Christmas Island: A question of self-determination

Kelvin Matthews
Chapter 3: Social and Cultural Demography

The previous chapter noted the historical development of Christmas Island that predominantly included its social, economic, environmental and political processes of change. The community of Christmas Island, its cultural groups and social practices are all relevant to the thesis study regarding the development of the community. This chapter will therefore discuss more specifically the social and cultural demography of the Island’s community in terms of the predominant ethnic groups, the Chinese, Malay and Europeans, which are reflective of the ABS 2016 statistics and are consistent with the residential settlement pattern and historical development of the Island as described in the previous chapter. This chapter also provides information about the demographics and cultures of the Island that builds upon the historical facts and experiences from the previous chapter. It also raises broad community concerns about the Commonwealth Government’s practices and policy (past and present), particularly as these deny the community its history and culture. The purpose and importance of this chapter to the thesis is to emphasise the demographic cultural and social nature of the island’s people, not only from a sociological perspective but also from the perspective of how the economic conditions shaped the demographic environment of the island. This chapter will also explore how any proposed changes to the governance and legislative arrangements for Christmas Islanders will influence the social and cultural fabric of the community. Specific social and cultural changes have helped shape identity on the island; for this reason this chapter should be read in conjunction with the previous chapter on the island’s history. In particular, this chapter will outline the community of interest and cultural composition which is markedly different to the Australian mainland, given the predominance of the island’s Chinese and Malay community.

It will be further argued in Chapter Four that the policy approaches by successive Commonwealth Governments towards the unique social and cultural aspects of the
Christmas Island community have in fact contributed to the desire of the islanders to aspire to some form of self-determination. This argument is supported by the Islands in the Sun report where Christmas Island was in a position of ongoing subordination owing to historical, administrative and economic elements, namely, the hegemonic control exerted by the Christmas Island Phosphate Commission, a joint authority of the Australian and New Zealand governments concerned primarily with exploitation of the Island’s resources and only secondarily with the welfare of its workers.\textsuperscript{213} Further, the Sweetland Royal Commission Inquiry Reports of 1980 and 1982 provide a critique of past discriminatory or poor practice towards the Christmas Island community by the Government that has ignored the cultural demography of the Island’s population and thereby progressively harboured the Asian community’s desire for equal recognition and participation in all the affairs of the Island. For example, recommendation 14 of the Sweetland Report notes that residents of Christmas Island should qualify for citizenship in exactly the same manner as foreign nationals who take up permanent residence on the Australian mainland, regardless of their original ethnicity.\textsuperscript{214} Since the adoption of the majority of the Sweetland Report recommendations in early 1982, Christmas Islanders were afforded full citizenship rights in the late 1980s. Integral to these continued aspirations is the social and cultural demography of the community of Christmas Island, particularly in the context of the origins of the Chinese and Malay communities as outlined in the previous chapter owing to the historical development of the Island for more than 100 years. The predominant cultural groups and their social practices that live at present on the Island are a direct result of this historical development and, in this regard, it is essential to understand the Island’s demographic elements when attempting to provide the most effective governance arrangements possible.

\textsuperscript{213} Islands in the Sun, 43.

\textsuperscript{214} Waters, 147.
As a contextual backdrop to this chapter, the 2016 ABS data indicated that there were currently 1,843 people living on Christmas Island on census collection night, which included 1,130 males and 712 females. This figure is reasonably accurate compared with the 2011 ABS data that included a large proportion of ‘fly-in fly-out’ workers resident on the Island at the time of data collection in August 2011 because of the activities of the IDC on the Island. The local population figures that more accurately reflect the current demographic and cultural composition of Christmas Island can be extrapolated from the ABS 2016 census data in Table 3.1 as follows:

- Approximately 62% of the population was born overseas and 38% born in Australia (including on Christmas Island).

- Of those born overseas, 28% were born in Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, China or Indonesia, approximately 9% were born in Europe and 35% were recorded as being born in Australia. Notably, there was a significant drop in those born in Africa or the Middle East compared with the 2011 census data, which can be attributed to a decline in the IDC activities between the census collection data periods.

- Among the population, 17% speak only English and 83% speak languages other than English.

- Of those who speak other languages, approximately 18% speak Chinese languages and 11% speak Bahasa Malay (in the home).

- Approximately 72% of the population stated they have a religion, with their predominant religions being Buddhism (19%), Islam (20%), Christianity (16%) and religion not stated (22%).

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Table 3.1 below provides this statistical general community profile data in table form extracted from the 2016 ABS census regarding the population composition on Christmas Island.
### Table 3.1: ABS 2016 Census General Community Profile Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Affiliation Responses</th>
<th>Christmas Island: Persons</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Australia: Persons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>563,674 2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>604,240 2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Stated Religion</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>6,933,708 29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>5,291,834 22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3,101,183 13.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birthplace of Parents Responses</th>
<th>Christmas Island: Persons</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Australia: Persons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both parents born overseas</td>
<td>796</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>8,051,196 34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father only born overseas</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>1,488,092 6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother only born overseas</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>1,094,591 4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents born in Australia</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>11,070,538 43.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Spoken at Home: Other than English</th>
<th>Christmas Island: Persons</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Australia: Persons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bahasa</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>238,617 0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>596,711 2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantonese/Hokkien</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>255,549 1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>55,444 0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tagalog</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>111,273 0.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In many regards, the composition and features of the Christmas Island community as extrapolated above set it apart from mainland Australian communities. With the exception of some more densely populated urban areas of the Australian mainland that have a high concentration of Asian immigration, the cultural makeup of Christmas Island is unique; the Asian community of Christmas Island can demonstrate the longevity of its ancestry and cultural features through long standing connections that are rarely found on the Australian mainland. Further, the data reflecting that more than 17% of the community have stated their religion as
Buddhism (being of Chinese ancestry) are reflected in the many Buddhist and Taoist temples on the Island, noting that the ABS Census may not necessarily reflect separate Taoist representation in the final 'Buddhism' data, given that no specific definition is provided. Similarly, the Malay community who predominantly practice their religion of Islam built their mosque and religious school that are a focal point of their community life on the Island. The historical description of Christmas Island in Chapter Two provided information from various literary sources regarding the cultural development and composition of the Island community since it was first settled. In this regard, minimal ABS statistical census data are available for Christmas Island that provide any specific cultural and demographic composition until after official census data commenced, and even then, it took some time before any comprehensive data became available for Christmas Island.

As noted above in the 2016 census data, the majority of the current population on Christmas Island was born overseas and this has remained consistent with the 2011 census data, noting that at the August 2011 census night, a majority of people on Christmas Island (at the time) were engaged in employment at the IDC in occupations such as interpreters (translators) based on a ‘fly-in fly-out’ basis. Accordingly, the statistics of the ABS data from the 2011 census collection reflect the origins of these interpreters, even though they did not reside permanently on Christmas Island. Notwithstanding this data and the explanation provided for the population of overseas-born persons who are identified as working on the Island at census collection night, the ABS 2016 data strongly reflect the local population who identify as either being born overseas or having immediate family who identify as being born overseas. This is supported by the ABS 2016 data where languages spoken at home indicate the diverse society of Christmas Island, especially in the large percentage of Chinese language dialects that ensures a strong and diverse multicultural society remains on Christmas Island. The Chinese and Malay communities on the Island maintain strong cultural links and traditions, including
the maintaining of temples and shrines, and the mosque, as well as the celebration of traditional festivals and occasions. Also relevant to the social and cultural demographics of the Island are the residential settlement patterns on Christmas Island that are concentrated on the Island’s North West Point. There are a number of distinct residential areas each of which have historically been associated with certain cultural groups within the (previous) colonial structure on the Island. The larger detached houses of Settlement, Silver City and Drumsite were traditionally occupied by the (generally) European supervisors, teachers and Island middle classes, while the flats at Poon Saan and Kampong were associated with the Chinese and Malay communities respectively. While persisting on a general level, the enforced residential groupings of the past are no longer relevant because the Christmas Island population cultural groups have dispersed around the Island in recent decades to all the settled areas.

While the history of human settlement on Christmas Island spans little more than a century, the cultural diversity and settlement pattern arrangements as outlined above are not just contemporary factual statistics, but legacies of Christmas Island’s colonial origins and development that the community brought with them from their countries of origin. Notwithstanding the predominant Chinese and Malay groups that have a historical and cultural connection to the Island, other ethnic groups are also present on the Island although they are later arrivals. However, for the purpose of the thesis study, this chapter is more concerned with the cultural groups that have a demonstrated association and presence in the Island community as a result of their historical development on the Island and can therefore claim an Island ‘identity’ in regard to the demonstration of cultural roots being the principle qualification. The publication *The Right to Self-Determination under International Law* by Sterio will be referenced in this chapter (and other chapters in the study especially Chapter Four) in regard to the interpretation that she applies to ‘colonised peoples and minority groups’ and how this may be applicable to the population of Christmas Island in
their quest for some form of self-determination. The publications cited in the previous chapters will also continue to be referenced where applicable to the social and cultural practices of the Island’s community.

*Figure 3.1 Statistical map of the residential built areas of habitation on Christmas Island.*

*Source: Shire of Christmas Island Local Planning Strategy 2012.*
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Figure 3.2 View of the majority of the residential built areas of habitation located on the North East Point of Christmas Island taken from Territory Day Park with the Malay Kampong in the foreground, the Harbour, Settlement and Silver City (on the hill). Source: Shire of Christmas Island Local Planning Strategy 2012.
Chinese Community

The largest ethnic group on Christmas Island are the Chinese who have a direct relationship with, and identity related to, the commencement of phosphate mining on the Island. That is, because of the discovery of phosphate on the Island and the commencement of mining operations, the Chinese were originally brought to Christmas Island as an indentured labour force (coolies). Bartleson notes that by June 1899, the first 200 indentured Chinese labourers, eight Europeans, five Sikh policemen and a small group of Malay boatmen had arrived on Christmas Island to begin mining.\textsuperscript{216} This is also supported by Hunt as noted in the previous chapter, where the newly created CIP Co. decided to use Chinese indentured labour that had been successfully used in the Malay States for some years, especially in tin mining.\textsuperscript{217} In this regard, the subservient colonial rule that had been established in South-East Asia was (conveniently) replicated by the mining company on Christmas Island at the commencement of phosphate mining operations that was to last well into the twentieth century. This colonial approach by the mining company involved using instruments such as a labour contractor to recruit Chinese coolies to work the phosphate mine. The mining company’s first appointed (European) Island Manager was Vincent Samuel, who made enquiries in Singapore, which was the major point of entry for Chinese labour brought from China, and chose Ong Sam Leong to be the labour contractor to recruit indentured labour.\textsuperscript{218} Ong Sam Leong’s agents went to the small villages of ‘Kwangtung Province’ in Pearl River Delta region of southern China to recruit the required labour force where most of the young men were labourers living in family houses and in abject poverty.\textsuperscript{219} Therefore, recruitment of these young men was not difficult, given the hardships they endured on a daily basis.

\textsuperscript{216} Bartleson, 9.
\textsuperscript{217} Hunt, 10.
\textsuperscript{218} Hunt, 11.
\textsuperscript{219} Hunt, 13.
to support their families and the fact that they were nearly all totally illiterate and not able to understand the contract conditions to which they had submitted. The mining company had no regard for (or indeed any interest in the cultural and social factors of the labour they required for the mining operations. They were only concerned with treating the imported Asian society as an economic means to productivity, of taking short cuts to economic progress and growth without any regard to the social factors. As a result, the mining company’s colonial approach created an economy based on phosphate production and profit on Christmas Island without creating a means for effective social management and integration. This social integration, especially for the Chinese coolies, was essentially left to themselves to establish, which they gradually did.

The Chinese coolies that first came to Christmas Island brought with them their cultural traditions, languages and religious beliefs, and currently, the Chinese community on Christmas Island comprises Chinese groups speaking several ethnic languages, such as Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkein, Teow Chiew and Mandarin, which reflect their origins from mainland China and South-East Asia. This is supported by Bartleson who notes that headstone inscriptions at the various Chinese cemeteries around Christmas Island indicate that for more than 50 years most of the Chinese labour force came from the Guangdong (Kwangtung) area of southern China, with lesser numbers from surrounding provinces in China, such as Fujian, Jiangxi and Hainan Island. There is also an imbedded observance of traditions and festivals, such as Hungry Ghost and Moon Cake Festivals, God’s Birthday and the traditional Lion Dances (especially at the lunar Chinese New Year period), and the maintenance of numerous temples around the Island (Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian). These have all developed over a period as a direct result of the presence of the Chinese community on the Island since their initial arrival as indentured coolies. The

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220 Bartleson, 9.
establishment of a cultural network for maintaining their traditional cultural customs was necessary for the Chinese community, especially given that the mining administration paid scant regard (or care) for any of their social practices. For these earliest coolies who came from the poor rural areas of southern China, in the absence of family structures on Christmas Island it was important to establish a structure that was based on their village and clan links and communicate in a common Chinese language (dialect), such as Cantonese.

Some of the early coolie arrivals would have almost certainly added the support of ‘Hung Men Hui Brotherhood’ membership that had existed in China for centuries and had a large following among the poor and unemployed. The brotherhood’s activities were well organised, and with traditional links to temples, gave a sense of security, order and focus through family rituals. The brotherhood would have taken responsibility for the construction of a ‘Joss House’ at the earliest opportunity to provide a social and spiritual base for its members.221 The bonding of the Chinese coolies in these early years continued to manifest itself in various social activities and customs that are still maintained by the Chinese community on Christmas Island. For example, on the site of today’s Tai Pak Kong Temple (at Gaze Road Settlement), the brotherhood had fulfilled their oath of obligation to fellow members and built a substantial Joss House with a cement floor, wooden plank walls and a zinc roof from where, in addition to their traditional rituals, they could organise the rare social events and festivities enjoyed by the men. They could also offer assistance with tasks, such as reading or letter writing when needed, and dispense community justice in the resolution of disputes. Further, their support of fellow members during illness was vital to their survival in a place where the earliest make shift hospital had few facilities, which was particularly relevant during the beri-beri crisis described in the previous chapter. For those who died, brotherhood members took responsibility

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221 Bartleson, 11.
for funeral and burial arrangements. In such circumstance, the brotherhood sustained its members with a depth of comradeship not unlike the traditional mateship so highly valued by (mainland) Australians. No doubt this practice arrived with the Chinese coolies indentured in the early twentieth century to work on the Island whereas common practice was for ‘voluntary associations’ to be established for various activities, such as burial societies to ensure that members would be assured of a properly conducted funeral, and to form welfare and progress activities, such as literary clubs and religious organisations. Figure 3.3 depicts the ‘All Souls Coolies Memorial’ at the Chinese Gaze Road Settlement Cemetery erected in 1971 in memory of the early Chinese workers who were buried at the various Chinese cemeteries around the Island.

222 Bartleson, 16.


224 Bartleson, 62.
Housing conditions for the Chinese coolies was rudimentary at its very best and reflected the disdainful attitude of the mining company towards the coolies. There was a clear hierarchy on the Island (not only in housing but also in all other forms of social well-being), and the coolies were at the bottom of this pecking order. The social pecking order referred to by Ayris would survive both World Wars and several social revolutions. It started in those first early days when the Island received irregular visits from ships bringing food from Singapore where the rules governing the distribution of food and supplies were immutable. That is, first choice went to Europeans, then came the Mandors (Chinese-appointed foremen), followed by skilled labourers and tradesmen and finally the coolies.225 As in other (neighbouring)
Asian countries where the colonial rulers had created a social hierarchy with the European at the top, the Christmas Island hierarchy was derived from the mining company and the subsequent government administration developed the same regime. Generally, the hard facts of power as established by the colonial hierarchy were enough to create this ranking without much effort in enforcing it. The colonial attitude demonstrated one significant characteristic that conveyed their tremendous prestige—its overwhelming power of control that manifested itself in the different clothing Europeans wore, the houses they built and lived in and the food they prepared and ate and through nearly every other aspect of living that excluded and separated them from the Chinese (and Asian) community of Christmas Island. This social exclusiveness was justified by the European mining management and administration on the grounds of prestige and privacy, much the same as it was through all of the neighbouring South-East Asian colonised countries of the time. For example, as noted in the publication *In Search of South East Asia: A Modern History* the building of modern administrations by the colonial rulers of South-East Asian countries at the time was above all a great cultural achievement in the minds of the aliens (colonisers) holding the new power.226

Further, the Western capitalist mode of production, characterised by large units under a single management, cheap labour, investment of money capital and scientific methods, was in all respects quite different from prevailing pre-colonial methods of (mining) production in South-East Asia. For that reason, it was not a natural out growth from local economic activity but entirely imported from outside and run entirely by the colonial governments in South-East Asia at the time.227 As noted by Neale and Adams, according to the principles of colonial capitalism, for the

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226 Steinberg, 204.

227 Steinberg, 226.
extraction of raw materials from the colonies all that was needed was an inexhaustible supply of cheap labour. The same colonial ideology held that to be white and wealthy placed one indisputably at the top of the socio-economic order. This in turn fostered an authoritarian system predicated on racism.\textsuperscript{228} This colonial practice was certainly evident in the attitude taken by the European mining management and administration towards the Chinese coolie population of Christmas Island that remained largely unchanged (with the exception of minor improvements) for nearly 80 years. It would have been psychologically and physically impossible for Europeans of this colonial era to live in their role on the Island had they not persuaded themselves that they were superior to the Asian community they exercised control over. In this regard, the European colonisers continued the entrenched practices of subjugating the population on the Island that they had previously exercised in their colonial rule in South-East Asian countries that they controlled at the time.

Accommodation for the first Chinese coolies occupied a strip of land from the workshops and loading piers along what is now the Gaze Road foreshore area and consisted of eight sleeping huts made of planks with ‘atap’ (coconut thatch) roofing. The huts were 35 feet long, 20 feet wide and 10 feet 6 inches high at the point of the roof and the low wooden sleeping platforms in each hut were divided into four spaces separated by upright planks. Each space was occupied by four coolies and each man thus had a personal space of approximately 3 square metres. These huts remained in use until 1941.\textsuperscript{229} This rudimentary accommodation lacked any sanitary facilities with washing and cooking being communal and rubbish waste thrown underneath the huts. The space under the floors was filled with rubbish; no water

\textsuperscript{228} Neale and Adams, (1988), 22.

\textsuperscript{229} Hunt, 18.
supply or drainage had been connected to the new buildings and latrines were insufficient.\textsuperscript{230} In these unsanitary conditions, it was no wonder that the coolies were subject to disease and sickness that was exacerbated by the atrocious daily working conditions they endured. The relocation of a new hospital to the Phosphate Hill site provided some improvement for coolies suffering ill health. This coincided with new phosphate mining production at the Phosphate Hill site with accommodation being constructed that also relieved the need for coolies to walk daily up and down the steep incline from their accommodation at the Gaze Road foreshore. The site of the Phosphate Hill Chinese Cemetery is testament to the fact that coolies still suffered from poor working and living conditions, which continued until the discovery of more lucrative phosphate deposits at South Point and the subsequent demolishment of Phosphate Hill village. As Bartleson notes, this is where victims of the extremely hazardous work conditions at the nearby quarry were buried until the cemetery’s closure in 1914–1915, when huge deposits of phosphate were found at South Point.\textsuperscript{231}

In this regard, all of the Chinese cemeteries of Christmas Island provide a tragic indictment of the suffering that the coolies endured and in part explain the strong social and cultural bonds that developed (and still exist) among the Christmas Island Chinese community. Generations of the (Chinese) community members continue to visit not only the Phosphate Hill Cemetery but also the Gaze Road Settlement Cemetery (and other cemeteries around the Island) to honour the souls of these early coolie pioneers and therefore represent significant cultural importance to the Chinese community. As noted in Figure 3.3, in 1971 the ‘All Souls Coolies Memorial’ at the Chinese Gaze Road Settlement Cemetery on Christmas Island was erected in memory of these early Chinese workers who were buried at the various Chinese cemeteries around the Island.

\textsuperscript{230} Hunt, 27.
\textsuperscript{231} Bartleson, 22.
Currently, the early coolie accommodation and housing of the Settlement, Phosphate Hill and South Point areas are long gone, replaced progressively by modern buildings constructed from the post-Second World War period that can be best described as being appropriate to the time they were built. However, until new subdivisions were created to release new land opportunities following the outcome of the Islands in the Sun report and adoption of the regime of WA applied laws (including town planning legislation), these housing arrangements still reflected the colonial social hierarchy as evident in the flats at Poon Saan or the Kampong at Flying Fish Cove. Undoubtedly then, these earlier accommodation and housing patterns of ‘ethnic demarcation’ had a significant influence on the social and cultural
behaviour of the Chinese community on Christmas Island. The ethnic demarcation patterns were evident not only in the housing arrangements, but also to some degree in the public building infrastructure. The most notable examples of these were the Christmas Island Club, which was a club exclusively for Europeans, and ‘Tai Jin House’, which was formerly the District Officer’s (and later Administrator’s) residence located at Smith Point away from the general community. Neale and Adams describe the ‘Club’ as being the primary entertainment for the Island’s European population, who were all members, where they played tennis, snooker and badminton and had a swimming pool adjacent to the Club.232

The Christmas Island Club was built in the late 1920s and is historically significant as one of the only surviving pre-Second World War buildings on the Island, although it is now dilapidated and not in use. It was built exclusively as a European Staff Club and was the focus of social and community gatherings of the European community on the Island from approximately 1930 to 1980. Membership of the Club excluded the Chinese (and Asian) community with the exception of those who were European servant staff who provided services to the Club. Little wonder then that this exclusion gave rise to resentment among the Chinese community, who have little regard for the conservation and refurbishment of the building even at present, regarding it as a symbol of the colonial structure that socially excluded them from participation. Similarly, Tai Jin House is one of few surviving pre-Second World War buildings on the Island and remains in good condition and use today. The District Officer occupied it as a residence and government office until the transfer of Christmas Island to Australia in 1958 when it became the Administrator’s Office and residence. The Chinese community hold Tai Jin House in higher regard than they do the Christmas Island Club, which could be owing to the fact that one of the functions of all the District Officers who occupied the building was that of ‘Protector of

Chinese’. In fact, the name ‘Tai Jin House’ derives from the colloquial terminology by the Chinese community for the position of District Officer. In his memoirs, District Officer Victor Purcell states that he was virtual ‘Pooh Bah’ having all the functions for the community, such as Magistrate, Assistant District Judge and Assistant Protector of Chinese, and that when any of the Chinese community requested to meet with him, they would ask to see the ‘Tiajin’, or big man in his capacity as Protector of the Chinese. He was District Officer on Christmas Island in 1926 for a period of seven months.\textsuperscript{233} In this regard, it was the position that was respected and not necessarily the Caucasian person who held it from time to time.

Notwithstanding the overt social hierarchy that prevailed between the European and Chinese community on Christmas Island, there was also a distinct separation within the Chinese population. This was particularly evident in the control of the coolies by the European-appointed labour contractor’s use of Mandors who were widely despised by the coolie population. The Mandors exerted control over the coolies in nearly every aspect of their life, social and working. They were often cruel, beat the coolies with rattan canes (although this practice was legally prohibited) and often extorted bribes from the coolies. The use of Mandors by the mining company and the appointed labour contractor instilled long-term deep resentment among the coolie population, and although working conditions gradually improved, this resentment manifested itself in isolated incidents of Mandor murders until the 1960s.\textsuperscript{234} The influence Mandors had on the daily lives of coolies was far-reaching since they controlled all aspects of the coolies’ life, including the dispensing of opium at often inflated prices, which was imported by the Labour contractor with the government administration condoning the practice. In fact, by 1912 the government

\textsuperscript{233} Neale and Adams, (1988), 35.

\textsuperscript{234} Adams and Neale, (1993), 33.
assumed the monopoly of opium distribution throughout the Straits Settlement and the District Officer sold opium in either small packets or sealed tubes.\textsuperscript{235} Adams and Neale note that many of the coolies were actually addicted to opium before coming to the Island because of its availability in their countries of origin. The mining company (and administration) condoned the use of opium as a means to keep the workforce docile.\textsuperscript{236} Therefore, the use of opium on Christmas Island was endemic in the coolie population as a means of relief from the arduous life they endured and it continued unabated until the Second World War only decreasing slightly with the Japanese occupation and the non-availability of opium imports. It ceased altogether after Australia took possession of Christmas Island in 1958, when it became illegal.

Commensurate with opium use as a pastime for the coolies is gambling, a pastime that continues at present. From the very early days of the arrival of Chinese on Christmas Island, gambling was a practice that was both encouraged and condoned by the government administration. Hunt notes that even after the Japanese occupation, the head Mandor wanted gambling reintroduced legally to the Chinese community and the then Mining Manager (John Paris) supported the proposal as a means to keeping the workers quiet. In 1947, approval was given to allow gambling in a controlled environment at the ‘Tea Gardens’ on the Gaze Road foreshore for the Chinese population only (Malays were excluded) with proceeds of the gambling to be placed in a fund for old or sick coolies to travel back to China.\textsuperscript{237} This practice continues in a similar form currently at the Poon Saan Club, and has been a feature of the Christmas Island Chinese community’s way of life for more than a century. It provided a social means of interaction and although gambling has inherent social problems, it certainly provided relief for those early Chinese coolies as a way to

\textsuperscript{235} Hunt, 61.

\textsuperscript{236} Adams and Neale, (1993), 56.

\textsuperscript{237} Hunt, 230.
endure the hardships they encountered in their daily lives. Also providing some relief to the hardships of life for the coolies was prostitution, although, as Neale and Adams note, it was unlikely many coolies were able to engage in the practice, given the expense and ‘social pecking order’ of the Island that controlled access to the brothels. Further, the prostitutes were often booked on a roster system and at a cost of about $6 per night the lowly paid coolies could not afford the price. According to Ayris, a Christmas Island pecking order was established, which was to survive both World Wars and several social revolutions. This again led to resentment within the Chinese community bearing in mind the large coolie workforce on the Island that were continually denied access to some of the minimal pleasures available to them on the Island.

One of the most striking examples of this resentment in the Chinese community was the action of Jimmy Kang, who was Chief Superintendent of the mine during the time of Japanese occupation. He forced Chinese women who had placed themselves under the protection of powerful Chinese men (such as Mandors) on the Island as wives to revert to prostitution for the Japanese. According to Hunt, the women despised the idea of having to work for the Japanese as prostitutes; Jimmy Kang’s actions violated traditional Chinese principles by forcing the women back into prostitution and was an attack on Confucian values, which was bitterly resented. The site of the earlier brothels on Christmas Island at the ‘White House’ on the Gaze Road foreshore and at South Point have long gone and despite an attempt to revitalise the ‘trade’ by enthusiastic men on the Island after the Japanese had left, the doors remained permanently closed at the White House.

239 Ayris, 6.
240 Hunt, 190.
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The traditional customs, beliefs and social activities that the Chinese community developed on Christmas Island because of their origins continue to a large degree at present. The many temples and shrines around Christmas Island are testament to these earlier social beliefs and customs. For example, the Chinese traditional belief was that the unquiet dead would come to Earth to cause mischief in an attempt to force humans to pray and make offerings on their behalf. As Christmas Island had more than its share of men who had passed away without fathering sons, or died by suicide or violence, the most common way a man could end up was as a ghost. Hence, altars would be located in places where untimely deaths had occurred, food would be offered, and joss sticks and paper from material goods would be burned for the spirits. The hospitals and graveyards were the obvious places for this practice, although small altars were also established in the jungle where a runaway coolie had died or below a tree where another may have hanged himself. Bartleson also supports this fact and notes that the two Festivals of the Dead, Qing Ming (also known as All Souls Day) and the Hungry Ghost Festival are major celebrations on Christmas Island.

Other traditional Chinese festivals that have continued since the first arrival of Chinese coolies on Christmas Island include Chinese New Year, Moon Cake Festival and Lantern Festival. While some of the earlier temples, especially those smaller ones in the jungles of Christmas Island, no longer exist, a majority of the temples and shrines are still active and in use by the Chinese community. One of the largest of these is the South Point Temple (see Figure 3.5). Even though there is no longer any community living there since the phosphate deposits were exhausted by 1970 and the satellite township was closed, the Chinese community maintains the temple and celebrates the ‘Kang Tian Tai Di’ (God’s Birthday) Festival each year. Thus, the

241 Hunt, 57.
242 Bartleson, 67.
modern-day Chinese community continues to instill these social customs and beliefs in the younger Chinese generation on Christmas Island, with most of the celebrations and festivals being well attended, not only by the younger Chinese generation but also by the broader community of Christmas Island. This then ensures the continuation of the Chinese customs and beliefs that were brought to the Island with the first Chinese coolies more than a century ago.

Figure 3.5 South Point Temple. Source: Shire of Christmas Island Local Planning Strategy 2012.

Central to maintaining the established Chinese customs, beliefs and social activities on the Island was/is the Chinese Literary Association that was first established in the early twentieth century and has a proud history of service to the Chinese community in all aspects of social well-being. Despite a brief period of decline in the 1970s, the Chinese Literary Association maintains a strong presence in the community of Christmas Island currently. It is a focal point for organizing various community events and activities aimed at highlighting the Chinese community presence on Christmas Island and preserving its cultural heritage. It has recently opened a museum at its location on the Gaze Road foreshore precinct and also operates a commercial traditional ‘noodle house’ restaurant that enjoys strong patronage from
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Chinese and non-Chinese patrons. As noted by Waters, the Chinese Literary Association had come into existence to preserve and maintain Chinese cultural features. In this regard and together with the Poon Saan Club and the Kung Fu Association (that maintains the traditional Lion Dance and continues to train younger people for the activity), the Chinese Literary Association ensures that the customs, beliefs and social practices of the original Chinese population on Christmas Island continue. Hence, the future of the Chinese culture on Christmas Island is positive and strong with the Chinese community ensuring its traditions and customs are maintained.

The Chinese (Mandarin) language is taught at the local school as an elective (along with Malay) and the school curriculum includes an emphasis on Chinese art and history, especially the latter with its anthropological and demographic relevance to Christmas Island. The annual Territory Day celebrations on 1 October each year (celebrating Australian sovereignty for Christmas Island in 1958) also include social and cultural activities by the Chinese community that continues to portray its strong presence in the Christmas Island community. This highlights the significant cultural and social contribution the Chinese community has made (and continues to make) to the Island’s community that will no doubt continue to be just as strong in the future. The identified beliefs and customs of any community are integral to their quest for self-determination recognition in accordance with the meaning provided by Sterio as a ‘minority group or people’ that is further discussed at the end of this chapter, and in Chapter Four of this study.

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243 Waters, 5.
Figure 3.6 Chinese Literary Association entrance to the building on Gaze Road. Source: Shire of Christmas Island Our Future: Community Strategic Plan 2011 to 2021.
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Malay Community

The Christmas Island Malay community is the second-largest community group on Christmas Island with its members initially recruited from Ambon and Bawean Island in the (then) Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia) in the early 20th century. Subsequently, others arrived from peninsular Malaya, Java, Sumatra, southern Thailand, Singapore and Borneo and at first, they were predominantly employed in boat-handling and marine-type work. The Malay community are nearly all Muslims and overwhelmingly follow the cultural and religious practices of Islam. They originally lived as a separate community in the ‘Kampong’ area of Flying Fish Cove. At the time of the ABS Census collection in August 2016, the Malay community was celebrating the annual ‘Ramadan’ (fasting month) and subsequent ‘Hari Raya Aidilfitri’ festivities. This meant that a proportion of the Malay community was not present on the Island during census collection night, being either overseas (Malaysia or Singapore), or on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands or in Perth celebrating with family and friends, which is the usual practice in the Islamic Malay community during this period. Therefore, the ABS 2016 census data statistics reflect this fact showing a smaller than usual response from the Malay community. Similar to the Chinese community on Christmas Island, the Malay settlement patterns are currently widely dispersed around the Island’s urban area, although the focal point of Malay social activity remains at the original Kampong site that has always been interpreted as its cultural heart. The Mosque, Malay Club and Islamic School are situated here; this was the traditional early settlement area for the Malay population.

The Malay community on Christmas Island did not suffer the same extreme hardships as the Chinese coolies did, mainly because they were not recruited for the sole purpose of working in the phosphate mine as indentured labour. As noted by Hunt, the Malays were not employed on precarious labour contracts with enforced

244 Hunt, 16.
penal provisions and the shadow of debt, as were the Chinese coolies, and Malay employment was mostly with the mining company (or government administration), mainly in marine and port services. Further, the Malays had ample opportunity to fish because of their location at the Kampong; they had a mosque; and they had a Headman as they did in their communities at home in Malaysia or Indonesia. More importantly, most of the Malay adult men were married and had families with them.  

The Malay men also played football and other physical sports, such as the traditional Malay form of ‘Sepak Takraw’, while the Malay women were active among their own community with various family social activities and in the traditional arts of batik weaving and hand-woven basket making. The fact that the Malay community were permitted to marry and have families naturally meant the Malay population would increase over time. In the space of 40 years since the Malay community was first established on Christmas Island from 1901 when there were only 21 men, no women and no children, the Malay community population grew to more than 50 men, 25 women and 47 children by 1941. In this regard, the Malay community was the only ‘normal’ community on Christmas Island in terms of sex ratio and family stability. Accordingly, the Malay community has been able (allowed) to develop and establish a distinct social pattern that values the concept of family, its solidarity, traditions and social status from the early days of settlement on Christmas Island.

245 Hunt, 118.

246 Hunt, 151.
This strong Malay family structure is usually large, patriarchal and functionally extended, which is especially evident because of the earlier housing arrangements of
the Kampong, which was the original place of accommodation for the Malay families and community. The strong values of Islam are also followed where gender segregation is still practised in the Mosque and to a lesser degree in the household although modern Malay practices on Christmas Island have changed over the decades and certainly no gender segregation in the Christmas Island workforce. Therefore, the family values of the Malay community still largely follow their origins of Malaysia and Indonesia, especially in the Islamic context. That is, even at present it is unusual for a Christmas Island Malay to marry a ‘non-Muslim’ unless that person converts (of his or her own free will) to Islam. Neale and Adams note the difficulties experienced by Jasmine Draman and Mohamed Noor in their relationship in the late 1960s where both of them underwent extreme scrutiny by both the Island’s Muslim leaders and the European Island community, to the extent where their impending marriage was strongly discouraged; nonetheless, they married anyway.247

There is also a strong connection between the Malay communities on Christmas Island and the Cocos Islands Malays, although not as harmonious as would be expected. Forbes and Heng note that the original settlement of Christmas Island by the Clunies-Ross family also included Javanese people as well as some Cocos Malays.248 Williams and MacDonald also note that there were sharp divisions between the Christmas Island Malays and the Cocos Islands Malays, since the latter, having lived under the Clunies-Ross regime for generations, had adopted European names, moved away from Muslim orthodoxy and regarded the local Christmas Island Mosque with disdain.249 This division is evident to the extent that in the current Christmas Island Cemetery Malay section that was established after the

248 Heng and Forbes, 71.
249 Williams and McDonald, 394.
Second World War on the north side of Gaze Road, the Cocos Islands Malay are buried separately from Christmas Island Malays. Prior to the establishment of the current Malay cemetery, there was a Malay cemetery located near the Kampong at Flying Fish Cove. As Adams and Neale note, when a large group of Cocos Island Malays came to Christmas Island to work and live, the local Malays were stunned because they had Scottish names and spoke Malay with Scottish accents. They played the fiddle and sang Scottish songs and dances they had learned from Clunies-Ross. While there is this historical division between the Christmas Island and Cocos Islands Malays, they still maintain a common bond in most of the Malay cultures, customs and social practices even if this does not necessarily extend to the strict Muslim orthodoxy practised by most of the Christmas Island Malays.

Currently, the descendants of the early Cocos Islands Malays still live on Christmas Island and coexist in the social fabric of the Christmas Island Malay community. As with the Chinese community, the Malay Christmas Island community strictly observe and actively participate in many of the festivities and celebrations associated with their culture on the Island. These include (as noted earlier) the observance of Ramadan and Hari Raya Aidilfitri as the most important events on the Island’s Malay social calendar. They also celebrate Hari Raya Haji and the Prophet Mohammed’s Birthday, which have also become part of the social festival calendar. While fasting during the month of Ramadan, the Malay community refrain from eating and drinking in daylight hours (as well as other activities, such as smoking and sexual relations) and attend the Mosque regularly for prayers, in the same manner as Muslims worldwide. The Hari Raya Aidilfitri (see Figure 3.8) celebrates the end of the Ramadan fasting month and is usually a time for visiting family and friends around the Island and, of course, cooking and eating. With reference to the experience of Eve Akerman and her husband on Christmas Island from 1946 to 1948,

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250 Adams and Neale, (1993), 64.
Neale and Admas note that Malay feast days came to celebrate religious, family or community events and they were loud joyful affairs at Flying Fish Cove beneath the palms by lantern light or by the full moon at the end of the Ramadan fasting month. There were trestle tables with a great deal of food, such as chicken and fish curries with rice that were hotly spiced and served with abundant amounts of chilli and tamarind. Food is an integral part of the Christmas Island Malay community life, and in accordance with Islamic adherence, all food prepared and consumed by this community is halal.

There are also numerous examples of the traditional arts practised by the Malay community, not only during festivals but also at other social community events and at weddings. The Malay Club located at the Kampong precinct was built in the early 1950s by the mining company as one of the community facilities provided for the Malay population. It demonstrates certain social features of the Island in the post-war period in which it was built, such as being a place for the association of Malay workers under the umbrella of an ostensibly cultural organisation in a climate where any overt association of workers was discouraged. At present, it is actively involved in maintaining the various Malay forms of arts and customs passed down from generation to generation of Christmas Island Malays. While woodcarving has never been a commercial industry, the traditional woodcarving art has been practised on Christmas Island since the Malays first came to the Island.

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This was primarily because of the need to make fishing boats, which was a means of livelihood for the Malay community especially given their origins as traditional coastal Malays (orang laut) meaning sea people. The Malay fishermen made their own ‘kolehs’ that were used in and around Flying Fish Cove to catch tuna, salmon and mackerel, and while currently, this fishing provides an exciting sport, the Malays only interest was, and still is, to provide a good meal for family and friends. The tradition has recently been revitalised among the Malay men, who have built several

252 Hunt, 118.
kolehs involving the community, and has included teaching the younger Malay men the art form of building the kolehs. In this regard, there was (and still is) no shortage of ample product on Christmas Island for woodcarving and boat building, or even housing construction, which the Malay men were/are particularly skilled in. The Christmas Island Malay men also perform one of the oldest traditional Malay customs of martial art known as ‘Silat’ that is also practised in a danceable art form. The Silat is often combined with the music of ‘Kompang’, which is a rhythmic beating of hand drums and a popular activity at social community events. These social events also see the Malay community dress in traditional costumes that are an integral part of their custom since first arriving on Christmas Island. In this regard, as Islam became more widely embraced, the Malay community started wearing the more modest yet elegant ‘bajukurung’, which is a knee-length loose-fitting blouse and is usually worn over a long skirt with pleats at the side. It can also be matched with traditional fabrics, such as the ‘songket’ or batik. Typically, these traditional outfits are completed with a ‘selendang’ or headscarf. The traditional attire for Malay men is the ‘bajumelayu’, which is a loose tunic worn over trousers and is usually complemented with a ‘sampan’, which is a short sarong wrapped around the hips (see Figure 3.9). Although the Christmas Island Malay community suffered social exclusion during the colonial period of Christmas Island, it did not suffer to the extent that the Chinese community did during this time. This difference can be attributed largely to the fact that the Malay community was allowed to develop its family structures and thereby retain its culture and customs, which were not impeded by the harsh working conditions that the coolies endured. As Waters notes, the Muslim Malays, perhaps, had a greater sense of unity since they lived in a Kampong that was also the location of the Mosque and the Imam, or religious teacher, and there was also a Malay Club.254 Currently, the Malay population on Christmas Island is a vibrant community that continues to celebrate its cultural diversity and sense of unity in a harmonious way.

254 Waters, 5.
Figure 3.9 Traditional Malay costume circa 1920s. Source: From the late Basil Murphy collection cited in ‘Suffering Through Strength – The Men Who Made Christmas Island’, John Hunt, Blue Star Print ACT, page 152.
European (and others) Community

The European community has had a presence on Christmas Island since phosphate was first discovered and mining commenced in the late nineteenth century and have historically comprised the smallest proportion of the Island’s ethnic group. However, while this presence has been continuous, Christmas Island has no identified generational European families that can source their roots to the beginning of settlement on the Island. This can be attributed largely to the transient nature of European employment practices on the Island, and while some European families can claim a generation of living on the Island, there is no evidence to support long-term family roots on the Island in the same context as the Asian community. The primary purpose of Europeans coming to, and living on, the Island has always been related to employment. Common examples include those engaged as public servants (police, teachers, health services and administration), in mine management or in other related ancillary services, such as small business. There was in fact another community on the Island containing people referred to under the generic term Supervisors, who were engineers, accountants, chief clerks and foremen. They were mostly engaged from the Australian mainland and some had worked for the BPC on Ocean or Nauru Islands. They were often attracted to the Island by advertisements offering salaries free of income tax, furnished accommodation at low nominal rent and amenities, which included (exclusive) a staff club, and boating and golf clubs. Further, they came into an atmosphere in which the character and nature of the undertaking and accepted attitudes had long been established during the colonial period, and hence, naturally enough they continued to absorb the opinions and assumptions of their more experienced colleagues with whom they mixed with almost exclusively.255 As Ayris also notes, life was comfortable for the Europeans. They lived in spacious homes overlooking the sea; they were addressed as ‘mem’ or ‘tuan’ by their Chinese or Malay servants; the men wore white suits and pith helmets

255 Waters, 6.
and most families had an ‘amah’ to look after the children. The heat of the afternoon could be made bearable by a pig-tailed coolie discreetly seated outside the house pulling a ‘punkah’ fan over the heads of the sweating masters. While this social segregation has dissipated over the past 20 to 30 years, the older generations of the Chinese and Malay communities still remember their exclusion from the European community with some disdain. In this regard, the long-term colonial rule on the Island created psychological impressions on the subject people (Asian community).

Some among the European community did not necessarily subscribe to the view of the majority of the European population on the Island about mixing socially with the Asian community. Neale and Adams refer to the arrival of Dr John and Eve Akerman circa 1948 on the Island and that during their short stay on the Island they had so endeared themselves to the Asian population that they were bid farewell with tears and an hour-long fireworks display that expressed gratitude and goodwill reserved for the special few. The Akermans mixed freely and comfortably with the Asian community during their stay on the Island and considered many as their genuine friends; however, this was not necessarily without criticism from the majority of the European community. In particular, Eve received much of the criticism and when she often replied that some the Asian community were indeed her friends, she was met with the reply from the (mostly) European female population with a typical colonial smile and advice that ‘but my dear, it’s just not done’. All of the publications referenced and used in this study provide a narrative and pictorial description of the colonial European impact on the Island, and on the Island’s Asian community. As evident in other South-East Asian countries, the European colonial rule created a social hierarchy with the European at the top and

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256 Ayris, 6.
from the early settlement of the Island they (the Europeans) were essentially interested only in treating the Asian community as an economy without any real regard to the social factors of the community that created a plural society. As Steinberg notes, the importance of economic industries in South-East Asian countries during the colonial period and the subsequent requirement to import an immigrant labour workforce contributed directly to the growth of plural societies in those countries.  

Having said this however, there is no evidence that the European community on Christmas Island overtly attempted to disrupt the traditional social and cultural practices of the Chinese and Malay communities, especially during the colonial period on the Island.

The improvement of industrial conditions on Christmas Island from the 1970s played a significant part in the gradual improvement of social well-being for the majority Chinese and Malay community. The dismissal of Teo Boon How in 1974 was the catalyst for this change and although it was initially industry related, its social implications for European and Asian relations were more far-reaching. The dismissal of Teo Boon How stirred feelings throughout the Asian community and although a new Administrator on the Island reinstated him, strength had been given to those among the workforce who were promoting the formation of a trade union.  

This action promoted further awareness in the Asian community of their fundamental rights to be treated as equals of their European counterparts living in

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259 Steinberg, 240.

260 Williams and McDonald, 535.
Figure 3.10 Straits Settlement Government District Officer McFall with ‘companion’ circa 1913.
the community, not only from an industrial perspective but also generally in a social context. For example, the practice of the mining company (with government support) to pressure aged retiring Asian employees to leave the Island, which threatened to divide generations of families on the Island, caused resentment among the community.\textsuperscript{261}

A majority of the European community were shocked at what was occurring (especially the mining management), mostly because they could see a threat to the lifestyle they had led for so long, although there was sympathy in some quarters of the European community. This sympathy was evident in the arrival of Europeans on the Island who were exposed to the changing social conditions and values on mainland Australia. One of these was Mike Grimes, who was a teacher instrumental in forming the inaugural Christmas Island Teacher’s Association, eventually becoming involved in forming the first trade union on Christmas Island and appointed its first Secretary.\textsuperscript{262} Grimes struggled with the colonial environment of the Island that he and his family had come to and it was not long before he incurred the wrath of the dominant BPC European management and a majority of the European community when he began making changes. His view was that the Union had a place at the centre of Christmas Island society (all of the society) and since it was the only democratically elected body on the Island, it had a responsibility to represent the interests of a majority of the people in a whole range of areas.\textsuperscript{263} Evidence of this change to the comfortable lifestyle of the majority of Europeans on the Island is summarised by Mike Grimes in his interview with Neale and Adams that refers to the only (first and last) Managers’ Gala Charity Ball that he and his wife attended in 1975 –

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{261} Williams and McDonald, 535.
\item \textsuperscript{262} Waters, 24.
\item \textsuperscript{263} Neale and Adams, (1988), 197.
\end{itemize}
'We were greeted at the door on arrival at the Ball by the Manager and his wife, the Administrator and his wife and a host of other Island European dignitaries and the Manager’s wife pinned an orchid on us all especially flown in from Singapore. It was the last Ball because apparently we had spoilt it. We were those dreadful unionists who spoilt everything for the European way of life on the Island. Fancy expecting workers to sleep on proper mattresses imported from Singapore when the cost of these mattresses would mean they could not buy the Singapore orchids they needed for their Ball. How dare they do this, it was really preposterous and the unionists were really dreadful people'.

The change was indeed a shock to the European community that had enjoyed a lifestyle that was to dramatically alter to the extent where social equality has gradually become a normal aspect of community life on Christmas Island. Currently, the European community on the Island is an integral part of the community and although still transient in nature, there is some evidence of long-term residency especially in the small business sector of the Island. The reference by Hunt can best summarise the European dominance on Christmas Island that has now dramatically changed. That is, relations between Chinese, Malays and Europeans in the period from 1899 to 1948 were shaped in a world different from the current times. People held assumptions about others, racial stereotypes that sometimes glided into racism, which were accepted and unchallenged. It is difficult in the twenty first century to grasp the strength of these powerful feelings, which underpinned virtually every aspect of Christmas Island life.

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265 Hunt, 154.
One of the smaller ethnic groups that first came to the Island in the colonial period is the Indian Sikh community. They were originally engaged on Christmas Island from the turn of the early twentieth century in policing functions and as mining company watchmen (known as Jagas) under the direct control of the colonial government. They practised all of the social cultural customs they had brought with them from their countries of origin, noting that a majority of the Sikhs were from the South-East Asian British colonial dominions, such as India, Malaysia or Singapore. The Sikhs on Christmas Island originally had a small circular temple near where the current Roundabout Road is located (at Settlement), and they would conduct services on Sundays. Drums would summon the worshippers and prayers were read from the ‘Granth Sahib’ holy book. Sweet food wrapped in leaves was available to all people entering the temple. As noted in the previous chapter of this study, the Sikhs were the subject of one of the more tragic events that occurred on the Island. This event was the murder of five British army troops stationed at the Smith Point Fort on Christmas Island that preceded the Japanese occupation of the Island although importantly, not all the Sikhs on the Island participated in the murder. Currently, there is still a small Indian (generational) community on the Island even though they do not appear to practice all of the formal Sikh traditions, and while a minority have also converted to Islam, they do still celebrate some of the earlier cultural traditions, such as the annual Deepavali Festival. One of the more remarkable men on Christmas Island in the early colonial period was Walter Oorloff. He was of Sri Lankan origin, although Eurasian with a Sri Lankan mother and European father, and he lived on Christmas Island for more than 40 years having first arrived in the early 1900s. He was engaged originally as a medical dresser and

\[^{266}\text{Adams and Neale, (1993), 52.}\]
\[^{267}\text{Hunt, 106.}\]
although he had no formal medical qualifications, he enjoyed the confidence and support of the entire community, even some of the European women. He and his wife had 10 children but they all left the Island, and with the departure of Walter Oorloff owing to ill health in 1948, no descendants remained. In this regard, the Indian community played a significant role in the cultural demography of Christmas Island, especially in the Island’s early settlement period that was reflective of the South-East Asian countries in which other cultural groups, such as the Chinese and Malays, originated. This presence is greatly diminished now, unlike that of the other cultural groups, who maintain a strong presence and continue to practice their cultural customs and traditions.

Chapter Summary

Sociologists emphasise culture as an existence of collective language, systems and conventions that is distinguishable and specifically distinctive from elsewhere as a way of life of a group of people. This definition is provided in The Dictionary of Sociology by sociologists and anthropologists using culture as a collective noun for the symbolic and learned, non-biological aspects of human society, including language, customs and convention, by which human behaviour can be distinguished from that of other primates. In this regard, the culture of the Chinese and Malay communities on Christmas Island (as well as the other minor groups) is distinctive of the cultures they bought with them when they first arrived on Christmas Island from their countries of origin. This can even be extended to some degree to the European community, since the early colonial period of occupation on Christmas Island displayed a distinctive way of European life in this period. Therefore, it is quite easy to distinguish the cultural practices of the different groups on Christmas Island by

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268 Hunt, 158.

the cultural characteristics they display. As noted earlier in this chapter the present Chinese community on Christmas Island display distinctive cultural practices in their celebration of festivities and significant religious events similar to those they bought with them when they first arrived on the Island as indentured coolie labour. Their activities were well organised and with traditional links to temples, gave a sense of security, order and focus through family rituals that had existed and been practised in China for centuries. Similarly, the Malay community retained their cultural distinctiveness that they had originally bought with them from peninsular Malaysia or Indonesia as early immigrants to Christmas Island. The exception, as indicated, were the Cocos Malays who, for want of a better term, had assimilated with the European Scottish descendants of Cocos Keeling Islands over the course of occupation on the Cocos Keeling Islands.

The intent of this chapter has been twofold. First, it provides information about the various demographics and cultures of the Island that builds upon the historical facts and experiences from the previous chapter, many of which are still evident in the Christmas Island community. Second, it provides this description in a context that could be applicable to defining the community as a distinct minority group or peoples that can be interpreted according to Sterio as fulfilling the requirements of self-determination, an issue that is further explored and discussed in Chapter Four.

Under the principle of self-determination provided by Sterio, a group with a common identity and link to a defined territory is allowed to decide its political future in a democratic fashion. However, for this group (that is Christmas Islanders) to be entitled to exercise its collective right to self-determination, it must

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270 Bartleson, 11.

qualify as a ‘people’. In this regard, Sterio notes that an objective and subjective two-part test applies to this qualification as a ‘people’. The objective test seeks to evaluate the group to determine the extent to which its members share a common racial background, ethnicity, language, history and cultural heritage, as well as the territorial integrity of the area the group is claiming. Hence, the difference between the various majority groups on Christmas Island (Malay, Chinese and Europeans) would only partially fulfil this objective test, especially given the separate and distinct racial, language and cultural practices of each group. The subjective test examines the extent to which individuals within the group self-consciously perceive themselves collectively as a distinct people, and the degree to which the group can form a viable political entity.\(^{272}\)

The objective and subjective tests described by Sterio will be explored further in Chapter Four, especially since it relates to Christmas Islanders and to determine the extent to which these tests are applicable to defining them as a distinct minority group or peoples that can be interpreted as fulfilling the requirements of self-determination. Further, the status of Christmas Islanders as colonised or non-colonised peoples is a necessary discussion, given the interpretations provided not only by Sterio but also by Cassesse in his publication ‘Self-Determination of Peoples: A Legal Reappraisal’ and Weller in ‘Escaping the Self-Determination Trap’. These authors point out that the right to self-determination was expressed under the United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the United Nations Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights where under the Covenants the right to self-determination acquired a new meaning and an obligation on behalf of the Covenant’s Member States to respect a peoples’ right to some form of democratic self-governance.\(^{273}\)

\(^{272}\) Sterio, 16.

\(^{273}\) Sterio, 11.
While this process was afforded to the people of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in 1984 under observance by the United Nations, which is discussed further in Chapter Four, no such process has ever been afforded to the people of Christmas Island. Moreover, the right to self-determination was expressed in two different formats, one for non-colonised peoples and the other for colonised peoples. Weller notes that the notion of people is distinct from minority rights where the latter protects the existence of religious, linguistic or ethnic groups and facilitates the development of their identity to ensure they can participate fully and effectively in all aspects of life within the mother state. Therefore, should Christmas Islanders be classified as colonised or non-colonised people, and what is the meaning of people and minority rights for the purposes of self-determination in accordance with their cultural and historical composition?

The historical and demographical analyses of Christmas Island (and its community) in Chapters Two and Three have positioned the discussion towards arguing that Christmas Islanders have been systematically subjugated by the controlling European powers, first the United Kingdom and then Australia. While the circumstances of colonisation may have changed historically in a century, the definition remains the same where the Australian Government continues to regulate the daily lives of Christmas Islanders while denying them their rights to vote. In particular, this chapter has demonstrated that Christmas Island displays the characteristics of a colonised regime where the continued existence of a hierarchy with colonising powers is clear together with the subjugation of the cultural group(s) on Christmas Island. These cultural groups continue to preserve their distinct cultural practices despite the ongoing colonial subjugation through the historical

274 Sterio, 11.

economic exploitation (phosphate mining) and the disenfranchising of their
democratic voting rights through the application of the applied laws regime.

The use of photographs in this chapter has been similarly intended to provide
pictorial evidence of the social and cultural conditions on the island that are specific
to the Asian population in comparison with the colonial European community. This
explains to some degree why the local Asian population of Christmas Island desire
some form of self-government and expression that reinforces their cultural identity
as a distinct group. Accordingly, the interpretations by Sterio, Weller and Cassesse
(among others) not only sets the context in which Chapter Four will discuss the
governance and legislative arrangements on Christmas Island (and the IOTs),
especially from a global perspective, but are also integral to the direction of this
research in regard to applying the principle and right of self-determination by
Christmas Islanders, who can demonstrate they have been historically subjected to
various forms of colonial rule.