5.9 The Torres Strait Islanders

The Torres Strait Islands are the hundreds of islands, many tiny, scattered between the tip of Cape York, in Queensland, and Papua New Guinea. Many have been inhabited for thousands of years. Their Indigenous people are a culturally unique group, distinct from the Indigenous Aborigines of mainland Australia.

Before the Europeans arrived, it is known that the Torres Strait Islanders (hereafter called Islanders) traded with Cape York Aborigines and the people of Papua New Guinea. They also had their own religious cults; some practised calling up the spirits of the recently dead, ritual beheadings and cannibalism.

Here come the visitors …

Initial European contact was made in 1606 when the Spanish navigator Luis Vaez de Torres sailed through what is now called the Torres Strait.

After 1770, when Captain Cook proclaimed part of Australia’s eastern coast as Crown land, many British ships favoured Torres Strait as a passage to the Pacific. It was not long, therefore, before European pearlers and fishermen began occupying the resource-rich waters.

Their competition with Islanders for the sea’s resources caused many confrontations.

There was no significant European impact on Islander life until the arrival of the London Missionary Society on Darnley Island in 1871. The Islanders generally embraced Christianity; but this decision had a significant impact on the way they lived. For example, women now had to completely cover their bodies; they risked being disciplined by the mission court if they did not conform.

Missionary teachers also discouraged traditional songs and dances in order to minimise adherence to the ‘old ways’. Some destroyed Islanders’ artefacts, sold them to passing ships or buried them.

Islanders were also required to take a second name. These were selected in a number of ways: some because they were European names (for example, Joe or Tom), some by a connection with a type of job (for example,
Cook or Captain) and some from the Bible (for example, David or Matthew).

In 1878 the government of Queensland claimed the Torres Strait Islands in the name of the Crown. Initially, the Islanders enjoyed more independence under European control than did mainland Aboriginal people. This was mainly because the then Queensland Government Controller, John Douglas, would not allow Islanders to be classified as Aboriginal people under the Queensland Aborigines Protection Act 1897. However, this changed with his death in 1904. Thursday Island, for example, then became a European settlement that Islanders could now only visit, and only during the day.

**Discrimination and rebellion**

The Queensland government in the early twentieth century systematically discriminated against Islanders, deliberately limiting their freedom. They were not, for example, permitted to enter bars, and were not allowed to have sexual relations with anyone outside their race. Those of mixed descent were transferred to the islands of Moa and Kiriri. The government also appointed representatives for the Islanders, but these were ineffective and were later replaced with elected Island Councils.

Frustrated by the loss of ability to run their own affairs, Islanders working on government-owned boats rebelled against the Queensland government in 1936 by staging a strike. It lasted nine months; the outcome was that Island Councils were allowed to have more substantial input into the management of their boats and other affairs.

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**EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION**

1. When were the Torres Strait Islands claimed in the name of the Crown, and what did this mean?
2. What was John Douglas’s contribution to the history of the Torres Strait Islands?

**PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS**

3. **a** Copy and complete the following table to document the impact of the arrival of European settlers on the Islanders. Take the viewpoint of a typical European settler.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change to way of life</th>
<th>Positive outcome from change</th>
<th>Negative outcome from change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

   **b** Now draw a similar table in your notebook. This time, take the point of view of a typical Islander.

   **c** Discuss your two completed tables with a partner to identify similarities and differences. To what extent did this exercise help you to understand the different viewpoints that may exist in a multicultural society?

   **d** Explore, through discussion, what values you think are needed to support a society made up of different ethnic groups.

**ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES**

4. What can you tell from Sources 1 and 2 about the way of life of Torres Strait Islanders?

**HISTORICAL QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH**

5. Use the internet and other resources to discover more about one of the larger Torres Strait Islands of your choice. Investigate any issues it currently faces, and what is being done to address these. Evaluate the extent to which the arrival of the Europeans has affected people’s way of life there and write a short report on your findings.
Attitudes to Asians: Chinese diggers

In an age of empires, racism was part of the outlook of most Europeans. To justify taking other people’s lands, Europeans had to believe that those people were lesser human beings. Along with Indigenous Australians, non-white migrants suffered racial discrimination in Australia throughout the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century.

Chinese arrive on the goldfields

The gold rushes that began in the 1850s saw different nationalities — mainly British and Irish, but also Germans, Italians, Canadians and others — band together to fight injustice. But such comradeship was never extended to the Chinese diggers. These non-European migrants generally encountered suspicion and hatred on the goldfields.

As news of the gold discoveries spread around the world, many thousands of Chinese men travelled to Australia, hoping to earn enough to take back to their families. The Chinese usually had their own areas on the goldfields. Rather than competing directly with other miners, they often worked over tailings abandoned by European diggers.

Hostility towards Chinese diggers

The Chinese gold seekers were very different from the colonists and the European gold rush migrants in their appearance, dress, language, religion and customs. They were used to working very long hours for little return, and many European colonists feared that when the gold ran out the Chinese might take their jobs. Most Europeans looked down on Asians. They resented the Chinese working on Sundays. They were offended by their use of opium, although it was then legal, and were appalled by the clothes and pigtails of the Chinese. Although most Chinese intended to return to China as soon as the rush was over, most white diggers believed that the Chinese had no right to be there at all and there were many violent protests against them.

Did you know?

The worst anti-Chinese riots were at Buckland River in Victoria, in 1857, and in 1861 at Lambing Flat, the site of the present-day town of Young in New South Wales. In 1881 New South Wales and Victoria passed laws stating that any ship coming to Australia could carry only one Chinese passenger for every 100 tons of cargo.