Reference No. 11

Summarising: Arthur (2005), *Torres Strait Islanders and Autonomy: A Borderline Case*
Responsibility for the preparation of this research summary rests with the authors of the MCEETYA report *Education, Training and Indigenous Futures: CAEPR Policy Research 1990–2007* and not the original author(s) of the summarised material.

Title of Research:
Torres Strait Islanders and Autonomy: A Borderline Case

Research Publication:
Unpublished PhD thesis 2005

Name of Researcher(s):
W.S. Arthur

Time period:
1996

Geographic location:
Torres Strait Islands (Qld)

Methodology:
This thesis draws upon information used during the 1996-97 Australian government inquiry into greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders. These information sources included public hearings and submissions made to the Inquiry by Islanders, industry, Queensland and Commonwealth government agencies and people with specialist knowledge of Torres Strait Islander affairs. The thesis also draws upon information collected since the late 1980s by the researcher, particularly research of Islander economic development and its fisheries.

Aims:
The thesis aims to analyse the nature of autonomy that applies to Torres Strait islanders residing in the Strait and those residing on the mainland of Australia. Particular attention is paid to the economic and political components of autonomy as well as regional and corporate aspects of autonomy.

Selected findings and insights:
The overall finding of this thesis is that it is necessary to distinguish between those Islanders residing in the Strait and those residing on the mainland.

In 1996 there were about 6000 Indigenous Islander people living in the Torres Strait, together with a small Aboriginal and Papua New Guinea population of about 800 persons. There were about 1300 others, mainly Europeans.

- The overall proportion of Indigenous persons residing in the Torres Strait was about 80%, much higher than elsewhere in Australia.

However in 1996 the Islander population in Torres Strait only represented about 20% of all Torres Strait islanders identifying as Islander, the remaining 80% living in the coastal towns and cities of the mainland, and particularly in Queensland.
The thesis details key features of the culture of Torres Strait Islanders, noting:

- Linguistic differences across the islands in the Strait, influenced by their closeness to Papua New Guinea;
- The strength and vibrancy of dance, song and customs and their centrality in Islander life in the Strait;
- Islanders possess their own flag and although Aboriginal people have their own flag that flag applies to all Indigenous Australians, including Islanders;
- Islanders have their own particular body of traditional and contemporary songs, dances, art, musical instruments and set of creation myths, though some of these are linked to those associated with coastal Papua New Guinea; and
- Islanders have their own form of dress.

The thesis also examined the socio-economic characteristics of people living in Torres Strait and found that:

- Compared to non-Indigenous people, Indigenous people were poorly represented in the more skilled jobs as managers and professionals while being over-represented in less skilled clerical work and in labouring (where many were employed in CDEP); and
- Indigenous Torres Strait Islanders were less skilled than non-Indigenous people, and much less likely to have a post-school qualification, degree or skilled vocational qualification.

Those Islanders living on mainland Queensland still had a strong association with their homeland:

- 59% identified with a clan or language group (compared to 72% living in the Strait)
- 79% recognised their traditional homeland (compared to 93% living in the Strait); and
- 56% grew up on their homeland (compared to 78% living in the Strait).

However they tended to more frequently use English as their main language:

- 70% stated that English was their main language (compared to 12% living in the Strait).

Mainlanders gained recognition from the former ATSIC as being a distinct group of Indigenous people rather than being treated as Aboriginal. Specific Islander features of mainlanders include maintaining cultural ceremonies, traditional dance and taking young boys back to the Strait for initiation.

Standard indicators suggest that mainlanders were achieving a level of economic autonomy when compared to Aboriginal people, although well below that of non-Indigenous Australians:

- They were more likely to be employed and qualified than Aboriginal Australians; and
- Mainlanders had a higher socio-economic status than those Islanders residing in the Strait, hence achieving one of their goals for moving to the mainland.

In terms of employment, mainlanders were approaching parity with non-Indigenous people in most States and Territories except in the case of Queensland and the NT where they had parity ratios of 0.68 and 0.54 respectively.

- For state government employment parity was being approached or in the case of Queensland and the NT exceeded; and
- For private sector employment, parity was being approached in all States and Territories.
Educational implications:

This thesis suggests the need to include in cultural awareness courses for teachers and trainers a consideration of the distinct cultural characteristics of Islanders that differentiate them from Aboriginal culture. This applies particularly in regard to those involved in educating and training mainland Islanders as they will tend to be a minority among the larger Aboriginal populations. It will also apply to those agencies responsible for employment programs, health and community support services.

Relevance:

Introductory Topic: The Changing Demography of Indigenous Australia

Introductory Topic: Culture, Family and Community

Related papers:

W.S. Arthur, 'Access to government program and services for mainland Torres Strait Islanders', CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 151, 1998