2016

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Louise Hamby
louise.hamby@anu.edu

Valerie Kirk
Valerie.Kirk@anu.edu.au

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Seafarer People and their Textiles from Erub Arts, Torres Strait, Australia
Louise Hamby and Valerie Kirk
louise.hamby@anu.edu and valerie.kirk@anu.edu.au

A quote from Florence Gutchen, an artist from Erub (Darnley Island) in the Torres Strait, 180 kms NE of mainland Australia, sets the scene for this document. “We hear the wind…We are seafarer people. Our livelihood depends on the sea. We are saltwater people and we are the seafarers.” The geographic location of her current home is crucial to the understanding of not only the textiles artists produce but to all of their work. Their island in the eastern part of Torres Strait plays a major part in how their identity as Erubians is expressed through textiles. This paper primarily examines the ways in which their clothing and recent use of printed fabric reflect the influence of their island home, impact of trade in the Pacific and links with outsiders.

Background of Encounters
Erub and the other islands in the Torres Strait were not isolated in the past; they engaged with warfare, trade and exchange with each other before the first European explorer sailed through the Strait in 1606. Others followed: the Fly and the Bramble in 1844-45 and the Rattlesnake in 1848-49 (Danaher 1991, 56). Collections from these voyages are in the Bristol Museum and the British Museum (Florek 2005, 21).

When the winds came from the southeast trading happened particularly with PNG. McIntosh Murray noted in the 1930s 'the trade consisted of fire-sticks, string, possum twine and human hair-belts, skulls, armlet shells, large shell cooking pots, stone axes, clubs, cowrie shells for war canoes, and with white cowries for sacred purposes, small money cowries which act as cash in Papua New Guinea even to this day. In exchange they would get canoes, bundles of spears, parcels of sago, cassowary and bird of paradise, and women for wives (Murray-Livingston and Mackinnon 1927, 9).' Trade continues today on a different scale. Earlier this year Walter Lui from Erub, was the recipient of goods from PNG from a boat that brought family to visit; the goods included the classic sago wrapped in banana leaves.

During the 1860s the Torres Strait Islands were a centre of pearling and gathering of bêche-de-mer. ‘Shells obtained from the Strait were used for the mass production of buttons, combs, buckles, knife-handles and a multitude of other decorative trinkets (Florek 2005, 14).’ These activities brought together many cultures. By the 1870s Darnley Island was the headquarters of the bêche-de-mer activities (Danaher 1991, 58). The recruitment of labour took various forms, not all pleasant and locals were often not paid. Rev. William Wyatt Gill from 1876 that “women make excellent divers; […] and some] women have been kidnapped and compelled to dive. “(Florek 2005, 14). Erubian artist Franklin Mye produced a lino print 'Our Kidnapped Women' telling this story.

Diving is an activity that continues today and is a source of inspiration for some artists particularly the women. Ellarose Savage, one of the artists at Erub Arts discusses her first-hand experience. ‘My inspiration is mainly based on my father’s diving history. He has been a pearl diver and trochus. Myself and my two sisters we have been diving with our father. The reef inspires me. (Cattoni 2014b).’ Florence Gutchen dives with her husband and children stating ‘We both train them up with the sea (Cattoni 2014a).’
An event that occurred over 145 years ago has been a very influential occasion for residents of Darnley Island. On July 1, 1871 members of the London Missionary Society arrived on the HMS *Surprise*. One welcome change that came with the missionaries was protection from the violence associated with pearlers and trepangers (Danaher 1991, 152). On the other hand they engaged in a systematic process of cultural dislocation and change (Florek 2005, 16). Traditional practices were forbidden, except for some crafts such as basket making and mats, and they enforced the European dress code and new crafts like patchwork quilting (Gab Titui Cultural Centre 2014, 18; Moore 1989, 55). Samuel McFarlane and Archibald Murray, and eight New Caledonian teachers from Lifou impacted not only on Island custom but on the clothing the Islanders would be wearing in the coming decades. The style of dress that was encouraged was most likely what is referred to as the ‘Mother Hubbard’ style. The dress was long, loose-fitting, high neck and long-sleeved. The objective of the missionaries with this dress style was to cover as much of the body as possible.

**Clothing Tradition**

Clothing is a topic that is intimately involved in the identity of the women from Erub. McCulloch provides evidence that the women in 1907 were still very much under the influence of the early London Missionary Society staff. The Mother Hubbard style dress is shown in a photograph of his titled, *Bowd and Lyabel fishing with the cast-net*, Mer. The woman is wearing a classic dress complete with a small ruffle (Florek 2005, Fig.61, p.63). McCulloch was a good observer and noted that a desire for distinction for the women was apparent and maintained in the dresses of the ladies.

Most of the clothing is purchased from the missionaries who receive it from the sewing clubs in London. Variety of colours rather than fit is the feature arrived at, so that impression in my mind of the dresses in church on that first Sunday morning at Murray Island is one that will outlive almost any others. Canary yellow with black spots or stripes was very popular or salmon pink with purple lace (Florek 2005, 55).

A quarter of a century later the Mother Hubbard dress was still worn on Erub and on the other islands in the Torres Strait. The young missionary McIntosh Murray arrives with his wife on Erub in 1927. ‘When we first came to the island we found the women all dressed in the old mother Hubbard dresses, with leg of mutton sleeves, such as were used in early Victorian days. These were introduced by early missionaries (Murray-Livingston and Mackinnon 1927).’ The Murrays however were not convinced the style of dress was necessary to maintain.

The example of my Good Lady and the ridicule that we heaped upon them calls most of the younger ones to go into "new patent" dresses.’ He explained that the reason was not so much for the shorter dresses but it allowed the women to show off their new stockings. (Murray-Livingston and Mackinnon 1927)

There is not much documentation about clothing and dress until fifty years later with the work of Lindsay Wilson who wrote about contemporary artifact production in the Torres Strait. He does not elaborate or collect clothing but did comment on it and its manufacture. Machine made clothes were never in an abundant supply and hand-cranked sewing machines and cloth were available from Island stores. ‘Embroidery, crochet and appliqué work were popular for many years. Embellishment on clothing, domestic linen and church furnishings was a well-established and competitive art form (Wilson 1993, 19).’ Wilson’s comments about the decorative aspects of the clothing are true today.

There is a steady demand for "Island dress", colorful loose-fitting garments with puffed sleeves. These dresses were popular with Island women and said to be descended from the "Mother Hubbard" look, introduced by missionaries. Dressmaking is a small-scale cottage industry in the Torres Strait. (Wilson 1993, 143)
Torres Strait Islander women, both on the islands and on the mainland of Australia, maintain a modern and contemporary lifestyle. Mobile phones and IPads are plugged into available outlets, people are dressed in universal jeans, t-shirts and baseball caps. Yet there is a distinctive island custom and feel to the clothes worn particularly by the women. The past asserts itself in the lingering presence of the Mother Hubbard dress.

This missionary style of dress had its origin in Victorian England but has been transformed and refined into a dress style seen in the Pacific. In Hawaii the Protestant missionaries from 1820 brought this style of dress known as holokū. 'The early 19th century holokū was characterized by a loose fit and a lack of a waistline. It was accompanied by a chemise referred to as the mu‘umu‘u (Arthur 1997, 129).’ In Papua New Guinea this style of garment is known as meri blaus. There is a direct connection with Erub and New Caledonia where these are known as robes missions. The style of dress is worn today (“Mother Hubbard Dress - Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia” 2016).

This refined and modified style of garment, whether worn as a dress or a blouse, has become part of island custom and has permeated into the fashions that have been created from the digital printed fabrics produced at Erub Arts. Some of the garments the women wear to the Arts Centre are ones they have created for themselves and almost they always include a ruffle near the neckline of the full top of the garment. During a visit to New Caledonia in 2013 the Erub women saw other versions of island dress that were similar to their own. The New Caledonian women had the tradition of the robes missions.

This inspired them to use their own designs and sew garments for a local fashion show. In December 2013 Erub Arts hosted their own fashion parade. Local designs, locally printed, sewed and modelled by Erub women. An event that showcased creativity and pride to the community. (Griffiths 2014, 7)

Figure 1 Fashion show at Erub’s Arts 2014. Photo: Courtesy Erub Arts

This renewed interest in island clothing has resulted in clothing with added ribbons and other embellishments like crochet trim or a different fabric ruffle. Through the artists at Erub we have been introduced to a source of manufactured island clothing at Mona’s. Mona’s Bazaar is located on Thursday Island and according to their website ‘celebrates and encourages the Torres Strait Island Tradition - we provide beautiful Island clothing, materials and accessories that are enriched with culture. Mona’s also provide traditional souvenirs for visiting guest (“Monas” 2015). In an attempt to create a version of an Island garment a top was purchased from Mona’s and additional ribbons added. In March this top was worn and approved by Florence Gutchen, however she felt it needed another layer of trim on the ruffle!
Textile Projects and Events
Erub Arts is the first Torres Strait artist-owned and operated art centre; founded in 2005. It was proceeded by the Craft Group Ekkilau (Hamby and Kirk 2016, 4). Digital printed fabric and fashion are the newest artforms that have been added to the repertoire of the artists that includes hand printed fabric, ceramics, drawings, lino prints and ghost net sculpture and jewellery. Clothing and printed fabric have played a big part in the identity of the artists and their connection to the sea. This is evident in other works particularly Ghost Net sculpture. GhostNets Australia was an initiative of the Australian Government started in 2004 to try and eliminate the debris from commercial fishing. Erub Arts have embraced the issues of protecting their sea environment by producing artwork from the nets, rope and plastic recovered by rangers. Conceptually it is difficult to separate the sculptural work from the printed fabric. They move together in currents and cross-fertilise each other.

Traditions in Fabric

The artists at Erub Arts work as a collective group on a daily basis rather than bringing in work when it is completed for sale (as at other Indigenous Arts Centres in Australia). A sense of community has developed from this style of operation and all gain benefits from workshops and excursions. Much stimulus comes from their Arts Development Manager, Lynnette Griffiths. In February 2010 she arranged a research trip with the artists to the Queensland Museum and the State Library of Queensland to investigate historical bodywear from the eastern Islands of Torres Strait and Darnley Island in particular. It was from these observations in the museum of necklaces, armbands, and headdresses that the artists developed their knowledge of their tribal totems and history of body markings. They also reflected on their family history and relationship to their place in the Torres Strait and connections to New Caledonia in the Pacific.

An output from this exploration was a series of charcoal drawings inspired from the objects and documents viewed. A large sail artwork was also digitally printed with a design composed of motifs from the original drawings. Visually the sail is constructed of squares which reference the original construction of canoe sails from woven pandanus mats. The imagery was developed as a composite of artists’ drawings embodying ideas about spiritual beliefs, connections to the island, relationships of men and women to each other, the land and the sea. The stars of Tagai drawing by Fred Kiwat is layered on top as the stars are important for the Erubians to navigate by. The star at the bottom is the Eastern Island star. These works in 2011 were part of the Body Language series that was exhibited at Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane from 1 July – 9 October.

Figure 2 Lynnette Griffiths working with artists in Art Centre. Photo: Louise Hamby
as part of Land, Sea and Sky that was a part of the event Torres Strait Islands, A Celebration. Ceramic figurines with their body decoration were also produced from this body of research.

Sea Journeys
Following on from the research into history in the museum context, a new historical theme evolved. In 2012 there was a transition from the emphasis on the body to one pertaining to journeys taken on the sea, literally and figuratively. There are three key events that underpin this theme: Missionary arrival in 1871, New Caledonians visit Erub and Erub people visit New Caledonia. Lynnette Griffiths summed up the importance of joining these events. ‘By completing this circle there will be no start, no finish – just a continued connectedness of family and culture across Pacific Island communities.’ The arrival of the missionaries from England and New Caledonia is celebrated in the “Coming of the Light Festival”. Linked to this event was the visit in October 2011 of trainee priests from Lifou who were descendants of the original Kanake missionaries to Erub. They wanted to find descendants of their relatives.

Their visit was potent, connecting long lost relatives from two Pacific Island communities. The people of Lifou extended an invitation to the people of Erub to visit, reconnect and stand on the land - to commemorate the departure of the first ship carrying islander missionary teachers so long ago. (Griffiths 2012)

In 2013 Erubian artists and their families travelled to Lifou to make family connections and develop new artworks. Large drawings and works in fabric and clay resulted from research into the history, geography and cultural aspects of these events. They were presented in the exhibition Sea Journeys – Our Home Our People shown at Langford 120 in Melbourne from September 8, 2012 thru October 6, 2012.

Sea Journeys New Caledonia, Return Voyage
The second iteration of the Sea Journeys theme that resulted from this cultural exchange was the exhibition Sea Journeys New Caledonia, Return Voyage, held at Kick Arts in Cairns in 2013. This comprised of the works of ten Erub artists in an expansive installation of sculpture, prints, fabric, layered vision and sound. The gallery space was divided into three main sections which dealt with the stories from Erub and Lifou, the people and the sea voyages. In the third section, an immersive experience with digital projections by Jan Cattoni was designed to connect people across the ocean. Fabric printed with figures, the journey and the time the first missionaries landed on Erub was symbolically draped over a canoe. Although people now travel frequently by air, water is the element that connects all Melanesian people and they hold great respect for the craft people previously sailed in to connect across the Pacific. The drawing, “Seru Serub Nar” 2012, by Jimmy Thaiday, celebrates the customary boat racing and references traditional mens’ wood carving in the patterns of the waves. For the opening of the exhibition the artists designed their own tops and dresses from fabric they also designed. These tops had variations of ruffles with lace and ribbon.

Also held at Kick Arts at that time was a fashion show that included garments made from Erub fabric. The exhibition and fashion presentation reinforced the connections between all the art forms and confirmed a sense of identity that relates not only to Erubian traditions but to the influence of the missionaries and connections with people beyond the island, across the ocean. Artist Franklin MYE said, “The spirituality of the past has made us strong and together with the celebration of Christianity we can rejoice in who we are, where we’re from and look to the future (Griffiths 2013).”
Ufla Upla
A major event, Ufla Upla (You Fella, You People): National Indigenous Textiles Forum and fashion show at Kick Arts in 2013 brought together industry representatives, educators, artists and supporters from across Australia. It highlighted the growth area of Indigenous fabric and fashion, captivating the audience with a stunning presentation with live music and dance incorporated. Collaborations such as “AKIN Collection: Creating pathways for Indigenous fashion textiles” demonstrated how emerging fashion designers from Queensland University of Technology could work with Indigenous artists to create new fabrics and fashion. Mark Cawood from Publisher Textiles, Sydney talked about outsourced hand fabric printing as a way of remote communities increasing their output with access to better facilities and skilled printers. Digital printing was discussed by Penny McIntyre, Think Positive, Sydney as a means to directly transferring artists’ images on to fabric with a full range of colours, in repeat or as one-off prints. The fashion show was a “mash-up” of hand painted silks, lino and screen printed fabrics from communities and experimental digital fabric prints worn in clashing combinations by the models. It established a new direction in Indigenous Art.

Through the expanding production of fashion garments, consideration of the type and quality of the fabric became more important. There was also an imperative to produce in larger quantities. At the Erub Arts Centre this led to a desire for finer fabrics that would flow more in the style of casual traditional island dress and not be as heavy as the pigment prints on cotton. The events and ideas up to this point led to the birth of the label Ailan Pasin (Island Fashion). There are now three collections under this label; each consisting of drawings, fabrics and a range of clothing.

Fabric/Fashion Ranges – Ailan Pasin (Island Fashion)
Body language
From the body drawings the first collection of fabrics was designed and printed, called Body Language: written on the body. The range of garments produced with this fabric was designed collaboratively by Grace Lillian Lee, designer and Lynnette Griffiths. Lee visited the island to workshop ideas in the Arts Centre directly with the artists. The first collection was loosely styled in free-flowing garments. Original drawings were from Maryann Bourne, Emma Gela, Florence Gutchen, Racy Oui-Pitt and Ellarose Savage. Lynnette Griffiths, worked with the artists on the textile design, putting images into repeat and deciding on issues of colour, scale and fabric type. The designs were digitally printed onto lightweight silk and cotton fabrics. Digital printing allows for the photographic translation onto fabric of the velvety tones and subtle qualities of the charcoal medium.

These garments were premiered at the Australian Indigenous Fashion Week in Sydney in 2014. This was a new and unique fashion event aiming to bolster Indigenous economic development through sustainable and fair trade business. The initiative had high-profile Indigenous model Samantha Harris as its Ambassador and spokesperson, leading the runway shows and featured in the press. She drew attention to the complex issues of cultural and intellectual property rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fabric and fashion designers. For Erub Arts, the event was an opportunity to increase their profile with major public and media exposure. Also shown with the garments was the new product, stretch knit leggings, featuring Maryann Bourne’s drawing.
Sand Spirals and Ellarose Savage’s Sand Lion. This range was also shown at CIAF in Cairns 2014.

Shoreline
The coral reef around the island was the inspiration for the next series of work. Artists spent time walking out over the reef together, collecting shells and coral, photographing sea life and drawing on their memories of fishing and gathering shells. Ellarose Savage described growing up on Erub and going with her father to dive for pearls as a teenager. She was able to hold her breath while she swam more than 50 metres under water. The family also enjoyed recreational camping trips to other islands and time spent making things, beading, crochet, sewing, fishing and gardening. In this shared time and activities together, young islander people learned from elders (although some stories could only be passed on through the male lineage). They carry an intimate knowledge of their environment with craft skills gained through the need to survive in a remote geographic location.

Figure 3 Florence Gutchen collecting on the reef at Erub. Photo Lynnette Griffiths

Back in the studio, the first images were drawn with ink and charcoal – observing collected shells and coral, recalling observations and using innate knowledge. As the artists explored on paper they were searching for the essence of shape and pattern, working carefully with attention to detail. Further drawings with Indian ink explored and refined visual forms before final images were produced as works on A1 paper with watercolour and charcoal. A major conceptual difference in the production of the work at this stage was that the artists were producing works on paper specifically to translate into fabric design and digital print. Through group discussions several drawings were selected to be made into repeat designs for fabric. The next step in the process was photographing/scanning and manipulating on the computer to design for repeat pattern digital fabric prints. The resulting collection of digitally printed fabrics was used in the second range called Shoreline. Garments were then designed by Griffiths based more on classic island dress including ruffles and layering. The multi-functional “switch” was produced as a versatile garment that could be worn around the body in several ways and fit a range of body types and sizes. CIAF 2015 at the Fashion Parade was the launch of these garments.
The artists have pride in their work and want to share with neighbours, family, people in the Torres Strait and the world beyond. The fabrics are testimony to their passion for their environment and culture. Lynette Griffiths said “Making art is from the heart” and the artists of Erub Arts have the creative spirit, dedication to their art and willingness to open their hearts and share with the world.

In early 2016 the last of the reef drawings were selected to be transformed into fabrics. These became the large scale printed fabrics shown in the exhibition, Ailan Bumer, The Australian National University, 2016. The name of the exhibition Ailan Bumer [meaning heavy roaring thundering sound, Kapua Gutchen Snr] conveys a sense of telling the world about Erubian culture. This philosophy reflects one of the aims of the Erub Arts Centre. ‘We want our community to have a strong Erubian identity. Our Art Centre works to revitalise our traditional culture and promote it to the world.’ (Vision Statement Erub Arts). Self and identity are key features in the art presented in Ailan Bumer.

Ged Nor (Home Reef)
The large scale fabrics produced for Ailan Bumer at ANU were the basis for the third fashion range produced for Erub. It is called Ged Nor (Home Reef). These new fabrics were made into garments for CIAF 2016. Erub Arts fashion label Ailan Pasin presented on the catwalk at the Jana Jaral (Respect) – Cairns Indigenous Art Fair Fashion Performance. Their collection was selected as the finale for the event ensuring their position at the peak of their field. The reef inspired island style/resort fashion garments were alive with movement and fringing, evoking tribal culture and tropical colour. Grace Lillian-Lee contributed her creative vision for the performance and Lavinia Ketchell from Erub was a model.
“From Country to Couture – The Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair Fashion Show”, 2016 was an inaugural event at the 10th DAAF. It was heralded as celebrating the marriage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contemporary fine art and high end fashion. As Indigenous textile and fashion design has continued to grow with acknowledgement of success in winning awards and gaining recognition in the press the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair Foundation decided it was time to include a specific fashion event in its programme. This Art Fair is the most prestigious in the country with a reputation that attracts the highest level international collectors, curators, gallery and museum directors. Erub Arts’s participation ensures their standing as leaders in the field. On Facebook they promoted their new products made from the Geb Nor fabrics produced for Ailan Buumer.

Conclusion
The textiles from Erub Arts are a long distance from the port of Savannah Georgia but they share history and concepts of settlement with indigenous people from the south. The Erubian people have adopted and adapted clothing from outsiders to reflect their own identity. The new printed fabrics from Erub Arts reflect the concerns of Crosscurrents as the introduced technique of fabric printing was shaped by the artists to fit their own economic, technical and cultural issues. The small and remote centre is not ideally suited to producing quantities of hand-printed cloth but has become a centre for the design of fabric that is printed elsewhere. The identity of the people is shown in the fabric and their strong connection to the sea that surrounds their island home. Florence Gutchen sums up this connection extremely well.

All these patterns they all lead to the sea. Again we place all our artwork, we talk about the sea. I believe the sea, we are born and bred we see the sea. We hear the wind blow we hear the waves roll. Like we are seafarer people. (Cattoni 2014a)