

# **A Fleeting Aquapelago: A Theoretical Consideration of the Japanese Presence in the Torres Strait 1880s-1940s**

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## **Abstract**

In the 1880s-early 1940s a number of people from poor coastal communities in Japan relocated to the northern fringes of Australia, and particularly the southern end of the Torres Strait, to work in the pearling industry. This group formed a distinct community centred on Thursday Island and also worked more broadly throughout the region. Their economic activity and related lifestyle were closely premised on their interaction with the seafloor and with navigating to and from pearling areas. As part of this activity they came in close contact and interaction with Torres Strait Islanders and other indigenous groups. The article identifies the manner in which the Japanese community's interactions with other communities, other living species, spaces and technologies within the Torres Strait created a distinct aquapelagic assemblage. Discussion of this particular topic is preceded and informed by an overview of the development of Island Culture Studies in the period 1999–2016 and of the concept of the aquapelago arising in this context.

**Key words:** Torres Strait, Thursday Island, Japanese, pearl divers, aquapelago

## **Introduction: The Torres Strait and the Aquapelago**

The Torres Strait is a narrow, shallow passage of water that lies between the tip of Cape York, in far north-eastern Australia, and the south coast of New Guinea, some 150 kilometres north, and marks the interface of the Arafura Sea (to the west)

and the Pacific Ocean (to the east) (Fig. 1). The Strait covers what was once a land bridge between Australia and South East Asia (during the Mesolithic period) that was submerged by rising seas around 8000 years ago. Prior to the arrival of European colonists and Japanese workers in the region in the late 1800s, the region was (and continues to be) home to an indigenous population of Melanesians with two distinct languages (Kala Lagaw Ya, in the west, and Meriam Mir, in the east) who are now referred to collectively as Torres Strait Islanders. The region has been



Fig. 1. Torres Strait Islands and adjacent coastlines (source Wiki open access: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torres\\_Strait#/media/File:TorresStraitIslandsMap.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torres_Strait#/media/File:TorresStraitIslandsMap.png)).

estimated to have been populated for at least 2500 years with a strong possibility of earlier settlement (BRUNO *et al.* 2004: 65-78). Archaeological evidence and research conducted since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century indicates that communities have maintained a combination of subsistence agriculture, harvesting of marine food resources and trading with communities within the Torres Strait and on the mainland of Papua New Guinea. As in the case of Australia as a whole, the non-indigenous groups that arrived and settled in the area from the late 1800s on were uninvited visitors who disrupted traditional societies and imposed arbitrary restrictions on indigenous livelihoods and self-determination. While this article focusses on the particular nature of Japanese presence in and around the Torres Strait in a specific historical period, it should be noted that whatever degree of intercultural collaboration occurred between them and Torres Strait Islanders (as discussed below), the Japanese presence was fundamentally an intrusive one and its temporary nature was due to very specific geo-political developments.

### Theoretical Contexts and Perspectives

Our address to the topic expounded in this article represents a return to the subject matter some seventeen years after our initial ethnographic and literature research was undertaken and fifteen years since our original article on the topic was published (HAYWARD and KONISHI 2001). While our return to the topic is informed by new research findings it is, more significantly, a reconsideration of the significance of our

topic in the light of recent theorisations that were substantially triggered by aspects of our original work. Before moving to the main subject of this article, it is pertinent to address these. Our original research on the Japanese community in the Torres Strait in the 1880s-1940s was conducted from our respective viewpoints as an Australian-based popular music historian and a Japanese ethnomusicologist. We commenced our collaboration when the first author, Hayward, was a visiting research professor in Sociology at Kansai University in Osaka, and the second, Konishi, had just completed her PhD in Ethnomusicology at Osaka University, researching Micronesian music cultures. Our collaboration involved archival research into the music culture of the Japanese community in the Torres Strait and associated interviews with a number of aged Torres Strait pearl industry employees who lived in Wakayama prefecture, conducted in 1999. Subsequent to completion of our research we attempted to conceptualise and make sense of it from within our two disciplinary fields and with reference to the broader work of GANTER (1988, 1994, 1999) on the Japanese role in pearl diving in northern Australia during our focal period. As a result of this, our research, while original with regard to aspects of musical repertoire, social music-making practice and intercultural contact between Japanese and Torres Strait Islanders, was limited in its conceptual scope. In particular, it failed to engage with the manner in which Japanese livelihood activities in the region might be understood more holistically. Our sense of there being a greater conceptual picture and dynamic to the relationships between culture and livelihoods in a specific archipelagic-marine region that was somewhat out of our grasp was one that had unforeseen consequences.

Subsequent to our collaboration on the Wakayama field research, we linked up with Daniel Long, a sociolinguist specialising in Japanese small island cultures, for field research on language and culture issues in Japan's remote south-eastern Ogasawara Islands in 2002. In our evening meetings, our discussions about aspects of island societies and the general nature of social interactions in archipelagic and oceanic contexts led us to ruminate on the lack of dialogue between various academic disciplines and to comment on a related lack of cross disciplinary theorisation. In order to address this shortcoming, we decided to try and prompt greater communication and collaboration by holding a colloquium on cross-disciplinary approaches to island cultures. Initial responses to our proposal were so positive that we decided to drop our initial idea of a small event in Tokyo and go for a full academic conference. In order to achieve the latter (and to ensure maximum support from existing island researchers in Japan) we approached Kagoshima University's Research Centre for the Pacific Islands (the publishers of this journal) with a proposal to host what we identified as the 1<sup>st</sup> International Small Island Cultures (ISIC) Conference. The Centre was unequivocally positive about our proposal and collaborated with us in holding the conference across four days in February 2005. The event was highly successful with over 100 delegates attending panels, community presentations and music and dance performances. The sense of a shared research project led to the establishment of SICRI, the Small Island

Cultures Research Initiative, as a continuing network.<sup>1</sup> SICRI has continued to thrive since the initial event, with annual conferences being held in alternating continents ever since,<sup>2</sup> the most recent of which (ISIC 12) was held in Okinawa.

The issues raised at the first ISIC, and subsequent conferences, and the encouragement of researchers such as Henry Johnson, from New Zealand's Otago University, led to the establishment of a biannual refereed research journal whose title—*Shima* (the Japanese term for island) reflected the Japanese context of the project's origins. First published in April 2007, the first ten issues of the journal primarily explored case studies of particular island and archipelagic societies before shifting into more sustained conceptual work on how to understand island societies and the cultures they produce in interaction with the marine environments that encircle and connect them. Commencing with Volume 6 number 1, published in April 2012, the journal has actively sought to develop theoretical frameworks and debates about island cultures. Particular strands of this have concentrated on aspects of the close integration of *some* island societies with marine resources and environments, discussed with regard to the neologistic concept of the aquapelago; aspects of islands and micronationality; and, most recently, concepts of peninsular 'almost islandness'.

The concept of the aquapelago was first sketched in HAYWARD (2012a), and was subsequently refined after responses from SUWA (2012) and MAXWELL (2012) in HAYWARD (2012b). Further debate on the issue has appeared in *Shima*,<sup>3</sup> and the concept has, most recently, been developed by Suwa in his paper at the ISIC 12 Conference in Okinawa and the extended version published in *Shima* Volume 10 Number 2 (SUWA 2016). The concept was germinated by various contributors to *Shima* in response to a paper published in *Island Studies Journal (ISJ)* calling for the establishment of Archipelago Studies as an academic field (STRATFORD *et al.* 2011). The *ISJ* paper identified that within the broad fields of Humanities and Social Sciences (within which Island Studies is located) there is an absence of address to “ways of being, knowing and doing—ontologies, epistemologies and methods—that illuminate island spaces as inter-related, mutually constituted and co-constructed” (ibid: 119). In this regard, they proposed archipelagos as assemblages that “act in concert [and] actively map out, select, piece together, and allow for the conception and conduct of individual units as members of a group” (ibid: 122). While correct in identifying the absence of address to aspects of islands' connectedness in archipelagic groups, the scope of the article was stunted by its omission of marine environments as focal places for human livelihood activities and of related concepts of integrated terrestrial and marine spaces.

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1 See the SICRI website (2004-) for details.

2 See details of conference locations and proceedings of early conferences on the SICRI website (2004-).

3 See, for instance, BALDACCHINO (2012), DAWSON (2012), NASH (2012), FLEURY (2013), HAYWARD (2014), ALEXANDER (2015) CASHMAN (2015) and DICK (2015).

Prompted by the imbalance in the *ISJ* article's conceptualisation of archipelagic spaces, HAYWARD (2012) proposed the concept of the aquapelago as:

a social unit existing in a location in which the aquatic spaces between and around a group of islands are utilised and navigated in a manner that is fundamentally interconnected with and essential to the social group's habitation of land and their senses of identity and belonging (2012a: 5)

And went on to emphasise the aquapelago:

as an entity constituted by human presence in and utilisation of the environment (rather than as an 'objective' geographical entity). In this regard, aquapelagos are assemblages that come into being and wax and wane as climate patterns alter and as human socio-economic organisations, technologies, and/or the resources and trade systems they rely on, change and develop in these contexts. In this sense, aquapelagos are *performed* entities. (2015a: 6)

The article's final sections addressed the Torres Strait or, rather, the spaces within the Torres Strait in which humans reside and interact with marine resources, as an exemplary aquapelago. After noting that the region is usually referred to by the name of its aquatic space—ie the Torres Strait—rather than as an archipelago of islands *within* the Strait, it went on to identify the manner in which “traditions of marine usage were a key element in the landmark Australian legal case that led to the rejection of the concept of *terra nullius*, formerly enshrined in Australian Law as the pretext upon which indigenous peoples were denied land rights due to the assumption that land was not 'owned' in any way prior to European colonisation of the continent” (ibid: 7). The article went on to quote key Torres Strait Island indigenous rights activist Eddie Koiki Mabo, who extended an original land rights claim to Mer Island made in 1982<sup>4</sup> to encompass two small reefs located 10 kilometres to the east of Mer Island, identifying that:

There is a stone fish trap that I'm claiming, and beyond that... we have, a lagoon that I call Las Kapar and beyond that again is our home reef called Op Nor. And then, of course, there is a stretch of sea which goes out to the Great Barrier Reef, and I claim that because it has special significance as far as our cultural myths and legends go. (GRAHAM 1989)

Interpreting this as reflective of an aquapelagic sensibility, evident in Mabo's reference to “home” as an integrated terrestrial and marine environment, the article went on to identify how a subsequent claim pursued by a group of Torres Strait Island

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4 'MABO and Others v QUEENSLAND n2' .

communities for marine rights in an area of 37,800 square kilometres was upheld by the Federal Court of Australia in 2010<sup>5</sup> (implicitly) recognising Torres Strait Islanders as an aquapelagic people. Subsequent research on traditional aquapelagic societies was presented in HAYWARD (2012b) with regard to the Haida people of Haida Gwaii, located off the northern coast of British Columbia, emphasising continuities across pre-contact and contemporary periods.

Given the above, the Japanese performance of a particular aquapelagic assemblage through their livelihood activities, residence in and transit across the Straits in the 1880s-1940s was a fleeting manifestation within a region that was home to the Torres Strait's complex island societies and trading networks (see BECKETT 1990, SHARP 1993, DAVIS 2004). It was, nevertheless, a significant one and, in contrast to the long established aquapelagic culture of Torres Strait Islanders, it offers insights into how aquapelagic assemblages can be produced by temporary economic migrants in new aquatic spaces and island terrains.

### **The Japanese Presence in the Torres Strait**

The trigger for Japanese involvement in the Torres Strait was the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which loosened restrictions on Japanese movement outside of the nation for employment or migration purposes. From 1885 onwards migrants departed Japan for locations such as Hawai'i, Mexico and South America in organised groups (ENDO 2009: 160-161) following the paths that individuals (mostly sailors) had blazed in the previous decade. The year the Emperor was restored to Japan was also that in which the first pearl shells were harvested by (European-Australian) divers for commercial purposes off Tudu (also known as Warrior Island) in the north-east Torres Strait. After several years of trial harvesting using free-divers,<sup>6</sup> a pearling operation was established on the island in the early 1870s. This led to other trial operations, many using (then new) underwater breathing systems that involved a diver in a suit and helmet descending to the sea floor and moving across it gathering pearl shells while receiving oxygen via hose connected to a manual air compressor located on a ship moored above. This technology created a new experience for humans in terms of their ability to descend to greater depths for more sustained durations than free-divers and to move across the sea-floor in a similar manner to movement across a terrestrial landscape. In this environment, they interacted with marine species (either deliberately or accidentally) and experienced particular aspects of marine depth (most

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5 'AKIBA on behalf of the Torres Strait Islanders of the Regional Seas Claim Group v STATE OF QUEENSLAND No 2' 2010.

6 Free-diving involves the diver holding their breath whilst underwater and restricts the diver to submersion for a limited duration. This approach was used in the Torres Strait for marine harvesting prior to the introduction of assisted diving and continued as a subsistence practice in shallow waters for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

notably during perilous ascents when nitrogen build-ups in the bloodstream could prove debilitating or, on occasion, fatal, if the divers rose too quickly). In this manner, air-hose assisted diving for the purposes of marine harvesting created an aquapelagic space that was central to a range of livelihood activities (either directly involved in or as support operations for divers, pearling operators and their families and associates).

In its early years, the aquapelagic spaces generated were ad hoc ones, explored by various operators in various parts of the Torres Strait, but by the 1880s a specific socio-cultural aspect was founded through the establishment of Thursday Island (Waibene) as the centre for the regional pearling trade. The government of the (then) British colony of Queensland annexed the southern and central area of the Torres Strait in 1872, with the approval of the British Colonial Secretary, and initially administered it through offices in Somerset, on Cape York, before relocating to Thursday Island in 1877 and retaining those offices subsequent to the further annexation of the remaining Torres Strait Islands in 1879<sup>7</sup> (MULLINS 1995). By the early 1880s over 200 pearling vessels were based in Thursday Island. The relocation spurred a substantial development of what was initially a small, quiet island, with a number of commercial operations congregating on it to support the rapidly developing pearling industry.

While Torres Strait Islanders had been free-diving in local waters for centuries, they were not favoured for employment in the industry as divers (for reasons that require further research) and, instead, operators employed a variety of Asians and Pacific Islanders who found their way to the Torres Strait in order to gain employment in what was akin to a marine resource “gold rush” that promised ready and lucrative employment for those willing to work in arduous and often dangerous conditions. Early foreign arrivals included Malays, Indians and Pacific Islanders. The first Japanese individual to reside on Thursday Island appears to have been Kojiro Nonami, from Hirose in Shimane Prefecture (now annexed to Yasugi city), who arrived in Australia as a sailor in the mid-late 1860s and found his way to Thursday Island by 1878, where he found work and established a reputation as an accomplished diver.<sup>8</sup> News of his successful employment reached other Japanese sailors and communities, with a series of young men travelling to Thursday Island to work as divers. The majority of these also proved reliable and competent and the Australian Pearl Company specifically recruited 37 Japanese young men to work in the the Straits in 1883 (NAGATA 2004). By the mid-1880s there were some 90 Japanese divers based at Thursday Island, comprising a significant—although still minority—group with an ethnically diverse labour pool (GANTER 1994: 101).

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7 This was accompanied by the passing of legislation in the Queensland Legislative Assembly that formally incorporated the islands of the Torres Strait into the British colony of Queensland.

8 Jun'ichiro Suwa has pointed out to us that Hirose is located in the Lake Shinjiko area (a major centre of shijimi clam harvesting). Nonami might therefore have had some knowledge of and/or affinity for harvesting shellfish that inclined him to work in the Torres Strait pearling industry.

There was a substantial increase in the number of Japanese divers and associated personnel moving to the Torres Strait in the 1890s when the Australian marine trading company Burns Philp began utilising Japanese agents to recruit sailors from Japan and international ports they passed through (such as Hong Kong and Singapore). At the same time, and as a subset of *nanshin-ron* (a broader Japanese interest in southern economic and/or colonial expansion to regions such as Micronesia, Australia and New Guinea—IWAMOTO 1995), Japanese business interests began to target Thursday Island as a 'bridgehead' into the wider region. As a result, the Japanese presence on Thursday Island swelled dramatically in the late 1880s and early 1890s, with divers, sailors, prostitutes, merchants and their families relocating to the Straits (and other parts of northern Australia such as Broome and Darwin). Their numbers and prominent role in public and commercial life on Thursday Island was reflected in the establishment of the Nihonjin kurabu association, which acted as an umbrella group for the Japanese community and as a conduit for communications with Japanese commercial and governmental agencies. By 1893 the successful establishment of Japanese nationals on Thursday Island prompted HATTORI (1894) to advocate the island as a *shin shokumin* (new Japanese colony). As the 1900 census identified, in addition to Japanese residents on Thursday island, who numbered 385, a further 706 were recorded as living on boats or on other islands (NAGATA 2004).

Around half the Japanese population of Thursday Island originated from the southern coastal area of Wakayama Prefecture, to the south-east of Osaka. The principal reason for the region's prominence in this regard was its poverty and isolation from emerging Japanese commercial centres.<sup>9</sup> Faced with little prospect of economic advancement at home, a large number of young men followed an initial handful of migrant workers who had found success in the Straits' pearling industry. A smaller group of migrants from Ehime—who had departed their region for similar reasons—comprised the next largest population cluster, with individuals from Nagasaki and Hiroshima making up the majority of the remainder. By 1897 the Japanese numbered around 1000 and were the largest ethnic group on Thursday Island, outnumbering European-Australians by a ratio of 2:1 and comprising a significant proportion of pearl divers and pearling boat captains working in the region. The prominence of the Island's Japanese population (and of the Island's appearance as a potential long-term base for Japanese presence in the region) led to a 'goodwill' visit by three Japanese warships in 1903. The prominence of the Japanese population, the 1903 military visit and Japan's decisive naval victory over Russia during their 1904-1905 war prompted substantial concern about Japanese expansionism in Australia. One result of this was a resolution of the new Australian Senate<sup>10</sup> to limit the number of non-whites admitted into the

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9 We have been unable to establish whether the area's traditional fishing livelihoods inclined migrants to work in the pearling trade, or whether poverty was a more determining aspect.



country on short-term contracts to equal numbers of those departing.

The Senate action provided a severe restriction on the volume and flexibility of hiring arrangements for the pearling industry. One (unforeseen) result of this was that the major pearling fleets operated by Australians Reg Hockings and James Clarke relocated their bases to Aru (in the Dutch East Indies), allowing them to hire as they wished. This halved the number of boats based at Thursday Island and left Japanese divers in a (near exclusive) dominance of the local industry and provided Japanese with increased opportunities to captain their own ships. Perceiving the leverage this situation gave them, Japanese divers organised a strike in 1906 that won them better conditions but caused further concern amongst the European-Australian establishment about Japanese power in the region. This led to the imposition of a standard contract for Japanese employees on Thursday Island that severely diminished the number of Japanese residents, business establishments and community amenities by requiring Japanese employees to reside on their pearling boats all year-round, aside from summer months when the trade was suspended due to unfavourable sea conditions. By the mid 1920s pressure to ‘de-Japanise’ the pearling industry led to a substantial increase in the number of Australian Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Papuan divers and members of pearling ship crews. This resulted in a reduction of the number of new Japanese arriving to work as divers and a shift from pearling to other marine activities, such as *bêche-de-mer* and trochus shell gathering (in the Straits<sup>11</sup> and down the eastern Queensland coast), with Japanese often working as captains. This activity has received far less attention than pearling histories but is returned to below. Japanese involvement in the marine trade in the Torres Strait and elsewhere in Australia terminated in 1941, following the outbreak of The Pacific War, when Japanese nationals were interned.

### The Japanese Aquapelago in the Torres Strait

One of the most original and significant theorists to contribute to the development of Island Cultural Studies and theoretical debates in the journal *Shima* is Japanese anthropologist Junichi Suwa. Following his exposition of the concept of *shima* in Japanese culture that introduced the first issue of the journal (SUWA 2006), he contributed an insightful discussion of the concept of aquapelagic assemblages that extended the livelihood focus of his earlier paper to a discussion of particular human communities engaged in interaction with marine environments (SUWA 2012). Citing “the Bajau of the Sulu Sea, the Moken of the Andaman Sea and the residents of *ebune* houseboats who pursue a traditional lifestyle in some parts of coastal Japan” as

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10 Established with the federation of Britain’s formerly separate colonies into the Commonwealth of Australia in 1899.

11 NB While the official name of the region refers to the Strait in the singular — ie ‘The Torres Strait’, the area is colloquially referred to as ‘The Straits’ (in the plural).

examples (ibid: 14), he contended that for such groups:

the assemblage of (human) livelihood provides a mediating process between land and marine environments and it constructs cultural landscapes with diversity as well as complexity. People hunt, gather or grow products from the sea as well as from the land, and when their 'commons' are open, wildernesses and grasslands can be understood as a 'sea'. In discussing aquapelagic assemblages, therefore, the process by which cultural landscapes are generated turns out to be a central issue. (ibid: 14)

Identifying that the "constitution of aquapelagic assemblages involves the appropriation and sharing of cultural land/seascapes; therefore, occupancy of space is a primary consideration" (ibid: 15), he contends that:

Aquapelagic assemblages are, rather, specific products of ongoing processes in actual locations; and the resource uses, finances, identities and alliances involved in constituting them are fluid, transient and sometimes elusive... they are occupied with sacred, untouchable, memorised and/or identified elements that are shared through and as common knowledge, skill, consciousness, desire and ideology, whatever the direction they take. (ibid: 15)

These characterisations are so precisely appropriate for the subject of this article that they may have been expounded on the evidence and characterisations previously published by the authors (HAYWARD and KONISHI 2001). In many ways, they provide the holistic overview of the nature of Japanese culture in the Torres Strait in the 1880s-1940s that we were unable to grasp in our earlier paper, an irksome aspect that—like a grain of sand in an oyster—contributed to the kernel of theory that accreted through the establishment of SICRI and *Shima*. Indeed, returning to a discussion of the nature of Japanese community in the Torres Strait in the mid-2010s in the light of subsequent debates provides clear perspectives on the particularity of that community within its environment.

The Japanese community in the Torres Strait performed an aquapelago through the assemblage of seafloor, sea surface and terrestrial planes of livelihood, social and residential activity. The central element of the pearling trade was the integrated assemblage of divers on the seafloor being life-supported by crewmembers on board ships and by these overall crews' integration with both the extended pearling business and by members of the Japanese community providing various services and comforts. Given the perilous nature of pearl diving and the highly precise requirements of surface navigation, equipment maintenance and monitoring, communication between Japanese workers was essential and skills and knowledge transfer was vital to the community's survival and prosperity (in the manner identified by SUWA 2012 above). Given the

absence of written materials or interviews conducted at the time, it is difficult to assess to what extent Japanese divers discussed their experiences of submerging and ascending and of traversing the sea floor and watching and interacting with variously benign and/or hostile aquatic species. Even if they did not communicate on such matters—or else were hampered by the lack of suitable terms and concepts to express their experiences—they undoubtedly shared similar experiences and various senses of monotony, beauty, anxiety, exhaustion and elation relative to the success of their dives and the related conditions in which they dived. One of the few insights into Japanese divers' experiences is provided by a song in the *kouta* idiom (a vernacular song form that emerged around 1910 and became broadly popular in the 1930s). One composition identified as popular amongst Japanese divers in the Torres Strait in the 1930s by various of our interviewees back in 1999 was *Daiba no Uta* ('The Divers' Counting Song'). The song amply conveys the manner in which aquapelagic lifestyles can be as taxing as terrestrial ones.

*Daiba no Uta* consists of twenty stanzas<sup>12</sup> that describe the tough conditions experienced by divers and identifies the various issues faced by new arrivals in the Straits, chiefly related to language, nature of food, nature of work, absence of female sexual partners and nostalgia for family and home. Stanza sixteen provides a particularly stark image of the diver's physical state after extended periods at sea: "You can see our plight from our emaciated and sunburnt bodies". Reflecting the declining nature of the pearling business in the Torres Strait in the 1920s and 1930s, when over-harvesting had severely depleted stocks, two stanzas include poetic statements of disappointment and of the extremity of the divers' occupation:

*Twelve.* I had the courage to leave Japan since I thought I would find a mountain of treasure but instead I have found a mountain made of needles.

*Fifteen.* Divers take shells from the border between Heaven and Hell in a vain attempt to gain money.

The reference to the border between Heaven and Hell in Stanza Sixteen is a significant statement of the liminality—the 'inbetweenness'—of the diver's existence—working on the sea floor but tethered by an air-hose to the surface, living on board ship when above the water, living with compatriots but away from home, and harvesting valuable pearls but largely excluded from the profits of the pearling industry.

As we discussed in our 2001 article, one way that the divers and Japanese community as a whole negotiated their stresses, alienation and homesickness was through music. Despite the bleak picture of a diver's life painted in the lyrics of *Daiba*

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12 See full transcription in HAYWARD and KONISHI 2001: 54-55.

*no Uta*, a significant number of Japanese ships' captains were successful in their enterprises and often purchased traditional Japanese instruments such as shamisen or shakuhachi, or western instruments such as guitars or violins which they—or other crew members—would perform on in evenings, rest days or holidays. A number of successful divers and captains also owned gramophones and collections of discs imported from Japan. Accompanied or unaccompanied singing of Japanese traditional and contemporary songs was also common and musical events were often held onshore during the prolonged summer lay-off period. The musicality of pearling lugger crews and, later of the crews employed on boats captained by Japanese employed in the *bêche-de-mer* and trochus trade, was significant with regard to another facet of the aquapelagic lifestyle experienced by the Japanese, that of the aquapelago as an intercultural contact zone (PRATT 1992), identified by SPYER (1998) as “fissured performative spaces”.

As we discussed in 2001, and as also identified in the discussion of intercultural musical exchanges between *bêche-de-mer* and trochus shell boat crews and groups of Australian tourists on the north-east Queensland coast in the 1930s described in HAYWARD (2001), the aquapelagic assemblage operated as a transactional crossroads. While similar accounts do not appear in records of Australian captained pearling, *bêche-de-mer* and trochus shell boats, several accounts of musical interactions between Japanese, Papuan and Torres Strait Islander crew members reported them listening to each other's songs and/or watching dances that might accompany them and, in some instance, subsequently imitating these and/or collaborating in the performance of such repertoires. This interest also led to Japanese crews' attendances at festivals on various Torres Strait islands, where their familiarity with aspects of repertoire facilitated their enjoyment of and participation in the festivities. One of our 1999 informants, Yuzuru Kuhara, from Izumo village in Wakayama (now part of Kushimoto city), recalled that a group of his fellow Izumo crew members working on the lugger *Trenton* made a point of learning Torres Strait songs and dances and even performed these at festivals in Japan in the late 1940s after their repatriation from Australia. Another informant, Yutaka Higashi, sang a song he learned in the Straits<sup>13</sup> at senior citizens' events in Wakayama until the 1990s.

The experience of cross-cultural association and observation also extended to the development of a Torres Strait song repertoire about Japanese crews and captains. Dicky Lahou, from Poid Island, for instance, who had worked on luggers in the 1920s and early 1930s, regularly sang two songs about life on the luggers to guests at Lindemann Island Resort in the Whitsundays, where he worked in the mid-1930. One was similar to *Daiba no Uta* in describing adverse living conditions on the lugger *Trenton* during a voyage to Bell Cay on the Great Barrier Reef, while another (again

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13 Which we identified as the composition 'Black Swan'.

recalling themes from *Daiba no Uta*) commented on language issues in multicultural contexts by satirising a Japanese captain's confused renditions of "I" and "r" sounds and the consequent difficulties of understanding particular orders.

The constitution of intercultural spaces within broader aquapelagic ones is not a regular aspect of the latter but rather results from the particular presence of Japanese as a prominent group in pearling and, later, *bêche-de-mer* and trochus harvesting enterprises. As significantly, it reflected their perverse status as dominant outsiders in activities constituted in a remote area of Australia sparsely administered and populated by that country's dominant European-Australian population. In many ways, this particular location, at this particular time, merits comparison to the much discussed 'Temporary Autonomous Zones' identified by BEY (1985) as constituted by corsairs (pirates) in areas such as the Caribbean during the early period of European colonisation. While the Japanese workers in the Torres Strait appear to have been law-abiding (with regard to the few Australian laws that impinged on their everyday operations), they enjoyed a variety of autonomies during their heyday, including far freer associations with cross-cultural groups than was common amongst European-Australians interacting with indigenous workers in a similar period (again evoking the corsairs and their frequently multicultural, multi-racial crews). Like the corsair societies discussed by BEY (above), the Japanese autonomous aquapelagic assemblages proved decidedly temporary and faded with the decline of the local pearl stocks and the imposition of restrictions on Japanese recruitment and residency in the Torres Strait. With no little irony, their internment and later deportation arose from a militaristic extension of the same *nanshin-ron* impulse that brought them to the Torres Strait in the first instance. Three months after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour, the Imperial naval air force also staged an attack on Horn Island in the lower Torres Strait, killing 156 Australia servicemen and support workers and closing the chapter on the Japanese association with the Torres Strait and their performances of aquapelagic assemblages within it.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

The discussions in this article have attempted to provide an interlinked and mutually illuminative account of two aspects. The first concerns the origins of the SICRI research network, the journal *Shima* and, consequently, the concept of the aquapelago in the authors' earlier attempts to describe and analyse a series of Japanese cultural activities in the Torres Strait between the 1880s and 1940s. These resulted from

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14 Although a small number of Okinawans were allowed to work on pearling luggers in the Torres Strait in the late 1940s, when a brief attempt was made to revive the local pearling industry. (NB As residents of an area that had been excised from Japan by the US occupying administration, Okinawans were exempt from restrictions on Japanese entry into Australia at this time.)

the migration of a large number of Japanese workers and family members to the area to participate in pearling and subsequently bêche-de-mer and trochus harvesting. The second strand comprises a consideration of the manner in which Japanese livelihood activities in the region created a temporary aquapelagic assemblage that had highly distinct aspects with regard to the cultural activities and perceptions of both Japanese workers and members of the various indigenous groups they came into contact with. As a reflection on a short-lived aquapelagic assemblage it adds to the body of literature on longer-established indigenous aquapelagos (in the Torres Strait, Haida Gwaii and Vanuatu islands). In this regard, the article points to the need for research into aquapelagos to consider various time spans for their constitution and various means of their invocation and performance. Drawing on a body of theoretical work developed in the journal *Shima*, the article identifies the complexity of integrated marine and terrestrial societies and the need to find flexible and subtle ways of characterising and analysing them.

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