

ETHNOGRAPHICAL NOTES OF TORRES STRAIT.

Illustrated by Specimens in the Queensland Museum Collections.

By R. HAMLYN-HARRIS, D.Sc., ETC. (DIRECTOR).

(Plate II and one text-figure.)

THE LEGEND OF PATRAETER.

THE Ethnological Collection from Torres Strait has recently been enriched by the addition, through purchase, of a very fine specimen of a Darnley Island god made of lava, bearing the name of Patraéter, and fashioned in a truly realistic manner into a figure representing a man in a squatting position with its hands brought up to its chin in a prayerful attitude.

There can be no doubt that the contours of the original piece of lava were particularly adapted for this sculpturing, but the figure, nevertheless, displays considerable ability on the part of the unknown artist. A great resemblance in workmanship exists between this image and those of a similar nature described by Professor Haddon in his "Myths and Folktales."*

Tradition, dating back to proto-historic times, has it that this very god was found by the natives of Darnley Island (Erub), having been previously deposited there by the famous Soiida (or Sida), a mythical super-man credited with creative faculties of no mean order.† The accounts of Soiida's doings vary in a remarkable way with the different islands, and this may be best explained by the view that the legends have been handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, giving ample scope for the imagination of the natives to run riot.

SOIIDA AT MER.

According to Mr. P. G. H. Guilletmot, from whom the specimen was obtained, and who has very kindly furnished me with the particulars here published and which were verified by several of the oldest men in the island, Soiido (pronounced Soydo) originally came from New Guinea and made his first halt on the island of Murray ("Mer") for the purpose of making the hitherto barren island fruitful. After a very brief stay he was instrumental in causing the abundant growth of bananas, cocoanuts, yams, etc.

FISH-TRAPS ON MER.

Fish-traps were also built by him round the island of Mer (*see* text figure). A. E. Hunt‡ refers to a "big fish enclosure" (Sai), evidently the

* A. C. Haddon, *Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait*, Cambridge, 1908, vol. vi.

† *The Story of Sidor*, by E. Beardmore, *Journ. Anth. Inst.*, vol. 19, 1890, p. 465.

Also, *Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait*, vol. v., 1904, pp. 28, 31, 35.

Also, Rev. A. E. Hunt in *Ethnographical Notes on the Murray Islands, Torres Straits*, *Journ. Anth. Inst.*, vol. 28 (new series 1), 1899, p. 5.

‡ A. E. Hunt, *Ethnographical Notes, etc.*, *Journ. Anth. Inst.*, vol. 28, p. 17.

same.* These fish-traps, which are still visible to-day, were made with lava arranged in a semicircular fashion, with curved walls to ensure a better capture of fish. The natives, when asked for a reason for this particular method, say "To make fish silly," and it requires very little imagination to understand how the fish would wander round and round such an enclosure very much in the same fashion as a caged wild beast would parade the narrow limits of its prison home, ultimately becoming tired out and "silly" with its vain endeavours to gain the sea and liberty.

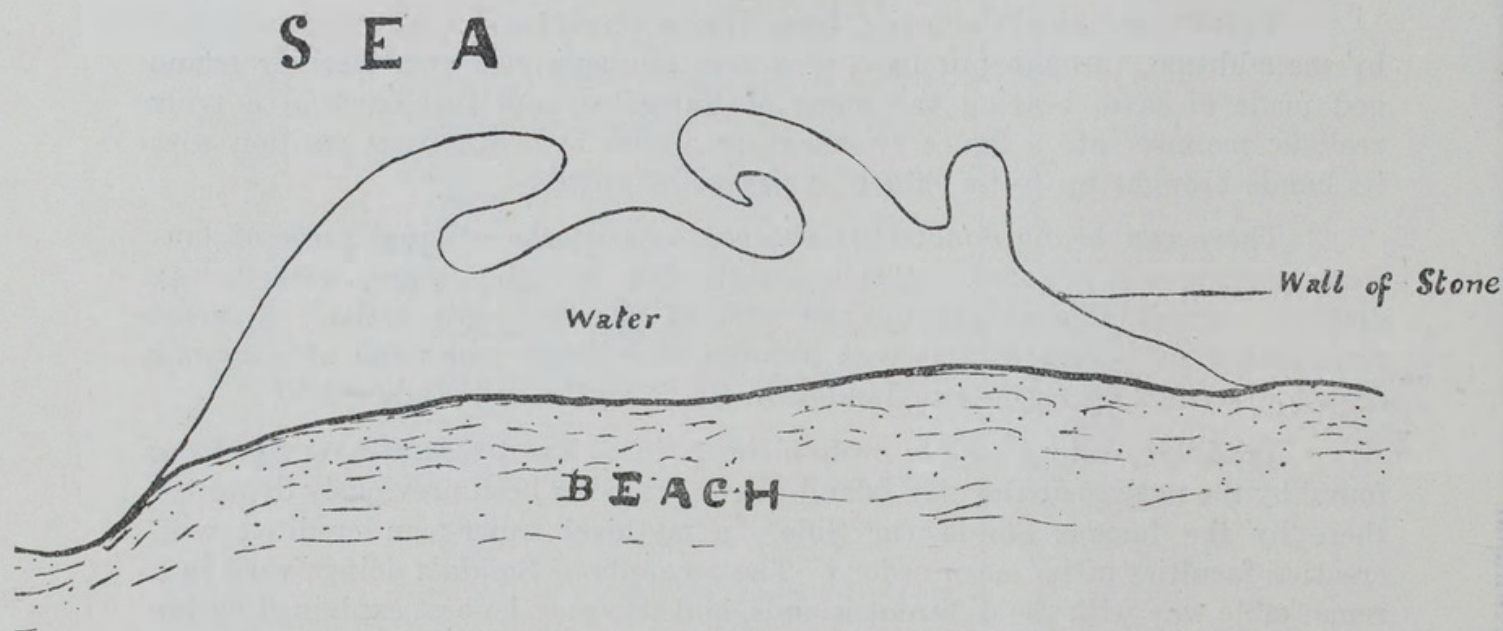


Fig. 1

Fish Trap - Darnley Island.

SOIIDA AT ERUB.

Soiido's efforts at Mer having thus been crowned with success, he next visited the island of Darnley (Erub), repeating his endeavours to fertilize the island, and whilst there he was seen by natives who consulted him about the "evil spirits" believed to have existed in and around the island, with the result that he made this god, and left immediately afterward.

PATRAETER DEPOSITED ON ERUB.

The god was deposited in a certain place on the island, so that he might be available for purposes of consultation with regard to the removal of the evil spirits through the instrumentality of the heads of the clans or tribes. This god became very antagonistic towards the evil spirits and demanded their removal—each evil spirit being represented by definite stone figures. Obedient

* See A. C. Haddon, *Anthropological Expedition*, vol. vi.



A DARNLEY ISLAND GOD—PATRAETER.
Specimen No. : Q.M. E.13/212.

to the wishes of Patraéter, they removed to a neighbouring sandbank and asked if they were far enough away, to which the god replied, "No; go further." This was repeated over and over again until the evil spirits had reached the black rocks known as Bramble Cay, in the Great North-East Passage, about 26 miles from Darnley, when the god professed himself satisfied.

Bramble Cay is still visible to-day to passers-by as a rock representing a human figure (probably a female) holding an infant in its arms. In reality a considerable amount of imagination is required to confirm this.

Through the kindness of Dr. Tosh we have the following from an Erub native, Speah; this is not so reliable, Speah being from all accounts a much younger man with a more vivid imagination:—

"On Darnley were four of these stone figures—the name of each being Patraéter; they seem to have been used as land marks or rather property marks in turtle-fishing, and to have possessed the powers of the usual mythical super-man. A man named Py dug up or fashioned similar figures in the creek just south of his house. This seemed to trouble Patraéter, for he insisted that they be taken away. So Py packed the two figures (or more) on a canoe and set off. Some of the earth carried with them fell overboard a little to leeward of Darnley and there formed a sandbank—Diaul; then Py and his people shouted to Patraeter, to know if they should leave them there, but the 'god' answered, 'Take im more far. We savvy pole, we savvy pole.* Take em more.' This was repeated (including formation of sandbank) at Merádi, Tôt, and Kep.

"At last Bramble Cay was reached, and Patraéter was satisfied that they be left there.

"Two figures are especially named Py-wer and his picaninny Burwak. And ever after, when Py and his people went turtle-fishing on Bramble Cay, there was much ceremony. First Py went ashore alone and all canoes drew back into deep water. Having assured himself by private interview with Py-wer that all was well, he signed† to his people to come ashore. There they fished for some days, and sun-dried much turtle meat, and laid in stock of fresh turtles for transport to Darnley. When all are ready to depart, Py takes some turtle grease and anoints the head of Py-wer, beseeching him to send a favourable wind. Py is the last to leave."

SOIIDA AT OOGAR.

Soiido, after making the islands fertile in the prescribed way, proceeded to Stephens Island ("Oogar") and repeated his performances there. From Oogar he went to New Guinea, where he met a beautiful woman (as he had done on the other islands), who was so struck with his handsome demeanour that she fell in love with him straight away and asked him to elope. Soiido, however,

* That is, "Pole a canoe."

† Made sign, "Plenty turtle here," by half squatting down and raising the arms.

denied her the request, and informed her that he could never marry a mortal. This is indirectly opposed to the Kiwai version of Sida,* when Sida married Sagaru. He wandered to and fro from place to place, allowing her to accompany him until full moon came, when he took a certain seed from his dilly-bag and planted it in the ground. Assisted by certain incantations and weird noises he caused the seeds to germinate. The seed grew into a large tree, Soiido seating himself with the woman on different branches, and as the tree grew higher and higher they were carried up to the moon, where Soiido left her; but the woman's face is still visible in the moon until this day, going away on the wings of a cloud.

LEGEND OF THE DOIOM (ERUB).

Professor Haddon has made lengthy references to the small "weather-gods" of Torres Strait known by the local name of "Doiom" (Doyom),† but one or two additional details in connection with a specimen recently acquired by us are worth recording. About three months previous to the North-West Season, when universal drought prevails, the rain-maker (or rain-man) envelopes the "Doyom" in so-called "bush medicine" consisting of herbs, etc., and lowers the weather-god by means of an attached string into a hole specially prepared to receive it. The cord is left only partially visible after the hole has been filled up. After the "Doyom" has been allowed to remain for at least three days and three nights undisturbed in the ground, the rain-maker visits the spot fully dressed in ceremonial finery, and approaching from the weather side indulges in incantations until, by the rehearsal of magic ritual only understood by themselves, the weather-god is pulled out by the cord. It has been a belief amongst them that the fumes given off by the fermented herbs reach the "medicine man" and affects the testes, which swell in consequence. Rain follows next day after severe winds.

STORY OF BAEXIS (ERUB).

I am also indebted to Mr. Guilletmot, whose kind assistance in many ways I desire to gratefully acknowledge, for the following information:—There is a belief in "Erub" that there is in existence a so-called "dog" as large as a cow, which appears either on or before the death of men of importance (only)—"Big men"—called "Awle." The natives who have seen it say that it is black and white and abides at Stephens Island ("Oogar"). Additional colour has been lent to the belief by some natives, who are still living, declaring that it was repeatedly seen by them at Darnley during the epidemics of dysentery prevalent in 1912, when it caused great consternation amongst the inhabitants. The so-called "dog" is supposed to land on the north-west side of Darnley,

* A. C. Haddon in *Folktales, Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait*, vol. v, 1904, p. 35.

† A. C. Haddon, *Anthro. Exped. Torres Strait*, vol. vi., 1908, p. 194, etc.

leaving its tracks on the shore to proceed along the public road wandering about, calling at the front doors of houses, and finally returning to the place from whence it came.

The apparition is said to have been seen by other native races of the South Seas, who also go so far as to say that it is "as true as god," but dare not molest it for fear of misfortune.

Dr. Tosh gives the following version obtained from Speah, the Erub native before mentioned:—

"Baexis is a beast like a dog, as big as a cow, spotted black and white, one side of face white, one side black: thought to be a devil or spirit that comes for the souls of the departed.

"The men who owned this dog were two brothers, Imai and Dowai, sons of Kanórr, who used to live at the village of Apro, or Gibbo, or Zighis on Stephen Island. Baexis is invisible when not on duty, no one knowing where he lives. Speah has seen him twice here (Darnley); once as he passed, and once on the occasion of the death of a native at Stephen Island. The woman died in the evening, and all through the night three men watched by the door of the grass house where she lay. One of these was Speah. At midnight the dogs barked as they became aware of the presence of Baexis. He came right up to the door where the men sat, then quickly turned his tail to the door and stood looking seawards. The men beheld him in fear and trembling. At last he departed along the sand-beach. When in the morning the people came out of their houses, the tracks of Baexis were visible on the sand."

A SUPPOSED AEROLITE FROM SAIBAI.

Through the instrumentality of His Excellency the Governor of Queensland, Sir William MacGregor, a large stone weighing just upon 4 cwt. was sent to the Queensland Museum for examination and report. According to local tradition the stone was supposed to be an aerolite, which had fallen on the hard ground (formed of pisolite, iron, etc.), near the sea on the island of Saibai. Subsequently it was rolled away to assist in the reclamation of the swamp area, and when taken it was nearly covered with soil. The presence of this stone was all the more noticeable owing to the fact that there is no stone of any kind on Saibai. It is common belief in the island amongst the oldest men that, in the days of their fathers, it fell from Heaven near a man sitting on the hard ground on which the village now stands; he rose and fled. It is said that a second one fell in Danan and killed a number of people there (Danan, I believe, is granitic). Mr. Charles Niebel, the Government Teacher on Saibai, sends me the following particulars relating to this supposed aerolite, and I here reproduce them for what they are worth:—

"Moigi, a man of about sixty years of age, says that when he was a boy his father Kubid told him the story, which he had heard from *his* father Ausi, that the stone in question had fallen from the sky, and did not belong to this

world. Ausi (the grandfather of Moigi) had not seen it fall—it did not fall during his lifetime, but he had the story as it had been handed down from father to son by his (Ausi's) forefathers. The story being already traditional during the childhood of the grandfather of one of our oldest men, points to the fact that the stone is more than a century old; perhaps considerably more. The stone was allowed to lie where it fell, and, during the childhood of those who are now old men, parents used to forbid their children from touching it, for fear that if they touched it more stones would fall. When the first missionaries came they said their God was the only god and that the stone could not hurt them, and suggested burning it. Then five men—Gari, Dagi, Aina, Janaur, and Kinaur—put fire round the stone, and managed to chip off the outer shell for stone clubs, but could make no impression on the inner portion. By this means they reduced the diameter of the stone by about six or eight inches. After that the stone lost its sanctity and children used to play freely round it and climb on to it.”

Unfortunately, however, the composition of the stone is not that of a meteorite, so that it is very hard to bring facts already stated into line with what we now know of its nature. At my request Mr. J. B. Henderson, the Queensland Government Analyst, has very kindly supplied me with the analysis of a piece of this rock, which is as follows:—

						Per Cent.
Moisture at 100°C	..	..	..	..	..	0.3
Loss on ignition ..	..	..	..	..	..	0.2
Silica (SiO ₂) ..	..	..	..	..	..	59.5
Iron oxide (Fe ₂ O ₃) ..	..	..	..	..	..	6.8
Alumina (Al ₂ O ₃) ..	..	..	..	..	..	18.4
Oxide of manganese (MnO)	..	..	..	..	..	0.4
Oxide of titanium (TiO ₂) ..	..	..	..	..	..	0.6
Lime (CaO) ..	..	..	..	..	..	6.5
Magnesia (MgO) ..	..	..	..	..	..	1.9
Alkalies (Na ₂ OK ₂ O) ..	..	..	..	..	..	5.0
Sulphur ..	..	..	..	..	..	Nil
Phosphoric acid..	..	..	..	..	..	Nil
						99.6

It has been remarked that the words “fell from Heaven” suggest Christian teaching rather than heathen superstition, so that Dr. Anderson's report (Australian Museum, Sydney) on the subject is all the more forcible:—

“Structurally and chemically the supposed aerolite has all the characteristics of an ordinary terrestrial rock, and none which are recognised as distinctive of meteoritic bodies. Unless its fall was actually observed by reliable witnesses, I am afraid that the meteoritic origin of this specimen would not be accepted on the evidence of legendary reports. It would be unsafe to say that a body with the characteristics of andesite might not reach the earth from space, but possibilities are not probabilities, and such a substance would have to furnish unexceptional credentials before it would be admitted amongst meteorites.”

Whatever view may be taken as to the character of the stone, the ethnological significance of the belief is still of interest.



Hamlyn-Harris, R. 1913. "Ethnographical notes of Torres Strait, illustrated by specimens in the Queensland Museum collections - Plate II and Text figure I." *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum* 2, 1–6.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/213414>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/37564>

Holding Institution

Queensland Museum

Sponsored by

Atlas of Living Australia

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: Public domain. The BHL considers that this work is no longer under copyright protection.

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.