



## Muslim Australians: the deep histories of contact

Regina Ganter

To cite this article: Regina Ganter (2008) Muslim Australians: the deep histories of contact, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 32:4, 481-492, DOI: [10.1080/14443050802471384](https://doi.org/10.1080/14443050802471384)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14443050802471384>



Published online: 05 Nov 2008.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 741



Citing articles: 9 View citing articles [↗](#)

## Muslim Australians: the deep histories of contact

Regina Ganter

*Griffith University*

Muslims are now arguably the most widely debated and feared segment of the Australian community but they are also its most long-standing non-indigenous segment. In Australia we are able to draw on a long and primarily positive contact history between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians that makes nonsense of the paranoid nationalism with which the Howard government wanted to protect a way of life from ‘recent invaders’. There are deep histories underlying some of the highly debated ‘border control’ phenomena such the *Tampa* refugees and ‘Timorese poachers’. The way we understand our histories also shapes the way in which we can imagine our futures and the fantasy of a white Australian history does not stand up to historical investigation.

**Keywords:** Muslims in Australia; Aboriginal history; Asian-Aboriginal history; border control

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Since the political bankruptcy of the idea of race after the end of World War II, public discourse of significant differences between peoples has been twice revamped. As natural science proclaimed ‘there is no race’, the discourse of systematic difference was rescued through the idea of ethnicity and nationality, until more recently religion has come to be the new great divide between peoples presumably acting out an age-old ‘clash of civilisations’.<sup>2</sup> All of these terms have been put to effective use in defining distinctions for which blood may be shed, without actually erasing older conceptual distinctions such as ‘white’ and ‘black’.

The reconfiguration towards religious difference in public discourse presents an interesting challenge to Australian historians (who have tended to ignore the admonitions of older historians of white Australia, that religion is of fundamental importance for understanding the past) because having anchored our history on ideas of race, ethnicity and nation, it is all the more difficult to effectively decipher the history of religious groups. Thus the historical phenomena of Malays, Afghans, and Macassans in Australia are rarely read together as the history of Muslims here. Once we assemble the diverse histories of these marginal groups into a single narrative, however, a long, strong, and still relevant history of the presence in Australia of a religious group emerges which derives its salience from the way in which Australian Muslims are now externally identified primarily through the prism of religion, and indeed appear to self-identify on that basis.

Within the first few years of the new millennium Muslims have become the most widely debated and feared segment of the Australian community. The trajectory of this view picked up with the First Gulf War (Iraqi invasion of Kuwait 1990–91) and became quickly firmed in the Howard government’s stance against (mostly Muslim) asylum seekers. This erupted in international news when the *Tampa* was refused entry to the Australian immigration zone in August 2001. In the following month the September 11 attacks brought about a hardening

of attitudes and Australia aligned itself more closely with the aggressive foreign policy of the Bush administration, for which the Bali bombing in October 2002 was widely understood to be a revenge. By December 2005 white supremacist youths in Cronulla were ready to attack Lebanese Australians at the site of a memorial for six local victims of the Bali bombing, sparking a prolonged race riot. Anti-Muslim sentiment had gradually gelled over a series of gang-rapes by young Middle Eastern men, and Sheikh Taj Din al-Hilali ensured his demise as Australian mufti with ill-considered remarks about Australian women in October 2006. The deception and malpractice of a single individual, Dr Jayant Patel, who became famous as 'Dr Death' in May 2005, severely dented the image of foreign-trained doctors in Australia, so that when British investigators of the London and Glasgow bombings in July 2007 expressed interest in interviewing Dr Mohamed Haneef, the Australian media and government recast him within a few hours into a 'major terror suspect'.

The currently dominant narrative of Australian Muslims is highly pejorative, constructing an imagined religious community as backward, violent, latently dangerous, and intrinsically more disposed to terrorism than anyone else.<sup>3</sup> The Howard government actively fostered this attitude ('we wouldn't want such people here'). In 2002 it implemented the Pacific Solution for turning asylum seekers away, in July 2005 it excised important points of entry for refugees from the Australian migration zone,<sup>4</sup> and since October 2007 Australian visa applicants now have to sign an 'Australian values' declaration (unless they are from New Zealand in which case they need not bother).<sup>5</sup> A citizenship test was also implemented, so that aspirants now need to know whether Australians refer to their swimsuits as bummies, budgie smugglers, toggie batties, swimmy budgers, or sossies, exceeding in banality any of the questions in the citizenship test introduced in the UK in November 2005 or in the US in November 2006.<sup>6</sup>

The 'paranoid nationalism' with which the Howard government fed negative images of Muslims, thrives on the idea of the need to protect a way of life or 'social space' from recent invaders, as Ghassan Hage points out.<sup>7</sup> But once we reconfigure a complex tapestry of Afghanis, Pakistanis, Lebanese, and other middle eastern people as a single social phenomenon bounded by religion, then it must also be observed with neat historical irony that Muslims are not only a long-standing part of the Australian social landscape (rather than 'recent invaders'), they are in fact its most long-standing non-indigenous segment, because they entered northern Australia well before any Christians.

### **The long history of Muslims in Australia**

The earliest documented contact between Aborigines and others is with the Muslim Macassans who seasonally visited *Marege* (literally 'wild country') on the northern shores of Arnhem Land, and *Kayu Java*, the beaches on the Kimberley coast and the off-shore islands of the Arafura Sea to gather trepang (also referred to as *bêche-de-mer*), a highly prized sea cucumber (holothurian) that is ascribed with aphrodisiacal qualities. This contact, much predating European interest in the Australian continent, was not just incidental and occasional, but left profound imprints on the cultures and languages of the far north shores. Annie Clarke observed from archaeological field work on Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria that under the impact of this regular contact, the indigenous people of Groote Eylandt became more strongly orientated towards the coast and marine resources.<sup>8</sup> Anthropologist Ian McIntosh also speaks of the profound impact of this contact as a result of which Aborigines creatively adapted aspects of Islam.<sup>9</sup>

The fleets came predominantly out of Makassar (formerly Ujung Pandang), the capital of Sulawesi, either via Timor or via the Aru Islands. It is preferable to continue to refer to

'Macassans' in the Anglicised spelling, because this term refers to a historical phenomenon rather than an ethnic group. The visiting fleets comprised Sama Bajo (sea gypsies), Timorese, Aru Islanders, the captains and crew from Makassar itself, as well as people from other kingdoms in Sulawesi, and even the occasional Chinese trader. The crews and captains were predominantly Muslim, and Muslim prayer references still survive in some secret/sacred incantations on the northern Australian shores, alluding to 'Allah'. The Macassan trade krio became a lingua franca for indigenous peoples in habitual contact with these fleets, and several early European reports refer to indigenous people in the Top End addressing strangers in 'Malay'.

That Macassan contact predates the arrival of the British on the Australian continent is not disputed, but there are various understandings of the commencement of contact. Indigenous people tend to understand this contact history as quite ancient, so that Ernie Dingo, at the opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games referred to 'thousands of years' of contact with Macassans. John Darling's 1994 ABC documentary *Below the Wind* refers to 400 years of contact, counting in the undocumented visits from 'sea gypsies' or Sama Bajo who seem to appear in Yolngu mythology as Bajini. This 400-year account of contact history is mirrored on the Indonesian side by a Sulawesi historian suggesting that the Australian Top End had been part of the (Macassan) Kingdom of Gowa since 1640.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately he does not produce the evidence on which this dating claim is made.

The academic debate about when this contact might have actually commenced, hinges partly on questions of methodology – to what extent one is prepared to rely on ethnographic, linguistic, and archaeological evidence for events that are outside the timeframe of documented history. A number of archaeologists have argued for the 'long history' view – that in order to have brought about the substantial cultural changes that it did, it must predate the British arrival by at least 200 years, and a 400-year history is often cited as a 'more or less' reliable estimate.

The other question revolves around the presumption that the contact itself was initiated by the trepang industry powered by demand from southern China. This is clearly not how traditional indigenous economic activity is normally organised: it is not usually the orchestrated long-distance expedition in search of a single export commodity. Such intensive trades generally craft onto already established traditional routes that may be very localised but serve a range of economic and cultural purposes. The current of the trade winds support an easy sea route from Timor to the Tiwi Islands.

Staying on the safe grounds of historical method, C. C. Macknight dates the beginning of the trepang *industry* in Australia to between the 1720s and 1750s, although this does not preclude earlier, less organised contact. The earliest *recorded* trepang voyage to Australia was undertaken from Timor in 1751, so that a 250-year contact history is established through the historical record. The British became aware of this trade some ten years later, in 1762, when Alexander Dalrymple, then hydrographer for the British East India Company, speculated that the indigenous people these trepangers were interacting with on the southern continent were apparently 'Mohammedans', presumably because they were circumcised.

### **Indigenous perspectives**

Today Aboriginal ceremony, language, song and oral history of the Top End shores reflect the memory of the annual visits of the Macassans. The Yolngu of northeast Arnhem Land have been particularly well studied by anthropologists, and a number of their elders have

been especially forthcoming with what had traditionally been considered secret knowledge, so that we have a much clearer picture of the cultural impact of Macassan contact on Yolngu people compared to other language groups in the Top End and the Kimberley. In Yolngu culture Makasan and its surrounding languages and dialects enjoy a status much like Latin in the Western world, representing the most initiated and learned form of speech, but also percolating profusely into the vernacular. Even the characteristic and omnipresent expression 'Yo!' used in Yolngumatha, has its equivalent in Makasan.<sup>11</sup>

Some of the most characteristic cultural icons from the north also reflect this contact history, but in order to understand its embedded allusions demands the requisite cultural capital. For example, the *Lunggurra*, or northern wind, is a central icon used in body decoration and traditional and commercial art. A typical description of such artwork would be that *lunggurra* is the monsoon wind, and that the pattern refers to the cirrus clouds that are typical for the wet season.<sup>12</sup> Occasionally there is also mention that this season is associated with the arrival of the Macassans. Typical for indigenous art and storytelling, we see here layers of meaning piled upon each other. The Macassan connection is revealed by those who have the traditional authority to do so, generally very highly regarded members of the yirrtja moiety.<sup>13</sup>

Conversely, the end of the trepang season, when the fleets returned home to Sulawesi, has also imprinted itself on ritual culture in the form of the characteristic ceremonial poles from Elcho Island that are used for mourning or funerary ceremonies. Again there are various levels of revelation in the descriptions of the artwork.<sup>14</sup> According to Warramiri elders, the Morning Star poles represent the masts of a boat, with strings for the riggings, as an allusion to the farewell, when the Macassan boats would depart at the end of the trepang season. They now represent a long, and final, farewell, alluding to the time when the trepang boats came for the very last time, when an embargo was placed on their entry into Australian waters in 1906.<sup>15</sup> This incisive moment in Yolngu history is still so historically close that the stories surrounding it are both history at the brink of mythology, and myth at the brink of history as their deeper meanings are getting rediscovered and re-embedded with historical detail.

Artist John Bulunbulun makes extensive connection between his art and the Macassan contact history. He explains the role of the Marayarr (Morning Star) pole in the Marayarr Murrkundjeh ritual, a song cycle of cultural exchange and diplomacy in which Dhuwa and Yirrtja have complementary roles, celebrating the creation and cycles of nature, birth, death and regeneration. The Marayarr pole represents the mast and rigging of a Macassan boat, and by giving away the pole at the end of the ceremony the sadness of parting is expressed. This ceremony was performed in a three-day ritual in Makassar in 1993:

The visit, to re-establish relations with descendants of the Makassans, was a moving time for the Ganalbingu . . . On the last night of the ceremony, the dancers slowly appeared out of the shadows to reveal their final gift. People mourned the loss of the pole as it was presented, a traditional ritual which reflected the Ganalbingu's sadness at parting with their Makassan friends and family.<sup>16</sup>

The effect of all this cultural affinity is that Yolngu people feel deeply bonded to Macassans, spiritually related as well as connected by family. And indeed, several traditional stories allude to family connections between them.

One such story recording this final farewell is the Djawawungu (the story told by Djawa, and belonging to Djawa). It is called, 'The final visit of the Mangatharra' (of the Macassans) and its storyline makes some deeply meaningful connections between Macassan and Yolngu people. It is about an encounter between young Djawa and the

Macassan captain 'Gatjing' who came to take his final leave, saying they would never come back to *Marege*, because the 'balanda' (white people) were 'making trouble'. As part of his farewell, captain Gatjing bestowed on Djawa the Macassan name of Mangalay, and instructed him to let his father and mother and uncles and everyone know that he now carried this Macassan name. We can assume that with the acceptance of the name he carried the responsibility of keeping alive the memory and connection with these Macassans, and indeed he is depicted in this story wearing a Muslim fashion headscarf.

Expert advice on Aboriginal mythology cautions that it must not be mined for historical references.<sup>17</sup> But the striking feature of this story is that Gatjing can actually be traced through the records of the Australian customs officials stationed at the Top End to police the trepang trade. His full name is Suleiman Daeng Gassing, sometimes referred to just as Gassing. He belonged to the family of Husein Daeng Ranka, a captain whose customs records trail through the entire period that these records were kept, from 1881 to 1907. In other Aboriginal stories Husein appears as Yocing, and his father Samaila Daeng Bacan appears as Jamaila. His son, Mangellai Daeng Maru also participated in the trepang voyages so that this family represents at least three generations of Pa-Marege (captains travelling to Marege).<sup>18</sup>

The bestowal of the name of Mangellai on Djawa in the story is therefore deeply symbolical. It is an acknowledgement of a family connection between the family of Husein Daeng Ranka on the Sulawesi side and the family of Djawa on the Australian side. That Husein had family in Australia is well documented.<sup>19</sup> He was based in the Kampung Maluku (Moluccan township) of Makassar, working in association with the merchant Abdulrazak Puddu Daeng Tompo. This Abdulrazak also appears in an account supplied to the anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt by the Yolngu elder Djaladjari who stayed in Kampung Maluku for several years. According to his account there was a sizeable Aboriginal population in Makassar who also formed families there.<sup>20</sup> His son Bawurr at Yirrkala said that Djaladjari himself also had children in Kampung Maluku.<sup>21</sup>

Husein Daeng Ranka remained a regular visitor in the final years of the trepang industry to Marege, and was actually the last captain to visit. Another link to his family is provided through the genealogy of Elcho Island elder Mattjuwi Burruwanga who is said to be related to Jamaila.

Many place names in Yolngumatha also make reference to specific Macassans (like Garra Mangalai) or their activities (such Lembana Panrea meaning tradesmen's bay, Melville Bay), and some Makassan place names have also been adopted, such as Lembana Mani Mani (abrus seed bay, for Maningrida). Yolngu people today tell the story of long and peaceful contact with the Macassans as a counterpoint to the violent colonisation by balanda (whites). This is evident in a number of song lyrics. The Wirrnga Band from Milingimbi produced 'My Sweet Takirrina' in 1990 celebrating that they were 'trading goods and making better friendship . . . Macassan men – how brave they were'. In 1993 the Sunrize Band from Maningrida produced the bilingual *Lembana Mani Mani* singing 'we commemorate and celebrate for those visitors from Makassar' and Yirrkala's Yothu Yindi also has a bilingual 'Macassan Crew' in its repertoire where the English text gives a general gloss on the history of Macassan visits ('they came in peace through the Ashmore Reef . . . navigate the morning star, brave Macassan crew'), while the Yolngumatha passages make specific reference to Gatjing (Dayngatjing), again displaying the characteristic layers of meaning of Aboriginal cultural production.

When faced with the suggestion that beneath this harmonious veneer the Macassans came well-armed with guns and carrying cannons on their fleets, Mattjuwi asserted:

No. These here Makasar people, very good start. Real good friend. All the Makasar bringit here friend, brother and sister, uncle, nephew, not they bringing trouble, not anything, because they looking for *dharippa* job [trepang], he working on the *dharippa, ma*. This is the story from the beginning. True story. Different from there Captain Cook. Makasan people come here, they are friends. One group.<sup>22</sup>

From the historical record it is clear that this contact history was not without friction, even violence, including the hostile reception of shipwrecked Macassans on the Tiwi Islands. Ian McIntosh suspects that the Wurramu ceremony, which refers to the law of Walitha'walitha (Allah) is grounded in an unequal relationship between Macassans and indigenous people. It was reportedly first performed by Macassans at Cape Wilberforce as a tribute to their historical partnership when 'hundreds of Aborigines had lost their lives'<sup>23</sup> (possibly due to a smallpox outbreak). However, these days in an 'almost contradictory way this ritual is being put forward as a public show of inter-cultural unity'.<sup>24</sup>

### White perspectives

Whereas indigenous people tend to remember harmonious relations with Macassans the documented historical record suggests quite a different contact history, punctuated by violent encounters that had to be settled through the intervention of white officialdom.

The idea to tax and police the Macassan trepang trade emanated from white entrepreneurs who were in direct competition for Aboriginal labour and natural resources with them. The white manager of the Cobourg Cattle Company, stationed at one of the prime trading points of the trepang industry before customs officers were appointed in the region, reported in 1877 that Macassans were abusing Aborigines and that a tax ought to be placed on their activities, and in the following year observed again that Macassan crews were raiding the timber and trepang resources of the coastline and were 'debauching' Aborigines. In the same year Captain Cadell, who was attempting to enter into commercial competition with the Macassan trepangers, reported that the competition from the Macassan trepangers was unfair and presented a tax on the environment. He offered to protect local Aborigines in return for a monopolistic lease of the sea shores for 'quitrent'. E.O. Robinson was appointed as collector of customs at Port Essington in 1881. He had attempted to establish a trepang station at Croker Island in 1878, and became manager of the Cobourg cattle station in 1879. He was hardly a disinterested party. In 1888 he complained that 'The Malays lure my trepang workers away with alcohol'. He imposed a hefty licence fee which would 'hopefully mean that the Malays would go to New Guinea, Papua and other places in preference to paying the licence'.<sup>25</sup> The trade did indeed drop off under the imposition of fines, taxes, import duty on provisions carried, and the requirement to report to inconveniently situated customs stations, as well as high-handed attitudes and capricious regulations.

The arguments leading to the patrolling of the trepang trade in 1881 and its prohibition in 1906 ranged across concerns over resource depletion, lack of returns to the domestic economy, detrimental impact on Aborigines, using alcohol as payment for services, introduction of disease, and unfair competition: much the same range of objections that was used against Chinese on the goldfields, Japanese in pearling, and other ethnic groups that were successful in establishing a foothold in a particular commercial activity. The historical record of this trade is clearly over-determined by the views of men who had a direct investment in this industry, so that it is all the more necessary to look to alternative methods of discovering the past, such as oral history.

The 'Afghan' cameleers were faced with similar resistance. They started to arrive in Australia in 1865 and their migration peaked in the 1880s.<sup>26</sup> Again we are dealing with a historical phenomenon which requires the label 'Afghan' to be placed in parentheses. The cameleers came from a wide range of Muslim origins, but mostly from Beluchistan, the Punjab, Kashmir and the Sindh province, areas that now straddle north India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. In other words, they were just as likely to have come from British India, and were British subjects, originating from east of the Durant line that separated British India from Afghanistan. Their common designation as 'Afghans' served the purpose of classifying them as Alien or 'Asiatics' under various restrictive laws curtailing their rights to own property, land, or engage in independent business. A group of cameleers in Wyndham, most of them Indian and therefore British subjects, battled for sixteen years to obtain a lease which was denied them on the basis of being 'alien Asiatics'.

'Afghans' came to dominate long-distance cartage, particularly through the dry interior and in the northern goldfields. As in the case of Chinese on the goldfields, and Japanese in the pearling industry, it was their commercial success in Australia that engendered racist opposition, because leading members of their community quickly outgrew the patronage of large companies like Elders and started to import camels and cameleers under their own name. By the 1890s 'the ownership of camels in Australia was well and truly in the hands of Afghan merchants' like Faiz and Tagh Mahomet from Kandahar.<sup>27</sup>

Resistance against Afghan cameleers peaked in the 1890s, during a period of general agitation against Asians, Africans, and Pacific Islanders, the fomentation of the White Australia sentiment. An Anti-Afghan league was formed on the eastern goldfields in 1896, and in NSW and Queensland cameleers were harassed by bullock teamsters, with the result that the Imported Labour Registry Act of 1897 prohibited 'coloured aliens' from importing other workers. The dynamics of racial exclusion are familiar, we see economic competition, lobbying based on racial vilification, and quick legislative action supporting the economic interests of whites.

Not only bullock teams competed with the cameleers. In 1892 white shop-owners in Western Australia complained about the competition from hawkers who were servicing the remote stations. The Western Australian parliament up took this debate on behalf of 'legitimate traders', discursively rendering the non-white hawkers, who had obtained and paid for their licences, 'illegitimate'. The debate referred to hawkers from 'India or other Asiatic countries' that made themselves 'a nuisance and terror to law-abiding settlers'. It was alleged that they usually visited remote farms when the 'husbands were away and only the women and children were at home', and being 'strong hulking-looking fellows', 'often put the womenfolk in great fear being aliens and coloured men'. The appearance of some of them, it was claimed, 'was enough to intimidate any lonely female, and make her purchase against her will'.<sup>28</sup> The attorney general thought that their licences could be withdrawn on the basis of being alien Asiatics, but found that most of them were in fact British subjects. The dilemma was resolved by abolishing the Hawkers Act 1882, and hawking licences, altogether.

Despite such xenophobic legislative responses, 'Afghans' settled successfully into Australian lives, very many of them forming families with Aboriginal women.

### **Living trails of Muslim history in Australia**

Whereas Muslims today are under pressure to assimilate into a largely undefined 'mainstream' society, the history of contact contains a different model of cultural blending. Next to the historical case lesson of the Yolngu/Macassan family and cultural connections,



Afghans and Malays also successfully formed families with Christian women, mostly indigenous women who had been raised on Christian missions. As a result many indigenous people today remember poly-religious families based on mutual respect for each others' cultural practices and avoidance rules.

The immigrants were not on the whole evangelical about their faith and permitted their children to be raised in Christian schools, and their wives and children, while not abstaining from pork, would generally use separate dishes to avoid contamination. Muslim 'Malays' entered the pearling industry in large numbers so that many families in Torres Strait, the Kimberley and the Top End today bear Arabic names (Anglicised to varying degrees): Doolah, bin Doraho, Hassan, Hoosen and other versions of Husein, Ahwang, Ahmat, Boota, Sahanna (for Sianna), Dewis, Loban, bin Awel, Barba, bin Bakar, bin Sali, Khan, Mahomet, and many others. Chee Krimon (from Singapore) and Igari Bamau (from Badu Island) gave an equal share of Muslim and Christian names to their eight children: Marsat, Samat, Aaron, Leah, Alia, Ruth, Jane and Nauma. Among the descendants of such men there has been revival of Islam in an effort to embrace their patrilineal heritage, and Islam must be counted as the second most important religion in Torres Strait next to Christianity.

When we think today of indigenous cultural heartlands our thoughts are drawn to the Red Centre, to Arnhem Land, the Kimberley, and the Torres Strait. These are precisely the areas where indigenous contact with Muslims was at its most intensive. This is no mere historical coincidence. William McNeill argues strongly that poly-ethnicity is the normal state for a civilised society, while mono-culturalism is the historically rare, aberrant form.<sup>29</sup> According to this argument a developing, buoyant and vibrant culture is always poly-ethnic, able to accept, adapt and syncretise external influences.

By recasting ethnic 'problem populations' as religious ones, historical continuities are erased, and something that has a long history can emerge as an entirely new phenomenon. When the *Tampa* was refused entry to Australia in 2001, it carried 433 refugees, mainly from Afghanistan, who had been rescued at sea. The SAS (Special Air Service) was deployed to guard the vessel and prevented any Australians including lawyers, reporters and residents of nearby islands, from contacting the vessel, so that no images of the people on board, or any personal stories could percolate to the public. Julian Burnside believes that this was carefully orchestrated in order not to allow a feeling of compassion to arise among the Australian public. Had the Australian public known about the stories of the Afghans on board (practically all of them have since been confirmed as legitimate refugees) a wave of compassion might have arisen.<sup>30</sup>

This is precisely what happened in another border control phenomenon of the 1990s, that of the 'Timorese poachers' on the Arafura Sea. Noticing that the same men kept turning up in their jails from the same villages, prison officers in Broome joined with members of the community who had Indonesian and Timorese family connections in the Kimberley/Indonesia Friendship Association. This is the kind of story that makes us proud to be Australian. They found out that these fishermen continued the age-old tradition of the Macassan trepang fleets, except that they were now fishing for trochus and shark fin, and that what they had considered part of their home reefs – Pulau Pasir (Ashmore Reef), Pulau Datu (Scott Reef), Pulau Baru (Cartier Reef) etc. – had become Australian waters, as the customary 3 mile limit had been extended to 12 miles in 1968 and to 200 miles in 1979. They also found that most came from Roti Island, which is just 80 kilometres from Ashmore Reef and were permitted traditional fishing rights in a boxed area around Ashmore Reef. Traditional fishing meant no motors, no radar, no sonar, no radio, no two-way and therefore no weather warning, no quick get away, no SOS, and no search and

rescue in case of cyclones (willie-willies) for which that part of the open sea is famous. When members of the Association visited Papela on Roti Island, the villagers said that about 140 of their men had drowned in this area within the last ten years. There were many widows and fatherless children. The delegation started to understand that it is wellnigh impossible to determine an unmarked (and uneven) sea boundary without modern equipment, and that marine resources had come under extreme pressure (from a combination of population pressure, boosted by the Indonesian policy of *transmigrasi*, and permissive trade policy with Taiwan and Japan, permitting their fleets intensive fishing in Indonesian waters).

Another delegation of Australian citizens reached much the same conclusions. They were Bardi Aborigines from One Arm Point who went to Roti Island to protest against the frequent incursions into their traditional fishing area, over which they had recently gained rights after a prolonged battle for recognition. Irene Davies, a member of that delegation, told me when they saw how these villagers lived, their anger melted into compassion. Both of these citizen groups started to lobby and raise funds for aid to be channelled to these islands. Since small community projects for sustainable resource management were established at Kadatua, no poachers from that island have been apprehended. At Masaloka a cooperative trading venture had the same effect. The Broome group organised a similar scheme for Maginti, and the Bardi initiated trochus hatcheries at One Arm Point and in Sulawesi.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

Informed Australians should be able to draw on a long and primarily positive contact history between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians. Muslim organisations have been arguing this for some time, but it reads to most like a novel assertion because, for one, northern histories have generally been marginalised in the Australian historical consciousness, and secondly, migrant groups in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were referred to by ethnicity and nationality rather than as religious communities. The result is that some current phenomena appear entirely unrelated to their historical antecedents: any connection between Afghan cameleers and *Tampa* refugees is as submerged as that between Macassan trepangers and Timorese poachers on the Arafura Sea.

Beneath this difference in constructing 'problem populations' there are also some significant continuities. These are the essentially economic root causes of xenophobia, and the steps along which 'problem populations' are first constructed as monolithic entities, then identified as a threat to the social fabric, and thirdly legislated against. This historical cycle is as easily identified with regard to Aboriginal Australians, Chinese Australians, and any other group that has come under target in the richly chequered Australian history of xenophobia.

To describe a generalised 'Australian' sense of thinking about anything is necessarily hazardous. More importantly, it is essentially a question of method: who will be allowed to speak for the 'Australian sentiment'? Media reportage seeks out the troublesome, extraordinary and controversial, and neither are parliamentary debates likely to be sparked by community harmony. The documented historical record is always more predisposed to lead us into trouble: Hansard, the press, magistrates' courts, police journals, inquests. But for all the trouble, research focussed on a particular ethnic group has generally found that migrant groups – though they may be overrepresented in gaols, and in media reportage of organised violence – are more law-abiding, less troublesome, and also less likely to seek recompense through legal means, than non-migrants in Australia.<sup>32</sup>

Paradoxically, migrants have generally been understood as a ‘problem’ in white Australia. This view rests largely on the assumption that they are a somehow ‘recent’ phenomenon, punctuating a white Australian history. As I have argued elsewhere, white settlement did not make any substantial inroads into northern Australia until the 1860s, and remained numerically tenuous next to the preponderance of Aboriginal and Asian people there. Until the mass evacuations during World War II, Asian, Aboriginal and coloured populations far outstripped a thin layer of white residents so that the social history of the north is characterised by poly-ethnicity rather than monoculture, until precisely the moment when large scale post-war immigration in the south put a practical end to white Australia there.<sup>33</sup> The idea that Muslim migrants in Australia pose a problem has to do with what Hage calls ‘the fantasy of white supremacy’, but it also rests on the fantasy of an imagined history of an essentially predominantly white Australia.

### Notes

1. This paper emerged from a joint conference presentation with Emad Soliman whose PhD work examines the construction of Australian Muslim Identity since the War on Terror.
2. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996.
3. Edward W. Said and Gauri Viswanathan, *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*, Pantheon Books, New York, 2001; Nahid Afrose Kabir, *Muslims in Australia: Immigration, Race Relations and Cultural History*, Kegan Paul, London, 2005; Scott Poynting, Greg Noble, Paul Tabar and Jock Collins, *Bin Laden in the Suburbs: Criminalising the Arab Other*, Sydney Institute of Criminology Monograph Series, No. 18, Institute of Criminology, Sydney, 2004; Liz Jacka and Lelia Green, ‘The New “Others”’: Media and Society Post-September 11’, *Media International Australia*, no. 109, 2003; Peter Manning, *Us and Them*, Random House Australia, Milsons Point, NSW, 2006.
4. In particular, Christmas Island, Cocos-Keeling, and Ashmore and Cartier Reefs were excised from the Australian immigration zone.
5. From the Department of Immigration website:

The statement requires applicants to confirm that they will respect Australian values and obey the laws of Australia before being granted a visa.

Australian values include:

- respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual
- equality of men and women
- freedom of religion
- commitment to the rule of law
- parliamentary democracy
- a spirit of egalitarianism that embraces mutual respect, tolerance, fair play and compassion for those in need and pursuit of the public good
- equality of opportunity for individuals, regardless of their race, religion or ethnic background.

6. A sample question from the citizenship test implemented in October 2007:

Give three Australian colloquialisms for swimming suit

- \_\_\_ budgie smugglers, cossies, swimmers
- \_\_\_ budgies cossers, toggie batties, swimmy budgers
- \_\_\_ togs, bummys, sossies
- \_\_\_ swommies, cossies, mugglers

7. Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*, Pluto Press, Annandale NSW, 2003.

8. Anne Clarke, “‘The Moormans Trowers’”: Macassan and Aboriginal interactions and the changing fabric of indigenous social life’, *Modern Quaternary Research in South East Asia*, vol. 16, 2000, pp. 315–35.
9. Ian McIntosh, ‘Islam and Australia’s Aborigines? A perspective from North-East Arnhem Land’, *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 20, no. 1, June 1996, p. 55.
10. This nearly 370 year history is only about 10 per cent short of 400 years. Abdulrazak Daeng Patunru, *Sedjarah Goa*, Jajasan Kebudayaan di Makassar, 1967. Special thanks to C. C. Macknight for a copy of this rare publication.
11. David Paul Zorc, ‘Yolngu-Matha dictionary – Macassan loanwords project’, 29–30 May 1986 (MS) and Alan Walker and R. David Zorc ‘Austronesian loanwords in Yolngu-Matha of Northeast Arnhem Land’, *Aboriginal History*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1981, pp. 107–34.
12. For example, Shirley Banalanydju from Ramingining describes her *Lunggurrma* painting as follows:

This wind heralds the season when the seas are calm and new growth starts. The months for this type of wind are October to December. This season is known to Yolngu as Gunmul. There are big clouds without thunder, then rain.

The triangles in the paintings of Lunggurrma represent clouds. This triangular patterning represents monsoons “standing up” on the northern horizon. The clouds seem to stand higher and higher on the horizon. They become black, heavy with rain (black triangles). Soon it starts to rain, with lightning flashing (cross-hatched triangles). When a storm passes, the setting sun glows brilliant red or yellow against the clouds (red or yellow triangles).

The Lunggurrma design belongs to the Yirritja moiety and clans linked with this design are known as the ‘line of clouds’ bapurre (group of clans). Clans in this group include the Wulaki, Djardewitjibi, Balmbi, Dabi and Mildjingi peoples. [www.bulabula-arts.com/gallery/artwork.php?id=245](http://www.bulabula-arts.com/gallery/artwork.php?id=245)

13. John Bulunbulun at Maningrida describes his *lunggurrma* as follows (in a Maningrida Arts and Culture website no longer accessible):

Johnny Bulunbulun is a senior member of the Ganalbingu group and is one the most important singers and ceremonial men in north-central Arnhem Land, NT. In this lithograph he depicts his personal clan totem design which is used in public ceremonies of diplomacy and by boys during their circumcision ceremonies. Lunggurrma is the northern wind which brought the Macassan trepangers to the shores of Arnhem Land. The memory of the annual visits of the Macassans has been enshrined in Aboriginal ceremony, language, song and oral history. The wet season is strongly associated with the arrival of the Macassans. Lunggurrma is also the name of the high cirrus clouds which run in a straight line across the sky.

14. At Elcho Island Art and Craft the Morning Star Pole by Gali Yalkarriwuy Gurruwiwi is described as follows:

This Morning Star (Banumbirr) Pole comes from the artist’s father’s traditional homeland of Ngaypinya. The Banumbirr Star is sacred to the Dhuwa clans of the Yolngu people. The Banumbirr Star is very bright and rises just before the dawn. At this time the light is changing rapidly. There’s is the darkness of the night, punctuated with the reflections of the Morning Star on leaves of the trees, together with the distant glow of the dawn and the fading of the other stars in the sky. This Banumbirr Pole represents a ground yam known as riny’tjangu. The feathers at the top of the pole represent the Banumbirr Star. Further down the pole the dark feathers depicts that the leaf of the plant is dead and dried up. The white, green and orange feathers represent the new life given to the plant, which is also representative of new life for the people. The different colours of ochre represent the

changing light of the early morning, with the black being the night, the yellow and the red being the coming dawn and the white being the rays of sun light and it's reflection on the trees.

15. Interview with Terri Yumbulul, George Wulanybuma, and Willie Danjati Gunderra at Galinwin'ku, Elcho Island, June 1995.
16. Rosalinda Corazon, *Garuda In-flight Magazine*, September 1997, p. 45.
17. This view of Aboriginal mythology follows anthropologists Hiatt, McConnell, Morphy and Malinowski. Ian McIntosh, 'The bricoleur at work: Warang Dingo mythology in the Yirritja moiety of north-east Arnhem Land', MS (NLA), 1992.
18. C. C. Macknight, *A Voyage to Marege – Macassan Trepangers in Northern Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1976; Peter Spillett, 'Gotong Royong: Hubungan Makassar-Marege' Paper presented to the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Convention of the Indonesian Educational and Cultural Institute, Ujung Pandang, July 1987, MS.
19. Regina Ganter, *Mixed Relations: Asian-Aboriginal Contact in North Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, 2006, pp. 34ff; see also Spillett, Gotong Royong and Macknight, *A Voyage to Marege*.
20. Ronald and Catherine Bernd, *Arnhem Land – Its History and its People*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1954, pp. 53ff.
21. Ganter, *Mixed Relations*, p. 38.
22. Interview by Regina Ganter with Mattjuwi Burruwanga at Galinwin'ku, 1995.
23. The connection between Walitha-walitha and Allah is not equally shared by Yolngu people. McIntosh observed it to be only known to some older informants, and particularly yirrtja moiety members, and is cautious to assert that most of his information pertains only to the Warramiri at Elcho Island. Ian McIntosh 'Islam and Australia's Aborigines?', pp. 53–77. Part of the Wurramu song cycle recorded by W. L. Warner at Milingimbi and Elcho Island in the 1920s, runs: 'Oh-a-ha-la! (during a funeral ceremony where a dead body is moved up down as if lifting a mast), 'A-ha-la!! A-ha-la!! Si-li-la-mo-ha-mo, ha-mo-sil-li-li' and later 'Ser-ri ma-kas-si' (resembling the Indonesian terima kasih for thank you). W. L. Warner, *A Black Civilization: A Social Study of an Australian Tribe*, P. Smith, Gloucester Massachusetts, 1969, p. 420.
24. McIntosh, 'Islam and Aborigines', p. 57
25. Robinson to Little 12/2/1882, cited in Macknight, *A Voyage to Marege*, p. 106.
26. Christine Stevens, *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns, A History of Afghan Cameldrivers in Australia* Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1989; Michael Cigler, *Afghans in Australia*, AE Press, Melbourne, 1986.
27. Stevens, *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns*; Cigler, *Afghans in Australia*.
28. Legislative Assembly Hansard, 1892–93:401ff and 11/3/1892 p. 847 WAPP.
29. William H. McNeill, *Polyethnicity and National Unity in World History*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1985.
30. Julian Burnside has made this point in a number of speeches. It is also published in [smh.com.au/articles/2003](http://smh.com.au/articles/2003), from a speech at Parliament House, Victoria, on World Refugee Day 2003 as 'Australia's treatment of asylum seekers: the view from outside', 8 July 2003.
31. Jill Elliott, 'Fishing in Australian waters', *Inside Indonesia*, no. 46, 1996, and 'Indonesian fishermen: a Western Australian perspective', MS, ca. 1994.
32. This finding has been made by historical researchers of Chinese, Japanese and Malay histories in Australia, but continues to be confirmed by social science empirical research. Holly Johnson, 'Experiences of crime in two selected migrant communities', *Trends & Issues in Criminal Justice*, Australian Institute of Criminology, no. 302, 2005, pp. 1–6. This is not only the case in Australia, but has also been observed in the USA and Europe. Robert J. Sampson, Jeffrey D. Morenoff, and Stephen Raudenbush, 'Social anatomy of racial and ethnic disparities in violence', *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 95, 2005, pp. 224–32; Stephen Castles et al., 'Assessment of research reports carried out under the European Commission targeted Socio-economic Research Programme', European Commission Directorate General, December 2001.
33. Ganter, *Mixed Relations*, pp. 69, 235, 254.