SIOBHAN CAMPBELL

The art of seafaring

Their engine broke down at sea, so they paddled to a nearby island where they found food, fire, water and shelter for the night. In the morning, they calmly fashioned a sail from what was available to make their way home.[1]

The above is from a story accompanying the Yolngu/Macassan Project at the 10th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT10) by the Yolngu artist Gunybi Ganambarr. The sail in question is a Macassan sail, recalling a time when fleets of wooden sailing boats from the port of Makassar in South Sulawesi navigated a cyclone-prone ocean to reach the coast of Arnhem Land in the north of Australia. More than one hundred years since the contact between seafaring Indonesians and Indigenous Australians officially ceased, the dynamic history and present-day incidence of sea crossings and cross-cultural exchange has been documented by the many individuals involved in this project. The Yolngu/Macassan Project is contained within a tranquil space of light blue gallery walls, yet the complex assemblages within the space reflect many layers of exchange. It incorporates multiple curators, artworks produced across several decades, commissioned work and collected artefacts, collaborations and individual responses, and is entwined with a broader program of artistic exchanges exploring the encounters between the Yolngu and the Macassans.[2]

The 10th Asia Pacific Triennial has rightly been described as a "milestone", the result of "an unprecedented, shared effort from participating artists and curators, writers and advisors and interlocutors from across the region."[3] From the outset this momentous exhibition has seen shifting models of cooperation and curatorial practice: this iteration features sixty-nine projects by more than one hundred and fifty artists from over thirty countries. While Australian commentators have frequently described the overall significance of the APT in terms of reorienting the Australian art world towards the Asia-Pacific region, its impact on the region's art world has often been evaluated in a more tangible sense. In Indonesia, for example, throughout the 1990s the APT was important for many artists who were unable to show subversive art in their own country.[4] As the selection of artists and works was done independently from the Indonesian government, there was no pressure to showcase state-approved art and thus, in the absence of institutional legitimation in their own country, many artists aspired to participate in this major international exhibition. Furthermore, the APT was a model for aspiring Indonesian curators who had no access to specific training in curating or art history in their own country, and who relied on the co-curatorship model and informal interactions to develop their skills and networks. Although different curatorial structures have been trialled over its thirty-year history, the co-curation model remains an important facet of the APT. The Yolngu/Macassan Project has been curated by Diane Moon, the Curator of Indigenous Fibre Art at the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art with Indonesian artist and performer Abdi Karya, whose video performance is part of the exhibition. In turn, there has been considerable interaction

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[1] From the wall text accompanying *Djirrit* by Gunybi Ganambarr

[2] The term "Macassan" is used widely in Australia to denote the people from present day Indonesia who sourced *trepang* in northern Australia for the export trade based in the port city of Makassar in South Sulawesi

[3] Chris Saines, 'Foreword', *The 10th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery|Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2021, p. 15

[4] Agung Hujatnikajennong, *Kurasi dan Kuasa: Kekuratoran dalam Medan Seni Rupa Kontemporer di Indonesia*, Jakarta: Marjin Kiri, 2015

between the curators and members of the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, the Indigenous community art centre located in Yirrkala, East Arnhem Land. The complexities of the curatorial interactions and artistic collaborations, now spanning several years, are partly described in an account of the project by Abdi Karya, which makes clear that this been a pivotal experience professionally, but a profoundly emotional one.[5] The Yolngu/Macassan Project is about personal connections to a shared history.

A MARITIME WORLD

The trade in sea cucumber (*trepang*), based around the trading port of Makassar on the southwestern peninsula of Sulawesi, is the best known and documented aspect of early contacts between Indonesia and northern Australia. China was the destination market for the *trepang* found throughout island Southeast Asia and by the eighteenth century *trepang* fishing was established as the most important commodity for Makassar,[6] a cosmopolitan trading port which attracted settlers from throughout the archipelago. The *trepang* fishers were predominantly of Macassar and Bugis ethnicity, but included other groups like the Mandarese, Butonese, Bajau, Timorese, Malukan and Papuan (now collectively referred to as Makassans).[7]

Sourced widely from the archipelago around Makassar, *trepang* fishing extended to the coasts of neighbouring islands and into Australian waters. The dating and scale of this trade has been debated amongst scholars over recent decades, though its extent is thought to have reached the Kimberley coast, an area known as Kayu Jawa, in the northwest of Western Australia during the 1750s, and Arnhem Land, known as Marege, in the 1780s.[8] Coastal people from various parts of Indonesia, including the Bajau (Bajo) and the Butonese probably visited Australia earlier than this and, while many accounts of contact between Macassans and Indigenous Australians focus on the Yolngu of northeast Arnhem Land, the region of cultural contact was likely to have been across a much wider area of the Australian north coast.[9] Marine products other than *trepang* were also important for trade, including seaweed, pearls, tortoise shells, trochus shells and shark fin. The pearling industry, which developed in northern Australia throughout the nineteenth century, brought Indonesians from islands such as Alor, Babar, and Solor to Broome, Darwin and Thursday Island.[10]

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[5] Abdi Karya, '*Jappama. Nia'ma* (I'm leaving. I'm here)'; https://apap.qagoma.qld.gov.au/jappama-niama-im-leaving-im-here/

[6] From 1746 there was a direct junk link between Makassar and the port of Amoy (now known as Xiamen). See Heather Sutherland and Gerrit Knapp, *Monsoon Traders: Ships, Skippers and Commodities in Eighteenth-Century Makassar*, Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004

[7] The different ethnicities of the *trepang* fishers is reflected in the large number of loanwords found in northern Australian languages from speakers of languages other than Makassan, including those from South and East Sulawesi, Maluku and Timor-Rote and the Bajau and Oceanic subgroups. See Antoinette Schapper, 'Beyond 'Macassans': Speculations on layers of Austronesian contact in Northern Australia', *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, vol. 41, 2021, Issue 4

[8] Campbell Macknight, 'The View from Marege': Australian Knowledge of Makassar and the Impact of the Trepang Industry across Two Centuries', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 35, ANU Press, 2011, p. 122

[9] Regina Ganter, *Mixed relations: Asian-Aboriginal Contact in North Australia*, Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2006

[10] Julia Martínez and Adrian Vickers, *The Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labor and Indigenous Encounters in Australia's Northern Trading Network,* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015

The people who collected *trepang* in Australian waters were organized into large fleets of wooden sailing vessels of a type known as *paduwakang*. These were plank-built boats, characterized by their tripod masts to which rectangular sails, made from *karoro* or palm-leaf sail cloth, were attached. The *trepang* harvesting fleet was the largest collection of craft sailing in and out of Makassar, and in the year 1786-87 there were eighty registered boats.[11] Maritime journeys were regulated by the onset of the monsoon season. These fleets would depart Makassar each year with the arrival of the northwest monsoonal winds, usually during December. The boats travelled northeast of Timor, stopping for supplies on one of the islands in the Banda Sea before embarking on the journey south across open seas to Marege, a total travel time of between ten and fifteen days. On arrival, the *trepang* fishers would then negotiate with local populations to spend four to five months collecting and processing *trepang*, building small camps close to the shore and erecting smokehouses. The boats probably carried bamboo and prefabricated wall panels, mats and palm leaf for this purpose. When the southeast winds arrived in March or April each year, they would return to Makassar.

Some Aboriginal Australians travelled back to Makassar with the fleets, either to work in the port city and return home during a subsequent fishing season or to settle and establish families. The presence of Aboriginal Australians in Makassar was recorded by a number of nineteenth century European visitors in written and visual accounts[12] and there are traces of this in present-day Makassar: residents in the neighbourhood of the former home of Unusu Daeng Remba, a captain involved in the *trepang* trade, recollect that the house was constructed of ironwood brought to Makassar from Arnhem Land and that several Aboriginal Australians lived in the house.[13] Macassan heritage in the Northern Territory is extensive, including rock art and *trepang* processing sites, in objects of material culture such as cloth, iron and dugout canoes, and in languages, music, art forms and ceremonial life. Macassans also had sexual relationships with Aboriginal women and fathered children in Australia.

By the early twentieth century the thriving *trepang* industry between northern Australia and Makassar was terminated. The British colonial administration attempted to take advantage of the lucrative export trade by gradually introducing higher taxes from the 1880s until the South Australian government (which administered what is now the Northern Territory at that time) completely outlawed the trade in 1907. In Indonesia, although Makassar was a trading port of the Dutch East Indies Company and then a regional centre in the colonial Dutch East Indies (1800–1942), the trade in *trepang* was largely in the hands of local traders and regional rulers. Throughout the eighteenth century the Dutch East Indies Company's trade in Makassar was "relatively insignificant" and in decline.[14] Today, the *trepang* industry is still significant for Makassar, which continues to operate as a hub for its fishing, processing and exporting while seafaring communities still operate throughout the Indonesian archipelago.

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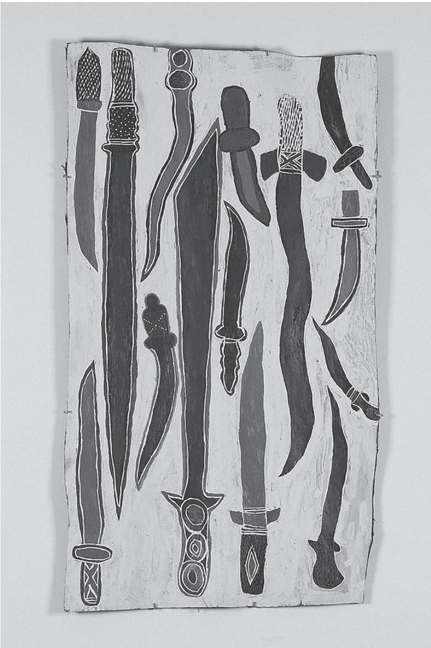
[11] Heather Sutherland, 'Trepang and Wangkang: The China Trade of Eighteenth-Century Makassar c. 1720s-1840s', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-en Volkenkunde*, vol. 156, no. 3, 2000

[12] Jane Lydon, 'Picturing Macassan-Australian Histories: Odoardo Beccari's 1873 Photographs of the 'Orang-Mereghi' and Indigenous Authenticity', in Jane Carey and Jane Lydon eds, *Indigenous Networks: Mobility, Connections and Exchange*, Routledge, New York, 2014, p.147-48

[13] Marshall Clark, 'Tangible Heritage of the Macassan-Aboriginal Encounter in Contemporary South Sulawesi', in Marshall Clark and Sally K. May eds., *Macassan History and Heritage: Journeys, Encounters and Influences*, Canberra: ANU Press, 2013

[14] Macknight, p.122; Sutherland, p. 461



RECONNECTING

While the significance of the interaction between Aboriginal Australians and the Macassans has never featured prevalently in the national histories of either Indonesia or Australia, the descendants of the people involved have retained and recorded these histories in various forms. Since the 1980s there have been many initiatives to reinvigorate connections, involving community members, performing artists, and exhibitions of visual art. One of the earliest and most significant was the controversial 1988 Hati Marege bicentennial project, for which the Northern Territory Museum facilitated the recreation of a traditional *paduwakang* vessel to re-enact the voyage of Macassan *trepang* fishers from Makassar to Yirrkala.[15] It is important to note that these numerous initiatives have involved many of the artists exhibited in the APT10 Yolngu/Macassan Project and that many works in the current exhibition draw on earlier forms of collaboration.

One example is the late Yolngu painter Johnny Bulunbulun (1946–2010), whose painting on bark titled *Body design–wind* (2002), representing the northwest wind, clouds and weather patterns (*lunggurruma*) measured the timing of the fishing expeditions.[16] In 1993, the artist took a group from Maningrida to perform the Marayarr Murrukunddjeh ceremony over three nights at the Museum La Galigo in Makassar, the ceremony by which Ganalbingu people annually received the Macassan traders to their land. Johnny Bulunbulun was also part of a major exhibition, titled *Trepang: China and the Story of Macassan–Aboriginal Trade* in collaboration with classically-trained Chinese artist Zhou Xiaoping, held at the Capital Museum in Beijing and at the Melbourne Museum in 2011.[17]

The Yolngu/Macassan Project also features work by artists from the Marika family, including two paintings on bark and wood by Dhuwarrwarr Marika, titled *Macassan-style Swords and Long Knives* (2021). These relate to the earlier work of her father Mawalan Marika (1907–1967), who made the crayon drawing on paper, *Makassan Swords and Long Knives* for the anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt in 1947.[18] Dhuwarrwarr Marika's two renditions of *Macassan-style Swords and Long Knives* feature a series of colourful, vertically arranged knives with individually shaped handles.[19] These knives are a distinct symbol of cultural identity in South Sulawesi and to the Indigenous Australians were synonymous with the Macassan seafarers. They are made in a variety of shapes and sizes but generally feature straight, curved or wavy blades and can reach about half a metre in length. Much more than a weapon and hunting tool, they are believed to have been imbued

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[15] For an overview of the Hati Marege and other projects see Aaron Corn with Brian Djangirrawuy Garawirrtja 'The Legacy of Yolŋu-Makassan Contact: Before the First Wave', in Danielle Clode and Gillian Dooley eds, *The First Wave: A New Approach to Exploring Early Coastal Contact History in Australia*, 2020, Film, Digital Media or Visual Output, Adelaide; https://youtu.be/nr0MW6uWf6s. See also details of the Trepang Project by Andrish Saint-Clare; https://www.insideindonesia.org/trepang-3

[16] This work is part of the QAGOMA Collection, Accession Number 2003.147; https://learning.qagoma.qld.gov.au/artworks/body-design-wind/

[17] Marcia Langton, Alejandra Duschatzky and Stephanie Holt eds, *Trepang: China and the Story of Macassan–Aboriginal Trade*, Melbourne: Museum Victoria, 2011

[18] The work is part of the Yirrkala Drawings Collection at the Berndt Museum of Anthropology, University of Western Australia

[19] In addition to the works shown at APT10, Dhuwarrwarr Marika has produced other versions of the work, including a collagraph in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/works/2021.13/ and another shown in the exhibition *By the Stars, Wind & Ocean Currents* at Cross Art Projects, Sydney 2019; http://www.crossart.com.au/current-show/357-by-the-stars-wind-ocean-currents

with a supernatural force during the time of their forging. A young man embarking on a journey would usually be presented with a dagger by his family in the hope that it would bring protection and prosperity.[20]

The larger of the paintings depicting the Macassan-style knives was then replicated by a group of Javanese batik artisans on cotton cloth using the wax-resist dyeing technique. The technique of batik, practiced predominantly on the island of Java, has no apparent direct relationship to Macassan culture, though cloth was certainly part of the exchange of material goods between the Aboriginal Australians and the *trepang* fishers.[21] Collaborative batik production has also featured in earlier exchanges. For instance, when the Yolngu artist Nawurapu Wunungmurra (1952–2018) visited Makassar and Java in 2015, a batik cloth was made by artisans in Pekalongan based on his bark painting which features a triangle design symbolizing the departing red sails of the Macassan traders.[22] In addition to the painted renditions of the Macassan blades, for the Yolngu-Macassan Project artists including Djakapurra Munyarryun have recreated the actual knives using materials such as metal and synthetic twine. Djakapurra has been involved in several performances based on the exchange, including *The Eyes of Marege*, shown at the OzAsia Festival in Adelaide and the Sydney Opera House in 2007 and *The Voyage to Marege* with the Indonesian classical composer Ananda Sukarlan in Jakarta in 2017.[23]

An additional significant form of memory represented in the Yolngu/Macassan Project are the earthenware pots, and shards of earthenware arranged on a circular mound of sand. These shards regularly appear on the east coast beaches of East Arnhem Land.[24] The Macassans brought earthenware with them to use as cooking pots, water and storage jars. They were manufactured locally in South Sulawesi, though some may have come from other parts of the archipelago. Song cycles known in *Bawaka*, which record the knowledge of place, explain why there are so many broken pieces found on the beach,

> *The songs tell us of the harvest working together side by side, sharing and trading. And at the end, a great party. Our friends bring out all their fine goods. We laugh into the night. We celebrate our hard work. We sing and dance. And then when it is finished and we have drunk all the nanitji and eaten all the fine food, we smash the bottles and they burst and explode!* [25]

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[20] Halilintar Latief, 'Revisiting the Collection of Dr František Czurda' in Sri Kuhnt-Saptodewo (ed.) *Sulawesi and Beyond: The František Czurda Collection,* Wien: Museum für Völkerkunde, 2010

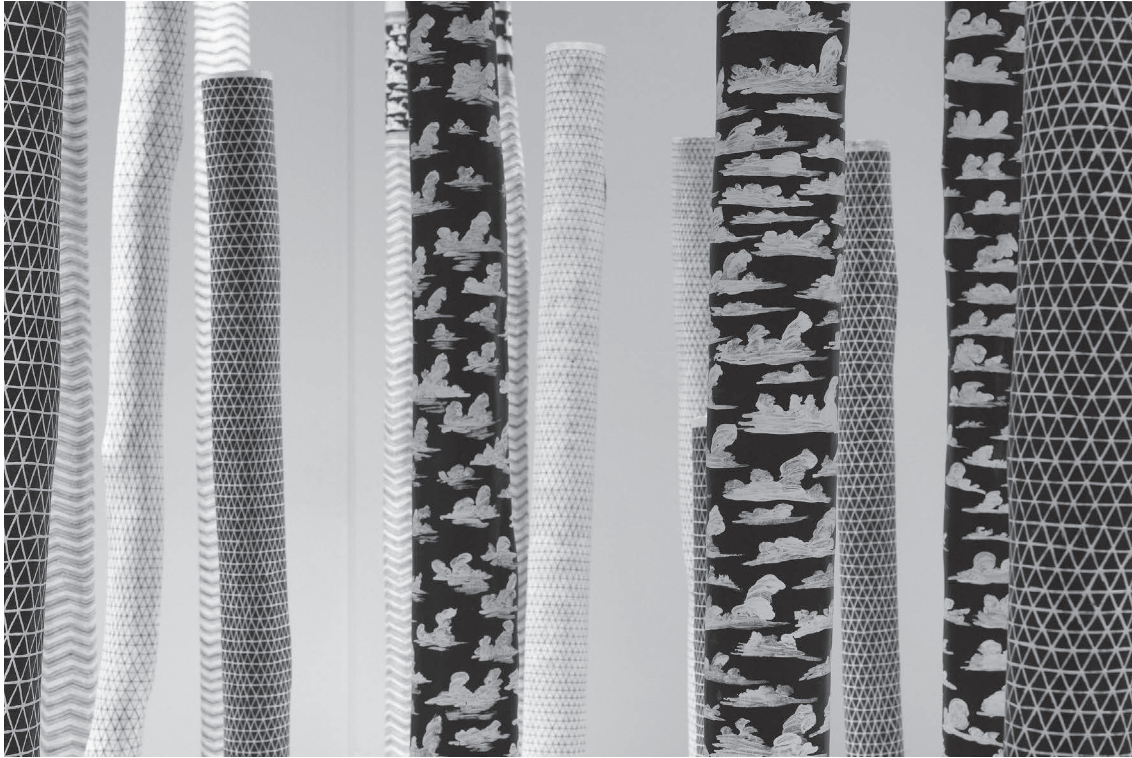
[21] Although commonly associated with the island of Java, the technique of batik is practiced by many cultures of Indonesia, including Central Sulawesi, where the Sa'dan Toraja people use a resist dyeing method with rice paste and indigo dye

[22] The batik production was funded by the Australian Embassy in Jakarta and presented to the Textile Museum in Jakarta in 2017; https://indonesia.embassy.gov.au/jakt/MR15_012.html

[23] Julie Janson, 'The Eyes of Marege', APE Australian Performance Exchange; http://australianperformanceexchange.com/dev/v2/?q =eyes-of-marege and Ananda Sukarlan, '"The Voyage to Marege" a Voyage of Discovery', *The Jakarta Post*, 11 August 2017; https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/08/11/the-voyage-marege-a-voyage-discovery.html

[24] Will Stubbs, *APT10-10th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2021, p. 172

[25] Djawa Burarrwanga, as told to Will Stubbs, p.172



Curator Abdi Karya, and Will Stubbs of the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre have been investigating the history of this earthenware for some years. They were able to collect a number of pots made by artisans in Soreang, a village located to the south of Makassar, which were then painted by artists in Yirrkala.[26] Several of these painted pots are in the exhibition, including one by Nawurapu Wunungmurra which features several bands of a triangle pattern and cross hatching and a single black band featuring objects including a long dagger, pants, a tobacco pipe, sailboat and water pail. The earthenware on display encapsulates the spirit of these artistic exchanges, for like the collaborative batik pieces the Yolngu/Macassan Project is less concerned with authenticity or reproducing historical artefacts than with exploring how objects of material culture have been remembered and how they can relate to each other in the present.

SEAFARING AS ART

The *Macassan Sail* (2020) by Gunybi Ganambarr is a testimony to the precarity of life on the ocean and to the resourcefulness and poise that it takes to "calmly fashion a sail" to travel by boat through a vast body of water. Constructed from a frame of wooden harpoons, it hangs on the gallery wall with one harpoon lying vertically, intersected by a second harpoon at a forty-five-degree angle to create a triangular-shaped frame onto which a fabric sail has been fastened with wire. The sail itself has been constructed from pieces of repurposed cloth in shades of dark blue, light blue and yellow, roughly sewn together and attached using the eyelets in the dark blue cloth. This improvised sail was produced by the artist and family members in December 2020 when their boat engine failed during a turtle hunting trip,

> *Gunybi, his son Daniel, Yinimala Gumana, Mangila Munungurr and Bulungitj Marawili used the boat canopy and their work shirts, stitched together with copper wire, to make a Macassan-style sail, supported by a frame of turtle harpoons. When the tide and wind were favourable, they set sail for home, but were intercepted by a police boat searching for the men following reports that they had been missing overnight.*[27]

The sail, as a document of their experience, and a photograph of their boat made by police rescuers, informed the second work by Gunybi Ganambarr, *Djirrit* (2021) an etching on aluminium composite board depicting the boat at sea. An aluminium boat, or tinny, dominates the top half of the picture, with rails along the bow, boldly afloat, the pointed nose of the boat facing the viewer in three-quarter profile with the five men seated aboard. The handmade sail appears taut, the artist using a shading effect to signify the multiple pieces of fabric used to construct it. The sea around the boat is rendered in a series of vertical zigzag lines partly infilled with cross hatching, while a darker narrow panel along the top of the work suggests the clouds on the horizon or coastline.

Sharing the floor space, adjacent to the earthenware pots and shards set in sand, was an installation of Larrakitj memorial poles, *Wangupini Larrakitj* made by Nawurapu Wunungmurra between 2016 and 2018. Several of the wooden poles feature depictions of white *wangupini* clouds on a base of black, referring to the thunder clouds that mark the arrival of the wet season, a time

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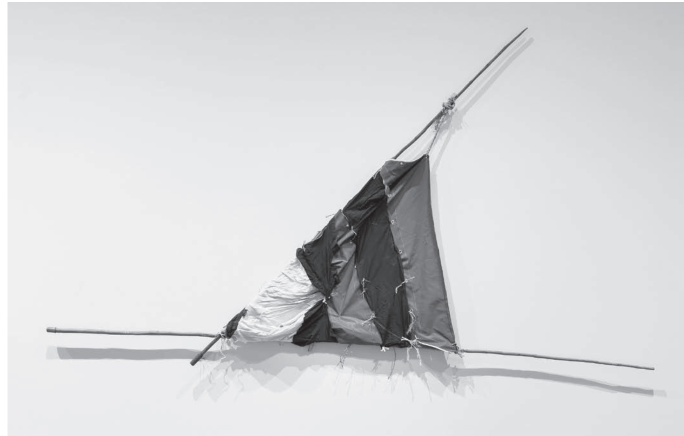
[26] Abdi Karya, op cit.

[27] From exhibition wall text accompanying *Djirrit* by Gunybi Ganambarr



when the monsoon winds turned and enabled the Macassans to sail to Australia. Suspended from the ceiling above the poles was a large rectangular palm-leaf sail called *Karoroq/Gharuru*, made by artisans in West Sulawesi. Sail-cloths like this, made by weaving the fibres of the *Arrenga pinnata* or *gebang* palm, hung from the tripod masts of the *paduwakang* vessels that travelled to Australia.

The Yolngu/Macassan Project also featured a handwoven sail made from woven *pandanus* (*pandanus spiralis*) and hand-rolled kurrajong bark string (*brachychiton populneus*), by Margaret Rarru called *Dhomala* (2018). Sails like this, and the dugout canoes (*lipa-lipa*) they propelled, are examples of practical knowledge brought by the Makassans to Australia. This sail was commissioned for the APT9 in 2019 and similar sails were shown at *Dhomala Dhäwu: Makassan Sail Stories* in Sydney at Cross Art Projects in 2021. The latter featured a series of drawings by Margaret Rarru depicting woven *dhomala* and canoes alongside the work of Javanese artist Ipeh Nur, whose drawings depict the craft and livelihoods of Makassan and Bugis boatbuilders.[28] The refined canoe sail hanging next to the spontaneously constructed *Macassan Sail* suggests the kinds of possibilities the Yolngu/Macassan Project presents, to understand that this cultural exchange is more than unearthing underexplored histories, and seeing how memories and skills are rendered aesthetically and developed over time. As works of art many of these pieces have been displayed independently of the Yolngu/Macassan Project, the efficacy of which is to usher the viewer into a vast island world, to consider that not only contact between Aboriginal Australians and Indonesians occurred, but also to acknowledge a sense of ambiguity around some of these objects and artworks. The resonances of these legacies are complicated, the voices of contemporary Makassans are particularly faint, perhaps a legacy of the Indonesian art world that is concentrated on the art centres of Java and Bali, leaving artists from cities like Makassar on the periphery. However, given the momentum and passion that has driven this project for so many years, it is clear that the journey does not stop here.

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[28] *Dhomala Dhäwu: Makassan Sail Stories*, 2021; http://www.crossart.com.au/current-show/369-dhomala-dhaewu-makassan-sail-story-by-the-stars-wind-ocean-currents-part-2