

# EMINENT INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN

## *Great Warriors - EDDIE MABO*



(1936 - 1992)



Eddie Koiki Mabo 1936 - 1992

Eddie Koiki Mabo was a Torres Strait Islander who believed white laws were wrong and fought to change them. The historic Mabo decision by the High Court of Australia overturned terra - nullius - or 'no-ones land' which the British declared before claiming Australia over two hundred years ago.

Edward Koiki Mabo was born in 1936 on Mer Island also known as Murray Island in the Torres Strait. Koiki's mother died shortly after his birth and was given to his mother's brother, Benny Mabo and his wife to raise their son.

From an early age, Koiki was taught about his family's land.

*"... it was handed down from generation to generation , they knew by the boundary lines and markers. There was a certain tree, or stones, heaps of rocks, different trees. They knew exactly where the place was."*

But life on the Torres Strait Islands was strictly regulated by the Queensland Government.

When he was seventeen years of age, a teenage prank landed Koiki in trouble with the island Council and he was exiled.

He worked on pearling boats but when his exile was extended he moved to Townsville and got a job on the railways.

This was to be a critical time in Koiki's life.

*"...he became spokesperson for the Torres Strait Islander gang, and as a result of that he interacted with white Australian trade union officials."*

In 1959, at the age of twenty-three he married Bonita Neehow. They would eventually raise ten children.

Koiki had many different jobs but when he was thirty-one years old he got work as a gardener with James Cook University in Townsville.

*"...he joined in the university life. He would sit in on seminars. he would go to the library and read books and especially would read what white anthropologists and the so-called white experts had to say about his people."*

In 1974, a discussion with Professor Noel Loos and Henry Reynolds was a turning point.

*"...we were having lunch one day in Reynold's office when Koiki was just speaking about his land back on Mir, or Murray Island. Henry and I realised that in his mind he thought he owned that land, so we sort of glanced at each other, and then had the difficult responsibility of telling him that he didn't own that land, and that it was Crown land. Koiki was surprised, shocked and even..."*

*"...he came home and said, and I remember him saying 'No way, it's not theirs, it's ours.'"*

In 1981 a Land Rights' Conference was held at James Cook University.

*"Koiki made a very important speech where he spelt out clearly land ownership and land inheritance in Murray Island."*

A lawyer at the conference suggested there should be a test case to claim land rights through the court system.

The Murray Islanders decided they would be the ones to challenge the claim of terra nullius in the High Court.

Koiki Mabo was chosen as leader.

*"...it was a ten year battle and it was a remarkable saga really. After listening to the argument and after investigating it Justice Moynihan came to the conclusion that Koiki Mabo wasn't the son of Benny Mabo and declared that he had no rights to inherit Mabo land."*

Koiki was devastated. For the first time in his life he felt like giving up.

But he believed he was right and threw himself back into the court case.

To relax Koiki would work on his boat or paint watercolours of the island home he loved.

But after ten years the strain began to affect his health.

*"He was determined to fight it all the way. Even on his deathbed he knew that he was going to win."*

In January 1992, Koiki Mabo died of cancer. He was fifty-six years of age.

Five months later the High Court announced its historic decision.

*"The High Court has announced its historic decision..."*

*"...so Justice Moynihan's decision that Mabo wasn't the rightful heir was irrelevant because the decision that came out was that native title existed and it was up to the Aboriginal or Islander people to determine who owned what land."*

Three years after Koiki's death, with the traditional mourning period over, his people gathered in Townsville for a memorial service.

Overnight his grave site was vandalised.

Koiki's body was reburied on Murray Island, the land he loved and fought for so hard.

That night, the Islanders performed a traditional ceremony not seen on the island for eighty years.

It meant that Koiki Mabo had been buried as a king.

*"He has proved himself really as one of the great battlers of Australian society and one of the people who has changed Australia's history."*

