

Macassans at Victoria, Port Essington (Cobourg Peninsula) by H.S. Melville (1845) published in *The Queen* (8 February 1862).

Aboriginal Trade with Macassan Seafarers

Indonesian fishermen established a trading relationship with Aboriginal people in northern Australia, harvesting sea cucumbers before processing them for markets as far away as China.

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Australia's relationship with Indonesia and China was established several hundred years before the continent's settlement by Europeans. Northern coastal Aboriginal people developed trading relationships with Macassan fisherman seeking the highly desired trepang—sea cucumbers found in the warm waters that stretch from the Kimberley coast to north-east Arnhem Land. Macassan traders from Sulawesi in Indonesia processed the trepang for markets in southern China and other parts of Asia.

During the proto-historic and historic periods ... the most intensive Asian–Australian contact involved Indonesian seafarers: Makassarese, Bugise, Butonese and Bajau

people from islands, such as Sulawesi, Madura, Flores, Timor and Roti, visited parts of the north Australian coast to collect marine resources, such as trepang, pearl shell, turtle shell, clam meat and sharkfins.¹

Interactions between the Macassans and various northern coastal clans varied. The relationship between the Macassans and Aboriginal people in the Kimberley was characterised by hostility, while more cordial relations of exchange existed between the Macassans and the Yolngu people of north-eastern Arnhem Land. 'In some areas, Macassans were denied entry; in others, they were allowed entry to mutual benefit.'²

» Lyndon Ormond-Parker, 'Aboriginal Trade with Macassan Seafarers,' *Agora* 55:3 (2020), 3–7 «

- 1 M.J. Morwood and D.R. Hobbs, 'The Asian Connection: Preliminary Report on Indonesian Trepang Sites on the Kimberley Coast, N.W. Australia,' *Archaeology in Oceania*, 32:3 (1997), 197.
- 2 Denise Russell, 'Aboriginal-Makassan Interactions in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries in Northern Australia and Contemporary Sea Rights Claims,' *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1 (2004), 4.
- 3 Annette Oertle, Matthew Leavesley, Sean Ulm, Geraldine Mate and Daniel Rosendahl, 'At the Margins: Archaeological Evidence for Macassan Activities in the South Wellesley Islands, Gulf of Carpentaria,' *Australasian Historical Archaeology* 32 (2014), 64-71. .
- 4 Russell, 'Aboriginal-Makassan Interactions.'
- 5 Marshall Clark and Sally K. May, eds., (2013) *Macassan History and Heritage: Journeys, Encounters and Influences* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2013). <https://library.dbca.wa.gov.au/static/FullTextFiles/924788.pdf>
- 6 Paul S.C. Taçon and Sally K. May, 'Rock Art Evidence for Macassan-Aboriginal Contact in Northwestern Arnhem Land,' in Marshall Clark and Sally K. May, eds., *Macassan History and Heritage*, 134.

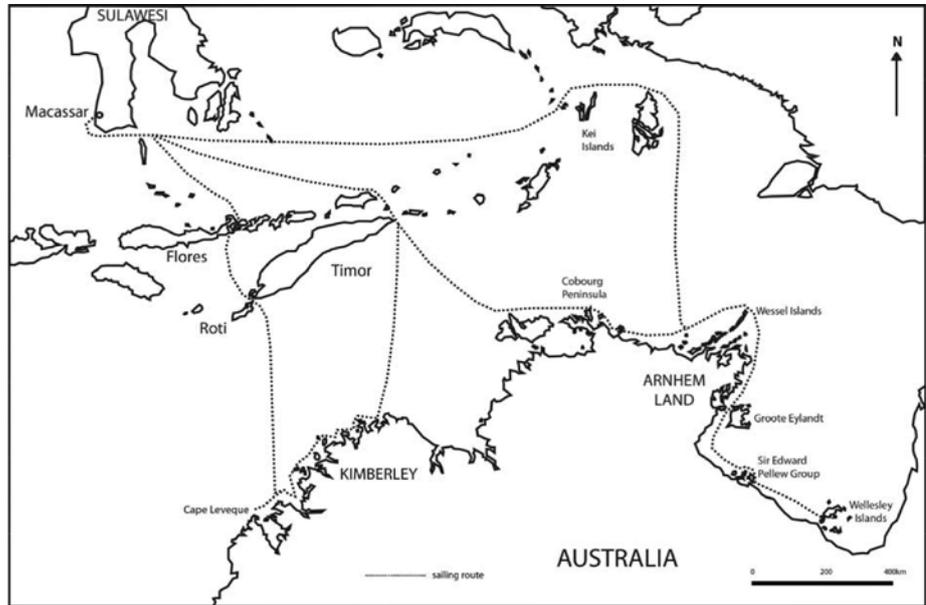


Figure 1. Macassan voyaging routes from Sulawesi to northern Australia.³



Rock art depicting a Macassan prau (1762-1814).

Wikimedia Commons

Archaeological research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s by Campbell Macknight found that fishermen from Macassar in the southern Celebes (Sulawesi) visited the coast between the Cobourg Peninsula and the Sir Edward Pellew Group around 1720 to 1906, with Groote Eylandt more frequently visited than Melville Island, Bathurst Island and the Wellesley Islands (Fig. 1).³ Several

linguistic studies showed coastal people in East Arnhem Land had incorporated a substantial number of Macassan words in their lexicon.⁴

Coins found in Arnhem Land with dates ranging from 1742 to 1838 provide evidence that trepang trade was occurring since at least the seventeenth century. Proof of trading is also seen in the visual depictions at rock art sites. Similarly, evidence of contact and trade appears in bark paintings and Aboriginal oral histories. However, the dates of found objects and rock art do not preclude earlier trade or visitors from Asia to the northern Australian coastline.⁵

Rock art evidence of Macassan contact exists across northern Australia from the west to the east coast. The rock art depicts seasonal fleets of Macassan boats called 'prau' that came to Australia's northern waters to trade and harvest trepang.

This pictorial history not only shows early contact with non-European peoples but provides evidence that these interactions were a robust cultural exchange. What the rock art exemplifies is a 'perspective of the encountered rather than those doing the encountering, as is usually the case.'⁶



Trepang is an edible sea cucumber that is dried for consumption.

Ed Bierman (CC BY 2.0) Steve Lovegrove/Adobe

The historical relationship of agreement and trade between peoples is also recognised today by the Numbulwar people in south-east Arnhem, whose red flag dance recalls the red sails of the prau.⁷

The Macassans fished for trepang or employed Aboriginal people to do so.⁸ They traded goods with Aboriginal people, and traded the trepang across Indonesia and mainland China.

Some Macassans lived with local inhabitants. They built temporary structures to process the trepang but no permanent dwellings.⁹ Seeds from the tamarind fruit brought to Australia have left tamarind trees here, and broken Indonesian pottery abounds in the trepang-processing areas, along with some glass.

Macassan influences on Aboriginal people have been studied in the context of religion, language, art, health, music and economic life.¹⁰ While anthropologists have largely researched Macassan contact from the Aboriginal perspective, Campbell Macknight has described the trepang industry conducted around the coast of Arnhem Land from the perspective of Macassan men. His chief point of originality, at least within the Australian literature, was to view the enterprise from the deck of a prau going south to Arnhem Land rather than looking from the beach at what was coming over the northern horizon.

We now have a remarkably full account of the whole trade of Makassar through the eighteenth century which places the trade in trepang within its context. Not only was Makassar the point of trade for trepang from Australia, but it was—and remains—the centre of the trade for the

7 Gabriel Solis, 'Welcome to Country and the Role of Traditional Music in Modern Indigenous Culture in Australia,' in Boh-Wah Leung, ed., *Traditional Musics in the Modern World: Transmission, Evolution, and Challenges* (Switzerland: Springer, 2018), 195–210.

8 Russell, 'Aboriginal–Makassan Interactions.'

9 Campbell Macknight, 'Macassans and Aborigines,' *Oceania*, 42 (1972), 284, 287.

10 Campbell Macknight, 'The View from Marege': Australian Knowledge of Makassar and the Impact of the Trepang Industry Across Two Centuries. *Aboriginal History*, 35 (2011), 121–143.

Call for Contributors to Agora

The themes for Agora's 2021 editions will be 'Women in History', 'Assessment' and 'Colonial Histories'. HTAV members are invited to submit proposals for a Thema or Praktikos article focusing on any of these topics.

Proposals for the first edition on 'Women in History' need to be submitted to agora@htav.asn.au by 30 November 2020. If accepted, the article will need to be completed by 11 January 2021. See agora.htav.asn.au for contributor guidelines.

We also encourage you to share your 'history victories' and teaching tips (up to 250 words) with other HTAV members, and to review one of the books listed at agora.htav.asn.au/books.

Guy Nolch
Editor, *Agora*

A Macassan stone arrangement near Yirrkala in East Arnhem Land.

Ray Norris (CC BY-SA 2.5)



whole archipelago. This new research confirms my suggestion that the trepang trade began a few years before 1720 and was initially small. Up to the 1760s most trepang came from relatively close at hand and was exported first to Batavia, and thence to China. In the 1760s the average annual export was 3469 pikul (210 tonne). In the 1770s, when a large proportion of the trepang went directly to

China in an annual junk, the export had grown to 4568 pikul (276 tonne) and then in the 1780s to 7068 pikul (428 tonne).¹¹

During his epic circumnavigation of Australia in 1802–1803, Matthew Flinders found stone fireplaces, pieces of cloth and the stumps of trees cut down with metal axes at several places along the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

¹¹ Macknight, 'The View from Marege,' 133.

Recommended Education Resources

Archaeology and Macassan Visitors to Australia

ABC reporters interview archaeologists as they unearth and interpret the evidence of Indonesian visitors to Arnhem Land. <https://education.abc.net.au/home#!/media/154244/archaeology-and-macassan-visitors-to-australia>

Macassan Trepang Processing Site

Historical photograph at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-16/makassan-trepang-processing-site/9331180?nw=0>

Archaeology and Macassan Visitors to Australia

Video and student activities at <https://education.abc.net.au/home#!/media/154244/?id=154244>

Considerations for Cultural Safety in the Classroom

Videos and teacher notes at <https://education.abc.net.au/home#!/media/3716966/considerations-for-cultural-safety-in-the-classroom>

Trepang Trade

Podcast at <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/hindsight/trepang-trade/3482266>

Macassan History and Heritage: Journeys, Encounters and Influences

Free e-book at <https://library.dbca.wa.gov.au/static/FullTextFiles/924788.pdf>

Trade with the Makassar

A short overview and podcast from the National Museum of Australia at <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/trade-with-the-makassar>

From Makassar to Marege to the Museum

In this podcast, curator Alison Mercieca considers the places connected by the Macassan voyagers from Indonesia and looks at the archaeological traces left on the Arnhem Land coast. <https://www.nma.gov.au/audio/behind-the-scenes-australian-journeys-series/from-makassar-to-marege-to-the-museum>

Journey Through History: Makassar to Arnhem Land

A 21-minute documentary covering a brief history of South Sulawesi, the culture of South Sulawesi, and the ongoing contact between the Muslims of Makassar and the Aboriginals of Arnhem Land. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aa7gNkZ-W6w&list=PLhoe0UHWi6idTQ8LqteO8IB53sbl0oc7E>

How Did the Macassans Influence Aboriginal Life?

This set of four activity cards explores the diverse range of shared knowledges, understandings and relationships that developed between Macassans and Aboriginal groups across northern Australia. <https://fusecontent.education.vic.gov.au/5e86e019-ccf3-460c-8580-e33afe6a54c3/p/index.html>

On 16 February 1803, Flinders met a fleet of Macassan praus anchored in the English Company Islands off the coast of East Arnhem Land. Here he learned from Pobassoo, the captain of the fleet, that Macassan praus came to the coast of northern Australia every year on the north-west monsoon winds to collect and dry trepang, which they then sold to the Chinese.¹²

Aboriginal people living in Arnhem Land incorporated the memory of Macassans into their social and cultural life. For example, Macassans and their voyages are important in some ceremonies and song cycles where songs may reference Muslim prayers.¹³

The trepang industry diminished after 1906 when the South Australian government, which administered the Northern Territory, restricted licenses to locally owned vessels. Fines were issued for boats entering Australian waters, and Macassan visits declined.

Evidence of Macassan trade was preserved with the National Heritage listing in 2014 of the Wurrurrwuy stone arrangements

near Yirrkala in East Arnhem Land. These depict secular objects from everyday life, such as arrangements depicting Macassan prau, houses and fish traps, rather than ceremonial or religious objects.

In 2020 we should be reinforcing historical and cultural ties to our closest friends and neighbours in Southeast Asia. Chinese migrants were some of the first free migrants to Victoria in 1815, many working and interacting with Australia's Indigenous peoples as pearlers, miners, cooks and farmers. They forged relationships and friendships with the local Indigenous populations, and children followed. Enduring family relationships between Aboriginal and Asian peoples ensued from Victoria to the Kimberley, and relationships between Yolngu people and Sulawesi endure to this day.¹⁴

It is historical encounters such as those between the Macassan and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that strengthen a shared regional history of diplomacy, trade and cultural exchange.

12 Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, 'Australian Heritage Database: Wurrurrwuy, Yirrkala, NT, Australia.' https://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/ahdb/search.pl?mode=place_detail;place_id=106088.

13 *ibid*.

14 Alison Inglis and Susan Lowish, 'Trepang: Crossing Cultures/Creating Connections.' *Artlink*, June 2012, accessed April 12, 2020, <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/3826/trepang-crossing-cultures-creating-connections/>

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