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## *Remembering Muslim Histories of Australia*

UNTIL QUITE RECENTLY the history of Muslims in Australia somehow sailed below the wind of popular attention as faintly-remembered historical marginalia. When I conducted fieldwork in north Australia between 1986 and 1996, I discovered a palpable sense of engagement among the indigenous people I came into contact with, about their mixed histories with Asian, Pacific and Muslim people. Similarly, Muslim organisations in Australia had started to narrate the histories of Afghans in Australia, and anthropologist and archaeologists had engaged with the history of Macassan seafarers. In other words, there were pockets of awareness of histories of ‘Afghans’, ‘Macassans’, and ‘Malays’ in Australia (none of these are strictly ethnic appellations), but it took a War on Terror to redefine all of them by the religion they held in common, and to turn them into the interesting historical subjects that they have now become.

In the first decade of this century Australia’s major cultural institutions engaged with these histories: the National Museum, the National Library, the National Archives, the ABC and SBS, and a number of state museums, and they have now become well entrenched in the Australian historical narrative. They have become useful histories for a range of political purposes in Australia by Muslim organisations, indigenous people, cultural institutions, and history practitioners. They have also found political uses in Indonesia, but I will not discuss these here.<sup>1</sup>

### **Writing the Muslims Back In**

Well before they became targets of xenophobia, Muslim organisations in Australia grasped the importance of remembering the long genealogy of Muslim contact in Australia. Many of their publications referred to Macassan trepangers and Afghan cameleers as the historical anchors of their presence in Australia. Rather than emphasize conflict and disempowerment – as white-authored histories of ethnic minorities have tended to – they underlined the long and predominantly harmonious accommodations with white and black Australia. My research since 1999 has explored what these histories meant for Australian historiography, predicting that a shift in attitude towards our histories was inevitable.<sup>2</sup>

These histories have moved from the margin to the core of Australian historical understanding. Now they are the first thing that flashes up on the screen under a search for ‘Muslims in Australia’. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade lead paragraph – in English and Bahasa Indonesia – exercises more than necessary caution in its first sentence, since nobody doubts that Macassan contact predates the European settlement:

Muslims in Australia have a long and varied history that is thought to pre-date European settlement. Some of Australia’s earliest visitors were Muslim, from the

east Indonesian archipelago. They made contact with mainland Australia as early as the 16th and 17th centuries.<sup>3</sup>

This is an elegant diplomatic pointer to a shift in attitude since the demise of John Howard as Prime Minister in 2007. Australia's major institutions now make reference to Muslim histories of Australia. The National Archives of Australia has featured 'Muslim Journeys' by Hanifa Deen in its 'Uncommon Lives' exhibition since 2007, and in the same year the National Library of Australia hosted an exhibition accompanying South Australian Museum's Philip Jones and Anna Kenny's book, *Australia's Muslim Cameleers*.<sup>4</sup> The National Museum of Australia added the Macassan contact history to its permanent Australian Journeys exhibition in 2008. The National Gallery of Australia and the Art Gallery of South Australia's Crescent Moon exhibition in 2006 on Islamic art in South-East Asia had also made reference to the Macassan traders in north Australia.

Besides being a 'good neighbour' policy, and affirming social harmony, this history is also a tourist drawcard, adding to the outback flavour of the remote north, popularized overseas with Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980) that became very popular in Europe. No doubt the completion of the Adelaide-Darwin railway line in 2003 also helped to bring 'Afghan' history in Australia back to popular attention.<sup>5</sup> After 125 years of interrupted construction, the 'Ghan' was advertised as a journey through time, with a camel and rider as its logo. Prompted by this, the ABC ran a feature on the Afghan cameleers on the George Negus Tonight show in November 2004, and published a camel book in 2005.<sup>6</sup> The Powerhouse Museum in Sydney included camel trains in its history of transport in 2004, and the Northern Territory library compiled a readily accessible bibliography of camels and cameleers in Australia.<sup>7</sup> In 2011 the South Australian Museum launched a comprehensive Australian Muslim Cameleers website based on the Jones and Kenny book of the same name.<sup>8</sup>

A quantitative analysis of the electronically available bibliographies reveals that publications on 'Afghan' histories increased from three books per decade in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s, to seven books per decade in the history boom of the 1980s and in the first decade of the 21st century, far outstripping books on convict history in the last decade. Expressed in the equivalent of the Australian Research Council's ERA weightings, the domestic output on Afghan cameleers was 41 points (13 publications) in the 1980s, and 44 points (16 publications) from 2001 to 2011.

The Wikipedia entry on Islam in Australia, begun in May 2005, tackles the old popular conception straight on:

Although Islam's presence in Australia is often perceived to be recent by Australian non-Muslims, adherents of Islam from what is today Indonesia had in fact been visiting the Great southern land prior to colonial era settlement of European Christians. For several centuries these Muslims had traded with coastal Aboriginal peoples of the north. The common misconception among Australian non-Muslims that Islam is new to Australia is due mostly to knowledge of Islam and Muslims limited only to the recent migratory waves . . . .<sup>9</sup>

It is no longer the province of Muslim organisations to remind us of these

histories, but several of them still do. Some drew on their own historians to rework the history of Islam in their state, such as the Islamic Centre in Hobart, which offers a brief history of 'Muslims in Tasmania before 1820', and the Perth-based AussieMuslims.NET which makes reference to the Malay pearl divers in that state. The Islamic Council Victoria published a history of Muslims in Australia by Bilal Cleland of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils in 2003, which forms the basis for the comprehensive historical treatment in the Islam Australia network and the Islamic Council of NSW.<sup>10</sup> In 2007 Almir Colan premiered his documentary 'Muslims in Australia since the 1600s', accompanied by a website.<sup>11</sup> Queensland has its own Queensland Muslim Historical Society since 2008, and in May 2010 an Islamic Museum of Australia was initiated in Melbourne.<sup>12</sup> Other Muslim scholars who have published on the Muslim history in Australia include Akbarzadeh and Saeed, G. Korvin, Hanifa Deen, and Nahid Kabir.<sup>13</sup>

Possibly the earliest publication on Afghans in Australia was Dr David Gunn's *The Story of Lafsu Beg the Camel Driver* in 1896 (now digitized), followed by an edited collection by H. M. Musakhan on the *History of Islamism in Australia* in 1932. Another biographical treatment appeared in 1972. Camels and camel transport were the subject of George Farwell's *Land of Mirage* in 1950, H. M. Barkers *Camels and the Outback* in 1964 and Tom McKnight's *The Camel in Australia* in 1969.<sup>14</sup> Local histories of townships along the camel trails necessarily included reference to them, such as relatively recent histories of Broken Hill, Alice Springs, Beltana, Port Augusta and Oodnadatta.<sup>15</sup> This literature treats the Afghan presence as a colourful addendum to histories of outback development.

The 1980s were a decade of historical introspection with large and well-funded nationwide history projects leading up to the Bicentennial celebrations in 1988. The history profession was determined not to write 'history as usual', but to undertake a bottom-up approach, where ordinary lives mattered, and cultural diversity was celebrated. This created an impulse to write Asians back into Australian history. Early in the decade two videos on Afghan cameleers were released by SBS (1980) and Nomad Films (1982).<sup>16</sup> They were followed by three major books on Afghans in Australia (Cigler 1986, Rajkowski 1987, Stevens 1989). Ann Atkinson's volume on Asian migrants to Western Australia in the *Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians* also gave extensive treatment to the topic, as did Jan Gothard's *Asian Orientations* in 1995.<sup>17</sup>

Australian Ethnic Press published a study by Michael Cigler in 1986, and in the following year appeared Pamela Rajkowski's *In the Tracks of the Camelmen*, re-published in 2005 by Seaview Press and still claiming to be 'the first history of the Afghan cameleers in Australia'.<sup>18</sup> Christine Stevens' definitive book in 1989 ended the bicentennial history attention.

Australian institutions started to become more interested in such histories after the Bicentennial, responding to new waves of migrants and emerging signs of ethnic tension. The Museum of Victoria sponsored a collection of essays on Muslims in Australia in 1992, which pointed out that one third of all Muslims in Australia were born



Fishery at Port Essington [1875].

Photo by Paul Foelsche. State Library of South Australia, 'Port Essington Collection', B. 10836.

in the country, and the Australian Government Publishing Service published a survey of Muslim settlement in Australia in 1994.<sup>19</sup>

## Muslim-Indigenous Histories

All of this literature still allowed Muslims to be seen as the 'Other' in Australia. They were simply not part of the family. Afghan relationships with indigenous people became the subject of a video produced – in restricted and unrestricted versions – by AIATSIS in 1969, and the *Journal of Aboriginal History* returned to this theme with a groundbreaking special issue in 1981 which canvassed the whole range of Aboriginal-Asian contact.<sup>20</sup> This inspired my *Mixed Relations* work (2003, 2005, 2006) which in turn spawned work by others including Peta Stephenson and Marcia Langton. Rajkowski's *Linden Girl* (1995) also treated this theme, as had earlier historical novelists of the north like Xavier Herbert and Ion Idriess. Aboriginal families in the far north also have strong connections with Muslim Malays from the pearling days, so that northern townships preserved a palpable sense of poly-ethnicity well before the national agenda turned to multiculturalism. Places like Wyndham in the Kimberley have always had halal butchers, and at Thursday Island there was a vibrant Muslim community of Australian-born coloured, white and indigenous people long before street rap made it cool to be Muslim. A Torres Strait Islander woman whose grandfather was Malay told me in the early 1990s that Islam must be considered as the second most important religion in the Torres Strait. The Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data show that between 1996 and 2006 the number of indigenous Muslims almost doubled.<sup>21</sup>



There are many reasons for people to embrace faith: personal, social, spiritual. For indigenous people becoming Muslim can be an expression of protest against their histories of institutionalisation on Christian missions, removal from their families, and separation of families, as Muslim fathers of Aboriginal children were forcibly repatriated at the end of their work contracts. They might try to reconnect with the lifeworlds and convictions of their ancestors, the reason given by Saleh Ahwang in Mackay.<sup>22</sup> New converts do not necessarily embrace a sanctioned version of Islam and local adaptations of faith emerge as a result. Local communities may prefer to be more relaxed on consumption of alcohol, daily prayers, and women's dress than orthodox Muslim communities. The Thursday Island Muslim community, for example, prefers to be more relaxed about daily disciplines in tune with island life.

But once the reins of orthodoxy are lifted, there is also room for toxic home brews. A local reinvention of Islam, severed from the Muslim tradition of literacy and scholarship, can have great street appeal. Rap culture projects a tough, cool and streetwise image for Muslim youth, and role models like rugby league legend come champion boxer Anthony Mundine, who converted to Islam in 1999, project an attractive image for indigenous youths who try to deal with the anger of marginalisation and community dysfunction,



The Burke and Wills expedition: the first day's order of march [20 August 1860]. Pencil, watercolor and wash by William Strutt, 1862, H5107.

much like the volatile young Arabs of suburban Paris. In prisons indigenous young men have come into contact with Arab gang members, described as ‘Koorimuslim’, a persona strikingly sympathetic to Rocky Davies (Shaheed Malik):

within N.S.W. correctional facilities Aboriginal and Arab inmates developed an alliance of political expedience, an alliance centered around power derived from the drug trade. Subsequently many Aboriginal inmates have inadvertently come into contact with Islam . . . [conversion to Islam] instilled in them an Islamic based social perspective that was conducive to the upliftment of the Aboriginal community. This social perspective was in contravention to the Arab culturalist expression that the Aboriginal inmates were previously predominantly exposed to in prison. The Arab culturalist prison expression being tolerant of terrorism, drug dealing, prostitution and racism as justifiable means to an end.

‘Koorimuslim’ here attempts to photoshop a toxic set of ideas that demonises young Arabs and refers to drug trading as political expedience. By this time conversions to Islam among indigenous prison inmates had begun to attract concern. In November 2005 the *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote that ‘Hard Men Turn to Islam to Cope with Jail’ and in August 2006 the *Australian* reported ‘Radicals brainwashing Aborigines in prison’.<sup>23</sup> The report included comment from Rocky Davis who claimed that he had

been involved in the conversion of 42 indigenous men to Islam during his 14 years in Goulburn prison. 'Koorimuslim' used the Muslim Village network to marshal support to set up a 'Redfern Aboriginal Dawah Project' requesting contributions to support Rocky Davis and his wife.<sup>24</sup>

On the ABC's Religion Report in March 2006, Davis explained the particular appeal of Islam for indigenous people:

it condemned drugs, alcohol, invasion, land theft, mass murder and all the things that Christian colonisation meant to me as an Aboriginal person.

He was planning to visit indigenous communities that had Afghan histories, in order to recruit further converts as a one-man drug rehabilitation and welfare initiative, with the idea of mobilising the Muslim genealogies of indigenous people:

I have Muslim ancestors just like a lot of Aboriginal people do. Whether they know about it or whether they want to accept it, but from Moree a group of unbelievable Muslims came from India, and one of them was named Muhammad Ali, not the fighter, and his brothers Ibrahim Ali and a lot of Aboriginal people according to an Aboriginal story called Noeleen Briggs, because Aunty Noeleen wrote a book about it and she said the majority of the Camorro people from Moree and Boggabilla and Walgett, they're all descendent, or the majority are descendent of Muslims.

In an attempt to indigenize Islam, Davis distances himself from scholarship and uses Islam as a counterpoint to Christian colonization, riding roughshod over historical truths:

Christianity is a culture of invasion, and if anyone can tell me that it's not, I need people to openly debate whether it be on live TV or in front of an audience, that Christianity was used as a weapon to invade all the world's indigenous peoples, Canadian Indians will tell you, Maoris will tell you, Cook Island[er]s will tell you, Africans will tell you, the English used Christianity to invade and conquer and enslave. Christianity [ie, Christians] were the founders of slavery. Not Islam. And I was never invaded by a Muslim country. Everywhere the Christians went, they plundered and they robbed and they murdered and they enslaved, and they raped. Christianity is a religion of child molestation. In terms of actual religious theology, Christianity is an unbelievable evil.<sup>25</sup>

In this home-brew historical discourse Aboriginal society is suffused with drug addiction, Arab culture is racist ('culturalist'), and Christianity is evil. Essentially the same Muslim/Indigenous histories that are used by Australian institutions to promulgate social harmony, here serve to undermine that tolerance with words of anger. The 'Redfern Aboriginal Dawah Project' never came to fruition.

Anthony Mundine, in contrast, speaks about his faith in theological rather than political terms in a credible language of healing:

Islam's given me a new perspective on the hereafter and what life is about. It's black and white and pure. We've got to ask the question, 'Where are we going and why are we here?' If you have a faith and belief in God there'd be less suicide, stress and sickness. You have a feeling and a purpose, and if you will take one step He will take two steps to you. Islam is my life, it's helped every aspect of it. Every time you see my life, my sporting successes, know that Allah is the greatest.<sup>26</sup>

Needless to say, indigenous Muslims are not uniformly comfortable with a discourse of anger and hate, and some dare to speak out against it. Young Chinese-Aboriginal Eugenia Flynn, from the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, finds the whole fascination with ‘saving’ Aboriginal people through conversion, a dangerous track to go down.<sup>27</sup> She converted to Islam after 9/11, when anger against Muslims reached a high point in Australia, but resists the idea that Islam appeals to indigenous people primarily because of a shared history of marginalisation. She observes certain natural ‘sympathies’ between the two world views. According to a *Sydney Morning Herald* article

Flynn sees “lots of similarities” between Aboriginal culture and Islam, including Islam’s emphasis on modesty and the segregation of men and women. “I think a lot of people think indigenous spirituality is based around animism [animism] but in Aboriginal culture there is a creator god, and the way I express my spirituality is through Islam. I don’t see the two as mutually exclusive. For me I choose Aboriginality as my culture and Islam as my faith.”<sup>28</sup>

Flynn warns against simplistic assumptions that Muslims have an

inherent bond with black people in this country that white people don’t. For example, some refer to the historical connection i.e. the peaceful encounter with Indonesians in the North and have a certain smugness about it and what that might indicate about white people.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, the extent of anti-Muslim sentiment among Aborigines is not substantially different than among non-Aborigines in Australia according to a study by Dunn and others.<sup>30</sup> Onnudottir et al. observe that

while some [Indigenous Australians] might be the descendants of unions between Aboriginal women and “Makassar” seamen or Afghan cameleers, the social, cultural and community contexts of Muslim life simply do not exist for the majority.<sup>31</sup>

It is certainly problematic to marshal the history of Muslim-Aboriginal family formation to argue that indigenous people have a predilection for Muslims or the Muslim faith, or that it is ‘less harmful’ for them than Christianity. What can be said, however, is that there is a significant history of positive interactions. One of the decisive factors they traditionally had in common was the practice of polygamy which allowed males to have several legitimate wives, including in different countries.<sup>32</sup>

## **Reflections of Allah in North-east Arnhem Land**

Macassan trepang fishers have made annual visits to north-east Arnhem Land for at least 150 years, spending from December to April on the north Australia coastline, until South Australian customs effectively outlawed their visits in 1906. This regular contact with the northern shores of Australia emerged after Makassar became the regional centre of a growing south Chinese trade in trepang, a sea-cucumber or holothurian also called bêche-de-mer. According to current knowledge, and following C. C. Macknight, the trepang trade to the north coast reached the Kimberley in the 1750s, and Arnhem Land in 1780. It was in full swing around 1800, always just a few paces ahead of the British assault on the southern part of the continent.





Anthony Mundine, champion footballer, boxer and noted convert to Islam.  
[http://www.stillsgroup.com/data/photos/72\\_1r221535670.jpg](http://www.stillsgroup.com/data/photos/72_1r221535670.jpg).

Islam, having reached the Malay archipelago remarkably early in the seventh century, progressed slowly and gradually, but gained pace in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the Portuguese competed for social dominance in the region. McIntosh notes that, like elsewhere on the globe, religious conversion was an important goal for Muslim traders in the commercial colonisation of the archipelago. The kingdom of Gowa, with Makassar as its centre, formally embraced Islam in 1603-05, and by the end of that century there was little obvious trace of an indigenous creed. The fishermen who visited north Australia in the 18th and 19th century were therefore predominantly Muslim.<sup>33</sup> The 'outward signs of conversion' were circumcision and the adoption of Arabic names (such as Using/Hussein).

As a result of this long-standing contact, Yolŋu languages are tinted with Makasar inflections much like English is inflected with French, and in both cases this is more obvious to the non-native speaker who is familiar with the foreign language. The extent of the suffusion of Muslim elements into the traditional Yolŋu culture of north-east Arnhem Land has been subject to some speculation. Even before the British colonisation of the Australian continent, the British East Indies Company hydrographer Alexander Dalrymple reported in 1762 that the Aborigines of New Holland visited by the trepang

fleets were 'Mahometans'. Macknight thinks this impression may have arisen from the practice of circumcision among Yolngu, and it was evidently an over-statement. But there is a remnant vocabulary in Yolngu rituals that is derived from Muslim prayer, and it has long been observed that their most important religious ceremonies are strongly inflected with Macassan influences. Makasar was once a lingua franca to interact with outsiders, and continues to be used by ceremonial leaders, much like the Catholic Church held on to Latin longer than other learned circles, and a familiarity with that foreign language continues to be a mark of prestige and learning. With the arrival of Christian missions in the mid-twentieth century the Muslim allusions in Yolngu mythology were downplayed and often went unexplained. This may be why the Macassan connections appear so difficult to tease out of recorded statements. Ian McIntosh argues that a strategic decision was taken by Yolngu elders under pressure of rapid changes in the mid-century to downplay some aspects of their cosmology (turning them inside) and allow others to be publicised (turning them outside).<sup>34</sup> We appear to be left with shreds of evidence.

The Manikay song cycle genre of Yolngu songs shows traces of classical Arabic religious music, according to ethnomusicologist Peter Toner. Yolngu singers improvise with sacred texts, and icons of Macassan contact like ship, anchor, sword and flag are among the important symbols.<sup>35</sup> According to descriptions by Yolngu elders, prayer-men (or imams) accompanied the Macassan trepang fleets. These were the ceremonial leaders, a role referred to as 'sick man' (*buwagerul*) in Yoljumattha. One of them is still remembered by name as Deingaru (possibly Daeng Garro), also known as Baleidjaka. (It is a feature of many contact stories that the protagonist has both a Macassan and a Yolngu name, expressing relatedness and family connections to both sides.) David Burrumarra remembered in the 1980s with amazing detail how this imam or sick-man would climb to the top of the mast to chant when the fleet departed, and pray at sunset, resounding an 'ama!' towards the setting sun, then bow his head to the ground and exclaim 'walata'walata!'<sup>36</sup>

Walitha'walitha is also the name of the creation spirit, sometimes translated as 'the most high God' or Allah. We need to keep in mind that the people who recorded these stories did not speak Arabic or Malay or Makasar, and did not always distinguish between these different languages embedded in accounts rendered in Yoljumattha or Kriol, so we are faced with phonetic approximations. The Walitha'walitha creation spirit belongs to the Wuramu song cycle of north-east Arnhem Land, a mourning ritual which Yolngu say they 'share with Macassans'. In this ceremony the words 'Oooo-a-hal-la', and 'A-ha-la', are exclaimed, and which contains appeals to the god in the heavens. These were transcribed as: 'si-li-la-mo-ha-mo, ha-mo-sil-li-li', and 'ra-bin-a-la la-ha-ma-hama' and ending with 'Se-ri ma-kas-si' (terima kasih means thank you in Bahasa).<sup>37</sup>

The carved Wuramu figures usually depict a figure with a *songkok* (a Malay adaptation of the fez), sometimes this cap is quite elongated showing an earlier fashion. Historically this song cycle derives from an incident of a ritual performed by Macassans at Cape Wilberforce, reportedly for the burial of a group of Aborigines. However, its

meaning has been reworked to blend Yolŋu beliefs and Macassan rituals, and there are multiple layers of meaning attached to the Wuramu figure, so that each explanation is only partial. The ritual extends over several days containing imagery reminiscent of exchanges with Macassans, such as a flag dance, a knife dance, a boxing dance, a smoking dance, an alcohol dance (dancers feigning to be intoxicated try to wrestle and dance at the same time), a *lunggurrma* dance (which is the north-east monsoon wind associated with the arrival of the trepang fleets) as well as story-telling elements brought back by Yolŋu who had spent time in Makassar, such as reminiscences of rice paddies, ship building and lily-ponds.<sup>38</sup>

McIntosh emphasizes that Yolŋu never embraced Islam as a faith, rather, they incorporated elements of what they observed from their Indonesian visitors into their own cosmology. However, it is tempting to speculate where this development might have led theologically, had not the British begun to conquer the same territory at the turn of the nineteenth century, ousted the Muslim visitors, and introduced Christian missions. Evicting the Macassan trepang fleets in 1906 was a last ditch attempt to claim a thriving trading opportunity with China for the European colonisers. It was just a few years before the Commonwealth took over the Northern Territory in 1911, after the anticipation of riches in the untapped north had dissipated into a string of disappointments. The competing claims are reflected in a duality of names for many sites: Ashmore Reef is Pulau Pasir for Indonesians, Scott Reef is Pulau Datu, Cartier Reef is Pulau Baru (new island). In the Yolŋu territories, apart from indigenous names for places there is Lembana Panrea (tradesmen's bay) for Melville Bay, Tarrusanga for Bowen Strait, Lemba Moutiaria (shell bay) for Port Essington, and Lemba Binangaja for Trepang Bay. In some cases the Yolŋu even accepted Macassan terms for sites, such as Gunyangarra for Ski Beach at Yirrkala, which is thought to derive from Kodinggareng, the name of an Indonesian island which houses a Sama Bajo settlement.<sup>39</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century there were Yolŋu people who were circumcised, polygamous, well-travelled, enmeshed in transnational trade and family relationships, spoke Makassan and carried Makassan names (such as a prefix derived from Daeng). The Yolŋu had made room for Muslim ceremony in their own rituals and appear to have been on a path of natural, unforced conversion, when the Christian missions arrived.

Since the mid-1980s, just as the last eye-witnesses were passing, the Macassan contact stories have undergone a revival, and mutual visits have recommenced. This is precisely what happened with the Anzac legend in white Australia ten years later, when with the passing of the World War I diggers the Anzac legend shifted from being a story owned and enacted by old men to being a story about real places ready to be explored by a younger generation who were starting to travel overseas, and Turkish officials were getting invited to the Australian ceremonies.

## Transnational History as Empowerment

A revival of the Yolŋu-Macassan contact history emerged in the 1980s, in the wake of the 1976 Northern Territory Land Rights Act which led the way in Australia to a national recognition of indigenous rights over country and the statutory recognition of land councils. A strong sense of ownership emerged among indigenous people in the Northern Territory, over their country, over their language, over their histories. The Milingimbi Literature Centre recorded and published stories in Yolŋumatha, among them stories of Macassan contact.<sup>40</sup> In 1985 the first Barunga festival took place facilitating an exchange of traditions and stories, art and culture, and in 1986 the highly respected Yolŋu elder Wandjuk Marika recorded the story of Djaladjari, a Yolŋu man who had been to Makassar several times, for a group of young Yolŋu students at Batchelor college planning to visit Makassar.

An 1981 issue of the *Journal of Aboriginal History* contained two important essays on the Macassan influence in the Yolŋu languages, reflecting linguistic work then being undertaken. The last phase of Macassan/Yolŋu contact was still accessible to oral history when Campbell Macknight and Peter Spillett were conducting fieldwork in the 1960s and 1970s. Macknight, working under the supervision of the now legendary Professor John Mulvaney, began to rediscover some of the names of Indonesian captains in the customs records, and matched them with names remembered in various stories told by Yolŋu. He made contact with the family of Husein Daeng Rangka in Makassar, who was the last of the captains who came to Australia, and whose career is practically reflected in the Australian customs records. This figure and members of his family appear in a range of Yolŋu stories, though with different spellings, sometimes difficult to recognise. The Arabic name Husein becomes Using or Oesing in Indonesian. The 'Daeng' in his name devolves from an old honorific title from the ancient kingdom of Gowa on Sulawesi and most of the prominent figures in Makassar carried this title in their name. It was also devolved to some of their Aboriginal relatives and trade partners in Australia where it appears as the prefix 'Dayn' in Yolŋu names. Husein Dg. Rangka<sup>41</sup> had at least two Aboriginal wives. He is also reported to have abducted a wife of Ganimbirngu who was the leader at Melville Bay (Lembana Panrea in Yolŋu territory). The Macassans referred to the latter as the rajah of Melville Bay, and Husein Dg. Rangka bestowed on him the name of Dayngmangu. This was the father of David Burrumarra, informant for most of the researchers conducting fieldwork until the 1980s. The family connections are closely woven.

Peter Spillett from the Northern Territory Museum instigated a Bicentennial project to reconstruct a traditionally crafted *padewakang perahu*, the type of boat used in the trepang trade, to sail once more from Makassar to 'Marege', the top end of Australia. He accompanied the Batchelor college students on a visit to Makassar in 1986 (at which time it was called Ujung Pandang). They were amazed at the similarity in language, expressions and names they encountered. They felt as if old legends were coming alive

in front of them, to see the characteristic sails, men wearing the *songkok* caps, all the iconography from the paintings at home: these Mangatharra<sup>42</sup> of the old stories, they really existed! It was only a few years since the last of the known travellers to Australia had died in 1978, Mangnellai Dg. Maro. As a boy of about 10 he had accompanied his father Using Dg. Rangka to Australia.

The *Hati Marege* (Heart of Marege) Bicentennial project caused a flurry of negative media reportage because the Northern Land Council had objected to the flying of the Bicentennial flag on the *perahu* (Indonesian boat), arguing that this history had nothing whatsoever to do with the Bicentennial of the arrival of the British anywhere in Australia. The Indonesian and Australian diplomats involved were faced with the possibility of a hostile reception or a cancelled event. It became a tussle about who owns this history. The *Hati Marege* sailed into Yirrkala precisely 200 years after the First Fleet reached Botany Bay (16 January 1988), captained by Mansjur Muhayang, a great-grandson of Husein Dg. Rangka. He handed over a bag of rice like olden times, and was greeted by Matjuwi Burrawanga from Galinwin'ku at Elcho Island as a family member. This Bicentennial project was understood as a family reunion, and was surely the single most successful bicentennial project: the Yolŋu people broke the isolation that had severed them from friends and relations in 1906.

This project and the personal encounters it entailed brought about an immense reinvigoration of interest in the Macassan connection among Yolŋu and neighbouring Aboriginal people and set off a series of mutual visits. A Maningrida dance troupe led by artist John Bulunbulun took the Marayarr Murrkundja – a *rom* ceremony lasting three nights – to Sulawesi in 1993, and the village news-trucks announced with blaring loudspeakers the arrival of the '*orang aborijin dari Australia utara*'.<sup>43</sup> On the Indonesian side there was also much amazement at the rekindling of contact. Peter Spillett, the organiser of the Bicentennial project, was given the honorific name Daeng Makulle (Mister Capability).<sup>44</sup> Bulunbulun spotted an old ceramic storage pot in one of the shops exactly the shape that he had always been including in his paintings, but he had never actually seen one. He brought it home and it became one of the first items in the Djomi museum that opened in 1996 at Maningrida.

The next big collaborative project was a trepang opera scripted by theatre director Andrish Saint-Clare. In 1994 he showed films of Yolŋu dances in Makassar to arouse interest, and in 1996 he brought Mansjur Muhayang (referred to as Yotjing, or Otjing, as the descendant of Husein Dg. Rangka) to Elcho Island, to perform in the trepang opera. The following year the opera was staged in Makassar, on the foundation day of the city of Makassar (Hari Jadi Gowa) in front of a 9,000-strong audience. It was now a performance team consisting of six actors and musicians from Sulawesi and ten artists from Galinwin'ku, performing 'the story of Matjuwi and Otjing who are brothers through the marriage of their grandparents'. Two years later the opera was performed at the Festival of Darwin (16-19 September 1999), and the ABC recorded it for video release in 2000. For the Centenary of Federation the opera came to Federation Square in

Melbourne in 2001. From the margins of history it was moving to the central celebrations of the nation.

At the opening of the 2000 Sydney Olympics, too, the long history of Macassan contact was mentioned by Ernie Dingo, though he claimed a wildly exaggerated history for it, perhaps following the lyrics of the Sunrize Band from Maningrida whose 1993 title '*Lembana Mani Mani*' suggests a 20,000 year history of contact. The Wirrnnga band from Milingimbi produced '*My Sweet Takirrina*' in commemoration of the Bicentennial project in 1990, and in 1998 the Yothu Yindi foundation commenced the Garma festival at which the Macassan history was always represented. Yothu Yindi released their Garma album in 2000 containing the title '*Macassan Crew*'.

In dance, song and also in paintings the Macassan history underwent a revival. In 1993 Bulunbulun was starting to collaborate with painter Zhou Xiaoping from Hebei, China, who had become artist in residence at Maningrida. Their collaboration was to result eventually in a Chinese book by Xiaoping and exhibitions in Beijing and Melbourne in 2011.<sup>45</sup> Bulunbulun's series of 25 paintings reflecting Macassan stories in the Yirrtitja song cycle received national acclaim, one of them hangs in Darwin airport. He revealed the clan totem Lunggurrma (north wind) as a symbol of the seasonal arrival of the Macassans.

Yolŋumatha does not make a distinction between British and Indonesian foreigners, referring to both as 'balanda' (the Makasar form of the Indonesian word for foreigners, or Hollanders, 'orang belanda'). But Yolŋu do distinguish between the effects of Macassan contact and British colonisation. There are ample indications of violent conflict in their myths and in the historical record, but the Macassan contact is now so long ago that there are no eye-witnesses left and it has become remembered as a period of trade and exchange without compulsion, in contradistinction to the British colonisation. The telling of the Macassan stories has become an act of resistance. It refuses to allow a government decision to sever the link to Macassar, Timor and Sama Bajo places. It also asserts that Yolŋu have long engaged in contact with outsiders without surrender or colonisation. In 1998 a group of Croker Island people lent on this history to support a sea claim, arguing that the Macassans had obtained prior permission for using the seas controlled by Yolŋu, and that they negotiated payments in kind. The judge was not convinced.<sup>46</sup>

However, the Australian government has also seen some mileage in the mixed histories of the north. In 2008 the Department of Foreign Affairs launched its IN2OZ program of cultural exchange with Indonesia, and sent among its cultural ambassadors to Indonesia two indigenous women who have Asian ancestry: *Australian Idol* star Jessica Mauboy, Darwin daughter of an indigenous mother and a Timorese father, and novelist Alexis Wright from Mornington Island/Gulf of Carpentaria/Chinese family roots. Such figures personify the polyethnic past in Australia where Asians and Muslims are not 'outsiders'.

That Australian history does not start in 1788 with the arrival of the British has never been news to historians, but it seemed less relevant until this century. It was, in the words of James Belich, convenient to forget those bits that did not extend British history, and therefore, while they were not entirely forgotten, they were just ‘not remembered very hard’.<sup>47</sup> Gradually these histories have become useful, so the time was right for remembering the long history of Muslims in Australia. Yolngu people draw cultural pride from their transnational history, Aboriginal organisations deploy their history of trade to mount legal arguments about native title, Muslim organisations point to their long anchor in the historical presence in Australia, and diplomatic circles support cultural exchange and the celebration of shared histories with Australia for geostrategic reasons. As a result Australian history has been extended in the popular imagination to become just a little more transnational.



Sheikh Fehmi al Imam addressing the faithful, Preston Mosque, 1993.

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