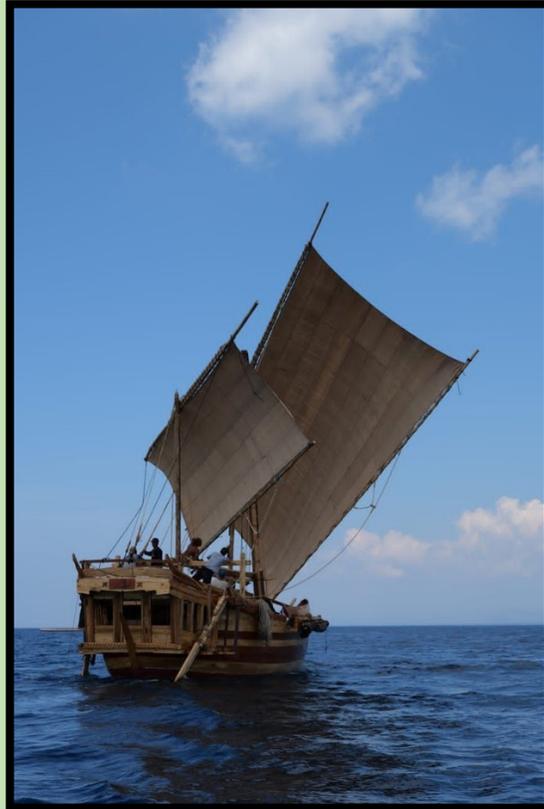


# The Makassar's Hunt for Trepang

By

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(Unknown)

## A Typical Makassar Perahu, used by Indonesia's Trepangers

Indonesia and Australia have always been linked when it comes to maritime trade. The Makassar's hunt for Trepangers is just one of the many Asian maritime traditions that has been recorded over the centuries.

The Makassar or Makassarese people are an ethnic group that originate from the southern part of the South Peninsula, of Sulawesi (aka Celebes), one of the larger Sunda Islands of the Indonesia archipelago. They are a traditional seafaring people that trade extensively throughout southeast Asia and Oceania. Their main type of sailing vessel is the **Perahu**, sometimes called a **Patoroni** or **Prau**. The Makassar peoples used a similar craft called the **Padewakang** which were traditional boats used by the Bugis, Mandar, and Makassar people of South Sulawesi for long distance voyages, such as to Northern Australia. In more recent times these have been superseded by the more modern **Pinisi** for longer voyages.

These long and arduous voyages were made in search of the highly valuable Trepang or Sea Cucumber, highly sought for medicinal reasons throughout Asia, particularly in China. These Sea Cucumbers were to be found in abundance, in the warm and shallow coastal waters in northern Australia.

Widely known as “**Makassan Fishers**”, they made the long and sometimes treacherous passages from the port town of Makassar in southern Sulawesi to the coastline of Arnhem Land and the Kimberley regions, of northern Australia. Some voyages also originated from other islands in the Indonesian Archipelago, including Timor, Rote and Aru. Frequently, convoys of large **Makassar Perahu** mother ships, together with their smaller daughter craft, would arrive on Australia’s northern shores. These voyages were made long before European settlement in Australia and continued until the early twentieth century.



Map indicating the trade destinations in Australia made by the Indonesian Makassans.

In seeking the edible and highly sought holothurians, also known as sea cucumbers, or sea slugs, the Makassan visited northern Australian waters each year, for the collection of “Trepang”. Trepang live on the sea floor and are exposed at low tide. Fishing was traditionally done by hand, spearing, diving, or dredging. The fishermen usually arrived each December at the beginning of the wet season, and camped along the Arnhem and Kimberley coast, catching, harvesting, boiling, and drying Trepang. They met, traded, and worked with local Aboriginal people. Makassar **Perahu** or **Praus** could carry a crew of thirty and it is suggested that up to 1000 boats could arrive from Indonesia, every season.



The months that the Makassar spent fishing in the coastal waters of northern Australia were busy ones. Fishermen speared the Trepang from their boats or dived down to spike them with weighted harpoons. Once harvested, Trepang were gutted and boiled in large iron cauldrons, then buried in hot sand and allowed to cool slowly. After some time, they were dug up and their chalky skin washed away with sea water. Finally, the Trepang were dried in the sun or slowly smoked over a fire in temporary shanties constructed of bamboo and

rush mats.

A Typical Makassar **Perahu** Mothership, sailing in company with its smaller daughter craft. (Unknown)

As April arrived, and the monsoon winds began to build, the fishermen departed, returning to Makassar with their boats fully laden with Trepang, prized for its culinary value generally and for its medicinal properties amongst Chinese communities throughout Asia, but mainly in the Chinese market. Turtle shells, pearls, and pearl shells also made up the items they carried which they also sold to the insatiable Chinese merchants.

The Makassar people began visiting the coast of northern Australia sometime around the early 1700s, although some scholars believe it started earlier during the 1600s, first in the Kimberley region (which they named “Kayu Jawa”), and some decades later in Arnhem Land (an area they called “Marege”). Even though the Makassar traded consistently to northern Australia, they did not settle in the Kimberley or Arnhem Land, but they did have an influence on the native Yolngu people's society and ritual. Although the later Makassan crews may have included Sama Bajau and indeed fishers from a variety of ethnic groups such as the Butonese, most of the crew, and their vessels, were from Makassar and spoke languages used by the main ethnic groups based there—namely, the Bugis and the Makassarese.

While undoubtedly the sight of Makassan fishermen was originally a shock to the Yolngu, they soon learned to trade peacefully. A dialect of Makassan pidgin became the main means of communication, along the north coast of Australia, not just between Makassan and Aboriginal people, but also as a language of trade among different Aboriginal groups, who were brought into greater contact with each other by the seafaring Makassar culture. If one listens carefully to the Yolngu language, some Indonesian words remain, for example “Rupiah”, a borrowed name for money. The cultural influence on the Yolngu is also evident by the discovery of aboriginal rock art and paintings depicting Makassan visitations, as well as in aboriginal story telling.

Some Yolngu communities of Arnhem Land appear to have changed their traditional hunting habits from being largely land-based to largely sea-based, following the introduction of new Makassar technologies such as dug-out canoes, which were highly prized amongst Australian Aboriginal groups. These canoes were far more seaworthy than the Aboriginal variety, which allowed them to hunt in more distant offshore waters for Dugong and Sea Turtles.

Below, an image of a freshly harvested Trepang before sun drying and being smoked.

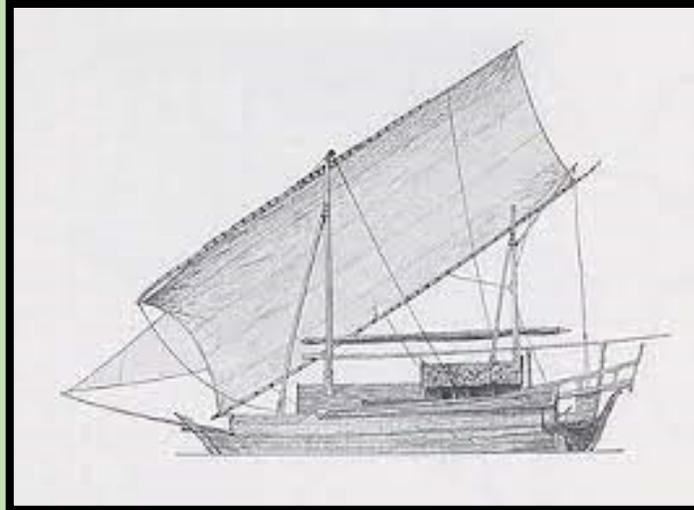


(Unknown)

The Makassar would arrive annually in Australia, in large and regular fleets of wooden Perahu sailing vessels. The Makassans sailed to Australia with the northwest monsoon each December and returned to their home port of Makassar with the southeast trade winds around March or April each year. The Trepang catch and trade goods such as pearl shell, turtle shell, beeswax and ironwood were brought back to Makassar and sold to Chinese merchants, for supplying the market of southern China.

In general, for the Indigenous people of Arnhem Land and the Kimberley, the Makassans were among the first foreigners they had ever encountered, arousing a great deal of interest in the various new technologies and cultures they subsequently introduced. These items include canoes, sails, hooks, fishing lines, beads, and metals, Tobacco, alcohol, calico, fabrics, rice, knives, and iron bladed hatchets, were also among the items introduced to Arnhem Land and the off lying islands, as articles of trade, by the Makassan, to mention but a few. Besides introducing these new innovations to the indigenous peoples in northern Australia, the Makassans employed Aboriginal people to help gather and process the Trepang catch. Dozens, if not hundreds, of Aboriginal are claimed to have sailed on the return voyages to Makassar, settling, marrying local women, and establishing families with them.

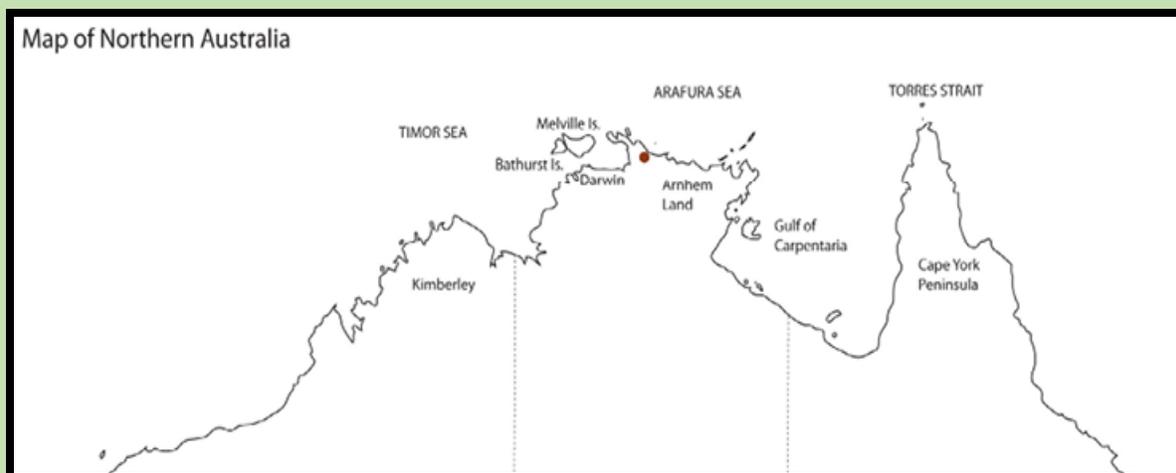
Activity in the Makassan Trepang industry declined from 1880 onwards due to the taxes and charges being imposed on the visiting Trepangers. By this time, the Makassar fishers had fallen into the roving-bandit-category, where fishermen exploit local stocks of valuable resources until they are exhausted, and then move to another area, to do likewise. The last Makassan voyage to Australia took place during the 1906–07 season before the Australian Government imposed taxes on the Makassan fishermen, which in effect signaled the demise of the trade, in essence the same as refusing to grant fishing licenses to non-Australian fishermen. Trepang is still valued by Chinese communities for its jelly-like texture, and its flavor-enhancing properties. The consumption of Trepang is almost entirely limited to China, where their people consider them a culinary delicacy and still, as an aphrodisiac. Together with similarly treasured resources such as shark fins and bird nests. Trepang belongs to a group of commodities which were so valuable that “distant peripheral seas became sought-after destinations” for those who hunted the elusive Sea Slug.



(unknown)

A drawing showing the rig of a traditional Makassar Fisher's boat, showing the rigging and deck house built from Bamboo and Rush matting. It carried two rectangular sails on two masts. Most notable is the large, canted rectangular sail stretched between two booms of flexible bamboo, well-controlled by sheets, vang, guys, and braces. The sails, made from woven palm-leaf is taller than its wide. Both the main foremast and mizzen masts were typically of a tripod construction that require no stays to keep them standing. This rig, called Tanja, is a distinguishing feature of the Makassar seafaring cultures.

The sails were Furled by rolling them around the lower boom. Steering was aided by twin rudders that hang outboard over each stern quarter, lashed to beams protruding from the hull. These ocean-going vessels carried palm-thatch deckhouse structures and hold coverings, usually did not have fixed or sealed deck planking.



The main areas visited in Northern Australia by the Makassar Trepangers.



(Unknown)

Showing all the characteristic features of the Perahu, tripod masts, fully deployed sails, rudder arrangement and traditional deck housing.

End

References: History of Makassan Trepong Trade and Fishing, Wikipedia, Trade with Makassar, The Makassar Peoples, and various other platforms on the Public Domain from which some additional information has been researched.

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