Culture/Nature, Islander knowing and the 1875 Chevert Expedition

Leah Lui-Chivizhe*

* Department of History, School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia, leah.lui-chivizhe@sydney.edu.au
Abstract

The 1875 Chevert expedition, headed by Macleay Museum founder William John Macleay, was the first Australian scientific expedition into New Guinea. With the explicit aim of collecting and documenting the natural environment, the expedition members collected vast amounts of animal and plant material from the east coast of Australia, Torres Strait and coastal New Guinea. The material and data from the expedition, along with important Torres Strait cultural material are a substantial collection in the Macleay Museum’s holdings at the University of Sydney. The paper will survey the collections scientific and cultural significance with a view to explore how a planned exhibition of the collection’s Torres Strait natural and cultural materials can articulate the connections and disconnections between place, people, nature/culture, and engage with Islander histories of knowing their world.

Introduction

This is an exploratory paper aimed at discerning how Torres Strait Islander histories of knowledge making can be exercised in framing an exhibition of natural history and cultural materials collected from the region during William John Macleay’s 1875 expedition. As a part of the proposal development phase of the exhibition, I am interested in exploring what a detailed focus on objects and specimens, the places and contexts of collecting and the knowledge and practices associated with their uses, can reveal about the relationships between people, culture and nature in the Torres Strait. The paper is presented in two parts. Part one provides overviews of Macleay’s voyage and critical early interactions between Islanders and markoi (outsiders, often European) to convey the context in which Macleay was collecting in 1875. Part two focuses on Erub (Darnley Island) and Erubam le ways of knowing and being in place and discusses Macleay’s collections from Erub.

PART 1

William John Macleay and the Chevert

As scientific expeditions go, William John Macleay’s self-funded 1875 expedition into New Guinea was short in duration, yet enormously successful in terms of the natural material amassed in a short time. The expedition lasted less than five months (mid-May to early October) and netted thousands of natural history specimens which included 1000+ birds, 800+ fish and more than 1500 shells. In his October 1875 address to the meeting of the Linnean Society of New South Wales, Macleay revealed that no more than 60 days of the voyage was spent in actual collecting (1875a, p. 39).
Macleay began collecting fish and marine organisms around Sydney Harbour in 1874. To supplement and diversify the collection, he asked local fishermen to supply him with ‘any unusual fish’ (Stanbury & Holland 1988, p. 49). Before too long, and in the company of George Masters, the curator of Macleay’s personal collection, the pair began shore collecting around Sydney Harbour, Bondi and other ocean beaches. In June, likely inspired by his discussions with the voyage scientists of the *Challenger*, Macleay hired a steam yacht for four weeks of dredging and collecting around the harbour (Stanbury & Holland 1988, p. 47). These experiences galvanised his interest in executing a collecting voyage that would expand the size and range of his own natural history collection.

Key to Macleay’s collection success was his planning and preparation before the voyage and the doggedness of his collectors. His careful planning included recruiting a Captain Charles Edwards who was well acquainted with the Torres Strait. Edwards had spent 25 years in the Pacific engaged in the marine industry and had reputedly established a *bêche-de-mer* station on Erub in 1864 (Davies 2007/11; Johannes & MacFarlane 1991). Under advice from Edwards, Macleay purchased the *Chevert* a former French Navy brig and had it modified and fitted-out for the preparation and storage of specimens.

The *Chevert* left Sydney on 18 May 1875 with much fanfare and a total crew of 30 men. The 19 crewmen included six Rotuman islanders all aged in their 20s, an American medical doctor, William H James and the first mate, Robert Williams, who kept the ship’s log. The engineer on the voyage, Laurence Hargraves, also kept a diary of the journey. The nine-member scientific crew included Macleay as expedition leader and voyage entomologist, his curator George Masters, and his cousin Arthur Onslow who had been on the *Herald* in the 1857-61 survey that included Torres Strait and the Great Barrier Reef (Davies 2007/11). The remaining men were variously skilled in taxidermy, and zoological and botanical collecting.

There were a numerous collection sites along coastal Queensland and between Cape York and New Guinea. Collections in the Torres Strait began near Somerset, before moving onto the central islands and Erub on the north-east edge of the strait. Throughout the voyage, the ‘dredge everywhere, take everything’ approach of Macleay along with the toil of his army of professional and amateur (Indigenous and Pacific Islander) collectors generated a remarkable body of material.

Figure 1: Torres Strait Map, courtesy Ian McNiven.
**Torres Strait, Markai and Erub**

For the people who had lived in the region for thousands of years, there was no single local name for the archipelago of islands strewn over 40,000 km sq of ocean between the northern tip of Queensland and the southern coast of Papua New Guinea, in Figure 1.

The Islanders had their own names and stories for each of the islands, reefs and sand cays, along with the winds and the constellations that guided their sea voyages in outrigger canoes. The outsider name for the region would come from a Spaniard, Luis Váez de Torres, who in 1606 was among the first known markai (European) to navigate a passage through the 150 km wide passage that separates Papua New Guinea from Australia. On Zegei, one of the central islands, Torres’s crew saw signs of habitation, which included a stockpile of turtle shell plates and a large turtle shell mask (de Prado & Vaes de Torres, 1922 translation). All evidence that a people of culture lived there.

After James Cook’s 1770 voyage mapped a navigable passage that he named Endeavour Strait, it was William Bligh’s 1789 account of his post-mutiny threading through the Strait that gave more prominence to the region. For Islanders this meant extending their trading practices to incorporate the materials markai brought with them. Along with the increased opportunities to acquire new materials, there were also increased tensions between Islanders and markai.

Following Bligh, in 1793 a significant clash occurred at Erub when five crewmen of the Hormuzzer and Chesterfield were killed after going ashore to replenish their water supply. Retribution was swift and brutal:

... several Islanders were killed, and 135 huts, sixteen large canoes and whatever gardens that could be found were destroyed. A village on nearby Ugar (Stephens) was also burnt, several more Islanders killed and a boy kidnapped (Mullins 1994, pp. 18-19).

Where the conflict occurred, on the northern shoreline of Erub, became known to Europeans as Treacherous Bay and the reputation of Erubam le as fierce fighters continued until the scientific expeditions in the 1840s.

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**Figure 2.** Le Op mask collected by Jukes, Erub 1845. Oc1846,0731.3 © Trustees of the British Museum

**Figure 3.** Le Op mask collected from Erub, 1875. ETA466. Sydney University Image: Micheal Myers 2010
Between 1842 and 1846 the British naval ships HMS Fly and Bramble made two hydrographic survey voyages through the strait and in doing so began the first sustained contact with Islanders (Mullins 1994; Powell 2010). In late March 1845, the Fly dropped anchor on the north western side of Erub (Moore, 1979). Looking to replenish their meagre food and water supplies the ship’s captain, Francis Blackwood, voyage naturalist, Joseph B Jukes, and a crewman made for land near the village of Keriam. Gathered on the shore were around fifty-five Islanders. Both parties were cautious. Their guarded appraisal of the intentions of each other eventually gave way to amity and a brisk trade in produce and objects ensued. Jukes would later write, ‘…they look upon iron implements as the most valuable of commodities’ (1847, p. 177). He exchanged iron for a turtle shell mask (in Figure 2), describing it as, ‘… very fairly put together, with hair beard and whiskers fastened on, projecting ears, and pieces of mother of pearl with a black patch in the centre for the eyes’ (Ibid).

Thirty years after Juke’s was on Erub, a similar mask was collected by members of the Chevert expedition (in Figure 3).

Erub’s location, on the north east edge of the Torres Strait made it the first point of call for all ships entering the Straits from the east. Over their many years of engaging with outsiders, the people of Erub had both resisted and accommodated the strangers that arrived on their shores. They had adapted to introduced materials and managed to continue their own way of life as a maritime people, who were skilled in navigation, marine hunting, fishing, and gardening. In 1848, the population of Erub was estimated to be between four to five hundred (Scott & Mulrennan 1999).

Once Europeans knew of the rich pearl beds in the central and eastern islands, the pearl-rush from late 1860s would change the region forever (Ganter 1997, Mullins 1994). On Erub, bêche-de-mer fishing fed the rapidly thriving fishing industries and propelled Islanders into sustained contact with an introduced labour force of South Pacific Islanders, Australian Aboriginal people and Europeans. After a bêche-de-mer station was established on Erub in 1864, Erub became a hub of economic activity (Mullins 1994). By 1871, ‘dozens of them [Pacific Islanders] were living on Darnley, while the indigenous population had declined in 20 years by more than two thirds to 120-130 people’ (Johannes & MacFarlane 1991, p. 103).

By the time London Missionary Society (LMS) reverends Samuel McFarlane and AW Murray landed at Erub on 1 July1871 there was already a well-established ‘community’ of outsiders and it was a time of economic boom. The missionaries were accompanied by Pacific Islander teachers from Lifu and Mare. It has been argued the presence of the LMS teachers offered some protection from marauding by pearling and pirate vessels and also contributed to ‘pacifying’ Islanders, making them ‘harmless to those seeking pearl shell and possession of the islands’ (Sharp 1993, p. 101). With the arrival of missionaries, the number of Pacific Islanders on Erub increased too and in 1875, a measles epidemic devastated the Erubam le population.

In 1879 the permanent presence of Europeans in the region was guaranteed by the colonial annexation of the entire region. Whilst Islanders were not separated from their home islands through forced removal, entire islands were turned into reserves for the containment and surveillance of Islanders by colonial officials. As the islands and region became overlaid with foreign ideas about property and ownership, Islanders remained physically connected to ancestral places, and thus more able to continue the cultural and maritime practices of long ago.

PART 2
Erub knowing, culture/nature and the Chevert Collection

A volcanic island, Erub is about 570 ha in area and at its highest point, 181 m above sea level. The fertile soil and fresh water springs supported productive gardens and each family or clan cultivated yam, banana, sweet potato as staples, and coconut grew abundantly. Garden foods were supplemented by fishing and hunting and the harvest from fish traps (saï) that stretch from the north-eastern shoreline along the southern coast and ended on the lower western coast of the island (in Figure 4).
Erubam le of the past and present know Erub through the communal property rights of the four primary tribal groups, Peiudu, Saisarem, Samsep and Meuram, who have rights to and responsibilities for specific tracts of land (for living on and for gardening) and sea. In the intertidal zone, ownership is extended to the sai adjacent to clan lands as ownership rights extend beyond the shoreline to also include outlying reefs and cays. The sea, like the land, is known and named and the re-telling of stories affirm knowledge and narrate cultural connection and responsibility to land and seascapes.

Erubam le knowing of time is premised on observing and learning from nature. The seasons of naiger, koki, and sager are the foundational measures of temporality. Their cyclic rhythm actuated and organised Islanders’ relations with the environment. Wind direction and force, the breeding cycles of animals, the migration patterns of birds, and the flowering and fruiting of plant foods signalled the right timing for practices, as well as the passing of time. Whilst there is some variation in the region’s climatic conditions, naiger is the time of calm seas, when marine turtles returned to breed and nest, koki is the rainy season, the time of the northwest monsoon when particular garden foods were harvested, others planted, and fish were plentiful. Sager brings strong south easterly winds and rough seas. It was the time to travel for trade and ceremonies (McNamara et al. 2010).

![Figure 4: Erub fish traps © Cartography ANU, Rowland and Ulm 2011.](image)

The winds of sager always brought visitors to Erub. So, it was surely no surprise to Erubam le when the Chevert dropped anchor on the leeward side Erub. It was 31 July, midway through sager. Throughout the voyage, Macleay wrote periodically in his journal giving us glimpses of the amount of material collected. Sections of Macleay’s journal outlining activities on Erub are quoted below.

Saturday 31st July—4 o’clock p.m
This morning everyone went on shore, the natives were most friendly & hospitable and the missionary (a Lifu man) visited us … A few insects were got but no birds to speak of. I anticipate doing more in fish and shells here than anything else.
Monday 2nd August—8 o’clock p.m.
Most of the people of the ship were ashore all day in one direction or another. I went ashore with Brazier to search the shore at low water. He got a good many shells etc & in the evening I purchased from natives a large snake & a mummied human head.

Most of the hands have been at work today getting water, about 1200 gallons have been put on board, a number of the natives assisting.

Friday 5th August—noon
On Wednesday morning one of our Rotumah men died…He was buried the same afternoon in the village burial ground by the Missionary… Fish seem to be plentiful but we have not got many. The sucking fish are numerous about the bow of the ship. Birds are few & not much account. Insects are very few, but diurnal Lepidoptera fine.

Wednesday 11th August—noon
We are still at Darnley Island, but intend to leave tomorrow morning for Bramble Bay… I have kept the dredge going almost constantly & we have been most successful. (Macleay 1875b, pp. 79-81)

The table below provides an approximation of the number of species collected from Erub, drawn from entries in the Proceedings of the Linnean Society of New South Wales (1875-1882).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>No. of species</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annelids</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birds</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corals</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crustaceans</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Echinoderms</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molluscs</td>
<td>759 lots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reptiles</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiders</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Natural history specimens collected on Erub.

Whilst these figures are yet to be cross-referenced with the actual collection, the number of molluscs listed is supported by Macleay’s journal entries. Further, in his report to the Linnean Society of New South Wales in October 1875, Macleay wrote that the marine mollusc collection was ‘so large that I cannot even guess at the number and value of the specimen’ and that ‘no-where was the yield so good as at Darnley Island’ (1875a, pp. 38-39).

A variety of cultural material, such as the le op, was also collected by the crew of the Chevert. Macleay’s collection of natural history specimens and cultural material present a unique opportunity for exploring the interconnected character of culture and nature, during Macleay’s time on Erub.

In turning to an example of the interconnectedness of nature/culture in Macleay’s Erub collection, I focus on the le op (in Figures 3 and 5), as it incorporates, either physically or symbolically, examples of the specimen types collected in 1875. The le op mask exemplifies the highly sophisticated sculptural works of turtle shell made by Islanders. Torres Strait turtle shell masks took two forms: the le op representing an elongated human face, and the krar most often a combination of human and animal forms. The masks are recognised as unique to the Torres Strait and remain as physical reminders of the Islander-turtle and culture-nature relationship that is thousands of years old (Fraser 1978; Crouch et al. 2007; David et al. 2004).

The le op collected from Erub is constructed from numerous turtle shell plates (scutes) that have been heated and shaped and then bound together with twisted vegetable fibre string, (generally hibiscus or coconut fibre). Pieces of the mother of pearl shell are used for eyes. The mask is painted with red ochre and the white pigment used to define its features is made from burnt, crushed coral. On the rear of the mask is one cowrie shell (Ovula ovum) painted with ochre (in Figure 5).

The inclusion of these cowrie shells is a feature of many of the turtle shell masks. Found on coral reefs, this animal is known to eastern Islanders as bubuam (Haddon, 1907). The mollusc is able to change the colour of its mantle to mimic its surroundings. The ability of bubuam to both reveal and conceal itself resonates strongly with how turtle shell masks were used to both conceal one identity and reveal another when performed in. Their inclusion on the
The turtle of culture learnt hunting of the sharksucker (Echeneis naucrates). Known as gep to Erubam, the sharksucker was used for hunting turtle. Natural fibre fishing line and rope was tied to the gep and when a suitable sized turtle was spotted, it was thrown into the water. The gep would attach itself to the underside of the turtle and the canoe would be moved to the position of the turtle. The hunter would then dive off the canoe and be guided to the turtle by the rope attached to the gep (Philp et al. 2015).

In early 2013, I discussed the turtle shell masks with a traditional owner of Iama (Central Torres Strait). At the time he was a gallery assistant at the Gab Titui Cultural Centre on Thursday Island. In his own research, he had spent many hours looking closely at high-resolution images of turtle shell masks. As we shared our images of the masks, we discussed what could be learnt by examining the colour and transparency of turtle shell and the various markings on the masks themselves. He indicated that the markings are not merely decorative, he saw them as ‘texts’ that can be read and deciphered for meaning and inspiration. The crescent shaped motif he then pointed out (in Figures 3, 5 and 6), resemble the sucker pad of the gep. This motif is a prominent feature on many of the turtle shell masks. On these masks both the gep’s historical use as a fishing tool by Islanders and the relationship between the turtle and gep are given permanency in the repetition of the crescent shaped motif.

**Conclusion**

This paper maps my early thoughts about how to represent the interconnectedness of Nature/Culture in an exhibition of Torres Strait natural history and cultural material. William John Macleay’s Chevert collection is a vital source for capturing something of the biodiversity of Erub in a brief period during the sager of 1875. It is also a tremendously rich and largely untapped cultural resource for Erubam le of today for thinking about and asserting our knowledge and our ongoing cultural connectedness to all the things that live within our land, sky and sea spaces.
Acknowledgments

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