

## Articles, etc.

### Allah and the Spirit of the Dead

#### The hidden legacy of pre-colonial Indonesian/ Aboriginal contact in north-east Arnhem Land

Ian McIntosh

##### **Abstract**

This paper is about mythopoeia or the myth-making which seizes the imagination: how Aborigines dealt with their first contacts with Indonesian trepang fishermen from Macassar in the 1700s. It is also concerned with how innovations in the Dreaming which are linked to the Macassan period are still relevant in Aboriginal lives. I investigate narratives in which Aborigines are confronted with the idea of being forever impoverished and bound in a state of dependence upon the non-Aboriginal Other and how salvation is seen to come only in the hereafter, in the paradise of a God held in common with the coloniser.<sup>1</sup>

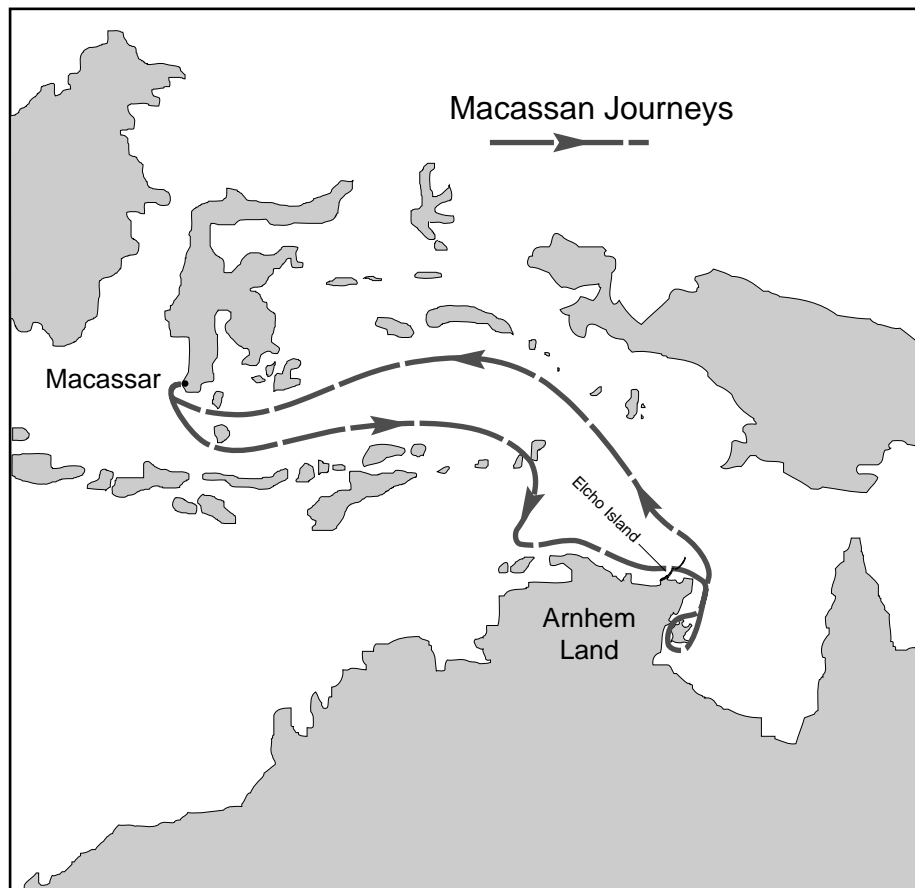
##### **Introduction**

In the feature film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, a Coke bottle mysteriously lands in the Kalahari Desert, in the village of Bushmen. Unbeknownst to the people on the ground it had been thrown from a plane flying high above. Now the Bushmen had never seen glass or metal of any kind. There is nothing harder than timber in the desert. The film begins with an examination of how just one bottle, which was immediately put to a vast array of uses in the village, could turn Bushman society on its head. Everyone wanted it. Children were fighting with other children to use it as a musical instrument or for various games; women were fighting each other to use it for weaving, stretching snake skins, or grinding; and men were threatening to hit each other with it. The film then deals with the attempt of the clan leader to rid his world of this object and restore harmony.

---

1 This paper is the result of consultations with senior Aboriginal men and women from Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island (11° 58'S, 135° 43'W) in north-east Arnhem Land, in particular the late David Burrumarra M.B.E. of the Warramiri clan. An earlier draft was presented to the annual meeting of the Mythopoeic Literature Society of Australia at the Northern Territory University, Darwin, in July 1995.

This paper is based on a similar scenario. It concerns the arrival of Indonesian fishermen in northern Australia in the early 1700s<sup>2</sup> and I speculate on how Aboriginal thinkers came to terms with the new, given that atrocities were a feature of contact.<sup>3</sup> There was a realisation that the Indonesians had possessions which were greatly desired — dug out sailing canoes allowing for long distance travel along the coast; cloth, knives, and most significantly, alcohol and tobacco. But I contest the widely held view in the literature that the impact on Aboriginal society was minimal<sup>4</sup>. For instance it is said that the fundamental nature of the Aboriginal way of life did not change. Aborigines came to appreciate that there were other people in the world and that the visitors followed different laws.



**North-east Arnhem Land and Indonesia**

2 The Macassan trepang industry began in c.1720 and ended in 1907. See Macknight, C.C. (1976).

3 See Berndt and Berndt (1954) and Searcy (1911).

### Thinking About the Past

If *The Gods Must Be Crazy* is any guide, going from a situation in which people were masters of their own destiny to being suddenly dominated by others and being bound in this state by their own desire, was a dilemma. If Aborigines rejected Macassans they would lose access to the things they had come to find invaluable. To let Macassans in, even if the visits were of relatively short duration, meant that Aborigines would always be under their influence, and leaders would lose their authority.

In the movie, it was a simple matter of the clan leader going to the end of the world and throwing the bottle over the edge into the abyss. This would settle matters and the world would continue as it always had, at least until the next plane flew over or a colonising party arrived in the Kalahari. In north-east Arnhem Land, however, the impact was unceasing, and in any one area, Aborigines were totally outnumbered by the visitors. Today Aboriginal elders can only speculate on how past leaders came to terms with this situation.

In his lifetime, David Burrumarra was a major informant for academics working on the history of the Macassan trepang trade. While he was born after the end of the Macassan industry, he nevertheless had a considerable knowledge of the exploits of the fishermen and he freely shared this information with others. Local perspectives on the impact of the trade on Aboriginal lives, on the other hand, have not been explored in any detail. For instance, in thinking about the Macassan past, Burrumarra looked for explanations for stories that had been handed down to the present but which had limited currency or made little sense, given the way the world had changed in the past fifty years.<sup>5</sup> Such views, often couched in myth, were outside the scope of the historian's brief,<sup>6</sup> and as I suggest elsewhere, were politically sensitive,<sup>7</sup> and have remained largely unrecorded. While both Burrumarra and other people with whom I have spoken were all in agreement that Macassans were not, and could never have been, land owners in Australia, they suggested that their ancestors must have wondered why it was that the visitors had so much and the Aborigines so little in the way of material wealth. Something must have gone wrong at the beginning of time, Burrumarra speculated, explaining that, according to 'inside' or once secret/sacred perspectives on Macassan contact, events of 300 years ago were seen to have their foundation at the beginning of time. What happened in real life in the 1700s and onwards was treated as though it had been ordained in Dreaming epics, and he detailed a number of variations of first contact myths.

In one Dreaming account, in the beginning, Aborigines were 'white' and rich and Macassans 'black' and poor and the visitors worked for the Aboriginal

4 See Macknight (1976), Thomson (1949) and Warner (1969).

5 The Methodist settlement on Elcho Island commenced in 1942.

6 Pers. comm. C.C. Macknight 1994.

7 See McIntosh (1995).

land owners.<sup>8</sup> But events were turned around when a mythological Dog representing Aborigines was rude and unco-operative to the visitors, and so the wealth of Macassans, which was seen to originate from Aboriginal land, was lost to them. From that point on, Aborigines were 'black' and poor and Macassans 'white' and rich. When Macassans departed from Arnhem Land, Europeans inherited their place as usurpers of Aboriginal wealth.

Another version, which I look at in detail here, says that when 'black' people came into contact with 'whites' (Macassans), there was a partnership between them. Both shared equally in the wealth of the country and they followed one law. But then things started to go wrong. Greed and jealousy on the part of Aborigines emerging from an insatiable appetite for material possessions led to bloodshed, murder and then revenge murders until nearly the whole population, both 'black' and 'white', was killed. It is not spoken of as 'black' killing 'white' or 'black' killing 'black' in the narrative however, but rather law breakers killing law breakers. The killers were said to be under the influence of the 'spirit of the dead', the Grokman or Wurramu, which would land on them from above and turn them from an orderly existence. People would forget ceremonial obligations, forget kinship, and indeed who they were, Burrumarra said.

These Wurramu spirits have a range of names corresponding to particular crimes inspired by the chaos associated with the new. As Burrumarra said, there are male or female thieves, husband and wife stealers, liars, doublecrossers, and murderers. They go by names such as Balala, Bakurra, Bawurramu, etc., and are said to be based on the activities of actual people who lived in north-east Arnhem Land in the distant past which is also simultaneously the beginning of time. All of the words for the Wurramu are drawn from the Macassarese language<sup>9</sup> and this strongly suggests a close interaction between the visitors and Aborigines in this time of turmoil.

David Burrumarra was the spokesperson for the Wurramu law and he described these 'evil' characters entering people's lives in this way:

Bakurra tries to make peace. He sees Balulu, the killer, doing the wrong thing and he intercepts. He sees his countrymen with knife and gun wounds and he becomes a Grokman himself. He kills Balulu.

and

The Wurramu [or Grokman] enters people, changes them, making them break laws and spread disorder and hatred.

So we have the emergence, in the form of narrative, of mythological beings characterised by the emotions they evoke, and the crimes that are committed by people under their influence, i.e. jealousy, hatred, and then theft and murder.

---

<sup>8</sup> Warner (1958), p. 537.

<sup>9</sup> Walker (1988).

The visitors in the Dreaming narrative were alone able to maintain the law throughout this period of chaos and they said to the Aborigines, 'From now on, we will have everything and you will have nothing.' Aborigines would work for the visitors in a master/servant relationship, because Aborigines had broken the law that once united them.

\*

\*

On the surface, this story is typical of Dreaming narratives found throughout Australia.<sup>10</sup> In traditional belief, mythical characters have free will and they often take a wrong turn.<sup>11</sup> All people are committed to the consequences of their actions, stories about the origin of death being an obvious example.

Many of the Dreaming epics revolve around the question of right and wrong. Good is seen to co-exist with bad and there is no ongoing struggle between them. One does not necessarily triumph over the other and there is no expectation of this in life. People are not accountable to mythological beings and will do wrong and there is nothing one can do to prevent it. Wrong doing brings its own punishment in this life and not in the next. In a majority of narratives, there is thus some form of resolution and the status quo returns to the land.

### **Evil, Misery and Domination by Others in the Dreaming**

Now in the case of the Macassan epics, there is no return to the status quo and the way in which this change was rationalised or seen to be resolved in myth and religious practice represents a significant change in world view.<sup>12</sup> As was mentioned earlier, Aborigines and Macassans were seen to be united by one law at the beginning of time. This law is associated with the mythological being Birrinydji, who was the source of all Wurramu. Birrinydji will not be looked at here, for as Aboriginal consultants say, the stories are 'too far, too sad and too hard to explain'.<sup>13</sup> Rather, the focus will be on Birrinydji's nemesis, a mythological being called Walitha'walitha, whose task it was to restore harmony to the land.

Living in the heavens above Aboriginal land, Walitha'walitha was said to have come down to earth to the aid of Aborigines at their time of greatest need. This was at the time of the Macassans, but people do not speak of Walitha'walitha in historical terms. Walitha'walitha is ever-present and is associated with events that occurred at the beginning of time, the Macassan era and now. In myths providing a view on why it is that 'Aborigines have plenty

---

10 Hiatt (1975).

11 Berndt (1979).

12 It needs to be noted however that it is not unique to Arnhem Land or even Australia, but is a feature of the colonial experience for many peoples throughout the world. See for instance, Hill (1988).

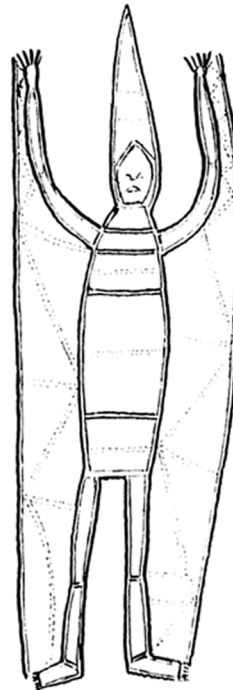
13 See McIntosh (1995)

but nothing', it is said that at the flash point in relations between 'black' and 'white', when the spirit of the dead had overtaken people's lives, Walitha'walitha descended from heaven to judge the judgements of the living. It came down to bring order to the world, for at the time people were killing one another indiscriminately.

Now we cannot pretend to know the full story of Walitha'walitha because it is a belief that has largely been overtaken by Christianity, but certain aspects are still understood, if not followed. It was explained to me in terms of balance. A traditional 'inside' view of the world sees the population as always being roughly the same. As a man lifts a spear to kill another or an old man is about to die, a new child spirit will come to a woman from the land. It can be anywhere in the Aboriginal world. Similarly, the qualities of good and bad were always present in roughly equal proportions but since the days of the Macassans, an evil power had entered people's lives, and it was there to stay.<sup>14</sup>

This Wurramu is an ever-present and powerful force to contend with and it threatens all living things and societies, whether Aboriginal or Macassan. According to the law of Walitha'walitha, this is why the world is considered to be a place of misery. Walitha'walitha is an 'inside' word for Allah, according to Burrumarra. Walitha'walitha dwells in a paradise above and this place is described as an island garden, with plenty of fresh water, fruit trees and shade. People spend their days hunting for turtle or sitting under the coconut trees smoking cigarettes. There is no pain, hunger or thirst, and no arguments or war.

The Wurramu, in contrast, dwells on the earth. When someone dies, the spirit goes up. It is collected by Walitha'walitha, Burrumarra said. The shooting star gives the message that someone, somewhere has passed away, and that the bad is coming down.



**Illustration. Walitha'walitha or Allah, in perhaps the only depiction of this being in the Islamic world**

<sup>14</sup> This change was ordained in the Dreaming, as mentioned earlier.

It lands on someone and if they are not prepared, it can divert them from the 'right' path. But deliverance will come in the end, Burrumarra said, but 'only on top, in heaven can changes be made'. Walitha'walitha is that which is most pure, beyond desire, the highest of intelligence, and it is associated with values of sharing and caring, law and order, and partnerships between peoples. Walitha'walitha will take the bad memory out of the people, for he 'sorts out the bad and makes them good. He collects up all the good and bad for his own purpose', Burrumarra said.

While there is some overlap in meaning between the Aboriginal Allah and the Allah of the Islamic world, the two are seen to be quite separate. The dances associated with this being appear to be of Indonesian origin, as do the words of the songs,<sup>15</sup> but Walitha'walitha is an Aboriginal creational entity associated with particular territories on the Australian mainland, and has always been there, consultants say. Belief in Walitha'walitha is not seen to be the same as belief in the religion of the Other. Walitha'walitha and Wurramu represent bodies of belief shared by different peoples, but the perspective of Aborigines is for Aborigines alone.

\*

\*

### Conclusion

Anthropologists and historians have suggested that, following contact with Macassans, it was necessary for Aborigines to come to terms with the fact that they were not alone in the world. People from across the seas to the north were powerful and rich and in a position to dominate them. How then is it possible to say that nearly two hundred years of contact and trade had little impact on the way Aborigines perceived or lived their lives?

Consultation with Aboriginal leaders suggests significant changes came in the wake of contact. One interpretation gleaned from myth tells of how at the beginning of time and at the time of the Macassans, Aborigines forgot the law of Birrinydji, and they lost everything and the Wurramu entered their lives. This is why, it is said, Aborigines have so little in the way of material wealth or rights in relation to Macassans or European Australians. Aborigines followed the law of Birrinydji and Walitha'walitha in post-Macassan and colonial days, in the hope for a return to the way things were at the beginning of time when everyone shared in the wealth of the land. The religion of the visitors, that of Islam, became the vehicle for an Aboriginal Dreaming in which there are visions of a return to inter-racial harmony. Since the establishment of Christian missions in north-east Arnhem Land in the 1920s, Walitha'walitha has become synonymous with the Christian God, and the Wurramu with the Devil. It is therefore not surprising that Christianity, as practiced in this area, has an overtly political aspect, with belief in God being directly linked to calls for equality, justice and land rights.

---

15 See McIntosh (1996 forthcoming)

In following out the law of Walitha'walitha, and so of the Christian God, one has some measure of the problems that arise from contact. There will be peace between Aboriginal groups and between Aborigines and Others, but unless people obey the law of God, it will not happen in this world. In the here and now, there will always be strife, poverty and domination by Others. This, I suggest, is a previously unrecorded legacy of contact between Aborigines and Indonesians.

Received 1 September, 1995

### Bibliography

- Berndt, R.M., (1979), 'A Profile of Good and Evil in Australian Aboriginal Religion. A Charles Strong Memorial Lecture', In *Colloquium: Australian and New Zealand Theological Review*.
- Berndt, R.M., and C.H., (1954), *Arnhem Land. Its History and Its People*. Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire.
- Berndt, R.M., and C.H., (1976), *The World of the First Australians*. Sydney: Ure Smith.
- Hiatt, L.R., (ed.) (1975), *Australian Aboriginal Mythology*. Australian Aboriginal Studies, No. 50. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Hill, J., (ed.) (1988), *Rethinking History and Myth. Indigenous South American Perspectives on the Past*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Macknight, C.C., (1976), *The Voyage to Marege*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press.
- McIntosh, I.S., (1994), 'The Dog and the Myth Maker'. *Australian Folklore* No. 9, pp. 77-81.
- McIntosh, I.S., (1995), 'Who are the Bayini?' *The Beagle, Records of the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory*, Vol. 12, pp. 193-208.
- McIntosh, I.S., (1996), 'Islam and Australia's Aborigines: A Contemporary Ritual Exchange between Arnhem Land and Macassar'. *Journal of Religious History*. (Forthcoming).
- Searcy, A., (1911), *By Flood and Field. Adventures Ashore and Afloat in North Australia*. London: G. Bell and Sons.
- Thomson, D., (1949), *Economic Structure and the Ceremonial Exchange Cycle in Arnhem Land*. Melbourne: Macmillan.
- Walker, A., (1988), Macassan Influences on the Aboriginal Language and Culture of Northern Australia, *Bulletin of the Indonesian Cultural and Educational Institute*, 5(1): pp. 28-37.
- Warner, W.L., (1958/1969), *A Black Civilisation: A Social Study of an Australian Tribe*. Chicago: Harper and Roe.