Systematic history building requires exploration of consistency and contradiction within and between these datasets and epistemologies. Torres Strait arguably offers an ideal opportunity to develop this approach with a rich corpus of ethnographic, archaeological and museum materials associated with Culture Heroes and commemorative (mortuary and initiation) ceremonies.

To examine consistency (or otherwise) across Torres Strait and through time, qualitative data, mined from stories and songs, was analysed statistically using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software package. This provides word

and concept frequencies as they emerge, and produces matrices facilitating investigation of relationships between each concept. It is then possible to assess whether themes intersect with archaeology (e.g. role of dead Ancestors, ceremony seasonality).

To explore spatial and temporal aspects of site construction, excavations targeted ethnographically significant features (e.g. shell arrangements and dugong bone mounds) within each initiation site. Radiocarbon dates from these features were compared with relative chronologies obtained from ritual paraphernalia connected with these sites (e.g. turtle shell masks and effigies; Figure 3). This made it possible to extend archaeological research ‘historicising’ Torres Strait ritual (e.g. McNiven & Feldman 2003; David and Mura Badulgal 2006) by examining ritual mobility spanning multiple sacred places and islands.

[Figure 3]

Excavations were completed using arbitrary excavation units (not exceeding 5cm), guided by changes in stratigraphy (e.g. Wright *et al.* 2018). Preliminary sorting occurred on site, allowing for immediate return of human bone and non-cultural materials. Faunal remains, together with lithics, and osseous/bone artefacts and charcoal, were shipped to ANU for specialist analyses.

Preliminary archaeology results

In 2016, Dauareb (who speak for Dauar and Waier islands) assisted with archaeological excavation of Waier’s Lodge at Ne. This represents the first (and only) sub-surface study of Waier Island, one of only two academic archaeological projects set in ETS, the other being ‘The Murray Islands Archaeology Project’ (e.g. Carter *et al.* 2004).

A large embayment flanked by black, volcanic cliffs, Ne is a naturally spectacular site. Rock shelters along the southern margins contained clamshell valves, reputedly used during initiation ceremonies as water containers, and considerable quantities of human bone (Wright *et al.* 2018). Ethnographically significant installations (e.g. Waier’s drinking vessel and fireplace), incorporating two stone and four shell

arrangements, were located on natural ledges three and five metres above ground level (Figure 4).

[Figure 4]

A surface cluster of human bone and *cyprae* sp. shells was found within a Ne rock shelter. Shellfish from this feature, and from the aforementioned Waiet installations, returned radiocarbon dates of 81–297 cal. BP (at 95% probability). This corresponds to a nineteenth-century estimate for the date of associated ritual paraphernalia including turtle-shell masks (Haddon 1904; Philp 2015). Estimates were based on typo-chronologies, and the presence of European human bones including ribs from “a white boy” in the Waiet effigy (Pasi cited in Haddon 1904).

The onset of Mortuary activities is likely to have been considerably earlier. In all three excavations, human remains (including semi articulated ribs and a vertebrate bone) continued into layers with a maximum age of 1692–1883 cal. BP. A shift was noted in layers post-dating 493–614 cal. BP, involving increased quantities of culturally predated and ochre painted shellfish. These elements mirror elements recounted within the Waiet ethnographies.

S-ANU#	Sample name	Material	d ¹³ C	±	¹⁴ C age	±	Calib 1 σ (BP)	Calib 2 σ (BP)	
50407	NE; L2; FIRE	Syrinx aruanus	4.512281	2	564	22	225-286 (0.831) 195-210 (0.093) 149-161 (0.076)	136 297	-
50406	NE; L2; FIRE (dup)	Syrinx aruanus	4.026614	2	565	22	225 - (0.848) 196-209 (0.078) 149-161 (0.074)	285 137 298	-
50409	NE; L1; LOOKOUT	Melo amphora	3.005983	2	560	21	224 - (0.781) 194-211 (0.122) 149-161 (0.097)	282 135 293	-

52131	NE; SQA; SURFACE	Cypraea (smashed)	6.4	1	519	23	144 – 246	81 - 273	
52132	NE; SQA; XU3	Strombus (fragment)	8.5	1	1605	24	1172 – 1245	1123 - 1275	-
52138	NE; SQA; XU3 (dup)	Strombus (fragment)	3.9	1	1588	23	1157 – 1237	1097 - 1264	-
52135	NE; SQA; XU9	Tridacnae sp.	6.3	1	1851	23	1382 – 1480	1343 - 1517	-
50819	NE; SQA; XU11	Charcoal	-	1	1489	27	1310-1351	1299-1376	-
52136	NE; SQA; XU19	Tridacnae sp.	7.6	1	2363	27	1977 – 2084	1923 - 2125	-
52137	NE; SQA; XU19	Lambis lambis	6.1	1	2352	24	1960 – 2065	1917 - 2112	-
52133	NE; SQA; XU19	Tridacnae sp.	4.5	1	2505	25	2163 – 2273	2117 - 2303	-
55314	NE; SQB; XU1	Tridacnae sp.	7	1	2169	24	1755 – 1852	1704 - 1883	-
55316	NE; SQB; XU2a	Lambis lambis	4	1	2155	25	1729 – 1827	1692 - 1871	-
55317	NE; SQB; XU2b	Nerita sp.	9	1	909	23	501 – 563	493 - 614	-

Table 1: Radiocarbon dates from Ne on Waier

[Figure 5]

Implications

Ritual mobility was, and continues to be, an important activity for human communities. This is demonstrably the case in Torres Strait where Culture Hero mythologies continue to structure relationships and identities (Figure 5). The Waiat Project demonstrates the important potential of inter-disciplinary research for historicising inter-connected and commemorative ritual (Wright *et al.* In press).

Complex histories of ritual emplacement were demonstrated at Ne, involving the earliest archaeological evidence for funerary activities (<1700 cal. BP) so far recorded for Torres Strait. Mortuary traditions alter over time, interpreted by Dauareb as evidence for the negotiated process by which Elders residing in ETS responded to Waiat's arrival. Alo Tapim and Segar Passi (pers. comm. 2019) suggest similar negotiation occurred when Christianity arrived in Torres Strait, with elements of earlier Malo and Waiat Culture Heroes embedded within this new religion.

In 2021, the project expands to Mer, undertaking geochemical provenancing of exotic sacred stones reputedly commemorating the journey of Waiat. A Waiat gathering is planned on Lag Mabuyag in order to share stories, further cementing the contemporary significance of the Waiat culture hero.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Haddon (1898) photograph of a Markai dancer (courtesy University of Cambridge, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology; Accession number N.23028.ACH2-003)

Figure 2. Waïat and Naga's pathway through Torres Strait

Figure 3. Kursi (hammer-head shark) mask used during the Waïet ceremonies on Woeydhul (courtesy Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Register nr SES, MVD 22/2020)

Figure 4. James Zaro, at “Waïet's fireplace” on Waier (Photograph: author).

Figure 5. The Waïat gathering on Mer, November 2019 (Photograph: author)