

Asteroids named in honour of Indigenous Australians for significant contribution to Aboriginal astronomy

[ABC Far North](#) / By [Brendan Mounter](#) and [Samuel Davis](#)

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Brian Robinson's Baidam Tithuyil depicts is the great Shark Constellation commonly known as Pleiades, or the Seven Sisters. *(Supplied: Brian Robinson)*

When Meriam elder Uncle Segar Passi looks to the night sky, there's now a special place among the heavens he can call his own.

A 1.9-kilometre-wide asteroid is now officially 7733 Segarpassi, an honour for the senior Dauareb man.

"I was surprised to see my name," Mr Passi said.

"Venus, Earth, Mars ... I'm up there too!"

As the senior elder on Mer Island in the eastern Torres Strait, his traditional astronomical knowledge runs

Key points:

- Five asteroids have been named after two Indigenous elders, two Indigenous academics and a Torres Strait island community
- The asteroids were originally discovered in 1979 at the Siding Springs Observatory in NSW

deep.

"We have Tagai, the Southern Cross; Beizam the shark; Ilwel the morning star and Dogai, there's a lot of dreamings for Dogai," he said.

He has shared that knowledge over many years with Duane Hamacher, Associate Professor of Cultural Astronomy at the University of Melbourne, whose work is focused on collating and preserving Indigenous star knowledge.

- Torres Strait Islander culture is linked to the stars, which inform laws, customs, and practices



Uncle Segar Passi is a senior elder on Mer Island and an award-winning artist. (Supplied: Cairns Art Gallery)

For the past 18 months, Dr Hamacher has lobbied the International Astronomical Union (IAU) to honour the contributions of Uncle Segar Passi, his Meriam community, and three others including Professor Martin Nakata, Professor Marcia Langton, and senior Wardaman elder Uncle Bill Yidumduma Harney.

"I put forward the argument that these people and the community have played a very pivotal role in promoting and pioneering, advocating, and sharing knowledge of Indigenous astronomy," Dr Hamacher said.

"I'm actually in the IAU working group for star names and we've officiated six Aboriginal star names, but none of those stars can be named after a person.

"Asteroids can be named after people and are usually named after people."

This week the IAU accepted his proposal and assigned new names to five asteroids originally discovered in 1979 by astronomers Eleanor Helin and Schelte Bus at the Siding Spring Observatory in New South Wales.

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Complex cultural knowledge of the stars

A 2km-wide asteroid of the Flora family, located in the inner region of the asteroid belt is now known as 7546 Meriam.

Dr Hamacher said his time on Mer taught him how closely the Meriam people and Torres Strait Islander culture was linked to the stars.

"Even the kids know this stuff," he said.

"There are six-year-olds who have told me more about astronomy than undergraduate students I teach at university.

"They're telling me the Meriam Mir names and the English names and what they mean and how they affect things on the ground."



Men on Mer Island performing a ceremonial dance related to the stars, which are closely connected to Meriam culture. (Supplied: Associate Professor Duane Hamacher)

Professor Martin Nakata is Pro Vice-Chancellor and head of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Centre at James Cook University (JCU) and a Torres Strait Islander.

He said the stars have informed Torres Strait Islander laws, customs, and practices over thousands of

years.

"There's a lot of traditions around the stars that go back to ancient times," he said.

"It's connected to everything in our entire being and who we are in the world.

"For Indigenous people, it's not just the land and the sea. It's also the sky and in using those reference points it assigns not just who we are but our responsibilities as well."



Professor Martin Nakata, Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous Education and Strategy at James Cook University, has had an asteroid named in his honour. *(Supplied: JCU Media)*

Ancient knowledge, modern-day lessons

Professor Nakata said Indigenous astronomy also contained practical information about the natural world for the survival of both people and the planet — ancient knowledge that was still relevant in modern times.

"[Stars have] been used for navigating oceans but also for agriculture — when to plant and when to harvest," he said.

"They teach about how we should be looking after the planet and how we should be treating it as a finite resource — to use the planet as a resource but not exploit it.

"We've got a pretty productive one here so why not just look after it in the teachings of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? There are good lessons about how we need to be in the world."

Professor Nakata has also been honoured with a 3.3km-wide asteroid of the Koronis family, named 7547 Martinnakata, which he described as a privilege.

"I'm still trying to digest what this is all about and why the recognition but very, very chuffed at the

Torres Strait flag

The Torres Strait flag, designed by the late Mr Bernard Namok, features a white five-pointed star which symbolises peace, the five major island groups and the navigational importance of stars to the seafaring people. *(Supplied: Torres Strait Island Regional Council)*

moment," he said.

"The very first opportunity I can get a telescope, I'll be learning a lot more about them and where they're situated between Mars and Jupiter."

Dr Hamacher said the five asteroids were just the first of many more that will be named after Indigenous Australians in recognition of their contribution to Aboriginal astronomy.

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