

- a clearing house for a broad range of resources, with live media feeds and links to specialist bodies such as AIATSIS, ANU's Centre for Native Title Anthropology, rep. bodies, the Aurora project and more.
- facilities for members to upload material such as work-in-progress papers, publications, training and professional development material, videos and contributions to our 'soap-box'.
- a context for direct interaction among members through live chat, blog and email facilities.

ANTS also hosts a [study leave scheme](#), which brings native title anthropologists to Adelaide. ANTS Fellows praise the program for providing access to first-class research facilities, including a research library, enabling synergies among colleagues and time out from their day-to-day work to think, write

and learn with others. This year we hosted David Martin (Canberra), who worked on a plain English guide to the design of PBCs; Petronella Vaarzen-Morel (Alice Springs), who examined social organisation, transformation and change among Lower Southern Arrernte people; David Raftery (Perth), who looked at social organisation and governance models for the Noongar; Sidrah McCarthy (Alice Springs), who explored the role of youth in native title claims; and Caro MacDonald (Melbourne), who explored the potential of ethnographic film in native title processes.

Finally, ANTS hosted the '[Society and Governance in Native Title](#)' project. This brought experienced practitioners to Adelaide in December 2011 and June 2012 for two-day workshops which discussed approaches to 'the society question' in native title claim research

and sought ways in which such work might better inform post-determination challenges such as governance.

In opening the June meeting, Professor Greg McCarthy, Chair of the ANTS Board and Head of the School of Social Sciences, said that ANTS reflects the University of Adelaide's commitment to social justice for Indigenous Australians and in particular the recognition of Indigenous rights.

Native title anthropologists are encouraged to apply for membership of the ANTS NEST at www.austnativetitlestudies.org

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EYES AND EARS OF THE NORTH: AN INTERVIEW WITH DOUGLAS PASSI, CHAIR OF MER GEDKEM LE



Douglas Passi, Chair of Mer Gedkem Le
Credit: Kerstin Styche

My people

The population of Murray Island is around 450 and there are more families living in Townsville, Cairns, Mackay and other parts of the Australian mainland. Our people are pretty straightforward.

There are people I would describe more as *kober* and *te kober* means 'eyes and ears of the north'. They will approach you immediately and say 'what are you doing in my country?' Then there are those in the eastern and southern part of the island that are *sor kober*, people that don't talk much. They will not approach you straight away. They normally sit back and observe you, to try to understand who you are. The people in the northern part of Murray Island always introduce themselves first to visitors and send a message to the *sor kober* people to say, 'this is what that group are doing in our country.'

Malo's Lore

When you first arrive on the island, I believe, and it's been handed down from generation to generation, you should approach the Traditional Owners. As is written in *Mabo*, Malo's lore says *malo tag mauki mauki, teter mauki mauki*, which means to say: you can't touch what is not yours. You can't enter into

private land. You have to get permission to enter any property. The lore, as decided by the elders and high priests, is about 25 to 26 clauses. I believe clauses 1 to 8 lay the foundations of the lore itself, and from 9 to 12 is directed at the person, and that person is *muia*. *Muia ad le ged mimika*. This means that he can't enter another man's property. He must walk on his path, to the front door, and get permission to enter.

We have a system in place. All Indigenous people have a system in place. This is something for western society to learn to understand and believe: we were in this country a long time. When you look at the system of government in Australia, it has three levels, federal, state and local government... We have a similar thing, but like I said, on a smaller scale. We have clan groups, which is family. Like the Passi Clan. We have 8 tribes on Mer. One tribal leader from each tribe sits on the *ait ira per*. The *ait ira per* is like the parliament, where people sit and listen before arriving at a decision. Imagine

that our system is like the octopus. The 8 tentacles are the 8 tribes, the suckers on the tips of the tentacles are the clan groups, and the head is the *ait ira per*. Mer Gedkem Le [the RNTBC] has this same structure.

I've seen university students and anthropologists come to Mer to learn our culture, custom and tradition. Then they go and write their report, essay, or whatever. But when they give it back to us, and we read that report, it's really complicated to us. It's no longer ours.

Our native title experience

Native title for me is from generation to generation. We always think and *believe* that we own the land, the water and the resources around us, under and above. This is native title for us. And when I mention resources, this includes sea rights. Native title is recognition of this to make the western society understand that we have a system in place and we have lores in place.

For me, native title doesn't mean the *Native Title Act*. You can amend the *Native Title Act*. Our law, Malo's lore, stays the same forever. I don't know when they actually amend that lore, I couldn't say that. It's the same from generation to generation, from time immemorial, that's what Eddie and the others would say.

The sea and trade

The water is common, but we believe that we own the resources in the water: the trochus shell, the cray, the prawn. Our forefathers sank Spanish ships and attacked any boat that came into our water. We travelled to PNG, right up the Lockhart River, and to Raine Island, not far from Lockhart, to do trade. We have a name for Raine Island which is *Bub Warwar Kaur*. *Bub* mean chest, *Warwar* means stripes and *Kaur* means the island itself. And when you are at Raine Island you see crocodiles, you see fish and you see birds. That's what I interpret as the 'land of many species'.

We have trades to PNG. We have trades to our Southern brother in the mainland. Like I said, we trade. If we want red ochre we go to Lockhart and we trade in skulls or fish. It's a commercial thing, but on a smaller scale. Before the Coming of the Light, back in the 1800s, they traded the tomahawk for land. Trade is our way of life.

The birth of Mer Gedkem Le

It was in 1997 that I first heard of a PBC. I was the Deputy-Chair of the Mer Community Council. The council called on TSRA [the Torres Strait Regional Authority], engineers, builders, an accountant, and we drew up a plan for the development of infrastructure on Mer. I remember sitting in a room in Cairns waiting for legal advice. The lawyer walked in and said, 'Sorry, I have bad news for you, before you can commence any construction or develop any infrastructure on the island, you have to form a body called a native title corporation'. We said, 'Why? We won native title in 1992.' He told us, that it is what the *Native Title Act* says. We put in our time and effort to fly down there from Murray Island just to get this answer and go back. What a waste!

At our next council meeting we decided to call a meeting for all people from the Meriam nations living in the mainland. This meeting, in Townsville, was paid

for out of the council budget. For the second meeting, held on Murray Island, the council paid for 10 to 15 elders to fly from the mainland to Mer, just to set up this corporation and to write the rule book. It took us 18 months to set up the corporation. In August 1998, Mer Gedkem Le was born.

Mer Gedkem Le today

Fourteen years later we are still under-resourced. We receive no funds from FaHCSIA [the Department Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs] and only recently, in 2011, we received a peanut from TSRA. Most of us are doing volunteer work, and I am personally frustrated. I have been frustrated for years now. The cost of living is high for us. I suffer. We need paid work to support our families.

In 2009, at our AGM, I was appointed Chair of Mer Gedkem Le and at this same meeting we endorsed fees for service. It's really sad to say this, but only if they can give us resources, pay for 2 to 3 people full-time, can our PBC survive. I've got two others working, like myself, and we are just doing our best to get our PBC up and running. We have ORIC sitting there, like big brother, saying 'you have to do this, you have to do that'... but they don't recognise who we are and what we are. A PBC for me is something set up by the government, not under our lore or structure.

The 20th anniversary: whose day is this? Is it supposed to be for the Meriam People? For us it's a day to recognise, not 20 years, but a much longer struggle. I remember sitting as a kid listening to my parents, aunties, uncles and grandfather talking about the DNA [Department of Native Affairs] police, saying 'look at this bureaucrat telling us what to do'. Today, the bureaucrats sitting on Thursday Island are meant to be there to help us. But they do nothing for us. We have to do everything ourselves. This is the system. Fight the system back.

Dancer from Komet Kus, a collective of Mer Islanders from the Eastern Torres Straits. Native Title Conference 2012

Credit: Kerstin Styche

For more information you can contact Mer Gedkem Le and elders within the Mer community on: mer_gedkem_le@yahoo7mail.com

