

ESSAYS

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Yolngu Conversations with Faith:
The “outward signs of conversion” to Christianity and Islam

Some unmistakable allusions to “Allah” in the folklore of north-east Arnhem Land suggest that before British colonization the Yolngu were engaging with Muslim life-worlds at a much deeper level than has been presumed, because many references to Macassans became unspoken until the Christian mission period was over. This article emerges from the hypothetical question what might have happened if the Muslim contacts had not been forbidden and replaced with Christian missions at the beginning of the twentieth century. To sound the depth of that prior engagement with Islam and probe whether perhaps a gradual process of religious conversion was underway, it examines the “outward signs” of religious conversion used by Christian missionaries. These “outward signs” are borrowed from Norman Etherington (2002), who observed in his study of Christian missions in Natal that since it is not possible to look into the soul, observable behaviours and material indicators served to signpost progress in the acceptance of Christian faith.

The following is not an attempt to compare any presumed Islamic and Christian conversion experiences of Yolngu, when “conversion” is such a difficult concept. It merely resorts to the anecdotes and reflections of Christian missionaries, which are so numerous, to speculate about the prior encounter with Islam, for which the non-Indigenous sources available in English are so scarce. This endeavour arises from my two major research projects – one that explored Asian-Aboriginal contact in North Australia (Ganter 2006) and one that examined the agendas of non-English speaking

missionaries in Australia (Ganter 2017a; 2017b).¹ In a double-take on these two apparently disparate topics, it asks what picture emerges if the “outward signs of conversion” used by Christian missionaries are applied to this different historical setting. We find that the gauges of conversion applied by Christian missionaries were all registering high response rates in the Yolngu responses to Macassans. However, we also notice that these “outward signs” are highly unreliable indicators. What the missionaries took for signs of conversion might be better understood as evidence of intercultural conversation, hence the title of this paper (see also Jolly 1996). The indigenist framework offered by Karen Martin and Booran Mirraboopu in 2003 uses the term “enfolding” to understand the Indigenous engagement with outsiders.

To explore these questions it is necessary to delve uncomfortably deep into Indigenous cosmologies. Indigenous cosmologies are necessarily shifting terrains, where it is possible to get different, even contradictory, interpretations of deeper meanings. The disciplinary experts engaging with Aboriginal culture in the post-contact period practically all acknowledged some clear indications of cultural change, although some managed to put them aside after an initial acknowledgement in the search for a static, pristine, pre-contact culture. Today few would deny that Indigenous cosmologies are dynamic, or that Yolngu culture is deeply infused with the pre-British Macassan contact.

According to current knowledge, the trepang trade orchestrated out of the trading port of Makassar in Sulawesi to the north Australian coast, reached the Kimberley in the 1750s, and Arnhem Land around 1780. It was in full swing around 1800, always just a few paces ahead of the British assault on the south-eastern part of the continent. The long-standing contact came to an abrupt end in the wake of the federal White Australia policy when the South Australian government resolved to disallow further Macassan visits after 1906

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in order to safeguard the economic dominance of Anglo-Saxon entrepreneurs who sought to establish themselves in the trepang industry (Ganter 2006:Chapter 2). As soon as contact with Macassans was severed in 1907, Christian missions began to emerge across Arnhem Land beginning with Roper River in 1908 and followed by Bathurst Island (1911), Goulburn Island (1916), Elcho Island (1921), relocated to Milingimbi (1923), Oenpelli (1924), Yirrkala (1935) and Croker Island (1941). In 1931 Arnhem Land was declared a massive Indigenous reserve to minimize contact with other outsiders. Ian McIntosh shows that the mission period left a lasting imprint on the conduct of culture, so much so that when a scientific expedition toured Arnhem Land in 1948 ritual leaders across Arnhem Land conducted a heated debate about what to disclose and what to “turn inside” (McIntosh 2011:Chapter 13). In the 1950s David Burrumarra at Elcho Island led an Adjustment Movement that disclosed much secret knowledge, particularly allusions to Macassan contact (McIntosh 1994).

The same cannot (yet) be said about the other regions of culture contact with Macassans, in the Kimberley, on the Tiwi Islands, and on the remaining coasts of the Top End, so that the discussions of Macassan/Aboriginal contact are (still) very closely focused on the Yolngu of north-east Arnhem Land, even though the Macassan contact zone ranged across a much wider area of Australian north coast (Ganter 2006:Chapters 2 and 3). The difference might lie in different levels of interaction, or it might lie in the subsequent religious colonization of the north, with a strong Catholic preponderance in the Kimberley (German Pallottines) and the Tiwi Islands (an Alsatian bishop supervising the French Missionnaires du Sacré Coeur). The language records (1846-1848) of the Italian Don Angelo Confalonieri at the Macassan trading port in Australia, Port Essington on Cobourg Peninsula, have been examined by the noted Australian linguist Nicholas Evans. He concludes that the earliest adaptations of Macassan loanwords in the Iwaidja languages of that region occurred over a millennium ago (Evans 1997). This sits well outside the now accepted timeframe of Macassan/Aboriginal contact, and will no doubt be either politely ignored or thoroughly attacked

by experts who have spent their lifetimes in the field and who might fear that their academic reputations could suffer if the frontiers of knowledge should advance beyond their own.

Researchers are still coming to terms with the implications of these different histories of connectedness. The linguists James Urry and Michael Walsh, who brought the profound influence of Macassan languages in Yolngu languages (*Yolngu-matha*) to renewed academic attention in 1981, warned that a mere register of loanwords fell far short of comprehending the profound cosmological and cultural changes wrought by Macassan contact (Urry and Walsh 1981; Swain 1993).

Perhaps we are now ready to ask whether Yolngu may have also been on a path of religious conversion. And if they were, how would such a process manifest? The best available comparison is the path to Christian conversion, which is much better documented. Regardless of what people claimed about themselves, Christian missionaries made their own judgements whether mission residents were progressing towards Christianity, and whether someone was deemed ready for baptism. Even asking for baptism was not enough, the request had to be encoded in terms that were recognisably Christian, and had to be supported by certain behaviours. The indicators, in the order in which they are discussed below, incidentally broadly follow the steps of competence from surface to deep learning outlined by modern educators (Biggs and Tang 2011; Biggs and Collis 2014):

(A) A demonstrated eagerness to learn, and the ability to recite prayers and hymns were good initial signs. Beyond this mimicry, any curiosity about the gospel: “How much food will there be in heaven?”; “Did Jesus die for me, too?” (Haviland 1980; Kenny 2007) was even more highly rated. (This loosely corresponds to the uni-structural level of understanding in John Biggs’ SOLO taxonomy, the ability to name, identify and follow simple procedure.)

(B) Creatively representing Christian themes in song, dance, and art

was taken as particularly strong evidence for progress towards Christianity. (In the SOLO taxonomy, this sits between multi-structural competence – to describe, combine, etc. – and relational competence – to apply, contrast, criticize, relate and justify.)

(C) The acceptance of a Christian name, especially if acquired through ritual baptism, indicated a level of Christianisation. (This does not register in Biggs' SOLO taxonomy, but belongs in the category of "changing the way you think", a deep level of learning according to Entwistle and Ramsden 2015.)

(D) Adjusting customs and habits was a required signal. This included attendance at school and church service, dress code, abstention from alcohol and opium, the consumption of introduced, often home-grown staples instead of bush-tucker, participation in economic activities such as gardening, clearing, or the production of goods for consumption or sale, and living arrangements such as residence in the mission compound and particularly the construction of dwellings by males and evidence of housewifery by females, with a competent use of introduced tools and gadgets. Sexual activity had to be confined to the monogamous form of marriage. (This belongs at the deepest level of learning, "changing the way you act", according to Entwistle and Ramsden 2015.)

The "Christianising project" was manifested through indicators that were role-modelled by the missionaries themselves. As a result, "Christianising" and "civilising" were inseparable for the religious, although government support targeted only the latter according to Christine Lockwood's analysis of 2014. Conversion, understood as a voluntary process, was predictably gradual and slow, and often accompanied by relapse. Partial understanding of Christian principles, and partial misrepresentation, were acceptable and it was not expected of a convert to be able to accurately or reliably portray the fullness of Christian meanings, symbols, rituals, and metaphors. Rote learning was therefore highly valued as a means of acquiring a stock of theological knowledge, and acting *like* a Christian was the best way to show that one was a Christian. On a mission the

standard route to baptism, inclusion, approval, and reward, was sheer mimicry of the missionaries. This option was particularly appropriate for displaced children who were separated from the training and role models of traditional societies, which had competing concepts, explanations, behaviours and responses. Christian missionaries thought of children as their most promising targets of intervention.

As far as we know the Macassan seafarers did not come with Muslim proselytizers to attempt Yolngu conversions. They had no key performance indicators of religious conversion like baptism, they did not seek out the children, nor try to reorganize Indigenous societies. Still, if we examine the Yolngu representations of contact with Macassans, the same “outward signs” of conversion congeal into a remarkable signal that a meaningful process was underway. However, it takes a little digging and dusting to unearth such artefacts.

Telling and interpreting stories is an organic activity, just like language itself, so stories naturally change over time. Creative variations may be an attempt to bridge cultural gaps or render details relevant to the listener. For example, an expert in the field of intercultural contact between Yolngu and Macassan people, Ian McIntosh (2011) notes that when Elcho Island Elder David Burrumarra instructed the anthropologist Campbell Macknight after the much-publicized 1969 Apollo landing on the moon (which therefore became the most distant accessible place in the universe), he added that the Bayini (discussed below) came from the moon. Stories and rituals are part of the Indigenous trade and exchange circles, and they change in the process of travelling. They can therefore become contested. An example here is one of the ceremonies used for circumcision, the *Djungguwan*, an epic tale of two sisters, that came from Milingimbi to Yirrkala around 1918 and because of the distance it travelled, lost its precise references to places. By about 1966, when it was performed at Yirrkala, one observer from Milingimbi thought it was all “wrong” (“there are too many poles”) and he left in disgust before the event finished

(McIntosh 2013).

Moreover, public revelations of Macassan allusions are uneven and somewhat controversial, and may incur social penalties. Often works that have known Macassan references are described in art galleries only at their most static level, leaving out explanations that are all too obvious for the initiated, much like Christian symbols such as the cross, the dove, or the fish, or references to places like “Bethlehem” require no particular explanation: their meanings are there for all to see, who see. But even devout Christians may not know the historical origin of the *chi-rho* monogram, or the Greek acronym of the fish, nor is the historically correct reference necessarily relevant: nobody reads the cross as an allusion to a particularly violent form of execution. For all these reasons there will not be a definitive encyclopaedia of Yolngu adaptations of Muslim influences – only some scratching of surfaces.

Type A Indicators: Memorising and Learning Texts

Learning songs from the missionaries was seen as a good indicator of readiness for the gospel. The missionaries at Zion Hill (Brisbane) confidently reported in 1839 that after the first Sunday service, one potential recruit promised that “they would soon sing like us, and we hope earnestly that this may be the case” (Lang Papers: October 1839). It was even supposed that just by singing hymns Indigenous people might be praying without intending to do so. Missionary Arthur Richter at Aurukun (1905) thought:

The people are learning, though slowly, a number of spiritual songs, which they sometimes sing while working or in the bush. Without knowing their real meaning, they often praise their creator without meaning to.

Hymn singing might mean anything from unmindful imitation to deeply expressed faith. A particularly poignant anecdote with regard to singing was recorded at Lombadina in the Kimberley in 1916 where “Damaso buried an old human bone found at Namogon and sang the *Miserere* softly to himself” (Droste Diary: 10 December

1916). Gregorio Allegri's (1582-1652) *Miserere*, composed in the 1630s, was for centuries subject to restrictions about when, where and by whom it could be performed (not unlike Indigenous sacred performances). A highly complex text and tune, one wonders how much would be left of Damaso's mnemonic dexterity if contact with the bearers of that originating culture had been severed for twenty years or more.

In the late 1920s, some twenty years after contact with Macassans had been severed, American anthropologist William Lloyd Warner (1898-1970) recorded a *wuramu* ceremony and transcribed its texts, which he first published in 1937. Speaking neither Arabic nor a Malay nor an Aboriginal language, Warner could only phonetically approximate what he heard. Warner noted that the incantations included appeals to the God in heaven. The text he recorded contains expressions that sound like invocations of Allah and the prophet Mohammed. During a funeral ceremony where a dead body is moved up down as if lifting a mast the accompanying chant is

Oh-a-ha-la!

and afterwards

A-ha-la!! A-ha-la!!

Si-li-la-mo-ha-mo, ha-mo-sil-li-li

and ending with "Ser-ri ma-kas-si" (Warner 420). The latter is clearly derived from *terima kasih* – "thank you" in several Malay languages. But the first part of that line is not unlike the Arabic *shahada* (taken from *Religion Facts*):

La ilaha illa Allah wa-Muhammad rasul Allah.

(There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God.)

Given the time elapsed since the phrase was last heard, and the approximation introduced by Warner into the transcription, this *manikay* line might be minimally understood as an attempt to

reproduce what was heard, and needs to be read with some latitude for transcription error. Warner transcribed another line from the *manikay* as:

ra-bin-a-la la-ha-ma-ha-ma

This is very similar to one of the lines in the *Salat* (daily prayer) intoned while standing up:

rabbana lakal hamd

Even as late as the 1980s – eighty years after last contact – David Burrumarra told Ian McIntosh (1996a:7) how at the departure of the fleet at the end of the season the “sick man” (muezzin) would chant from the top of the mast, and at sunset resounding

ama

towards the setting sun, then bow his head to the ground and exclaim:

walata’walata!

The prayer conclusion of Amen or Āmīn suggests itself for the “ama”. Moreover, the *Al-Fatihah*, the first *sura* of the *Qur’an*, which is included in the *mahgrib* (sunset prayer), ends with

‘alayhim walā ḍ-ḍāllīn

The last audible syllables here sound like “walada-lin” and could well be related to the “walata” recorded by McIntosh. The “wala” syllable occurs in various Arabic prayers, such as the *Bismillah* (eating prayer):

Bismillahi awwalahu wa akhirahu

(In the Name of God at the beginning and at the end)

Ethnomusicologist Peter Toner (22) detects traces of classical Arabic religious music in the *wuramu manikay* (song cycle) genre cited above. He finds that Yolngu singers improvise with sacred texts, and among the important symbols are icons of Macassan contact like ship, anchor, sword and flag. This is not altogether surprising, since historically the *wuramu* song cycle is thought to derive from a ritual performed by Macassans at Cape Wilberforce for the burial of a group of Aborigines (McIntosh 1996b:70). However, its meaning has been reworked to blend Yolngu beliefs and Macassan rituals. This reworking results in multiple layers of meaning attached to the *wuramu manikay*, so each explanation is only partial. McIntosh observed that the *wuramu* song cycle refers to the law of Walitha'walitha, a creation spirit sometimes translated as "the most high God", or Allah. McIntosh (1996b) describes the ritual as extending over several days containing imagery reminiscent of exchanges with Macassans, such as a flag dance, a knife dance, a lung[g]urrma dance, a boxing dance, a smoking dance, an alcohol dance (dancers feigning intoxication while comically trying to wrestle and dance at the same time). The ritual also contains storytelling elements brought back by Yolngu who had spent time in Makassar, such as reminiscences of rice paddies, ship building and lily-ponds (McIntosh 1996b).

Remembering and using specialized terms is an important foundation for the acquisition of knowledge in any discipline. Yolngu elders have often demonstrated their familiarity with the specialised knowledge derived from Macassan contact. An informant for Berndt and Berndt in 1947 rendered 43 specialised expressions in relation to work on the Macassan boats, including fifteen terms for parts of the ship, six relating to firearms, and fourteen terms relating to food and cooking, such as *gwula*, for syrup, clearly related to *gula*, the Indonesian word for sugar (Berndt collection Nr. 7246, Mawulan, aka Mawalan Marika).

These terms, like the musical influences detected by the Australian ethnomusicologist Peter Toner and the dances mentioned by McIntosh, remain at a material rather than cosmological level of contact, and merely demonstrate remembering. The phrases recorded from the *wuramu* song cycle look like Yolngu were seeking to remember what the Macassans were chanting. But what does it mean to them to remember such phrases? And if it means nothing more than the ability to remember, why were such things “turned inside” in the mission period? Some deeper meanings have been suppressed, and the higher level ritual language, strongly inflected with a form of Malay or Macassan, is confined to respected knowledge bearers (Terry Yumbulul 1995). For instance, during an interview at Yirrkala in 1995, Rarriwuy Marika, who acted as interpreter, declined to repeat the ritual words spoken in that language by Bawurr Munykarryun. She preferred to circumscribe the expression with “that word he just said”, an avoidance that could have any number of reasons. In 1986 her father Wandjuk Marika had told the historian Peter Spillett a whole verse in ritual language, which appears in his unpublished paper (16). This ritual language is the disappearing preserve of the highly learned, much like Latin among Western *literati*.

Type B Indicators: Creative Representation

Missionaries used images to convey biblical stories and European social norms, in the form of prints, lantern slides, photographs, and classroom drawings. At the newly established Aurukun mission, for example,

The instructions commence, as in Mapoon, with a bible story, illustrated by some pretty and colourful images, which are sent to us by friends in the south (Richter 1905).

The missionaries felt that pictures spoke for themselves. But not always were they convinced that their pupils could decipher them correctly. Rev. Arthur Richter of Aurukun warned that:

everything they see on pictures appears new to them. They have to learn to look at pictures. Oh, how much preparatory work is often associated with discouragement and disappointment, how much patience and endurance seems required to bring them to the level on which even a poor heathen negro or [American] Indian naturally operates (Richter 1905).

All the more joyously did missionaries respond to Indigenous forms of representing Christian themes, especially if they involved symbolic imagery. Near Brisbane on Stradbroke Island in May 1843 Bishop Polding noticed that a cross had already been cut into the bark of a tree (Moran 1895:227). Unaware that this may be a traditional symbol, Polding felt it augured well for the new mission. (Incidentally he had also received an unmistakable sign from higher authority in the form of a comet pointing to the very spot where he had planned to locate the mission in 1843.) His Swiss and Italian missionaries accomplished nothing and fled the island three years later.

More than a century later on the opposite side of the continent, Balgo dancers with crosses gleaming from their conical ceremonial headgear appeared in the flickering fire glow for the Pentecostal celebration for which Kimberley artists produced paintings incorporating doves and tongues of flame with Indigenous designs. Their pregnant Virgin Mary took the form of a *wandjina* figure typical of the Kimberley. All these things may be read as evidence of an active engagement with the messages conveyed – ignoring the note of caricature introduced by the young Balgo dancers at the end of the performance, who used walking sticks to imitate their old German missionary (Kriener 2011). “Outward signs” can be ambiguous, symbols like the cross can be over-interpreted.

In the 1980s the German Catholic missionaries in the Kimberley encouraged painting as a way of representing ideas and commemorating occasions. The Australian Catholic Bishops’ conference of 1978 had adopted a five-year trial of “inculturation of the liturgy” under pressure from state and federal governments that sought to ease them out of the anachronistic mission era. This

Inculturation policy allowed mass to be held in one or more local languages. It was an effort to approximate each other's ontologies, rituals and symbols to allow the emergence of an Indigenous church, on the strength of a shared commitment to metaphysics (Luemmen and Nailon 63-64). This engagement required some significant concessions from the missionaries.

The community art of the 1980s captured in the albums of Fr. Werner Kriener includes a large landscape painting representing the "most important influences in the region": pearling, natural phenomena, natural resources and the mission. One painting assembles icons of the Kimberley – barramundi, mud crab, boab, and saltwater crocodile – to identify the group sitting by a campfire as Kimberley people. The group is visited by the Holy Spirit in the form of seven tongues of flame.

These images might be showing many things besides Christian imagery, – they might merely depict the Kimberley people (identified by local icons) speaking many tongues given to them by their spirit beings. For example, the Beagle Bay church may denote a place for strangers, or the site of a significant community achievement in the form of its famous shell-decorated altar. However the late Father Werner Kriener, who treasured these images in his photo-albums, was there long enough to see many of them grow up, and he heard the artists explain what they *meant* with their images.

Precisely these interpretations from the artists themselves are inaccessible for much of the rock art at the Top End that show images of Macassan *praus* (from the Malay *perahu* for boat). Historians, anthropologists and archaeologists have used these to demonstrate the long association between Macassan seafarers and Yolngu people (Taçon and May; Clarke and Frederick 2008). But – to heed the warning of Rev. Richter – do we have to "learn to look at these pictures"? Do they "require some preparatory work to bring us to a level" at which perhaps Indigenous people of the world "naturally operate"? If we see these representations as empirical

measures of history, perhaps we are missing the more important message?

Such images are not just material representations of contact, they are also behavioural evidence of engagement with the intention to convey meaning. Perhaps the artists meant to report or record something they saw, or something they did, or something that someone else did. Maybe they awaited, longed for, or remembered something. Maybe they commemorated a separation, or a journey, or an arrival. Or maybe they used an image as a mnemonic device, perhaps for different parts of a ship, or a language. Whatever the intention, there must be meaning attached to the image, and there must be a purpose attached to the act of drawing. Like the cross carved into a tree at Stradbroke Island in the 1840s, the image alone does not signify either religious or secular symbolism, nor can that symbolism be discounted *prima facie*.

The ubiquitous Macassan *prau* is merely the most self-evident and unmistakable symbolic representation referring to Macassan contact. Another basic Yolngu symbol that alludes to Macassan contact is the *darabu* pattern, composed of pennant-shaped triangles like the ensign flags displayed on the former Dutch-licensed Macassan *praus*. Such patterns are also said to be reminiscent of the fabric patterns worn by Macassan captains. *Darabu* also refers to writing in general (the encoded visual representation of precise meanings) and slight variations in the pattern indicate different dialect groups. (For example compare Berndt Collection Item 931 by Mambur (aka Mick Marambur) and Artnet 'Rock of Tears' by George Ganyjibala, 1997.)

The *darabu* pattern is used to signify the two major seasons expressed as clouds or winds. These two seasons governed Yolngu lives as much as the Macassan journeys: *lung[g]urrma*, the northerly wind, bringing the wet season and the Macassans, and *bulunu*, the south-easterly bringing the dry season and heralding their departure. Whenever these winds or seasons are represented,

they also at some level invoke what we might call “Macassan Dreaming”:

The grief felt when Macassan trepangers departed back to Sulawesi with *bulunu* (the south east winds of the early dry season) is equated with someone’s death. The return of the Macassans with *lunggurrma* (the northerly monsoon winds of the approaching wet) is an analogy to the rebirth of the spirit following appropriate mortuary ritual (Marrawilli 2001).

The *darabu* pattern also occurs on the carved *wuramu* figures produced during the research visit of Catherine and Ronald Berndt in the 1940s. According to these two well-known Australian anthropologists, the *wuramu* figures are characteristic of Macassan contact. Some of them represent Macassans, others Dutchmen and ‘crook men’ or customs officials encountered on trepang voyages and visits to Makassar. One such *wuramu* figure, representing a ‘collection man’ passed through the camp of onlookers to pick up anything he fancied (Berndt and Berndt 1954:265ff; Berndt 1964:403ff). This ‘collection man’ behaviour is reminiscent of the behaviour of a customs official picking over a trepang boat. Indeed the Collector of Customs stationed at Port Essington to police the Macassan traders, confiscated articles from the Macassan boats according to ever-changing rules. Among other things the Collector of Customs Edward Robinson collected large stocks of arrak for his personal store (Ganter 2006:22ff).

This ‘collection man’ *wuramu* figure seems like a caricature. Sigmund Freud’s (1905) analysis of humour points out that the joke functions to process conflict and suppress (negative) emotions. For it to work, joke tellers must not laugh at their own joke because it is the shared cultural understandings (revealed by the appropriate response) that create a bond between teller and audience. Freud clearly underplays the way in which cultural boundaries are maintained by the social process of ‘sharing a joke’. In my migrant experience humour is among the most intractable cultural conventions defining who belongs, and who is outside, and from my interactions with Aboriginal people since 1980 I find that humour is

a very important cultural convention and an effective subversion of power relations.

Another icon for Macassan contact is the outline of the characteristic *prau* sail. The Madarrpa clan has adopted this symbol to represent an important place, a safe all-weather harbour on Marrngarr clan territory and an old Macassan trepang site called Garra Mangalay. This Yolngu word derives from the Macassan name *Karaeng Mangellai* (King Mangellai) and at the turn of the century the harbour site was used by a direct descendant of Mangellai, the Macassan captain Hussein Daeng Ranka. It owes its English name, Gray's Bay to the later trepang camp of Fred Gray. Garra Mangalay as a place has ecological, historical, and cultural significance. It can be likened in the Christian tradition to Mount Olive, with defined historical and symbolic significance that does not require elaboration.

This symbol, the outline of the *prau* sail, frames a painting by Barulankay Marrawilli, an account of a boat journey. The description explains that a fleet of three *lipa-lipa* (sailing canoes with characteristic sail) travel together from the artist's home of Yathikpa beach in Blue Mud Bay to Ayalangula beach on Groote Eylandt, via Round Hill Island, then Woodah Island and Bickerton Island (all these places have Macassan allusions). At each section of the journey we see the currents, the sea- and birdlife, including tern nesting places, turtle, mackerel, tuna, giant trevally and trout. One person sitting in the back holds the paddle, the other in the middle the *baya-baya* (forked rope) and the one in front the *luluna* (straight rope). Marrawilli's work combines place-based ontology (Swain 1993) with a proficiency in Macassan maritime technology.

In the words of the Indigenous theorist Karen Martin (2003), it enfolds the outsider. It blurs any analytical boundaries between a traditional Yolngu story and a historical reference to Macassan contact. Marrawilli's explanation alludes to deeper levels of association embedded in the image through the shorthand of symbolism. Precisely such explanations are missing from more

ancient rock art that is inaccessible to oral history, so that we are left staring at the outlines of an old Macassan *prau*. We have to learn to look at these pictures.

Type C Indicators: Adoption of Names

The adoption of a name is a public announcement of identity, such as the adoption of a spouse's name upon marriage. The Yolngu naming system shows some elements of Macassan names, such as the 'Dayng-' or 'Dein-' which prefixes some Yolngu names, deriving from the Macassan title of *Daeng*, or the 'Christian' name Terry which derives from *Terijini*, the label by which the 'sea gypsies' of Sulawesi refer to themselves (Terry Yumbulul 1995).

One such name bestowal is narrated in a Milngimbi school text, used to teach *Yolngu-matha*, called "The Last Visit of the Macassans" (*Dhä-dhuditjpuu Mangatharra*). [In the following account the names in brackets were recovered by C. C. Macknight from the Australian customs records and fieldwork in Sulawesi.] Told by Djäwa, the story relates how as a young boy he and his uncle, fishing at the shore, were visited by the Macassan captain Gätjing (Daeng Gassing) on his last journey to Arnhem Land. As a final farewell gesture Gassing gave the young boy the Macassan name "Mangalay" (Mangellai). At this point the storyteller points out – almost as if it were an aside – that there is also a far-away place called "Garra-Mangalay". Captain Gassing tells young Djäwa to make sure to tell his mother and his father, and everyone, that he now has the Macassan name "Mangellai".

Recording this story for use in schools is the ultimate fulfilment of that promise. With each telling of the story Djäwa affirmed the relationship embodied in that final gesture. His Macassan name links him with a place, the trepang station of Hussein Daeng Ranka, who is the brother-in-law of Daeng Gassing. It also connects him with this Macassan family, because Daeng Ranka had a son and an ancestor called Mangellai. The story incantation affirms for Djäwa the status as a son of Daeng Ranka, much like the recital of a Credo

affirms the Catholic speaker's faith in certain connections and meanings.

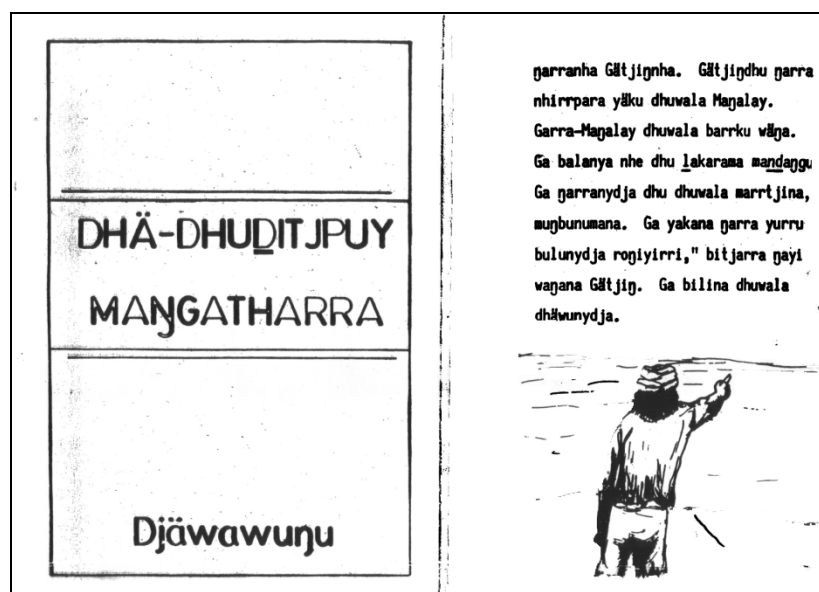


Fig. 1. The first and last page of the Milngimbi school text based on the story of Djäwa, showing the Yolngu storyteller himself as a boy farewelling the last Macassan captain, presumably in 1907. Djäwa's headgear as represented in this image functions as an allusion to his acceptance of a Macassan name and family in this encounter

The public bestowal of a name is a central ritual in the adoption into the Christian church. The so-called 'first sacrament' is usually performed in the presence of a sponsor (or God-parent). According to the *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, baptism "does not require a person to observe the whole law of Christ", and they are "not obliged to observe all the precepts of the Church, written and traditional". The initiation is executed "in the name of the father and of the son" (and of the holy spirit) and means the adoption as a 'son of God'. Baptism, with the bestowal of a suitable name, is also considered "the door of the church", a first step, in the *Catholic Encyclopaedia*. Djäwa's story offers remarkable parallels – the uncle present to witness, the name bestowed, the invocation of father and son relationships, the public dimension of the ritual.

Djäwa's story was recorded at Milngimbi in 1979, a time when missionary influence was already waning and the outstation movement was reasserting Indigenous sovereignty. McIntosh explains that the 1980s saw a revival of stories about Macassan contact, that had been "turned inside" during the mission period, not

only hidden from strangers but also from younger generations (McIntosh 2011). Djäwa's story might be read as a reaffirmation of prior connections that uses the symbolic narrative of Christians to produce meaning.

Type D Indicators: Customs and Habits

As early as 1767 the Scottish geographer Alexander Dalrymple (1767:92) referred to Aborigines of the north coast as "Mahometans". Dalrymple (1737-1808) gives no explanation for this assumption, other than having commerce with "Bugis". He also referred to many other peoples in the Malay archipelago as "Mahometans", in all of which cases he was either correct or proven correct by later developments. Charles Campbell Macknight (1976), the foremost historian of the trepang trade to north Australia, thinks that the practice of circumcision may have led Dalrymple to this conclusion. After all, circumcision has been understood as the most infallible "outward sign" of religion since at least the first century. Matthew Flinders observed what he interpreted as the "Jewish and Mahometan rite of circumcision" at Caledon Bay in 1803 (Flinders: 9 February 1803).

Indeed, there are various connections between circumcision ceremonies and Macassan contact. In north-central Arnhem Land the Ganalbingu group uses the Lungurrma design (north wind, associated with the arrival of Macassans) for circumcision ceremonies, according to the late senior artist Johnny Bulunbulun. During the mid-twentieth century ethnographers observed that the practice of circumcision was newly acquired in many regions. Birdsell (1953) and Berndt (1964) use Tindale (1940) as a baseline to suppose that in most inland areas circumcision and sub-incision was practised, whereas in north-east Arnhem Land and along parts of the Western Australian coast only circumcision was practised. There is no conclusive evidence that this practice spread from the north, or displaced sub-incision, but certainly a shared cultural practice such as this presents a commonality with Muslim outsiders and a point of difference from Christian outsiders.

Another deep cultural affinity was the shared cultural practice of polygamy. Polygamy was widely practiced in pre-contact Australia and became a major source of resistance to mission rule, the “chief evil” for Christian missionaries (Ganter 1999). Roman Catholic Father F. X. Gsell was only able to obtain permission of Tiwi parents to bring young girls into the mission in exchange for a gift of money to the parents, so that he was referred to locally as the “Bishop with the 150 wives”, as if he had succumbed to Indigenous views on marriage. Shared marriage customs facilitated family formation across the Arafura Sea, resulting in many stories of Macassan/Aboriginal marriages in Australia and Makassar (Ganter 2006: Chapter 3). The Methodist (later: Uniting Church) Reverend Djiniyini Gondarra from Elcho Island related how his brother Danyjati visited Kampung Maluku in Makassar, Lailai Island, Lumbu Kassati and was greeted as family. Another well-known story is the one of Djalajari (or Djalatjirri), who formed a family in Makassar, first recorded by the Berndts. When Djalajari’s son Bawurr met me at Yirrkala it could have been no coincidence that he was smoking a ‘Macassan pipe’ during our interview. It was a visible sign affirming his connectedness to Makassar.



Fig. 2. Bawurr Munykarryun, Elder of Yirrkala smoking a ‘Macassan pipe’. His father had three children in Makassar. Photo/© by R. Ganter, 1995.

Berndt and Berndt observed that the so-called 'Macassan pipe' was another piece of unique culture stemming from culture contact:

Another object peculiar to Arnhem Land is the 'Macassan' pipe, from one to four feet (about thirty centimetres to over a metre) long, and usually in the form the pithy stem of the *lungin* (pipe) bush. It is scraped clean and smooth, the mouthpiece tapered and ridged, and the whole covered with red ochre. (Berndt and Berndt 1964/1999:503)

Maggie Brady points out that pipe smoking was not customary among the Macassan crews, who were more likely to chew tobacco with or without betel nut. The long straight pipe now known as a 'Macassan pipe' was an adaptation of the Chinese opium pipe, initially used for smoking tobacco laced with opium ('madak'). Maggie Brady (2013) thinks that the pipe must have been introduced by Yolngu men returning from Makassar – men like Bawurr's father Djalajari. The local *pituri* tobacco, traded along major Indigenous trading tracks, was widely available for chewing with ash or smoking according to Dale Kerwin (2012). Such shared habits also formed a cultural affinity.

Another strong marker of culture and faith is dress code. Christian missionaries insisted on covering the body with dresses and pants to express Christian decency. Yolngu adopted pants, shirt and dress but retained their minimal headgear in various styles of red headband. Christian missions never encouraged the wearing of hats or priests' birettas, because headgear is not amenable to imitation – it is the most visible signifier of social status and often the most outward expression of a social role. The *wuramu* figures in the Berndt collection are topped by a *songkok*, or fez – unmistakably representing a Muslim Malay. A photograph in Berndt (1964:269, plate 23) shows a dancer wearing a tied headscarf reminiscent of the traditional Malay *tanjak*, a piece of folded (and often reinforced) fabric. A similar headgear is worn by the Yolngu boy Djäwa, drawn on the last page of the Milngimbi school text "The Last Visit of the Macassans". How close is the identification when the headgear is adopted?

Missionaries placed great emphasis on observing how closely the minute customs and habits of mission residents mirrored their own, such as sitting on chairs, the dexterous use of cutlery, hair combing and plaiting, and all manner of housewifery such as sweeping, dusting, laundering, arranging dishes on shelves, or handyman work such as furniture making, and particularly house building. At Mapoon on Cape York Reverend Nicholas Hey made it a condition of marriage for the groom to build a house first. At the Moravian mission Ebenezer in Victoria, the first convert, Nathaniel Pepper, built a one-roomed cottage for himself that became a solid symbol of conversion and news about it was widely circulated. Robert Kenny comments on this wooden hut in 2007:

Its prominence in the engraving I had seen at Herrnhut [the mission society headquarters in Germany] was only one indicator of the importance given to it. It was this hut that had first brought Pepper and his friend Boney to the attention of the missionaries. The hut had also featured heavily in the early dispatches of Ellerman, Spieseke and Gillespie from the missionary front. (64)

Coming to live at or near a mission was also an encouraging sign that Aboriginal people were ready to hear the gospel, although they sometimes expressed that they had heard “enough already”. Pastor Gottfried Hausmann at Beenleigh near Brisbane found in the 1850s that

when I spoke to them of God, they replied, they knew all about God still because I had spoken to them about God some years ago and they have not yet forgotten it. (Hausmann: 10 July 1855)

Hausmann took this as an encouraging sign that “They do retain in their language what they have heard of God”. But did they want to hear it again? At Hopevale in north Queensland it was put more bluntly. If Pastor Georg Pfalzer’s sermons went on for too long, someone might interrupt with the suggestion, “do you want us to chop some wood, or dig the garden?”, or more to the point, “are we getting something to eat now?” (Pfalzer 1887:55).

Missionaries tended to think that the more mission residents engaged voluntarily in digging wells, clearing scrub, planting gardens, watering plants, weeding, hoeing and using the appropriate tools, the more hopeful were the prospects for their soul – whether or not the residents performed these tasks in order to obtain food and rations. Hausmann at Beenleigh expressed the hope that “Jacky” (Bilinba or Bilinbilin) might become his “first fruit”, the first baptismal candidate in Queensland because he diligently attended services and lessons. Another viewpoint claims that this man “charged the Lutheran missionary 5/- per week to sit and discuss religion with the tribe” (Steele 81).

Yolngu people also volunteered to engage in the economic activities of the Macassans. They collected firewood, carried water, helped to gather trepang, and traded food. Their motivations may have been very much like those of early mission residents – material and social advantages and a good deal of curiosity, including interest in spiritual matters. Some cultural elements may be taken as shared between the polyglot Macassans and the Yolngu, such as attending to spirits, giving gifts, storytelling through dance, polygamous marriage, circumcision, chewing tobacco or the custom of sitting on the floor. But there are also signs of cultural adaptation. The most evident is a profusion of Macassan loan words in *Yolngu-matha*, which linguists have so far examined only as a one-way influence (e.g. Urry and Walsh 1981; Walker and Zorc 1981; Evans 1992; Evans 1997).

The bestowal and acceptance of names, relocating camps to Macassan sites of activity (as documented at Groote Eylandt by Clarke in the year 2000), participating in their economic activities, observing and attending Macassan rituals with such interest as to be able to re-tell them, adapting tastes to Macassan articles of consumption, representing them in images, songs, dances, and showing an eagerness to learn from and about them – these are all behaviours that Christian missionaries would have rated highly as so-called “outward signs” of conversion.

Outward Signs of Conversion of the Stranger

The process is clearly more complicated than something that can be read off “outward signs”. In the conquest of new territory, the religion itself gets transformed, just as myths or rituals change some of their meaning when they travel. We need only to think of the emergence of European Christianity that blended local practices with those from the Near East, where the bitter gum of the thornbush (myrrh) was used for medicinal purposes, or from Egypt, where Jewish expatriates learned the ritual of burning the resin of the *Boswellia* tree (frankincense). The burning of these substances as incense was transposed into the Catholic Church in about the eleventh century, the smoke now creatively interpreted as symbolising the rising prayer:

Incense, with its sweet-smelling perfume and high-ascending smoke, is typical of the good Christian's prayer, which, enkindled in the heart by the fire of God's love and exhaling the odour of Christ, rises up a pleasing offering in His sight.

(*The Catholic Encyclopaedia* <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07716a.htm>)

Rituals are dynamic and adaptable. Fasting during the forty days of Lent, for instance, underwent a series of re-interpretations in the Catholic Church from complete abstention, to eating but once a day, to some minimal food taboos, to merely abstaining from gluttony. According to the *Catholic Encyclopaedia* “No student of ecclesiastical discipline can fail to perceive that the obligation of fasting is rarely observed in its integrity nowadays.”

(www.newadvent.org/cathen/05789c.htm)

Ritual adaptations were also made in the Australian missions such as when missionaries performed the Eucharist under the shade of a tree, perhaps with an old table serving as altar and a decorated plastic bucket as baptismal font. In Fr. Kriener's album we see the Catholic priest replacing the biretta with a traditional red head-band, so that now the stranger shows “outward signs of conversion”.

Indeed cultural adaptation is unlikely to be an entirely one-sided process (Ganter 2006). The enthusiastic participation of the large Warmun (Turkey Creek) community in the Easter Passion play in the mid 1980s documented in that album was preceded by about eight days of fasting and accompanied by a smoke cleansing ceremony, both elements of local funerary rites. After its resurrection from the grave the symbolic body of Christ was laid out on a tree to signify the imminent tree burial.



Fig. 3. The German Pallottines Fr. Werner Kriener wearing a red head band, and Bishop John Jobst accepting gifts at the Beagle Bay Centenary 2001.

©Courtesy of Archives of the Pallottine Community, Rossmoyne.

The story was enacted through much dancing. It had to start in the small hours of the morning because the whole event had to be over and done with before the Halls Creek horse races began at ten o'clock – a competing cultural activity (Kriener 2011). Warmun people embraced, adapted and re-invented the Easter Passion in a process of transculturation. It is difficult to tell whether they were participating in a Christian ritual, or Fr. Kriener was participating in a local one.

An insistence on reciprocity shimmers just below the surface of missionary accounts from the earliest period. Many missionary anecdotes suggest, often with incredulity, that local diplomats trained missionaries to behave appropriately, frequently by teasing.

For example, at Zion Hill mission in the 1840s some local men adopted the missionary pioneers as brothers, travelled with them and encouraged them to attend festivals. During an excursion to a gathering at Toorbul (north of Brisbane town), Anbaybury challenged his adopted brother missionary Wagner by reminding him that back at the mission he did everything for Wagner – fetching wood and water, preparing clay, chopping wood, hoeing the ground – and therefore now at Toorbul it was perhaps time that Wagner did the same for him (Eipper: 2 August 1841). There is no doubt that the missionaries – who always understood themselves as the teachers of culture – learned many things from their Indigenous congregations. At the beginning of the mission period in Queensland, a visitor claimed about the Stradbroke Island missionaries that after four years they “had accomplished nothing except to learn how to hunt wild animals and to fish (andare alla caccia, alla pesca, etc.)” (Barberi, 17 April 1849 in: Thorpe 205). At the end of the mission era, missionary Geraldine MacKenzie at Aurukun frankly declared that “I had gone to teach but stayed to learn” (Cruickshank and Grimshaw).

Cultural anthropologist Howard Morphy in 2005 posited a process of mutual conversion between Yolngu and the Methodist ministers at Elcho Island. During the Adjustment Movement of the 1950s at Elcho Islanders erected a structure next to the church to house bark paintings representing various clans and ritual objects. Morphy interprets this as follows:

they were among the clans’ most valuable property, objects of ritual power, and in Yolngu terms the most important things they had to give. The intention of the leaders ... was not to reduce the power of the objects by releasing them from their shroud of secrecy but to assert to Europeans that Yolngu too had objects of great spiritual power and that they were willing to open these up to Europeans if Europeans were willing to reciprocate. (Morphy 1991:19)

At a minimum, the Yolngu were establishing a relationship between their own sources of power and the Christian Church with its sacred objects. If this was not a sign of conversion it was certainly an

opening of a conversation. Similarly, their commemorations of Macassan contact reach deeper than the observable material veneer. Ian McIntosh writes that

Yolngu view the history and legacy of trepanning not just through the narrow lens of tamarind trees, pottery shards and the years 1780-1907, but rather through an entirely different and sacred lens. (McIntosh 2013:13)

This lens also directs their view of Christian contact. The Elcho Island church is located, by mutual consent, on a sacred site, and its walls contain special rocks (*bilma*) that are connected with the Yirrtja and Dhuwa moieties:

it is said that one of the stone “bilma” or clap-stick *rangga* placed in the church wall replicated itself in the landscape of its own volition. As it was removed from the ground by Yolngu Christians another moved upwards to replace it. This was a powerful statement for ... the notion that the new was grounded in the old, and that the old could never vanish entirely from the world. (McIntosh 2011:50)

This is a powerful dynamic between tradition and Christianity that adopts, adapts and embraces new concepts but stops short of conversion. This cannot be read off the material itself, it requires interpretation from those who construct that meaning.

Conversion or Conversation?

McIntosh gained his insights from years of collaboration with David Burrumarra, who in turn was a close relative of mission elder Harry Makarrwola [referred to as Mahkarolla by Lloyd Warner, and as Magarwala by the Berndts, e.g. Berndt Collection, Item Nr. 438]. In the 1920s Makarrwola spoke of *walitha'walitha* as the supreme god (Allah) but “was struggling with what to disclose on this topic” (McIntosh 2011:3). As the missions were gaining momentum, certain dimensions of Macassan contact history were withheld from researchers and from younger members of the community. According to historian Geoffrey Gray (2007) fuel was added to the

fire when the Bayini artefacts collected by the Berndts were displayed in a Sydney gallery.

Bayini stories, referring to deep-time contact with “pre-Macassans”, including “golden-skinned” women, have confused those seeking to understand them historically, because they were not historical in nature and perhaps were not fully revealed. McIntosh speculates that they were seen as conflicting with Christian teachings and finds that the information given about the Bayini changed considerably over time. During the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land in 1948 Charles Percy Mountford garnered a “jumbled mix of myth and history”, Catherine Berndt collected references to Bayini women in the 1950s, and in the late 1980s David Burrumarra disclosed the concept of Birrinydji, the more powerful and more secret male partner of the female Bayini, who brought the law long before the missionaries arrived. McIntosh sees this “Dreaming Macassan” as a way of resolving the tension between tradition and the growing strength of Christian beliefs in the Yolngu community: Christianity was not a new religion but an old Yolngu law (McIntosh 2006). Some Aranda at Hermannsburg, and people from the former Kimberley missions, have reached the same conclusion: the missionaries did not bring God, “God was here before the missionaries” (Matthews et al. 2003). The Yolngu had an even more complex spiritual and historical road to navigate than people who had no major exposure to Islam. McIntosh explains the function of this “Dreaming Macassan” creation figure, which opened the possibility that “God was a product of the Dreaming” (2011:6). McIntosh emphasizes that Bayini stories reflect much about perceived power imbalances and are fluid rather than static.

Oral culture not only undergoes changes through time, it also has regional variations (see also Kenny 2007:50). More recently, in 2013, Rebecca Bilous found a local version of the Bayini stories at Bawaka, which emphasises its relationship with that particular site. On the Finke River at Hermannsburg (Ntaria) the “footprints of Jesus” belong to the same phenomenon of indigenising the foreign by attaching it to a place.

The cultural disruption that ensued from the cessation of Macassan contact in 1906 required the reinterpretation of cultural practices in a society that was in a process of conversation with Islam. By the time Christian missionaries arrived, the Yolngu were already prepared for accommodating foreigners and their beliefs, including dealing with an ontology of time that is linear, a language fastened to writing, and the notion of a supreme God, as Anne Clarke (2000) points out. They had already developed ways of establishing a dialogue between such ideas and their own traditions, and opened themselves up to the spiritual enrichment and the material advantages to be gained from entering into a conversation.

In the process of revealing knowledge that had been “turned inside”, David Burrumarra helped to forge a pan-Yolngu Christian identity capable of following Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal laws (McIntosh 2006). This break-through concept, like that of a “Dreaming Macassan”, strikes a dialectical synthesis, something completely new, out of the tension between the traditional and the imported discourses.

The “outwards signs of conversion” from which this essay started out are constantly undermined with suggestions that they may be superficial: when the Balgo dancers caricatured the old missionary; when the Turrbal people said they knew all about God still because they heard it some years ago; when the Guugu Yalanji at Hopevale interrupted the sermon with the offer to dig the garden. Conversely, we can equally detect such “signs of conversion” in the missionaries (Ganter 2017b). It is by no means clear to what degree representations of Macassans, such as the *wuramu* figures or the song lines recorded by Warner, were caricature or dispassionate historical record, or sincere efforts to reproduce meaning, like Damaso’s intonation of the *Miserere*.

These material and behavioural signs of conversion are merely suggestive, indicative, symptomatic, and yet they were the only guiding principles for Christian missionaries in their judgements

about the interior world of their congregations. Using the same register of signals strongly supports the notion that the Yolngu people had entered into a conversation with Muslim life-worlds when this historical process was interrupted by British colonisation.

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