

Transcript: Macassans and Merege

My name is Estelle Abbas. My involvement on this exhibition started out very small. I gave Merrill a photo of our Makassar Australian wedding. Then I remembered I had photos of the Columbo Plan students from Perth, the AIA of WA and the Dewaruci sword and offered them to Halina. Lyn and Din mentioned the Macassans and Merege. There was a slight chance that our children may be descendants of the Merege, so of course I started researching the Merege connection. The take-home message is 'join the MIA and become interested in a piece of history - you never know where you may end up'. In fact you may end up giving a talk on what you've found out.

I've been asked to give a talk on what I've investigated about early visitors to the northern coast of Australia, particularly about those who traded for Trepang (Sea slug). I use the term Macassans for these visitors, however these crews contained members from other islands. Likewise I use the term Indigenous people for the numerous tribal groups along the coast (some 1100kms) of the Top End of Australia. Yolgnu is a large language group of Indigenous people in Arnhem Land, who had a fairly harmonious trading relationship with the Macassans, so much of my talk is about the Yolgnu people.

I'm hoping to keep this short and to the point. It's a difficult task, because the topic is so interesting and there are many wonderful stories.

I have broken my talking into three parts. The first part is a very brief history of the Trepang industry. The second part is the influences of the Macassan culture on the Indigenous culture of Northern Australia and the third part is the reconnection of these cultures.

The first part is a very brief history of the Trepang industry. Please read the information in the exhibition. It is quite fascinating. There are many publications and books that will give you more details of the collection and processing of Trepang and the roles of both the Macassans and Indigenous peoples. Visitors have been coming to the shores of Top End Australia long before the Trepang industry was in full operation. 'Who', 'when' and 'why' they came is a subject of fascinating research, as seen in the Wesley thesis. Most likely the Macassan Trepang industry started in the 18th century. It was a well-orchestrated production. In 1803, Pabassoo, a commander of a fleet of ships owned by the Sultan of Bone, gave Matthew Flinders a detailed account of the operation. There were 60 ships in the fleet, each of which carried 100,000 Trepang. On doing the calculations it seems some 6 million Trepang were processed and transported to the Chinese market each monsoon season - just in his fleet alone. This was not a small operation. The European colonists tried to 'muscle in' on the trade and in 1823, 1826 and 1838 they set up their own trading posts, but they all failed. The South Australian government did the next best thing. They demanded money for fishing licences and import taxes for trading the Trepang. In 1906, as a result of South Australian government banning the trade, the Macassan ships left and never returned. This was devastating to the Yolgnu people.

This brings me to next section of the talk i.e. some of the cultural influences resulting from the interactions between the Macassans and the Indigenous people of the Top End.

Language

Makassar became the *lingua franca* between various Indigenous language groups and it became the trading language. Malay was also used. Approximately 300 words in the Yolgnu language have been identified to come from the Makassar language. One example was the word 'Daeng', title of respect in the Makassar/Bugis culture. This occurred as 'dayn' in Yolgnu and used the same way. Other examples are Rupiah (money), balanda (white person), jama (work).

Families

Many Macassans fathered children by Indigenous mothers. Indigenous women were taken as wives to Makassar. Some of these women already had children by Indigenous fathers. This meant the families were separated and they only saw each other when the Macassans returned each year. Young men and sons of

Makassans travelled with the crews to Makassar, Singapore, Batavia, New Guinea, Kupang (Timor), Borneo and other countries in the region. The Yolgnu were indeed a transnational people.

After 1906, families were split and not reunited until eighty years later.

Songlines

The Macassans brought rice, alcohol, calico, tobacco, knives, axes, fishing hooks and other metal products. They shared new skills such as fashioning dugout canoes. The traders returned to Macassar with Trepang, pearl shell, tortoise shell, beeswax and Ironbark timber. They also traded for wives and in some cases abducted them, only to return the following year to pay the bride price. It was not entirely harmonious. The combination of gambling, alcohol, knives and abducting women led to hostilities, which included death and leg spearing. Songlines identifying the various trade items are still within the Yolgnu culture. It seems ceremonies about the trade items were performed in front of an audience. This was instead of a written trade contract.

Islam.

It is thought that Islam made little impact on the indigenous people. However Islamic prayer words can be found in Yolgnu Songlines. There was circumcision and multiple wives in the Yolgnu culture. Men who travelled to Macassar came back as Muslims. The "Wuramu" a carved sacred Yolgnu totem wears a "peci" or "Songkok". There is a painting of a Wuramu in this exhibition. Islam may have flourished if the Christian missionaries hadn't arrived.

The Reconnection - 80 years later

Archaeologists Campbell MacKnight, Peter Spillett, Andrish Saint-Clare and others, put the pieces of the story together. They gathered oral histories from descendants and documented the physical evidence of cave paintings, Trepang processing rocks and the Tamarind trees planted by the Macassans. The book "Voyage to Merege" by MacKnight 1976 documented this evidence. Since then numerous books and papers have been written by scholars on all aspects of Macassar/Indigenous relations. I urge you to look at the book list and enjoy reading some of these books.

Music, art, writing and even political processes have re-affirmed the Macassan legacy in Australia.

I'll mention just a few of artists and musicians who have helped restore these ancient re-affiliations.

As a Bicentennial project, Peter Spillett was principally responsible for and participated in the sailing of a Makassan perahu replica, the *Hati Marege*, from eastern Indonesia to the Northern Territory in 1988 along the route taken by the Trepangers. Amongst its crew was a descendent of an original Macassan crewman. He was reunited with his Indigenous cousin.

In 1992 the Mabo decision was handed down. The policy of terra nullius was declared false. Indigenous people were recognised as the original custodians with the legal ability to negotiate land rights.

In 1993 to 1994 twenty six paintings by Johnny Bulunbulan reflected Macassan stories in the 'Yirritja' song cycle.

In 1995 Allan Baillie wrote Songman, a fictional story of a young boy, Yukuwa, who leaves his tribe in Northern Australia to travel through pirate-infested seas to Macassar and back.

In 1996 Peter Spillett supported a group of students from Bachelor College (100km from Darwin) who started of the process of finding and reuniting descendants of split Indigenous and Macassan families. Since then the reconnection has gathered momentum.

In 1996 An Exchange Ceremony on Elcho Island was arranged by Saint-Clare.

In 1997 The Indigenous opera 'Trepang' directed by Andrish Saint-Clare was performed in Indonesia and Australia by descendants of Macassar and Indigenous marriages.

In 1993 the Sunrize Band released 'Lembana Mani Mani and in the year 2000 YothuYindi released the Macassan Crew as part of their Garma Album

Julie Janson wrote Crocodile Hotel, which was performed by Teater Kita Makassar(2003). In 2008 she directed "Eyes of Merege". The Teater Kita Makasaar and some of Australia's leading Indigenous performers, including Djakapurra Munyarryun (Bangarra Dance Theatre) collaborated to celebrate the history of trade between the people of Northeast Arnhem Land and the Macassan fishermen of Sulawesi.

Melbourne Museum hosted an exhibition 'Trepang: China & the story of Macassan–Aboriginal trade' in 2011.

Also in 2011 the National Museum of Canberra hosted the 'Yalangbara: Art of the Djang'kawu'. These artworks by the Marika family depict motifs of the legendary Bayini who are believed to have voyaged to Arnhem Land, before the arrival of the Macassan fishing fleets.

And finally the Australian Government commissioned the orchestral piece "Trepang" as a gift to the Indonesian Government in 2017.

Now we will be part of the reconnection process. We will play "the Macassan Crew "by Youthu Yindi. I hope you enjoy it. Please enjoy the exhibition.

Thank you.

In this transcript I've added some details, which I left out of the talk, due to time restraints. Also I have used the old spelling of Makassar rather than the official spelling 'Makassar'.

SUGGESTED READING

Bugis and Makassar culture (background) found in Google Books with excerpts

Discourse *delivered on the 11th September 1815* by the Honourable Thomas Stamford Raffles, Pages 14 to 25

The Malay Archipelago, Volume 2 by Alfred Russell Wallace (observations from 1858 to 1861)

South East Asia, Colonial History: Imperialism before 1800 edited by Paul H. Kratoska (Maritime trade)

'The Politics of Marriage and the Marriage of Polities in Gowa, South SulaWesi, During the 16th and 17th Centuries' David Bulbek

'Chain of Kings: The Makassarese Chronicles of Gowa and Talloq' edited by William Cummings

'Pasompe'ugi: Bugis migrants and wanderers' Jacqueline Lineton 1975

Trepang Trade

'Makassar History and Heritage' ANU press

https://pressfiles.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p241301/html/ch01.xhtml?referer=294&page=3#toc_marker-4

'The Outsiders Within: Telling Australia's Indigenous-Asian Story'

Peta Stephenson

<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/aiatsis-map-indigenous-australia>

<https://mikedashhistory.com/2016/10/31/dreamtime-voyagers-australian-aborigines-in-early-modern-makassar/>

'The Makassar to Meringe Exhibition' -detailed description of Trepang Industry and display objects
http://www.nma.gov.au/audio/transcripts/NMA_Mercieca_20080709.html

'Bayini, Macassans, Belanda, and Bininj: Defining the Indigenous past of Arnhem Land through culture contact' Daryl Lloyd Wesley, Flinders University, Thesis 2014

'The Voyage to Marege: Macassan Trepangers in Northern Australia' Charles Campbell Macknight

Carlton: Melbourne University Press ; Forest Grove, Or., 1976

'Macassan History and Heritage: Journeys, Encounters and Influences' Marshall Clark, Sally May
ANU E Press, 1 Jun. 2013

Language

'Making Blood White: Historical Transformations in Early Modern Makassar' By William Cummings

Evans, Nicholas (1992) **'Macassan loan words in Top End Languages'**. **Australian Journal of Linguistics** 12:45-91.

'The Lost Makassar Language of Northern Australia' James Urry and Michael Walsh (1976)
Presentation paper

Families

'Mixed Relations: Asian-Aboriginal Contact in North Australia' [Regina Ganter](#), [Julia Martinez](#)

Islam

'Islam Dreaming: Indigenous Muslims in Australia' By Peta Stephenson

Music and art

<http://australianperformanceexchange.com/dev/v2/?q=eyes-of-marege>

<https://www.golyr.de/yothu-yindi/songtext-macassan-crew-203188.html>

<https://arena.org.au/trepang-opening-night/>

<http://www.aboriginal-bark-painting.com/wp/index.php/2015/02/26/bulunbulun-john/>