



# MONASH University

***Caring for Saibai Island Stories: conducting research and creating a performative story in an ethical and culturally appropriate way***

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An exegesis submitted for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy* at  
Monash University in 2020  
*Faculty of Arts*

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**I acknowledge the people of the Boon Wurrung and the Woiwurrung of the Kulin Nation, the traditional custodians of the land where I reside.**

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## Abstract

This work contributes to the growing body of research informed by an Indigenous viewpoint, and one that gives voice to Torres Strait Islanders who have been silenced, misinterpreted and ignored.

Despite the vast research by ethnographers and anthropologists on the Torres Strait Islands and Islanders, there is little that is led by Island people themselves and informed by Torres Strait ways of being, knowing and doing. Through Saibaian ways of seeing and understanding the world, this research considers a pathway towards a respectful and meaningful approach to research, and connecting past performance practices with new performance methodologies: a model that is by no means “*the way*” but merely “one way”, an organic process that is not fixed but evolves through consultation with community.

The Cultural knowledge offered by *Saibailgal* (people of Saibai Island) provided the guidance for documenting and archiving stories of, and by communities, in an ethical and culturally appropriate way. Informed by Saibai Island *girel* (dance), from Saibai Islander performative storytellers of the *Ait Koedal* clan, this approach also guides the development and presentation of a new Torres Strait Islanders’ performance work – *Woer Wayepa* – demonstrating how knowledge transference can in itself be an adaptive mechanism in the survival of Saibaian Cultural knowledge.

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## **Declaration**

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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**Date:** 7 April 2020

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## **Publications during enrolment**

2020 *Melbourne Women in Film Festival – Indigenous Women Filmmakers on Self-representation and Sovereign Storytelling panel*

2018 *December Issue (Issue 73) Australasian Drama Studies*

2017 *WOW Melbourne (Women of the World) Keynote address*

2015 *NIRAKN Adelaide 20min presentation*

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**Dedicated to**

Nguzu Ama (my mum), 1947-2009

you continue to teach and inspire me so much on this journey called life

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## INTRODUCTION

*Nguzu Seremana (Wasiu nee Waigana) ngep, Normana kazi*  
I am Aka Serema's granddaughter, Norma's daughter

My name is Margaret Harvey, and I am the sum of all my ancestors. My ama (mother), is Norma Harvey (nee Wasiu) from Saibai Island in the Torres Strait and Bamaga in Cape York. My father is John Harvey, originally from the south of England. My Saibai Island bloodline runs through, two clan groups: *Ait Koedal* on Aka's (grandmother's) side and *Samu* on Popu's (grandfather's) side. I am the ngep (granddaughter) of Serema Wasiu (nee Waigana) and Philip Wasiu. I was born in Redcliffe hospital in South East Queensland and spent nearly all my school years in outback Roma.

The above epigraph in the dialect of Kala Kawa Ya (KKY), is how I have been taught to introduce myself to my bloodline community of Saibai, through Aka's bloodline of *Ait Koedal*, one of the remaining clan groups on Saibai Island. Introducing myself in this way identifies my family line and who I am. In Bamaga I identify myself via Popu's Wasiu bloodline from the Samu clan.

My bloodline to Saibai Island informs this research. How I identify notifies my positionality within my methodology, and I will delve into that later. For Saibaian, connection to country as well as the retention and maintenance of knowledge, language, dance, songs, spirituality, craft, navigation skills, and other elements of Culture is what keeps our Culture strong.

Culture in this context is afforded a capital "C" as defined by Rachel Halverson for it represents specific customs for Torres Strait Islanders.<sup>1</sup> Culture is often referred to by Torres Strait Islanders as *Ailan Kastom*.<sup>2</sup> *Ailan Kastom* encompasses knowledge of customs, spirituality, myths, social organisation and beliefs that contribute to Saibai Island people's way of life. Locating and revealing my Saibaian bloodline not only situates me within my research but acknowledges the customary protocols of both my clan groups by introducing myself through my lineage.

Within the urban world that I navigate I am a storyteller in the mediums of theatre and film – as an actor, director, writer and producer – creating, re-creating and documenting stories. My Cultural heritage not only has its roots grounded in a strong lineage. It also informs my work in the performing arts. My Saibai Island heritage and all of the complex layers of identity is a familiar story to many First Nations people who were born and raised off country. Off country refers to living away from your ancestral First Nations' lands.

For my children, who may read this one day, I want them to know that before this can be comprehended, you need to understand the ethos of the people to whom your bloodline is connected. This includes understanding your bloodline's migratory stories as this will inform your identity. You may never fully understand without knowing the dialect of KKY, but Saibaian ways of being, knowing and doing can impact on how you care for the stories and knowledge in this document.

The work in this exegesis informs a way of collaborating with *Saibailgal*<sup>3</sup> when researching and when creating a live performance work. As I will attest in this Introduction Chapter, past research in the Torres Straits began during the London Missionary Society's (LMS) arrival in 1871 and the subsequent arrival of Alfred Cort Haddon's Salvage Ethnography expedition throughout the islands of the Torres Strait. This past research has extracted knowledge and Cultural objects and has

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel J. Halverson, "Culture and Vocabulary Acquisition: A Proposal," *Foreign Language Annals* 18, no. 4 (1985).

<sup>2</sup> Ailan Kastom means 'Island Custom' in Torres Strait Creole and is a term frequently used by the people of the Torres Strait.

<sup>3</sup> Saibailgal is the KKY word for the people of Saibai Island.

rendered Islanders voice-less and as a “dying race” in the literature. Since LMS and Haddon’s work, the dominant narrative of Torres Strait Islanders in the literature today is the narrative of a “dying culture.” Reclamation of our narrative through our own voices is the central focus of this exegesis. Throughout this document, the voices of *Saibailgal* will support the strength and survival of a people who have adapted and evolved through colonisation and kept healthy our Cultural traditions. Performative storytelling is an evolving Cultural practice on Saibai Island and *Saibailgal* performers of the past and the present impart their stories and knowledge of Saibai *girel* in the pages of this exegesis repudiating the literature that propagates Torres Strait Islanders as a “dying race.” Performative story, dance and *girel*<sup>4</sup> are interchangeable throughout this thesis.

This chapter gives a general history of the Torres Strait and situates Saibai Island within the context of my exegesis and as the primary focus. The intricate knowledge system of Saibaians is deeply connected to the ethos of its people and informs ways of being and ways of doing for Saibaians. Following this, I identify how Western knowledge systems have attained cultural authority over Torres Strait Cultural knowledge and how this was and still is a weapon used to disempower First Nations’ people autonomy over our Cultural knowledge and self-determination. I will also describe how modernity and globalisation bolster the colonial matrix thereby permeating across the fabric of society today.

### 1.1 Purposes

Giving voice to those who have been silenced, misinterpreted and ignored is the focus of this work, with a particular emphasis on my bloodline connection to Saibai Island. I examine how live performance supports the relationship of people to their country as well as supporting the retention and maintenance of knowledge, language, dance, songs, spirituality, craft, navigation skills, and other elements of Culture.

### 1.2 Significance, Scope and Definitions

The importance of this research is about defining/exploring/investigating a pathway that offers the voices of the silenced, ignored and misinterpreted to be heard in an ethically and culturally appropriate way that is meaningful to the community. The gap in the literature necessitates the voices of the silenced, ignored and misinterpreted to be heard in an ethically and culturally appropriate way that is beneficial and expels the myth of the “dying race.”

The extraction of Cultural knowledge from the Torres Straits has placed Indigenous people on the fringes, viewed through the prism of scientific investigations. This has left not only Islanders but many First Nations people disempowered and still fighting for custodianship and recognition of their knowledge and the physical connections to this knowledge system in the land, sea/waterways and sky. The scope of this research covers performative storytelling on the island of Saibai with particular members of the *Ait Koedal* clan who represent the past and present performers of Saibai *girel*. They range in ages from 30s to 90s. There are another two communities who migrated from Saibai Island to the mainland in 1947 and 1948 and built the now thriving communities of Bamaga and Seisia in Cape York. In these two communities are performative storytellers who have their own ways. This research is connected explicitly to the *Ait Koedal* clan on Saibai Island. The methodology of my research is driven by an approach where Saibai Island Cultural Knowledge Custodians are at the centre of the decisions and are guiding the research process. The study will be using qualitative research through interviews, conversations and deep listening.

Ten performative storytellers participated in the interviews, but the study has been limited to six Knowledge Givers in this thesis, as not all interviews have been transcribed from KKY to English. Also included in the study is a performance-led research component which will consist of a live performance work called *Woer Wayepa* and a short NITV documentary I made on the evolution of Saibai Island dance with a Saibaian choreographer, who is also a performative storyteller and a Cultural Knowledge Custodian of our clan.

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<sup>4</sup> In the language of Kala Kawa Ya, *girel* is the word for dance.

### 1.3 Background

To understand my positionality, I need to divulge some of my story.

#### Bloodlines

I have bloodline connections and clan lineage to the Torres Strait Islander communities of Saibai Island and Bamaga. Today Saibai is still home to my aka's clan lineage of *Ait Koedal* (Crocodile) and, since the 1947 migration, Bamaga has become home to my popu's clan lineage of *Samu* (Emu). Although it must also be noted that Saibai flows deep within the bloodlines of Bamaga. As a woman of Saibaian and English heritage, born and raised on the mainland, I am situated on the outside of these two communities. I am also further removed because of the patriarchal society that exists more so today than in pre-colonisation within Torres Strait Islander life. Now is the right time to briefly introduce you to my awas (uncles), Awa Jeff Aniba-Waia and Awa Walter Waia. These two brothers are the uncles and elders who have guided and informed the work within this exegesis. They are Knowledge Custodians of the *Ait Koedal* clan and born into the choreographic bloodline of the Waia family. I will mention them many times throughout this document, defining who they are and their positions within the community.

My positionality raises many questions about how I fit into all this as a woman of Saibai Island and of English blood, born and raised on the mainland of Australia. The space I occupy is situated on the periphery of Indigenous First Nations groups. The need to acknowledge and empower that space recognises how I came to occupy that space and, I will discuss this in detail later.

The greatest challenge I faced in re-establishing bloodline connections on Saibai Island was not being able to speak the language of my mother's tongue. Ama spoke two languages when I was growing up, English and KKY – the dialect of the North Western Island group in the Torres Strait. I still have memories from my childhood of feeling comforted and soothed on hearing my mother speak the language of Saibai – KKY – to family members on the phone, hundreds of kilometres away. My parents finally settled in the early 80s in a small predominantly white country town called Roma in South West Queensland. Bringing up five children with no family nearby and being in a mixed race relationship was challenging at the best of times.

Ama was forever repeating herself to be understood – even though she spoke English more than adequately, her accent and the colour of her skin became a barrier for some in the town to engage with her for longer than two sentences. I began to understand this at quite a young age. The look on the face of some of the white women when speaking to my mother was a look I will forever remember. It was the look I received from teachers when caught speaking out of turn in class. Although Ama's warm and vivacious personality attracted a small group of friends, not many people in the town took the time to find out about our Saibaian heritage. My mum lost her voice during the seventeen years she lived there – literally lost her voice, and it never returned. She could still speak, but her tone became hoarse and throaty. She continued to work hard to break down walls and open up doors for her children and her grandchildren.

I remember when she drove me from Roma to Brisbane, a twelve-hour return car trip, to help me set up in a share home to begin an undergraduate course at Queensland University of Technology. We both stayed at her sister's place, my favourite Aunt Judy. The morning she left I remember there was sadness in the air but I could see that she tried hard not to show it. As I think back on that day, I remember how she supported all her kids through their schooling years, as a full-time stay at home mum, away from the support of family, in this small predominantly white country town in South East Queensland – her commitment to us all was boundless. Her pride for her Cultural heritage was instilled in us, and I remember growing up with a sense of being something unique because of our Saibaian bloodline lineage. Language was not a priority for Ama as she believed the English language was what would benefit us the most. I questioned her many times about this, but still her stance stayed strong on that topic. When she drove away from my Aunt Judy's, I

waved her off, tears in my eyes. I could see her in her rear view mirror smiling at me through tears, but I could also see the pride in her eyes for me and for what I was embarking on. Pride is something Ama always showed to her children. The very last time I saw Ama it was I who was driving away from her looking back in my side mirror, and as always with tears in my eyes. She was living in Brisbane with Dad, and I had been living in Cairns with my firstborn and partner. We'd been down visiting. I watched her in the side mirror waving, as my parents always did, until we disappeared out of sight. One month later Ama became a statistic when she passed suddenly at the age of 62. Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginals have a much lower life expectancy than non-Indigenous people. For women it is 75.6 and for men it is 71.6.<sup>5</sup>

Like many Saibai Island people, she urged the documenting of Saibai Island stories. With the heavy grief of her loss also came an overwhelming feeling of being cut off from my cultural connection to Saibai. Her passing severed any sense of being rooted in my Saibai Island bloodline. My identity to Saibai was profoundly connected to my physical link to Ama. It was as if the umbilical cord that tied me to my island home was severed. A lot of this feeling of disconnect was wrapped up in not having grown up in my bloodline communities of Bamaga or Saibai, and not having a full grasp of language. The feeling was of displacement from my cultural connection. In the last few years, I have come to understand that my story is not a story of displacement, but a story of migration in three parts that began in the late 1800s. I am the third part of a much longer migratory story. The following stories document this history and include those based on shared accounts in varying forms from family members, including Ama.

### 1. Leaving Ait

The first part is leaving Ait. Ait is a tiny island surrounded by swamp waters on the island of Saibai and was home to the clan of *Ait Koedal*, offering protection from warring parties from Papua New Guinea. After the coming of the light – which was the coming of Christianity by the London Missionary Society in 1871 – under the guidance of Pacific Island missionary teachers, the *Ait Koedal* clan were invited to live in the newly formed village of Saibai. The Torres Strait had already become a centre for commercial pearling and bêche-de-mer fishing. The *Ait Koedal* clan understood the changes that were occurring in the waters of their island home and the “contemporary mindset”<sup>6</sup> informed their decision to leave their small island known as Ait and settle in the village of Saibai. The people of *Ait Koedal* clan were the last to be converted. Popu (grandfather) Enosa Waigana recounts the story in Lawrie's *Myths and Legends of the Torres Strait*.<sup>7</sup>

‘Lifu missionaries arrived at Saibai Village. They sent a man named Baira, who belonged to Village Kadal, to Ait to tell the people to leave their home in the swamp at the other end of the island and come and live with them. The people of Ait agreed to do this, but did not make the move because they feared they would own no land and they would lose their independence. A year later Baira went again to Ait to call the people to Saibai Village, and this time they went. As they walked across the swamps, the men and women and children repeatedly looked back at Ait, sorrow in their hearts, tears in their eyes. A song broke out from them’:

*Lag-gar nupaypa kunai wanan,  
Ngaw-gar maya ulaypa.*

*Lag-gar nupaypa pusiya thoeraypa*

<sup>5</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Life Expectancy Lowest in Remote and Very Remote Areas," news release, 29 November 2018, 2018, [https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/3302.0.55.003~2015-2017~Media%20Release~Life%20expectancy%20lowest%20in%20remote%20and%20very%20remote%20areas%20\(Media%20Release\)~15#:~:targetText=%E2%80%9CLife%20expectancy%20at%20birth%20for%20men%20and%20women%20respectively\).%E2%80%9D](https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/3302.0.55.003~2015-2017~Media%20Release~Life%20expectancy%20lowest%20in%20remote%20and%20very%20remote%20areas%20(Media%20Release)~15#:~:targetText=%E2%80%9CLife%20expectancy%20at%20birth%20for%20men%20and%20women%20respectively).%E2%80%9D)

<sup>6</sup> “Contemporary mindset’ is what Mr Waia often refers to his way of looking at Saibai Cultural practices.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Lawrie, "Myths and Legends of Torres Strait," (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., Inc, 1970).

## *Ngay-gar lagoepa kunia thaman*

'Home is left behind back there in the distance.  
My tears keep running.  
My tears keep running.

Home appears back there through a mist (of tears)  
I am thinking of home back there.  
I am thinking of home back there.'

'When they reached Saibai village, Baira met them and took them to his house. Men of *tabu augad* (*tabu*, snake) went there to greet them. Later Baira and the men of *tabu augad* gave them garden land and land where they might build homes. They also provided the young men with wives. On the first night at Saibai Village, one of the men from Ait could not sleep for the sound of the sea and went back to Ait. However, in the morning he returned to his people.'

## 2. Leaving Saibai

In 1947, half the clan groups of Saibai, including my bloodline clan of *Samu* – on Popu's (grandfather's) side – made the decision to move from Saibai to the mainland of Australia due to the rising tides that virtually flooded the island and caused issues with drinking water and diseases such as malaria and diarrhoea.<sup>8</sup> Ama was a baby when she left with her parents on one of those pearl luggers. Aka's birth clan of *Ait Koedal* stayed on Saibai; their migration from their home of Ait to the village of Saibai was enough movement for the clan. For the migrating clans from Saibai to the mainland of Australia, a new settlement was established. This story forms the basis for my performance-led research discussed in Chapter Five.

## 3. Leaving Bamaga

Bamaga was under the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protection Act. This legislation was utilized to control Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the workplace and to deny them fundamental civil rights.

Ama and Dad's decision to leave Bamaga was at the encouragement of Popu, who understood the socio-political and economic impact colonisation was having on our people and the influence modernity was having within the Torres Strait. Popu encouraged the marriage between Ama and Dad and showed no hesitation in giving his blessing to them. He was very close to his firstborn and was sad to see her go. Nonetheless, he encouraged her.

In a small way, this work becomes a voice for Ama and those who have walked before me. I trust and value those decisions made by my foremothers and forefathers – there was a purpose, drive and commitment to empowering our people of Saibai. There was also the knowledge that our Culture is a living thing that is continuously evolving. Acknowledging the space created for me by my forebears acknowledges the world they imagined for us. There are many liberties that I live with today. Liberties they dreamt of while they toiled for the generations to come – a university degree, a platform for my voice to be heard as a storyteller, a scholarship that allows me to work on a postgraduate degree.

I now know and embrace where I sit within the community because I understand what it means to be sitting on the outside. Being on the outside is about focusing on those liberties and acknowledging that I stand on the shoulders of giants who sacrificed much for our voices to be heard. There is, of course, an understanding of the trauma and loss – that cannot be escaped, as Saibaians have demonstrated. I refuse to live a life defined by trauma and loss. This is important to teach our children who may read this – there are two paths on offer – the path laid out by the oppressor or the path laid out by our forebears.

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<sup>8</sup> Dana Ober, Joe Sprouts, and Rik Mitchell, *Saibai to Bamaga: The Migration from Saibai to Bamaga on the Cape York Peninsula* (Townsville: Joe Sprouts and associates, 2000), commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the foundation of Bamaga.

My focus is not to gather as much Cultural knowledge as possible for myself and the next generation but to offer and give to my communities through facilitating storytelling in the mediums that I know best. Attaining Cultural knowledge should not be looked at as a birthright but as acquired through the proper channels of negotiation and exchange. Reciprocity is vital in the exchange – this is not something new for Saibai Island people and indeed most Indigenous peoples – it is the practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit. So far, I have touched on my positionality and will describe this further in Chapter Two within the context of my research. To further understand my Cultural heritage the next section will give you a brief background to the Torres Strait Islands and to Saibai Island.

## Torres Strait Islands

There are two diverse Indigenous peoples of Australia. They have different genetic, cultural, linguistic and historical heritages: the Australian Aboriginals, and the Torres Strait Islanders. The Torres Strait Islanders are Melanesian in origin and inhabit the islands of the Straits between Cape York and Papua New Guinea. The region is made up of over 150 islands,<sup>9</sup> wherein the following traditional five main island group communities reside:<sup>10</sup>

1. Top Western Islands – Boigu, Dauan, Saibai
2. Western Islands – Badu, Mabuag
3. Central Islands – Iama (Yam Island), Masig (Yorke Island), Poruma (Coconut Island), Warraber (Sue Island)
4. Eastern Islands – Mer (Murray Island), Ugar (Stephen Island), Erub (Darnley Island)
5. Inner Islands – Hammond, Muraleg (Prince of Wales Island), Ngurupai (Horn Island), Waiben (Thursday Island)

There are also two recognized Torres Strait communities on the mainland of Australia in Cape York – Bamaga and Seisia.<sup>11</sup> These two communities were established after rising tides brought about a migration from Saibai Island in the late 1940s. There will be more about that further on. To note, the traditional owners of the islands of Muraleg and Ngurupai are the Aboriginal people known as the *Kaurareg*.

Before pre-contact, there was a distinct separation between the Eastern Islands and the Western Islands. The custodianship of land, sea and sky was kept to their respective areas but may have overlapped into the Central Islands.<sup>12</sup>

Archaeological evidence dates human settlement on the islands to nine thousand years ago on Badu Island.<sup>13</sup> The name of the Torres Strait comes from Spanish maritime explorer Luis Vaz de Torres who navigated the waters of the Straits in 1606. Torres's expedition logs report the presence of black natives, who had turtle shell masks, outrigger canoes and bows.<sup>14</sup> Now known to have been the ancestors of today's Torres Strait Islander. During this voyage he is noted to have kidnapped three Torres Strait Island girls from the Central islands (*Kulkagal* Nation) and six boys and six girls from Papua New Guinea. Their fate is unknown.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Donna Green et al., "An Assessment of Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation for the Torres Strait Islands, Australia. *Climatic Change*, 102(3-4), . . ." *Climatic Change* 102, no. 3-4 (2010).

<sup>10</sup> TSRA, "Community Profiles," Torres Strait Regional Authority, <http://www.tsra.gov.au/the-torres-strait/community-profiles>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred C. Haddon, Jeremy Hodes, and Ray Sidney Herbert, *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits: Arts and Crafts*, 6 vols., vol. 4, Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits (University Press Cambridge, 1901).p.2

<sup>13</sup> Marshall I. Weisler, McNiven, Ian J., "Four Thousand Years of Western Torres Strait Fishing in the Pacific-Wide Context," *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 7 (2015).

<sup>14</sup> Brett Hilder, *The Voyage of the Torres: The Discovery of the Southern Coastline of New Guinea and Torres Strait by Captain Luis Vaez De Torres in 1606* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1980). p.74-77.

<sup>15</sup> John Burton, "General History (of Torres Strait)," Torres Strait Regional Authority, [http://www.tsra.gov.au/the-torres-strait/general-history#Qld annexes TS](http://www.tsra.gov.au/the-torres-strait/general-history#Qld%20annexes%20TS).

Before the arrival of the LMS in the mid-1800s, "Torres Strait Islanders were not a single homogenous or unified group."<sup>16</sup> Within these island groups are distinct tribal nations and clan groups. Shnukal goes on to outline: "each nation had its own name: Saibailgal (Top Western Islanders), *Maluilgal* (mid-Western Islanders), *Kaurareg* (Lower Western Islanders), *Kulkalgal* (Central Islanders) and *Meriam Le* (Eastern Islanders)."<sup>17</sup> However, I would argue, that still today the clan groups on Saibai are deeply rooted to Saibai Island life and it is an intrinsic element in the transfer of knowledge. As Mr Aniba-Waia points out below:

'In your mother's womb, you first become a member of a clan. In your dying days, you will imitate the totems of your clan before passing...'<sup>18</sup>

There are two traditional languages of the Torres Strait, *Kala Lagaw Ya* of the Western and Central Island group and *Meriam Mir* of the Eastern Island group. From the two traditional languages six distinct dialects are derived. *Meriam Mir* has two regional dialects while *Kala Lagaw Ya* has four regional dialects including the dialect of Saibai Island known as KKY.

Torres Strait Creole has been the lingua franca in the Torres Straits since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. After colonisation, *Yumplatok* or Torres Strait Creole as it is commonly known, has become a common language used by Torres Strait Islanders.<sup>19</sup>

### Performative Storytelling in the Torres Strait

In the field of Western knowledge, there is little known about the live performance culture of the Torres Strait. The oldest ethnographic film is from Haddon's collection and is a four-minute long re-enactment of a ceremonial dance from the island of *Mer* (Murray Island). While this kind of dance would have been repressed by the LMS, Maryrose Casey notes that the expertise demonstrated by the dancers of *Mer* in this sacred dance suggests that this ceremony could have continued despite the LMS's attempt at oppressing Cultural practices.<sup>20</sup> As this footage is of a men's ceremonial dance and from another island, it would be inappropriate for me to give a description of what I witnessed in the footage. In the face of this oppressive regime, there remains a rich cultural tradition of performance within Torres Strait Island Culture, which Islanders are proud of.

There are commonalities between the islands, but there are also distinguishable differences. The islands have their own distinct dances, songs, dance apparatus/masks, skin markings that connect with that particular island's ideology. Casey notes "the spiritual approach expressed in the dances and songs focuses on the sacred in the everyday."<sup>21</sup> The performative storytelling in Torres Strait tradition reflects the Culture of knowledge transference and may express teachings of everyday activities such as hunting, diving, etc., or may have a deep connection to the spirituality of the people in ceremony. As Saibaian Knowledge Custodian Awa Jeff Aniba-Waia points out, significant events of the times such as World War II, the migration from Saibai Island to the mainland, are expressed through song and dance and become a historical record.<sup>22</sup>

A lot of the knowledge I have of dance is through kinship ties, which includes but is not limited to, three of my Cultural Knowledge Custodians of Saibai Island – Awas (Uncles) Jeff Aniba-Waia, Walter Waia and Sedrick Waia: three brothers from the *Ait Koedal* clan of Saibai Island who come

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<sup>16</sup> Anna Shnukal, "Torres Strait Islanders," in *Multicultural Queensland 2001: 100 Years, 100 Communities, a Century of Contributions*, ed. Maximilian Brandle (Brisbane: The State of Queensland (Department of Premier and Cabinet), 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Harvey, "Saibai Island Dance," in *Our Stories Our Way Everyday* (NITV SBS: NITV, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Dana Ober, "Many Languages One Voice," *Islander Magazine*, May 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Maryrose Casey, *Telling Stories: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Performance*, ed. Professor Lynette Russell, *Studies in Indigenous Histories and Cultures* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing 2012). p.79

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p.84

<sup>22</sup> Harvey.

from the choreographic Waia bloodline. They will enter at various times throughout this document, and I will further clarify their invaluable contribution to this work as I progress through each chapter. Dance apparatus and masks were made from the environment that surrounded them, including feathers, turtle shell, wood, grasses. Since the advent of the World Wide Web, a lot of pieces and materials for apparatus, costume and headdress are sourced from costume and craft, and hobby shops on the mainland. The dance apparatus or dance machines are movable objects that attach to either the dancer's head or arms. An example of a dance apparatus is that of the *baizam* (shark), which is placed on the head and manipulated so its jaws open and shut. From Saibai Island, there is also the small model of a canoe that has a retraction device to extend the sails. The headdress known as the *dhoeri* is found in the Eastern and Western Islands and is an arch of white feathers creatively placed on a frame that sits forward on the head of a male dancer, framing the face. In Chapter Four, Awa Sedrick Waia will expand further on the apparatus used for Saibai *girel*.

Before the coming of the light through LMS, Cultural practices and ceremonies/rituals took up a lot of island life. These ceremonies and rituals included the cultivation of crops, initiation into womanhood and manhood, war/warrior rituals, funeral rites, stories of the land, sea, sky and sacred cult practices. Haddon categorized these dances into three groupings – ceremonial dances, war dances and secular dances.<sup>23</sup> The music of the dances are also distinct to island groups. Chanting is specific to the Top Western group of islands. The drum is an essential element and is often used to “mark time” signalling the entrance of the dancers.

Today there is a focus on dance/song as performance, but the practice of Culture remains a significant element. At the centre of my research is Saibai Island and this description of Torres Strait Island dance only briefly touches on the complex live performance aspect of Torres Strait Island Culture.

## Saibai Island

The focus of this thesis is Saibai Island from the Top Western group of islands in the Torres Strait. Saibai is the largest island in the Straits and is approximately the size of Manhattan in New York but with a much smaller population.<sup>24</sup> Looking north from Saibai Village, you can see the mainland of Papua New Guinea approximately four kilometres away. The island is low lying and sits one metre above seawater and was initially formed by alluvial sediment transported down from Papua New Guinea's rivers. It consists of brackish swamps, mangroves and flood plains.<sup>25</sup> *Saibailgal*<sup>26</sup> often refer to their homelands as Ama (Mother) Saibai and have a great love and respect for the island of their blood. The swamps and surrounding waters provide many stories of hunting and fishing since *bepotaim*,<sup>27</sup> nourishing and also protecting Saibaian from incoming warring parties from Papua New Guinea. However, the island of Saibai was not looked upon favourably by visiting English missionaries from the LMS. In a letter from LMS missionary J. Chalmers to Dr McMullens, dated 5 June 1878, Chalmers writes, “Everywhere you look there is nothing but low sickly looking land to be seen. It would be a pity to forsake these people now.”<sup>28</sup>

What most likely kept Saibai Cultural practice strong after the arrival of the missionaries was the proximity of Saibai to Papua New Guinea. This close proximity left *Saibailgal* on the frontline and tribal warfare between Saibai and Papua New Guinea's Kiwai Island kept Saibai's tradition of

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<sup>23</sup> Haddon, Hodes, and Sidney Herbert, 4. p.289

<sup>24</sup> Richard Davis, "Gubal, Malu, Boeradar, Daparaw Thithuy! (Winds, Sea, Land, Heavenly Stars): Property Ownership of Saibai Island," (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AITSI), 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Anthony J Barham, Michael J Rowland, and Garrick Hitchcock, "Torres Strait 'Bepotaim': An Overview of Archaeological and Ethnoarchaeological Investigations and Research.," *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum, Culture* 3 no. 1 (2004).

<sup>26</sup> Saibailgal is in the language of KKY and refers to the people of Saibai.

<sup>27</sup> Bepotaim is the Torres Strait Creole word for before time.

<sup>28</sup> J. Chalmers, "Lms Letter from J. Chalmers to Dr Mullens," (London Missionary Society, 1878).

warriorhood strong, right up till the late 1800s after the arrival of the missionaries. In a letter dated 11 December 1880 by LMS missionary James Chalmers wrote to Dr Mullens he says:

If you refer to Saibai and Dauan islands off the coast of New Guinea I think the less said of 'gratifying results' the better. A party landed lately on Saibai and they say it was well they were armed.<sup>29</sup>

There are seven clan groups of Saibai which Ama had spoken about: *Ait Koedal* (Crocodile), *Doeybaw* (Wild Yam), *Saibai Koedal* (Saibai Crocodile), *Sui* (Swamp Bird), *Umay* (Dog), *Thabu* (Snake) and *Samu* (Cassowary).<sup>30</sup> Some of these clans are made up of sub-clans or more specifically lineages. Each clan belongs to one of two *buway* (*moiety*) – *Koey Buway* (big clan) or *Moegi Buway* (small clan). Each clan group is distinct, and specific stories, dances, songs and knowledge belong with and are the possession of a particular clan group. Each family of a clan had a role; being hunters, gardeners, storytellers, dancers, choreographers, Knowledge Custodians etc. People had different roles in contributing to the livelihood, the spirituality and to the community. Since colonisation, roles have become less defined but the role of choreographer which is delineated by bloodline has been retained. Saibaian are always recalling stories of warriors being very fierce as tribal warfare between Papua New Guinea tribes, and the Top Western group of islands was a part of life for Saibaian. This fierceness is now reflected in the dances of Saibai. Perhaps the constant tribal warfare is what kept Cultural practices active on Saibai, as the missionaries and Haddon's team spent little time there.<sup>31</sup>

Also important to note is that there are another two communities on the mainland of Australia at the tip of Cape York made up of Saibai Islanders – Bamaga and Seisia. Both of these communities I visited as a child.

Saibai is vulnerable to flooding and rising sea levels with each monsoon season regularly inundated Saibai with tidal surges. Ama often spoke of the migration she was part of as a baby in 1947, which followed WWII, and was after a series of king tides had destroyed gardens and damaged properties. Half of the clan groups of Saibai Island made the difficult decision to migrate to the tip of Cape York. During one of the interviews held during my research, Uncle Barticoy Bamaga and his wife Aunty Lorna Bamaga share their memory of the migration.<sup>32</sup> As Aunty Lorna was a small girl at the time, she remembers some of the events around the migration.<sup>33</sup> Permission was sought and granted by the local Aboriginal community of Injinoo to build a new township at Mutee Heads. However, as freshwater was in short supply at this site, clan leaders negotiated and received permission to build a town some 20km away. Over the next four years, the men worked tirelessly to build up the infrastructure for what would be the township of Bamaga, named after leader Bamaga Ginau. Seisia was to become another settlement for a small group of migrating Saibai Islanders, who lived in old army huts donated to them.

All three communities of Saibai Island, Bamaga and Seisia represent the communities of the seven clan groups. Although the Saibaian of Bamaga and Seisia still refer to Saibai as Ama (Mother) acknowledging their original descent from Saibai Island, they are their own community with protocols and processes operating under their individual councils.

As Saibaian Knowledge Custodian, Awa Jeff states, within the ethos of Saibai "there are specific stories, dances, songs, ceremonial sites that are for women and specific stories, dances, songs, ceremonial sites that are for men."<sup>34</sup> Within Saibai Island ways of being, there is undoubtedly acknowledgement and a shared understanding of how much women contribute and to displace us from that complex web I mentioned earlier, would signal the demise of Saibai. What knowledge is

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<sup>29</sup> "Letter to Mr Whitehorse," (SOAS University of London, 1880).

<sup>30</sup> Davis.

<sup>31</sup> Haddon, Hodes, and Sidney Herbert, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Barticoy Bamaga, interview by McRose Elu and Margaret Harvey, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Lorna Bamaga, interview by McRose Elu and Margaret Harvey, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Harvey.

handed down to me is not just tied to bloodline but is also gender-specific. For Saibai Island people, our knowledge is deeply connected to the land, sea and sky. Every facet of life is interconnected and has its place within a complex web of knowledge that encompasses the ethos of Saibai Island. The spiritual world is just as tangible as the physical world, and the worlds coexist within that complex web. Elders and Knowledge Custodians hold invaluable knowledge that is passed down to appropriate members within their clan groups. What is relevant is tied to lineage and gender. Indigenous knowledge is a living entity and is informed by observation and interaction with the environment in which our people live. A deep spiritual connection to land, sea and sky informs Saibai Islanders ideology.

As mentioned earlier, Saibai Islanders kept the practice of performative storytelling strong even through the LMS reign in the Torres Straits. Cultural practice of Saibai *girel* is customary and influenced by the world Saibaians live in. The evolution of *girel* with each new line of dance choreographers is the natural progression of performative storytelling practice.

### Colonisation in the Torres Strait

Part of this PhD is to engage with cultural colonialism, the systematic suppression of Torres Strait Culture and ideology, specifically concerning Saibai Island. Central to the framework of cultural colonisation that took place in the Torres Strait are two key protagonists integral to this framework which I will touch briefly on.

The first is The London Missionary Society (LMS) who arrived in July 1871 and the second is the Cambridge salvage ethnography expedition led by Alfred C. Haddon in 1898. The history and repercussions of anthropological research and fieldwork by Alfred Cort Haddon's expedition to the Torres Strait in 1898, as well as the reign of the LMS that began in the Torres Straits in 1871, still reverberate today. This is because many of the Saibai Island ritual and ceremonial masks and Cultural materials ended up in museum collections throughout the world.

The London Missionary Society (LMS) was a non-denominational missionary society formed in England in 1795. The mission's aim was, "for the propagation of the gospel among the heathen, under the name of The Missionary Society."<sup>35</sup> Not long after the LMS's formation, the society turned its attention to the voyages of discovery made by order of King George III in the Pacific Ocean. Reverend William Brown of the LMS writes of these small island nations, "...as they afforded little to excite the ambition of princes, or the avarice of merchants, they were again sinking into oblivion, and were ready to be abandoned to that state of ignorance and barbarism in which they were originally discovered."<sup>36</sup> But by the 1860s, the Torres Strait did excite the "avarice of merchants" and became a centre for commercial pearling and bêche-de-mer fishing and international trading. The waters also became a major thoroughfare for ships sailing to and from the east coast of Australia.

Thus, the crucial, first protagonist, London Missionary Society, arrived in 1871 to spread the word of the Gospel and to stamp out Cultural practices that were deemed heathen in nature. They brought in Pacific Islanders as missionaries who would also teach the Torres Strait Islanders new dances befitting the teachings of the Gospel and create one homogenous island group. Jeremy Beckett argues, the LMS not only achieved the acceptance of the bible by Torres Strait Islanders but also the acceptance of the whole colonial experience.<sup>37</sup>

But Saibai *girel*, language, and the deep spirituality that connects land, sea and sky remained strong through the "whole colonial experience" and shows that Saibai Islanders did not completely accept the LMS's Christian experience. Even in the early days of the conversion, Saibai Islanders

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<sup>35</sup> William Brown, *The History of the Propagation of Christianity among the Heathen since the Reformation*, 3 vols., vol. 2 (Forgotten Books, 2012). p.238.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p.238

<sup>37</sup> Jeremy Beckett, *Torres Strait Islanders: Custom and Colonialism* (Cambridge ; Sydney : Cambridge University Press, 1987., 1987; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). p.24

displayed their resistance to receiving the full colonial experience as indicated in a letter written by Samuel McFarlane:

It appears that they have been living at peace with their neighbours (Papua New Guinea) on the mainland since my last visit. There has been no skull hunting of late. They readily attend the public services although they object to their children being taught in the school.<sup>38</sup>

McFarlane also mentions the challenges and the appeal of converting Saibaians and educating their children; McFarlane states that:

I endeavoured to show them the advantages of education and urged them to allow their children to attend school, but I fear that my address had not much effect. These Saibaians and the Bampton Islanders (PNG) are noted warriors and the key to that part of the New Guinea Coast. To succeed with them is an important, and almost indispensable step to success on the mainland (PNG).<sup>39</sup>

The project of colonisation established an oppressive regime to assimilate Islanders into European culture, converting Islanders to Christianity and negating their right to speak language and practice Culture. *Saibailgal* held strong Cultural knowledge and Cultural practices which will be demonstrated in this exegesis from the voices of *Saibailgal*. Nevertheless, the Torres Strait stories and Cultural Knowledge that has been extracted has ended up in printed and online publications, museums and elite auction houses with emphasis even today on the notion of a “dying race.”<sup>40</sup>

In 2015, one hundred and forty-five years on from when the LMS first landed in the Torres Strait, a Saibai Island ceremonial mask, the *Mawa*, used for the precise sort of ritual practice suppressed by the LMS, was sold at Christie’s Auction House in France for approximately AUD \$2.5m to the Toledo Museum of Art in the US. The mask artefact had been acquired from Saibai by McFarlane, who noted the value in the “object” but not in its Cultural significance. On describing the artefact, Christie’s website noted:

Like McFarlane, Haddon collected objects from the region — though did so because he believed the gradual influence of Christianity risked their destruction. McFarlane’s desire to catalogue and exhibit the works he returned to England with, however, did suggest an intention to preserve.

The information collated for the auction focuses primarily on McFarlane’s “discoveries” and his contribution to Haddon’s work in the Torres Straits. The performative storytelling associated with the *Mawa* is mentioned but in the past tense. The Cultural practice and importance related to the *Mawa* mask that continues today are not mentioned on the Christie’s website. Also not mentioned is the clan group or individual name connected to the mask. There is no story accompanying the piece that speaks of ancestral connections or of the mask being a living entity. Instead the mask is viewed and positioned in relation to the LMS’s collection and catalogued as “trophies of Christianity.”<sup>41</sup> These particular trophies are evidence of the Christian pillage of Saibaiian people’s Culture. For *Saibailgal*, Culture is a living entity. When Culture – whether it be Cultural material items, or oral traditions – is removed from its place in that Culture, it becomes an “object,” devoid of life and spirit.

Having already established the waters of the Torres Strait offered a valuable trading route, in 1872 Queensland made the decision to annex the seas and islands of the Torres Strait up to 60 miles from the coast of Cape York.<sup>42</sup> By 1879 the rest of the islands were annexed by an act of the

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<sup>38</sup> Samuel McFarlane, "Letter from Samuel McFarlane to Rev. Mullens," (SOAS University of London 1879).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Haddon, Hodes, and Sidney Herbert, 4.

<sup>41</sup> K; Wingfield Jacobs, C; Knowles, C., *Trophies, Relics and Curios? Missionary Heritage from Africa and Pacific*, ed. K; Wingfield Jacobs, C; Knowles, C. (Leidon: Sidestone Press, 2015).

<sup>42</sup> TSRA, "Torres Strait Climate Change Strategy 2014-2018," (2014).

Legislative Assembly in Brisbane,<sup>43</sup> and Torres Strait Islanders became the second Indigenous people of Australia.

The crucial second protagonist of this foundational colonisation of the Torres Strait was the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition in 1898 led by Alfred C. Haddon, a marine zoologist who turned his attention to ethnography, specifically salvage ethnography. By this time the British Empire was the dominant imperial power in the world and Indigenous peoples – caught in the net of the British Empire's oppressive colonisation – were seen to hold valuable information for British scientists to complete the history of human nature and the philosophy of humankind. Consequently, a committee appointed in 1839 known as the Committee of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, printed a set of queries to be addressed by the likes of ethnographers and anthropologists travelling to parts of the globe "inhabited by the threatened races." Queries included physical traits, language, individual and family life, cultural practices, artifacts and social relations, all for the advancement of science.<sup>44</sup> Haddon was to become president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science four years after his return from the Torres Strait. Inherent in salvage ethnography is the ideology of the "dying race" – the belief that the savage cannot exist in the face of civilization and therefore must die out.<sup>45</sup> Salvage ethnography is a term used by anthropologists since the 1960s, as part of a critique of 19th century ethnography. Generally, salvage ethnography was associated with anthropologist Franz Boaz, whose aim was to record Native American cultures that he believed were threatened with annihilation. Jacob W. Gruber who originated the term salvage ethnography writes:

Moreover, the sense of salvage with its concern with loss and extinction, stressed the disorganization in a social system at the expense of the sense of community; it stressed the pathology of cultural loss in the absence of any real experience with the normally operating small community.<sup>46</sup>

The ideology behind the subjugation of Cultural practices by the LMS followed closely by Haddon's quantitative analysis of a "dying breed" is not an unfamiliar story for Indigenous people in the throes of imperialism.<sup>47</sup> Jeremy Beckett writes:

After World War II there was a revival of interest, which viewed Islanders no longer as a vanishing people, as the Cambridge Expedition had tended to do, but as a contemporary people living on the periphery of the modern world but very much engaged with it.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, this "modern world" leaves Islanders no choice but to engage with it if they are to survive. The social, political and economic issues that have pervaded Indigenous communities since colonisation still gather power through the "one world order" of globalisation.<sup>49</sup> Peruvian sociologist and humanist, Aníbal Quijano states in his seminal work on the colonial power of Eurocentrism:

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<sup>43</sup> *An Act to Provide That Certain Islands in Torres Strait and Lying between the Continent of Australia and the Island of New Guinea Shall Become Part of the Colony of Queensland and Subject to the Laws in Force Therein.*, Queensland Act No. 1 of 1879.

<sup>44</sup> John Murray, "Varieties of Human Race: Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science" in *Report of the Eleventh Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* (1841). p.332

<sup>45</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

<sup>46</sup> Jacob W. Gruber, "Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 72, no. 6 (1970).

<sup>47</sup> Martin Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the Disciplines* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007).

<sup>48</sup> *Woven Histories, Dancing Lives: Torres Strait Islander Identity, Culture and History*, ed. Richard Davis (Acton, A.C.T.: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Studies and RMIT Publishing, 2004). 3

<sup>49</sup> Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Project Muse* Nепantla: Views from South, Volume 1, no. 3 (2000).

One of the fundamental axes of this model of power is the social classification of the world's population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism.<sup>50</sup>

Race was born of a Eurocentric construct and legitimized through Western knowledge systems to structure power through racial classifications of inferior/superior.<sup>51</sup> The theoretical frameworks deployed by non-Islander ethnographers and anthropologists researching the people of the Torres Strait Islands are inherently bolstering this power structure by taking away the voices and autonomy of a people to share their own knowledge through their own knowledge systems.

## Methodology

In consideration of past practices of the LMS and other anthropological approaches to extracting information and knowledge about a people and their Culture, how then can I approach documenting and archiving Saibai Island knowledge in an ethical and culturally appropriate way that is meaningful to the community? The approach, outlined in Chapter Two of my research paradigm, will begin to address this question.

The research will include qualitative research of interviews with Saibai Island performative storytellers on Saibai Island, a short documentary on the evolution of Saibai Island dance, plus the fourteen minute live performance work, *Woer Wayepa*. For the interviews, I sought guidance from a Cultural Knowledge Custodian of *Ait Koedal*, Awa Walter Waia, while for the documentary and live performance, I sought guidance from Awa Jeff Aniba-Waia. I will reveal more about them in the chapters that follow. Their cultural authority was integral to the research, informing and guiding the process.

## What are the Existing Frameworks?

Cultural practice has been acknowledged, respected and is underscored in the UNESCO *Recommendation in the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore of 1989* and in the *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity of 2001*. UNESCO is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization of which Australia is a member.

Cultural practice in the realm of performing arts is promoted by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). ICH focuses mainly on the intangible aspects of culture and attempts to preserve cultural heritage – “with” the people or community from that cultural group – by protecting the processes that allow traditions and shared knowledge to be passed on. ICH recognizes the transmission from generation to generation and is defined as:

This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.<sup>52</sup>

My research also supports Articles 11.1 and 31.1 in The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People which establishes:

a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world and it elaborates on existing human rights standards and fundamental freedoms as they apply to the specific situation of indigenous peoples.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage," ed. UNESCO (Paris: UNESCO, 2003).

<sup>53</sup> United Nations, "Department of Economic and Social Affairs Indigenous Peoples," United Nations, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>.

This framework of minimum standards establishes principles that protect Indigenous people and our intangible and tangible heritage. There is no intellectual property law that protects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ICH however Terri Janke's work for the Australia Council for the Arts offers protocols in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the performing arts, which includes and is not limited to dance, song and story.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless the objectification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Culture can still be witnessed today in stories that are on our main stages. There is strong advocacy from the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples who have called for a National Indigenous Cultural Authority that can assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in asserting their Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights (ICIP).<sup>55</sup> As Janke states, there are "gaps in the law which mean that unless Indigenous people can meet the requirements of intellectual property laws like copyright, their rights are unprotected and open to exploitation."<sup>56</sup> Protocols are essentially guidelines but can also be woven into contractual obligations that support the Indigenous community's Cultural knowledge.

This thesis focuses on documenting and sharing the rich cultural tradition of live performance inherent in Saibai Culture today for future generations of Saibaian: as well as exposing the colonial framework implemented, to "die-off" an Indigenous culture and the ramifications of this. Australia is not in a post-colonial era, the system of colonisation is alive and well for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Identifying who I am and specifying my bloodline connection also recognizes the fact that Torres Strait Islander people are not a homogenised group of people – we come from distinct bloodlines and clan groupings.

This attempted erasure now brings up questions around the "notion of authenticity" – what it means to be an authentic Indigenous person through a coloniser's gaze. As Casey points out, "notions of authenticity act to assist in the colonising process through the effective erasure of Indigenous cultural practice and deny not only the authority of Indigenous people but also their 'authentic' physical presence."<sup>57</sup>

These notions of authenticity have permeated into Torres Strait society with some Islanders asserting a power play in the positioning of the 'authentic Islander' identity, critiquing other Islander's language proficiency level, migratory status, and the degree of Islander blood in their genetics. My insider/outsider positionality is not informed by these notions of authenticity.

This thesis centres on claiming and empowering the space myself and a lot of First Nations women inhabit who are born and raised off country. My mixed heritage, coupled with being born and raised on the mainland, leaves me on the outside of my Saibai Island community. And as a woman, I am further removed because of the patriarchal society that exists more so today within Torres Strait Islander structure than before colonisation.

Furthermore, on the mainland of Australia, I sit on the outside of Aboriginal communities as there is a disparity in a lot of issues because of the distinct cultural differences in genealogy, cultural practice, language and geography as the following section will outline further. As Torres Strait academic Felecia Watkin-Lui states:

The residence of Islanders outside their ancestral islands has left them in an otherwise vulnerable situation as a minority within a minority group, calling into question not only their

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<sup>54</sup> Terri Janke, "Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Performing Arts," Australia Council for the Arts, [http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/symphony/extension/richtext\\_redactor/getfile/?name=42f208904890560b1eb1194724637ee6.pdf](http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/symphony/extension/richtext_redactor/getfile/?name=42f208904890560b1eb1194724637ee6.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> "Guarding Ground: A Vision for a National Indigenous Cultural Authority," (<https://aiatsis.gov.au/publications/presentations/guarding-ground-vision-national-indigenous-cultural-authority>: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2008).

<sup>56</sup> Terri Janke and Company, "Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (Icip)," Terri Janke and Company, <http://www.terrijanke.com.au/icip>.

<sup>57</sup> Maryrose Casey, "Colonisation, Notions of Authenticity and Aboriginal Australian Performance," *Colonisation, Notions of Authenticity and Aboriginal Australian Performance* 8 (2012).

right to be on Aboriginal country but their claims to participate in the social and political processes of their homelands.<sup>58</sup>

Through my eyes, I hope that you attain a greater understanding and connect with the people of Saibai Island. At this point I feel it is time to share with you a particular story of an elder on Saibai whose energy, liveliness and enthusiasm shines through when speaking about the practice of *girel* on Saibai. Within the pages of this exegesis, I have attempted to bring to life what I saw, felt and heard. I understand this is subjective in and of itself, but I hope that through my eyes as someone of Saibaian blood, you will gain a deep insight into the people of Saibai and the performative storytelling that has been continuing and evolving since *bepotaim*.

The second person to be interviewed was Popu (Grandfather) Leonard. This interview was again arranged for Awa Seda's block. And, in keeping with habit, Awa Walter Waia would be positioned on the left of the camera and Popu Leonard on the right. We located this interview under the palm tree along the front of the block for a change of background. Popu Leonard was picked up by my brother Alistair and brought down once we were set up and ready to shoot. When Popu Leonard arrived, the significance of the cap the elder males wore dawned on me. It seems to be part of a "uniform." His polo shirt was red with an American flag on it and was tucked into his crisply pressed tan trousers with a leather belt. His cap, also red, had the emblem of an eagle across the stars and stripes. To understand the significance, one must remember the status of the US during and after WWII. It was seen as a powerful country and the US armed services personnel stationed on their base on Thursday Island brought with them a style in their dress and their dance that Saibai Islanders' armed service personnel were influenced by. "Saibai *Waza Merika*" is a saying that speaks of Saibai being a powerful island. Reflecting on this, I realised the significance of the cap and the story that came with the "uniform" that these male elders had worn. In 2016, at 82 years old, the performer within him is still strong, and before the interview begins, when he and Awa Walter Waia are talking through what the interview will entail he makes a sudden dance movement which surprises, stuns and amuses us. He has a kind of fragility and leanness about him that is brought on by the passing of the years, but his quick sudden movement speaks of the energy and dynamism that still exists in Saibai dance today.

### Why Should There Be Something Written about Saibai?

This is a question that I thought about long and hard. Writing about Saibai Island needs to be driven by the community and the community needs to Culturally advise on the process.

As previously stated, the voices of Indigenous people have been silenced, ignored and misinterpreted in the project of colonisation and the origins of this are reinforced in the colonial power of Eurocentrism. When researching what had been written about of the Torres Strait Islanders, the voices of Island people were missing.

In the following chapter, I will define the prominent voices in research that have spoken on the Torres Straits. I will also attempt to explicate how the colonial power matrix has subtly pervaded Australian theatre by excluding and ignoring voices of First Nations' storytellers, thereby propagating the one narrative of the "authentic native."

### Glossary of Language Words and other Words

Some language words are featured prominently throughout this thesis: which I define below. There are also many language words listed in Chapter Three that need translation on the page to aid in the trajectory of thought. To add, there is also a specific terminology, in English, that I have deployed to describe these concepts. There will be many more language words in Chapter Four but I will define those within the chapter.

ama – mother (can also refer to an aunt)

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<sup>58</sup> Felecia Watkin Lui, "My Island Home: Re-Presenting Identities for Torres Strait Islanders Living Outside the Torres Strait," *Journal of Australian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2012).

aka – grandmother

popu – grandfather

awa –uncle

*bepotaim* – is Torres Strait Creole for “before time” and is usually referred to when talking about the past

*girel* – is the KKY word for “dance”

*Saibailgal* – people of Saibai Island

*Saibailyag* – person of Saibai Island

Waiben – Thursday Island

*Koey Buway* – big clans

Saibaian – person of Saibai lineage

Islander – I will sometimes refer to Torres Strait Islanders as Islanders for better flow

First Nations – Indigenous people of their respective nation groups

Indigenous – Indigenous people

Performative storytelling – refers to the many elements of performance in storytelling and is deployed throughout this thesis

## Chapter ONE

### The Silenced Voices and the Spoken Voices

*Lag-gar nupaypa kunai wanan,  
Ngaw-gar maya ulaypa.*

*Lag-gar nupaypa pusiya thoeraypa  
Ngay-gar lagoepa kunia thaman.*

*Home is left behind back there in the distance.  
My tears keep running.  
My tears keep running.*

*Home appears back there through a mist (of tears)  
I am thinking of home back there.  
I am thinking of home back there.  
Popu Enosa Waigana<sup>59</sup>*

There is little published information on Saibai Island live performance or indeed Saibai Island in general. There is also limited literature about live performance within the Torres Strait. Non-Indigenous researchers, academics, and anthropologists, such as Alfred Cort Haddon, Richard Davis, Maryrose Casey and Jeremy Beckett have notated and collated some information on Torres Strait Culture specifically about live performance. However, what little literature there is on live performance is centred on Mer, one of the Eastern islands, mostly due to Haddon's earlier work.

The focus of my work is the portrayal of a people and the leading voices that hold the authority within the field of research on the subject of Torres Strait, specifically in performative storytelling. I identify the critical literature beginning with prominent Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata, whose Torres Strait heritage immediately locates him as a leading voice for Torres Strait researchers. While Nakata's focus is not on live performance but education, his identity situates him within a cultural context that connects him to other aspects of Torres Strait culture. His rigorous critique of Haddon's anthropological expedition to the Torres Strait is comprehensive. In his book *Disciplining the Savages – Savaging the Disciplines*,<sup>60</sup> Nakata, writing about the Torres Strait Islander experience, offers a "potential theoretical schema" for an Indigenous standpoint theory. Nakata was the first Torres Strait Islander to receive a PhD. He is unfaltering in his stance about the negative impact of research and documentation on Torres Strait Islanders and counters this stance with a way forward. Nakata has been a leading voice in the academy since being the first Torres Strait Islander to be awarded a doctorate, and there have been many Islanders who have followed suit.

On reading Haddon's *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits Volumes I-VIII*, I felt conflicted. As the crucial second protagonist of the foundational colonisation framework for the Torres Strait, Haddon's approach was informed by notions of "salvage ethnography." Furthermore, his manuscripts hold the most extensive and methodical research done on Torres Strait Islanders: covering a period from 1888 to 1935. My conflict lies with the core belief of salvage ethnography's recording practice being based on the perception of a "dying race" and the value system put in place to capture the authentic native through documentation of salvage.<sup>61</sup> As expressed in the introduction, I condemn this form of research, however, I admit that

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<sup>59</sup> Lawrie.

<sup>60</sup> Nakata.

<sup>61</sup> Gruber.

I was curious to read accounts of my people from more than one hundred and twenty years ago. The majority of published historical information on the Torres Strait is by Haddon and his team, who were British anthropologists and ethnologists. His work includes a one hundred and fifty-page report as well as rigorous work contained in eight volumes; his eight journals cover Torres Strait material culture extensively. He touches briefly on live performance within the Western Islands including Saibai in Volume IV *Arts And Crafts*. Haddon states that their “knowledge of the Western islands is less complete than that of the Miriam (Mer).”<sup>62</sup>

Coming at the end of the nineteenth century, the expedition’s research in the field of anthropology and ethnography was groundbreaking. Haddon’s four-minute film became of great significance for Torres Strait Islanders when it was used as evidence in the landmark Mabo native title case<sup>63</sup> to prove that the people of Mer had a traditional connection to the land and a pre-existing system of law, thereby rejecting the legal doctrine of terra nullius.

My research so far has found that any analysis of the live performance collated by Haddon’s team is technical; there is no possibility of locating their analysis to its intrinsic connection – the complex web of Cultural knowledge. For me, this relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders being seen as “the other” – less human – a sub-species – a dying breed. This notion of Torres Strait Islanders as a “dying breed” by the LMS and by Haddon is still ingrained in the colonial framework that is inherent in Australian society today.

What my readings of Haddon’s journals have revealed is that his aim was to document as much of Torres Strait Islanders life before the suppression of Islanders’ cultural practices by the LMS. Haddon wished to take a “snapshot” of the “old world order” of the Torres Strait Islander.<sup>64</sup> His research also informs the more significant issue that has permeated the theatre world around who can tell whose story, and the danger of only one narrative about Indigenous people. This one narrative is seeing Islanders through a white lens and I will expand on further in Chapter Two. In the second half of this chapter, I focus on Australia’s theatre scene and the ongoing propagation of this dominant narrative of Indigenous people and the threat this poses to the survival of Indigenous people’s stories, history and Cultural knowledge.

Haddon’s expedition collected over 600 artefacts on his first trip to the Torres Straits and a further 1250 ethnological specimens on his second visit. These are housed in the British Museum and within the confines of Cambridge University.<sup>65</sup>

The LMS letters from missionaries stationed on the islands throughout the Straits denote a sense of pride and achievement when noting the demise of the so-called “old world order” which is transformed into the “new world order” of colonisation.

During a trip to London in 2003, I went with Ama and one of my brothers, John, to SOAS , the School of Oriental and African Studies, at the University of London, and read through and “extracted” information about Saibai from the original letters written by missionaries based in the Torres Strait. Ama was visiting family with Dad in the north of England and came down to London to spend a week. We also visited Cambridge University to look at artefacts related to Saibai within the Haddon Collection. I was drawn to these places as I was curious and hungry to find out more about our forefathers and foremothers. Having grown up with an English father and raised on BBC comedies, dramas and documentaries, I was somewhat familiar with English life. My mother was also a little curious – perhaps she felt some trepidation to be looking at the three ceremonial masks

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<sup>62</sup> Haddon, Hodes, and Sidney Herbert, 4. p.5.

<sup>63</sup> Led by Mr Koiki Mabo of the Meriam people. It began in the high court of Australia in 1982 and ended for the plaintiff in 1992.

<sup>64</sup> Alfred C. Haddon, *Sociology, Magic and Religion of the Western Islanders*, 8 vols., vol. 5, Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), anthropological and ethnographic.

<sup>65</sup> Lindsay Wilson, *Thathilgaw Emeret Lu: A Handbook of Traditional Torres Strait Islands Material Culture* (Department of Education, Queensland, 1988).

from Saibai, being unsure of their Cultural or ceremonial significance. Cambridge did not have this Cultural Knowledge either, and I often think about those pieces sitting on the shelf of a storage vault in Cambridge, devoid of the life and stories through which they were conceived. At the other end of the spectrum is Richard Davis's, *Gubal, Malu, Boeradar, Daparaw Thithuyi* (Winds, Sea, Sky, Land, Heavenly Stars) – property ownership on Saibai Island 1993.<sup>66</sup> This study is a substantial piece of unpublished documentation for Saibai Islanders. The report was driven and initiated by the community of Saibai, in particular, Saibai Island statesman Mr Terry Waia of the *Ait Koedal* (Crocodile) clan. The report is 185 pages long and was submitted on behalf of the Saibai Island community supporting a native title, land and sea claim, however, this was not the only purpose. The elders of Saibai also intended the report to document invaluable Cultural knowledge for future generations. The report is unique in the respect that Davis's approach to gathering information was undertaken in a reciprocal way through a respectful transfer of knowledge. Davis is not a Torres Strait Islander but was sensitive regarding his role as scribe in documenting another's Cultural knowledge from the relevant custodians, and the Saibai Island Council and community endorsed the document. The genealogy for each clan group is extensive. In the document it spans approximately eight generations incorporated into their perspective clan groups: including Ama's lineage and her marriage to Dad. Although the mention of performative storytelling is limited, the Cultural knowledge aspect of performance practices has informed and offered some guidance to my journey. How Davis's archival document differs from Haddon's research is that a Saibai Island person initiated the process and the community of Saibai always informed the process, thereby detailing complex knowledge systems and the interconnectedness of the physical plane with the spiritual plane for Saibai people. Originally intended to support a claim for land and sea by the *Ait Koedal* clan "before traditional knowledge about property was lost," other clan groups were stirred into action when Mabo's native title claim to the High Court was granted to the inhabitants of Mer, and the report shifted focus to all clan groups of Saibai Island.<sup>67</sup>

Davis edited and contributed an essay to the book *Woven Histories Dancing Lives – Torres Strait Islander Identity, Culture and History*. This book contains a series of articles from Torres Strait academics, prominent cultural members of the Torres Strait community and non-Torres Strait academics. The mix of voices brings together two complex knowledge systems of varying opinions, providing valuable views of the Torres Strait. In this essay, Davis introduces the reader to Awa Walter Waia and Awa Jeff Aniba-Waia and the popular images of warriors in films that have influenced them in their own identities as cultural leaders in politics and as the continuing performative storytelling lineage of the Waia family. These popular images that Davis cites have greatly influenced the style of Saibai *girel*. I will expand further on this in Chapter Three.

I felt relief to have come across Maryrose Casey's book, *Telling Stories: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Performance*, where she writes on Torres Strait dance. Casey offers a cogent account of the deep Cultural practices of live performance from the Torres Strait. In her book, she devotes an entire chapter to Torres Strait Islander song and dance.<sup>68</sup> Again much of the focus is on Mer (Murray Island) but the vivid picture Casey paints when detailing the movement in dances, the intricacy in costume, and the materials in dance apparatus is what sets her work apart from Haddon and Davis's – as Casey seems to have an understanding that every aspect of Mer dance has its roots embedded in Cultural knowledge. Other scholars/writers/researchers who have published works about the Torres Strait and its people within the last thirty years include Jeremy Beckett, who is the most prolific writer in recent times, and Lindsay Wilson.

Beckett's research in the field of the Torres Strait is rigorous. His book, *Torres Strait Islanders: Custom and Colonialism*, is at times a didactic read but offers an analysis on the complex effects of colonisation on Torres Strait Islanders.<sup>69</sup> Beckett's Western research paradigm of keeping a

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<sup>66</sup> Davis.

<sup>67</sup> Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes; Aboriginal Protection Society., "Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee, on Aboriginal Tribes, (British Settlements)," (London 1837).

<sup>68</sup> Casey. p.77.

<sup>69</sup> Beckett.

distance between researcher and subject never allows the reader to connect with Islanders, or our Culture or practices, therefore, positioning Islanders as “the other.” Perhaps had Beckett gone with his original line of enquiry in his writing, the voices of Islanders may have been stronger. As Beckett states:

I might have contented myself with recording the Islanders’ contemporary perception of their place in history, but the interaction between events and interpretation that I observed while I was among them impelled me to try to discover what had happened earlier.<sup>70</sup>

In Beckett’s book, *Woven Histories Dancing Lives – Torres Strait Islander Identity, Culture and History*, he provides an empathic view of Torres Strait Islanders. He throws an honest light on recent research, directions for future research and the challenges Islanders face in identity, and social and political matters after their migration to the mainland of Australia. He writes:

But what kind of identity have the next generation made for themselves? Who are their models and how do they identify themselves to their own and to others? To be Islander you must have an island, but for the mainland-born this ‘island’ has to be discovered all over again, and imagined.

We can expect not one but multiple negotiations of this predicament, and writing about it will I believe focus on individuals rather than some homogenized Islander constituency.<sup>71</sup>

The questions Beckett raises here are what I expound upon in this exegesis. The Islanders’ voice is fundamental in revealing the “kind of identity” we have made for ourselves. How we, as mainland Islanders, navigate the problematics of “identity” will further define our place in Islander society and Australian society.

The next writer is Lindsay Wilson. Reading Wilson’s two books, *Thathilgaw Emeret Lu*<sup>72</sup> and *Kerkar Lu*,<sup>73</sup> which are filled with intricately detailed drawings of Torres Strait Islander artefacts and material Culture, ignites excitement for many Torres Strait Island people including myself. The illustrations by Wilson give a sense of majesty and power to the pieces and clearly demonstrate the innovation and creativity of Island people. *Thathilgaw Emeret Lu*, was sponsored by the Queensland Department of Education, foremost as a knowledge tool for young Torres Strait Islanders wishing to know more about their Cultural heritage. This disturbs me. Lindsay Wilson, who is a non-Torres Strait Islander, has obtained a lot of resource material from Haddon’s journals.<sup>74</sup> At the beginning of *Thathilgaw Emeret Lu*, Wilson continues to propagate the notion of Torres Strait Islanders as a “dying breed” stating that, “European intrusion at the end of the eighteenth century was destructive to the indigenous way of life and community values, without offering Torres Strait Islanders acceptable alternatives.”<sup>75</sup> The oppressive nature of colonisation in the Torres Strait, expressed by Wilson simply as “European intrusion,” implies an absence of understanding of the impact of colonialism for Islanders.

This is the danger of the continual dissemination of knowledge about us, for us – it is not only the loss of Cultural philosophy that the knowledge is steeped in, but also the propagation of untruths that perpetuate the notion of the lost “authentic native.”

The literature above is limited and omits documentation on the relocation of Saibai Islanders to the mainland of Australia. The only published documentation on this subject is a book commissioned by Bamaga Council, commemorating 1997, the fiftieth anniversary, of the establishment of Bamaga, titled *The Migration from Saibai to Bamaga*. The booklet includes interviews with clan

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>71</sup> *Woven Histories, Dancing Lives: Torres Strait Islander Identity, Culture and History*.

<sup>72</sup> Wilson.

<sup>73</sup> *Kerkar Lu - Contemporary Artefacts of the Torres Strait* (Department of Education, Queensland 1993).

<sup>74</sup> *Thathilgaw Emeret Lu: A Handbook of Traditional Torres Strait Islands Material Culture.*, xii.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

group elders who made the decision to leave Saibai. In its introduction it states “Not all accounts are the same and some historical facts are unclear.”<sup>76</sup> The story is a reflection on what happened during this migration, combining predominantly Saibai Islander points of view from some local residents on Cape York Peninsula, it also includes government archival information.<sup>77</sup>

As I worked through the literature/material on the history of the Torres Straits, I noted a recurring theme: that researchers still position us as the “other,” as “exotic,” as the “noble savage,” and as a “dying breed.” As someone of Saibai heritage, the stories of my people are of great interest, but the lens through which my people and Culture are analysed and objectified is unsettling. I have spoken about the extraction of Culture for the purpose of anthropological and ethnographical observation. But what is Culture, and why does it mean so much to humans? The following section unpacks the definition of Culture.

## Culture in Theoretical Terms

As Raymond Williams writes, the word “culture” began as a noun at first – “the culture (cultivation) of crops or (rearing and breeding) of animals and by extension the culture (active cultivation) of the human mind.”<sup>78</sup> It was not until late in the 18th century that culture was defined more to mean “a noun of configuration or generalisation of the ‘spirit’ which informed the ‘whole way of life’ of a distinct people.”<sup>79</sup>

Culture was defined by founder of cultural anthropology, Edward Burnett Tylor, as the “complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”<sup>80</sup> Tylor who was influenced somewhat by Darwin, propounded the theory that human societies passed through three stages: savagery, barbarism and civilization.

Clifford Geertz’s definition of culture is, “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life”<sup>81</sup> This definition aligns with an Indigenous standpoint, in that it encompasses and begins from the point of the person as she/he is in the world. His subsequent work on the concept of culture was focussed more on the semiotics – the signs and symbols of society rather than on the science. And like Weber, he believed that “man is an animal suspended in a web of significance he has spun.” This “web of significance” holds stories and knowledge that inform a way of life.

In KKY, *igililnga* is the language word that describes Culture. *Igililnga* is also used to define the English word “life.” When I asked Awa Jeff about the language word for Culture, he simply stated, “*Igililnga*. Life.” It was as simple as that. *Igililnga* represents all facets of *Saibailgal* life from the physical to the spiritual. Culture and life is interchangeable in this definition. Life for Saibaians is a continuous fluid interaction with the environment in which the *Saibailgal* live: constantly adapting to the surroundings.

*Igililnga* informs life for *Saibailgal*, and the extraction of stories and knowledge from the web reframes this knowledge/story to suit the extractor’s needs. As I have written in previous chapters the shifting and morphing of this knowledge/story renders the life, Culture, *igililnga* from it. What is missing is the need to understand a fellow human being and how they fit into their particular society/community and their interactions with the world around them. How Culture is

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<sup>76</sup> Ober, Sprouts, and Mitchell.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture*, ed. Gavin Mackenzie, Culture (Fontana Paperbacks, 1981).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (New York: J.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1920), 1.

<sup>81</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures - Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), Selected Essays.89.

extracted from our people is all about fitting into a pre-existing framework. Geertz talks about the generalization of culture – which in anthropology is about finding “man” in every group of people and then layering it with identities that distinguish that culture from another – “To make the generalization about an afterlife stand up alike for the Confucians and the Calvinists, the Zen Buddhists and the Tibetan Buddhists, one has to define it in most general terms, indeed – general, in fact, that whatever force it seems to have virtually evaporates.”<sup>82</sup> This “force” that Geertz speaks of is the deeply ingrained ethos of a people. Caring for the knowledge imparted to us as researchers is a duty of care that extends to the people who have revealed this knowledge. Building on the idea of truly understanding a fellow human being, in relation to my Indigenous research paradigm, I will extend on Geertz’s concept of thick description in Chapter Two. To further understand how the colonial matrix has permeated the fabric of Australian society, in the next section I draw attention to Australian theatre and the leading voices that hold authority on Indigenous stories within the main stages of Australian theatre.

## Indigenous Performance

Australian theatre is historically rooted in Eurocentrism and Torres Strait Islander voices occupy even less space across all stages of live performance in this country. Casey argues that Aboriginal performance between 1800 and 1950 in Australia is reframed through the settlers lens via visual images and press reportage, “to create an economy of authenticity for the embodied presence of Aboriginal people.”<sup>83</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre artists are beginning to claim space on the stages for their voices to be heard. But on the main stages, Indigenous stories are still predominantly driven by non-Indigenous companies and are objectified.

In 2018, Ngarrindjeri playwright Lawrence H. Sumner publicly scrutinised Sydney Theatre Company and the white director of his play, prominent theatre director Neil Armfield, for “whitesplaining” his debut play *The Long Forgotten Dream*.<sup>84</sup> The play deals with the challenges a family faces and the secrets that are unearthed in the repatriation of bones. The term “whitesplaining” is a contemporary term that explains the patronising and condescending ways in which the issues of “race” and “race-related” socio-political issues are expressed by white people to non-white people. He was quoted in one paper as saying:

The danger is that in rehearsal, if they have a director who doesn't listen but imposes his own form and style over the production then sometimes the voice can be lost. There can be this tendency for white directors to 'whitesplain' Aboriginal stories.<sup>85</sup>

In a newspaper article Sumner wrote for *The Weekend Australian* he states that the “collaboration turned into an appropriation.” He argues:

The director, because of their Western status, assumes authority. Not only over the physical manifestation of the script but the very essence of the Aboriginal voice.<sup>86</sup>

Sydney Theatre Company even states on their online website that *The Long Forgotten Dream* is “led by lauded film and theatre director”, Armfield. The Indigenous voice and the Indigenous story is once again led by a patriarchal figure.

Another Sydney Theatre Company production led again by Neil Armfield, *The Secret River* was recently co-presented by the State Theatre Company of South Australia for the Adelaide Festival in 2017. The play tells the story of a white settler convict and his family’s interactions with the

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<sup>83</sup> Casey.

<sup>84</sup> Gary Maddox, "Indigenous Playwright: Australian Theatre Is 'Whitesplaining' Stories," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 2018 2018.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> H. Lawrence Sumner, "Collaboration or Appropriation? Why I Turned My Back on the Stc," *The Weekend Australian*, August 2018 2018.

Aboriginal people of the Darug Nation. The play was written by white playwright Andrew Bovell and adapted from the book with the same name by white writer, Kate Grenville. On the State Theatre Company's website, *The Secret River* was being touted as "a theatrical epic that promises to be one of the theatre events of the decade"<sup>87</sup> and was staged in the same quarry as Peter Brook's *The Mahabharata* in 1988. *The Mahabharata* was based on an epic Indian poem of the same name and featured a diverse cast from various cultural backgrounds directed by a white English man, Brook. Coincidentally, *The Mahabharata* had its own problematics around the issue of cultural appropriation.<sup>88</sup>

After reading the script of *The Secret River*, my frustrations and anger around the recurring narrative from the white voice came to the fore. The danger of this dominant narrative is that it becomes the authority on the history of Australia. Adding to this the reviews propagate this single narrative supporting a one-sided view of history, and as a non-Indigenous reviewer for the Sydney Morning Herald stated:

Andrew Bovell's adaptation is set to become one of the greatest Australian plays: not another night at the theatre, but something like a civic ritual that enacts the true history of where this society comes from.<sup>89</sup>

"True history" is accounted for through the dominant narrative of the white voice and as Casey argues on her examination of documents written by European observers of Aboriginal performance, "see and explain these events with the tools of their own epistemologies."<sup>90</sup>

Within the British colonial enterprise, discourses of race and nation shape representations of Indigenous people as victims or savages. This process of effectively manipulating the written and social memory of Indigenous actions, and the desires and beliefs they represent, has operated through many different strategies that silence Indigenous voices and deny Indigenous agency.<sup>91</sup>

The authoritative voice on Indigenous people in written history becomes the non-Indigenous observer. During the Melbourne season at an after-show talk, writer Bovell, points out the need for the story to be told through the lead white protagonist as well as the other white characters.<sup>92</sup> "The audience is placed in their shoes, because one of my concerns and how I feel we've grown up with the history, that particular history is that those deeds were done by evil men... where, in fact, they were done by people, not unlike us." He points out the reasoning is, "to ask the audience to empathise with a character who in the end, carries out this act." The "act" Bovell speaks of is the massacre that was committed on the Darug nation. Through a non-Indigenous lens, the story of *The Secret River* focuses on the English settler, a story that not only has been told and retold in my formal education but is the only story that I learnt about the history of Australia and settlement of this country.

This framing of a historical truth through a white lens, in turn, justifies an atrocious act and lessens the voice of Aboriginal people – in this case, the people of the Darug Nation. Prominent members of the First Nations' theatre community found the play disturbing and the artistic director of Australia's longest-running Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatre company, Rachael Maza,

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<sup>87</sup> State Theatre South Australia, "The Secret River," State Theatre Company South Australia, <https://statetheatrecompany.com.au/shows/secret-river/>.

<sup>88</sup> Rustom Bharucha, "Peter Brook's "Mahabharata": A View from India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 23, no. 32 (1988).

<sup>89</sup> Owen Richardson, "The Secret River Is More Than Just a Superb Night at the Theatre," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 2016.

<sup>90</sup> Maryrose Casey, "Bungaree and the Grand Corroboree : "White Fellow Sit Down All About; Black Fellow Murry Miserable ", " *About Performance* 11 (2012).

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Arts Centre Melbourne, "The Secret River – Post-Show Conversation: Shared History, Different Perspectives " (2016).

argued that she felt excluded from the story.<sup>93</sup> This exclusion she claims, is in part because the Darug language the Aboriginal actors spoke, alienated them from the audience. Notably, Maza also argued that the slaughter of most of the Aboriginal characters by the play's end, would not be a story that she would tell as this echoes the myth that Aboriginal people have all died out. Bovell declares that white Australia has a "shared history" with Aboriginal Australia. However, the underlying issue in all of this is the continual reframing of history that tells the dominant single story. Modernity has not eclipsed the colonial power it has simply evolved into the colonial matrix of power, a term advanced by Quijano.<sup>94</sup> Coloniality is the concept Quijano coined and he defines modernity as one and the same.

This model of power involved a process of historical reidentification; from Europe such regions and populations were attributed new geocultural identities. In that way, after America and Europe were established, Africa, Asia, and eventually Oceania followed suit. In the production of these new identities, the coloniality of the new model was, without a doubt, one of the most active determinations.<sup>95</sup>

Quijano goes on to state that, "In effect, all of the experiences, histories, resources, and cultural products ended up in one global cultural order revolving around European or Western hegemony." The Eurocentric dominance upholds the single dominant narrative of Indigenous people today.

This recurring narrative still views Indigenous people as the "other" – for some "the other" is described as "exotic," or as the "noble savage," and for others such as Haddon and the LMS the other is the "dying breed." The notion of the "authentic native" is often deployed as a commodity for the mainstream theatre. There is an interrogation that needs to take place as to why the dominant culture needs to define and locate itself in the foreground of stories that speak of persecution, oppression and genocide in the lives of Indigenous people. As Gruber states:

In the knowledge of the savage and the realisation of his extinction we came to know that unless we know all men, we can understand no man. For throughout in the stress for salvage, we feel that in the disappearance of the savage, in the irrevocable erosion of the human condition, we inevitably lose something of our own identity.<sup>96</sup>

As I have already indicated in the introduction, the single dominant narrative ignores, silences and misinterprets the voices of Indigenous people. Whatever space we as Indigenous people choose to tell our stories in, whether it is the elite spaces of the mainstream houses or the smaller independent spaces, or site-specific spaces – just by sharing our stories in a contemporary time, we are bridging the customary with the modern. Structural frameworks within not only the creative side but also within arts administration must be looked at with emphasis placed on properly caring for the Indigenous voice. Placing First Nations' people in pivotal decision-making roles within these colonial systems will empower the voice and presence of First Nations' people on our main stages. I must add that, there are many diverse groups in the Australian community who are ignored, silenced and misinterpreted. To support and strengthen the Indigenous voice alone merely bolsters and supports the colonial structure of power and its framework of social discriminations.<sup>97</sup>

In the twenty years I have worked professionally in theatre, the majority of stories that I have witnessed containing Indigenous content are led by non-Indigenous people who are in key creative roles. For these productions, there is a different focus to the outcome of the story. The focus for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island storytellers in the performing arts, is not just about the story arc and structure and the dramatic outcomes and how many people we can get through the box office – the focus instead is led by cultural protocols, and understanding portrayal of Indigenous people's realities in Australia, and what perpetuates the stereotypes that the media

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Quijano.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Gruber.

<sup>97</sup> AnF-bal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007).

often propagate. When we are not in the driving seat of stories about us, my experience is that this kind of focus is not present. The space, First Nations Australian storytellers hold, is quite precarious within the main stages of Australia's theatres.

For many Torres Strait Island people who do not live in their ancestral environment, we have a respect, an inextricable connection and feel the past pain of the land that we do reside on. We come from a long line of spirituality that flows deep in our bloodline. Maintaining autonomy over our stories is the custom of cultural maintenance that Torres Strait Islanders have been practising since *bepotaim*. This maintenance and development of our Cultural practices is a guiding principle under Article 31 in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People that "establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples."<sup>98</sup>

One Indigenous performing company that is excelling in the mainstream live performance sector is Bangarra. Bangarra is the leading Indigenous dance company in Australia and also one of Australia's leading performing companies. The company is made up of Indigenous dancers whose ancestral roots are from various Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island nations across Australia. As stated on their website, there is a distinct style and form that identifies Bangarra's work. They are lauded nationally and internationally for their "powerful dancing, distinctive theatrical voice and utterly unique soundscapes, music and design" and "moving performances, distinctive voice and authentic storytelling."<sup>99</sup> Whilst Bangarra has an obligation and responsibility to each community it works with, it acknowledges and pays homage to the First Nations' group from which their work is conceived. The challenge for mainstream audiences is to understand that Bangarra's work is an interpretation of dances and stories gathered from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups from around the country.

There is an ongoing debate in the Indigenous performance sector about appropriation of dances and what defines appropriation. The challenge for First Nations' performers is in understanding what they embody once they are taught a customary dance from a First Nations' group at a dance school or company and what is crossing the line of protocols when choreographing their own work outside of that school or company. It seems the lines are blurred when the dancer leaves a company, a dance school, or a community dance troupe and takes the knowledge that has been passed on to them, and embodies it in their own works. As an artist within the performing arts, I have unknowingly played a part in the cultural appropriation of another nation's story. Indigeneity is a commodity in the live performance sector, and I believe that the value of Cultural knowledge has been devalued by both non-Indigenous and Indigenous. My Cultural obligation is to my Knowledge Custodians and community of Saibai. I must always request permission when working with Cultural Knowledge and/or stories connected to my bloodlines. Even when permission has been granted, the lines about what is public and private knowledge are not clearly delineated. An ongoing conversation about *what* you are interpreting and *how* you are interpreting needs to be maintained. The focus for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island storytellers in the performing arts, is not just about story arc, structure, dramatic outcomes, and how many tickets are sold at box office – the focus is instead led by cultural protocols, understanding portrayal of Indigenous people's realities in Australia, and what perpetuates the stereotypes that the media often propagate. When we are not in the driving seat of stories about us, my experience is that this kind of focus is not present. The dominant narrative is that which is seen through a white lens. There is a gap in the protocols expected from mainstream companies and from First Nations people when creating Indigenous work for the stage.

As an experienced theatre-maker, when sharing Indigenous stories with predominantly non-Indigenous audiences, an important question I continually explore is – what is the audience's role as they have entered into a constructed space that is loaded with symbolism and cultural referencing. For many First Nations' storytellers including myself, communicating our stories, so we

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<sup>98</sup> United Nations, "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples," United Nations, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>.

<sup>99</sup> Bangarra, "Bangarra," <https://www.bangarra.com.au/about/company/>.

are not always the educators, but leaders in the accurate portrayal of our people in the media is still at the forefront of our mind when creating. We risk the truth of our own voices and our people's when the key creative and production roles are dominated by non-Indigenous writers, dramaturges, producers and directors. Progressing our artistic practice is the practice of our Culture, but this needs to be done with an open awareness of, and connection to, our own bloodline communities.

All of this demands the following question of the wider Australian theatre community – how does the patriarchal system within Australian theatre, deprive contemporary First Nations' artists of our right to practise Culture and share with a broader audience stories of our people through an Indigenous lens?

There seems to be a pattern within Australian theatre that the dominant storytellers of “Indigenous stories” on the main stages are the patriarchs of the dominant culture, older white men. Examples in the last ten years of this are: *The Secret River* (Neil Armfield), *Namatjira* (Scott Rankin), *Ngapartji Ngapartji* (Scott Rankin), *Shadow King* (Michael Kantour), *Wrong Skin* (Nigel Jamieson), *Hipbone Sticking Out* (Scott Rankin), *The Long Forgotten Dream* (Neil Armfield).

Defining Indigenous theatre remains an open-ended question that continuously arises at performing arts forums and conferences. Nevertheless, Indigenous theatre has been described in various ways by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people as having Indigenous content that is:

- Indigenous creatively controlled and Indigenous administratively controlled, i.e. Indigenous people as writer, director and producer/production company OR
- Indigenous creative controlled by non-Indigenous, administratively controlled by Indigenous people (or vice-versa), i.e. director and/or writer but produced/administered by a non-Indigenous person/company OR
- Non-Indigenous creatively controlled and non-Indigenous administratively controlled, i.e. writer, director, producer but with Indigenous performers.

## Lay of the Land

This chapter has looked at the voices who have previously held court on the subjects of the Torres Strait Islands and performative storytelling on Saibai Island. The importance of this research will be defined via my own connection and positionality. Deploying standpoint theory acknowledges my bloodline lineage, which can both empower and challenge the researcher as an “outsider.” Acknowledging the uneasy space, we sit in as outsiders recognises the multiplicity of what it means to be Saibaian. There are many ways to be a Torres Strait Islander.

In Chapter Two, my research design reveals my methodology. Before unpacking a theoretical approach, understanding my positionality within the research gives the reader a better understanding of where I am coming from and informs the epistemology of the research I am carrying out. The methodology will define how I approached my methods to date and contextualise it within an Indigenous research paradigm. Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata and Aboriginal academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson have theorized on Indigenous standpoint, the latter situating it from an Indigenous woman's standpoint. In Chapter Two, my research design reveals my methodology. Before unpacking a theoretical approach, understanding my positionality within the research gives the reader a better understanding of where I am coming from and informs the epistemology of the research I am carrying out. The methodology will define how I approach my methodology to date and contextualise it within an Indigenous research paradigm. Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata, and Aboriginal academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson have theorized on Indigenous standpoint, the latter situating it from an Indigenous woman's standpoint. This chapter will incorporate the breakdown of my ethics approval process as well as the process of protocols and procedures of my qualitative research.

Chapter Three conveys the voices of Saibai Island *girel* in 2016 based on conversations I had with *girel* performers past and present from the *Ait Koedal* clan. I have interpreted these conversations from the standpoint of my bloodline clan of *Ait Koedal*. Therefore, my responsibility will always first be towards my bloodline clan and secondly to my research. I also acknowledge my interpretation is in itself subjective and inherently through my eyes.

Chapter Four expands on Saibai Island *girel* with a rich description of the short documentary I made with Awa Jeff called *Saibai Island Dance*.

In Chapter Five, I will explicate on my performance-led research piece, *Woer Wayepa*, and the process of caring for story that was applied during the process.

I will draw on my findings from Chapters Three, Four and Five to illuminate a model I developed, to document and archive performative storytelling from Saibai Island in an ethical and culturally appropriate way that is meaningful to the community. I analyse what worked and what did not, and what could have worked better in Chapter Six.

To add, knowledge is sourced not only from Western knowledge systems – and will be referenced as such – but also from familial sources which will also be referenced accordingly. Quotes of Saibai Island Knowledge Custodians are highlighted. This is key knowledge and locates Saibai and Torres Strait knowledge within this document as the leading knowledge in regard to Cultural knowledge. This could also be a useful mechanism for future Torres Strait Island generations in understanding the validity of locating the Cultural knowledge within Western knowledge systems. Any language words that appear will either have their English pronunciation in brackets beside the word or will be described in footnotes. In some areas of this paper the Torres Strait will be shortened to the Straits because of the frequency of the name and to aid in the trajectory of thought. The complexities and distinct differences of all the First Nations groups of Australia, cannot be defined in a word – for now I refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Indigenous, First Nations, or as the particular nation group or clan group.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Researching my Island Homelands

*It's gonna be a sad case if people start looking in the museum into archives to try to find their own identity through language and dances, songs, stories and apparatus.*<sup>100</sup>

Mr Jeff Aniba-Waia.

As someone of Saibai Island heritage, I wrestle with the idea of “researching” my own community or any other Indigenous community for that matter. Prolific Maori academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith has proclaimed in her groundbreaking book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, “Research is a dirty word for Indigenous people.”<sup>101</sup> It is easy to see why.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people have a long and painful history in this country, and I am grateful to the Indigenous researchers who have gone before me and offer literature and valuable insight on this topic. In approaching the design of my research methodology, I drew on previous Indigenous researchers, and I pay homage to them and their work. They include Tuhiwai Smith, Aileen Moreton Robinson, Martin Nakata and Shawn Smith.

In this chapter I also draw upon the work of Clifford Geertz, to make the argument of how researchers must care and tend this knowledge. The consequence of extracting knowledge by previous researchers has left Indigenous people viewed as the “other” and a “dying race.” Geertz’s emphasis on thick description is especially useful to my analysis as it allows me to think through how I write about the Knowledge Givers of Saibai and therefore, how I write about the knowledge they share.

During these conversations, I am a researcher, and though I am connected via bloodline, I am still an “outsider” to Saibai Island, having been born and raised elsewhere. To define precisely the Culture of Saibaians concerning performative storytelling would not be a “first-order account.” As Geertz explicates, “anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot. By definition, only a ‘native’ makes first-order ones: it’s his culture.”<sup>102</sup>

Geertz was an ethnographer who developed the methodology of thick description through his own work. Contemplating Geertz’s “first order account” in this instance, consideration must be made to those who speak the language and live/d on Saibai Island. The term “native” Geertz employs, however, needs further defining, as there is a multiplexity of ways to be “native,” or an Indigenous person. This complexity of what it means to be Indigenous, I have delved into in Chapter One. To put it precisely, many Saibaians live off the island. Many were not born or raised on Saibai Island but hold firm their connection to their bloodline lineage. Further, many do not speak KKY. However, in the context of my research, I would argue that a better terminology, however cumbersome it may sound, would be a Saibai Island Experiential Knowledge Holder (SIECH). As I said, it is cumbersome, but breaking down the language of what Geertz refers to as “native” will encapsulate one example of the multiplexity of ways of being a “native.” The experiential knowledge of a SIECH may not only be informed by their bloodline connection but also through the language of the island that they speak and their relationship to the community of Saibai – having lived at some point on the island of Saibai. Their everyday lives have been informed by the surrounds they live/d in and entwine with the deeply engrained Saibai Island ethos. Awa Jeff asserts, “the stories cannot be

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<sup>100</sup> Harvey.

<sup>101</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies : Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London ; New York: Zed Books : Distributed in the USA exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>102</sup> Geertz.

understood and interpreted unless you speak the language itself.”<sup>103</sup> The oral language identifies the profoundly ingrained ethos that is inherently Saibaiian in nature.

The complex web that defines the Saibai Islanders’ philosophy and *Saibailgal’s* ways of knowing, doing and being is informed by the land, sea and sky, which is reflected in the dialect of KKY. Geertz expands on this interconnectedness:

... the image of a constant human nature independent of time, place, and circumstance, of studies and professions, transient fashions and temporary opinions, maybe an illusion, that what man is may be so entangled with where he is, who he is, and what he believes that it is inseparable from them.<sup>104</sup>

Understanding Saibaiian ways of knowing and being presents a different approach to the research process. I am *Normanakazi* (Norma’s daughter) first and a researcher second. My Saibaiian bloodline will inform my methodology and presents an act of transfer within a clan – knowledge from family members and from Ama (mother) that have been passed on to me through my life, and Saibai Island protocols and processes that have been established through the Knowledge Custodians of my clan group.

What is the meaning of an *act of transfer*? In this instance, it is the act of passing on Cultural Knowledge within a clan group. Every bit of knowledge and philosophy shared with me comes from a long bloodline and is shared because I am of the same blood. Knowledge is a crucial element in the survival of Saibai Island Culture as it is in any culture and is what has kept our Culture alive “before time” and since then. It has not been written down or held in libraries or museums. So often we are spoken about as being an oral culture but the listening, the aural, is also a vital part of the act of transfer. Listening to our elders, listening to the land, sea and sky. For Saibai Island people our knowledge is deeply connected to the land, sea and sky. Elders and Knowledge Custodians hold invaluable knowledge that is passed down to appropriate members within their clan groups. Indigenous knowledge is a living entity and informed by observation and interaction with the environment of which people live.

The aural is just as vital to the act of transfer, and they belong side by side and are acknowledged within the cultural exchange that happens between generations.

While the Cambridge expedition to the Torres Strait was about salvage ethnography of a “dying race,” the research in my PhD focuses on the living Culture of Saibai Island today that has continued in the face of cultural genocide and the maintenance of Cultural practices that are inherent in my Saibai Island heritage. My research design utilized the following qualitative research methods from a Saibaiian perspective:

1. Experiential Knowledge: my experiences inform and connect to my Saibaiian bloodline heritage including knowledge that has been imparted to me since birth
2. Written Materials: literature review
3. Interviews: conversations and deep listening documented by video recording
4. Documentary: short documentary on Saibai Island *girel*
5. Performance-led research: *Woer Wayepa*.

Modes of documentation and culturally safe spaces that are accessible for all Saibai Island people will be guided by my elders and Knowledge Custodians. Consultation with Saibai community on the written document right up to the final draft is a part of my Cultural responsibility.

My methodology encompasses an Indigenous research paradigm informed by my Saibai Island heritage. How I plan and implement Indigenous Research will be discussed in the next section, and

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<sup>103</sup> Margaret Harvey, "Evolution of Saibai Island Dance," in *Our Stories, Our Way*, ed. Margaret Harvey (Sydney: NITV, 2015).

<sup>104</sup> Geertz.

I will also outline the Indigenous methodologies that guided me, my positionality and the steps I took that cared for stories/knowledge that was shared with me.

### Planning and Implementing Indigenous Research

In truth, the methodology holds at the core, the passing on of knowledge within a bloodline. This is an act of transfer within a clan group that I belong to. It is a Cultural exchange wherein my part is upholding the legacy of those who have gone before me and, as my Awa, Mr Walter Waia says, “to safeguard our Cultural practices.” Therefore I have a responsibility to protect and maintain the knowledge passed on to me by following the Cultural practices laid out to me by my Knowledge Custodians. Foremost my responsibility lies with my people of Saibai during any phase of this PhD. This document is about giving voice to *Saibailgal* that have been taken away by research and documentation, and the broader performing arts landscape.

My main aim with the performance aspect of the research is to identify a process and model for knowledge transference to occur in the creation of a performative storytelling piece. How I care for story in the performance as the research piece *Woer Wayepa*, and how I care for story in my qualitative research with interviews will be monitored by my elders on Saibai Island.

### Theorizing through Indigenous Eyes

Shawn Smith, an indigenous researcher from the Opaskwayak Cree Nation in northern Manitoba, articulates, “Indigenous people have come to realise that beyond control over the topic chosen for study, the research methodology needs to incorporate their cosmology, worldview, epistemology and ethical beliefs.”<sup>105</sup> Smith also speaks about research being a ceremony for Indigenous researchers. As Indigenous people rise up in the Western world of research, we are acknowledging the power of our own knowledge systems and allowing it to inform, intersect and intercede through our epistemology. Smith also writes about relationality and the interconnectedness of Indigenous people within the physical and spiritual plane.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, offers Indigenous researchers an empowered space to constructively engage/interrogate the exploitative nature of research that has happened in the past and to turn it into something that empowers and enriches Indigenous communities.<sup>106</sup>

Tuhiwai Smith is of Maori descent from New Zealand, and her book offers a compelling insight into the intersection of research and imperialism and the subsequent effect on Indigenous people. The transfer of knowledge within the research as well as the performance-led research is part of my sovereign right to practice my Culture. Autonomy over the research process and documentation process driven by people of Saibaian blood will reflect **our** ways of being, **our** ways of knowing and **our** ways of doing.

Martin Nakata is a Torres Strait Islander academic and his chapter on *Indigenous Research Paradigm*<sup>107</sup> identifies the nexus between research and Indigenism for Indigenous researchers working in our own communities:

For Indigenous students, academics and researchers, standpoint theory in my mind is a method of inquiry, a process for making more intelligible ‘the corpus of objectified knowledge about us’ as it emerges and organises understanding of our lived realities. I see this as theorizing knowledge from a particular and interested position – not to produce the ‘truth’ of the Indigenous position but to better reveal the workings of knowledge and how understanding of Indigenous people is

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<sup>105</sup> Shawn Smith, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Canada: Fernwood Publishing, 2009).

<sup>106</sup> Smith.

<sup>107</sup> Nakata.

caught up and implicated in its work.<sup>108</sup>

It is only appropriate that an Indigenous research paradigm guides my research. Saibai Island knowledge will play a central role within this. An Indigenous research paradigm contextualises my standpoint and my approach within the PhD and situates me first through my Saibaian bloodline lineage and second as a researcher. Recognising my connection to the community of Saibai and the responsibility I have to and for my people is “seeing through Saibai Island eyes.”

This approach allows for a particular viewpoint. I interpret what has been imparted to me through the lens of my Saibai bloodline, and in doing so locate my people of Saibai not as the “other” but with an understanding that I am part of Saibai ethos. Through my bloodline connection, I bring with me a history of experiential knowledge and with *Saibailgal* we take a future that places the voices of *Saibailgal* in the history books of tomorrow, respecting the Custodians and the knowledge imparted in an ethical way. Their voices will continue to hold the stories and knowledge in this document that is passed down to the next generations.

An important factor in future research is to investigate further modes of documentation and culturally safe spaces to house Saibai-related materials that are accessible for all Saibai Island people. The Knowledge Custodians of Saibai Island will be the decision-makers in implementing this repository and it will be managed by *Saibailgal*.

Martin Nakata speaks about the Indigenous research paradigm as an approach that “navigates the complexities of Indigenous experience within such contested spaces.” He also points out that the Indigenous research paradigm is “not any sort of hidden wisdom that Indigenous people possess. It is a distinct form of analysis, and is itself both a discursive construction and an intellectual device to persuade others and elevate what might not have been a focus of attention by others.”<sup>109</sup>

This framework is about returning to Islanders, in both theoretical and practical terms, our ‘equal’ humanity and reinstating the value of our ‘different’ former lives in the past.<sup>110</sup>

In Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s *Towards an Indigenous Australian Woman’s Standpoint Theory*, the acknowledgment of who we are as Indigenous female bodies since colonisation, perceptions of the Indigenous female body and therefore more importantly to me, our connectedness to the continuing line of our bloodline, recognises and empowers the space we inhabit. The need to define and contextualise the specifics of who I am within an Indigenous female form informs my standpoint:

All Indigenous women share the common experience of living in a society that deprecates us. We share the experience of having different cultural knowledges. We share in the experience of the continual denial of our sovereignties. We share experiences of the politics of dispossession. We share our respective countries’ histories of colonisation. We share the experience of multiple oppressions. We share in the experiences of living in a hegemonic white patriarchal society. We share the experience of lacking epistemic authority within the academy. We share in the experience of resisting and replacing disparaging images of ourselves with our own representations (Collins 1990). We share experiences of different class locations. We share experiences within our communities as mothers, sisters, daughters, aunties, grandmothers, elders and community leaders. We share experiences of different sexualities and genders. These ways of knowing and experiencing generate the problematics of Indigenous women’s standpoint.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. p.196.

<sup>111</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "Towards an Australian Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory: A Methodological Tool," *Australian Feminist Studies* Vol.28(78) (2013).

Moreton-Robinson defines an Indigenous woman's standpoint separate to that of Nakata's Indigenous standpoint and Feminist standpoint and identifies the issues arising for the Indigenous female form in both theories. As Moreton-Robinson eloquently points out – "our lives are always shaped by the omnipresence of patriarchal white sovereignty and its continual denial of our sovereignty."<sup>112</sup>

However, the need to define further the space I and many Torres Strait Islander women born and raised away from their Island communities inhabit, acknowledges the migratory experience of the Indigenous female form. Who I am, and the space that I occupy informs my methodology profoundly. Firstly, I am of mixed heritage, from a Saibai Island mother and a white English immigrant father. Secondly, my mother was part of the migration that half the clan groups took from Saibai to the mainland who built and settled in the community township of Bamaga. Thirdly, I was born and raised on Aboriginal lands and now live thousands of kilometres away in an urban city. All of this informs my experiential knowledge and my identity. In truth, I am living on the occupied lands of Aboriginal First Nations' groups and am recognised as a member of the second Indigenous people of Australia. The distinctive genetic, cultural, linguistic and historical differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the migratory status of those of us who are visitors to another Indigenous people's homelands, constitute intersecting lived experiences that further define my standpoint.

African-American writer Patricia Hill Collins writes about the matrix of domination, a sociological paradigm that explains issues of oppression that deal with race, class and gender and where they intersect.<sup>113</sup> This paradigm is based on the premise that such things as race, age and sex may affect an individual in extremely different ways. The matrix of domination offers a way to place "my lived experiences" at the centre of analysis, offering unique insights on prevailing concepts, paradigms and epistemologies of this worldview. As stated in the online site of *Women and Gender Studies: College of Humanities and Social Sciences*, "The power of the concept of the matrix of domination lies in its ability to take off the blinders and expose the complexities of power, privilege, and oppression as it operates in individual lives, in institutionalized policies and practices, and in the creation of hegemonic ideologies."<sup>114</sup> In understanding my positionality, I have drawn from both an Australian Indigenous woman's standpoint theory and the matrix of domination to further define my standpoint in the context of this research.

In this chapter, I have explored the concepts and theories that I have deployed in this exegesis. Next, I delineate the process of researching Saibai Island in a step by step breakdown.

### **Aligning Formalities of the Academy with Saibai Island's Needs**

Acquiring ethics approval was thought-provoking and challenging. Monash's strict guidelines and the directives of the ethics application did not necessarily align with the community of Saibai's needs. Special permission and consent are not just about the individual making the decision. The community of Saibai, specifically the clan of *Ait Koedal* in this case, adhere to the community's protocols as well as the clan's protocols. The first step in the consultation process is to seek permission from the Saibai Island Council, *Mura Buway* Clan Corporation and *Ait Koedal* Cultural Knowledge Custodians as a researcher before individuals are to be invited to participate in the interviews. As my research component is not about a specific individual but affects members of the *Ait Koedal* clan in the community, each individual's participation within the research component is

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990). p.221-238.

<sup>114</sup> *Women and Gender Studies - College of Humanities and Social Sciences*, "History of the Matrix," <http://wmst.gmu.edu/center/publications>.

taken as community participation by the Saibai Council and the *Mura Buway* Clan Corporation and is discussed between the two.

First and foremost, my research component must benefit Saibai Islanders. As previously stated, there has been enough extraction of knowledge from the Torres Straits and from Saibai Island. Benefits to the community include documentation of the history of the framework and processes of live performance work and also documentation of Saibai Island contemporary practices when transferring knowledge. All future research work will have a pathway that can be followed with the voices of *Saibailgal* leading the process. Saibai Island artists will have the opportunity to build on their artistry within the performance-led research component. Knowledge will be handed down from key Saibai Island Knowledge Keepers to an emerging generation of Knowledge Keepers. Saibai Island people will have ownership over the stories they tell for documentation, and archival purposes and names will be documented alongside all knowledge collated during the research. The research may also inform policy around Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property rights (ICIP) in regard to song, dance, story – specifically in regard to intangible cultural practices as outlined by UNESCO.

### **Respected Elders of Saibai Island Community**

Some elders reside off Saibai Island. They extend to the other Torres Strait Islands like Thursday Island, to the Cape York communities of Bamaga and Seisia and down to major cities like Brisbane. Selection is based on their position within the community and in consultation with two of these elders – Knowledge Custodians Mr Walter Waia (cultural liaison on this research project) and Mr Sedrick Waia. Mr Walter Waia and Mr Sedrick Waia were approached and they, in turn, approached respected elders and Knowledge Keepers of Ait Koedal, Saibai Island. Mr Walter Waia was also approached to be cultural liaison/advisor on the interview process. Full disclosure of the PhD has been given and permission and advice sought. Mr Jeff Aniba-Waia was also approached to be cultural advisor on the performance-led research project. Mr Walter Waia and Mr Jeff Aniba-Waia offered valuable time outside their work commitments to guide this research, making sure cultural protocols were adhered to.

### **Storage Repository**

The storage is kept on a specific drive relating to this research project and will also be backed up via my computers back-up drive. Storage of this data will be locked away in a filing cabinet at my home address and will also be stored as per Saibai Island Council as well as *Mura Buway* Clan Corporation regulations, and Monash University regulations. Each interview participant – Knowledge Giver – will also receive their specific interview on a USB stick for their own purposes. Knowledge Custodians of Saibai Island community are already in discussion about a future repository for data storage.

### **Insider/Outsider Researcher**

A thought occurs to me, immediately placing me on the outside when requesting permission to interview, film, or even to enter Saibai for my PhD purposes. It is my bloodline connection that has led my desire to empower Saibaian voices. My research began as an insider via my clan and familial relationships, however, my requests immediately placed me on the outside of these familial connections and cast me as a bystander.

Before decisions are even made, the mechanism of outsider thinking already existed within me. It is the way I had grown up – with complete awareness of being different. On the few occasions I did enter what I thought was the “central sphere,” I was quickly made aware that this was an unobtainable space for me – that there was something that made me different to the dominant society.

My parents knew this, of course, and pushed for their kids to be the best they could be. We excelled in the area of sport, music and arts and passed enough academic subjects to keep our

heads above water in the education system. We represented our schools as school captains, vice-captains and sports captains. Ama and Dad made their presence and their support for us known with Ama working at the school tuckshop and Dad, becoming a member of the P&C (Parents and Citizens Association). Racism and otherism existed but my parents never focussed their energy on it. My dad worked hard as a builder and to this day, at the age of 73, is still working hard. We grew up in a hard-working, working-class home. There were many times I was reminded of my “outsider” presence as a child: playing at friends’ houses and not being able to enter their homes when other friends could, receiving racist name-calling, derogatory remarks about my frizzy hair, and being closely monitored in shops. But, as my parents did not focus attention on their outsider presence, I never drew attention to my outsider presence. This feeling of “outsider” is a part of my identity. It has contributed to my “automatic” thinking as an adult: positioning myself on the outside of my bloodline community.

At times I feel as if I am the outsider collecting and extracting material: collecting knowledge for my own benefit. The process is quite daunting and challenging and presents its own set of problems that hark back to the Cambridge University’s expedition, the missionaries’ extraction of cultural artefacts and the colonisation of the Torres Straits. A self-effacing manner comes with your role as researcher when entering your bloodline community. As Tuhiwai Smith explains the insider research “needs to be humble because the researcher belongs to the community as a member with a different set of roles and relationships, status and position.”<sup>115</sup>

I certainly felt that at times I was on the outside of the community before I took on the role of researcher. Having been born and raised on the mainland, as a first-generation mainlander of the Saibai Island migration, my birth already locates me on the outside. But what I also realised is that I am certainly not the only Saibaian who feels at times like an outsider. I believe this is par for the course for any Saibaian who navigates the complexities of a Western way of life with cultural practice and maintenance. For Awa Walter and Awa Jeff, there is a feeling that they have no home even though they visit their communities regularly – home in the sense of a concrete base. They left their homelands of Saibai Island and Saibai/Seisia respectively, to study in the Western world and now have worked and lived away from their communities far longer than they have lived in their respective communities. Awa Jeff refers to living between two worlds as “fence-sitting.” Both awas at different times have mentioned a quote from one of their fathers about leaving Saibai Island, “you will be like seagulls roaming the skies forever, with no place to land.”

One of the times during this research that I felt the emotional impact of insider/outsider was during a trip to Sydney to film Saibai Island’s dance troupe *Muyngu Koekaper*’s performance at NAISDA’S 40th-anniversary celebrations, as part of the Speaking Countries performances at Carriageworks.

Again, this trip was a family affair. With my partner and a then eight-year-old son in tow and one on the way, we drove from Melbourne to Sydney and returned in the space of three days. The filming of the dance troupe in Sydney had been a continuing discussion which began with Awa Sedrick Waia in Saibai a few months earlier when I had broached the subject of filming another performance of *Muyngu Koekaper*. NAISDA’S 40th-anniversary performance was mentioned, and from then I followed Awa Seda’s lead and contacted the artistic co-ordinator of NAISDA, requesting permission to film at their event. She followed up with Awa Sedrick and made a suggestion that the Saturday morning performance would be the best option. I took that as meaning all systems go as part of me wanted it to be that simple, all wrapped up in an email. It is because rejection for me in this regard hits hard and brings up feelings of self-doubt around my identity as to where I fit in the world I am traversing. But, as I found out on arrival into Sydney, a quick chat with Awa Sedrick confirmed my underlying doubts, and filming or recording of any kind was not allowed. I replied that I understood. Another harsh reminder of sitting on the outside looking in. I was looking forward to documenting the performance and asking some questions of Awa Sedrick, but it was not to be. Somehow communication must not have been as clear as I had thought and hoped. All photography and filming whether it be with a video camera, still camera, smart screens or any device that records anything had been banned by the dance troupe. This is something new that I

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<sup>115</sup> Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies*, 2012

had not seen or heard of previously. It was explained that the dances are of “traditional and ancient origin” and are “sacred dances.” I understood. I feel it is not my place to question or even try to negotiate how I perceive the importance of documenting cultural practice for the generations to come. It is at these times I feel like a researcher not Aka *Serema na ngep* (Aka Serema’s granddaughter).

Awa Sedrick and Awa Jeff mentioned that they would again talk to the group of elders and let me know the outcome. On that note, they were gone, taxied away back to their hotel. My heart sank, and I felt a sudden surge of heat. Tears welled up in my eyes as I walked back to the car with my little family; suddenly, tears began to run down my face. I knew this feeling well – I felt on the outside, and now that I was a researcher I felt like the “ethnographer,” the researcher extracting information. The loss of Ama hit home again and I realised how alone I felt on this journey. As I looked at my son running ahead, and with another child on the way, the loss made me even more emotional. The immense pressure I felt to share my heritage with my children and to other descendants of the 1947 Saibai migration brought on a panic attack.

It is quite a complicated process to write about this and brings up a lot around loss. Ama never regarded herself as a victim and did not bring us up to think we lacked anything because of our Saibaian bloodline. Consequently, being an Indigenous researcher carries the heavy weight of past research and is always at the forefront of my mind. An invisible flashing amber alarm and siren plays in my mind when working on the qualitative research phase. The fear of being seen as just a “researcher” plays on my mind when wearing the “researcher” hat. I continually worked with this, checking and being transparent about my intentions to myself and to the community.

The following section outlines the process in attaining the “interview as conversation” and the methodology I employed that reflects my intentions for qualitative research.

### **Process of Interviews as Conversation**

The process of interviews is fundamental in the model of Caring For Story in my findings in Chapter Six, as each step begins to outline a pathway that respects and is meaningful to the community of Saibai Island.

### **Relationality**

My first approach in regard to requesting “interviews” on the topic of performative storytelling on Saibai Island was via my respected familial relationships with Cultural Knowledge Custodian Awa Walter Waia. Awa Walter is a Knowledge Custodian of the *Ait Koedal* clan, and I was fortunate enough to meet Awa via my brother Alistair. Although based in Brisbane, Awa Walter is still very much part of the decision-making process on Saibai Island and was the main architect in the successful native title claim for Saibai Island in 1997. I began working with Awa Walter on a theatre show concept over seven years, and although the show did not eventuate, trust was built with Awa over this time. The working relationship and the opinion he had of me was passed on to his brother Awa Jeff, and would offer insight into a framework when working with Cultural Knowledge Custodians to construct a theatrical work. I invited Awa Walter to guide the interview process and to provide cultural advice in the process.

### **Permissions – Respecting Protocols**

First step – Awa Walter discussed my Saibaian bloodline connection to Saibai *Mura Buway* Proposed Body Corporate (PBC). The *Mura Buway* is represented by leading community members from the residing clan groups on Saibai. Awa Walter also informed the *Mura Buway* of my PhD and that I was requesting permission to interview community members who had been performative storytellers. Permission then had to be attained from the Saibai Island Council to enter the island for the purposes of work. Awa’s brother, Awa Sedrick Waia is the only choreographer living on Saibai Island and the Waia family along with the Tabuai family are the custodians of Saibai *girel*. Awa Walter discussed with Awa Sedrick who the interviewees would be and they came up with a

list of ten that spread in age from early nineties down to thirties paying homage to all the generations alive on Saibai during the time of the interviews. They all hold various forms of knowledge about performative storytelling, and within the context of this research, I will refer to them all as Knowledge Giver. Within this group, there are specific Knowledge Custodians of Saibai Island performative storytelling. These Knowledge Custodians are from the choreographer/composer lineage and have had knowledge passed on to them.

### **Bereavement – “Sad News”**

The challenge in the process was aligning dates with everyone during the dry season but then also being flexible to reschedule those dates when there was “sad news”<sup>116</sup> or variations in weather.

### **Kala Kawa Ya (KKY)**

Although KKY is not my strong point, language has always been an essential element to me in the scope of this project. The children of Saibai are not as fluent in the language as their parents or even grandparents are. Torres Strait Creole is the lingua franca in the Torres Strait and is the number one language for the children of Saibai Island. For Saibai Island Knowledge Keepers “language is the core ingredient.”<sup>117</sup> This would mean an interpreter would be needed to translate the language for me so I could understand what was being said in response to questions or queries.

As most of the Knowledge Givers were bilingual speaking two to three languages, I discussed with Awa Walter Waia the possibility of having the Knowledge Givers speak in the language they would be most comfortable with – KKY is a dialect of Kala Lagaw Ya. This was encouraged by Awa – the primary purpose being for documentation and archival. Currently, the use of the KKY dialect is less and less with each emerging generation within the Saibaian communities, both on the island and Australian mainland. The lingua franca of the Torres Strait Creole (Yumplatok) was also encouraged if it was a more comfortable option.

Full KKY is referred to as “Saibai Latin.” The remaining people that speak it are mainly of the generation born before WWII or the decade proceeding it. This documentation would consist of video and audio. As I do not speak fluent KKY, we decided that an interviewer who resided or who had a strong connection to Saibai would be the best option. Athe (grandfather) Dana Ober was approached. He is a respected clan leader of the *Samu* clan – the clan of my popu (grandfather) – and is also a linguist and much respected throughout the Torres Strait region. A week before departure, he had to withdraw because of clashes with an existing project’s dates. So after discussion, it was decided Awa Walter would be the interviewer/translator because of his connection and standing in Saibai community. My list of questions was sent to Awa Walter two weeks before to peruse.

On Saibai Island there had been a lot of focus on the speaking of KKY. To be looked right in the eye and spoken to whether you understand the language or not offers another communication and understanding of Saibai philosophy. There is something magical, ethereal and majestic that occurs when you are spoken to and communicated with in your mother tongue. The language of my bloodline is part of the earth from where it comes. What language offers for its speakers is a way of communicating the philosophy of Saibai when speaking. The philosophy and the ethos of Saibai is a part of every aspect of life for Saibaians. Immersion in the language allows a deeper understanding and nuance of what is being communicated.

### **Reciprocity:**

It was decided with Awa Walter that the offering of money for the exchange of knowledge should be considered. To be honest, this kind of transaction bothered me at first – it brought up all my own insecurities around not being brought up in “community.” There was an initial sense of “buying”

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<sup>116</sup> When a death has occurred on the island, 'sad news' is used when referring to the passing.

<sup>117</sup> Harvey.

knowledge causing me to devalue my cultural connection. I learned quickly that negotiation and bartering have been part of Saibai Culture *bepotaim*. Bartering was a much-needed negotiation tactic when dealing with other warring and non-warring tribes from across the waters to PNG. By the same token, my receipt of scholarship funding allows me to do this research, so it is just as crucial that community members are given something for their time and reciprocity. Cash in hand shows appreciation for their time and gratitude for sharing freely – it shows in today's times that we understand that there is a give and take in a world where distance and modernity intersect cultural practice: economic concerns are a part of everyday life. The people of the Torres Straits have always had a bartering system in place. Negotiating and bartering with Papua New Guinea and with the surrounding islands and within clan groups was and is a part of life. This negotiation and bartering was a "light bulb" moment for me, and it is something I discuss further in this document.

### Negotiation of Cultural Knowledge

The transfer of knowledge for Saibaians seems to be a contentious issue. It certainly seems a much more challenging path to follow for the new generation of Saibaians hoping for an exchange of knowledge than it is for non-Saibaians. There was a recent post on Facebook from a younger dancer of Saibai descent residing in Cairns about the sharing of Cultural Knowledge through social media platforms. He believed that it was the optimum way of passing on Cultural Knowledge to his kids and future generations. This raises questions around the best depository to house Cultural Knowledge that is respectful and meaningful for the clan groups who are custodians of the knowledge.

What I understand more is that cultural transfer is a negotiation and a "give and take" from both parties as it is *bepotaim*. Today I cannot expect to gain cultural knowledge without reciprocity of some sort – but by the same token culture is evolving and negotiation of how that will work is an essential part of maintaining the culture and being part of this "new world order." More Torres Strait Island people live on the mainland of Australia than on their island homes. Finding a way to navigate the sacred/spiritual with the distance that separates me from my homelands while at the same time adhering to cultural protocols and processes is just as important for me. I believe it is also about providing guidance on how to navigate the exchange with elders and Knowledge Custodians.

What my brother Alistair in Brisbane is attempting to do is to learn to dance through video clips from choreographer and Knowledge Custodian, Awa Sedrick Waia, who resides on Saibai. These original clips are training exercises and necessary steps. Technology allows for this. And although he may not be learning on the island of Saibai, he is still maintaining a cultural practice in a way that alleviates the physical distance and economic constraints. The next step for him is to follow up his training face to face on Saibai with Awa Sedrick.

### Interview or Conversation:

Qualitative research initially formed the basis of my methodology for interviewing, however, as the questions were written, the formality of an interview seemed too structured. To add, if the language of KKY was to be spoken then it would be challenging for an interaction to flow during conversation. My list of questions was a guide, and as the first interview unfolded, it became clear that the question/answer line of "interviewing" did not give the Knowledge Giver (interviewee) the space to have complete autonomy over what knowledge they sought to impart.

The main aim for me as the researcher in this relationship was to listen regardless of language spoken. The act of listening is in itself, essential in the act of knowledge transference. Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr (AO) extends on this in the term *dadirri*, a word, concept and spiritual practice from the Ngan'gikurunggurr and Ngen'giwumirri languages of Daly River region. *Dadirri* is an "inner deep listening and quiet, still awareness." Akin to a meditative practice, *dadirri* brings with it a deeper understanding of yourself on the Earth and a connection to spirit.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, "Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness," *EarthSong Journal: Perspectives in Ecology, Spirituality and Education* Vol. 3 no. No. 4, Autumn 2017 (2017).

In the field of research, Brearley and Hamm adapted and integrated this age-old Indigenous methodology of knowledge transference – the practice of *deep listening*; listening to elders, to the land, sea and sky – to utilize as a method within the research.<sup>119</sup> *Deep listening* as a methodology propagates Indigenous ontology within Western research as a complementary methodology.

From the start of this PhD, I always had in mind a qualitative research method that was conducive to the Saibai community in a way that allowed for the interviewee to speak freely and share knowledge that they perceived as fundamental to them. The reason for this is that the knowledge or story that they deem relevant is not just about an individual approach or response – these interviewees are steeped in the ethos of Saibai knowledge and come from a deep place that is weighted in the philosophy of Saibai culture. My methodology is not just about outcome – that is, answers to questions that I then write up into a critical commentary – it is also as much about *how* the knowledge is transferred and whether or not it respects and supports the maintenance of cultural practice. Giving Saibaian knowledge precedence over Western knowledge was always going to be my approach but putting that into practice proved to be challenging.

### Relaxing the “Interview”

I was aware of the “production-like” set up that resulted from all the equipment and added crew, so it was crucial to bring the Knowledge Givers and Custodians into the exchange in as relaxed a manner as possible. This took place when interviewer Awa Walter, who speaks KKY and Torres Strait Creole and is a respected community member, was able to facilitate an exchange that was reciprocated by the interviewee. He eased the interviewees into the allotted chairs, continuing the conversation that they were having off site. How the chairs were placed was also given consideration. Depending on who we interviewed, the space between chairs needed to be widened to allow for respectful distance depending on the familial relationship between the interviewer and interviewee/s.

### Questions to Elicit Conversation

I arrived on Saibai Island with a pared-back, list of questions I had written up, based on my experiential knowledge of what interested me in regard to Saibai Island *girel*. These were questions that I would ask the Knowledge Giver and if need be they would be translated through Awa Walter Waia. In the first interview, it became apparent that the Knowledge Giver was conscious in their choice of what knowledge they would impart. The questions I had in front of me became irrelevant very quickly. The interview became a conversation around the Knowledge Giver’s performative storytelling experience. This experience always paid homage to those who had gone before them: their teachers, their elders, their fellow performers. They also acknowledged their bloodline lineage and their clan groups. There was one particular question I began with, that was necessary in recognising my bloodline lineage, and therefore, my responsibility towards the participants. This question was about their bloodline connection to me. Such a simple question means so much to the distinctiveness of self and understanding of how I am the person I am today and what contributes to my experiential knowledge: my lived experience.

### Familial Connections

My connection to the Knowledge Givers was first via my familial relationships and not as a researcher. This was also the stance I took as a researcher – it was my familial responsibility and my bloodline connection that took priority over my role as a researcher. As I have entered the researcher/researched relationship with Saibaian bloodline lineage and with knowledge that has come from my experiential knowledge – knowledge gained from my own life’s experiences with a

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<sup>119</sup> Laura Brearley and Treahna Hamm, “Spaces between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Knowledge Systems,” in *Of Other Thoughts: Non-Traditional Ways to the Doctorate: A Guidebook for Candidates and Supervisors*, ed. A. Chr Engels-Schwarzpaul and Michael A. Peters (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2013).

Saibaian-born mother. Thus, throughout this thesis I will refer to family in regard to their familial connection to me. Expanding on this familial responsibility is to explore ways that are community-driven and bridges the two knowledge systems of cultural knowledge and Western research knowledge: in turn, offering one approach that has Saibai Island Knowledge Custodians and Saibai Island Knowledge Holders occupying places in the “history books” of tomorrow.

Extending this, my responsibility is also the writing up of interviews with the full understanding that I am at times a participant, at times an observer and at times interpreting the voices of those interviewed. Therefore Chapter Three is based on my account of the conversations that took place. I acknowledge that this in itself is subjective. How I have chosen what would be shared was a matter of allocating the subjects each Knowledge Giver spoke about into topic areas. From there, I collated the information to align not only with the subject areas but also with descriptions of each Knowledge Giver. The objective behind this was to give the reader the story behind each Knowledge Giver. The stories about the Knowledge Givers may consist of physical descriptions and/or may include character traits and/or distinguishing traits, including their stature in the community and their blood connection to me.

### **Knowledge Givers not Participants or Interviewees**

I refer to the interviewees as Knowledge Givers, for they are more than just interviewees and/or participants. They are active in the knowledge transference between myself and them. In this research they are the givers of knowledge that has been passed down to them, and their own experiential knowledge. The autonomy the Knowledge Giver had over what they shared during the conversation and was instinctual.

### **Interview Setting**

The interview setting was discussed between myself and Awa Walter as to what my filming needs may be. My biggest concern was having to set up and pack up for each interview and take up the Knowledge Giver’s valuable time as they waited.

After a discussion about the most appropriate place to conduct interviews in terms of allowing time for set up of audiovisual equipment so interviewees would not be waiting for us – it was decided that it would be at Awa Sedrick Waia’s place. Awa Sedrick’s place is on *Ait Koedal* land. Next to his home sits a vacant block that has been set up to support the practice of *girel*. When the missionaries came to Saibai, at the encouragement of other clans, *Ait Koedal* moved to the present-day village where they were given a parcel of land. The remaining clans still live by those boundaries today. Awa Seda’s house is positioned right along the esplanade overlooking the waters between PNG and Saibai. On the dance lot, there is a shelter down one end, “island-style” – a wooden frame with a shanty-style corrugated tin for the roof and a decorative bunting of thin strips of island printcloth tied to a rope and hung across the roof frame. There are a couple of made-up tables under the shelter – one specifically for prepping and gutting seafood. At the other end of the lot are newly thriving palms that line the front, parallel to the esplanade road. It is a beautiful spot that offers a sea breeze, and has an open community feel for passers-by who happen to drop in for a chat with anyone seated under the shelter.

### **Audio/Visual Crew Team**

The elders of *Ait Koedal* welcomed and were encouraging about the possibility of a documentary being made with the interviews captured. Having done quite a few short documentary stories for NITV it was essential to capture the discussions to a standard that would be suitable for broadcast for a possible documentary.

The audio/visual crew was made up of my immediate family members. My partner Desmond was on the main camera/sound, and my brother Alistair was on the second camera. Desmond had

already forged a strong relationship with Awa Walter based on my previous theatre workshops which he had also recorded for archival purposes.

This is Desmond's fourth trip to Saibai Island so he was fast becoming familiar with walking on the island with a camera, alongside me and our big son who was in tow. Our objective when entering all First Nations' communities to film, irrespective of whether it is my bloodline community, is to always spend time walking around the village so community members may get to know us. Sometimes, in turn, we get to know more about those First Nations' community members.

As we have shot several short documentaries for NITV we continued with the same set-up and processes in mind. We would stop if there were any outside noises such as planes landing, large vehicle works on the seawall and the like – that interfered during one of our sit-down conversations, patiently waiting till the sound lessened to capture the spoken word coherently. During these interviews, I had also introduced two video cameras. These were operated by my brother Alistair and my partner Desmond. There were two lapel microphones to place on two of the interviewees, and for back up, a boom microphone to pick up the voices of other interviewees if I had more than two. Capturing the essence of each interviewee and their physical realness, such as the spark in the eyes, the warmth in the skin tone, the vibrancy in a laugh was an objective. Torres Strait Island people are underrepresented in the media. Two portable lights were set up to support this.

### Archival and Documentary Forms

I asked each interviewee to sign two forms. The first was for my PhD research in regard to Monash University ethical guidelines, and the second was a release form for possible use in a future documentary if the community agreed. I explained each form to each interviewee and Awa Walter reiterated this in language. Each interviewee was more than happy to have their knowledge recorded. I also explained that they would each get a copy of their interview and that I would send it to the Saibai Council office.

### Conclusion

The set-up and logistics I have discussed in this chapter inform my findings in Chapter Six. They are the first steps on the pathway towards answering the research question: how do I document and archive Saibai Island knowledge in an ethical and Culturally appropriate way that is meaningful to the community? Having established the non-Torres Strait Islander voices who dominate the literature on my people and Culture, the following three chapters set out to situate the voices of *Saibailgal*. In these chapters, I will expound on the three qualitative research methods outlined at the start of this chapter.

My main aim in the scope of this research was to identify a pathway/model valuing and supporting the transference of Cultural knowledge which is informed by my elders of Saibai Island. Whilst this is my interpretation, written up in the following three chapters, I have attempted to maintain the power of those Saibai Island voices who have imparted their knowledge. Beginning with the interviews as conversations in Chapter Three, performers from my matriarchal bloodline clan of *Ait Koedal* impart their stories and knowledge, spanning a timeline from the 1930s to 2016. In Chapter Four, I explain further and bring to life Saibai *girel* as seen through my eyes in response to my short documentary, *Saibai Island Dance*. The detailed description is my attempt to break down what I saw, felt, heard, and is my interpretation – viewing the material from multiple perspectives – as a descendant of Saibai Island and the *Ait Koedal* clan. I continue with a detailed, rich description in Chapter Five for my performance-led research work, *Woer Wayepa*. Through this detailed description, I seek to reveal the many layers that support my findings in Chapter Six – a pathway to caring for story.

So now that you understand the set up and logistics of documenting this research my hope is that when reading the following chapter you can imagine Awa Sedha's shelter that overlooks the waters

across to Papua New Guinea from Saibai Island, and the Knowledge Givers/Custodians of this place and the stories they share.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Saibai *Girel*

*You jump off the shoulders [of those who've gone before] to reach higher goals. You never stay with the same thing, you must make a higher move because new ideas, new material, new styles of modern dance around the world. Our dances are influenced by global changes, [our] artefacts, dance costumes... It's not about holding on to old dance – it's about changing, we are very adaptive.*<sup>120</sup>

The quote is a fitting description of the performative storytelling on Saibai Island that is also profoundly ingrained within Saibaian ethos/philosophy. The resilient and adaptive nature of *Saibailgal* (people of Saibai), is evident in events such as: the warriorhood that protected the island from incoming warring raiders from PNG; the move of clan group *Ait Koedal* from the small island of Ait<sup>121</sup> to the main village in the late 1800s; the soldiers who fought in WWII protecting the frontline borders of Australia in the North; and the migration of the *Koey Buway* (big clans) to the mainland in 1947 because of the issue of rising sea levels.

During my lifetime, I have witnessed a small part of the evolving style and form of Saibaian performative storytelling. I have titled this chapter Saibai *Girel*. *Girel* is a language word that describes physical performative storytelling as well as all the creative components associated with dance. I acknowledge three Cultural Knowledge Custodians of Saibai, who have offered invaluable guidance on this journey – Awa Jeffa Aniba-Waia, Awa Walter Waia, and Awa Sedrick Waia – storytellers before time, after time and of the time. I also acknowledge and pay respect to each Knowledge Giver<sup>122</sup> who shared their story of *girel*. They had full autonomy over the knowledge that was imparted to me. There was thoughtfulness and an all-knowing of what needed to be shared from each participant. The focus of my research is on the performative storytelling that originates from the *Ait Koedal* clan of Saibai Island and spans the dance lives of those interviewed from the 1930s to 2016.

The quote also encapsulates the generations of performers that have created and performed *girel* on Saibai Island through to today. Saibai *girel* is an evolving artistry and while acknowledging the shoulders that current generations stand on, we must also reach for higher goals, to attain new methods and ways to reach existing and new audiences.

This chapter is broken down into Part One and Part Two. Part One is about my memories of Saibaian *girel* and concerns the changing and evolving nature of performative storytelling. Part Two covers the voices of Saibai Island *girel* performers from the past and present.

## PART ONE

### My Childhood Memories of *Girel*

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<sup>120</sup> Jeff Aniba-Waia, interview by Margaret Harvey, 2018, Sound Recording.

<sup>121</sup> Ait is a small island on Saibai that was home to the Ait Koedal clan before the missionaries arrived. It is situated on swamps and thus offered protection from incoming warring raids from the people of Kiwai in PNG.

<sup>122</sup> Knowledge Giver is the name I have given to each interviewee who has imparted their invaluable stories of their performance experience. Knowledge Custodians are the select few who belong to the bloodline where the choreographer/composer role has passed onto them. The Knowledge Custodian are also the dance troupe leaders.

When I was a child in the 1980s, I witnessed performative storytelling in Bamaga at feasting for tombstone unveilings and other celebrations. A substantial population of elders who were born and raised on Saibai, and who had become part of the 1947 self-determined migration from Saibai to the mainland were still a vibrant part of the community. The dance was still strongly connected to Saibai Island. I remember as a child, the grounded, earthed power of the performers, dancing bare foot on red dirt. I remember being transfixed by the colour of the costumes, the movement, the laughter, the joy, and the enthusiastic response from other spectators who were mainly family from the community of Bamaga. There was a feeling of celebration amongst the crowd. We had earlier indulged in the feasting, but still the aroma of *amai*<sup>123</sup> filled the air. When the dancing began, everyone was enjoying dessert with a cup of tea. My immediate response to all that I was seeing and feeling was a deeper connection to my Saibaian bloodline, an overwhelming sense of pride and of “home.”

The next time I was to witness *girel* live, was as an adult at the unveiling of Popu's tombstone.<sup>124</sup> Bamaga and Seisia are distinct communities that are governed by their own councils and mayors. There is still a deep connection with Saibai Island, but the bloodline of performative storytellers is now rooted to the land on which their elders had built the communities of Bamaga and Seisia. Unlike during my childhood, feasting and *girel* were now all held indoors at the Bamaga Town Hall, and the majority of the performers were of a new generation born and raised in Bamaga and Seisia.

One of the *girel* leaders was Awa Jeff Aniba-Waia. His performative storytelling is firmly planted in his Saibai Island bloodline lineage through the *Ait Koedal* clan, the original dancers and choreographers on Saibai Island.<sup>125</sup> Awa Jeff was born on Saibai Island, and through his adopted family, Seisia is another home for him. It was the first time too that I finally got to put a face to the name, Awa Jeff Aniba-Waia. My brother Alistair had spoken in high regard of our awas, the Waia brothers, after his time on Waiben. Their names came with a sense of power and authority, not just for Saibaian but also for the wider Islander communities, and I will reveal more about my relationship with them as the chapter unfolds.

It was at the cemetery where the three tombstone unveilings would take place. One of them being awa's adoptive mother, Aka Lelai Aniba, my popu's sister. Awa Jeffa as he is affectionately known, has a distinct flamboyancy. He has a contemporary mindset like his brothers, but Awa Jeffa also believes it is his responsibility to push the teachings that have been left to him by his fathers, as a choreographer/song composer: “to reach the higher goals.” He can seem quite stern at times, especially when he is imparting knowledge or teaching *girel*. However, when trust is gained, he offers a relaxed conversation and is warm, good-natured and light-hearted. He has a vibrant outlook to learning new knowledge. Even today as a retired schoolteacher he tries to keep busy attending art workshops and conferences: catching up with family and friends, and being invited to participate in interviews for documentaries to do with Torres Strait Islander Cultural knowledge. On the morning of the tombstone unveiling, he had on a pair of colourful, patterned, harem-style pants that the American rapper MC Hammer had made fashionable in the 1990s. He also wears a bright bandana around his neck, a symbolic item of Saibaian style, a rite of passage that can only be worn when permission is given. He also had another piece of fashion that is very much part of his “uniform” – his black sunglasses. He was accompanied by a number of the younger generation from the Seisia community who would make up some of the dance troupe that would perform at the feasting that evening.

There was certainly something different between what I had witnessed at Popu's tombstone unveiling and what I witnessed when I was a child. The enclosed building was a welcome relief

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<sup>123</sup> Western island language word for an earth oven sometimes referred to as kup murri.

<sup>124</sup> Torres Strait Tombstone Unveilings or Openings, mark the end of grieving for loved ones who have passed. It is a celebration of the deceased one's life. After families dress the tombstone with material, families gather for the unveiling of the tombstone in which the mariget (in-laws) unveil the tombstone to everyone gathered. It is customary to celebrate this joyous occasion with a feast and dancing after the unveiling.

<sup>125</sup> Margaret Harvey, "Saibai Island Dance," in *Our Stories, Our Way Everyday* (Sydney: NITV, 2015).

from the heat outside and enabled an earlier start time than if the event had been outdoors. The group had rehearsed for just a few weeks, so there was still a little uncertainty as to the moves by some of the performers, but there were not as many adults dancing as what I remembered as a child, and the dances were still quite new to the young performers. But this did not matter to those of us who were spectators, as the energy in the air was high-spirited as family members and community members whistled and cajoled the performers. Ama was in her element as she caught up with family, old and new, speaking the language of her mother tongue. She was now free to relax and enjoy the feasting and dancing.

Three years later, when I was to witness Awa Jeffa's dance troupe at the 2009 Cairns Indigenous Arts Fair, a vastly different style of dance had developed. This was the first time I would witness the form of *girel* Awa Jeffa refers to as "power" and "diesel." The Seisia-based dance troupe was known as *Ariw Poenipan* and was still led by Awa Jeffa. Some performers from the tombstone unveiling remained, but the style of the dance and the costumes had evolved. This evolution I will go into further in this chapter. On the grassed area at the front of the Tank Arts Centre, a crowd had gathered to watch the daily performances of Indigenous dance groups.

The Australian newspaper exoticized the performance. "The inaugural three-day Cairns Indigenous Arts Fair has been a festival of peace, love and understanding so far, but the *Ariw Poenipan* dancers from Saibai Island are dressed for war."<sup>126</sup> The writer goes on to describe their costume, appearance and the *dhoeybal* headdress as "fans of white feathers tipped with blood red."<sup>127</sup> The focus on the "warring native" overlooked the beautiful symbolic mat-laying movement piece, representing the life of a Torres Strait Islander – conceived on a mat, born on a mat, you eat and sleep on the mat, and when you die you are placed on the mat.<sup>128</sup> The mat is a symbol of the cycle of life. Many facets for entertainment are created within the thirty-minute set performance. The elements of Islander life are very much part of the narrative when collating those elements. The dancers are stated as being from Saibai Island but were from the community of Seisia. The three communities of Saibai, Bamaga, and Seisia differ in their councils, protocols and *girel* style, so the specificity of community origins acknowledges each community's commitment to Cultural practice.

Now is the right place to reiterate that the *girel* my research centres on stems from the Saibai Island clan of *Ait Koedal*. The dance troupe of *Ariw Poenipan*, while Seisia-based, is led by Saibai choreographer Awa Jeff who has been adopted into the *Dhoeybaw* clan. The Knowledge Givers whom I interviewed on Saibai Island were either present or past members of the Saibai Island dance troupe *Muyngu Koekaper*. Awa Jeff also at times performs with *Muyngu Koekaper*. In the documentary, *Saibai Island Dance*, which I will speak about in Chapter Four, Awa Jeff was performing with the *Muyngu Koekaper* dance troupe.

## PART TWO

### Caring for the Stories of Saibaian Voices

*Empowering our elders/people voices of today in the history books of tomorrow*

Beginning the writing of this chapter was the most challenging of all. The big question that echoed loudly in my mind was, *how do I archive and document these voices of Saibai Islander performative storytellers, in a way that respects the Knowledge Giver's voice and the story's connection to the complex web that is the Saibai Island ethos?* As I recollected the conversation with each Knowledge Giver, I realised each voice speaks of a story: an individual account that is born of their experiential knowledge of Saibai Island performative storytelling. It is a story born of

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<sup>126</sup> Michael Gebicki, "Coast and Country," *The Australian*, September 12, 2009 2009.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Aniba-Waia.

the complex web that is Saibai Island ethos and is now imparted to me being of the same bloodline and for the qualitative research for my PhD. It is my responsibility to care for the story that has been transmitted to me.

Part Two is about the voices of performative storytelling from Saibai Island community in 2016. They include Awa Jeff Aniba-Waia, who was residing on Thursday Island at the time. Awa Jeff was the translator of the recorded interviews from KKY to English. During the translation phase, he also imparted his experiential knowledge, interacting with the material he was transcribing and adding to the body of knowledge and stories he shared with me. My intention in writing this chapter is to bring the voices alive on the page as much as possible.

Awa Walter Waia is very much present in the process as a Cultural Advisor, an interpreter at times, an interviewer other times, and offering invaluable knowledge as a Cultural Knowledge Custodian from the Waia bloodline of choreographer/song composer. During the translation of the interviews, Awa Jeff also shared his experiential knowledge which I have included in this chapter.

After gathering information for the interviews as conversations, topics were revealed which I have separated into the following subject headings:

The Continuing Line of Saibai Island Dance

The Next Line of Choreographers

*Zamiyakal*: Apparatus, Dance Machines and Puppetry

Dances of Popu Mebai's Time

Christianity and Saibai *Girel*

Song and Music

Women's Dance

The Influence of Popular Culture on *Girel*

Audience

Training and Technique

Protocols and Copyright

The Future of Saibai Island *Girel*

The order of these subject headings has been informed by the personal stories/knowledge imparted. My intention in collating the topic areas has been to reveal each Knowledge Giver/Custodian personality so that their voices could be heard.

## **The Continuing Line of Saibai Island Dance**

*Dance is contained in those that are alive and their memories*

The present time holds the knowledge of performative stories within the generations that are alive today. The Knowledge Givers experiential knowledge of *girel* is what was imparted. Awa Walter's response to *girel* before the missionaries arrived in the late 1800s and in the decades proceeding, was that it was all relevant to the time. When I raised a question concerning *girel* before the missionaries arrived, Awa Walter asserted that the history of *girel* is contained in living memory.

'The dances of the time represent the era they're composed in. Time, it's an evolution thing...The main message is the world changes, and then dances change as well.'<sup>129</sup>

There was a sternness in Awa Walter's voice, and I understood. What happened before their own memories, their own lives is of another time and relevant to that time. The continuing line of each generation choreographing new *girel* is based on the stories relevant to those alive today – dances with apparatus or mask such as the *Mawa* may be utilized to tell the story again, but the choreography is new. There are no “old” dances that are danced today. Cultural practice is not a repetition of knowledge but a growing and evolving knowledge related to the present. The elders alive today who span birth from the 1930s to the 1950s were taught by various dance teachers from the same clan: many young people took part. It was part of community life – celebrations, hair shaving, marriage, ordinations, tombstone unveiling, church-related Christian observances, etc.

Like his brothers, Awa Sedrick Waia's name precedes him. I have long been aware of the Waia brothers, all of whom are known for their storytelling prowess and their Knowledge Custodianship of the *Ait Koedal* (Crocodile) clan group. Awa Sedrick still resides on Saibai Island and leads the dance troupe *Muyngu Koekaper*. Fondly referred to as Awa Sedha, he has a gentle sternness and is a man of fewer words than his brothers Awa Walter and Awa Jeff. He has a quiet nature but has a strong creative vision. However, he has a toughness that belies his gentle nature that can lead and coach a dance team to the competitive level that Saibai's *Muyngu Koekaper* has grown to exhibit. Awa Sedha lives on his family block in the village at the seafront of the esplanade. The empty block next door to him is the block where dance practice is held. He is a choreographer and composer of *Ait Koedal*. At the front entrance of Awa Sedrick's home sits a domineering *Mawa* mask. *Mawa* means “face.” This *Mawa* is placed next to the front door and is done to protect/ward off those who may wish to cause harm towards those residing in Awa's home – whether they be of the physical world or not.

Terminology and language words to do with performative storytelling on Saibai will come up repeatedly in this, and the following chapter. To fully understand the terminology utilized, I will begin this next section with dance apparatus as described by Awa Sedrick Waia. This particular interview is in regard to apparatus alone and was gathered and recorded by Saibai Island elder, Athe (Grandfather) Dana Ober and filmed in 2018 by my brother Alistair Harvey on Saibai Island. Awa Sedrick imparts the knowledge with ease and is concise in his explanations of each piece. Throughout the apparatus section, in-text citations will be deployed as much as possible to allow for the full connection to Cultural knowledge and to legitimize and empower the Knowledge Custodian or Knowledge Giver who has imparted the knowledge. I could not have explained these pieces better than through the words of the Knowledge Custodian and choreographer of *Ait Koedal*.

Apparatus and dance machines utilized by the dancers are known as *Zamiyakal*.

## The Next Line of Choreographers

*Close your eyes and picture us, your fathers that we are going to be dancing to you.*<sup>130</sup>

Choreographing and composing runs in the Waia bloodline and within the clan of *Ait Koedal*. Choreographing is defined by lineage. Before time, community members each had a role. With each clan, there are specific roles that family lines fulfil and the Waia brothers come from the storytelling line where *girel* is their role. Within Saibai Island the lineage of choreographers is patrilineal.

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<sup>129</sup> Walter Waia, interview by Margaret Harvey, 2015.

<sup>130</sup> Sedrick Waia, interview by Margaret Harvey, 2015, Saibai Island.

The choreographers are also the composers of the music and chants. When the time had come for Awa Sedha to be handed the torch as a choreographer, it was at the consent and encouragement of the existing choreographers, his fathers of the Waia and Tabuai family. Awa Sedrick recounts the time the torch was passed on to him with fond memories. One of his fathers asked the mothers to begin to sing and beat the drum, and in turn, he was expected to start to dance. It was in 1988 at the 50th anniversary of the Holy Trinity Church. As he recounts the story of when he was handed the torch, he smiles, reminiscing of a bygone era. The *kulup* Awa refers to is a shaker made from the seed pods of the matchbox tree and is used by men and women in dance:

‘One day when we had the gathering, the two old men asked me to come with them, and when we were at the dance grounds with the women they threw a *kulup* to me and said, “you are going to do the choreography.” I said, “no I’m not the one, it’s my older brothers Terry and Aruma, Walter and Jeff. They were the first to have the *kulup*.” They said, “no it’s your turn there’s a *kulup* there, start making a dance up, we will sing you a song. Close your eyes and picture us, your fathers that we are going to be dancing to you. When you pick or choose a dance movement just start dancing.” Then I closed my eyes, and I started picturing my fathers’ dancing. I did it in front of the people, and then I began to hit or beat the *kulup* slowly. There was old women and young women sitting around in the audience. The two fathers saw that I had the movements all in my head and it was all good. Then they told the ladies to go in the back line and start learning. “When you start dancing, you will try and learn as fast as you can because he will be dancing from his head.” Then I started dancing. I made a dance from the beginning, all the dance until the ending of it. We started learning. The mothers, the women learned the dance. Because I was choreographing dances all in my head, I had a background experience of my two fathers here on Saibai, Kala and Wagea (Waia) and the other two fathers in Cairns, Parisa and Edrick (Tabuai). So I had knowledge of these people as my teachers. And there were also other fathers that were dancers. That was the only time that dance was in my head. The next day I woke up I didn’t know the dance. Then the doors opened, as I was able to choreograph dances then. From then on, I started making choreography of my dances and on the 50th anniversary of our church I became the front line dancer for Saibai. Before time when my brothers were here, they were the oldest ones. I danced in the background. During that time, I was placed in the front line. So now they gave me the opportunity and allowed me to perform in the front line dancing.’<sup>131</sup>

These influential Saibaian choreographers/teachers who were revered and mentioned repeatedly by the Knowledge Custodians and Knowledge Givers are Popu’s Wagea Waia, Kala Waia and also Popu’s Edrick Tabui and Parisa Tabui, and I pay homage to them. Awa Walter recounts to me that when the grandfathers danced, there was not as much focus on the entertainment value, but rather an inward acknowledgment of the long bloodline they came from. There is a deeply thoughtful and reflective response to *girel*. Awa Walter mentions “they dancing for their shadow.” There is poetic meaning in each movement sequence, and it tells a story. The setting of the sun is one small movement that I remember Awa Walter spoke of where the arm is raised and shields the eyes from the setting sun. The action is endowed with the feeling the setting sun brings – a metaphor also for the cycle of life.

Awa Jeff states that he and Awa Sedrick are quite different in their approach to choreographing, “me and Uncle Sedrick are very different teachers. Uncle is very traditional, and I am the one who creates new things. I marry the new into the old.”<sup>132</sup>

Awa Sedrick has his dance apparatus lined up in his shack on the dance block ready to talk about. These pieces are ingenious in their conception and execution, utilizing the materials available at the time.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Aniba-Waia.

## Zamiyakal – Apparatus, Dance Machines and Puppetry

The use of apparatus is a sophisticated creation and is fundamental to Saibai Island's performative storytelling. There is the shark dance where the shark apparatus is attached to the head of the male dancer and the jaws open and shut which I witnessed with Awa Jeff's dance troupe in the aforementioned Cairns performance in 2009. Another is the canoe dance, where the sails can slap up or slap down and is attached to the forearm.<sup>133</sup>

Specific dances include props such as a bow employed by the male dancers. The female dancers utilize a broom to sweep the energy away from the performance area, renewing and re-energising the space after each dance.<sup>134</sup> It is interesting to note the use of puppetry: in this case, a large skeleton puppet used for the Adhibuya dance for the Swedish ocean liner performance in the early 1970s.<sup>135</sup> Like puppetry, masks and dance apparatus are brought to life by the dancers.

### *Dhoeybal*

The first piece is the *dhoeybal*. It utilizes a beautiful fanned headdress of red-tipped white feathers that frame the top part of the male dancer's head. The *dhoeybal*, which is only used by the male dancers of Saibai Island, was initially made from the white feathers of a reef crane called *karbay*. The arch-shaped frame that supports these feathers is made of lawyer cane traded from Papua New Guinea and sits over the top part of the face.<sup>136</sup> The popular image of the *dhoeybal* can also be found as the emblem for the Saibai Island Council. The simple movements of the head adorned with the *dhoeybal* create a dramatic and majestic component of the dance:

'We use that headdress for rain dances called *Madhubal*. It's a story from *Thabu* clan that mentions that headdress. Grandfathers made, then fathers made it, now we make these headdresses. This headdress was used by *Madhubal* to dance the rain dance. When they call the rains, they flog the water in the shallows (salt water). There's a dance attached to the *Madhubal*. They beat the water, or sometimes they dance around a well that contains water.'<sup>137</sup>

### *Dhoeri*

Similar to the *dhoeybal* is the *dhoeri*. Again a headdress was worn only by male dancers but this time shared throughout the other islands of the Torres Straits. White feathers from the *karbay* are traditionally sourced to create the fanned arch but now ordered from a store on the mainland. The *dhoeri* of Saibai is distinguishable by the cane frame. The frame is known as *bomeh* and differs in size from other islands as Awa Sedrick points out, "We have wings of a stingray. Bigger headdresses."<sup>138</sup> The *dhoeri* is worn by the male in dances that symbolize victory and celebration:

'It (the headdress) imitates the movement of a pearl shell as it sinks in water. It's what we imitate here. Different ways of movement to do with this headdress – (backwards – *apathayan*; forwards – *paypathayan*). We can make it disappear and appear by the movements of the head. (*Ladhun* is the way you move the headdress from side to side and imitates the pearl shell sinking in water. It shakes and then it sits).'<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Harvey, "Saibai Island Dance."

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Mebai Warusam, interview by Margaret Harvey, 2015.

<sup>136</sup> Sedrick Waia, interview by Alistair Harvey, 2018.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

### *Kuyku Samu*

The final headdress Awa Sedrick shares is known as *Kuyku Samu*: *samu* meaning cassowary. As there is no cassowary on Saibai, the *samu* feathers are obtained from a Papuan headdress that is deconstructed and recreated as the *Kuyku Samu*. The decoration applied is known as *sagaya* and can also be used for decoration on the drum. The *toeyd* is the long central piece of wood resembling a hunting implement.<sup>140</sup>

‘That headdress was a cassowary headdress to put on your head for warrior costumes for battle. Through time of change, it becomes a warrior costume for dancing. Started far back as our grandfathers to fathers than to our time that headdress is used. We get the feathers from PNG as Saibai doesn’t have cassowary. We then pass on to our children and nephews that same headdress.’<sup>141</sup>

### *Burrubur*

The *burrubur* is a beautiful, large, hourglass-shaped drum used for *girel* and also in church alongside Amen songs.<sup>142</sup> The drum beats of the *burubur*, produce a steady deep “boom” beat supporting the tempo of the dance and song. When struck, there is a deep resounding beat that echoes throughout the body. Previously, a smaller drum known as the *warup* was played in Awa’s grandfather’s time. The *burrubur* is traded from PNG, and often comes bearing old designs. The *burrubur* began being used by Saibaians in Awa Sedrick’s father’s time and is often characterised with designs and symbols befitting the owner’s clan. The drum skin is usually made from a water snake known as *zazimar* or goanna skin. Stuck to the surface is beeswax known as *wam*, which tunes the *burrubur*.<sup>143</sup>

### *Thuram*

There is another drum frequently played during *girel* known as *thuram*. Made out of the wood from the *mekay* tree (translated as sea almond tree), the *thuram* is used for the quicker beats. This cylindrical-shaped drum is a much smaller in size than the *burrubur* and is elevated off the ground with a wooden stand to produce a clean tapping sound when hit with accompanying wooden drumsticks.<sup>144</sup>

‘Used for dancing and today on Saibai we Saibaians use to control dancing by giving signals by the drum. We give signals for when to start the dance and when to finish the dance through beats of the drum. Some drums are made out of big bamboo. The one I’ve got is from *mekay* tree. There are a lot of good trees that you can use. Another one is *wongai*, but it’s heavy. It’s a good-sounding wood. *Mekay* is light, and you’re able to carry to different locations. You start by chiselling inside of the wood. Then you can burn it. You chisel from both ends and then when you finish you have handles.’<sup>145</sup>

### *Bu Shell*

The *bu* shell is a large cream-coloured conch shell and very much part of an Islander’s culture. When blown into, it produces a horn-like sound.<sup>146</sup>

‘We call it *bu* and we also use it as a dance apparatus. This shell is very symbolic to our culture. We use it in the church to gather people together or when we summon people for a meeting gathering. Today we use it for dancing.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Church hymns sung in language are usually referred to as Amen songs.

<sup>143</sup> Waia, "Saibai Zimayakal - Apparatus."

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

We use it during dance to summon the dance spirits into the dance field. There's a choreography to use this as a dance apparatus. And you blow the *bu* and dance with it.<sup>147</sup>

### *Moerap*

The *moerap* is a bamboo cut to approximately fifty centimetres in length. The bamboo is cut in half lengthways to about the three-quarter mark which allows for a clapping sound to be produced when pulsed. A section is taken out of the middle to allow for flexibility.<sup>148</sup>

'Every island uses it. All the way from Murray Island to Boigu use this for dance. But the difference is they have different moves or choreography, and we have our styles for using the apparatus. There are different methods to make it in a way that makes a good sound. Then you compose songs to suit this apparatus. When you want to use somebody else's song, you have to get permission. We use it. Every island uses it for dancing. In Saibai dancing it's used for fast dancing. We use this to make a sound.'<sup>149</sup>

### *Sik*

The *sik*, which means wave foam, is an elegant, white-feathered, women's apparatus employed by all the islands of the Torres Strait. Nine white feathers are constructed standing in a line across the length of a white, wooden base, embedded in place by lawyer canes. Behind this base is a handle for the dancers to clasp when manoeuvring the *sik*. Awa Sedrick explains, "When a lot of women are dancing, it really looks like foam on the water surface. It imitates the waves." He then goes on to demonstrate the two pieces side by side, moving them together to resemble the gentle movement of a wave and then separating both pieces and moving them forwards and backwards. At this point Awa Sedrick then hits both parts together lengthways, creating a sound to imitate waves crashing the rocks.<sup>150</sup>

'It imitates the wave and the foam that appears on the waves – smashed against the rocks or the beach with sounds accompanying the waves. Other islands also use this type of *sik* apparatus but made differently. This is the way we do it on Saibai. I don't know if they used in my father's time but we created this recently.'<sup>151</sup>

### *Moethay*

The *moethay* is made of dried leaves from the coconut tree and is used by many island people as a broom. Awa Jeff describes the use of the *moethay* for *girel*, "to clean the energy up before your dancers go in, and the broom is also swept at the finishing of the dance to clean the footprints out of there because there'll be new dancers approaching the dance field."<sup>152</sup>

### *Dagul*

The *dagul* is a long wooden spear. Attached to the end of the spear are three sharp prongs made from wood called *buru* traded from Papua New Guinea.<sup>153</sup>

'That spear is used for fishing for food and also as a dance apparatus. We use that same dance apparatus during the time of when the apparatus is used. When we do a dance there

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Harvey, "Saibai Island Dance."

<sup>153</sup> Waia, "Saibai Zimayakal - Apparatus."

must be a story or explanation attached to it. In the past they use *burul*, today they use iron.<sup>154</sup>

### *Gagay a thayak*

*Gagay a thayak* is a striking apparatus based on the Saibaian hunting bow and arrow. The drama of the dance is in the flexing/pulling/drawing of the *gagay a thayak* to imitate the shooting of an arrow, and is often met with excited whistles and shouts from spectators. No longer used for hunting, the *gagay a thayak* is specifically made today for *girel*.<sup>155</sup>

‘The bow is called *gagay*. One end is the forehead of canoe and the other end is the stern of a canoe. The string is called *gagawoer*. The sharp ends of the bow is called *poeni*. The front part is called *dhayal*. The whole body of the bow is made out of *buru*. Some bamboo bows are big bows, made out of bamboo. The bows are used for killing cassowary and kangaroo. This particular bow is a smaller one for dancing. In New Guinea they use this for dancing and hunting and in the three islands of Boigu, Dauan and Saibai we use it for dancing.’<sup>156</sup>

### *Mawa*

At the front entrance of Awa Sedrick’s home sits a mask known as *mawa*. *Mawa* means “face.” This *mawa* is placed next to the front door and is done so to protect/warn off those who may wish to cause harm towards those residing in Awa’s home – whether they be of this world or not. As this particular apparatus is created by Awa Sedrick and is imbued with a story conceived by him containing significant Cultural Knowledge, Awa Sedha is a custodian of, I feel it best to include all of Awa’s Sedrick’s transcription:<sup>157</sup>

‘I constructed it. *Mawa* is a face mask.

I called him *Dhibagil Mawa* (language constructed of this story – *adhi* (big story) *kulba* (old), *poelgil* (rising) *moelpal* (moon) – words were put together to make the name *Dhibagil Mawa* It’s a really old moon.

This thought came to me when we were doing something at the primary school. At that night there was a rising moon. Where I was sitting I was able to see the rising glow above the mangrove tree line. Then the moon appeared.

When I was watching it I thought I would do something or make something regarding this moon. And this *mawa* is the old moon himself.

It’s only used by male dancers. We only perform this *mawa* dance in the rising of the full moon.

It is constructed by cane (lawyer cane) and it is attached together by string (or twine). This is a treated cane. The untreated cane gets rotten quickly.

The cassowary feathers are traded from PNG.

The hair is made of straw skirts. It is again woven.

The beard is human hair. And the eyebrows. We’ve also got human hair on the head and then *samu* feathers with *Sagaya* attached. It also has earrings called *Thawthi* and *Kaza* (nose piercing).

The moon must be old. I compose songs. His appraisal songs of *mawa*. When we perform this *mawa* dance. Following this is the time of when the *mawa* appears. When he starts the phases from a new moon to the old moon. From the rising until he disappears in the west.

There’s old names to the phases of the moon. Labels given to them by old people.

When he’s facing the new crescent he’s predicting big rain.

When the crescent is facing upwards it’s dry season. The time of the shark –*Baydhamaw Thonar*. The swamps dry up. The names are:

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

*Dhangamoelpal*: new moon – literally *dhanga* meaning edge.

*Padamoelpal*: literally top of head.

*Paypagoeygi*: facing the east – rising moon.

*Apadoegamia thayan*: that's when he hides/disappears.

*Urugubaw Nathan*: you cook the sweet potato – the timing of how long it takes to cook is when it appears.

*Goeyn Nathan*: the timing is how long it takes – the timing of *goeyn* is a taro.

*Koeyma Nathan*: is a type of taro. It takes a longer period of time. He now disappears.

*Koepi Apadoegamuya thayan*: is when he goes underground then reappears in the west as a new moon.

*Ipikazil*: the moon is now yarning with his family. That's when he rests. That's when he goes underground. When it appears again: that's when it appears again as the new moon towards the west.

If you boil sweet potato and *kima*, the sweet potato will cook first then the *kima*. When you cook sweet potato than he disappears and after a short while he will appear again. So when you cook *kima* it takes a long time, slightly longer than the sweet potato before it's ready to eat. Then the moon rises again. When he goes under and disappears it is dark and when you see it again it will be a new moon.

We will do this dance then it will be finished for the season. We've done Bamaga in NPA Cultural Festival. But first we performed here at the primary school. We thought we were going to perform for the men only but women turned up so we performed for the whole crowd.

When he rose that night he was hidden by clouds and he was hiding his face.

He only appeared when he was up above.

When you compose a dance or your thinking and it takes place. Because when you do performances you are accompanied by deceased descendants of the performers or they give you ideas.

The name of the *mawa* is *Dhibigil Mawa*. I made up the name. The fathers never gave me this name. I put all the names together. *Adhi, kulba, poelgil, moelpal*. *Adhi* meaning big. *Kulba* meaning old. The same moon been there all the time. Generations come and then generations go. He's still here. There are a lot of stories about the moon but this particular story is an old moon.<sup>158</sup>

## Puppetry

Puppetry was a part of one of the dances of the 1960s: the *Adhibuyia* dance. One of the Waia popu's choreographed it. The puppetry was in the large scale skeletons deployed in the dance and operated by the male dancers.

Ama Patimah recounts a memorable time when a Saibaian dance team entertained a Swedish cruise liner in 1972. She happy recalls a shared memory that persists amongst Saibaian people which included a particular dance practice with her father, Popu Mebai Warusam.

Ama Pati Waia recounted a memory she had as a child watching her fathers rehearse a performance of the *Adhibuyia* for the Swedish cruise liner:

'I was very young, a young child, when I watched the old men preparing the dancers, the fleet of dances, to go to the ship, off Wednesday Island and T.I.

I was sitting on a mat watching, when I see two performers, my father and Bab Asu were participating in a battle between Papua New Guinea warrior and Saibai warrior.

And the dance went as the battle took place and Bab Asu, he struck my father and my father fell to the ground and in that same instant I burst out a big cry for my father.

And they told me, "Don't cry it's only a dance."

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

With the usual dance, we dance the happy dancing... it's not the same, not powerful as when they do the warrior dances and this man is my father.<sup>159</sup>

Popu Mebai Warasum is a tall, striking man of 91 at the time of the interview. He still has a commanding presence and moves between English, KKY and Torres Strait Creole. I have met Popu on a previous trip to Saibai, and he is always eager to speak. Flung over his shoulder is the facecloth worn by many Torres Strait Islanders to aid in wiping the perspiration from their faces. He watches tentatively while we arrange and test microphones. Popu Mebai is the oldest Knowledge Giver I am speaking to about Saibai *girel*. Beside him sits his wife Aka Rona, in her late 80s. Aka Rona has a warmth about her that so many of akas and amas have. Their temperaments complement each other, and when they are not engaged in conversation with Awa Walter, they are both highly interested and alert as to what we are doing: watching us scurrying around them: trying to be as quick as possible in finishing the set-up. Popu chose to speak about the dances of his time. He is brief in his account and tells us that to understand the dance is to see the dance. This I have not witnessed so am not fully cognisant of what these dances look like. I offer them up to those of Saibaian blood who may read this and who may follow this up in future.

## Dances of Popu Mebai's Time

In this section, I will keep to what Popu has imparted as in-text citations so as not to obscure what he has said. What is in brackets next to Popu's descriptions are a brief translation from Awa Jeff, which I have added to further elucidate what Popu Mebai has imparted.<sup>160</sup>

### *Pipi*

'Where people singing and chanting across, and back. They carrying branches going that way and this way.'<sup>161</sup>

### *Badhoera*

'Where people are carrying small drums called *sagab sagab*. You bend your knees hitting the drum.'<sup>162</sup>

### *Kadaypapudamay*

'In *kadaypapudamay* you are jumping up and down and to your side one side to the other. (*panithumay* – the stretching of your left and right legs. It's a part of the *kadaypapudamay* dance).'<sup>163</sup>

### *Pawpawoeyaman*

'This dance is using head dress on top of your head  
And the headdress is *dhoeri*.  
The dance is passed on from one generation to the other.  
When I was a boy I saw *dhoeri*. As one of the headdresses (in this dance).  
The other thing that is attached to this dancing is *buruwa* (coconut leaf).

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<sup>159</sup> Patimah Waia, interview by Margaret Harvey, 2015.

<sup>160</sup> Warusam.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

*Buruwa* –‘when it is tied on by *Migi Buway* by a *Koey Buway* person those big *buway* people will do the dancing. When people come with their dancing they will bring with them garden harvest, crops from their garden and give them up for the small clan people.

This event has only been done in the Top Western Islands and mainly here on Saibai After *dhoeri*, it’s a hand-held apparatus called a *kulup*. It’s a rattle.

You can use bow and arrow or using the bamboo clapper called *merap*. Out of the *kulup* came a dance using hand movements, body movements and the *kulup* itself.

Sometimes the actions are so fast that no one follows them.

Sometime the *buruwa* event take place during church festivals. So you tie that *buruwa* on to people prior to the event. You will tie the *buruwa* one or two months before the event.

Before time them grandfathers used to hip all the harvest of their gardens, and then that harvest is used in feasts, in feeding the group of people doing the dance.

Today is different, we don’t have the garden food, but we use money.

People drop money (collection) into make that *buruwa* feast happen

This year we went to Boigu and we did collection of big sums of money almost \$1,000. And that was our *buruwa*. We took to Boigu to give them dollars for their church. The money went to their church.

Sometimes families get together and give their donation and that donation goes to the church and that is what we mean by *buruwa* today.

Now *buruwa* is a leaf used to tie on people's hand and this leaf comes from the tree pandanus. And there's a certain type of pandanus, not the one that grow in the gardens but the one that grow on the sand called *kawsar* (cow-sar).

The one that grows in the gardens, the type of pandanus is known as *abal*.

The *abal* pandanus is very strong, it's not very good.

There's a process that goes with the pandanus leaf, when you cut it it's green. You put it through coals of fire and when the oil substance shows, you take it out and you lay it out on the sand to dry, and the colour changes from green to white.

So you can use the same pandanus to weave mats and make different patterns by using different colours.

And the patterns come out very, very clear

The word *buruwa* comes from these leaves

That's a leaf coming from the pandanus that grows on the sand known as *kawsar*.

There's one growing just at the back of my house.

Like I explained before *buruwa* is that if you tie *buruwa* on me, I'll be the dancer and you are going to be the one providing the feast with food.

If I tie *buruwa* on you it’s the other way round I do the cooking I provide the feast/food and you do the entertainment by dancing.

We can dance all day all night.

When you put the stick of *buruwa* it's a coconut leaf tied around the pole and you stick the pole into the ground, you don't take it off until the next day that's when the dancing finished you take the *buruwa* out.

Before time, we sow gardens harvest, today it's only money (use money as the *Buruwa* gift).

Same, if Boigui came and put *buruwa* here to Saibai, Saibai people take the *buruwa* back with a gift of money to donate to the church.

Same with Dauan we can take *buruwa* down to Dauan. They provide the feast and we dance.

Only the three Islands use the *buruwa* not the other Islands. I don't know why.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

## Adhibuya

'They took this rock known as *Adhibuya* from Fly River and the story goes that Kiwai raided Ait people the time when the men were out hunting.

When the Kiwai went back, they come back saw their woman and children were killed when the men of Ait came back from hunting dugong that night (and the Ait revenged by taking the rock).

Then the Ait people got together prepared the weapons went back and paid revenge. When they came there, what they (Kiwai people) did, they did dance around this glowing stone, the stone that known as *Adhibuya* and maintained power.

During the day it doesn't glow, only at night it glows.

We'll wait till the birds tweet in the dawn and attack in the dawn.

Two men (*Ait Koedal* clan) volunteered to take the rock that glows. The plan was that when the fighting will take place the two men will take the rock and they will travel ahead before the others. The rock, *Adhibuya* could mean "story light." *Adhi* meaning big light.

The other one is story light or *Adhi* also means "big light." So it's a "big light" or a "story light."

When the missionaries came, the Ait people took the rock to a place called *Diwicoll*. Just where the airstrip is, just behind the airstrip that's where they placed that *Akananiayzinga* (Aka also refers to the name Ait people gave to the rock. They call it Aka meaning Grandmother. When it's night the rock glow it killed all the surrounding vegetation so today it's red in colour).

That's where the site where they left the rock that glows, it's bare, no vegetation grows there. Today we got ant bed.

Today that place is called *Akananiayzinga*. It means where the grandmother sat.

Sometimes called grandmother or sometimes as *Adhibuya* – big light or story light.

The rock where they placed has now no vegetation growing there but also around there it killed the vegetation where the rock was placed.<sup>165</sup>

## Kulup

'There's a song in Mabuiag where *kulup* dancing came out to the Torres Strait Islands, but to our knowledge it was Bab Wagea who took the *kulup* from Poruma by the name of old man Elia Faud. When the rattle dancing came – in the Central Islands they were just using one way to use the *kulup* or the rattle. But here it was more complicated techniques or body movements/usage of *kulup* or dance rattle.

Using the whole body with the rattle, the *kulup* and the effect changes, the sounds of *kulup* changes by using the whole body.

Da da da da da! (Popu says this in short staccato-like beat).

Today the *kulup* dancing or the *moerap* dancing changed big time. Today I am an old guy, I don't take part in dancing anymore. All my brothers are gone we always been together in dancing. All my brothers are gone and there were a generation of dancers with me and my younger brothers and some were older brothers who were still performing.

Some brothers of ours are in Bamaga. Some already have passed away.

Some people are still living, some brothers that we were together have already passed on.<sup>166</sup>

## Drum

'There was an old man, His name is Kakaw. He was the inventor of the drum *thuram*. And the idea came from the diesel motor. Today the same beat is now in Torres Strait. It

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

actually started from here by imitating the diesel motor. Mabuiag People are saying the *kulup* came originally from Mabuiag but the drum beat, the *thurup* came from Saibai. Today you can ask Uncle Sedrick who controls the dance by using *thoeram* drumbeats to start and finish the dance. Today it's all controlled by the *thoeram* beats Uncle Sedrick uses. Not by voice but by drumbeats.<sup>167</sup>

All dances described by Popu Mebai (above) are from a time when he was dancing as a young boy into adulthood, which was from the late 1930s into the 1940s.

## Christianity and Saibai *Girel*

There is a distinct evolution through the periods that the Knowledge Givers speak of from the late 1930s to 2016. As modernity began to take hold, lives became busier – priorities shifted. There is also a distinct correlation with churchgoers and the practice and maintenance of Cultural practice with *girel*. Ama Patimah Waia states that Saibai *girel* survived because it continued throughout the initial LMS and colonising period through to today.<sup>168</sup> It was evident that she was concise with what she was choosing to impart during the interview as conversation. There was a method to the delivery of the information on *girel* that she was sharing with me. Her answer to my question in regard to her bloodline heritage and her connection to Saibai Island and me was first through her acknowledgment of her father Mebai Warasuam, and also her mother, Rona Warasuam nee Waigana. Aka Rona is the sister-cousin of Aka Serema Wasiu (nee Waigana). Their fathers are brothers – Aka Rona *Bab* (Father) is Enosa. Aka Serema *Bab* (Father) is Waianga.

Ama Patimah laughs when she recalls her clan before marriage. Her mother Rona came from *Ait Koedal* and married into the *Dhoeybaw* clan when she married Mebai. And now Ama Pati has married into the *Ait Koedal* clan. She laughs because she went back and was not supposed to as it is against protocols. But now it is a frequent occurrence to have intermarriages within the clan.<sup>169</sup>

She goes on to explain her wind. Many Saibaians acknowledge their wind when speaking of their bloodline and clan group. "My wind is *Sager*, East Wind."

'The star of *Sager Tithui* is known as *Ee*.  
My father's constellations are *Thoegay*.  
When I married, I married into the constellation of *Ee*.<sup>170</sup>

During the oppressive regime of colonisation in the Torres Straits, missionaries instilled in all Islanders a sense that their dances may no longer be performed. Awa Jeff speaks further on the Pacific Islander missionary influence in the dance since the arrival of the LMS in the following chapter.<sup>171</sup>

Similar to Casey's claim that the Cultural practice of dances on Mer would have continued, albeit in secrecy, Mer Islanders demonstrate a proficient level of practice in the re-enactment, as captured on camera by Haddon. Ama Patimah also speaks of the continuing tradition of Saibai *girel*.

'The dancing was here before the missionaries came  
Even though there was the introduction of Christianity, the dance was continued.  
Dancing was here all the time before the Christianity came so it continued.  
The dance was about clan ownership, boundary lines, the sky, the constellations associated with the clans.

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Waia.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Harvey, "Evolution of Saibai Island Dance."

Even though Christianity came people continued because it was part of their lifestyle, music and dance.<sup>172</sup>

There is a respect for the church. The Saibai dancers who form the *Muyngu Koekaper* in 2016 are Christians and churchgoers.

Ama Patimah speaks of the Holy Trinity Church on Saibai Island, and the connection Saibaians have to Christianity. There is undoubtedly a link between Saibaians who are still practising *girel* and the church. Most of the Knowledge Givers I interviewed are churchgoers and there is a connection to the practising of Culture through *girel* and the church. The three awas are not regular churchgoers but have respect for those who are. Ama Pati spoke of a time when she was a child and the festivities that would take place in the lead up to the anniversary of the Holy Trinity Church's dedication on 4 December.

She describes how families would camp near the church and how they would all work together preparing the church day and night: practising dance at night:

'Sometimes when there was a big festival coming up we camp near the families and gather together. We work and prepare the church during the day and at night we do our dance practices.

When the church day comes 4th December – I participated in that – we move together to make a camp around the church. Families gather. We cook on the grass and at night people start doing dance practice in preparation.

When the date falls everybody dances.

Then it started to disappear slowly.

Then it slowly died out, then finally it went all together.

Then we stopped camping around the church like we used to do.<sup>173</sup>

Ama Patimah spoke about *girel* happening at festivities like Christmas or church events such as the dedication:

'When it came to Christmas time, one end of the village would take dance to the other end, and vice a versa. And we dance with the dancers going from one end of the village taking a dance, and the other villagers come back.'<sup>174</sup>

She speaks about how before time there was a lot of time spent in rehearsing and practising the dances and how today there is just one day. There was more than one dance teacher when she was growing up, and as there were quite a few families in the middle village with plenty of children, they were split up, attending dance practice at opposite ends of the village.<sup>175</sup>

## Song and Music

The oral history of Saibai Island is not only present in the spoken word but also in song. Songs are not only part of cultural preservation but also speak of the vibrant historical events that have impacted Saibai Islanders. Many songs are composed during each generation separate to the *girel*, and certain songs captivate the hearts of *Saibailgal* decades after the song was created. Some *Saibailgal* compose songs about the world, national or community events – some about family or their life on Saibai.

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<sup>172</sup> Waia.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

Music and song form the base of all the *girel* and the choreographers are also the song composers. The two drums *burubur* and *thurem* provide the beat of the *girel*. The rhythms of the *burubur*, produce a steady deep base “boom” beat supporting the tempo of the dance and song. The *thurem*, is used for the quicker beats and is a much smaller cylinder-shaped drum that is elevated with a stand to produce a clean tapping sound when hit with accompanying wooden drumsticks. There was one particular Knowledge Giver for whom song was a part of her narrative and her vibrant personality and she recounted stories without hesitation.

I first met Aka Sela Sam a few days before her interview. We were setting up for another interview when we heard a yell from Awa Walter. We looked up and noticed a distinguished-looking woman had stopped along the road. I knew that face as soon as I saw her. I have seen that similar look in Aka and Ama. Aka Sela has a strong presence. She is tall in stature and she has a sense of strength about her. Her cheekbones are set high and offset the twinkle in her eyes. At the time of recording, she was 79 years old. I was very sorry to hear of her passing the following year, and my hope is her recording may bring some comfort to those closest to her and for her future line. When I was introduced to her tears came to her eyes. And straightaway she told me of her blood connection to me. It was a short but precious exchange. The exchanges I have with my akas are for me always a heart connection and offer me a sense of the strength of who I am and where I come from. Alistair told me of how she would break into a song when recollecting stories and performance from the past.

When the day arrived for her interview, my brother went to pick her up. Awa Walter mentioned that it would be good also to have Awa James there. He was her brother but through island adoption has now become our awa instead of popu. He could help by prompting her if need be.

Awa Ronnie James Akiba was the first person to be interviewed. He was also forthcoming with imparting his knowledge and supportive of what I was setting out to do. Awa Ronnie has a warm, giving nature. Not one to look you directly in the eyes as he speaks, he is thoughtful in his responses and takes the process quite seriously. We set up both chairs for the interview between Awa Walter and Awa Ronnie under the shelter.

The glare from the water and sky was blowing the image out, so we shifted the chairs and the camera gear to an appropriate background and re-set. When we met Awa James for the first time twenty minutes before the interview, his gentle nature was apparent. He held out his hand and with eyes and head looking downwards at the ground, he shook my hand quite gently. He was respectful of the space we had set up for the interview and only sat down when he was offered the chair that he was to sit on. Awa Walter checked in with us to ascertain how long it would be before we would be ready. Once it was confirmed it would be another ten minutes, he continued his chat with Awa James in KKY. Providing sufficient time for each Knowledge Giver to feel comfortable in this enforced environment was always a priority. Setting them up with a cup of tea or coffee beforehand as they chatted with Awa Walter in their designated chair, assisted in creating a relaxed environment and alleviating any concern for the equipment such as the lapel microphone and the small crew operating the camera and sound. Whether we were ready or not that extra ten minutes sitting around chatting helped us and the interviewee to relax. I noticed the cap Awa James was wearing was causing a slight shadow on his face and made a polite request for him to remove it. Awa did so without hesitation.

Once I felt the vibe was relaxed, I casually mentioned to both awas that we were ready and motioned to both camera operators to begin rolling. The two awas immediately wrapped up their conversation and confirmed that they were ready. I aimed to keep dialogue happening, so the relaxed feeling of communication remained. I went straight into talking about the process and began with asking them about their clan group and bloodline links to me.

When Aka Sela arrived, there was a big greeting from her. She had turned up in a vividly colourful island dress with the lace trimming ruffled around the neckline. The island dress is a popular dress for women of the Torres Straits and is based on the Victorian notions of style that missionaries

brought to the Pacific Islands. She wore silver drop earrings and behind one ear was a beautiful bright yellow *kukuam* (hibiscus flower) that framed her striking, angular face. She reminded me so much of Ama. When she smiled, her eyes lit up. I let the three elders catch up first so Aka Sela could relax in the space and become comfortable with the set-up.

When she was ready, she began. Aka Sela came from the *Dhamuway* clan and married into *Suy Baydham* to Joseph Sam. Her father's name was Kinur Akiba, and her mother's name was Kuykuyit. She recalls her time at school on Saibai and how the school building was made out of sago palm. Aka Sela began her education with a white teacher but soon Island teachers were also employed. *Popu Kala Waia* was her teacher and his teaching style encompassed "the white cultural techniques of education and also the Islander way of education." Popu Kala was also Aka Sela's dance teacher.<sup>176</sup>

One of the most memorable moments for me during this time on Saibai was the moment Aka Sela broke into song during the interview. It was a magical moment. She locked eyes with me and began to sing. It was the goodbye song composed after the migration of *Koey Buway* (big clans) from Saibai to the mainland. I could feel tears welling up in my eyes. At the same time, Aka Sela's eyes began to well up. She gathered up all her strength to keep on singing. The two awas, heads bowed, also joined in, softly singing in island harmony. Three-part harmony is a distinct feature of Torres Strait musicality.

SONG: (English translation)

*The boat travelling  
With child on board  
As the sun sets,  
As they came nearer to Entrance Island  
And I can hardly see them  
As they disappearing*

'The person who composed the song, his name is Samuel. He composed the song for the movement, the migration. When the two luggers went from Saibai to Cape York (and) Samuel was the wardsman at Thursday Island hospital, he was standing outside the hospital and the sun was setting... the boats were nearing Cape York (when) he composed the song. The boats names were Millard and McCoy.

I think far back then, the way we think and felt from the small clan people when the boats left...<sup>177</sup>

When it is time to recount her dance experience, a mischievous grin appears on Aka Sela's face as she responds, "I am an expert my grandchild."

## Women's Dance

'I liked my dancing, I love dancing.

When there was a festive event on like church event, I always do dance like it's something you like to eat, your favourite food and that was dance. I love dancing

I always took over the dance field and asked other ladies to come and join me. When I was taught dancing the proper Saibai techniques of dancing was by Mr Wagea Waia. You really go down in dancing, and the term that use, is that you use your fingers through your mouth.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Sela Akiba, interview by Margaret Harvey, 2015, Saibai Island.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

This expression to “use your fingers through your mouth” in KKY is known as *geth goodi muyma* – which means it is coming through your mouth, the proper techniques of dance.<sup>179</sup>

The evolution of the women’s dance has evolved dramatically from 2009. Ama Patimah acknowledges the evolving nature of dance styles adding, “the time is now changing and so the dancers change with the time. In our time we were not fast like these girls are now. The girls are very fast.”<sup>180</sup>

Before the missionaries arrived the *girel* was deeply connected to the spiritualism and rituals of Saibaian ethos.<sup>181</sup> Today, the entertainment element plays a big part in choreographing new dances. Implementing a more male-orientated dance style to the women’s dance style lifted the entertainment and energy of the show of Saibai Island performances. This dance style advanced from closed thighs to open thighs, similar to the men. The jump off the ground was also added for power and energy. This was born from the need to heighten the energy for an audience: to create a show that would keep the audience attention from start to end, that was “action-packed” as Awa Jefa exclaims.<sup>182</sup> Awa explicates on the changing of the female dance during leading the *Ariw Poenipan* dance troupe:

‘I had Cassie (Adidi-Sabatino) the student, and she was a willing student. She's one of those students like in any NAISDA<sup>183</sup> or whenever you can ask to do this and they will do it regardless. We are working around this idea. See if this idea works. She did it well. And when we took it back to Saibai, showcase at Saibai, the Saibai girls were scared. They said no because we were breaking the protocols, because Sedrick got me on the phone and said, “they can't do it, they can't do it,” I said, “keep trying, keep trying.” Then finally they did it, and bought it to Thursday Island, and we showcased that. Very powerful and different. And the comments people made, some of them I can't say... like it was very beautiful. In the Western world they always attach sexiness into it, because we not only share the dance, we also put the lipstick on and make-up on their faces like an actor would do for a stage show. And of course have paint to mark as a traditional dancing. It's a really show off and it's so powerful with energy. It's so powerful that even the young men have to be very strong and fit, to match the energy of this women.

Every time there's a man dancing in our group, so powerful. And then the girls come in and so weak that energy going down so Ilario asked me one day... this is Cassie's husband, “Mr Waia, can you do something because this energy is going down. Can we do something so it will bring the energy up of the women?” – “OK let's think on it.” So I started to think of dancing like a man and break the protocols of having thighs together, to open stance. And Cassie did it. Cassie did it well. And it was different. Very powerful. Then I gave it to Sedrick to have a try with his dancers. It took a long time for Saibai to get around it ... and then they did it. We actually took our dance team back to Saibai, and when they did the performance the girls couldn't handle that Saibai dance team. They said, “no we're not going to do that, it's so embarrassing,” but then they finally did it. And that's the power we displayed then. They were nervous but we've been practising it. This became a norm.”<sup>184</sup>

## The Influence of Popular Culture on *Girel*

Since the 1970s when the Saibai Island dance troupe performed for the Swedish cruise liner off Wednesday Island, Saibai dance troupes have performed regularly outside the island at public

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<sup>179</sup> Aniba-Waia.

<sup>180</sup> Waia.

<sup>181</sup> Harvey, "Saibai Island Dance."

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> NAISDA is the acronym for dance college, The National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association.

<sup>184</sup> Aniba-Waia.

events such as NAIDOC week (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee), arts festivals, museum, and art gallery events on the mainland of Australia, as well as internationally in places such as China, Vanuatu and the Cook Islands. These numerous performances continue to drive the need to evolve the *girel* style for Torres Strait Islander audiences and other varied audiences.

There are dances performed for entertainment purposes at celebratory events, and there are dances performed for ceremonial purpose such as the initiation of young men, and the first haircut of a boy. Further, although tombstone unveilings and weddings are ceremonial celebrations there is an entertainment factor in the performance of the dances for the guests gathered during feasting time.

The drum beats of the *thorem* were inspired by the diesel motor of the dinghy.<sup>185</sup> During WWII, US soldiers were based on Thursday Island alongside Torres Strait servicemen and during that time tap dancing was introduced to the Islanders. Tap dancing influenced the style of dance when new dances were choreographed:

'The influence of media is now so global that we able to view different cultures and the thing that interests me is the movie characters especially the warrior. There was a good movie out in the 70s with a guy called Bruce Lee and when you see this actor with his kung fu style there's a different language going on but it's so action packed that you just enjoy the whole piece. So in order to do that, you just go in with your fast movements, your fancier dance costumes, your apparatuses, and that's the way you perform. So it's a non-stop, action-packed styles of dancing with accompanying narration and always catch the audiences.'<sup>186</sup>

The Knowledge Custodians of performative storytelling are not only choreographers and song composers but are also costume designers. The costumes are heavily influenced by popular culture and the materials on hand at the time. Ama Patimah recollects the transient nature among the Islander population:

'Other influence of other cultures coming into Saibai was when people started to move away from the Island or into other communities and then bringing back the knowledge of those communities, and that influences our way of life here. When we have people now moving from one island to another, visitors coming here and taught our people their island dancing. Or people moving away from Saibai into another community learning their dances and bringing those back to our community on Saibai. Same thing happened when men travel to other community and bringing back new ideas.'<sup>187</sup>

## Audience

The audience is a major factor in influencing the choreography and how the show is presented. In an age where there are many options for entertainment, and smart screens offer constant distraction. Keeping audience attention is always at the forefront of Awa Jeff's mind:

'You see a lot of that stuff I was involved in, the changing of dance, the dance outfits and the changing of the woman style of dancing. I am the scientist behind all of that. You don't allow the audience to wander in their minds. It's a show. It continues – coming in, coming out, coming in, coming out, to coming in, coming out 35 minutes to 40 minutes you have to be fit to put on a show. So it's non-stop action-packed for that period of time. It's not a normal Island dance where everybody wanders off till the next dance comes in. It's a stage

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<sup>185</sup> Harvey, "Saibai Island Dance."

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Waia.

show.... I have to change my tactics in dance presentation because one, we got no language speakers in the crowd and money being the main thing so you create not that boring slow to a climax style of dance you *makem* (make them) fast, explosive, sexy that's what Western people wanna see. That's what we present.<sup>188</sup>

## Training and Technique

The training and technique is complex and physically challenging and has the male dancers beginning their training in water with a *dhoeri* headdress made of plastic. Awa Sedrick speaks of the dances being connected to the land on which they are choreographed. She says the proper way to learn *girel* is on Saibai as the spirit of the dance: as its creation was born of Saibai. *Bala* (brother) Nathan Tabuai is a senior dancer with *Muyngu Koekaper* today. He recounts the steps he took to become a senior dancer in the troupe:

'Of course there is always continuation of dancers like there's steps. I am now a senior dancer in our dance group. I started as a junior at the back, then I became an apprentice then as soon as you become a senior dancer than you wait for your time to become... (choreographer).

All of my elders and relatives have that long line of choreographer, dancing, composing that's where I learnt from a young age. Since the day I started walking because it was imprinted in my genes.

From then to today the changes have gone through

I remember beforehand my uncles here, Uncle Walter, Uncle Sedrick, Uncle Jeffa, all those uncles, they really influenced me in dancing and the late Uncle Terry also.

I'm probably on the verge of graduating and my uncles will give the consent of choreographing my own styles of dancing and implement it into our dance group. So now I am a front line dancer and with respect of my uncles, I've learnt that through many years of dancing practice and listening to my elders, listening to my uncles. And it's an honour what I've learnt from many years.<sup>189</sup>

Awa Sedrick has also been part of NAISDA's cultural residency program over a twenty-year period. The dances taught at dance schools or for other non-Saibaian are taught for their technical elements alone.<sup>190</sup> The "spirit" of the dance is interconnected with the knowledge passed on to dancers of the same clan. This is a long process. As previously discussed, knowledge is informed by the land, sea and sky, the environment in which Saibaian live.

The dancers are heavier set and carry more weight than what they did during their fathers and grandfathers' era. Chronic health issues are prominent in the Torres Straits, and Awa Jeffa speaks of bringing more energy and physical prowess to the dancing to raise fitness levels because of the health challenges knocking at Islanders' doors. This means that dancers must increase their fitness to keep up with the physical demands of rehearsals and the performance itself.

## Protocols and Copyright

The main concern for Saibai *girel* is cultural and intellectual property rights. The Cultural Knowledge Custodians have oral protocols and copyright in place but this has not been enough. The term "copy and paste" is what they refer to when they see their family line of dances

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<sup>188</sup> Aniba-Waia.

<sup>189</sup> Nathan Tabuai, interview by Margaret Harvey, 2015.

<sup>190</sup> Waia, "Saibai Girel: Interview as Conversation - Awa Sedrick Waia."

performed by others who have not followed protocol or sought permission.<sup>191</sup> Awa Sedrick was straightforward in his explanation of what protocols and copyright mean to him:

‘Today we have to have a copyright in regards to no other people’s (take) our product without permission.

But the point always was, and has always been, what belongs to Saibai must be kept on Saibai. It belongs to the Saibai people.

What belongs to this grandad or this place (Athe Wagea), it belongs to him and his brothers. In other cases some things just belong to him.

Everyone has the same ownership.

Today generation we have to make sure that it is copyright properly. It doesn’t go out it stays here in this community.

The dancers today in this dance team know that you are not allowed to dance the dances outside. It’s only kept in Saibai for this dance team.

The dancers in the dance team know that we keep our product here.

Them dances from the Waia family, holistic ownership for them dances, “Bala Sedrick dance those concepts shared with me, Leonard, Awa Jeffa, Uncle Terry.” If it’s community then it’s *Muyngu Koekaper*.

All can own the name *Muyngu Koekaper* but the thing there inside *kulup* and *ga-guy* and *wanem* they *blo* somebody else. Respect. That’s why you have to come and get permission.<sup>192</sup>

## The Future of Saibai Island *Girel*

There is a sense of the Custodians biding their time before a decision is made to pass the choreographer role onto the next generation. Talk about who it could be has eventuated, but when this interview took place, the uncertainty was apparent. Awa Sedrick was not even sure if the role would continue. It might even die with today’s choreographers. Dancers have also come and gone from the island as modernity brings with it issues of jobs, education, and the environmental concerns of climate change and rising sea levels, affecting the low lying island of Saibai. But Saibai Island *girel* is continuously evolving and adapting to these problems and Awa Jeff has told stories about what has affected each generation of choreographer/composer:

‘Torres Strait culture is adaptable. We change in times. We move on. If there’s rock, we rock, if there’s jazz, we jazz if there’s reggae, we reggae. If I wanna do traditional dancing, then I’ll do traditional dancing. If I wanna come up with the creative ideas, new costumes and all that I will create that and that’s the beauty of Saibai dances... other island dances don’t do that.’<sup>193</sup>

## Conclusion

There is complete awareness of the commodity that Indigenous Cultural practice has become and the many competing factors that challenge the continuing tradition of Saibai *girel*. The practice and evolving nature of Saibai *girel* is driven by the choreographer of the time, although the fathers and grandfathers are always acknowledged and remembered with love and dignity. Awa Jeff’s quote at the beginning of this chapter epitomizes the creative and innovative way Saibaians have responded to ways of doing and ways of being. There is a resilience and innovative mindset that is

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<sup>191</sup> Waia.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Aniba-Waia.

inherent in the ethos of the Saibaian way of life and comes alive in dance and song. Saibai Island *girel* and its evolution is discussed in Chapter Four. I will attempt to depict a rich description of the short documentary I made with Awa Jeff, expanding on the evolutionary process of Saibai *girel*.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Saibai Island Dance – Documentary*

*The dance is your identity,  
the songs are your identity,  
the stories are your identity,  
regardless of your skin of colour, these are true identities of your soul.*

The video for this documentary can be found online via the vimeo link in the support material provided.

This chapter presents a rich description of the content in the documentary *Saibai Island Dance*, including the performance of *Muyngu Koekaper* captured on the island of Waiben during the 2013 Gab Titui Art Awards. It also includes an interview with Awa Jeff Aniba-Waia held in 2015.

The detailed description is my attempt to break down what I saw, felt and heard while viewing the material from multiple perspectives – as a descendant of Saibai Island, of the *Ait Koedal* clan. Through this description, I seek to reveal the many layers of the process that illuminate a pathway to caring for story that I elaborate on in Chapter Six.

Desmond and I were employed by Gab Titui and the production company Brown Cabs to deliver a film workshop alongside the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS). This workshop would be for interested participants who would also film the week's events, including the awards' night. Gab Titui is the central location for artworks, artefacts, and cultural heritage material from the Torres Strait created by local Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal artists. Situated on Waiben in the Torres Strait, Gab, as locals fondly call the cultural centre, is positioned on the front to overlook the beautiful turquoise waters of the Torres Straits.

Desmond and I had previously spent time with the Burundian community of Melbourne working on their stories of refugee life and facilitating these stories into digital media over twelve weeks, so we compressed and produced a condensed version of these facilitations into the space of a week. Gab Titui had also requested a video of the week's events that would serve as a promotional reel and would play in their gallery space at different times during opening hours. AFTRS would supply the equipment, including cameras, sound, and laptop computers, and Desmond would also utilize his gear in the workshop. The participants would work with Desmond on basic editing techniques and instruction on the camera. They would also be taught by Murray Lui, a notable Torres Strait Islander director of photography (DOP). My role was to assist the participants during the workshop and to direct the promotional video.

On the grounds of the centre's location is a grassed area that also encases an outdoor stage for live performance events such as presentations, dance, music, or theatre. Part of this workshop included filming the evening's presentation and performances as well as the traditional arts and crafts workshop.

On this particular evening, Gab Titui's 2013 Art Awards were to be presented, a large crowd had gathered to celebrate the event. The centre had been bustling with excitement over the days leading up to the awards, as workshops in *warup* (drum) making, comb making, weaving, and jewellery making filled the outdoor spaces. The spectators were made up of Islanders and non-Islanders from Waiben and surrounding Islander communities.

As the sun began to move to late afternoon, spectators and guests arrived for the evening's events that would include performances by three dance troupes from the Torres Strait regions, including

Saibai dance team *Muyngu Koekaper* and a local Thursday Island band as well, as the presentation of the art awards. The setting sun lessened the heat of the day, but the air-conditioned gallery spaces offered respite. There were many unique pieces of visual art to explore. There was plenty of colour and excitement in the crowd that bustled through the galleries and shop spilling out onto the grassed area where chairs had been laid out ready for the night's proceedings. Elders were already taking their seats and catching up with familiar faces of family and friends. Outside the fenced area of the cultural centre, there was an enclosed tarped area that served as a green room space for the many performers prepping their costumes, apparatus, and paint.

The performance of dance troupe *Muyngu Koekaper* was much anticipated by not only myself and big son Joharo, but by many of the spectators in the energetic crowd of around five hundred. I had already heard from some of the Islander Cultural art workshop facilitators and staff of Gab Titui of the high expectation surrounding all the dance troupes performing this evening, notably the Saibai Island dance troupe. The high energy entertainment factor of *Muyngu Koekaper* aligned with the cultural connection the dance troupe has to the ethos of Saibaian culture attracts the Islander crowd. Islander people are proud of their island Culture, and island dances displayed at community events throughout the islands of the Torres Strait always attract excitement from the community. The predominantly Islander crowd, whistled, yelled, and provided encouragement for all of the performers. As the dancers of *Muyngu Koekaper* positioned themselves off to the side of the performance space waiting for the musicians to take their seats, our film team positioned themselves in and around the performers and spectators. As the drum began to beat, flashes of cameras went off, and a plethora of smart screens were whipped out and lit up above the heads of the crowd, as spectators recorded the high-energy dances.

The idea for the documentary materialised in Melbourne after the Gab Titui event, during the editing of the promotional video. The performance of *Muyngu Koekaper* was captured with five cameras. There were three cameras positioned for the event, but during *Muyngu Koekaper's* performance, Desmond and I jumped on another two cameras to capture as much as possible. Our sound equipment had been pre-set by Desmond at the sound desk and onstage for the musicians to capture the music, presentations, and ambient sounds of the night. The footage we had attained of *Muyngu Koekaper's* performance that night and the evolution of Saibai Island dance style I had heard Awa Jeff speak of during the week, could be brought together as a documentary. Awa Walter was still my first port of call as a contact, and I had spoken to him about the prospect of a short documentary for NITV's (National Indigenous Television) *Our Stories, Our Way* Series. He was supportive of this idea and advised me that he would first talk to Awa Sedrick and Awa Jeff about the concept and get back to me.

Regular consultation with each other about the protocols of sharing Cultural knowledge, whether it is with bloodline or in the public domain, has always been the process for the three brothers when I have worked with them on projects including the research involved in my PhD. This would allow for full creative control and cultural authorship by those of Saibaian blood. The NITV series would offer a platform to create a short documentary. It came with a small fee. This fee would be utilized to support travel to Thursday Island for Desmond, our then seven-year-old son Joharo, and myself so that we could interview Awa Jeff, who was employed in full-time work, teaching at the high school on Waiben. Desmond and I could also spend time collating the footage from the five cameras and editing the story together.

### **Awa Jeff Aniba-Waia Interview**

The interview with Awa Jeff was held almost two years after we captured the dancing at the Gab Titui Awards. Awa Jeff decided the topic would be the evolution of Saibai Island dance that evolves with each generational line of choreographers taking up the mantle.

It was a beautiful bright blue sunny day in May on the day we interviewed Awa: a hot 30C day. Desmond had strolled around the front part of Waiben first thing that morning to find the quietest spot that would also underscore the beauty of the Torres Straits. The turquoise waters as a backdrop were always on our minds as we searched for an appropriate place. We finally decided

on the park at Waiben's Bach Beach with Prince of Wales Island in the background. The light green leaves of a mangrove tree frame the shot, and the yellow sands of Bach Beach reflect the pristine natural beauty of the Torres Strait.

Awa chose to wear his sunglasses for the interview, and I did not question this. He is legally blind in one eye, and since that interview, he has spoken of his self-consciousness of that eye when giving interviews.

The interview was not an interview as such. We recorded just over an hour of footage of Awa speaking, although we were interrupted by the sound of a whipper snipper and a garbage truck picking up the park's rubbish. In the entire time, I asked only two or three questions of Awa. Awa already knew what he would impart and did so during the hour.

Like all of our NITV documentaries, the work is done in-house through Desmond and myself, including producing, capture, video and sound editing, image correction, and grading. We are a team. Decisions are made in consultation with each other and I acknowledge Desmond's mastery of storytelling in bringing a story together in the editing suite. Sometimes our older son, Joharo, picks up a small Sony camera and shoots as a second camera on our shoots, but it is entirely up to him as to his input. We encourage him in whatever way he can to assist in the facilitating and keeping of stories alive.

### Documentary Opening Intro

My aim with this documentary was to highlight the energy, and the prowess of the performance that I witnessed live and to remind the viewers of those that have gone before us, of the continuing line of Saibai Island *girel* that is still very much a vibrant part of the Saibai Island community. The opening of the documentary begins with slow-motion footage of the performers dancing, superimposed over a photo of a Saibai Island sunset, and framed by mangrove trees. These opening frames pay homage to the long line of *Saibailgal*, the spirits of our ancestors. Finding creative ways to tell this story other than through words is also an objective when editing the story and putting it together. The voice-over accompanying this is of Awa Jeff speaking the quote at the beginning of this chapter about performative storytelling and the connection to your identity.

‘The dance is your identity,  
the songs are your identity,  
the stories are your identity,  
regardless of your skin of colour these are true identities of your soul.’

Awa is a passionate advocate for the maintenance of culture, especially language. He proclaims that you cannot have stories and Cultural knowledge without language, and declares: “Today we are sharing not only dancing but the very core, and an ingredient of oral culture and these are cemented together by our languages.”

Alongside this voice-over, is footage of Awa being painted with clan markings by one of the support members of the troupe. This support member is an integral part of the dance troupe and assists in:

- Packing/unpacking costumes, apparatus, and instruments
- Painting clan markings on the performers
- Setting of apparatus and instruments
- Attiring the performers in costume before the performance and during the performance
- Playing the *warup* and singing.

There is focussed energy as the dance troupe prepares for their performance. The quiet nature of being seated with little discussion and emotion belies the performance that is about to come. Under the voice-over, a low hum of a synthesized dissonant chord increases slightly in crescendo and supports the building of anticipation that we are about to witness something extraordinary. There is a mid-shot of both Awa Jeff and Awa Sedrick entering the performance space in front of

the crowd. They are both dressed in full Saibai regalia. The effect of their warrior-like costumes and intense focus alludes to preparation for battle. There is an air of anticipation in this shot. As a viewer, we have witnessed Awa speaking on stage in full costume only a few seconds earlier, but it is when you see both awas together, as they enter the performance space, that the grandeur of what you are about to witness is revealed. This shot marries and contrasts with the infusion of popular culture on Saibai *girel* that has influenced today's choreographers, and the ceremonial Cultural traditions that have been around since before time. In this context, as a filmmaker, I allude to the similarity of "rock stars" entering an arena about to perform. The costumes they are attired in, and the fact that we see them enter first, reveals the status for the dance choreographers and composers who lead the troupe. Awa Sedrick and Awa Jeff both have costumes that distinguish them from the musicians and dancers. They wear the feather headdress that is similar to that of the male dancers, but the faceguard heightens and stylises the warrior look. The antagonist from the movie *Predator* has inspired the leather armguard that is worn by these two dance troupe leaders. There is a continued building of anticipation with cutaways of the live spectators at the event. Off to the side of the dancing space, the female dancers stand awaiting their entrance for their first dance. Behind them are two grass huts made by one of the Islander arts/crafts workshop facilitators. With their grass-thatched roofs and woven walls, these grass huts are reminiscent of before time.

We view an extreme close-up of one of the male dancers being adorned by a support member with the feathered headdress. The camera is positioned behind the dancer's head, and the footage of this action is slowed down. Like the crowning of royalty, this shot reinforces the majesty and ritual that surrounds Cultural knowledge of Saibai Island *girel*. Close-up shots and extreme close-up shots of the performers are a focus point at this stage as the camera can reveal a window to the soul through the performer's eyes, to engage the viewer. We share with the audience the humanness of *Saibailgal* and elimination of the "otherness" that has been born of colonisation. Witnessing what the "other" is thinking and feeling offers viewers a connection through which to identify and understand.

With that, the iconic sound of the *warup*, a Torres Strait Island drum, and the *burbur*, a Saibai Island drum begins to beat. The distinct voices of Torres Strait harmonies permeate our ears as the visual images of Saibai are introduced. This is an opportunity for the viewer to be introduced to the land, sea, and sky from which the stories and knowledge of Saibai *girel* was born. These images include an aerial shot of Saibai village with Papua New Guinea in the distance, low tide at the front of the village, a Saibai street and the setting sun. The particular song called *Idiwoeyay Na* is sung alone without dance and is employed to calm the space and summon the ancestors. The musicians are seated on chairs in two rows with Awa Jeff and Awa Sedrick front and centre. Awa Jeff will be playing one of the *buruburs* while Awa Sedrick is on the *thuram*. There are two female singers to the left of Awa Sedrick, including Ama Patimah Waia and two males to the right of Awa Jeff, who are on the *warup* and *burubur*. The support member positions himself next to these awas with a drum. There is another male performer seated behind the front row on a drum.

## Women Dancers

We are introduced to the female dancers and the first performance of *Muyngu Koekaper*. This particular dance has been created to clean the space of the previous energy before the dancers begin and is also done in between dances to clear the footprints of the last dance. The women employ the use of the *moethay*, and a sweeping action is made with their right arm as their feet jump high off the ground. One hand is positioned behind their backs, imitating the sweeping action of many island women when using the "island broom" for domestic purposes. The female dancers wear a patterned island dress. On a black background the large green and white colours of a *kukuam*, the hibiscus flower with leaves are featured prominently as the print.

Similarly, the female members of the choir wear an island dress of a lighter background with a large print of the green and white colours of the *kukuam*. Markings decorate their face and arms. There is a feather on the cheek that Awa Jeff has created and an emu footprint on their hands. A woven headband is wrapped around their heads. Similar to the men's costume, the women wear a

grass skirt over their island dress, which is also echoed in the neck adornment. White calico strips are wrapped around the ankles, and again the echo of the skirt is repeated in a grass cuff around the ankle. All the dancers wear a bandana scarf around the neck tied together with a toggle.

Awa Jeff points out that “every Islander community has their own dancers, song composers, hunters, canoe builders who are specialised Knowledge holders.” He then states that he will only speak about his clan origins of Saibai *girel* as speaking about the culture and dance of other islands is “taboo.” This is also how Awa Jeff began his 2015 interview. The choice to bookend the introduction and end of the documentary with issues of protocols highlights the validity of protocols surrounding the tangible material of Culture. This bookend works to affirm and support Awa’s voice requesting all Islanders and non-Islanders to respect the protocols put in place by the clan groups. The introduction acknowledges those who have gone before and is aligned to the power of Awa Jeff as a distinguished orator during these live performances, where he advocates for not only Cultural protocols but the issues of rising sea waters. He is adamant that we must respect and adhere to the protocols of our bloodlines and those of other bloodlines as all dances come from direct bloodlines. Edited footage of the women dancers sweeping away the energy and the last footsteps from the previous dance troupe are interpreted as a transition from the opening introduction of the documentary, to the body of the story, continuing the meaning of the dance.

## Men Dancers

Awa Jeff continually acknowledges his fathers and grandfathers and his direct bloodline connection to the choreographic and song composition bloodline and is a point of focus for all Saibai Knowledge Custodians and Knowledge Givers when imparting knowledge:

‘There were two men, who happened to be my grandfathers, one being Waia and the other one is Tabuai. Now, these men were the dance choreographers from the clan of *Ait Koedal* and being descended from this particular family group we are now today the custodians of the knowledge and the apparatus and the songs.’

Deploying footage of the male dancers at this point performing the bow and arrow dance is befitting of the patriarchal line that Awa stems from – strong in warriorhood, leadership, and kindred ties. The men are costumed in the feathered headdress, *Kuyku Samu*. They are also adorned with the armguard, which is overlaid with a grass skirt embellishing the neck and shoulders. A grass skirt is worn over the *wakow*, a form of cloth wrapped around the waist of the male. Also, around their ankles are strips of calico matching the colour of their forearm cuff. Overlaying this calico is an ankle cuff adorned with *Samu (emu)* feathers and smaller variations of the grass skirt on the ankles and below the knees. Clan markings are painted on their faces, hands, legs, and feet. Frequently during the performance all dancers keep each other in their eye line. The musicians are included at certain times and provide a focussed intensity to the story they are telling. The warriorhood of *Ait Koedal* is reflected in the dance style and costumes of the men.

This warriorhood is reflected in *The Story Of Ait Kadal*<sup>194</sup> told by Mr Enosa Waigana and documented in the book, *Myths, and Legends of the Torres Strait*.<sup>195</sup> Popu Mebai also recounts some of this story in the previous chapter. In the legend, there is a battle between the clan of Ait and a neighbouring people from a Kiwai Village of Papua New Guinea. It erupts after the massacre of most of Ait's women and children. A magical stone believed to possess great powers of warriorhood is stolen from the Kiwai raiders by the men of Ait. Furthermore, there is a ritualised ceremony that the warriors of Ait perform to “obtain strength.” This ritualised ceremony is particular to the men of *Ait Koedal*. I hold firm to my clan's protocols, and as a woman will not document for my thesis the ritualised ceremony that Dudu Enosa Waigana has imparted for his book. This legend informs the choices made in the making of this documentary and how particular shots were

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<sup>194</sup> The spelling of language words are dependent on the Knowledge Custodian sharing the story. In this case Ait Koedal is spelly Ait Kadal by Mr Enosa Waigana.

<sup>195</sup> Lawrie.

deployed to reinforce the bloodline of *Ait Koedal*. Further on, I will expand on the influence of popular culture on the warrior of today.

At this point, Awa Jeff adds that in *bepotaim* the choreographers and song composers through to the singers, musicians, and dancers of the paternal line were the only performative storytellers:

'The old stories and the old dances and the songs performed long before the missionaries is known as *before time*. *Before time*, it's to do with the spiritualism, the dances, the songs, it's to do with rituals. People before time used voices of men and drums, it was the dance style of jumping.'<sup>196</sup>

I must digress at this point and relay a memory I have of the particular jumping style Awa speaks about. In 2003, when I made my first trip to Saibai Island there was an ordination at Saibai's Holy Trinity Church. On a warm October day there was a clear blue sky. As the crowd moved along the street towards the church, the sound of chanting began to emanate in the air around me. Ahead of me I could see the tops of male dancers centred in the slow-moving crowd jumping in the style Awa speaks of. They were part of the group surrounding the three who would be ordained. This was not a style I had witnessed previously and has not been a style I have seen since. There was a ritualistic manner to the jumping style and accompanying chant. As I looked in the distance, across to Dauan Island and back to Papua New Guinea, I felt like I had been transported to another time and place. Akas and amas in the crowd looked striking. They wore wide-brimmed straw hats garnished with colourful scarves and flowers, topped off with pieces of silver or gold jewellery which was glimmering in the hot sun. Their island dresses were just as vibrant. There was a celebratory, ritualistic nature to the event. Boigu Island, another Top Western Island of the Torres Strait, was also represented in the ordination and the dancers may have also been from there.

## Influences

I have separated the influences Awa Jeff speaks of in the documentary into topics. These include influences from the Pacific Islands missionaries, US soldiers during WWII, rap music and cinematic warriorhood.

### Pacific Island Missionaries

The London Missionary Society (LMS) brought Pacific Islander missionaries with them who would teach the Gospel and introduce their own tradition of dance. The LMS forbade Cultural practices, including dance to be practised. These missionaries would be scattered throughout the islands of the Torres Strait, including Saibai Island, and would be encouraged by the LMS to impart their dances to Torres Strait Islanders and to form a generic homogenised version of the dance. This Pacific style introduced the stomping style into the dances of the Torres Strait.

The influence of the Pacific Island style of music from the missionaries also spread throughout the Torres Straits. South Sea Islanders introduced the Gospel to Saibai Island. The instruments they brought were the ukulele and guitar. Thus, the form of the song has evolved into a more Pacific style.

### The American Influence during WWII

Two significant influences impacted Saibai *girel* during the war period that Awa shares. The first is a particular beat of a drum. Passed down to Awa, the beat mimics the sound of the diesel engine. This more than likely would have come from the 1940s in WWII when heavier diesel vehicles were introduced to the Torres Strait, and Saibai men who were enlisted in the army came and journeyed across to Waiben.

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<sup>196</sup> Harvey, "Saibai Island Dance."

At this time, popular culture was also beginning to impact Saibai Island dance. Awa speaks of the influence of step dancing on Saibai Island dance when it was introduced during WWII. Men and women from island communities were enlisted to dance sets up the front on Waiben alongside the United States Armed Forces, who brought with them a style of dance called tap. During the editing of the doco, I queried the use of the term step mentioned by Awa Jeff in the interview, and he further defined the style of step dance to tap dancing. Though interestingly enough, I must note there is a similarity between Saibai Island dance and the style of step dancing known as stepping that has its origins during the apartheid era in Africa. The slapping and clapping and percussive use of the body is a renowned style in stepping and is not dissimilar to the bamboo clapping style dance performed by the men and women in Saibai *girel* seen at the time code 10:45 in the documentary. The rhythm, precision, and pace with the stamping of the feet are similar in style to the stepping style. This particular Saibai *girel* gradually increases in speed and is commonly the finishing dance of a performance. Also, similarly, Muller and Fargion refer to the element of "marked time," which in dances of the Torres Strait is referred to as "mark time" and is the process of marching on the spot to the beat of the drum. Stepping is rooted in Africa and derived from the gumboot dance, conceived during the apartheid era when black labourers worked the dangerous and racially discriminatory mines.<sup>197</sup>

What Awa expresses and then reiterates throughout the documentary is the need for each new line of choreographers and song composers to keep creating and evolving:

'A lot of those people from the past have now passed, but their songs and stories remain to this day. We have to create something new, so we are choreographers, we are song composers it doesn't stop us from creating new dances, new songs, new ideas, new apparatuses and address the latest issues of the day.'

### Rap Music

Rap music is one example of popular culture that has influenced song composition of chants, affecting the rhythm of the dance. Awa presses on, "the influence of media is now so global that we are now able to view different cultures."

### Warrior

The effect of popular culture on Saibai *girel* redefines and acknowledges the warrior's status and power through a performative storytelling element. Awa speaks of Bruce Lee, and the action-packed component Lee's movies are renowned for. He has a keen interest in popular culture and elucidates the influence movies and music of the time have in the creation of dance, song, costume and apparatus, specifically films where the protagonist is the warrior. Awa Jeff explains the cinematic warrior influence:

'Because we are warriors. And I'm looking for the thing there's a warrior everywhere, *Last Samurai*, a warrior. *Predator*, warrior. *Shaka Zulu*, is a warrior. *Avatar*, warrior. And that's what island dancing is, the warrior. You bring up the warrior-ship.'<sup>198</sup>

The high energy of a Bruce Lee action film keeps fans of the action genre engaged and is interpreted through Saibai Island performative storytelling in the "non-stop action-packed styles of dancing" Saibai is renowned for. The performative storytelling of Saibai Island permits and recognizes the warrior that is no longer demanded of men, as battles and warring tensions of the past between Saibai and Papua New Guinea, or other raiding parties, no longer pose a threat in today's environment. Davis recognized this when discussing the Saibai dance costume inspired by the film *Shaka Zulu*:

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<sup>197</sup> Carol Muller and Janet Topp Fargion, "Gumboots, Bhaca Migrants, and Fred Astaire: South African Worker Dance and Musical Style," *African Music* 7, no. 4 (1999).

<sup>198</sup> Harvey, "Saibai Island Dance."

Oscillating between sensory violence and sensory beauty few Saibaians deny that these innovative associations were in the spirit of ancestral warrior veneration, a benefitting tribute to Saibai warriors, enhancing the beauty of the male dancers and endowing them with a regal presence.<sup>199</sup>

The accompanying narration in the documentary is also part of a set performance when performing for entertainment at events. Awa Jeff sees this as a time to educate Islander and non-Islander audiences about protocols, environmental issues such as climate change, and to inform viewers of the dance being performed.

### Patrilineal Line

Popu Wagea Waia, Popu Kala Waia and Popu Edrick are mentioned frequently by Awa Jeff, Awa Sedrick and Awa Walter when paying homage to their fathers of Saibai *girel*.

The distinct Saibai Island headdress the *Dhibal*, evolved from using coconut leaves on a husk to being made of cardboard. This was done by Popu Wagea Waia. Popu Edrick Tabuai then created the feathered version used today, and Awa Jeff recounts his brother Awa Walter being present during the creation of this piece.

The three male dancers at the Gab Titui performance are from the Waia and the Tabuai bloodline and are to be the next generation of choreographers and composers. There is uncertainty as to “if” and “when” the next line will have the opportunity to continue the path of Saibai *girel*. Concerns about language, Cultural Knowledge, and being physically based on the Island are all issues that have been raised when the topic of the next line of choreographer/composer has been introduced. Each generation of male dancers carries a weight of expectations to meet and exceed the standards of prior choreographers and composers.

The transitioning footage after this section is the canoe dance with the Waia and Tabuai dancers. Based on a 20th-century outrigger canoe with sails, the canoe of this apparatus came after the 19th-century double outrigger canoe, which used manpower for paddling. Today, Islanders use horsepower motor dinghies for transport, hunting, and fishing. Although this canoe is no longer used in the Torres Straits, the marrying of the customary, to the contemporary is continuously reflected in *Muyngu Koekaper* performances.

When referring to his brothers, there is great respect that is in keeping with the reverence Awa has for bloodline lineage. There is a shot at 9.09 mins where a Customs boat is seen passing in the background of the frame that became a sign for Awa, sealing his approval for the final documentary. I shared the doco with Awa for his consent, before handing it into NITV, following protocols Awa had put in place. Awa Jeff informed me that when he saw the shot of the Customs boat in the distant background passing through the shot, he knew that it was a sign from his *koe y bala* (big brother) Awa Terry and that all was good with the documentary. A month earlier, Awa had buried his oldest brother, Awa Terry, a much-respected pillar of the Torres Strait Islander Community and loved by his family. A former commissioner of ATSIC, Awa Terry Waia held vital positions such as Saibai Island Council chairman, Torres Strait Regional Authority chairman, and Commissioner for the Torres Strait Zone from 1997 to 2000. He also founded the first Torres Strait Regional Authority Fisheries Committee. It is right for me to acknowledge Awa Terry for he had a significant impact on his siblings, and they carry his achievements with such pride. In 2017 he received recognition as Member of the Order of Australia (AM).

Awa advocates for understanding your Torres Strait Islander identity, encouraging the younger generation to be specific about their bloodline connection and to be cognisant of their clan's Cultural knowledge: all with the awareness of following their clan's protocols. He is passionate about keeping the language alive, and he asserts language is the key to understanding Saibai

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<sup>199</sup> Richard Davis, "The Spirit of the Image," in *Woven Histories, Dancing Lives*, ed. Richard Davis (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004).

ethos – ways of being, knowing, and doing. Language is Cultural knowledge, and you cannot truly comprehend Cultural knowledge if you do not know the language. At this point, Awa proclaims, “it's gonna be a sad case if people start looking in the museum into archives trying to find their own identity through language and dance, and song and storytelling and apparatuses.”

The last words Awa imparts to the live audience are also the last words he leaves viewers of this documentary: centred on the issues surrounding Cultural protocol when practising and performing *girel*. He states that dances belong to a clan and to families, and permission must be sought to perform the songs and dances.

### Choosing the Cutaways

The cutaways of Saibai Island are photos we took of a trip to Saibai in the previous year. When Pacific Islander influence is mentioned, cutaways from a family get-together are included from the week when I interviewed Awa Jeff on Waiben. These shots are utilized to support and offer a reference to the Pacific Island style Awa speaks about. Choices were based on the power, the majesty, strength, symbolism of slow-motion in one shot, underscoring the nobility, the epic nature of the continuing line and the dramatic quality.

In the final dance of the live performance, the company of dancers *lego*<sup>200</sup> and are quite relaxed showing their enjoyment for the dance, at times amused at the speed and energy needed in this particular dance. After the intensity of preparation and performance, this dance offers and allows a moment for spectators of the live performance and the audience of the documentary to enjoy the challenge of the dance along with the performers.

### Conclusion of the Documentary

The quote, “the dance is your identity,” as mentioned earlier by Awa is the reason for choosing to document and archive the voices of Saibai Island through the documentary and also through the process of this PhD. Historical oral narratives of Indigenous people are given little value in Western European society. Precedence and value is given to written narrative as outlined in Chapter One. The voices of the Torres Strait Islanders are very soft in Australia's narrative of the Torres Strait.

We leave Awa, with his closing remarks during the live performance, stressing the utmost importance of following clan protocols. This something all three awas have reiterated to me on many occasions. The dances come from a long bloodline of choreographers/composers, and observing the protocols of each clan must be adhered to and respected. The continual extraction of Cultural knowledge emphasises the significance of respecting protocols. Adding the voices of the silenced to the field of Western knowledge will bolster, empower and give autonomy to how we impart and share the knowledge and stories of our people.

The rich description described in this chapter is an interpretation of what I witnessed and the choices I made to create the Saibai dance documentary, which reveals one of the many layers in the process of caring for story. My Saibaian bloodline has, of course, helped to inform this process. I have, however, viewed the material from multiple perspectives – as a descendant of Saibai Island, *Ait Koedal* clan, and as a researcher and outsider to the community, born and raised on the mainland.

### Conclusion

I have approached this chapter with the aim of keeping Saibai voices active and with a sense of empowerment over the knowledge they shared. This is also the main aim in the framework of my research paradigm. The learning curve in understanding where I sit as a researcher within my bloodline community of Saibai Island and as an outsider born and raised on the mainland was

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<sup>200</sup> 'Lego' is a creole term that simply translates as 'let go' and means to let go of all tension and be relaxed.

challenging at times but was also crucial to understanding the significance in applying meaningful processes driven by the community. What was initially about following cultural protocols in line with the community's, grew to a question about *how* I genuinely care for the stories shared. There is a holistic approach that respects and adheres to the philosophy passed on to me from Ama, grown from the web that is Saibai Island ethos. Partaking in the sharing of stories of where your bloodline is born, deeply roots you to the land, sea and sky of your bloodline. It is the practice of culture, the practice of passing on stories that have been around since *bepotaim* with every conversation/interview weighted heavily in cultural practice because of the transfer of knowledge and story. The documenting and archiving of Indigenous elders' stories by Indigenous researchers is an integral part of cultural maintenance that holds value for future generations and places our elders in the history books of tomorrow.

In the following chapter, I will discuss in detail the creation and execution of the performance-led research work, *Woer Wayepa*. *Woer Wayepa* had the aim of translating knowledge of climate change in the Torres Strait to mobilize islanders into action around this issue. What came out of it was the awareness of storytelling as an adaptive mechanism for the dissemination of research knowledge and for the reclaiming of Cultural knowledge to mobilize Islander audiences.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Performance-Led Research – *Woer Wayepa*

I have published an earlier version of some of the material throughout this chapter.<sup>201</sup>

*These people, young Seisia people, they acknowledge me last night (emotional) and they are dancing today because of me. I have influenced a lot of Saibai young people who are now trying to be me or Sedrick my brother. They imitate us, we were like Gods when we come ... little pickanniny follow us, they now big kids dancing and to them it was like eye opener thing that, "Uncle Jeffa been grow old, em no go dance anymore but look at him, he's doing something different." And they were all (gestures, amazed). Another kid started to imitate the way I walk from the show.*<sup>202</sup>

The video for this live performance work can be found online via the vimeo link in the support material provided.

In 2014 I began my PhD with the understanding that I would document and archive knowledge on Saibai Island dance from the perspective of Saibaian still residing on Saibai Island. This would be something that people of Saibaian descent, especially our children, our children's children and so on, could look to when searching the libraries, or museums in search of information about their Cultural heritage.

I also set out to create a performance-led research piece that drew from the experiential knowledge of two different storytellers of Saibaian blood – myself and a Cultural knowledge Custodian from my bloodline. Also documenting the framework of protocols for Cultural knowledge transference during the creation of this performance. The quote that begins this chapter reminds me of the impact that performative storytelling has on the next generation and the ramifications of having autonomy over the process of telling our stories. Reframing the spaces so that our voices are heard is crucial in reclaiming the narrative of our people.

For all PhD students, the journey is a long and winding road, with potholes, roadblocks, detours, and sometimes the odd U-turn. Those who have completed a PhD or are in the throes of one will understand the many roads that open up and the overwhelming challenge in finding clarity when one is deep in the writing and research phase. But it is when that breathtaking scenic lookout reveals itself, and you transcend the cloud of information overload, the landscape you are travelling through is shown in one instant viewing. It is then that the long, winding, imperfect road makes sense, albeit just for a few still quiet moments. It was during my performance-led research that the "breathtaking scenic lookout" revealed itself and I completely understood what drew me to this PhD.

The main aim of my research was to identify a framework that values and supports the transference of Cultural knowledge in the creation of a live performance piece, maintaining the sophistication and the Cultural integrity that exists within Saibaian performative storytelling. This was explored in the 2018 performance of *Woer Wayepa – The Water Is Rising*.

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<sup>201</sup> Margaret Harvey, "Woer Wayepa - the Water Is Rising: A Torres Strait Islander Approach to Knowledge Mobilisation, and Saibaian Approach to Cultural Knowledge Transference to Performative Storytelling," *Australasian Drama Studies*, no. 73 (2018).

<sup>202</sup> Aniba-Waia.

## Background

*Woer Wayepa* was first presented in 2018 at the opening night of the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF) as a 14-minute piece by myself and Desmond's production company, The Jo Ze Sparks and the Torres Strait Islander Researchers Network Community of Practice (CoP), as part of the Lowitja Institute and James Cook University-funded research project: *Meriba buay – ngalpan wakaythoemamay* (We come together to share our thinking). The CoP was formed to assist Torres Strait Island researchers and community members to build research Knowledge Translation capability. Knowledge Translation, also known as KT, is a commonly used term amongst First Nations' Canadian health researchers and is defined as:

a dynamic and iterative process that includes synthesis, dissemination, exchange and ethically-sound application of knowledge to improve the health of Canadians, provide more effective health services and products and strengthen the health care system.<sup>203</sup>

I was invited to become a member of this newly formed CoP in 2017 by the project team leader, Dr Felecia Watkin-Lui and Dr Sanchia Shibasaki. This is the first time a CoP made up of Torres Strait Islander researchers had been established. Within the group is a broad range of expertise covering health, education, science, engineering, linguistics and creative arts. The objective and underlying core value of the group is:

We share a passion for the empowerment of Torres Strait Islander people to shape our own futures. One way to support empowerment is to make research knowledge more accessible to Torres Strait Islanders. The key message to emerge from our collective synthesis is Know the risk, Own the risk and Flip the risk.<sup>204</sup>

When we are explicitly researching content that is directly connected to and/or that concerns Torres Strait Island people it is a matter of urgency that the research does not end with the written form sitting in a library or in an institution or in a way that does not translate for our communities. As Torres Strait Islander researchers, it is important that our communities must be able to access the research knowledge that we have at our fingertips. But, how do we translate research knowledge we deem of value to our communities in an impactful way?

Two research areas were addressed for the work of *Woer Wayepa*. The first was driven by the Torres Strait Researchers' CoP and the second inspired by research for my PhD. In what follows, I outline my account of the following two research areas undertaken in the creation of *Woer Wayepa*. This dual approach to KT can assist in communicating and mobilizing invaluable research knowledge to Torres Strait Islanders and support the maintenance of Cultural practice. I have separated these two research areas to identify the questions I had for my PhD research and questions addressing the Torres Strait Islander Researchers' CoP criteria.

The following two approach areas are:

1. A Torres Strait Islander approach to KT

Torres Strait Islander (TSI) researchers' CoP questions:

How can TSI researchers communicate research to our communities in a tangible way? And, can research knowledge complement our cultural knowledge in a way that mobilizes our people into action and with that support the practice of Cultural maintenance?

2. Saibalian approach to Cultural knowledge transference within the creation and execution of *Woer Wayepa*.

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<sup>203</sup> Canadian Institutes of Health Research, "Cihr-Irsc. Knowledge Translation - Definition About Us," Canadian Institutes of Health Research, <http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/29418.html>.

<sup>204</sup> F. Watkin-Lui, Shibasaki, S., Ah Mat, L., Hunter, C., Mosby, V., Grainger, D., Harvey, M., Harvey, A., Sellwood, V., Sibthorpe, B., "Meriba Buay - Ngalpan Wakaythoemamay (We Come Together to Think): Evaluating a Community of Practice for Torres Strait Islander Health and Well-Being. ," (2018).

My research questions:

What is the process in the transference of Cultural knowledge within my bloodline?

How do I create a live performance that respects and adheres to protocols whilst transferring Cultural knowledge within the same clan? In this section I outline the process that answers these questions as well as detailing a rich description of the performance of *Woer Wayepa*.

## 1. Torres Strait Islander Approach to Knowledge Translation

*Woer Wayepa* encompassed a Torres Strait Island approach to KT where research knowledge complemented Cultural Knowledge and/or experiential knowledge.

The Cultural knowledge of Indigenous peoples, including Torres Strait Island peoples, is not fully recognized and utilized as a core knowledge system by the academic knowledge system. As Métis Canadian, Smylie combines with Olding and Ziegler in outlining:

There is a need to move towards KT theory and practice that embraces diverse understandings of knowledge and that recognizes, respects, and builds on pre-existing knowledge systems.<sup>205</sup>

The pre-existing knowledge systems Smylie, Olding and Ziegler speak of are Indigenous knowledge systems. Pre-existing Indigenous knowledge systems have been tried and tested over thousands of years by many generations and are evident in the continued survival of *Saibailgal*. They then state "this will not only result in better processes and outcomes for Indigenous communities, it will also provide rich learning in the mainstream KT scholarship and practice."<sup>206</sup>

Before the CoP's first meeting in early 2018, a conceptual framework was developed utilizing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through a Torres Strait Island lens by the occasional members of the CoP.<sup>207</sup> These casual members were sought from the Torres Strait community by core members in the CoP group and were invited to participate in specific topics of interest where they could offer their expertise and guidance to our CoP. When I refer to the CoP, I am referring to the core members, all of whom are Torres Strait Islander researchers.

It was the SDG of Climate Action that reverberated through the group as Torres Strait communities have been experiencing the impacts of climate change for decades following a tidal surge in January 2018. We decided that tackling this issue in a KT event, to mobilize Island people to take action, would be a challenge that the group could rise to.<sup>208</sup>

The scientist in our Torres Strait researchers group was Cass Hunter from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) who was able to offer guidance on this issue. The group also discussed viable ways in which we could communicate the KT to our communities. Our CoP recognized that one of the most effective ways to mobilize knowledge in our communities is through stories, music, dance and visual art. As the only arts-based researcher in the group, I was tasked with the challenge of creating and producing the live performance component of this arts-based KT piece, to draw from and creatively interpret the independent research each member of the group was involved in.

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<sup>205</sup> Janet Smylie, Michelle Olding, and Carolyn Ziegler. , "Sharing What We Know About Living a Good Life: Indigenous Approaches to Knowledge Translation.," *The journal of the Canadian Health Libraries Association* 35

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> United Nations, "17 Goals to Transform Our World," <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>.

<sup>208</sup> Ben Doherty, "King Tide Driven by Super Blue Blood Moon Inundates Torres Strait Island," (Sydney: [www.theguardian.com/australia-news/](http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/), 2018).

I had two aims for the *Woer Wayepa* work:

Aim 1

To capture the hearts and minds of a Torres Strait Islander audience through a live performance that implemented research knowledge; and

Aim 2

To employ a Saibaian approach to the transference of Cultural knowledge within the creation and execution of the work.

There is a substantial amount of scientific data being collected about the effects of climate change, much of which is of great concern for Australians.<sup>209</sup> At this time it appears the worldwide scientific consensus on climate change, has had little effect on Federal Government actions to limit our carbon dioxide emissions.<sup>210</sup> Torres Strait Island-led research about climate change issues affecting the region was essential in situating Torres Strait leaders as “knowing the risk.” The Torres Strait Climate Change Strategy 2014-2018 document from the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) predicted an increase of sea level between 5cm and 15cm by 2030 and 52-98cm by 2100.<sup>211</sup> Even a small rise in sea level can have a significant impact on communities, especially when combined with high tides. This projected increase in seawaters became the underlying drama within *Woer Wayepa*. Futurism plays a big part in this piece. Climate change is happening now, but still our leaders maintain policy paralysis around environmental issues at a time when Torres Strait Island people are facing the biggest threat to our culture. The piece only touches lightly on the many complexities the issues climate change brings to the islands – including displacement, loss of language and loss of land. How can we empower the rest of the population to adapt? How do we continue the practice of culture and knowledge transference while doing this, respecting the stories, the protocols and our bloodline lineage? These are all questions that are pertinent to the structuring of the story before and during the creative development.

## 2. Maintaining Sophistication and Cultural Integrity of Saibaian Performative Storytelling – the Making of *Woer Wayepa*

*Facilitating, assisting and fostering the transference of cultural knowledge in a culturally safe environment.*

- *Acknowledging Cultural knowledge as a core knowledge system and*
- *Complementing Cultural knowledge with research knowledge.*

In embracing a Saibaian approach to KT, my Cultural responsibility was to adhere to my bloodline protocols and bring in a Knowledge Custodian from my own bloodline and clan. Cultural knowledge transference is an act of transfer – in this instance, it is the act of passing down Cultural knowledge within the same clan group.

To this end, I looked to Saibaian elder Awa Jeff Aniba-Waia – a Cultural Knowledge Custodian, storyteller, and *Ait Koedal* clan choreographer and song composer. He is also my awa (uncle). A Cultural Knowledge Custodian like Aniba-Waia is someone within a clan who has been imparted Cultural knowledge. I must acknowledge him not only as my elder but as the Cultural Advisor on *Woer Wayepa*. Without his custodianship none of it would have been possible.

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<sup>209</sup> Ebony Bennett, "Climate of the Nation - Tracking Australia's Attitudes Towards Climate Change and Energy," in *Climate and Energy* (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2018).

<sup>210</sup> Nicole Hasham, "More Australians Fear Climate Change as Morrison Government Dumps Emissions Legislation," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 September 2018 2018.

<sup>211</sup> Torres Strait Regional Authority Land and Sea Management Unit, "Tsra (2014) Torres Strait Climate Change Strategy 2014–2018," (2014).

There is a respect and adherence to a set of protocols that clan elders have passed on to such custodians. This authority may evolve over time but it is done so upon discussions with other Cultural Knowledge Custodians and elders within the clan.<sup>212</sup> Cultural authority over a story must be recognized when dealing with Cultural knowledge. Having Awa Jeff on the project meant that a meeting of two storytelling worlds could take place during the development of the project. This process required a consideration of Awa's storytelling, as inter-generational knowledge that has been passed down from his Saibai elders. It is not a given that any of the knowledge that has been passed onto me could be used in any other context other than *Woer Wayepa*. Saibaian protocols require that I approach Awa and my clan group Knowledge Custodians to gain permission to access the Cultural knowledge again.<sup>213</sup> The process of co-creating with Awa was built over a period of time that began with our first meeting after a performance of the Seisia dance group he was leading called Ariw Poenipan at Cairns Indigenous Art Fair in 2009. Inspired by Ariw Poenipan and driven by an urgent request of my Ama (Mother) to tell stories of the Torres Strait and more specifically my bloodline. My older brother Alistair had already forged a strong relationship with Awa's brother, Awa Walter Waia from his time in the Torres Straits working and Ama had a great respect for both Awas.

The process of co-creating with Awa was built over a period of time that began with our first meeting after a performance of the Seisia dance group *Ariw Poenipan* in 2009, as previously mentioned. It was also driven by the urgent request of Ama to tell stories of the Torres Strait and more specifically my bloodline. Ama had great respect for the Waia brothers.

As Awa Jeff states, within the ethos of Saibai there are specific stories, dances, songs, ceremonial sites that are women's business and individual stories, dances, songs, ceremonial sites that are men's business. What knowledge is handed down to me is tied to bloodline and is clan specific. As a woman navigating what I had perceived might be a challenge when working closely with an elder like Awa was not as complicated as I had thought. Awa, like his brothers, has a "contemporary mindset" that is influenced and inspired by the expanding world they live in. They are artists and visionaries and create performances accordingly, as demonstrated in the choreography of dances.

Awa later described the creation of this style and recounts the process required to gain permission and acceptance from our clan, *Ait Koedal*, to have the female dancers move like male dancers. It took a little time before everyone, including the female dancers from Saibai Island accepted this new style. But within a year the dance troupe on Saibai Island, *Muyngu Koekaper*, had fully integrated this unique style into their dances.

### **Navigating Awa's Cultural Authority in a Culturally Safe Environment**

As in any culture, knowledge is a crucial element in the survival of Saibai Island Culture. As previously mentioned, our knowledge is what has kept our Culture alive *bepotaim* and since then. It has not been written down or held in libraries or museums. Torres Strait Culture is not only an oral Culture but the listening – the aural – is also a vital part of the act of transfer: listening to elders, listening to the land, sea and sky. For Saibai Island people, our knowledge is deeply connected to the land, sea and sky and there is an interconnectedness of the spiritual with the physical

Awa alternates between three languages with ease: KKY, Yumplatok (Torres Strait Creole), and English. Language gives weight to knowledge in the continuing line of where that knowledge is born. Communicating ideas and concepts with Awa was challenging at first. It was not until the end of the first week that this realisation set in. Not only was Awa switching between three languages he was also code-switching between the Cultural ethos/philosophy of Saibaian Culture and Western culture – all the while taking on the roles of Cultural advisor, co-creator and performer.

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<sup>212</sup> Aniba-Waia.

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## My Creative Practice

My role was to complement Awa's sophisticated storytelling style (passed down to him from previous generations), with my own creative practice, an interdisciplinary performative storytelling form. As I have described in Chapter One, inherent in mainstream elite theatre companies is the voice of the dominant culture reflected in the narratives through a Western Eurocentric form. I employ the terminology Western Eurocentric, to describe the Australian theatre making form developed from European theatrical traditions during settlement in the late 1700's. My training and experience began as an actor in the Western Eurocentric form of making theatre. Stepping away from this form is not only an act of resistance but stepping towards a form that embraces Saibaian ways of performative storytelling and is reflective of the urban social and cultural dimension/environment I live in. This "act of resistance" Walter Mignolo extends further in the concept he has termed as de-colonial gesture:

'De-colonial gestures' would be any and every gesture that directly or indirectly engages in disobeying the dictates of the colonial matrix and contributes to building of the human species on the planet in harmony with the life in/of the planet of which the human species is only a minimal part and on which it depends. And that would contribute to planetary re-emergence, re-surgence, and re-existence of peoples whose values, ways of being, languages, thoughts, and stories were degraded in order to be dominated.<sup>214</sup>

*Woer Wayepa* embraces the crossover of disciplines fundamental to Awa's practice and to my own. In my creative practice, "de-colonial gesture" is epitomised in the deploying of an interdisciplinary approach towards a form that explores not only the origins of performative storytelling from my bloodline but other creative disciplines such as video design, interactive sound/music, physicality, and heightened language. This creative approach is based on a non-linear narrative, a fusion of elements that unearth and convey more profound levels of subtext in the characters and story. My collaborative enquiry also centres on the exploration of various genres, e.g. Sci-Fi with Indigenous mythology. *Woer Wayepa* is a futuristic piece that speaks of the impact of climate change in the Torres Straits, utilizing Saibai mythology in contemporary time. The feedback from audiences and peers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous was resoundingly positive. The process became quite a complex, layered process. To add to these complex layers, respect for cultural protocols would always guide the creative choices.

## Cultural Dramaturge

There was a lot of give and take between myself and Awa Jeff. Awa allowed space for discussion and negotiation around creative choices and Cultural knowledge. Having been a school teacher, his passion for telling stories in the performative medium is still strong today. He has an incredible storytelling technique and the extraordinary ability to transcend Cultural boundaries when creating performative stories for live performance. Awa is highly cognisant of the framework needed to structure a story. For example – in a dramaturgical sense, when we speak of storytelling, of how you place drama within the story and where you place the energy to support moments of engaging an audience emotionally – Awa understands these concepts and contributes valuable insight into the structure of the piece.

Awa had never previously worked in a theatrical setting: with formal lighting rigs, sets, video projection, etc., however, he approached this with ease, and it was a natural progression from the storytelling practice that was passed on to him. His practice has evolved over the course of his lifetime. The influence of popular culture in the Saibaian dances he choreographs and the costumes he creates, acknowledge the innovative artist that he is.

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<sup>214</sup> Walter Mignolo, "Looking for the Meaning of 'Decolonial Gesture'," ed. D; Gomez-Barris Taylor, M (Hemispheric Institute, 2014).

## Devising or Script Writing

Devising was the method we employed when creating *Woer Wayepa*. Awa and I began discussions five months before the event, catching up on the phone, in person and then in a three-week workshop/rehearsal process in Cairns leading up to the CIAF event. We spent time talking and workshopping ideas and thoughts, transferring Cultural knowledge from uncle to niece. We also spent time in knowledge transfer in regard to my theatre-making practice.

The creation of performative stories and ceremony has been happening since *bepotaim* as an oral process. Awa brought this Cultural knowledge to the project. Part of the process of creating story and performative storytelling is about empowering the space and empowering the storytelling process. The challenge in creating a culturally safe rehearsal/workshop space demanded more time than we had available, and I feared that I would be setting Awa up to fail. This was one of many moments where I felt fear and doubt creep in. In these moments, I stepped back, took a deep breath and simply asked for guidance from my ancestors. With that, I let go of my fears and doubts and acknowledged that the path is already laid out before us. I began simply by breaking the 15-minute presentation time allotted to us into 3 x 5 minutes sections that contained a beginning, a middle and an end. Simple enough. I also knew that I wanted to bring Awa's strength as a Knowledge Custodian and as a performer to this piece. In *Woer Wayepa* we presented the audience with a prediction of the future: a prediction of the rising levels. The three-line tag of *Woer Wayepa* was:

It is 2050. A tidal surge has sunk the last of our Torres Strait Island homes. Culture clings to a lifebuoy. Is there anybody out there?

As we only had 15 minutes, the focus was simple, to capture the hearts and minds of Island people in the audience. But how do we do that? How do we mobilize Island people into action? There is a responsibility to the Torres Strait Islanders in the audience. There were some topics or ideas that Awa felt were taboo for Islander audiences, and Awa had final say over what he deemed appropriate. My responsibility to Awa and the trust he placed in me was always at the forefront of my mind, but Awa always gave me permission to create freely.

I also knew that Saibaian Cultural knowledge would not be there as an exotic flourish but would resonate the echoes of *bepotaim*, bridging the past to the present to the future, presenting the continuing line and evolution of our Culture. Amidst the severe issues that we were exploring, there was also need for lightness. Awa also emphasised the importance of Island people's love of laughter. Part of the work was built on an experience Awa had, based on the flight attendant's safety demonstration on a flight back to Cairns. Awa used a life jacket that would signal the threat of the encroaching waters to Island people, to Island culture, and to Island homes. The prop of the life jacket was used in a satirical way to address these pressing issues affecting the Torres Strait Islands.

What I realised with my talks with our creative team was that whatever we were aiming for it was essential to not lose the sophistication that is inherent in Torres Strait Culture. Too many times, Indigenous stories are dumbed down, extracting and skimming from the surface, appropriating and homogenizing Indigeneity. It often seems as if the exoticism of our Culture becomes the main thread on which to hang a story. My main objective in developing this project was to maintain the sophistication of our stories, our ethos/philosophy while also creating stories for a varied audience of diverse cultural backgrounds.

During the three-week workshop, we collaborated with three creatives from non-Torres Strait Island backgrounds, set designer Alison Ross, sound designer Andrew Belletty, and video projection designer Desmond Connellan, my partner in the production company, The Jo Ze Sparks, and also in life. To grow our collective experiences and level of expertise was the objective of the collaboration.

In working with crucial elements of the show Awa and I did not want the spoken languages of KKY, Yumplatok and English to be the only way to indicate knowledge or inform the audience of

the story. The sound was utilized to create mood and build on the music and song Awa created for the piece. In devising the sound and music elements we recorded my voice and Awa's, employing a layered effect to signify the many voices of our ancestors.

Another component of the work was a video projection creatively interpreting and sharing the sea level prediction that Awa's character Dr Ngaynga, knows only too well. Dr Ngaynga is a time traveller who finds himself in the wrong time zone. He is a code-switcher. Switching from three different languages and from three different ethos/philosophies. Dr Ngaynga is an ancient entity who spans *bepotaim*<sup>215</sup> and till the end of time. The combination of projection and a user interface (in this case an iOS device) signalled modernity, bringing together modern science with an ancient culture.

### The Story

The message and the storyline idea for the piece were inspired by the Cultural knowledge imparted by Awa Jeffrey and by the scientific predictions of the rising sea level. Awa speaks of the different moon phases and its effect on tidal surges. He also imparted knowledge around the *Mawa* (mask) and *malpal* (moon), and so the *Mawa* became the intrinsic Cultural knowledge element in *Woer Wayepa*. The extensive knowledge around the moon that Awa imparted is not for me to pass on. This was the transference that happened naturally for Awa. There were many times where Awa could feel free to expand on the knowledge he was sharing as we were of the same clan. It was a simple but vital component to the Cultural knowledge translation and to our collaboration on the co-creation of *Woer Wayepa*.

Dr Ngaynga speaks of the future and delivers a warning that something is coming. "What was once our friend, a spiritual element is now a threat, and we must do something." He exclaims – "*Woer Wayepa! Woer Wayepa!* The water is rising! It is here now, seeping in through the cracks, swallowing the resting grounds of our loved ones..." Island people of the Torres Strait have long been guided by the constellations, and Dr Ngaynga calls on the moon who appears as an ominous presence. The moon's many phases can tell us many stories. It can also tell us of rising seas and tidal surges as mentioned by Awa Sedrick Waia in Chapter Three. Conventional theatre elements such as digital video projection and sound were fused throughout the piece and added to the many layers of the story. Language, song, dance, are key to beginning to understand the ethos and philosophy of Saibaian culture and are strong components of the piece.

### Rehearsal Venue

We were limited in rehearsal venue choices. That ended up being a blessing rather than a hindrance. The student space in the Indigenous Education and Research Centre at James Cook University (JCU) was offered as space for us to work from. Outside the centre is a decked area that is undercover that offered some privacy with another building shielding the space from the road that surrounds the perimeter of JCU. We spent the first week inside the centre discussing ideas over cups of tea. The second week we moved to the deck area outside, and this offered a fresh, breezy space to create. The rehearsal on the outside deck gave us the freedom to be outside in the natural elements surrounded by the university's forest growth. This also gave my family members, which included my then 11-month-old and 10-year-old, freedom to be part of the process on the outer edges and not to feel obliged to speak in hushed tones.

### Performance Space

Initially, I believed that the KT arts event would be performed inside a controlled environment, much like a traditional theatre space. With this in mind, my first thoughts were focussed on an experimental theatre piece, like performance art, that could signal a message but not necessarily have a story that had a beginning, middle and an end. This approach was also something that interested me in terms of exploring a form of theatre that integrated and paid homage to Saibaian performative storytelling.

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<sup>215</sup> Bepotaim is Torres Strait Creole for "before time" and is usually referred to when talking about the past

Once we received advice that the performance would be presented at CIAF's opening night party which was to be held outside the cruise liner terminal, my immediate reaction was to pull the plug. The opening night party meant that we had to contend with outdoor elements and take into account what mother nature might have in store for us, plus we would need to work at holding the attention of an audience in a carnival atmosphere with food and beverage stalls on offer. We had 5 minutes to set up, 15 minutes to present and 5 minutes to pack down. We were also given access to a projection screen. I thought about how the sophistication of both of our storytelling ways would be lessened by being in an outdoor space, but reminding myself that our people have been conducting ceremony and stories in outdoor settings since "before time" gave me a sense of trusting in the process. My primary fear was my own feelings of inadequacies of not being a storyteller within my Saibalian community. My belief in this entire journey, of reconnecting and reclaiming our voices, was that my ancestors would guide me. All I needed to do was remember that I stand on the shoulders of giants, and to listen and take the time to tread a path that respects and acknowledges those that have gone before me, my elders that are still here today and to appreciate the collaborators of non-Torres Strait Island heritage, their ways of telling the story and how that can complement what Awa and I were creating.

### Tech'ing the Show

We were invited to tech the show the night before the opening night event and were offered one hour in which to do this. Awa, Alistair, Desmond, Andrew and myself arrived one hour before the scheduled time along with our cohort from the Torres Strait Islander Researchers' CoP. This allowed plenty of time to transport and deliver the set piece of the time machine to the event's location. This also allowed us time to view the physical set-up of the performance space, and to talk through and adapt our work to the space. The one-hour tech we had available to us was about determining which of the available lights we would incorporate, and to integrate our video projection and sound with the CIAF's technical crew and their equipment as well as to allow time for Awa and AI to rehearse in the space. My approach was a "smoke and mirrors" approach to appeal to the atmosphere created from an opening night event. In terms of the lighting the options available to us were those that were pre-set for the night. My choices for *Woer Wayepa* were based on enhancing and balancing the performance and video components of the show. I stuck with a general wash across the stage, calling on gobo patterns on a moving head fixture when needing something a little extra to reinforce the mood and action or Sci-Fi genre. We were quick and orderly and managed to tech and do a run of the show all within one hour, fifteen minutes.

### Rich Description of Performance of *Woer Wayepa*

There was joyous energy in the crowd and lots of movement in the background as opening night-goers moved between the art exhibition in the shipping terminal, to the food trucks/stalls, to the bar and the live performance space where we were performing. I could see many Islander faces in the crowd, and I was overcome with nerves and excitement at the prospect of sharing *Woer Wayepa* with them all. The anticipation of performing was also starting to wear Awa's energy down, and I made sure I kept his blood sugar levels up with food and water as he and Alistair prepped in the marquee area backstage. My little one was also starting to feel overcome with the excitement of the night, and I carried him on my back for the two hours till home time. This had been my regular go-to while we were rehearsing, and Awa often commented on his Aka carrying him as a young boy on her back. Family has been an integral support during this work and being with them on Saibai also offered a deeper connection to who I was and why I was driven to do a PhD. Bringing my family along was not just about them learning about their cultural heritage but also about sharing with my bloodline community the heart of who I am. Caring for story is also about sharing your heart with the place where the stories are born.

This 14-minute theatrical piece was broken up into the following three sequences.

Sequence One: The Arrival

Sequence Two: *Mawa*

Sequence Three: The Departure

## Sequence One: The Arrival

The opening sequence was all about capturing the audience's attention and drawing them in. Beginning with a digital visual storytelling element introduces the interdisciplinary approach and establishes one of the creative elements that will inform the story.

The audience see themselves from our protagonist, Dr Ngaynga's point of view, hurtling through space at high speed and accompanied by the sound effects of his time machine. To punctuate the end of this moment, a bright light explodes on the screen, and we cut to Dr Ngaynga, drawing with his index finger an animated curved line on a graph. As we are in Cairns, the closest city to the Torres Straits, the majority of the audience will identify the man as Islander in origin. This graph on a screen separates us, the audience and the Doctor. This graph is of the rising sea prediction for the Torres Strait from 2018 to 2100.<sup>216</sup> Dr Ngaynga follows this animated graph with his index finger and in the background we glimpse what looks like the inside of a spaceship. We leave the audience with a visual of the rising seas and the sound of the time machine slowing down before ceasing. This sound effect is a combination of mechanical sound effect and the beat of the *warup* that gradually slows down after the time machine has landed. It is like an engine winding down. There is a large, black, box-like structure on the grassed area representing the time machine, which lights up with accompanying sound and action when the door opens. This large black box is Ngaynga's time machine and is rather like an oversized geometric-shaped structure, standing two metres tall at the highest point. There are indented abstract geometric lines patterned across the front of the structure. In some of these indentations there are battery-operated LED lights with a built-in function controller that can flicker or remain steady when selected. Two people are needed to operate the LED lights and the drawbridge door, which works on a pulley system. The designer of this set-piece, Alison Ross, and I had spoken at length about what this structure could look like. My initial concept envisaged a glass cube resembling a museum display cabinet to emphasise what may happen to Islander Culture if we do not adapt. Budget and time dictated that we needed to simplify the set-piece. We also had no workshop space at our disposal to build this structure and as Alison was based in Brisbane finding someone in Cairns to construct the piece was becoming extremely challenging. Alison finally wrangled somebody, but they were based 135km south of Cairns. Therefore, the piece needed to be something that could be constructed off site, taken apart, transported to Cairns, erected at our rehearsal space and then moved from there to the performance venue where the structure would sit the night before the performance. The ephemeral nature of the piece being a one-off performance and our being at the mercy of the weather meant we needed a structure that could withstand nature's elements with the knowledge that the piece would end up in rubbish in the aftermath. Looking back, I would have liked to have spent more time working on the design of the structure and would have focussed on the use of recyclable materials, and implemented issues of the environment into the set design as well. We spoke about making the structure from cardboard but this did not eventuate, due to weight problems in keeping the structure upright should there be any wind on the night. Alas, for the purpose of durability in weather, travel and repeated assembly, we settled on plywood.

Smoke begins billowing around the time machine, and a man is revealed silhouetted in the doorway framed by a hazy purple-hued light. This is Dr Ngaynaga. The image of him standing as a silhouette in the time machine pays homage to the futuristic genre of the 80s when Awa Jeff was beginning his transition from dancer to choreographer/song composer, and the impact of popular culture on Saibai *girel*.

The lights change and come up on the main grassed performing area in front of the stage. The man then steps out of the machine. He is carrying with him a long hourglass object. The man is revealed to be Dr Ngaynga from the initial video projection of the rising sea level graph. He exits the time machine and walks onto the grassed area assisted by his wooden walking stick. Dr Ngaynga's costume is a mixture of organic pieces of grasses, feathers and a modern formal dress with top hat, waistcoat, white gloves, slacks and lace-up shoes. The idea for the costume came

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<sup>216</sup> Land and Sea Management Unit.

from Awa Jeff, a fan of the tap-dancing era of Fred Astaire about whom Awa's father's had learnt during his WWII service on Waiben. Combining the popular culture element with the Saibai dance costume component gives Ngaynga a uniqueness not often witnessed on our Australian stage. He has a quirky uniqueness, not unlike the BBC time-travelling hero, Dr Who, but with a strong connection to his Islander origin. There are many pop culture references throughout the piece. He is carrying a *warup*. He looks a little confused as he looks around the crowd. Finally he speaks in KKY. Our collaboration builds on Awa's knowledge as an oral storyteller in contemporary theatre creation. This code-switching between languages is crucial in defining the character of Ngaynga.

Ngaynga is looking for someone and calls out to them, but no-one answers. When he speaks again, it is in English, and we hear him calling out looking for Ama, his mother. He is confused as to where he is. He asks the audience to tell him what the year is. When someone yells back, "2018!" the realization of being in the wrong time dawns on him. Like Dr Who's time machine, Dr Ngaynga's time machine does not always arrive at the pre-planned destination. Ngaynga was hoping he had landed on Saibai Island in 1947 but instead he has landed in Cairns 2018 at the CIAF opening night event. In discussion, we touched on the 1947 migration from Saibai Island to the mainland of Australia. His objective is to see Ama (Mother) Saibai<sup>217</sup> again and to learn from those who implemented adaptation measures exactly how the clan groups went about them and to document this for future Islanders. He calls to his mother, looking for her in the audience, and is confused by the crowd.

Ama was a baby when she left Saibai with her parents, and travelled on one of the three pearl luggers across the Straits to the mainland of Australia, landing at Muttee Heads. Seawaters had inundated the island, flooding vegetable gardens, freshwater wells, and the cemetery. Half the clan groups of the island, *Koey Buway* (big clans) decided that leaving Saibai would be best for their families. They would build a community with the permission of the local Aboriginal people that would be named Bamaga in Cape York. The *Migi Buway* (small clans) decided they would stay and they are the clans that are still on Saibai Island today. This adaptive measure that was put in place in 1947 is implemented in *Woer Wayepa* to remind audiences of Islanders' resilience and determination and the possibilities that exist when contemplating significant measures in surviving climate change. Understanding what can be done to implement measures that will lessen the extent and begin to heal the planet is about how we go about bridging science with cultural knowledge. This is about empowering our cultural knowledge in the climate change debate. When Ngaynga realises he has travelled to the wrong place, he approaches the time machine, picks up his walking stick and beats on the wall. A connection between the machine and Dr Ngaynga is established as he speaks in a stern tone in language that infers his displeasure with it. With that a hydraulic sound effect is heard as the door opens again. Wailing emanates from the machine. This wailing was a stylized version of a chant Awa had composed imitating the crying of loved ones when someone has passed. In *Woer Wayepa* the wailing is that of the *Saibailgal* for their Ama Saibai. Ngaynga slowly backs away from the time machine, urging us to listen to the wailing. He tells us, "they are in mourning."

Language emanates from the time machine, and Ngayana then translates this in English. "Life is like a hibiscus. It opens in the morning and then withers and dies in the evening." Awa Jeff informs me that these are the words spoken, proclaiming a death, when someone has passed on. He cautions Island people to listen again, and in a mix of Yumplotak and English, Ngaynga warns the audience of a future where the islands of the Torres Strait will be under water. (Language) "*Youpla* (you people) will be like seagulls roaming the skies forever." There is a distinct performance style to Awa Jeff's performance. He is a natural-born performer, but because the piece is aimed at mobilizing the audience, his performance has an educational tone as he is a Knowledge Custodian and a retired teacher. After attempting to draw the actor out of Awa we recognized that the best way forward was to support Awa's strengths as a performer and build the emotion from the other creative elements.

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<sup>217</sup> Ama Saibai is what Saibailgal refer to as their island home.

Awa chose to ad-lib at times throughout the piece, whether due to nerves and tiredness. By the time he performed, it was 8.45pm. He did not speak as much language as we had rehearsed, but the code-switching from English to language also expends more energy. “That’s one of the things that sort of scared me, I will (try) remember English but the language is very easy because I *sabe* (understand) what to say.” He never worked off the script I had typed up, preferring to workshop the story concepts through. Code-switching during the performance became less and less, and Awa’s concentration to remember lines became the aim. The energy needed to switch languages was becoming evident, and the combination of nervous energy and a later starting time had already consumed quite a bit of Awa’s energy. He worked with the core story adlibbing, and at times building on the story. Awa is also quite animated at times when expressing himself, as the dancer in him is drawn to utilizing his whole body when performing.

Ngaynga mentions the constellation and the four winds and the eight phases of the moon. This section becomes the core and essence of *Woer Wayepa*. Spoken in language through a Cultural Knowledge Custodian from the continuing line of where that knowledge is born, confirms the power and weight of Cultural knowledge. As Awa Jeff has stated, “I am the language, I am the power of the language.”

All of this then becomes a theatrical device signifying the gravitas of complementing science with Saibaian Cultural knowledge on the issue of climate change. Cultural knowledge offers a holistic approach that is built on thousands of years of science, testing and utilizing the learnings of a people’s interaction with the surrounding environment. It is the core of who we are. Saibaian’s Cultural knowledge is deeply connected to spirituality and well-being and can also be deployed to combat the intense fear and paralysis humans are feeling around the issues of climate change.

*Ngaynga* then summons *Kubil Malpal* (night moon). The moon phases can speak of weather patterns and wildlife patterns, of hunting and gathering and gardening. In *Woer Wayepa*, *Kubil Malpal* is depicted through the *Mawa*. The accompanying chant is translated as, “what spirit has taken you moon?”

### Sequence Two: *Mawa*

“What spirit has taken you moon?”

The *Mawa* was a prominent feature in the story of *Woer Wayepa* and speaks to the phases of the moon and its effect on the tides. The *Mawa* exits out of the time machine into the performance space. The performer playing this entity was my *bala* (brother) Alistair. I will say more about the process of his involvement a little further along. Alistair’s physicality is the basis for the *Mawa*’s movement in all of the *Mawa*’s performative stories. The moon prop has been added by Awa to this performance and represents the full moon. The costume the performer wears includes the *Mawa* mask. It is made by Awa Jeff from cane, feathers, raffia, over the four months leading up to this performance. The costume is also designed and created by Awa Jeff and is his costume when performing with the dance troupes of Saibai or Seisia.

In this iteration of the *Mawa*, we see the *Mawa* holding a life jacket. The life jacket is a symbol for the seas rising, and this is the message he brings to Ngaynga and the audience. We chose to bring all Saibaian elements of the story via the time machine as the *Mawa* represents a part of Ngaynga.

The *Mawa* proceeds to offer the life jacket to Ngaynga, who then reciprocates by giving the *Mawa* a smart screen. The visual imagery on the smart screen is projected onto the big screen. Awa Jeff speaks of the protocols surrounding the exchange of objects between *Mawa* and Ngaynga and stresses the importance of giving something back to *Mawa*. Also, we wanted to draw attention to the influence of modern technology on the Torres Straits by introducing a message from the future of the sea swallowing up the islands through the contemporary communication device of a smart screen. This exchange works merely to play out the reciprocity between *Mawa* and Ngaynga.

Alistair was not the original performer of the *Mawa* for *Woer Wayepa*. As we entered our third and final week of workshopping and rehearsing, we still had not had a full rehearsal of the *Mawa* sequence. The two Cairns-based Saibai performers were unable to commit to the project due to work and family commitments. I could tell Awa was in a contemplative mode from the beginning of that final week, and by mid-Monday morning, he raised concerns over still not having implemented the *Mawa* performer into *Woer Wayepa*. There were difficulties in scheduling rehearsal time for the two performers Awa had approached. Fortunately for the project, Alistair was a member of the Torres Strait Islander Researchers' CoP, and could take up the mantle of the *Mawa* performer. Alistair is currently Chief Investigator for the ARC Discovery Indigenous Research Project, *Saibai Island Language and Cultural Knowledge Project*. Al, as he is fondly known by family and friends, built a relationship with Awa Jeffa and his brother Awa Walter Waia, beginning in the late 1990s when he entered the workforce on Waiben where the awas were based. I respectfully approach him for advice and guidance for all things Cultural within our immediate family. Al had arrived in Cairns from Brisbane at the end of the second week. He assisted us during rehearsals, painted the set and was an all-round gofer. It was Awa who asked Al to stand up and indicated that he begin moving, physically directing him and guiding him through the movements. After five minutes, Awa's mind was made up, "good, you are the *Mawa* performer." It was a late start for Al, a slow learner already a couple of decades into adulthood now granted permission to perform. He had been patiently building on his experience of Saibai *girel* for a while, and he was fortunate to have Awa Jeff Aniba-Waia, Awa Walter Waia and Awa Sedha Waia teach him along the way. And, of course, he graciously accepted the offer. He and Awa spent a rigorous week together focussing on technique, transferring knowledge around the *Mawa*, and finishing off costume and apparatus for the *Mawa* sequence. There would not have been good outcome if this step had been overlooked because the transference of Cultural knowledge is an integral and crucial part of creating *Woer Wayepa*.

The first time Al performed the *Mawa* movement in rehearsal with Awa singing the accompanying chant, all of our children that were in the space were quiet and still, captivated by what they were witnessing. This was one big moment when I could feel the pull of our ancestors. Al has had a long relationship with our three awas, and his love of Saibai *girel* has been there since he was a child: similar to my memories of *girel* in Bamaga. He has actively pursued the learning of *girel*, but the cultural politics surrounding a lot of his search to foster a teacher/student relationship or to be part of a Saibai bloodline dance troupe from Brisbane to Waiben has brought many roadblocks. In the late 1990s when Alistair began his career fresh from university, a job on Thursday Island brought him closer to our Saibai and Bamaga bloodline. His desire to learn more about our bloodline heritage was fuelled further:

'I met Uncle Walter when I was working up at the native title tribunal – him and Athe (grandfather) Dana – as a claimant for the native title claim. And meeting him (Uncle Walter), as well how passionate and knowledgeable he is about Saibai and dancing and all parts of Saibai culture. For me, the ember was always there burning and that sort of stoked it a little bit more just with talking with Awa Walter, and you know he emphasised needing to fully understand Saibai culture. At that point he was out of his primary years of dancing but whenever there was Christmas or that sort of event he would still get involved in dancing. Then from that point, shifting up to T.I.<sup>218</sup>, and talking to him more about Saibai specific stuff and about language and the importance of understanding and speaking language to fully understand Saibai culture and knowledge.'

Alistair's first-ever dance practice was with another athe (grandfather) living on Thursday Island who had high standing and much respect from all Islanders. His name was Athe Caralous Isua. Alistair continues:

'I used to pull around and see Aka Keru and her husband Athe Caralous, and he was an old dancing man as well, and I sorta mentioned to them my interest in learning dancing, and through that, I think Athe Caralous was the first one who taught me how to mark time.'

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<sup>218</sup> Thursday Island is often referred to as T.I. Waiben is the language name for Thursday Island.

That was the first lesson I had at the end of '97. He probably realised as well, obviously, it's easier to learn Saibai dancing if you're part of a dance troupe and you got regular dance practice as well. So to a certain degree he was probably just humouring me or at least just teaching me the basics if I ever did come across a dance troupe I wouldn't be starting from total scratch, I'd have a little bit of an idea.'

He has great memories of the lead dancers of the time from the communities of Saibai and Bamaga, that made their mark on in the dance world:

'I remember going across to Bamaga for some tombstone unveilings and seeing *bala* Jesse (Saugaukaz) dance and thinking, "gee whiz he can move!" But it was him and Cliffy (Wasiu) at that point. And I remember seeing *Muyngu Koekaper* as well especially with Isaac Waia and Victor Akiba, I think were two of the younger dancers and you know looking at them and seeing, "jeez man their really amazing movements and that sort of thing." That would have been 98, 99 during that sort of period. While I was up there, I never thought it was going to eventuate just 'cause I thought I'd have to be in Saibai or Bamaga.'

Alistair's fire was still burning, and his yearning for *girel* continued when he eventually moved back to Brisbane. Brisbane proved the most challenging for Al in seeking out troupes to dance with and teachers to learn from. He and Ama put the word out to dance troupes of Saibai bloodline before he went up to Waiben and also when he returned to Brisbane. But nothing ever came of the requests he put out via Ama. The politics is thick on the mainland and is something I have yet to comprehend fully. Although the family line may have a lot to do with it, the authenticity of who a "true Islander" is always a negotiation/navigation of who your parents are and what your clan group is:

'It wasn't till I shifted down here.... with Uncle Walter here, and he was talking about getting back into dancing and he'd always known that I was interested in getting into dance, so then we started doing basic lessons from the start. He was teaching me what he knew, but because he'd been out of it a while and because Uncle Sedha had been dancing and choreographing continuously with dance troupes, those two spoke together about the best place to start, and he talked about the technical aspect of marking time. I think Awa Sedha was emphasising that you got to get it right at that point, from the beginning.'

Understanding the ethos of our Saibaian bloodline heritage was the most significant factor influencing Alistair to continue his passion for Saibaian *girel*. His move to Waiben in the Torres Straits grounded his bloodline connection to Saibai Island, revealing and informing ways of knowing, doing and being from *Ait Koedal* Knowledge Custodians, contributing to a greater awareness of Saibaian ethos. The relationships and trust he built with Awa Walter and Awa Sedrick were the driving force behind the initial step:

'We started doing that, and Awa Sedha recommended some easier dances to learn. So me and Uncle Walter began to practise down at Whynum near the mangroves there because it reminded him of Saibai, so it had to be near the mangroves at Whynum.

So we'd start practising these two or three dances, and Uncle Walter would be singing, he'd be standing in front of me and I'd be standing behind following his technique and we'd start off slowly and build up. In the end, I think we learnt two or three dances but we never actually got to a performance, which was alright, it woulda been nice too. The idea was to work up to performing, performing at different events, but we also had a problem of "how do we have the back up accompaniment with the chorus and *burubur*?" And Awa Sedha and Awa Jeffa just use USB stick 'cause that's what the awas were doing at times.

Just putting recordings onto a USB stick and having a portable speaker and dancing to that. And you know dancing to that and that was probably the route I was gonna take. But it didn't eventuate, probably for different reasons it wasn't the right time.'

Adaptation and resilience are the main attributes of Cultural survival. With the advent of technology, ways of learning can be expanded on to meet the growing demands of maintaining and evolving Cultural practices in adapting to the impacts of climate change. Alistair filmed Awa Sedha's dance teachings on his iPhone, copying them and sending on to me when he heard my big son Joharo was interested in picking up and learning *girel*.

He also worked closely with Awa Jeff in Cairns, employing his language skills to transcribe interviews from Saibai Island as he works on his ARC-funded language project. He is also working closely with Awa Walter on how he can return the stories back to Saibai, exploring what kind of repository this may look like for *Saibailgal*:

'There's still a part of me if you get to a certain point in doing a few different movements as part of that performance maybe a dance troupe could happen. And to be honest, it doesn't bother me as much as it did growing up. When I was younger, I was thinking well, I have to do that to cement myself more as a Saibai person, and you know personal growth and development. But these days, my thinking has changed to the fundamentals of Saibai Culture is making sense of the world we live in. The dance exists as a part of making sense and understanding the world Saibai people lived and live in. Whereas if I adopt the same concept of living here in Brisbane, then it's not just about doing Saibai dancing or tying that into who you are.'

With the threat of invading seas immersing our islands, how we adapt will determine the survival of Saibai Island Culture. Alistair offers one way towards evolving a Cultural practice, off-island defined by the environment. A plausible discussion to continue with our Cultural Knowledge Custodians of Saibai Island.

### Sequence Three: The Departure

As the *Mawa* exits, a siren is heard signalling the rising of the waters. This is time for Ngaynga to depart and continue his time travel to 1947. Introducing a comedic sequence has much to do with Islander humour and the need to laugh. Awa and I both agreed that a lighter mood needed to be in this piece, as laughter and comedy are a big part of the Islander's way of being, but how would we do this while keeping the urgent message of rising seas. We brought in the fun through the voice-over of a well-spoken flight attendant informing passengers of safety instructions on board the flight of the time machine. This was a satirical tongue-in-cheek paternalistic voice, utilized in this context to be laughed at. Awa also requested that the music supporting this sequence be up-tempo, "like rap music" for him to move to as he entered the time machine in preparation for departure. The time-travelling element of the story grew from acknowledging what the future scientific predictions are reporting for the islands of the Torres Strait. By creating a protagonist who is a time traveller, we were able to deploy a genre so often underrepresented in theatre and a genre that inspires and influences Awa's and my creative practice. We were also able to invite the audience to contemplate a time when the islands of the Torres Strait have been swallowed by the rising seas. What are the feelings that this invokes especially for the Islander audience? My aim was that it would begin or support the continuing process of growing awareness of the fact that communities need to adapt and mobilize their efforts regarding climate change in the Torres Straits.

In the creation of the character, Awa Jeff embodied Ngaynga during the lead up to rehearsals and during the performance:

'I became the character I wanted to be. I created this stage character. He is gonna look old. And I tried that out in Central (Cairns Central Shopping) in the middle of big crowd. Walking along with my top hat. I drive to new frontiers, no problem.'<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Aniba-Waia.

## Conclusion

The breathtaking, scenic lookout was revealed in *Woer Wayepa*. All that it encapsulated is just a beginning, but it was the coming together of my experiential knowledge with the knowledge of my bloodline heritage. As many Saibai Island people are migrating to the mainland and with the threat of rising sea levels engulfing the Island of Saibai, how we adapt will determine our survival.

Changing and evolving how we maintain cultural practices is not a new thing for Saibai Islanders. As mentioned earlier, trading has been a big part of the Saibaians' way of life with other Islanders, Papua New Guineans, and Indonesians. Relationships with other Pacific Islanders have also been occurring since *bepotaim*. Collaborating with Awa on *Woer Wayepa* is just one project on how our Knowledge Custodians are already thinking about the future of Saibai performative storytelling and the need to adapt and practice Culture for those of us who live off the Island.

Crucial learning from the process is not to underestimate the in-depth discussions needed to ascertain *who* holds the Intellectual Property (IP) Rights and also *what* material/content/knowledge do those rights cover. If other bodies are involved, such as institutions, organisations, companies, etc., the area in regard to IP can become grey very quickly if not covered extensively from the beginning.

I think it is fitting to finish this chapter with a quote of Awa Jeff's that sums up the process of both of us working together on *Woer Wayepa* and conveys what it means when Islanders have autonomy over how we tell stories:

'I love to, I love to... working with people like you are. You have the patience plus you my niece, and not only that plus you are an Island person, when I'm coming from the Island perspective you pick up easily. Whereas working with a Westerner would be a bit hard, I like to work with Indigenous people. As in Island people. The more Saibaians the better. We do it our way.'<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Caring for Story – Giving Voice to the Silenced

*You are their uncles, you their teachers, so you will get the same bami, (the one I eat then I take it out the food from my mouth I put it in your mouth), and you will take the same food from your mouth and put in his mouth. It's knowledge.*

*Bami, It's the food that you chew, it's still in your mouth, you don't swallow it you take it and put it in (the child's mouth).*

*The teaspoon is the knowledge, 'whatever knowledge you give to your boys, give the same knowledge to my boys.'<sup>221</sup>*

As Awa Jeff has articulated in the above quote, *bami* in KKY, is very rich and layered in its meaning and in this context reveals how knowledge is maintained and then shared with the next generation. As conveyed in the introduction chapter, for *Saibailgal*, the complex web of knowledge encompasses the ethos of Saibai Island and the spiritual and physical world coexist within that complex web.

This complex web of knowledge is the *bami* that Awa Jeff refers to, feeding each person that is the recipient and informing their place in the web that reflects *Saibailgal* ways of being, knowing, and doing. When you have that *bami* you don't swallow it; you chew on it until the time has come to share that *bami*. Saibaian ways of being centre on custodianship, not ownership, of the land, sea, and sky extending into the spiritual and the intangible, a responsibility inherent in the ethos. *Bami* nourishes each generation that is a recipient, maintaining *Saibailgal's* Culture. Awa Jeff explained this within the context of a story, linking the knowledge. The terminology of *bami* is imparted within the context of a story: a narrative if you will that supports and informs the Cultural Knowledge. Story links knowledge. The emotional impact of a story creates a memory and strengthens the act of knowledge transference.

Custodianship of *bami* is a way of life for *Saibailgal* and has a complexity that informs and guides a way of living. All this "big knowledge" as Awa Jeff refers to it, is stored in the compartment of the mind known as *Sawa lag*. What I must also note is the classification of language to define the present, past and historical narratives of *Saibailgal*. A recent event that has occurred is known as *ya*. That then becomes a story known as *adhi*. In time, *adhi* becomes a part of Saibai's historical record known as *gidha*. I elaborate on this to share the intricacy of the *Saibailgal* oral narrative that informs Saibaian ways of being, knowing and doing. The silencing, misinterpreting and ignoring of Indigenous voices in the Western knowledge system underestimates the complex and powerful knowledge systems Indigenous people have lived with for thousands of years.

I have attempted to take the blinkers off seeing "us" as the "other", by revealing much about *Saibailgal* through the eyes of *Saibailayg*.<sup>222</sup> My "interpretation" in this context is the story, a vehicle to share what has been imparted to me. I am not chewing on *bami*, for that remains with the custodians who have shared it with me. What is within the pages of this exegesis is a story of my bloodline, one small part of my bloodline. In my research, a story has transmitted the narrative elements of Cultural knowledge, experiential knowledge, research knowledge, and historical narrative, and I have chosen to employ the term *story* in this chapter to define what has been imparted to me from those who have shared within the pages of this document.

Story has the power to change the truth and so must be cared for in a way that supports the reclamation of the silenced, ignored, misinterpreted Indigenous voice.

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Person of Saibai

## Reclaiming OUR Narrative:

Story is a living entity – a transaction; there is a relationship formed with the story that you are interacting with. Story can be in the narrative of Cultural knowledge; the functionality of story is wide and varied and essentially is how we make sense of the world around us. In the research for this PhD, the story's functionality has been in imparting cultural knowledge, sharing experiential knowledge, including personal anecdotal stories that reflect *Saibailgal* ways of being, knowing and doing. How you interact with that story is a vital process in keeping stories alive and connected to the place the story was born from.

The model for Caring for story includes the protocols of working with the community. There is no ownership of the story but custodianship. There is a responsibility once a story has been shared with you as it is forever attached to the place of where it is born. How do you keep the story's spirit alive? Perhaps it's about reflecting on your own story – the one you tell everyone else of yourself. This story is born of you – whatever spin you give it – it is born of you. When people speak your story to others, you hope that they convey the story you have expressed to them about yourself. Or perhaps thinking about a living entity that you care for will resonate with you more when contemplating the notion of caring for story. How do you care for and nurture that living entity? Caring for story begins once story has been imparted to you and ends with once you return the story. Caring for story is striving to understand and “interpret” the story at every level. Knowing full well it is your interpretation, your account of how you are choosing to interpret that story – but being fully conscious of the story as a living entity and the ties that bind that story to its place of birth and conception. When you cut the ties of the story's birthplace, you kill the spirit of that story. So once you have followed the protocols, there is a much more important tail end to it all that encompasses and cares for this living entity that I will discuss further.

When I began this PhD, it was because I wanted to empower and reclaim the space Ama inhabited that has been devalued and silenced. What has also transpired is empowering and understanding the space I occupy, not only for myself but for all of Ama's grandchildren. There were spaces of weakness that existed within me that were born from a coloniser's gaze/the white gaze. The year before Ama passed, she said to me, “Muggie, you must tell Torres Strait stories.” We had just finished watching an ABC Four Corners report on the sinking of the *Malu Sara*, a Torres Strait immigration vessel that sunk after leaving Saibai Island for Waiben in 2005. The voices on the *Malu Sara* were ignored and silenced as they tried in vain to raise the alarm when the boat they were travelling on took on water. All five on board perished at sea. When we finished viewing the story, we were both distressed at the tragic loss that had occurred. The *Malu Sara* story is a story of racism, of otherism, and of the patriarchal power that exists within the colonial matrix.

The voices of the silenced, the ignored, and the misinterpreted fuelled the focus of my PhD. Everybody's story matters and all stories are born from somewhere.

Until *Woer Wayepa*, I had not yet been part of sharing a Torres Strait story that had been cared for and driven by Torres Strait Islanders. I knew why – it was because the spaces of weakness that existed within me held court, and I did not feel capable or understood what the process would be. This perceived weakness included everything, from not being born or raised in the Torres Straits to not speaking the language. Both of these are perceived weaknesses that inform the make-up of an “authentic native,” an identity born from the coloniser's gaze, and are at times deployed by some Islanders to assert and acknowledge their own identity.

To move away from a colonised internalization will contribute to having a sense of identity that empowers perceived spaces of weakness. There is no ownership of the bloodline stories shared with me and contained in this exegesis. But *how* I care for the stories in a way that respects the people and place of where the story is from, is undoubtedly a responsibility and custodianship.

Outlined throughout this document are the distinct steps undertaken in the course of conducting conversations/interviews for the qualitative research and the process of creating the performance-

led research work. In Chapters Three and Four, storytelling is deployed in the transmission of stories. In Chapter Five, I have explicated on storytelling as an adaptive mechanism and storytelling as a cultural transmission through the live performance work, *Woer Wayepa*. A simplified model summarizing the process was developed through experience and refinement and is outlined through the Caring For Story model.

### Caring for Story Model

So how do I make sense of all that has been imparted to me within the confines of the Western Eurocentric research framework, documenting and archiving Saibai Island Knowledge in an ethical and culturally appropriate way that is meaningful to the community? The process has been summarised into seven steps with relationships at the heart of caring for story: Relationships – Request, Respect, Reciprocity, Responsibility, Reflection and Return.



1. Relationships – build and develop trusting relationships each step of the way with the community. This includes the custodians of the story/knowledge and the community’s council and/or clan corporation.
  - a. Collaborating with the custodians of the knowledge contained in the story – deep listening. The custodian of the story should have a key role in the project. I worked with a Cultural Knowledge Custodian of my Saibai island clan group of *Ait Koedal* who could guide the project and be the cultural advisor.
  - b. Transparency in what you are setting out to achieve is a major part of developing the relationship.
  - c. Identify and share yourself with the community – sharing who you are is a vital part of building relationships.
2. Request –
  - a. Request permission from relevant council or clan corporations or equivalent Indigenous bodies or custodians.

- b. Although this is my bloodline community I was also entering for research – I requested protocols specified by the Saibai Island Council and/or the community I was entering.
  
3. Respect – the voices of whom are sharing the story/knowledge.
  - a. Respect the people and the story imparted.
  - b. Offer those voices key roles that drive the process – acknowledge Cultural authorship in these key roles.
  - c. Interviews as conversations – elicit an environment and also structure the conversation so they have autonomy over what they impart.
  - d. Understand the Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights (ICIP) and with input from the Cultural Knowledge Custodian integrate ICIP protocols into the creation process. Address all aspects of intellectual property with the all involved bodies.
  - e. Caring for story is about genuine respect.
  - f. Respect the spirit of the story/knowledge – keep it connected to where it was born.
  
4. Reciprocity – offer something in exchange for people’s valuable time.  
 Reciprocity is not something new for many First Nations’ groups and is indeed intrinsic to Saibaian customs. In exchange for the participant’s time, offer something in return to each participant and/or their family – this should be done in consultation with the cultural advisor. I entered into this trip believing I needed to give, as there had been too much history of taking from Torres Strait communities. What I left with was knowing that bartering and negotiation have been a part of Saibai Culture for thousands of years. With PNG and all the different tribes from *Migi Daudai* being so close, bartering and negotiating was and still is a part of life. Give and take is expected and is an exchange.
  
5. Responsibility – you have a responsibility to the people and to the knowledge/story shared.
  - a. How you care for the story as a living entity is a responsibility that cannot be removed from the process.
  - b. Responsibility is in *how* you interpret what has been imparted to you.
  - c. I chose to interpret the interviews/conversations through the eyes of my Saibaian bloodline heritage with a rich, thick description that reveals the essence of *Saibailgal*. My responsibility was bloodline first, researcher second.
  
6. Reflection – Reflect on these steps and your relationship with the story
  - a. If you have missed anything in the steps re-evaluate with the cultural advisor
  
7. Return – the story/knowledge is not yours to keep. Return the story/knowledge.
  - a. This critical step is frequently overlooked in the process of protocols when knowledge/story has been imparted – at the end of the project you return the story. The story is not yours to use again out of context of the initial consultations/protocols.
  - b. You are simply letting go of the story/knowledge.
  - c. In the process of collaborations between the creator/researcher, the end – the return of the story/knowledge – is a vital step that must be implemented in caring for story. Once the story/knowledge is imparted to the researcher/creator, the story/knowledge is not at the disposal of the researcher/creator. Unless otherwise negotiated with the custodians, the full circle ending with return, should be employed for further use of the knowledge/story.
    - d. If you wish to utilize the story/knowledge again then simply begin the process again – the story of the moon and the *Mawa* is not for me to take out of context and utilize again. Acknowledging Awa Jeff’s Cultural Authorship acknowledges his custodianship of the knowledge/story.

This process was informed by the two Cultural Advisors I worked alongside, Awa Walter Waia and Awa Jeff Aniba-Waia. They were essential in driving the research process of my PhD, and it could not have happened without them. The Caring For Story model is based on the premise of custodianship, acknowledging that what is shared with you is not yours to “own.” There is no ownership in what has been imparted to you. Recognizing the “story” as a living entity that must be “cared” for appropriately, is central to understanding all steps in the framework. The strength of such an approach identifies and listens to *Saibailgal* voices of the past, present and future from where that story was conceived, acknowledging the continuing bloodlines of Saibai Island.

### **Conclusion:**

The key question for me as long as I am researching my bloodline community is what is my responsibility? What I have realised on this path is that reciprocity is vital in the negotiation of Cultural knowledge transference and in this context, the Cultural knowledge that is part of my bloodline. Being part of the same bloodline does not give automatic inclusion into ownership or rights to Cultural knowledge. I was born and raised on the mainland and entered the community as a researcher with an agenda that could be looked at by Saibaian communities through a lens tainted by previous researchers who have extracted Cultural knowledge. Acknowledging this and honouring the relationships and processes put in place by our communities will, in turn, empower perceived spaces of weakness that exist within us. The spaces we sit in as outsiders created can further strengthen our communities with the experiential knowledge we have gained. It is not a given that knowledge is handed to me on a platter, but through the right channels and a clear understanding of upholding the community’s protocols, the transfer of Cultural knowledge can be an act of sovereignty.

## Conclusion

My PhD has been about documenting and archiving Saibai Island knowledge in performative storytelling in an ethical and culturally appropriate way that is meaningful to the community. In the process of doing this, a respectful, significant pathway unfolded. One of the challenges insider/outsider researcher presented, revealed my insecurities with being born and raised on the mainland. Acknowledging then empowering the spaces of weakness born out of colonisation was a fundamental step in the reclamation of the *Saibailgal* narrative, as outlined in the Introduction and Chapter Two. At the core of my research paradigm was to contribute to the maintenance of Torres Strait Cultural practice – to have reciprocity in place for Cultural Knowledge transference to occur. The big question that has reverberated in my mind during this process and continues to reverberate is – how can I be of assistance? In the act of reciprocity, what do I have to give back?

The problem I was addressing in the scope of this research was the extraction of knowledge and stories from the Torres Strait by non-Torres Strait Island people that had propagated the trope of the “dying breed” and rendered Islanders voice-less. The repercussions of anthropological research and fieldwork by Haddon’s expedition to the Torres Strait in 1898, as well as the reign of the London Missionary Society (LMS) that began in 1871 are still reverberating today. Cultural knowledge, Cultural practices and material objects were extracted and given a narrative through the coloniser’s lens in line with salvage ethnography’s “dying race” narrative. The continued denial of Cultural knowledge as a complete knowledge system in itself and the attempted Cultural genocide has left Torres Strait Island people voice-less in the Western knowledge system expounding the narrative of the “dying race.”

My work contributes to the literature on researching Indigenous communities by offering a model as a guideline to working in an ethical and culturally appropriate way when working in Indigenous communities. It contributes to informing researchers about the responsibility that is needed when working with Indigenous knowledge/story. This further supports and informs the Australia Council’s protocols when working with Indigenous communities and offers a way of understanding for researchers and theatre-makers of what is at stake when a story/knowledge has been shared outside of the land, sea/waterways, sky connection from where the story was born. In addition, this work also supports and offers a pathway to towards the guiding principles outlined in Articles 11.1 and 31.1 as stated in The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People for:

a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world and it elaborates on existing human rights standards and fundamental freedoms as they apply to the specific situation of indigenous peoples.<sup>223</sup>

Caring For Story is about the process of reclaiming our narrative – a narrative that supports the continued survival, dignity and well-being of a people and is central to caring for story. My intention in writing this thesis was to add to the written record the voices of Saibai Islanders with a focus on Saibai performative storytelling and to draw light on the systemic suppression of Indigenous people’s voices. Saibai knowledge is a knowledge system tried and tested over thousands of years as proven by the continuing bloodline of *Saibailgal* living today.

The major questions this exegesis addressed were:

a) How do I document and archive Saibai Island knowledge in an ethical and culturally appropriate way that is meaningful to the community?

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<sup>223</sup> United Nations, "Department of Economic and Social Affairs Indigenous Peoples".

b) How do I create a live performance work in an ethical and culturally appropriate way that is meaningful to the community?

Clearly, this document has shown the main factors that have impacted upon issues surrounding these questions and is organised in the following way. The Introduction chapter introduces the reader to how Western knowledge systems have attained cultural authority over Torres Strait Cultural knowledge and as such, have become a weapon to disempower our autonomy over Cultural knowledge. My viewpoint introduces the reader to who I am and how and why this research impacts me personally. I also present the problem and outline previous research and the problematics of extracting knowledge from Indigenous communities.

Chapter One is the literature review – what literature exists on Saibai Island *girel* and why the predominant literature is problematic for Islanders. Chapter Two is my research paradigm – how standpoint theory offers a way to theorise my research. Also included are the steps I followed in the research and documenting. The next three chapters tell the story of my qualitative research and show a pathway that documents and archives Saibai Island knowledge in an ethical and culturally appropriate way that is meaningful to the community. In Chapter Three the voices of Saibai Island *girel* and how Geertz's thick description has influenced my qualitative research is discussed. Chapter Four is a rich description of the short documentary of Saibai Island dance that I made with Awa Jeff Aniba-Waia. In Chapter Five, the model engaged is developed further when employed for the performance practicum titled *Woer Wayepa*, extending this pathway towards caring for story. The major questions addressed in this exegesis, outlined above are discussed in Chapter Six, a chapter on caring for story that describes a model for working *in an ethical and culturally appropriate way that is meaningful to the community*.

*My research study* utilized qualitative research based on interviews and performance-based research. I found in answer to questions a + b as outlined above, was that the framework/processes needed had to be based on a Saibaian ethos/philosophy. *Saibailgal* needed to drive the research and also to drive the creation of a live performance piece so that ethical guidelines could be followed.

The main steps involved in this collaboration could be summarized in seven steps. These were:

1. Request
2. Relationships
3. Respect
4. Reciprocity
5. Responsibility
6. Reflection
7. Return

The prefix of 're' in all the words outlined above designates returning to where one begins, indicating an interaction at the "site" where one starts each step. The Caring For Story model is about treating the story as a living entity to be cared for when imparted. It is not about superimposing a set of protocols onto a community: rather a guide to igniting questions for the researcher while working in Indigenous communities in search of an ethical and respectful way of working that is meaningful to the community. The strength of such an approach centres the voices of Saibai Island performative storytellers. When that knowledge/story is interpreted again for another purpose, the process begins again.

### Limitations of Research

This research is specific to the clan group *Ait Koedal* of Saibai Island in the Torres Strait. All the other small clans that reside on Saibai Island at the time of this research have their own Cultural Knowledge Custodians who will have in place their own set of protocols relevant to their clan. The big clans that now reside in Bamaga and Seisia again will also have their individual Cultural Knowledge Custodians and a set of protocols.

The limitations of the research include not having lived on Saibai Island and not speaking KKY. As expressed in Chapter One, not residing on Saibai and not knowing language places me on the outside of the community, adding to this I entered Saibai as a researcher who brings with them a history of extracting knowledge stemming from of colonisation. Cultural knowledge is interconnected with *Saibailgal* ways of being, knowing and doing. Passing on knowledge/story is also a vital act of cultural practice. As a researcher coming into the village of Saibai, I am in turn “researching” and although I have bloodline connection to Saibai the responsibility is more significant when wearing the “researcher’s hat.” And although I encouraged having a relaxed environment during the interviews as conversations, the specific nature of film crew set-up on a location adds a formality to the discussion.

During these conversations, the language barrier dictated what level of engagement I could have in the conversation. All of the Knowledge Givers had received a minimum of interruptions, and there was a flow in the conversation as they imparted their performative storytelling knowledge.

### **Audience for this Thesis**

The audience for my PhD research is inextricably linked to my two sons who share with me being born and raised away from their aka’s bloodline and the communities of Saibai and Bamaga. Empowering the space we as mainland Torres Strait Islanders inhabit, also strengthens the continuing line of our people. Torres Strait Islanders born and raised away from the land, sea and sky of their bloodline connection, and who are collaborating with their communities, can also be guided by this document. I hope that this can also be employed and extended by future generations of Saibaian bloodline lineage in keeping the Saibaian voices secure in the reclamation of our narrative. Other audiences that may benefit from the work in this exegesis are researchers into the Torres Strait and other Indigenous communities.

### **Further Research**

My research covered performative storytelling on Saibai Island alone. The other two Saibaian communities of Bamaga and Seisia also have their own performative storytelling leaders and dance troupes. There is similarity in the dances, as Saibai *girel* has influenced the dances of both communities. Further research on how these two communities have adapted their performative storytelling practise away from their Saibai Island heritage would also contribute significantly to the field of Torres Strait Island performative storytelling. Adding to this is the migration story and adaptation of cultural practices. The communities of Bamaga and Seisia have their own councils and clan groups residing in each community.

Further research on storytelling as an adaptive mechanism for the maintenance of cultural knowledge can be developed further within the context of the migration. Working closely with my awas has presented at times the complicated relationship of what is imparted from male to female: adapting cultural practices in light of the continuing migration to the mainland of Saibaians, the impacts of climate change, and the encroaching “one world order.” Saibai also has a large population of people from Papua New Guinea and adapting to this influx has been challenging for *Saibailgal*.

Saibai is the closest part of Australia to another country. Across the waters, you can see Papua New Guinea, 5km away. When I have come to Saibai, I have heard many times about the influx of Daudai. In KKY *Daudai* means land – *Migi Daudai* is Papua New Guinea and *Koey Daudai* refers to the mainland of Australia. Tuberculosis and other diseases cause a threat to Saibaian and raises an alarm for them and their families. There are visible signs of poverty in the Papua New Guineans who come across to Saibai Island in their boats to sell at the markets on the esplanade. But there is also a sense of the “old ways” in the people. The old ways that I hear Saibai elders talk about are missing from the younger generation. The Papuan New Guineans on Saibai, always greet me with a somewhat shy but welcoming smile. There is a leanness in them that speaks of a

hard-working life: a leanness that is predominantly missing from the generations of Saibaians today.

On the western end of Saibai is Daudai village. As there had been a small outbreak of tuberculosis a few months ago I was a little apprehensive about entering that part of the village – after hearing TB had infected some community members a couple of months ago it was the last place I wanted to walk with an 8-year-old. But I heard that it is part of a walking route for fitness-orientated Saibaians.

As we walked we noticed where Daudai village started – they were out and about with children playing on the cement wall that is being built for protection against the tidal surges that envelope the village. A PNG man I had seen selling billums at their markets on the esplanade was walking our way and greeted us with a welcoming smile. He proceeded to tell me that he was leaving tomorrow and had now discounted the billums from \$70 to \$50. He shook my partner's hand, said his goodbyes and walked on ahead of us. There were kids everywhere playing in the dirt piles that were part of the sea wall project – the houses were alive with children running between them and onto the roads. Below, in shin-deep water, were two boys hunting for something in the mangroves. I was worried about them as I searched for any sign of crocodiles lurking in the waters that surrounded them. The houses of the village seemed to be made up of a mix of old dwellings constructed during the last fifty years, new residences built in the previous ten years, and “shanty town-style” homes amidst Saibai's industrial site, which included sea wall construction vehicles, a mobile tower and a sewerage plant. There was a home whose exterior was made up of thatched leaves of some sort that looked like it could have been made any time in the last century.

Two teams were playing mixed volleyball on a vacant lot. Near the end of the Daudai village was a home that had an outdoor kitchen with a roof. Two ladies were cooking and preparing the evening meal. Another lady was sweeping the yard and watching the kids, who played everywhere. I looked at the two ladies cooking and gave a wave which was returned with smiles. There was certainly a different atmosphere between the main village of Saibai – whose streets were all but empty bar the two cars that had passed us on the way to and from the Daudai village. It made me think of what Saibai was like when Ama was born.

Having Daudai as helpers around the home seems to be a prominent part of Saibai life. It almost seems like there is a difference in status between Daudai and Saibai. What I find hard to grapple with but curious at the same time is the status between Saibaians and PNG people. Saibaians are economically richer than the Papua New Guineans and Saibai offers them monetary opportunities they would not have in their home village across the water. As well as selling their creative wares, i.e. billums, baskets, carvings, mats, etc. along the waterfront, they also work in the homes of Saibaians, gardening, cleaning – doing anything and everything like servants. The population in Saibai has decreased since the establishment of the new Centrelink rules that say you must leave your town of residency if you have gained no work within six months. There are more, older residents in the village of Saibai than in Daudai village. A lot of the younger generation, those between 20 and 45 have left in search of work and have taken their families with them.

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