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The Macassans
A study of the early trepang industry
along the Northern Territory coast

by

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Two volumes and a case

Volume 1

This thesis was submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Australian National University

December 1969
This thesis is the result of my own research, except for that material specifically credited to other people.

C.C. Macknight

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project has brought me into contact with a wide range of people and virtually all have played some part, direct or indirect, in shaping this thesis. For this help, and for many personal kindnesses, I am extremely grateful. A number of specific debts are acknowledged in the appropriate places, but the bare list below must serve to record my thanks to the majority. To any who may have been omitted or who have had to be included under a group heading, I offer my apologies.

Darwin: Rev. B.A. Clarke, Mr W.B. Cochrane, Mr E.C. Evans, Mr R.W. Evans, Mr H. Giese, Mr F.H. Gray, Mr & Mrs C.W. Holmes, Mr & Mrs G. Kirby, Mr J.P.M. Long, Mr E.P. Milliken, Mr J. Morris, Mr V. O'Brien, Mr C. Patterson, Rev. G.J. Symons, Mr A.K. Wilson.

Elsewhere in the Northern Territory: Mr Nandjiwara Amagula, Mr J. Blitner, Mr & Mrs M. Bray, Mr M. Casey, Miss B.R. Clews, Mr & Mrs F. Eygenraam, Mr & Mrs W. Farr, Rev. W.J. Fawell, Mr W.J. Gray, Mr I. Gunn, Miss H. Hinch, Rev. E.J. Hughes, Mr & Mrs R. Ingram, Mr P. Jeans, Mr V. Johnstone, Mr & Mrs D. Lindner, Miss B. Lowe, Mr & Mrs S.A. Luck, Mr P. Mackey, Mr & Mrs G. Mason, Mr G. O'Brien, Mr S. Roberts, Mr & Mrs H. Robertson, Mr & Mrs J. Rudder, Rev. & Mrs H.U. Shepherdson, Rev. M. Spengler, Miss J. Stokes, Rev. J. Taylor, Mr & Mrs D. Westover, and many other members of the staffs of the Social Welfare Branch, N.T.A., the Methodist Overseas Mission, the Church Missionary Society, and
Groote Eylandt Mining Co. Ltd.

Adelaide: Mr N.S.K. Baker, Mr R. Edwards, Mr G. Fischer, Mr J.M. Main, Miss C. Searcy, and the staff of the Archives Branch of the Public Library of South Australia.

Melbourne: Mr D.A. Casey, Mr J.A. Davidson, Mr J.A.C. Mackie, Mrs A.M. Moyle, Mr A. West.

Perth: Professor R.M. and Dr C.H. Berndt, Mr I.M. Crawford, Miss S. Meagher.

Sydney: Mr F.M. Dunn, the late Rev. A.J. Dyer, Dr M. Hartwig, Dr L. Hiatt, Mr H.V. Howe, Mr L. Lind, Mr A.G. Thorne, and the staff of the Mitchell Library.

Port Moresby: Dr F.J. Allen, Professor G. Ward.

Great Britain: Mr C. Osborne, Professor P.M. Worsley.


The Netherlands: Dr A.A. Cense, Dr J. Noorduyn, Dr A.C. van der Leeden, and Archivist of the Algemeen Rijksarchief.

U.S.A. Professor W.L. Warner.

Canberra: Dr N. Burbidge, Mr J.H. Calaby, Mr M. Gray, Dr J. Harris, Mr C.A. Key, Miss C. Kiss, Mr J.D. Kleeman, Mr F.D. McCarthy, Miss M. Molijn, Mr H. Polach, Miss M. Rutledge, Dr D. Shineberg, Dr Sutjipto Wirjosuparto,
Mr R.D. Terrell, Mr V. Wells, and many other members of the staffs of the National Library of Australia, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, and the Department of Prehistory, R.S.Pac.S., A.N.U.

In the actual production of the thesis, I owe a special debt to Mr W. Ambrose, Mrs L. Beattie, Mrs B. Fox, Miss W. Mumford, Mrs L. White, Mrs E.R. Wilkie and the staff of the Visual Aids Unit, A.N.U.

Two other groups of people, listed elsewhere, have my particular gratitude: the friends who assisted me in the hard labour of Macassan archaeology, and all my various informants.

Finally, I have to thank my supervisor, John Mulvaney. It is a welcome duty to acknowledge his influence, direct and indirect, in general and in particular, on the pages that follow. At all times, he has given me unstinting encouragement and support.
INTRODUCTION

In 1769, Alexander Dalrymple, still young in his career of schemes, acrimony and hard work, was recommending to the Court of Directors of the English East India Company the advantages to be gained by establishing a settlement on the island of Balambangan, off the north point of Borneo. Among the agents who might be expected to distribute from here the products of Europe and India, and bring in return the exotic products of the distant islands of the eastern archipelago, he lists the Bugis seamen and traders. 'They have penetrated to New-Holland on the south, and to Papua on the east; they also voyage to Bencoolen, Quedah, Manila, and to all the intermediate countries' (Dalrymple 1769:83). This quotation, presumably based on information acquired by Dalrymple in the early 1760s, can fairly be taken as the earliest certain reference to the trepang industry on the coast of northern Australia.

Two points only will be noted here: the voyaging of these renowned sailors to Australia is set in the context of their activity throughout the archipelago, and the fact that they do come to Australia occasions no surprise. These two comments can, in a general way, be applied to virtually all the many descriptions of the industry left by those who observed it in operation over the next century and more. To such men, who had read and studied the accounts of northern Australia given by Flinders (1814), King (1827) and others, and for whom the world, particularly in this remote corner, was so wide and free that events were directed more by opportunity than control, the existence of the industry offered little occasion for remark or reproach. The basic facts were widely known, so that even a member of the
general public, such as Rachel Henning, a central Queensland pioneer of the 1860s, was aware that the coast was visited by 'Malays' (Henning 1952:68).

However, by the end of the century, enthusiasm for northern Australia had been tempered by repeated failures in the task of development. Interest was centred on those more favoured regions in the south where an ideology was being developed that would claim a whole continent for one people. The development of the concepts of exclusiveness and national identity was not restricted to southern Australians, for the Dutch also, around the turn of the century, were forging those tighter bonds of administrative control between their Indies possessions that have led to the modern unitary state of Indonesia. Thus after about 1890, and even more after the end of the industry in 1907, there was little incentive to recall that northern Australia had once been linked in commercial relationships with the islands to the north, and many Australians of the early decades of this century, or even of recent years, would have regarded the industry as unexpected, perhaps unwelcome, and certainly as exotic and unfamiliar.

Today the position is changing as interest in the area slowly rekindles and as the work of the scholars who have concerned themselves with the area becomes more widely known. Following the classic work of Warner in the thirties which first described in any detail the repercussions of the trepang industry on Aboriginal culture, a succession of anthropologists and ethnographers have gathered more evidence to fill out the fading picture. At the same time, the background of the industry within Indonesia has become clearer through the work of various scholars. In this respect, the contribution of Cense (1952) has been the most outstanding. One aim of this thesis is to consolidate, combine and in some matters extend the historical and ethnographic knowledge already available.
It is no accident that the visit of Golson and Mulvaney to the Gove Peninsula in 1963, which marks the beginning of the present phase of work on the subject, was in connection with a proposed mining project. Northern Australia is once more witnessing attempts at economic development, and some authorities are aware of the vital importance of creating a wider understanding of the region and its history, leading to a greater sense of identification and acceptance by those who live there. Furthermore, (and this is not to suggest anything sinister), public opinion is increasingly able to accept a relatively impartial treatment of a subject involving non-European activity in Australia.

Although Golson and Mulvaney found little of interest in 1963, two years later Mulvaney returned to Arnhem Land and visited a number of locations around the coast. Some archaeological investigations of trepang processing sites had already been undertaken in 1948 by McCarthy and Setzler (1960), and R.M. and C.H. Berndt had obtained several other collections of pottery, but little significant information had resulted from these efforts. Mulvaney, however, demonstrated very clearly the possibility of recovering useful archaeological evidence which could be integrated with other forms of source material (Mulvaney 1966). The present thesis is an attempt to realize this potential.

To some archaeologists and anthropologists accustomed to long field expeditions, the time I have spent in the Northern Territory on this project may appear short - less than five months spread over the dry seasons of 1966 and 1967. The achievement of so much in this time was facilitated by the detailed planning which was possible as a result of Mulvaney's work, not least in the making of personal contacts, and by the extensive information available concerning the location of sites. Moreover those familiar with the area will be aware of the unfailing kindness of all
who live there in arranging transport for visitors, together with the considerable difficulties of maintaining for an extended period a camp at any distance from a settlement. Two other factors which made my task easier were the negative result of Mulvaney's survey in 1965 to the west of Darwin in search of sites and the work of Mr Ian Crawford in the Kimberley area. Although I have specifically excluded from this thesis any extended discussion of the trepang industry in Western Australia, a general awareness of Mr Crawford's results has helped in seeing the subject in perspective.

One last point is relevant here. Since the topic is unusual in the diverse methods required to explore it, the reader needs to remain fully aware of the central subject - the men who used to sail each year from Macassar or nearby to the coasts of Arnhem Land and the Gulf of Carpentaria for the chief purpose of collecting and preserving trepang. The activity of these men formed only a part of the total trade and commerce of the eastern archipelago, just as the contact that they had with the Aborigines and various Europeans in Australia made up only one facet of the experience of the latter groups. These wider subjects have only been touched on as they are relevant to the main theme.

This matter will be seen more clearly by explaining the use of two words used in the title. Firstly, the word 'industry' is used for the activity of getting trepang (in preference to such terms as 'fishery' or 'trade'), since more was involved than just collecting, and since no money or commodities were exchanged for its direct acquisition. Although other activities beside the trepang industry were also carried on, this was always the main form of labour and the chief hope of profit. Secondly, and more importantly, in using the term 'Macassan' (both as a noun and as an adjective), I simply refer to any person who came on the
annual fleet of praus to the Northern Territory. The only minor exception might be any returning Aborigines, though even they are best regarded as part of the trepanging group when out of their own tribal area. 'Macassan' is used in preference to the colloquial 'Macassar' or 'Macassar-man' found in some sources, though I take these terms to be similar in meaning. Other terms which each have their own specific meaning and should not be confused, are Macassarese, Malay, Bugis, Indonesian, Bajau, Kupanger, etc.

Two of the most striking features of the Macassan industry in the Northern Territory are its distinctness and cohesion. The regular captains were well aware of the size and composition of the fleet spread out along the entire coast. To a lesser extent they were aware of praus that had chosen to work along the northern coast of Western Australia, but this area was known by a different name and seems to have been visited by more diverse groups. The use of the term 'Macassan' for trepangers in the Western Australian context is likely to lead to confusion and more precise terms should be employed. It must be emphasized that the term 'Macassan' does not refer to any racial, linguistic or cultural group as such within the Indonesian archipelago.