

Essay:

Turn the map upside down

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If we turn the map upside down and start Australian history where its documentation properly begins - in the north - the kaleidoscope of Australian history falls into a completely different pattern. Prior contact with Muslim Asians on the north coasts and the cultural bridge of the Torres Strait into coastal New Guinea, make nonsense of the idea of an isolated continent. Indeed, until World War II, whites were heavily outnumbered in the north by close-knit Asian and indigenous communities. Instead of a White Australian past in the north we see a history of “mixed relations”.¹

Nowhere in northern Australia does Anglo-Celtic history yet amount to 200 years. European encroachment was gradual and unsteady, and sometimes in retreat. It only reached the northern mainland roughly 100 years after southern settlement. More importantly, it did not take place on a historical *tabula rasa*. Apart from the longstanding indigenous presence, there were inchoate colonial claims over the continent whose map was literally dotted with Dutch names: Eendraghtsland, Leeuwinland, Peter Nuyts Land, De Witts Land, Van Diemen’s Land and Nieuw Holland.

Australian histories abound with references to the regular visitors from Makassar without according them more than incidental status: an ancient trade that once existed, then ceased, and left a few inconsequential imprints on a marginal part of the remote north. I think, however, that the Macassan trade to Arnhem Land expedited the British claim over the whole continent and rendered it more urgent.

The Macassan trepang trade features in the earliest British accounts of the northern coast. During his circumnavigation of the continent, Matthew Flinders encountered the spearhead of a 60-ship-strong fleet at the north-eastern tip of Arnhem Land (Malay Roads) in 1803. He estimated that this fleet carried about 1000 Macassans, which must have seemed a veritable invasion against the fewer than 7000 British nestled into Sydney Cove and Newcastle.

Flinders learned from the encounter about the commercial value of the sea slug in China, and of a history of contact that he understood to have started 20 years earlier (after

Cook, before the First Fleet). But Alexander Dalrymple from the British East India Company had already heard in 1769 that there was a regular trade to the southern continent (and that, as a result, the natives were circumcised and probably Muslims) so that Flinders, who carried a Dalrymple memorandum among his instructions, must have known that the trade started before the British possession of New South Wales.² Flinders' datum is now considered far too conservative, possibly a result of a misunderstanding: it seems more likely that the Macassan captain Flinders interviewed was referring to his own 20-year record in *Marege* (the Arnhem Land coast). The most authoritative estimate of the start of this trade now locates it somewhere between 1720 and 1750.³

In his circumnavigation of the continent, Flinders became utterly preoccupied with the regions of Macassan contact; he spent five of the 10 months of his round trip there. The challenge to a British claim, presented by the Macassan trade to Arnhem Land channelled through the Dutch East Indies, could not have been lost on a strategist like Flinders. It might have dented the concept of an Australia starting in 1788, but that concept had not yet formed, the continent was still divided between the nominally Dutch New Holland and British New South Wales. Flinders boldly proposed the label "Australia" to refer to the whole continent - a label that eventually erased the Dutch connection from popular memory.

Flinders' assessment of the trading opportunities between the north coast and China, and the extraordinary profit margins involved ("cent per cent") could have triggered a commercial rush to the north. But, on second thoughts, he deleted his description of this trade from his letter from Kupang to the *Madras Gazette*,⁴ perhaps with a view of capitalising himself on this discovery. At this time, he was dissatisfied with his career prospects in the navy and was contemplating a private venture with his former companion George Bass. The venture never materialised. Bass disappeared at sea during a speculative trading voyage and Flinders was detained by the French for almost seven years and died a few years after his return from captivity.

Knowledge of the trepang trade continued to inspire British efforts to colonise the far north. Phillip Parker King continued Flinders' hydrographic work (1818-21) and also reported on strong trading activities between Makassar and the north coast, having encountered a trepang fleet on the Kimberley coast. Shortly after his report was submitted, two northern outposts were established to graft onto the flourishing trepang trade: Fort Dundas at Melville Island in 1824 and Fort Wellington at Raffles Bay on Cobourgh Peninsula in 1827. The rush into northern outposts took place before the western half of the continent was formally claimed in 1829.

It was not until the 1880s that white settlement of the north developed momentum. Customs officers were appointed to collect revenue from the trepang trade and their

records reveal the regularity with which Macassan captains visited. Reading these alongside Yolngu stories, we can trace a number of family links between Yolngu and Makassar. Taxation and official harassment caused a decline in the trade until the South Australian Government forbade it altogether in 1906, after nearly two centuries.

When Australia celebrated its bicentennial, reckoning 200 years from the founding of a convict colony in 1788, two centuries of attachment seemed like an eternity. Few Australians cared to remember in 1988 that 200 years referred only to a speck on the map in the south-east, and that most of the remainder had a far shorter history of white settlement.

But were the Macassans settlers? And if they didn't settle in the same way as the British, is that enough reason to eclipse them? A "settler" in German (*Siedler*) and French (*colon*) is someone who plants. The Macassans planted a range of crops, including tamarind. They were more than visitors, coming regularly to the same places, staying for several months or sometimes a whole year. They left imprints on the country and the people: they dug wells and erected dwellings and named places, some of which became adopted by Yolngu. They felt they had some claim on the country: they bestowed the title of *daeng* on some of the sea people of Arnhem Land, which became part of local names. The Yolngu understanding is that they planted *abrus* seed with the same symbolic significance as the Europeans planted flags.⁵ This understanding is supported by an extraordinary map at the Sultan's Palace in Makassar, Sulawesi, which shows the boundaries of the "Gowanese kingdom and areas that accepted Gowanese sovereignty until 1660". Sulawesi is at the centre of the kingdom that includes the top end of Australia.⁶ The cultural imprint on Yolngu people of this contact is everywhere: in their language, in their art, in their stories, in their cuisine. Family bonds continue to link these people, and the strength of connection is expressed by Yolngu people who say about the Macassans, "we are one spirit". Charles Macknight's detailed studies in *A Voyage to Marege* have shown, moreover, that this contact history is accessible to historical methods and does not need to be relegated to prehistory.

On balance, it takes a single-minded commitment to Anglo-Celtic history and its peculiar type of settlement to believe Australian settlement started at Sydney Cove or that Australian history started there. Without breaking the rules of historical method, we might say that Australian settlement history starts in the north. I say this with the rider that the standard account by Aborigines of their past, that they have "always been here", seems more credible shorthand than their reconstruction as migrants or settlers in historical terms.

What we have, then, are two bicentennial episodes of settlement - give or take a few

decades - related to each other: the Macassan trade roused the commercial interest of British colonisers in the north and the British colonisation of the north spelt the demise of the Macassan trade.

That indigenous people of the far north were linked in trade with China well before the British colonists also pulls another plank of the historical master narrative into the vortex. The idea of the isolated continent has tenaciously survived empirical counter evidence. The Torres Strait has long been recognised as much bridge as barrier, a region of intensive trade linking the Australian continent with the New Guinean mainland.⁷ Torres Strait Islanders were eventually confined to their islands by Queensland Aboriginal policy that also prevented mainland Aborigines from travelling abroad and the Macassans were evicted when white colonisation became established in the north. We might say, on balance, that a period of isolation from the outside world began in the north with the arrival of white colonisers.

The desire for a “White Australia” became a galvanising factor in the emergence of a federated nation precisely because, in the 1890s, the historical outcome - to which we have become accustomed - was by no means clear. Due to the scarcity of labour in the north, Chinese and Asians continued to be recruited to assist northern colonisation even after anti-Chinese sentiments had been well formulated in the south and legislative measures been taken in response. The three engines of northern colonisation - pastoralism, pearling and transport - all depended on Asian labour: Chinese shepherds in North Queensland; Chinese railway workers in the Northern Territory; Afghani camel teams for long-distance haulage; Japanese, Filipinos and Malays in pearling.

As a result, the northern population balance continued to be weighted against White Australia well after Federation. Until 1911, there were more Chinese than Europeans in the Northern Territory; in 1910 only 7 per cent of those engaged in Broome pearling and 1.3 per cent of those engaged in Thursday Island pearling were European. Thursday Island was the administrative centre of the Torres Strait and subject to residential restrictions for indigenous people. Still, in 1910, Europeans made up less than half of the population.⁸ In the Northern Territory, the European population was consistently dwarfed by the Asian and Aboriginal populations until World War II. The Chinese in the Northern Territory peaked in 1888 at over 6000, Japanese participation in the Thursday Island pearling industry peaked in 1898 at 790, dipped in 1901 to 551, but continued to swell until 1913 to 655. Streetscapes in the northern colonial townships suggested Asia not Europe and white Europeans were a minority. To visitors, places like Thursday Island appeared “a regular little Chinese, Singhalese or Japanese principality”.⁹ The entrepreneurial competition of numerically strong non-white communities caused the shake-up of several industries - pearling, trepanning, haulage by camel and hawking -

and the competition from cheap imported labour caused the ethnic reorganisation of the sugar industry.

The numerical dominance of Chinese in the non-Aboriginal population of the Northern Territory until 1911 suggests that its histories ought to be preoccupied with the Chinese. However, they tend to be either incidental or problem populations - studies that focus on the Chinese make no claim to be histories of the territory. The fundamental commitment to Anglo-Celtic history seems beyond argument. Nor will it do to make allowances for the unique history of Broome, the unique history of Thursday Island, the peculiar history of Darwin, Derby, Wyndham, Cooktown, Cairns and any number of northern townships - because how many exceptions does it take to break a rule?

Fast-growing mixed populations challenged the idea of white dominance even more fundamentally than Asian immigrants or Aboriginal majorities. They undermined the evolutionist prediction of the eventual demise of the indigenous population and blurred the distinctions between populations on which the idea of white dominance was based. While it was possible to regulate the immigration of Asians, and to administer Aborigines under special legislation, the mixed Asian/Aboriginal people of the north made the distinctions on which such management relied meaningless. During World War II, they were regarded as a "fifth column" and indigenous people with suspected or real affinities with Japanese were treated with circumspection. From the point of view of a history committed to a white centrefold, Asian/Aboriginal families may appear as a quirky footnote at the periphery. But in a "mixed relations" model the phenomenon of Asian/Aboriginal families are at the core of the "anxious nation".¹⁰

Such families represented the convergence of two "problem populations". Ros Kidd sees a medical/moral policing rationale as the core of Aboriginal protection policies.¹¹ This is equally descriptive of Anglo-Celtic attitudes towards Asians. Medical concerns associated with Chinese in Australia, like opium addiction, leprosy or smallpox, were couched in language suggestive of moral judgements (filth, laziness, lasciviousness) so that medical and moral concerns were a tightly constructed complex of grievances. Aboriginal/Asian interactions were constructed squarely within this medical/moral rationale.

The history of colonisation of indigenous Australia has been framed in the firm grid of black-and-white interactions, but Asians in the north were prominent in the minds of policy makers in Aboriginal protection. Anxiety over contact between indigenous and Asian peoples shows itself in the first comprehensive legislative package in Queensland, the 1897 Aborigines Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act (prohibiting the sale of opium, considered a Chinese transgression) and its 1901 amendment (barring Chinese from employing Aborigines), and the equivalent 1905 Protection Act in Western Australia (prohibiting contact between Aboriginal females and Japanese and Indonesian

pearling workers). Mixed marriages were a particular concern.¹² The 1901 amendment in Queensland was aimed at marriages between Asians and Aborigines, which were then disallowed.¹³ The Aboriginal protection bureaucracy in Queensland became a moral arbiter judging requests for permission to marry and focusing on young women and mixed descent children. For more than 30 years the government department was hamstrung by its definition of “Aboriginal” and “half-caste” in the face of a quickly growing mixed population. Legally, it needed to be able to define a mother as “Aboriginal” in order to rein in her children as “half-castes”. However, the mixed populations of north Australian towns quickly outgrew the definition and neither the administrators nor the members of these coloured communities could be sure about their standing. The department resorted to illegal removals of young women and to remarkable feats of reasoning by which siblings could be classed as “Aborigines” or “half-castes” or “neither Aboriginal nor half-caste”, depending on where they were born and their age. The Ahwang family of Thursday Island tested the ingenuity of an exasperated bureaucracy, which declared retrospectively in 1921 that the mother “had been an Aborigine” from 1897 until 1905.¹⁴

Asian/Aboriginal families formed the core of the polyethnic spaces that characterised the north, such as Malaytown in Cairns and Police Paddock in Darwin. Such “coloured communities” were linked by family, friendship, residence or experience and woven into indigenous and Asian communities. Much as the state sought to distinguish between populations, coloured communities resisted these distinctions.

In 1934, the Queensland department asserted its authority with a further amendment targeting the northern coloured communities. It then controlled indigenous offspring to the fourth generation. This meant disenfranchisement of many who had previously enjoyed full citizenship. All over Queensland, associations were formed demanding citizenship, and strikes, from Stradbroke Island to Torres Strait, galvanised the resistance movement. In an attempt to fragment this movement, the acts were repealed in 1939 and replaced with legislation that separated the mainland and Torres Strait and gave the Islanders some self-government.

White hegemony was constantly under siege in northern Australia. In townships of the far north, coloured communities occupied definable polyethnic spaces. The social fabric was woven with finely graded rules about which school one attended which streets one occupied, where one shopped, with whom one socialised and even where one sat in the local cinema. Their disappearance meant many people forgot about them but I have met and interviewed countless people in the north for whom this past was part of their experience, a part of their identity. Many accounts suggest that polyethnicity was the defining characteristic of the northern townships.

Since World War II, a range of factors combined to erode these communities. During the evacuation of civilians, the northern towns were under allied command and Chinatowns and Japanese townships were demolished. Japanese were, at first, interned and then repatriated, and a conscious effort was made to prevent the reappearance of polyethnic townships in the central business districts. Indigenous Australians, on the other hand, were gradually released from the paternalistic grip of the department and eventually their access to rights became linked to indigenous identity. Under these conditions it became difficult to remain “coloured”.

The family of the Filipino Antonio Cubillo and his Aboriginal wife, Lily McKeddie, was typical of the community at Police Paddocks. One of their descendants, Gary Lee, wrote a play about their relationship, called *Keep Him My Heart*. The subtitle, *A Larrakia-Filipino Love Story*, speaks volumes about a hybrid lineage. Most descendants of this family today define themselves as staunchly Aboriginal while others have opted out of an Aboriginal identity altogether. A polyethnic past creates possibilities for a range of identities when people are routinely asked to declare whether they are Aboriginal or not.

The uncertainty of the boundaries of identity is clear in the Ahwang family on whom the full range of possible identities were conferred. Among its descendants, there are women voyaging into the Pacific to reassemble family links and others performing Malayan songs and Malayan dances, or embracing Islam, while still holding on firmly to their indigenous identity. One descendant suggested that Islam needed to be recognised as an important faith in the Torres Strait next to Christianity.¹⁵ In Arnhem Land, Aborigines have been active in reconnecting severed links into Makassar with a number of mutual visits. They continuously represent themselves as having strong links with Macassans and celebrate their shared histories through locally produced school textbooks, exhibits in local cultural centres and popular music. The Sunrize Band gained fame with *Lembana Mani Mani*, which is the Macassan name for Maningrida, the Wirringa Band from Milingimbi sang *My Sweet Takirrina* (the Macassan name for Elcho Island) and Yothu Yindi's *Macassan Crew* refers to Dayngatjing, the Macassan captain Daeng Magassing, who appears in customs records and Yolngu myths. Johnny Bulunbulun paints the Lunggurma, the north wind that brought Macassan trepangers to Arnhem Land, and Elcho Islanders celebrated their family connections with Makassar at Federation Square in Melbourne in 2001. All these affirmations of shared histories do not challenge their indigeneity.

These manifestations of hybridity have found their strongest expression in the arts. The musicals of Jimmy Chi, *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road*, both deal with hybridity and use a good deal of “Broome creole”.¹⁶ Sarah Yu, discussing the Broome history of Aboriginal and Asian partnerships, refers to the moral condemnation and intensive policing to which such relationships were subjected, but also powerfully conjures the

image of a shared history, shared cuisine, shared houses and a shared “Broome creole” that make up the town’s Aboriginal culture. These observations strongly resonate with the conclusions reached in Caribbean cultural studies. Beverley Ormerod’s analysis suggests that assisted by a unifying creole language that asserts diversity of origin and unity of experience, an emphasis on 'negritude', which played an important part in weakening the hold of colonial culture, has been displaced by a sense of 'creoleness' which has far greater local relevance. [17](#)

If we start to write Australian history from north to south, instead of the other way round, and chronologically forward instead of teleologically backward, we must, straightaway, give up the idea of Anglo-Celts at the centre of the Australian universe. Documented Australian history starts well before their arrival and indigenous people of the north were not as isolated before their coming as after. The two roughly bicentennial episodes of Australian settlement history are not incidental, but causally linked in a British effort to fend off the earliest reliably documented Asian connection to the Australian continent.

Anglo-Celtic Australia defined itself defensively against the empirical circumstances of the north, where Asian, indigenous and mixed populations preponderated and polyethnicity was dominant. Asian entrepreneurial competition, the growth of mixed populations and their contestation of white hegemony play a crucial role in key policy shifts in Aboriginal management. This means that we need to look at the triangulated relationships between whites, Asians and Aborigines instead of histories of Aborigines and of Asians against a white centrefold. Mixed families defied legislation to contain both Asian and Aboriginal populations: they reside at the core of an anxious nation. Such families predate the British presence in Australia and have become an integral part of indigenous identity in the north, demonstrating that indigenous identity can embrace creoleness.

Once we look at the whole continent instead of its southern half, the moment of Anglo-Celtic dominance appears brief. This was not achieved until World War II in the Northern Territory and by the 1970s, a new period of Asian immigration in the south and a broad-based mass movement for indigenous rights demonstrated to policy makers that a monocultural nation was not, after all, tenable. These days, nearly two-thirds of Australians have parents from two different countries of birth. The trend is towards a mixed population - this is a time for looking beyond binaries. Histories that are to be relevant for the future ought to pin themselves at the crossroads of cultural contact, on the threads that link populations. ■

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- ¹ An earlier version of this paper was published in P. Edwards and Shen Yuan Fang (eds), *Lost in the Whitewash*, HRC, ANU, 2002.
 - ² Alexander Dalrymple, *A Plan for extending the Commerce of this kingdom and of the East-India Company*, London 1769; and Joseph Banks to Matthew Flinders, May 1, 1801; Instructions from the British Admiralty to Matthew Flinders June 22, 1801, National Maritime Museum (UK), Flinders Pages.
 - ³ C.C. Macknight, *The Voyage to Marege: Macassan Trepangers in Northern Australia*, Melbourne University Press, 1976.
 - ⁴ Letters by Matthew Flinders from Timor to Ann Flinders, March 28, 1803; and to Campbell & Co., Calcutta, April 1, 1803, Flinders Manuscript Collection, State Library of New South Wales.
 - ⁵ Information supplied by Peter Danaja, Maningrida Arts and Culture Centre, Willie Danjati Gunderra, George Gulan'buma Pukulat'pi and Terrichi Yumbulul at Galiwin'ku, June 1995. "Maningrida" means "abrus seed bay".
 - ⁶ The map was photographed by Batchelor College students and published in their account of the journey: Michael Cooke, *Makassar and Northeast Arnhem Land – Missing Links and Living Bridges*, Batchelor College, July 1987. Macknight kindly presented me with a copy of the rare manuscript in which it first appeared, a history of the kingdom of Gowa by Abdurrazak Daeng Patunru, *Sedjarah Goa* (Jajasan Kebudayaan Sulawesi Selatan dan Tenggara di Makassar, 1967), republished a few years later with the updated Indonesian spelling.
 - ⁷ David Walker (ed), *Bridge and Barrier - The natural and cultural history of Torres Strait*, ANU Press, 1972.
 - ⁸ Figures adapted from Gaynor Evans, "Thursday Island 1878-191, a Plural Society", honours thesis, University of Queensland, 1972, appendices; Tim Jones, *The Chinese in the Northern Territory*, NTU Press, 1990; and Louis P. Anderson, "The Role of Aboriginal and Asian Labour in the Origin and Development of the Pearling Industry, Broome, Western Australia, 1862-1940", honours thesis, Murdoch University, 1978.
 - ⁹ Mr Lesina, member for Clermont, Legislative Assembly, October 8, 1901, *Queensland Parliamentary Papers*, LXXXVII (1901) p. 1150.
 - ¹⁰ David Walker, *Anxious Nation – Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939*, University of Queensland Press, 1999.
 - ¹¹ Regina Ganter, "Affections: Chinese and Aborigines in North Queensland" in Henry Chan (ed), *Chinese in Australian and New Zealand History*, UNSW Press, in press.
 - ¹² Roth to Under Secretary, Home Department, January 21, 1901, QSA A/58764.
 - ¹³ This has been argued in detail in Regina Ganter, "Living an immoral life – 'coloured' women and the paternalistic State", *Hecate*, 24, 1 (1998) pp 13-40.
 - ¹⁴ Ganter, "Immoral life".
 - ¹⁵ Muriel bin Dol, pers. comm., August 2000.
 - ¹⁶ Sarah Yu, "Broome Creole: Aboriginal and Asian Partnerships along the Kimberley Coast" in Regina Ganter (ed), *Asians in Australian History*, *Queensland Review* 6, 2 (1999), p. 72.
 - ¹⁷ Beverley Ormerod, "The Martinican concept of 'creoleness': a multiracial redefinition of culture", *Mots Pluriels* 7 (1998).