

CHAPTER TEN

A Life in Words: History and Society in Saibai Island (Torres Strait) Tombstones

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In Tracey Moffatt's 1993 movie *beDevil* a trilogy of ghost stories are threaded together to explore how gender, race and cultural differences are dealt with in Australian society. Apart from ghosts, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander characters are common to all three stories, suggesting that the foremost negotiation of difference in national space is one which everywhere includes indigenous people. In one of Moffatt's vignettes, 'Lovin' The Spin I'm In', she explores the long mourning of Imelda, an elderly Torres Strait Islander woman, for the tragic deaths of her son and his lover and their spirits' haunting of the abandoned warehouse that Imelda lives in. It is one of the few recent representations of Torres Strait Islanders in popular visual culture, and, while Moffatt uses haunting as a metaphor to explore relationships between Indigenous and other Australians, in the movie there is a very literal power ascribed to ghosts. It is surely no accident that Moffatt focuses on haunting to explore larger issues of Aboriginal and Islander presence in the nation. Amongst Torres Strait Islanders sightings of and interactions with ghosts, spirits, and ancestral beings are so common that it can be said with a fair degree of accuracy that the dead are a regular part of Torres Strait Islanders' lives. To come to terms with Torres Strait Islander society is to come to terms with the dead, the contiguous others of the living, their influence, suggestions, contrariness and incomprehensibility.

Anthropologists and others have long recognized the importance of the dead in Torres Strait Islander culture, paying particular attention to the part of the mortuary

rituals known variously as the tombstone opening or unveiling (Fitzpatrick-Nietschmann 1980; Beckett 1989, 221; Wilson 1993, 25). The tombstone opening is the last of a series of mortuary practices that take place over about five years, longer in some cases, in which close family of the deceased commemorate the memory of their dead and conduct ritual observances to ensure that the spirit of the dead is appropriately cared for. The unveilings are often spectacular affairs where many dozens or hundreds of people gather to recognize publicly, for the final time, the person of the deceased and their importance in providing kin and status linkages between the mourners. The apex of the ritual occurs when the draped headstone, around which dozens of items of clothing, lengths of cloth and large amounts of cash are placed, is exposed. These goods and money, all of which are provided by guests, are then distributed to the 'ghost hands' (*marigetal*, or singular, *mariget*), usually drawn from a pool of potential in-law relations. Over the years, *marigetal* will have planned the funeral, including invitations to attend, and the construction of the grave and tombstone. When the tombstone is exposed, mourners are able to read the epitaph, which since the beginning of the twentieth century has dramatically changed from brief Christian and personal homilies to an extensive biography of up to 400 words. A common anthropological interpretation of the tombstone unveiling is that it is the definitive end of an extended period of mourning, in which the deceased move from the world of the living to the world of the dead, allowing their relatives to re-enter their daily lives unencumbered by the obligation to conduct a fitting funeral (Fitzpatrick 2000, 36). In this chapter tombstone unveilings, particularly as they are organized by the members of the community of

Saibai Islanders of northwestern Torres Strait, are not treated as a final rite but as emblematic of a two-fold ambiguity revolving around simultaneity and exchange.¹

On the one hand, the dead are difficult to locate, no matter the stage of the mortuary ceremonies that their living kin have organized for them. They are simultaneously in their bodies, in their commemorations and in their spirit-world. The latter is comprised of two contemporaneous domains: existence, or 'community' as Saibaians² say, with other spirits, and existence in close proximity to God. In both domains, but especially in the company of other spirits, it is not always clear what the dead do with their time; as a result there is a good deal of uncertainty as to what their intentions are when they appear without warning to their living kin. And, while the spirit of the deceased is actively pursuing its inexplicable designs, the creation by close family of the deceased's tombstone biography sediments, as commemorative monuments tend to do, the life of the deceased. Of course, memories of the deceased are not tied to epitaphic biographies, and the ongoing haunting of living family by the dead, as well as purposeful seeking by living relatives for encounters with deceased close kin, indicates that neither do relationships cease between the living and the dead. However, there is an ending of sorts that the tombstone unveiling signifies and this concerns the lifelong exchange between the deceased and their labour. As I discuss below, the content of Saibaian epitaphs as they are found in the Saibai Island cemetery has dramatically changed in the last century. To the extent that Saibaian epitaphs can be grouped together into an incomplete, disjointed narrative about the Saibai community, it

¹ The material for this chapter derives from five fieldwork excursions undertaken on Saibai Island 1992–2006. In November of 2006 I conducted a detailed survey of the headstones of the Saibai cemetery, which forms the basis of the observations and arguments of this chapter.

² In this paper I use 'Saibaian' to refer to Saibai Islanders.

is possible to discern emphases on church based work as an indication of Christian virtue, labour as an indication of individual worth, family as a collectivity that displaces labour-based collectivities, and the radical localization of personal and clan-based identities. On Saibalian epitaphs references to labour appear in a number of guises: as voluntary work for Christian organizations, as a form of generosity in service of provision for family, and as paid employment in Government and industry based markets. This last, paid labour, is the only form of labour that ceases with death, as the dead can be beseeched by the living to intercede to God on behalf of close family, thus continuing the religious and familial activities of the person when they were alive. The tombstone unveiling is not then the last exchange between the living and the dead, but the last exchange between the dead and their obligations to capital and civic society.

The emphasis in tombstone unveilings on the family as a unique social collective sheds light on why it is important to display wealth and goods on the grave and later have it distributed to *marigetal*, as well as to participate in long hours of feasting, singing and dancing. It is the family that is celebrated throughout the ceremony and to the extent that there is an ostentatious display and distribution of wealth and goods, the tombstone unveiling shares similarities to classical accounts of the North-Western American Indian potlatch. According to Mauss (2005[1954], 50) the system of obligations that surrounded the potlatch necessitated an obligation to receive a gift and then to later repay it. Mauss also noted that 'in certain kinds of *potlach* one must expend all one has, keeping nothing back', which amounts to the possibility of unredeemed expenditure, giving without return (Mauss 2005[1954], 47). Recalling Emile Durkheim's sociology of the sacred, Georges Bataille (1991) writes that the potlatch's ritualistic excess is distinguished from the everyday world of productive, economic

existence in which the balancing of expenditure and gain is uppermost. Economically nonsensical, such rituals are challenges to a bourgeois rationality of productivity, as those who give may not receive anything in return. One interpretation of Bataille's insight into the uniqueness of giving-without-receiving (Kofsky 2004, 82) is that it is a form of self-sacrifice, because the self is unconfirmed by giving, thereby creating an openness to community, precisely the intent of the tombstone opening ceremonies, where those who place money and goods onto the grave cannot expect to see an equivalent return from the *marigetal* who claim their gifts. Bataille (1991) employs a similar framework in considering death; it is not closure of the existence of the deceased that funerals punctuate, but celebration of community and the exuberance of living. In Islander tombstone unveilings the boundaries between selves, and life and death are collapsed, thus creating the conditions for the affirmation of Islander social collectives of family and clan, and ongoing relationships between the dead and the living. This is in contrast to those parts of tombstone biographies that emphasize the importance of the deceased's labour.

Tombstone Narratives

Saibai is a low-lying alluvial island 5km south of New Guinea in the northwestern part of Australia's Torres Strait. The population of around 400 resides in houses that extend along a three kilometre stretch of coastline on the northwestern end of the island. The majority of the population is of Saibaian descent, with a third being of Papuan descent. The Papuans settled at Saibai from neighbouring New Guinean villages after New Guinea became an independent nation in 1975 and have become a permanent part of the Saibai community. Kala Kawaw Ya is the major language spoken by Sabaian; it is also spoken in the neighbouring island communities of Dauan and Biogu, and is regarded as

belonging to the Australian Pama-Nyungan family. Other major languages spoken on Saibai include Broken (Torres Strait Creole) and Kiwai, a Trans-Fly Papuan language spoken along the adjacent New Guinea coastline, and commonly spoken by the Saibai Papuans. English is primarily used as an administrative language. Torres Strait, which is populated by approximately 7, 000 people, is administered at four levels: through local Councils, the regional Torres Strait Regional Authority, the Queensland Government and the Commonwealth Government. It is one of the few areas of Australia where indigenous people form the majority of the population.

There are two cemeteries on Saibai, book-ending the eastern and western arms of the village, which winds for about three kilometres along the northern foreshore of the island. At the eastern end of the village lies the older, defunct cemetery, where a small number of graves lie covered by a large bush fowl nest. This eastern cemetery was abandoned in the early years of the twentieth century for the western graveyard, which has been in use at least since 1896, according to the dating on the earliest legible tombstone there. Saibaians do not recall who is buried at the eastern cemetery and the elements have eroded what writing there was on the tombstones so it is difficult to know what was recorded, if anything, on those headstones. At the western cemetery the earliest headstones of the 267 graves are made from stone with minimal information written onto the surface in English; usually name, birth and death dates, religious and family sentiments. Over time the headstones become larger, concrete is introduced and from the 1970s onwards, marble and granite become common materials in grave construction. As the size of the headstone enlarges over time, so the amount and nature of biographical information recorded on the headstone expands. None or minimal biographical information and sentiments gives way to brief descriptions of the major

employment and institutional positions the deceased held. In the last two decades headstones have included phrases written in Kala Kawaw Ya, as well as inlaid reliefs of totemic clans, and mention Christian organizations and employment that symbolize the areas of the deceased's life that the living family wish to emphasize. The more elaborate and expensive headstones and graves also feature photographs of the deceased.

Changes in the content of Saibai headstone over the course of a century are largely of two kinds. Firstly, when contemporary epitaphs are compared with earlier ones, there is a noticeable increase in the quantity of words. Early epitaphs are rarely more than 50 words whereas contemporary epitaphs contain up to 400 words. As I discuss below, this increase in word length has not occurred gradually but dramatically from the 1960s onwards. This leads to the second major change in Saibai tombstones, which is that contemporary epitaphs read more like biographies, making them substantially different textual entities than the earliest headstones. As these biographies have developed, emphasis has been put on the importance of church-based activities, civic and labour-based activities, family membership and totemic identity.

The earliest headstones contained little or no information about the deceased. Where information is included, the name of the deceased, the dates of their birth and death and their age are written in English. Sometimes, but not always, a sentiment is added: familial (as in 'he was a loving father') or a quotation from a hymn or the bible.³ This brief epitaphic structure – age, familial position, and religion – provides the

³ Prior to 1914 churches in Torres Strait came under the jurisdiction of the London Missionary Society (Beckett 1989, 44). After 1914 the Church of England, later the Anglican Church, took over responsibility for the regional diocese. There are now a number of Christian denominations with churches in Torres Strait and it is well recognized that all denominations are influential in the communities of Torres Strait.

template for epitaphs for about forty years and is present in almost all of the headstones until the present. From the mid-20th century onwards the major work activities and civic roles that the deceased engaged in when alive start to be recorded, albeit briefly, on headstones. Headstones for men from this period onwards begin to mention their major paid occupations including diving (for pearlshell, trochus and bêche-de-mer), government positions such as teacher, local store manager, Council councillor, and military service. Voluntary positions in the local church and organizations affiliated to the church (such as deacon, churchwarden, membership of the male-only Church Council⁴ or chorus composer) are given equal prominence (in terms of word length and font size) on headstones to paid positions. By contrast few paid positions are mentioned on women's headstones; greater attention is given to their importance in the family (such as, 'mother to, sister to...') and, like men, their voluntary activity in the church and affiliated church organizations such as the Mothers' Union and the Girls' Friendly Society.⁵

From the late 1960s onwards a number of changes are evident in epitaphic content, the most significant of these being the length. As noted above, prior to this

⁴ Church Councils are male-only groups formed by members of the Anglican Church for the purpose of conducting church-based activities.

⁵ The Mothers' Union and Girls' Friendly Society are women-only organizations that have been affiliated to the Anglican Church in Torres Strait since the earliest years of the twentieth century. Through these organizations Saibaian women, like many other women in Torres Strait, have the opportunity to associate with members throughout the world as both are extensive world-wide organizations. Membership of the Mothers' Union is restricted to married and widowed mothers while unmarried mothers and single women are able to join the Girls' Friendly Society. On Saibai these are the primary institutions through which women engage in community projects and politics.

period word content is rarely more than fifty words; then, greater biographical information is included on tombstones and, by the 1990s, word content dramatically increases, with close to 400 words appearing on the most recent tombstones. Alongside the rise in biographical content has appeared a greater willingness to use phrases written in Kala Kawaw Ya, as well as graphic symbols. The phrases most often express personal sentiments about the deceased but often in a way that links them to a wider cosmological environment, in particular totemic qualities associated with the clans to which each Saibaian belongs, such as winds, stars, flora and fauna. These can be quite enigmatic statements, having particular meaning to the author and the deceased, both qualities the graphics share.

From the mid 1980s onwards the graphics, like the Kala Kawaw Ya phrases, are simultaneously personal and indicative of the clan to which the deceased belongs. One example of this can be found on the separate tombstones of two brothers. The first is of a man who died in 1988. His grave is adorned with images of snakes, which signifies the clan of his father and himself and makes liberal use of red tiles, a colour associated the snake clan. His tombstone provides his birth and death dates as well as a quotation from Psalms, while a more extensive biography is mounted on a plaque at the foot of his grave. The epitaph at the foot of the grave starts by listing all of the important totemic features of the clans of his mother and father after which there is a description of his immediate descent, his marriage and his fathering of a number of children. After these details there is an account of his working life as a diver and policeman, his work in the church, his service in the Army during World War II, and his participation in cultural activities such as tending garden beds that would have grown yams and sweet potatoes and other traditional foods, and the construction of racing canoes. Behind this

man is the grave of his brother who died in 1985, also constructed with red tiles as well as hand-painted tiles depicting a snake and a cassowary, totems of the man's father and mother, respectively. These graves are not unusual in their use of colours and symbols designating the deceased's clan totems, and while one has more life history and totemic detail than the other, they are both indicative of the shift to greater biographical detail and use of totemic symbols on Saibaiian graves from the mid-1980s onwards. Those earlier graves that bear graphics tend to be gender specific, with many deceased women bearing the crest of the Mothers' Union or the Girls' Friendly Society on their tombstone, while men's graves bear the crest and personnel number of the military wing they belonged to, if they served in the Australian military. Both men and women's graves also have religious icons, such as crosses, but clan specific graphics are only evident in graves erected for those who have died from the mid-1980s to the present.

Changes in epitaphic content over the years have resulted in commemorative monuments that, in total, serve as an autobiography of the Saibaiian people. Here 'autobiography' should not be taken to refer to an ordinal passage of time linking events, memories or ideational categories in successive moments. Beyond the brevity of important life details, the Saibaian in these epitaphic narratives are largely imagined in terms of career (synopses) and identity (précis). On one reading the Saibaian in these biographies can be said to be affirmative syntheses of an individual's life activities. At another level these epitaphs are also statements about the more problematic categories of labour and culture, and Saibaian's own experience of integration into global marine industries, and religious and civic institutions. The extent to which Torres Strait Islanders, men in particular, worked as divers in a marine industry that spanned from the last three decades of the nineteenth century into the early years of the 1960s is well

documented (Beckett 1989; Ganter 1994; Mullins 1995). The corporate structure of the companies that ran the diving boats shifted over the years so that the head offices of private and Queensland Government companies were at various times, and depending on each boat, located in Torres Strait or major Australian cities, in Fiji, or in Japan (Ganter 1994, 23, 25, 68, 131). However, it was the international destinations of the extracted pearl-shell, bêche-de-mer and trochus that marked this industry as having global dimensions and brought divers from Japan and, to a lesser extent the Philippines and the Pacific Islands, into the region; some of them eventually settled there (Ganter 1994, 99, Shnukal et al. 2004). Almost all Torres Strait Islander men in these years found work for a period of time in this industry. Only the Australian Army, for the few years of 1941–1945, provided such an encompassing field of mass employment for Islander men, although its greater significance was to bring them into contact with white Australian men, the traditions of a national military, and a greater sense of civic *esprit de corp*.

During this period of the marine industry, Islanders were also subject to the restrictions of various Acts passed by the Queensland Government, which granted limited powers of self-government on each island except Thursday Island, subjected Islanders to the decrees of the regional Queensland Protector, controlled their labour and earnings, and placed restrictions on the free mobility of Islanders between islands and between the Strait and the mainland (Nakata 2004). Apart from the restrictive powers of colonial administrations, Government schools and the Anglican Church also proved to be potent areas of community and self-regulation. However, Islanders were not without influence in these institutions. From the latter part of the 1910s onwards the Islanders indigenized the church by placing ordained Islander ministers in each

community church, staffing the churches with local deacons and other officials, organizing the influential affiliated voluntary organization, the Mothers' Union, and developing an elaborate body of hymns in local languages (Lawrence 2004). On some islands a similar process of indigenizing schools was undertaken where, from the late 1940s onwards, Islanders became permanent teachers, even if, as with official church liturgy, the curriculum was set by a central organizing body that omitted Islanders (J. Davis 2004; Williamson 1994).

Islanders were, then, employed in the major industrial, administrative, religious and educational activities of the region, which, in total, comprised almost the whole of the regional cash economy and institutional presence. As a number of writers have shown, in large measure Islanders did not regard their work in these spheres of activity as menial, without joy and skill, or bereft of providing status amongst themselves, and to a lesser extent with their employers; and occasionally, as platforms to exercise labour power (Ganter 1994; Sharp 1981-82). It should therefore be no surprise that an account of their employment or voluntary work be recorded on tombstones given Islanders' imbrication into the regional market economy and major government and religious institutions over the latter years of the 19th century and much of the 20th.

The visions of person and society presented in the headstone texts, particularly those of the last 20 years, reveal a preoccupation with civic action and work, which raises the question of whether, given the large number of words used to describe work lives, the headstones record an essentially secular vision of Saibalian society, person and history. The issue of a secular imagination is tied to a concern with a certain kind of historicism, as well as universal and local sociological categories. As I have already suggested, the headstones can be read as a series of narratives about the institutional

lives of individuals, which, in their totality, provide, if not a community meta-narrative about 130 years of colonization, at least a commentary by Saibaians on their negotiation of its various aspects. This would yield less a form of historicism as progress, than a form of historical consciousness that values civic, political, and labour action. From a secular point of view, these epitaphs can be regarded as attempts to read biographies into larger imagined collectivities of nation, state and capital.

Epitaphic labour histories are *curricula vitae* of participation in civic institutions and capitalist enterprises, but the biographies are not entirely reducible to their secular characteristics, given three other major thematic concerns of headstones: family, Christianity and identity. Unlike labour histories, these three themes are present in the earliest headstones and continue into the present. Written accounts of the deceased's church-based activities are structurally similar to labour histories: details of the positions achieved in church and affiliated organizations, as well as the communities in which their Christian work took place are described. Where a person has moved to another part of Australia to find paid work, work for the church tends to be mentioned as an additional, rather than primary, reason to migrate. However, it is sometimes the case that when a Saibaiian transferred to another community within Torres Strait, New Guinea or northern Queensland, precedence is given to church work as the motivation for the move. Mention of religious work is not limited to the bearing of religious office (deacon, minister, or officer bearer of the Church Council, Mothers' Union or Girls' Friendly Society); mention is frequently made of the work or roles a person has fulfilled during their religious career, such as hymn composer, lay reader or choir singer.

Family sentiments are brief and are usually the last written part of the epitaph and, alongside religious sentiments and icons, are the most ubiquitous feature of Saibaiian

tombstones. The brevity and ubiquity of family sentiments suggests their unimportance relative to the extensive labour histories, except that these statements, at least in more recent years, are often abbreviations of extensive temporary biographies erected on interim graves constructed prior to the tombstone opening. These interim graves are sparse wooden constructions comprised of four posts and a pitched roof covering the gravesite and a low fence surrounding it. Saibaians call these *sara* in Kala Kawaw Ya, or *shadehouses* in Kriol, and explain them as temporary houses for the dead, erected to give shade to the spirit of the deceased. They give dignity to the deceased, anchoring them in a domestic-like abode until their more elaborate permanent residence is built. They are erected as soon as possible after the first interment and stay over the grave until the second interment immediately preceding the tombstone unveiling. Directly over the ground of the grave and underneath the roof are many colourful plastic flowers laid over dried coral or sand collected from the nearby beaches. In this setting is placed the temporary epitaph. Early temporary epitaphs were often brief and painted onto permanent surfaces, such as metal sheets, and were almost exactly repeated on the later tombstones. Later temporary epitaphs are often family negotiated biographies written into a computer and printed onto sheets of A4 paper. These can be very extensive, running into many hundreds of words and containing religious and tribal graphics, some or all of which are repeated on the permanent tombstone. Even though these temporary epitaphs contain career synopses they are more discursive, reflective and sentimental than those inscribed on permanent tombstones, greater attention is given to the deceased's relationships to others, often expressed in terms of family, and to a lesser extent, clan relationships.

In temporary epitaphs, a common way of describing the deceased, and the family networks they are part of, is to write discursively about the paternal ancestry of the deceased to a depth of up to three generations, what clan they belong to by virtue of their parent's (most often father's) membership of that clan, who the deceased may have married, and mention of their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The descriptions of family groups are often generic, that is the classes of relations are mentioned rather than the names of relatives, but some temporary epitaphs name close relatives, such as parents and spouse, and many use symbols to designate the clans of the deceased and their parents. The most expansive temporary epitaph in the cemetery is devoted to a man who died in the early years of this century in his late seventies. It starts by listing seven kin positions the deceased inhabits vis-à-vis members of the immediate family he is part of (father, brother, husband, son, etc), then listing four collateral and agnatic descendant groups (nieces/nephews, grandchildren/great-grandchildren), and the nicknames they call him, then a list of the names of the members of each of the groups, which amounts to 62 named relatives. Next, the two clan groups the deceased's parents belong to, and hence the deceased himself, are mentioned, as well as his and his father's moiety, and the surname list of 45 family groups, in addition to persons already named, that the deceased is related to through his parents. After a description of the jobs the deceased held and the places he lived at during his life, the names of his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are repeated. The exceptional relational detail in this epitaph contrasts with other epitaphs in the Saibai cemetery but only to the extent that the relatives who are grouped into kin and family classes, as in other temporary epitaphs, are identified by personal name or family surname. Naming relatives extends, rather than departs from, existing eulogic

convention, and highlights the importance of family networks to public descriptions of Saibaiian social life.

While the civic and labour histories are highly individualized, they also allow Saibaiians to imagine themselves as part of larger collectives, of workers, civic and church officials, classes that encompass people from across Australia and other parts of the world. This is implicitly recognized in general conversation and daily life; Saibaiians regularly interact with non-Islander colleagues in their spheres of work so providing a means for a work-based consciousness to develop. However, while recognition of shared working lives currently exists, it does not amount to a form of ideological awareness that a fully-fledged work-based consciousness would require. This contrasts with the firmer forms of work consciousness expressed by those who have worked as divers in the heyday of the marine industry or in the church, activities frequently mentioned on tombstones. What is most interesting about these epitaphic narratives is their implicit recognition that the affiliative networks that go beyond the deceased's island of origin coincide with equally important descriptions of filiative relationships.

In *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Edward Said (1983) argues that as modern nations developed, affiliative (chosen association) social networks replaced filiative networks. Affiliative networks are based on a shared consciousness acquired through recognition of oneself as belonging to a gender, generation, class or culture. They replaced those filiative networks that failed to provide the means for familial *communitas* or national identification allowing for nation-wide 'imagined communities' to emerge (Anderson 1983). Said derives these ideas from his analysis of novels that explore personal and family histories against the background of colonialism where the discovery of personal pasts leads to the discovery of national pasts; the immigrant or

slave unearthing a parent or grandparent born in a different country. In Homi Bhabha's (1990, 292) opinion personal and family narratives can also be read as national allegory, where, citing Frederic Jameson, he writes, 'the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately include the whole laborious process of the collectivity itself'. As Ghosh (in Ghosh and Chakrabarty 2002) has written, such collectives of consciousness are often concerned with the nation because they occur within the boundaries of a country the writer writes from. Class, gender or generational consciousness is then a national consciousness, even if only a variant of it.

These arguments suggest a way of explaining the importance of Saibaian epitaphic labour narratives, but there are, at least to me, two major shortcomings in explaining Saibaian epitaphs as expressions of national consciousness. It is true that some mention the names of boats the deceased worked on and the north Queensland regions they sailed in, and to this extent a regional consciousness is expressed; but it is equally valid to claim that descriptions of the positions the deceased held on diving boats express a labour, if not class, consciousness that has a global dimension. Apart from Torres Strait Islanders, diving crew were largely sourced in the early years of the industry from Oceania, and in later years from Malaysia, the Philippines and Japan (see Ganter 1994; Shnukal et al. 2004). Recollection of crew status brings to mind crew in general, so that these epitaphs make it possible to recall the international composition of boat crew. The descriptions of where the deceased sailed in life may well be expressions of a Queensland regionalism, and perhaps Islander Australian nationalism, but crew status must also draw attention to the global dimensions of the industry and the international composition of crew. The many epitaphs that describe men's working lives

imagine regional and international labour consciousness far more than visions of Islanders' place in the Australian nation.

While temporary epitaphs are frequently condensed when permanent epitaphs are erected, the graphic symbols gracing temporary epitaphs are frequently transferred with little or no diminution onto permanent tombstones. Symbols of the Mothers' Union and Girls' Friendly Society, the two main organizations affiliated with the Anglican Church, are common on women's tombstones. These are female-only organizations and while there is a male-only Church Council, the Mothers' Union and Girls' Friendly are also global organizations with chapters in many countries, unlike the island-specific Church Council. These groups have allowed Saibaian and other Islander women a capacity to connect their local concerns with influential world-wide movements and their ideas, a more expansive and structured set of relationships than the loose-knit personal associations formed by men with each other aboard the diving boats. The only comparative male-only symbols are found on the tombstones of men who served in the Australian military and died during World War Two; there are only two of these.

If these personal biographies are not exclusively national allegories, also being regional and international, beneath and beyond the nation, then what part does the nation have in the most filiative parts of epitaphs: the descriptions of family classes and the persons who belong to them? This is, I would argue, a collective that does not imply the nation, the nation being a more ephemeral entity than family in the daily experience of Saibaians. This is not to claim that the nation is a non-existent imagined community, as Saibaians and other Torres Strait Islanders recognize that their participation in the Australian military, various civil activities such as government, and location in Australian territory, so close to the border shared with Papua New Guinea, locate them

in Australian civil and national society. Far more than the labour narratives, family descriptions and relationships are anchored in extensive lists of names and categories. Family is not yet superseded by forms of affiliative consciousness, indeed the family, arguably, stands outside of the nation, it is an alternative collective consciousness that admits members on the restrictive grounds of descent and marriage. Access to this collective can only be gained through these forms of recruitment; it is not accessible on the grounds of membership of a category, such as gender or class, based on shared experience, regardless of location. Through the ground of family consciousness Saibaians generate social categories common to other Australians, but which are unique to the collectives they form.

The use of Mothers' Union and Girls' Friendly Society insignia on tombstones draws attention to the importance of women establishing churches as central institutions in Saibai, as well as other Torres Strait Islander communities. However, the use of graphics associated with clan totems are more ambiguous, recalling personal and group identity as well as more ephemeral qualities associated with clans that are highly idiosyncratic and open to interpretation. These totemic symbols have only appeared on Saibai tombstones since the mid-1980s. They reflect the importance of the articulation of indigeneity amongst Torres Strait Islanders at that time when calls for greater self-governance were common following from the successful integration of the Torres Strait region in the late 1970s into the Australian state (see Kehoe-Forutan 2004).

These symbols appear on the graves of those who have passed away since the mid 1980s, but given the long period of time between death and the final tombstone unveiling, the tombstones were almost always erected in the late 1980s/early 1990s. This was at a time when the public display and acknowledgement of indigenous identity

intensified due to the successful resolution of the Mabo case in the Australian High Court in mid 1992. In that case the High Court recognized the land rights of the traditional owners of Mer Island of eastern Torres Strait. This decision led to legislative innovations, such as the Commonwealth *Native Title Act* 1993, which allowed Torres Strait Islanders and Aborigines to claim land around Australia, if they successfully fulfilled the criteria laid out by that Act. It also vindicated Meriam claims that they maintained longstanding cultural traditions that were not diminished by colonization or modernization. The case also precipitated an identity movement amongst Torres Strait Islanders throughout Torres Strait and elsewhere in Australia, where it became important to publicly acknowledge individual and group cultural activities and icons.

Appeals to tradition places emphasis on locality as the already-existent, an assertion that local categories of meaning can provide the means for interpreting social circumstance. Social stresses are not always readily identifiable but radical appeals to tradition show what a potent weapon tradition can be. In 1998 three Torres Strait Islander men confronted a fishing boat in Mer waters and brandishing a crayfish spear, demanded they move on and hand over the fish they had caught because they were fishing in Torres Strait Islander traditional waters. Two of the three Torres Strait Islander men were indicted on charges of robbery with violence, which they were later acquitted of (Haigh 1999). One of the Torres Strait Islander men involved, Ben Ali Nona, later changed his first name to Maluwap ('sea spear' in Kala Kawaw Ya) an uncommon occurrence amongst Torres Strait Islanders. While this was a single incident, other more widespread appeals to tradition have also occurred in Torres Strait, with significant social impact. In December 1997 the Torres Strait Regional Anglican Council seceded from the Anglican Church of Australia and affiliated itself with the

Traditional Anglican Communion, a smaller association committed to orthodox Christian teachings. The split in the Anglican Church was prompted by Torres Strait Islander aversion to the process leading up to the appointment of a regional Bishop of Torres Strait in June 1997. Wetherell is undoubtedly right to argue that the roots of this split lay in tensions arising out of the long-term impact of South Sea Islanders in the 1870s on Torres Strait Islander social life, the post-1915 adaptation to European Anglicanism, and the more recent challenges posed by Pentecostalism in Torres Strait (Wetherell 2001, 205). However, in my own discussions with Torres Strait Islander ministers and deacons shortly after the breakaway, much emphasis was also put on their aversion to what they saw as encroaching liberalism in the church. The ordination of women was often mentioned as antithetical to traditional male leadership, and was cited as undermining Torres Strait society as a whole. Saibaian women that I talked to agreed with this sentiment and also sought to oppose women's ordination. Likewise, there was concern that changes to Anglican liturgies were not in the spirit of traditional Anglicanism and were, furthermore, evidence of lack of consultation with Torres Strait Islanders. Whatever the many causes leading up to the church split, it is clear that appeals to tradition, itself a malleable category, have urgent symbolic potency.

In this wider social context, as well as the context provided by their own claims to native title, Saibaians placed increasing importance on clan membership as an expression of belonging to unique social and cultural entities. Clans are conglomerates of families who recognize each other as belonging to a group, but for which there are no social structural features that bind families to act or acknowledge each other in any compelling way; each family being independent as regards political activity and land ownership. It is on the level of clans that Saibaians have generated symbols of

inclusion, such as graphic designs and founding myths. As these clan groupings have no internal social structures that clash with the will of family groups, they are ideal for articulating identity concerns that rarely carry political implications. For Saibaians, clans provide neutral social conditions for the expression of personal indigenous identities.

The use of totemic iconography on tombstones acknowledges the membership of the deceased in a/the totemic group. As the clan is a largely symbolic entity comprising more socially substantial family groupings, an expression of clan identity is a recognition of both the superordinate and subordinate collectives; to be a member of a clan is to be a member of a family. For some, not all, Saibaians, a person's, particularly a man's, death posture is said to evince the primary characteristics of their clan totem. This is nowhere more apparent than at the moment of death when a person's body can be set in the recognizable posture of their totem, or just preceding death when a person makes a series of movements interpreted as embodying their totem. In the posture of one who has only recently died and who belongs to the snake clan, close family relatives see the sinuousness of a snake; for a man belonging to the crocodile clan and near death, his writhings are clearly the movements of a crocodile. Men's totemic death postures confirm the validity of the clan and the validity of a family's patriarchal basis for belonging to a clan. They give embodied form to a social abstraction, authenticating the symbolic displays of clan identity found on tombstones, flags, t-shirts, and other publicly visible surfaces.

Death postures are more though than totemic embodiments of a social group, they presage the most enigmatic feature dealt with in Islander funeral rites: the spirit of the deceased. Throughout the whole period between death and the final tombstone

unveiling, the deceased is an enigmatic figure who is both a body and a spirit, located in their grave but also able to appear to family members and wander through their dreams. The final tombstone unveiling marks the moment when this existential duality ceases and the deceased is recognized entirely as a spirit. Given the exuberance of the event it is not surprising that anthropologists have emphasized its social dimensions. Fitzpatrick (2000) draws attention to the political dimensions of the ritual and the jockeying for social status that occurs within it. Smith and Bliege Bird (2000) observe that tombstone unveilings provide significant opportunity for men to display their prowess in providing meat that they have obtained through hunting turtles. Beckett (1989, 1–2) opens his ethnohistory of Torres Strait with a celebratory portrait of a tombstone unveiling on Murray Island in 1976, making clear that perhaps more than any other Islander ceremony, the event has the potential to reinforce familial connections for those Islanders who have settled across the Australian mainland. The rituals, orations, feasting, dancing and gift-giving provide opportunities to reinforce the centrality of family relationships; in death the wider family community celebrates itself, a self that is described on temporary and permanent epitaphs. In the anthropological accounts I have just referred to, that social self is treated as the extant collective, as the final unveiling of the tombstone ends the ambiguity of the deceased's multiple existence, allowing their relatives the opportunity to effusively recognize that death does not amount to the demise of the family, clan or society that the deceased belongs to, but is itself generative and progressive.

The dead, however, do not go away. The tombstone unveiling does not mark the end of their existence or of their participation in the lives of those who are still living. The tombstone unveiling may be the last stage in a series of rituals that manages the

separation of the deceased from their living social world, but the deceased do not change what has been their common behaviour from the time they died: haunting. From the moment a person dies their spirit, or *markay*, infrequently appears to family. Saibaians say that, between the moment of death and final unveiling, a *markay*'s appearance is portentous. It is also the case though that in the many accounts of ghostly visitations that I have been told of by Saibaians, the significance attached to the appearance of the kin-ghosts does not decline because they have been through the tombstone unveiling. The motivations of the dead are difficult to fathom, they may portend events to come, explain why an event occurred, influence current events, or simply just appear to a person in or out of dreams. Ghosts may be seen but they are not always readily identifiable, their presence may be inferred through noises or viscerally experienced rather than sighted. Ghosts do not always visit their family as they are regarded as living a full and complex life of their own as members of a vibrant spirit-community located at the cemetery (cf. Beckett 1975). The rich lives of ghosts allow for reciprocal relationships between the dead and the living to continue long after the final tombstone unveiling. It is common for Saibaians, when arriving on or leaving the island for an extended period, or leaving to attend a significant event elsewhere, to visit their dead family members and pray to them by laying hands on their tombstone. Alternatively, they may be entreated for other reasons, success in a dugong or turtle hunt or guidance on personal matters, as they are said to be closer to God, allowing for intimate intercession rather than a direct approach to God through personal prayer.

Conclusion

I have written elsewhere that the realm of the dead and its associations with sorcery amongst Torres Strait Islanders has allowed them to develop a space of magical action

where their own authority and expressions of power are alternative to the space of the state and its interdictions in their lives (Davis 2002). In this space it is possible for Indigenous Australians to regard themselves as having great power and influence over events or state agencies, such as police, that might otherwise be out of their control. This sacred space of authority and agency, populated by the dead, mythical and other beings of power, is a transgressive space. Transgressive, not only, or in spite of, the vulgar sense of encroaching on a taboo of challenging the authority of the Australian state, but transgressive for reasons arising from the collapsing of boundaries between death and life, the dead and the living. It is precisely this space that is entered into in the tombstone opening, which can only be said to mark the end of mourning, as the apparently ontologically distinct worlds of the dead and the living continue to mingle long after the event.

When the tombstone unveiling is understood as involving a series of performative deliberations on different types of exchange – the cessation of the deceased's obligation to work in paid and voluntary circumstances, as well as the continuation of relationships between the deceased and the living – it is possible to discern the importance that Saibaians, and other Torres Strait Islanders, place on the family. On all Saibaiian tombstones familial relationships are mentioned, particularly because it is the children and other close family members who write epitaphs. But it is also the case that, especially in the last three decades, Saibaians have placed increased emphasis on the role the deceased played in the maintenance of the family. More than any other aspect of epitaphs, the descriptions of kin relationships between the deceased and the living imply that the family is a unique collective subject in contrast to other labour-based collectivities. As Ghosh (in Ghosh and Chakrabarty 2002, 166) has argued for the

literature of colonial and postcolonial Indians and Africans, collective subjects such as class, gender, culture and generation are largely subsets of the nation itself. The family, in these contexts, offers scope to imagine a different kind of collectivity, one that is not coincidental with the nation. When Saibaian epitaphs are read with Ghosh's argument in mind, it is clear that for Saibaians the family is not just a set of kin relationships, but a unique form of consciousness that maps itself onto social space in ways that do not invite national imaginings of any kind.

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