



NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

Strangers on the Shore

Early coastal contacts in Australia

Edited by Peter Veth, Peter Sutton and Margo Neale

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First published 2008 by
National Museum of Australia Press
GPO Box 1901
Canberra ACT 2601
Phone +61 2 6208 5340
Fax +61 2 6208 5148
www.nma.gov.au

National Library of Australia cataloguing-in-publication data

Strangers on the shore : early coastal contacts in Australia
editors, Peter Veth; Peter Sutton; Margo Neale
Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2008
ISBN: 9781876944636

Subjects:

First contact of aboriginal peoples with Westerners – Australia
Aboriginal Australians – First contact with Europeans
Aboriginal Australians – History
Aboriginal Australians – Social conditions – History
Cultural relations
Intercultural communication
Acculturation – Australia.

303.482

Publisher's editors: Raylee Singh, Julie Simpkin
Design and typesetting: Po Sung
Print: Nexus Print Solutions

Cover image: detail of *Bennalong Time*, 2002, by Adam Hill. Casula Powerhouse and Liverpool Regional Museum

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also like to thank Peter Veth, Steve Kinnane, Rodney Harrison, Robert Cribb, Denis Shephard, Daina Harvey and Amanda Zervos who assiduously served on the Steering Committee. Peter Veth deserves special mention for his commitment to the project, the lead he gave in arranging the program of speakers and undertaking the lead editing of this volume. Finally, I would commend National Museum of Australia Press for agreeing to publish this groundbreaking work.

Rupert Gerritsen

Chair

Strangers on the Shore Conference Planning Group

1. Introduction and themes

PETER SUTTON

University of Adelaide and University College London

PETER VETH

The Australian National University

Europeans were not the first strangers to visit the shores of what is now Australia, but they were the first to leave a record and a chart of where they did so. These were Dutch-speaking sailors and traders who sailed to Cape York Peninsula under Willem Janszoon in 1606 from their base at Batavia, now known as Jakarta in modern Indonesia. This is the date that acted as a catalyst for the conference *Strangers on the Shore* held at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra in 2006, on the 400th anniversary of this important if ambivalent moment in history. This book contains papers from that conference as well as some that have been written specially.

The conference aimed to provide a series of reflections on the dynamics of first contact between outsiders and First Australians. Our first objective was to include an Indigenous storyline into the 400-year commemoration. It seemed equally important to disentangle homogenised versions of first contact which either embraced glorified versions of European discovery and conquering of a naïve land populated by acquiescent peoples or — as equally fallacious — narratives of unrelenting resistance to intruders by armed denizens mustered on beachheads. As the Berkeley-based anthropologist Kent Lightfoot (2005:234) recently noted on the legacy of colonial encounters on the California frontiers:

California offers a tremendous opportunity for examining how native entanglements with missionary and mercantile colonies produced a *diverse range* of multicultural experiences that reverberate among Indian populations to this day. [emphasis ours]

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9. Harvesting the memory

Open beaches in Makassar and Arnhem Land

CAMPBELL MACKNIGHT

The Australian National University

In twenty-first century Australia, the story of the Makassar-based trepang industry along the Arnhem Land and the Kimberley coasts during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries should come as no surprise. Trepang (sea slugs or *bêche-de-mer*) were gathered, processed and sold for eventual consumption as an expensive ingredient in Chinese cuisine. The existence of the industry has long been known, even with recourse only to English-language sources. In 1769, Alexander Dalrymple published the information that traders from South Sulawesi, whom he called generically Bugis, had 'penetrated to New-Holland on the south', and he notes that they 'describe new Holland to yield gold, and the natives, who are Mahometans, to be well inclined to commerce' (Dalrymple 1769:83, 92). A Dalrymple manuscript, with essentially the same information and dated to 1763, is held in the British Library (Ian Caldwell, pers. comm.). In 1792 Thomas Forrest was rather better informed, probably most significantly by the captain of a local trading vessel at Kedah whom he had met 10 years before. He still refers to the Bugis and gold, but specifically mentions the trepang industry, thinks the Gulf of Carpentaria is the most likely area for the activity, makes the link with the annual Chinese junk exporting the trepang from Makassar and, by the time of publication, can even hazard a guess that there will be contact with the newly established colony of New South Wales (Forrest 1792:83). This contact came to pass, and in the early nineteenth century Flinders and Baudin provided accounts from direct observation. They were followed by many others throughout the century. Macknight (1976) provides a detailed discussion of these sources relating to the conduct of the industry itself.

This well-defined industry, carried on by praus from Makassar and based on the collection and processing of trepang (even if other products played a minor role), came to an end when the last prau returned from the Arnhem Land coast in early 1907. The situation on the

Kimberley coast has always been more complex, both in regard to the products collected and the home ports of the vessels involved. There have also been varied and sporadic visits to this coast throughout the twentieth century. Crawford (2001) and Morwood and Hobbs (1997) are recent treatments of the Western Australian material. This chapter, however, is concerned solely with the Makassar-based industry in Arnhem Land and immediately adjacent areas — for, of course, trepang continues to be collected and consumed in many parts of the world.

Most nineteenth-century observers of the industry in Arnhem Land noticed the interaction between the trepangers and local Aboriginal groups, though their accounts of the consequences of this usually reflect their own interests and concerns. Then, in the 1920s, less than 20 years after the end of the industry, various scholarly fieldworkers began to trace the effects, as they observed them in the field, of contact with the trepangers in the several Aboriginal societies involved. Tindale, Jennison and Warner were the first, and in the 1940s and 1950s they were followed by others, notably Ronald and Catherine Berndt, Worsley, Rose, Thomson, McCarthy and Mountford. Cense and Heeren provided perceptive comments on these accounts from their knowledge of the trepangers' background. When, in the early 1960s, Mulvaney began to interest himself in the contact, it was initially with the aim of tracing change in the Aboriginal past (Mulvaney 1966). Macknight (1972) exhaustively reviews the literature on this question of the interaction between the trepangers and Aboriginal people, and the effects of the interaction on both sides, as these matters were understood at that time.

Since the 1970s, the subject of the industry itself and more particularly the effects of the trepangers on Aboriginal societies and cultures have continued to attract attention from many sides. Various matters have been studied in detail, and some refinements introduced to previous understanding. Macknight (1986) surveys work done up to the mid-1980s, but more has been done since. For example, Pelras (2000) has explored the patron-client relationship in South Sulawesi societies that is hinted at in many other sources on the industry. Similarly, we can assume that Ammarell's account (1999) of navigational knowledge and practice in a closely comparable context gives us a good idea of the skills of prau captains coming to Arnhem Land. There has been much research on the details of the praus themselves, especially in relation to the design and construction of the replica, *Hati Marege*. Rock art pictures of praus have even provided useful information (Burningham 1987, 1988, 1994, 2000).

More thorough study and publication of previously known sources have yielded fresh details, such as the mention of a trepanging captain with leprosy in Collet Barker's journal from 1829 (Mulvaney & Green 1992:159). Barker also confirms many Makasar placenames for the Australian coast. In a 1839 document from the Port Essington settlement, there is also the earliest unequivocal reference to Aboriginal people themselves manufacturing dug-out canoes (Cameron 1999:55). I am now persuaded that a photograph, taken by Paul Foelsche at the settlement site in Port Essington on 26 March 1875, shows 'Malays' from Makassar who

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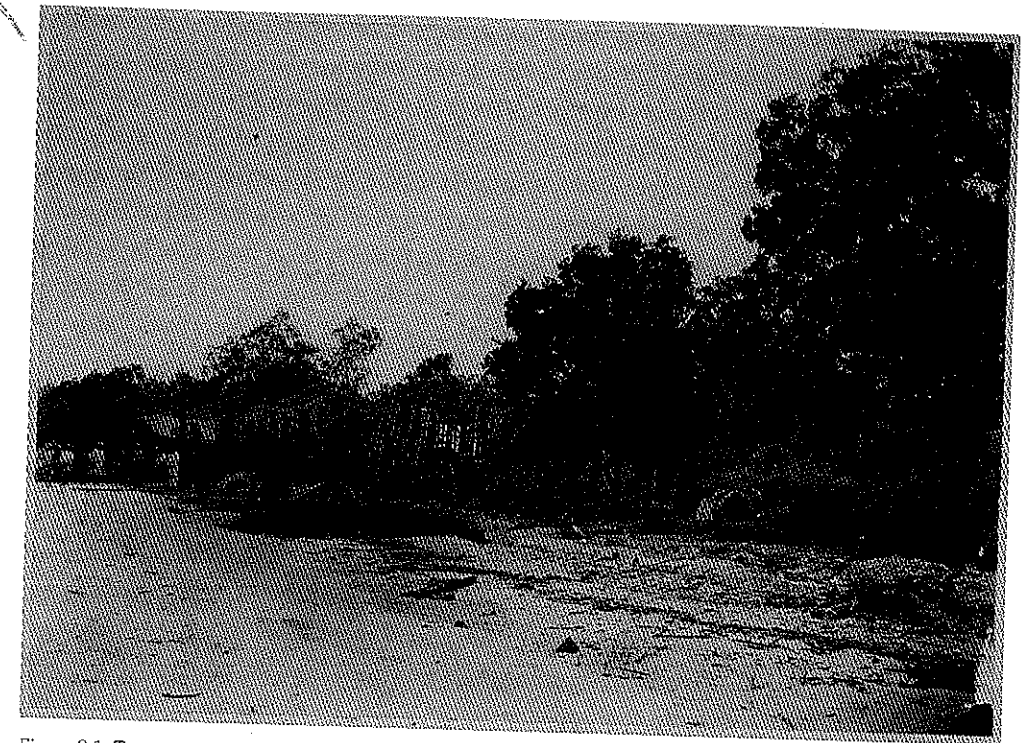


Figure 9.1. Trepangers from Makassar visiting Sinclair and Robinson's camp in Port Essington, Northern Territory, on 26 March 1875. Photograph by Paul Foelsche. State Library of South Australia

had come to visit Sinclair and Robinson's trepanging operation there (Figure 9.1). Even with expert advice from these visitors, the business collapsed (Macknight 1976:102, 1990:251; *Northern Territory Times*, 24 April 1875).

The archaeological evidence of the industry continues to attract attention. As discussed below, Annie Clarke has worked on Groote Eylandt, as well as later in Blue Mud Bay, and Scott Mitchell on the Cobourg Peninsula. Stray artefacts occasionally turn up, but it is often difficult to show that they relate to the visits of trepangers from Makassar. A welcome development has been the interest in conserving sites, especially the stone picture site near Yirrkala and possibly some preparation sites. Richard Baker's unpublished survey in the Sir Edward Pellew Group of islands significantly extended the range of known sites. In relation to the actual operation of the industry, however, this new archaeological evidence has consistently confirmed the earlier picture.

Research with Aboriginal communities has, by contrast, filled out understanding of the effects of contact with the trepangers in important ways. Walker and Zorc (1981) offer a thorough survey of language borrowing in one area and demonstrate the value of systematic work.

Evans (1992, 1997) takes this up more broadly and suggests that some words were borrowed earlier than others. An intriguing, if tragic, case is the likely derivation from a trepanger ancestor of the hereditary Machado-Joseph disease in four families on Groote Eylandt (Burt et al. 1993). No one has done more than the late Peter Spillett to enliven the memory of the contact between Aboriginal groups and trepangers, especially through his work in tracing family connections at both ends. His papers and many unpublished reports will continue to provide useful data. Building in part on the basis laid by Spillett, there have now been many visits in both directions, some of which are discussed further below. The personal impact of such visiting is evident in Michael Cooke's account (1987) of taking 10 students from Batchelor College to Makassar in 1986.

Four new insights are of major significance; the first two relate to the industry itself and the others to its effect in Australia. The most important is new confidence about when the industry began. Knaap and Sutherland's study of the extraordinarily detailed trade data for Makassar in the eighteenth century makes it clear that, in their words (2004:101), in the 1720s 'the trepang trade in Makassar was still in its infancy'. By 1754, we hear that the Australian coast was 'made now and then from Timor and Makassar, but produces so far [as] we know nothing but trepang ... and wax' (Macknight 1976:95, following Leupe 1868:206-7). The first trepanging voyages to Australia must lie somewhere between those dates. As we have seen above, Dalrymple independently confirms knowledge of the Australian coast among South Sulawesi seamen less than a decade after the latter date. It is not knowledge of the coast that matters, however, and one can show that a good outline of the Australian coast had been available to indigenous authorities in Makassar since the 1650s (Keuning 1935). The point on which Knaap and Sutherland's work is so precise and helpful is that it gives the earliest date for any significant trepanging in the whole area of eastern Indonesia. Any claim for trepanging in Australian waters before 1720, at the very earliest, is now unsustainable, though this is a matter to which we will return below.

As Macknight (1986:69-70) explains, the eighteenth-century sources do not give a reliable indication of the ultimate source of the trepang being brought to Makassar for sale. It is the steady growth in the trepang trade, which by the 1780s had become substantial, that, together with the comments already mentioned, suggests the Australian coast. As Knaap and Sutherland (2004:101) observe, 'it seems as if in the course of the century it came necessary to seek trepang in ever more distant fishing grounds'. It is worth noting, however, that, among the eighteenth-century comments, only Forrest suggests the Arnhem Land coast and his information is late and not based on direct observation. Given that the 1754 comment arose from a report by the Dutch representative in Kupang, one could suggest that it is more likely to refer to contact with the Kimberley coast than further east. The incident that gave rise to the comment was not contact with 'the large sand-plate beyond Rotti', but rather the coast further south (Macknight

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1976:95). This distinction is noted by Flinders in his account of the information he picked up at Kupang in April 1803. He says first that the 'natives of Macassar had been long accustomed to fish for the trepang among the islands in the vicinity of Java, and upon a dry shoal lying to the south of Rottee'; that is, presumably, the same as the 'large sand-plate' and we know that 'long accustomed' cannot be longer than the first appearance of trepang in the Makassar market in about 1720. Flinders (1814:2:257) then goes on to say that:

about twenty years before, one of their [that is, belonging to the 'natives of Macassar'] prows was driven by the north-west monsoon to the coast of New Holland, and finding the trepang to be abundant, they afterwards returned; and had continued to fish there since that time.

It is a pity he did not specify whether by 'the coast of New Holland' he meant the Arnhem Land coast of which he had such recent experience or the Western Australian coast which he knew only from Dutch charting.

In the light of this evidence (and somewhat at variance with my earlier views), I am not now so ready to dismiss Pobasso's comment when he met Flinders in February 1803 that he was 'one of the first who came' to the Arnhem Land coast (Flinders 1814:2:231), or in Robert Brown's even more direct version, apparently written at the meeting itself, that Pobasso 'had been employed in this trade for 20 years [and] according to himself he was [the] first person sent from Macassar in this service' (quoted in Macknight 1976:162, n.19). Granted that the industry began elsewhere in eastern Indonesia early in the eighteenth century and that there was activity somewhere on the Australian coast by the middle of the century, there is no evidence from or relating to Arnhem Land and adjacent areas that would require a date earlier than about 1780; that is, we can accept Flinders' information, both from Pobasso and at Kupang, at face value. After all, Flinders does correctly record a very great deal of other information. Nor is this conclusion in significant conflict with any archaeological evidence as set out in the thorough survey by Bulbeck and Rowley (2001).

The second new insight is the context of the whole trepang industry in island south-east Asia in the expanding economic power of eighteenth-century China. This boom applied both to internal trade (Rowe 1998) and, of direct relevance here, to trade and other contacts with south-east Asia (Blussé 1999). The possibility of trade with China was in the minds of many concerned with the European settlement of Australia (Ganter 2001). While I long ago made some effort to place the trepang industry, which has always been focused on Makassar, in the context of supplying China (Macknight 1976:6-16), much new information is now available. Thus, for example, Knaap and Sutherland (2004:148, 246) show that the trepang export from Makassar to Amoy roughly doubled in both volume and value between the 1770s and the 1780s, though still making up over 70 per cent of the total value of exports to Amoy.

The annual average trepang export to Amoy in the 1780s was 6000 pikuls, worth 147,000 rix-dollars. The demand these figures imply helps to explain the extension of the area being harvested to Arnhem Land, as suggested above.

Some rather less reliable figures suggest that the demand continued into the early nineteenth century. Flinders' information implies a catch from Arnhem Land alone of 6000 pikuls in 1803 (Flinders 1814:2:230-1). In 1824, Governor-General van der Capellen (1855:375) reports that the trepang export from Makassar to China was worth about 350,000 guilders, still about 88 per cent of the value in the 1780s. By the 1840s the trade had fallen away considerably. A newly discovered source in the Jakarta archives gives detailed information on Makassar's trade from 1840 to 1842. In 1842, for example, 43 vessels with a total capacity of 446.5 *lasten* (893 tons) brought trepang worth 31,907 guilders from Marege, but this was only 47 per cent of the value of the total trepang imported. The total trepang export worth 114,867.50 guilders was still the largest item of export, comprising nearly 15 per cent of the value of total exports, but this was worth only about 29 per cent of the figure from the 1780s (ANRI Mak. 354.3,4,5). (See also Macknight 1976 for other statistics on the industry.)

The third new insight concerns the effect of the contact between trepangers and Aboriginal groups. There is now no serious doubt that the several smallpox epidemics that affected Aboriginal Australia between the 1780s and the 1870s arose from inadvertent introduction of the infection through contacts with the Indonesian archipelago. While there is still room for debate as to the scale of death and disruption, even at a minimal estimate this must rate as the most significant and far-reaching effect of the contact (Campbell 2002).

The fourth insight, or issue, also concerns Aboriginal society; in accounting for observed changes, there has been considerable debate on the question of agency. With some very elegant archaeology, Mitchell (1994, 1995, 1996) has demonstrated changes in Aboriginal economy, technology and settlement patterns, particularly on the Cobourg Peninsula, as a consequence of the trepangers' presence. Clarke (1994, 2000) has also addressed similar issues on Groote Eylandt. While Mitchell does not address the matter of agency directly — though his detail makes it clear that he assumes Aboriginal agency — Clarke (2000:333) is explicit in her wish to assign agency to Aboriginal groups. She seeks to give due weight to 'indigenous agency in the processes of cultural change in the recent past'. It is, therefore, somewhat poignant that she insists on the possibility of an impossibly early date for the beginning of the trepang industry; a later date actually gives greater credit to Indigenous adaptability to reach the level of influence about which there is general agreement.

The question of agency arises also in Tony Swain's attempt to link the Mother cult of northern Australia with Bugis and Toraja models. It is important to appreciate the subtlety of Swain's argument (1993:181):

The annual average trepang export to Amoy in the 1780s was 6000 pikuls, worth 147,000 rix-dollars. The demand these figures imply helps to explain the extension of the area being harvested to Arnhem Land, as suggested above.

Some rather less reliable figures suggest that the demand continued into the early nineteenth century. Flinders' information implies a catch from Arnhem Land alone of 6000 pikuls in 1803 (Flinders 1814:2:230-1). In 1824, Governor-General van der Capellen (1855:375) reports that the trepang export from Makassar to China was worth about 350,000 guilders, still about 88 per cent of the value in the 1780s. By the 1840s the trade had fallen away considerably. A newly discovered source in the Jakarta archives gives detailed information on Makassar's trade from 1840 to 1842. In 1842, for example, 43 vessels with a total capacity of 446.5 *lasten* (893 tons) brought trepang worth 31,907 guilders from Marege, but this was only 47 per cent of the value of the total trepang imported. The total trepang export worth 114,867.50 guilders was still the largest item of export, comprising nearly 15 per cent of the value of total exports, but this was worth only about 29 per cent of the figure from the 1780s (ANRI Mak. 354.3,4,5). (See also Macknight 1976 for other statistics on the industry.)

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The question of agency arises also in Tony Swain's attempt to link the Mother cult of northern Australia with Bugis and Toraja models. It is important to appreciate the subtlety of Swain's argument (1993:181):

I see no evidence suggesting a wholesale adoption of the rituals of Sulawesi. The ceremonies are indeed authentically Aboriginal. Nonetheless this does not obviate the possibility that something in the visitors' beliefs and practices ignited a fire of ceremonial creativity in this region. My view is that the Macassans' 'Mother' disclosed much about this agricultural people's relationship to land and it was precisely for this reason that Aborigines sought to incorporate her being into their own order.

The problem with this argument is that Swain actually has no relevant evidence at all on the 'beliefs and practices' of the trepangers either in Australia or at home in Makassar and its environs — other than some well-aculturated Islam, of course. In the reality of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Sulawesi, it is quite a long way from the Bugis' Sangiang Serri (Koolhof 1999:373-4; Pelras 1974:358-62) to 'the Macassans' "Mother" — whatever that might mean — and still further from the mountains of the Toraja. What Swain does seem to think necessary, however, to ignite 'a fire of ceremonial creativity' in Aboriginal society is some external influence and this is consistently argued throughout the book.

An even stranger case of assumed agency is presented in the work of Noel Butlin, especially his book *Our Original Aggression* (1983). Butlin is determined to prove that the smallpox epidemics that affected Aboriginal people in south-east Australia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were the result of infection from European sources, even in the face of overwhelming contradictory evidence. As mentioned above, the trepangers were the very probable source of the widespread epidemics. The insistence that all agency must remain European, which is encapsulated in the title of his book, seems to be related to a need to assign blame. This position then has consequences in contemporary cultural politics.

As suggested at the outset of this chapter, the existence of the trepang industry in northern Australia and some of its effects on Aboriginal societies have long been known, at least to those who cared to look. Let us now turn to a wider review of the purposes of those who have looked at the industry and its effects over recent decades. How have the memory of the trepang industry and an awareness of the industry's consequences been made to serve particular interests? There is, of course, nothing wrong or unusual about such political use of the past; history is always in someone's interest at some level. It is convenient to distinguish three arenas within which these interests have been expressed: the national, the regional and the Aboriginal.

In modern Australia, there is an understandable — and welcome — desire to expand the scope of the nation's history beyond the narrative of British settlement and the development of that society in its many aspects. Reference to the trepang industry meets that desire in several ways: it was essentially non-British; it was Asian, with specific links to Indonesia and

China; it involved Aboriginal people; it was carried on in areas remote from modern cities, even by the standards of northern Australia; and it appears to predate Captain Cook — though, as suggested above, this may not be the case in respect of Arnhem Land. The contemporary enthusiasm for this approach is very evident in Stephenson's juxtaposition of examples of interaction between diverse groups throughout Australia's history and the memory of such relationships. Stephenson (2007) devotes considerable attention to the trepangers and gives further detail on some of the material discussed below. Many instances of such concern can be found over recent decades. Take, for example, Allan Baillie's well-researched novel for young people, *Songman* (1994), that tells the story of a boy and his uncle from eastern Arnhem Land who visit Makassar in the last phase of the industry. This excellent attempt to enlarge the popular imagination meets almost all the concerns mentioned above. Greeves (2005), to whom I am indebted for drawing my attention to *Songman* and other material, provides a good example of the interest the subject provokes among students. Most journalists focus on the trepangers' connection with Aboriginal society as, for instance, in Souter's (1987) well-informed, but hypothetical, musings on the effects of more prolonged contact. Another common hook is Islam; in a feature article in the *Weekend Australian* on Islam in modern Australia, the trepangers and camel men of the Centre are trotted out to give historical depth (Brown 2000). There is a very common tendency to push back the origins of the industry, usually with phrases that clearly remove the matter from British settlement and its consequences. For example, a current caption in the National Museum of Australia tells visitors, under the heading 'cultural exchange', that:

Macassans [that is, trepangers] have visited north-eastern Arnhem Land over the last 400 years. The Yolngu have adopted many Macassan words, ideas and skills. Macassan influence is also apparent in Yolngu ceremonies and art. Today, some Yolngu have both Aboriginal and Macassan ancestry.

Regina Ganter has provided much scholarly weight to this wider view of Australian history. In the opening sentences of her recent book, which begins with a section on the trepang industry, she picks up many of these themes (2006:1):

This book approaches Australian history from the north, where it properly begins. Long before any British interest in Australia, its northern shores were enmeshed in a trading network that linked it to China.

In Indonesia too, there has been occasional mention of the industry at a national level. In 1983, a prominent Jakarta news magazine published a long insert rather alarmingly entitled 'Koloni Makassar di Benua Selatan [Makassar colony in the southern continent]' (*Tempo* 1983).

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The text and illustrations were drawn almost exclusively from Macknight (1976) and there was no suggestion of permanent settlement!

Interest at the regional level on both sides has been more sustained. Much of this has been directed to the creation and maintenance of regional identity. This is most obvious in the task of showing that north Australia has a distinctive history. The Northern Territory Department of Education has, over the years, put out teaching resource materials to provide the content for this claim in Territory schools. Among much else, I note a set of slides, a cassette and cards dealing exclusively with 'The Macassans' (NT Department of Education 1985). An even better example, not least because of its irony, was the Australian Bicentennial project to build, sail and preserve the *Hati Marege*, a replica prau now a key exhibit in the boat collection of the Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery (Burningham 1988). Whatever the level of awareness in the rest of Australia, knowledge of the trepang industry and its effects is now pervasive in Darwin and especially in Aboriginal communities around the Arnhem Land coast. For example, the term 'balanda' for any non-Aboriginal person, derived through the Makassar from the Dutch 'Hollander', is now widely used throughout the Top End. The story of the industry is seen as part of local distinctiveness.

There are even a few examples of the memory of the industry being used to support local identity in South Sulawesi where, of course, its existence is well known to scholars and historians. At least that is the interpretation I put on the map at the back of the standard local history of the state of Gowa, which is the indigenous state around the city of Makassar (Abdurrazak 1967). This shows the power of Gowa extending to various parts of the Indonesian archipelago in the course of the first half of the seventeenth century; the Top End of the Northern Territory is included with a date of ±1640 in the first edition of the work in 1967, but ± is removed in the second edition of 1983. A more soundly based version of the power of Gowa in the 1660s is now available elsewhere (Sutherland 2004:94). A display on the industry currently features in the excellent Museum Kota Makassar (Makassar City Museum), with much material being supplied through contacts with Australian colleagues.

The theme of regional identity is expressed particularly through the rhetoric of a special linkage between north Australia and South Sulawesi, or at least eastern Indonesia more generally. The concept of an Arafura region has had some attention in political circles in Darwin, where it fits with the politics of the Northern Territory government's capacity for independent action. Such initiatives are well received in an era of regional autonomy in Indonesia. The intellectual potential of the concept is well explored in the collection of papers on material culture edited by Fredericksen and Walters (2001).

A more elaborate — and very particular — expression of this general relationship can be seen in Andrih Saint-Clare's *Trepang* project, an opera-style theatrical event built around a story of relations between the trepangers and Aboriginal people. Performers from both

The Figure 9.2 was suppressed due to copyright restrictions

Figure 9.2. A scene from the opera *Trepang*, as performed in Sungguminasa, South Sulawesi, in November 1997. The Yolngu girl defends her lover, from Makassar, against her outraged father. Photograph by Andrish Saint-Clare

backgrounds were integral to the work, which was seen both in Darwin and South Sulawesi in 1997 (Figure 9.2). In terms of judging local interest in the theme of regional connection through memorialising history, the performances in Sulawesi attracted rather more notice from the local press and official support than Australia could provide.

A comparable artistic link, but less precisely focused on the trepang industry, was evident at the 2005 Garma Festival. Dr Halilintar Lathief and the famous drummer, Abdul Muis Daeng Mile, led a group of musicians and dancers from Makassar to north Australia where they were invited to perform as a re-affirmation of the past relationship (Figure 9.3). This assertion of cultural values on both sides needs also to be seen in the context of the international links between ethnomusicologists: Professor R Anderson Sutton (2002), with his experience in Makassar; and Professor Alan Marrett and Dr Aaron Corn from the University of Sydney, with their Australian experience. The visit raises various questions. To what extent can the memory of a long-past contact serve as the peg on which to hang an ongoing relationship? In what ways were the performances of the visitors from Makassar understood at Gulkula in north-east Arnhem Land, where the memory of previous contacts is very clear and strong, and

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Figure 9.3. Makassar dancers at the Garma Festival, 2005. Photograph by Jane Dermer. Courtesy Yothu Yindi Foundation and the Garma Festival

in Darwin, where the links are far more general? Was there any sense, especially among the visiting performers, that the very specific cultural forms from South Sulawesi related somehow to a wider regional context, or was this, ultimately, a display of cultural distance?

This regional linkage is pushed to a suggestive extreme in the *Crescent Moon* exhibition mounted in both the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra and the Art Gallery of South Australia in 2006, and in its magnificent catalogue (Bennett 2005). Groote Eylandt bark paintings and carvings from Yirrkala are included as art created in a Muslim context, however attenuated. The result, if one accepts the premise, is to link north Australia with the wider Islamic world of south-east Asia through the mediation of the trepangers. This may be pushing the argument to the limit, or even beyond, but what is striking — in this most self-conscious display of national cultural politics — is its acceptability to a contemporary Australian audience.

The third arena in which the memory of the trepanging industry has been put to use is Aboriginal cultural politics. The former presence of the visiting trepangers from Makassar in north Australia provokes, for Aboriginal thinkers, comparison and contrast with other settlers,

particularly Europeans. Many ethnographers through the twentieth century suspected an element of idealisation in the accounts they heard from their Aboriginal informants of relations between the trepangers and local people. Worsley, for example, working in the early 1950s on Groote Eylandt, believed that he could detect a systematic difference between his information and the accounts of hostile relations collected by Tindale in the same area in the early 1920s (Worsley 1954:11–12). What is at issue here is not the reality of relations before 1907, but the subsequent memory of that contact. Indeed, there are some recent instances of quite deliberate gilding of the memory, even if only in tiny details. For example, any mention of alcohol is carefully omitted among the items introduced by the trepangers in a school text produced recently at Yirrkala (Yirrkala Community School n.d.).

There are also interests in claiming some degree of conflict. Denise Russell (2004:15) makes a case that 'in some places Aborigines did assert a right to exclude Makassan fishers'. This assertion can then be used to support sea rights claims. Whatever the justice or success of such claims, which have been tested both in the Croker Island area and in Blue Mud Bay, the cases underscore the salience of the former trepangers in the historical memory of people in these areas.

The most complex expression of this memory is to be found in the stories from north-east Arnhem Land of *baiini*, reported initially by Mountford and the Berndts in the 1940s. Most fortunately, Ronald Berndt was able, before he died, to prepare transcriptions and annotations for all the original field recordings of the *baiini* song cycle, so that in due course we can expect the full publication of these precious texts (John Stanton, pers. comm.). Meanwhile, Ian McIntosh has written extensively on the topic, especially as developed in the thought of David Burramarra. This is a most remarkable and moving body of material. What McIntosh brings out so well is the cultural logic of the stories; that is, the stories explain relations between Aboriginal people and others (see McIntosh 1994, 1995, 1997; and see other publications cited in these papers). As for the origin and historicity of the *baiini* stories, I continue to see them as a re-working of Aboriginal observations on visits to Makassar and, in particular, a shift in the spatial association of the information from Sulawesi or some trepanging context to particular sites in Arnhem Land (Macknight 1972:313, 1976:92).

It may just be a function of where research has been done, or perhaps of other developments in the area, but a tendency that would be worth watching for in the future is the emphasis on the experience of the Yolngu of north-eastern Arnhem Land as evident in some of the material discussed above. The contact with the trepangers was shared along a much more extensive stretch of the coast; can the memory of this be used as a means of drawing different groups together or does the celebration of contact by Yolngu exclude others from the memory?

Finally, one might ask what I have got out of the memory, or the story, of the trepangers from Makassar with which I have been concerned for over 40 years. Most obviously, it was a

particularly Europeans. Many ethnographers through the twentieth century suspected an element of idealisation in the accounts they heard from their Aboriginal informants of relations between the trepangers and local people. Worsley, for example, working in the early 1950s on Groote Eylandt, believed that he could detect a systematic difference between his information and the accounts of hostile relations collected by Tindale in the same area in the early 1920s (Worsley 1954:11–12). What is at issue here is not the reality of relations before 1907, but the subsequent memory of that contact. Indeed, there are some recent instances of quite deliberate gilding of the memory, even if only in tiny details. For example, any mention of alcohol is carefully omitted among the items introduced by the trepangers in a school text produced recently at Yirrkala (Yirrkala Community School n.d.).

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topic for research well suited to my skills and training, and the resultant publications have, I presume, contributed to my academic preferment. More than once, I have visited the grave of the last entrepreneur of the industry, Puddu Daeng Tompo, in a lane off Jalan Somba Opu in Makassar, to pay my respects. But this hints at something deeper.

I am proud to be a product of that 'older' Australian society created in the south during the course of the nineteenth century; I have benefited from its institutions and support many of its values. The study of the trepang industry, however, led me to walk the beaches of Arnhem Land and to listen carefully to its people; then I came to the streets of Makassar and learnt something of the history of that society. These new realms of imagining lie beyond the intellectual and cultural compass of my forebears, but find an easy place in the outlook of the Australia that is coming into being. I have been carried — and have tried to carry others with me — from that older, more circumscribed view of the world to broader sympathies with human experience.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Maggie Brady, Ian Caldwell, Aaron Corn, Darmawan Ma'sud Rahman, Jane Dermer, Karen George, Jan Leo and Andrish Saint-Clare for assistance on particular matters in this paper.

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