

COMING OF THE LIGHT

Spirituality in Diaspora

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Abstract

Townsville hosts one of the largest populations of Torres Strait Islander people outside of the Torres Straits, and the community makes a valuable contribution to the fabric of cultural diversity in Townsville. The 'Coming of the Light' is an annual celebration in recognition of the first missionaries entering the Torres Strait Islands on 1 July 1871. The day is a celebration of lifestyle and heritage with presentations of activities such as traditional songs, cultural performances and feasting. This paper aims to explore the connections of culture, spirituality, identity and community with the 'Coming of the Light' ceremony as the focus of a case study based on the re-enactment at the St. Stephens Anglican Church in Townsville officiated by Father Elemo Tapim. This project also celebrates the Townsville Torres Strait Islander community as a vital component of Townsville cultural diversity and ties in with the James Cook University research focus of enhancing life in the tropics. This study establishes how this event impacts on lives of the congregation and the significance of this celebration in the annual calendar of the community. Connections are made between pre-Christian belief of the Torres Strait Islanders and the adaptation of Christianity as the main religion in their lives. Evidence is given as to why this ceremony is significant to Torres Strait Islander people and specifically the St. Stephens Anglican Church community.

Keywords

Torres Strait, North Queensland, diaspora, spirituality, community

Background and aims of paper

In 2008 I began to research the Coming of the Light ceremony that is re-enacted on 1 July each year by the Torres Strait Islander community in Townsville. My interest in researching this event is due to an ongoing interest in the Townsville Torres Strait Islander community. In a previous study I pointed to Torres Strait research has established that due to a decline in key maritime industries a mass migration to the mainland, and in particular North Queensland, occurred (Salisbury, 2009). This has created significant diasporic communities in towns such as Cairns, Townsville and Mackay. It is in these communities that many participants find ways in which to express their identity as Torres Strait Islanders through the re-creation of ceremonies and events, such as the re-enactment of the Coming of the Light ceremony on 1 July each year.

The aim of this paper is to examine the significance of the Coming of the Light ceremony to the Townsville Torres Strait Islander community. This paper is part of an investigation of this significant annual ceremony that is unique to Torres Strait Islanders where ever they may be. The data for this research was collected at two ceremonies I attended occurring in 2008 and 2009 and an interview in 2011 with Father Elemo Tapim of the St. Stephens Anglican Church in Townsville.

In 1996 there were 11,633 Torres Strait Islanders living in Queensland mainland – over twice that of the population of 5,741 still living in the Torres Strait (Arthur, 2000). In

2006 the Queensland Torres Strait Islander population had risen to 20,902 or about 62.8% of the total Australian Torres Strait Islander population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

Coming of the Light ceremony

The Coming of the Light ceremony or festival is an official date on the calendar and widely embraced by Torres Strait Islander communities. What is the significance of this event that connects Torres Strait Islanders from such a diverse region and dispersed population? On the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) website the following statement appears:

The Coming of the Light festival marks the day the London Missionary Society first arrived in Torres Strait. The missionaries landed at Erub Island on 1 July 1871, introducing Christianity to the region. This is a significant day for Torres Strait Islanders, who are predominantly of Christian faith, and religious and cultural ceremonies across Torres Strait and mainland Australia are held on 1 July each year (TSRA, 2011).

In the city of Sydney publication "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols, Resolution of Council 1 August 2005", it lists the Coming of the Light Festival under significant dates (8.1: 9) paraphrasing the above statement:

Torres Strait Islanders are predominantly of Christian faith and celebrate this event through a variety of religious and cultural ceremonies across the Torres Strait and also on mainland Australia (City of Sydney, 2005).

So throughout mainland Australia and the Torres Strait Islander community this calendar date has significance that is unique to Torres Strait culture and identity. This paper will look at three main questions in regards to this ceremony as practiced by the Torres Strait Islander community in Townsville:

1. Why is this a celebrated event as it represents a whole hearted adoption of a foreign based religion and in many ways the subjugation of Torres Strait Islander people to an imperialistic power, in this case the British empire?
2. Was there a pre-disposition of Torres Strait Islander people to the codes and ethics of a Christian based religion?
3. How does the re-enactment symbolise these dynamics and reinforce the values of Torres Strait Islanders?

Adoption of a foreign based religion

If there is light then there is darkness. In his book on Torres Strait Islanders, Beckett states:

The Light image implies the existence of a Darkness, which in Torres Strait was used to represent the heathen state in which the missionaries found the Islanders (Beckett, 1987).

Does this imply that Torres Strait Islanders make a similar connection to their past or do external observers impose this perception? In an article by Nicholas Thomas the point is stressed that in the conversion of "natives" the missionaries represent the "light and provide guidance" whilst the "natives respond to the dawn and happily learn and work within the new order" (Thomas, 1992).

In an article by Alfred Haddon there are several legends recounted but none of them have any clear reference to images of light and darkness. In general the legends describe how people from the Torres Strait learned to hunt dugong or the birth of the *Kusa Kap* (a mythical bird similar to the Moa of New Zealand). Shnukal makes the point that:

Christianity brought both a new religion, which over time was to incorporate elements of traditional ritual and belief, and an end to the cycle of arbitrary and reciprocal killing for that most valuable of exchange items, human heads. Unique in Australian history, the daily work of conversion and cultural modeling was carried out by Pacific Islander pastors and teachers, not by Europeans (Shnukal, 2001).

It is an interesting perspective that Christianity was promoted primarily by Islander clergy and that there was an incorporation of pre-Christian belief systems rather than a wholesale eradication of those beliefs. The other significant point is the cessation of hostilities that were prevalent in pre-colonial Torres Strait. However Lahn makes the observation when discussing dance forms on Warraber island that:

During the early period of Christian missionisation after 1871 the London Missionary Society objected to 'prapa dans', particularly its links to warfare and initiatory Ritual (Lahn, 2004)¹.

So initially customs, dance and tradition had negative connotations because of a savage past and were discouraged by the clergy. In his seminal book on the Torres Strait, Beckett (as noted by Lahn) points out that eventually the Anglican Church encouraged the use of drums and hymns sung in language. So although there is no direct connection to the symbolism of light and darkness in pre-Christian Torres Strait Islander tradition there has been a blending of the past with Christianity and current religious beliefs. Christina Toren in her work with Fijian culture notes:

If the quintessentially Christian 'Last Supper' can represent Fijian chiefship-which itself exemplifies 'the way in the manner of the land'-then it can also imply that Fijian chiefs were always inherently Christian; that even long ago 'in the time of the devils', before 'the coming of the light', the chiefs embodied a fundamental Christianity-one that was obscured by the practices forced upon them by the ancestors in their malign aspect. The light made them see that human sacrifice and cannibalism, war and wife capture, widow strangulation and polygamy were sins imposed on them by their ignorance of the Christian God. But they had only to strip away these practices to stand revealed as true Christians, as people whose very tradition was at base Christian (Toren, 1988).

This is certainly an extreme example of cross appropriation² and validation in which the Indigenous population and the colonial missionaries colluded in the construction of an acceptable belief system that maintained pre-colonial power structures. Shnukal also points out that one effect of the spread of Christianity in the Torres Strait was a unification through inter-island interaction during openings of new churches, festivals in the church calendar and meetings between congregations of different islands (Shnukal, 1988).

In an interview with Father Tapim I asked about the significance of the Coming of the Light Ceremony to him and his church:

(DS) How does the community feel about this ceremony? In other words what is the importance of this date, like Christmas or Easter?

(ET) For us the celebration of the Coming of the Light is just like celebrating Christmas day. On Christmas day God came to us in the form of a baby and on July 1 God came to the Torres Strait in the form of a book³.

Father Tapim equates the Coming of the Light with the birth of Jesus making a clear indication that this event represents a new beginning and the start of a new life for the Torres Straits.

(DS) What are the significant or important points of this ceremony?

(ET) We used to worship idol gods. We didn't really know it could have been that the spirit of God was there (Tapim, pers. comm., 15 May, 2011).

It is important that he equates both the coming of Jesus and the coming of the book as having the same impact. His answer also leads to the next question about pre-Christian beliefs in the Torres Strait.

Pre-Christian beliefs

Was there a pre-disposition of Torres Strait people to the codes and ethics of a Christian based religion? During the interview I asked the following questions:

(DS) How does this ceremony connect with the past and history of the Torres Strait?

(ET) In previous times the people on Mer (Murray) Island worshiped Malo like the spirit of god.

In referencing the *Malo* myth Father Tapim makes a connection with Torres Strait mythology and spirituality. This strengthens the retrospective alignment with the God figure of Christianity and the God figure of Torres Strait cosmology and legend.

(DS) Are there any connections with pre-Christian beliefs and ceremonies?

(ET) Yes, God's spirit was there which we did not know before the Coming of the Light (Tapim, pers. comm., 15 May, 2011).

In his answers he refers to an important god figure *Malo* and an association of this previous god with the god of the book (bible). This prompted an investigation of myths and legends of the Torres Strait. The following is a paraphrased recounting of the *Malo-Bomai* myth:

The myth of Malo-Bomai consists of two associated narratives. The first tells of the coming of Bomai, Malo's maternal uncle; the second is about Malo's arrival at Mer, looking for his uncle. There are many versions of the myth now in written form. Of critical importance for the Meriam people is that Bomai, the very secret and sacred name for the god of the Meriam, came first; Malo, the lesser god came after.

Bomai combined into one the power of the manifold qualities of creatures and creations that go with the sea, from the 'other side' beyond Boigu travelling from west to east. In embodying protean metamorphoses, Bomai is the pinnacle of sacred power known as zogo, the ultimate power of a sea people.

Zogo or sacred dances and chants were performed by the people at Las through the power of Bomai. They came to be known as the sacred dances of Malo because Bomai

was so sacred that no ordinary mortal might call that name. Meriam people today compare the sacredness of Bomai's name with the Old Testament rule: 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy god in vain' (Sharp, 1993: 29).

So this also sets up a similar dynamic with the Christian religion in that there is father figure and a son figure or in the case of the myth uncle and nephew, which is more common in Aboriginal and Southeast Asian cultures in general. In a follow up question when asked if there were laws or a code laid out by *Malo*, Father Tapim gave this account:

Malo tag mauki mauki: Malo keeps his hands to himself.

Malo teter mauki mauki: Malo keeps his feet off other people's land.

Malo wali aritarit sem aritarit: Malo plants everywhere – under wali and sem, the yellow-flowered hibiscus.

Eburlem esmaolem: Let it [unneeded fruit] drop and rot on the ground (Tapim, pers. comm., 15 May, 2011).

These guidelines would certainly resonate with Torres Strait Islanders when they were introduced to the bible or given the *LIGHT* in the form of a book and taught the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Christ. I then asked some questions to see if there was an evil god or spirit:

(DS) Are there any connections with specific spirits, legends or myths? Were there dark spirits as well?

(ET) I know of one, which is Waiat. He was living on another island.

(DS) What did he represent? What was it that made him a dark force?

(ET) He was evil. He was a bad influence.

(DS) Was he able to bring bad things to people himself?

(ET) Yes, he was able to bring bad things to people himself (Tapim, pers. comm., 15 May, 2011).

This type of spirit or god could be easily identified with the Devil or Satan as described in the New Testament. Lawrie gives the following account of *Waiat*:

Waiat came to Mer from Mabuig. After his arrival, he went to Werbadu on the other side of the island-as Malo had done. Waiat became the head of a cult of evil repute. Both Dela Mopwali and Robert Pitt spoke of Waiat as a "proper bad man" (Lawrie, 1970).

If there is a godlike father or uncle figure, and a godlike son or nephew figure as well as an evil spirit or Satan figure, each with similar moral codes, then it is reasonable to assume that past and present beliefs were not too dissimilar or disparate. Some of the literature also points out that with the adaptation of Christianity throughout the Torres Strait a cessation of hostilities that were an ongoing aspect of the islands was also alleviated with the inclusion of a mostly neutral moderator in the form of the colonial administration.

Connecting the past to the present

How does the re-enactment symbolise these dynamics and reinforce the values of Torres Strait Islanders? When asked how this ceremony is important to Torres Strait Islander people Father Tapim replied the following answers:

(DS) Why celebrate the Coming of the Light?

(ET) We celebrate the arrival of Christianity to the Torres Strait.

(DS) What is the significance of this ceremony?

(ET) It is the beginning of new era, beginning of a new life.

(DS) Does this have significance across the Torres Strait and did it act as a unifying force in the Torres Strait?

(ET) Yes I agree that this influence had a unifying effect in that people from different parts of Torres Strait had common ground.

Father Tapim confirms the basic thesis of this study that this event represents the changing of the guard, or a change from the past to the future and from the old to the new. More specifically a change in the power structures of the Torres Strait Islander people from a clan based or tribal based people to a more homogenous people as a byproduct of the centralised colonial control of the British.

(DS) Where does this take place and can it happen elsewhere?

(ET) It really depends on where people are living, people are scattered all over. Where there is a big or small group of TSI people they will celebrate this event.

When finally asked what the Coming of the Light Ceremony meant to him personally Father Tapim gave this eloquent response:

(DS) What does the Coming of the Light ceremony mean to you personally?

(ET) It gives me another vision again to look at life beyond what you are living (Tapim, pers. comm., 15 May, 2011).

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the Coming of the Light Ceremony re-enacted by the St. Stephens Anglican Church in Townsville as a case study to determine how this event impacts on lives of the congregation and the significance of this celebration in the annual calendar of the community. Connections have been made between the pre-Christian belief of the Torres Strait Islanders and the adaptation of Christianity as the main religion in their lives. Evidence has been given through direct interview questions with Father Tapim as to why this ceremony is significant to Torres Strait Islander people, specifically the St. Stephens church community.

Although this paper is not an investigation into the mythology of Torres Strait Islander people it has been touched on as an aspect of a pre-disposition of Torres Strait Islander to accept the concepts and codes of Christianity. This paper does not seek to represent these connections as final or fully substantiated as that would involve a more in depth investigation and a wider scope of informants and communities.

However there does seem to be a foundation to build a more exhaustive argument for the case of connecting the *Malo* mythology and codes with the Christian belief systems and values. In watching the re-enactment there is the sense of a turning point in Torres Strait practices from a more local to a more global viewpoint. Their geographic location as a crossroads of important and strategic sea lanes has in my opinion given Torres Strait Islanders a history of adaptability due to the influx and connection with a wider range of people from distant lands in contrast to say a community in the central desert of Australia. I have observed two events at the church and documented these through video, audio and photographic equipment. Further study and research is recommended. In particular ongoing research into publications and recordings would confirm and further the findings of this investigation.

Endnotes

1. Warraberan informants state that prior to 'island dance', all Torres Strait Islanders performed *prapa dans* (real or proper dance). This form of dance involved lighter steps and only a few dancers, as opposed to the heavier stamping and multiple line formations that characterise the style of "island dance" (Lahn, 2004: 75).
2. "But since cross-appropriation, as we have described it, does not require a large disclosive space with a single style, cross-appropriation politics has the advantage of working where there are many local worlds (or nations) related to each other in ad hoc ways. If national cultures are becoming fragmented so that they act like a mosaic of different local worlds, international relations are already in this condition, and certain groups, commonly called *new social movements*, are already engaging in the politics of cross-appropriation on this international level" (Spinosa et al., 1997: 109).
3. (DS) = David Salisbury and (ET) = Elemo Tapim.

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