

2. Studying trepangers

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Trepang has been collected, processed, traded or consumed by diverse groups of people, largely in East and Southeast Asia, but also, importantly, in northern Australia. The producers of trepang, however, have not usually traded their product beyond the initial sale, and the consumers have been different again. This has meant that those who have studied and written about trepang and trepangers have often done so in relative ignorance of other parts of the overall story and the separate literatures that have developed are divided not just by geographical coverage, since there are also distinct differences of discipline and approach. As one continues to explore aspects of the subject, more and more unsuspected vistas open up, especially as the consequences of the activities associated with the industry and of those involved in it are pursued. It is difficult, therefore, to find a central focus in any study of trepang and those involved with its exploitation and use. A fruitful way to analyse our knowledge is to distinguish various literatures—as set out in what follows—and this has the benefit of throwing up some inconsistencies and gaps that invite further research. The contrasts between the research done within different disciplines and fields of study provoke many questions about the organisation of knowledge.

The first body of literature to consider is a negative case. The collecting, processing and trading of trepang all involve the sea and have thus been open to the view of those who also come and go in ships. Moreover, trepang has only rarely been for the consumption of those who collect and process it, but is usually for trade; there is money in trepang and that drew the interest of observers. This visibility of the getting and trading of trepang is relevant when considering the complete absence of any mention of the industry in the abundant records left by the servants of the Portuguese Crown, or of the Dutch and English trading companies, in island Southeast Asia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Within a year or two of the Portuguese capture of Malacca in 1511, Tomé Pires was assiduously gathering information for his king on the whole trading world of the Indian Ocean and seas beyond as far as Japan (Corteseo 1944). His work is a remarkable compilation and its final publication in 1944 transformed our understanding of trade in this period; it contains no mention of trepang. Even closer to the eventual centre of the trade, in 1670 Cornelis Speelman, who had just conquered Makassar for the Dutch East India Company, completed a massive report on South Sulawesi for the company, spelling out in detail all the information he had been able to amass on the history, politics and economic affairs of the area. He was, naturally enough, particularly thorough on

trade; but again there is no mention of trepang (Noorduyn 1983). These are but two examples—even if particularly persuasive ones—of the silence of the early sources on the subject of trepang.

It is easy to assume that a commodity that came to have such a major place in the trade between the Indonesian archipelago and China had long been sought and traded. I remember talking about this with the late Mrs Meilink-Roelofs, the authority on early Southeast Asian trade; she thought trepang must have been there, and pulled a copy of her masterwork from the shelf to consult the hugely detailed index. It does not contain an entry for trepang (Meilink-Roelofs 1962). All the records of the first two centuries of direct European involvement in the trade of Asia are silent on the question of trepang, whether its collection, processing or trade.

The Chinese sources explain why this should be so. Although there is one reference to trepang in the sixteenth century, the consumption of trepang only began in any quantity in the seventeenth century. Its use seems to have originated in northern China, though there are also early references to inferior types of trepang from the south coast. The question was kindly investigated for me in the 1960s by Wang Gungwu and reported in Macknight (1976, pp. 7–8). More recently, in a separate study, Dai Yifeng could find no record of trepang earlier than a book written in the reign of Wanli (1573–1620) by a man who had been a candidate in the imperial examinations in 1602 (Dai Yifeng 2002, p. 21).

Not unexpectedly perhaps, there is no lack of later comment on trepang in Chinese. As Dai Yifeng remarks, ‘Starting from the Qing Dynasty [1644–1912], records about trepang in Chinese literature were more and more extensive’ (Dai Yifeng 2002, p. 23). This interest covers its biology, its culinary uses and its sources, both in China, especially from northern waters, and as imported from Japan and Southeast Asia.¹ It had particular medicinal uses; as a source from 1757 says, ‘The best trepang live in Liaohai [northern China]...The medical function of trepang is to invigorate the kidney, to benefit the essence of life, to strengthen the penis of man and to treat fistula’ (quoted in Dai Yifeng 2002, p. 25). I suspect that there is much more to be done with the Chinese sources.

This brings us back to the discussion of the affairs of island Southeast Asia. Even if trepang was not an item of immediate interest to Europeans, the eye of traders and administrators has been on trepangers from the outset of the industry there and this has resulted in a remarkably detailed body of records. Here is another literature, or perhaps more accurately, series of literatures. The first known reference to trepang in Southeast Asia comes from June 1710 when a

1 Although trepang had been known in Japan as early as the eighth century, its actual use at that period is not clear. Export from Japan, as from Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam, to China only began from the middle of the seventeenth century (Akamine 2004).

Bugis, Toissa, was granted a pass by the Dutch East India Company in Makassar to collect trepang on Buton (Sutherland 2000, p. 460; Nagel 2003, p. 500).² The trepang trade through Makassar to China, often via Batavia, grew somewhat unsteadily through the eighteenth century, but by 1800 was substantial. This growth in the import of trepang and other sea products into China is presumably linked to the vast expansion of the Chinese economy through the eighteenth century.

The demand for trepang in Makassar drove the search for suitable collecting grounds. As early as 1728, 40 small Bajau Laut praus were looking for trepang off the southwestern coast of Rote and, when driven off by local people, then moved on to Kupang from where the Dutch East India Company official reported the matter (Fox 1977, p. 460). Even if that attempt to open up new grounds was unsuccessful, numerous official and private reports over the next century and more describe Bajau and others collecting and processing trepang throughout the islands to the south and east of Makassar.

The earliest reference to trepang being collected in Australia dates from 1754 when the Dutch authorities in Batavia reported that, as far as they knew, the 'Southland' southeast of Timor produced nothing but trepang and wax. It was visited 'now and then' from Timor and Makassar (Macknight 1976, p. 95). I believe that this is a reference to the Kimberley coast. The reference to wax is puzzling; what exactly was it and how was it obtained? This report had been prompted by earlier news that a Chinese trader had set out from Timor—that is, Kupang—to look for 'turtle-horn', presumably tortoise shell, on islands south of Rote. Given what we now know about eighteenth-century trade, there is no surprise in any of this.

Such knowledge was not restricted to Dutch observers and officials. In the 1760s, Alexander Dalrymple, planning the extension of British trade, heard that sailors from Sulawesi had reached Australia. In the 1780s, Thomas Forrest collected more accurate and detailed information about the trepang industry being carried on in northern Australia to supply the Makassar market (Macknight 1976, pp. 95–6).

In the nineteenth century, the major focus of the trepang industry in Australian waters was the Arnhem Land coast and adjacent areas—that is, Marege'. I now accept the evidence recorded by Flinders and Brown that the abundant resources of trepang in this area only began to be exploited from about 1780 and this date

2 One claim for an earlier date needs correcting. Schwerdtner Máñez and Ferse (2010, p. 3) claim that Pieter Pieterzoon in the Aru Islands in 1636 reported a trepang industry. They seem to have misread the remarks by Earl in his Translator's Preface to Kolff's *Voyages of the Dourga* (1840). (They have confirmed in personal communication that they should have referred to their reference 13, not the reference 9 as in their text.) The original report of Pieterzoon's visit to the Arus from 12 May to 9 June 1636 is to be found in Colenbrander (1899, pp. 227–8); though full of interesting information, the report has no mention or hint of trepang.

is confirmed by a marked rise in the quantity of trepang passing through the Makassar market.³ For the nineteenth century, the reports of numerous observers and various official records allow us to understand the activities in Australia of the trepangers from Makassar in some detail, though the material for Arnhem Land is better than that for the Kimberley coast. I have estimated that in the first half of the century between 30 and 60 praus visited the Northern Territory coast each year, bringing 1000 or more men. The numbers declined somewhat later and by the end of the century only about half a dozen praus were coming, though they still brought some hundreds of men. A single, final prau—at least for the trepangers from Makassar working the Northern Territory coast—the *Bunga Ejaya*, under the command of Using Daeng Rangka, came for the 1906–07 season (Macknight 1976). Trepang has been one of various maritime products taken from the reefs and islands in the Timor Sea, and occasionally from the Kimberley coast, by vessels from the Indonesian archipelago throughout the twentieth century, but the quantities seem to have been relatively small and the groups engaged in these activities have been very various.⁴

The Australian contribution to the trade, even if considerable, needs to be seen in relation to production elsewhere in the Indonesian archipelago, in the Pacific and in various other parts of the colonial world. Everywhere officials and observers recorded what they could and it is from these accounts that the main outline of the history of the industry can be reconstructed. At one level, the sources seem various: the Dutch East India Company records, the journals of British—and a few French—explorers, the annual reports and other papers of Dutch colonial officers, the diaries of British officials in the early settlements in northern Australia, and the later records of the colonial and federal governments in Australia. At another level, however, these are the products of outsiders, written in European languages. Whatever the problems of access, language or handwriting, historians are used to dealing with documents of this type.

A quite different discourse has its origin in oral accounts from people affected by the industry. Within Australia, trepang was collected and processed on the beach in a series of sites from the Cobourg Peninsula to the Wellesleys, though there was also some slight contact with the Tiwi Islands. This activity involved,

3 A further argument for a date later in the eighteenth century, which I have not seen before, arises from thinking about the 1756 voyage under Gonzal to the Gulf of Carpentaria. This expedition appears to have been in response to the 1754 report from Kupang. Admittedly, it was a poorly managed business and not to the area visited by the trepangers, but it is hard to believe that, were there a flourishing trepang industry in Arnhem Land in 1756 and given the reason for the voyage, this would not have been noticed somewhere in the records. As I have previously observed, no earlier Dutch account of contact with the Australian coast mentions the industry or its effects, especially the material from the 1705 expedition that spent some time around the Cobourg Peninsula and had extensive contact with Aborigines (Macknight 1976, pp. 96–7).

4 Much has been written about these activities from various perspectives, but they are not of much significance for the trepang trade as a whole. Crawford (2001, pp. 68–94), Fox (1998) and Dwyer (2001) provide helpful discussions.

necessarily, meeting local people and there was much interaction, including Aboriginal people travelling on the praus back to Makassar and even further afield. Though a few other items were collected, the essential purpose of those who sailed from Makassar to the Australian coast was the trepang industry. This was an industrial process, not a trading exchange.⁵

Although there were a few contemporary observers who commented on the effects of contact between the trepangers and local Aborigines, the first significant study was by Norman Tindale on Groote Eylandt in 1921 and 1922. Exercising a ‘proper breadth of interest’, as was so typical of all his work, Tindale fell into studying local people and that led to an interest in the effects of contact with the trepangers. His reports, published with admirable speed, remain useful sources (Tindale 1925–28). With the notable exception of his reference to a picture of a late sixteenth-century sailing vessel from South Sulawesi (Macknight 2011, p. 128), Tindale knew little of the history of Makassar or Southeast Asia in general. His account was ethnographic—that is, he recorded what he saw and what his informants told him, giving this information an internally consistent form and structure, but not testing it against other sources or approaches.

Over the next 50 years, a series of very distinguished fieldworkers recorded a wealth of information about the effects of contact—to name only the most prominent: Rose, Worsley, Moyle and Turner on Groote Eylandt; Warner and Thomson in northeastern Arnhem Land; Ronald and Catherine Berndt all over Arnhem Land; Mountford and McCarthy on the 1948 expedition. With the exception of some of the Berndts’ work, this body of ethnographic record shared, in the main, four characteristics. First, the focus of interest was on Aborigines, not trepangers and the trepang industry. Second, the various accounts relied almost exclusively on information provided, in one way or another, by Aboriginal informants. Third, there was little knowledge or understanding of the world from which the trepangers came. Last, there was a tone of scientific detachment with a studied absence of any moral judgments.

My 1972 article in *Oceania*, entitled ‘Macassans and Aborigines’, which was based on a chapter in my doctoral thesis from 1969, serves as a summary of this ethnographic literature, together with a modest contribution in the same vein, which, I was surprised to discover in the field, could still be made. The article is distinguished from previous work, however, by an awareness of the need to know more about the sources of influence. As I said then:

One major difficulty with virtually all this previous work by Australian ethnographers has been the failure to look for the models which the

⁵ This is an important point in the interpretation of early European contacts with the continent. See the discussion in Macknight (2008b).

Aborigines are supposed to have imitated...Enough is now known about the Macassans to set some limit to their usefulness as a general ragbag source of the unusual. (Macknight 1972, p. 291)

This is a call to move from one body of literature to another. In particular, I was able to show the helpfulness of the Makasar⁶ dictionary and supporting ethnographic atlas of B. F. Matthes, the Bible translator who was working in Makassar from the middle of the nineteenth century, exactly the most relevant period for providing background to the trepangers. I also had the considerable assistance of the 1952 articles by two Dutch scholars, A. A. Cense (1952) and H. J. Heeren (1952), who had taken the ethnographic data available to them at the time and analysed them in the light of their good knowledge of South Sulawesi languages, history and society. They had also read the most obvious historical sources such as Flinders' account of his meeting with the trepanging fleet in 1803. Since then, there has been, of course, much more work done that is relevant to understanding the background from which the trepangers came. Anthony Jukes (2006) has provided a detailed account of the Makasar language, which he refers to as 'Makassarese'; Gene Ammarell (1999) has demonstrated how it was possible to navigate on such a voyage as that to Australia, both across the open sea and around a coast; Christian Pelras (2000) has explored the patron–client relationship that was undoubtedly critical for any such cooperative enterprise undertaken by men from South Sulawesi.

While I would modestly claim that there is some value in re-reading my 1972 article, further work, still essentially in the ethnographic mode, has gone well beyond it (Macknight 2011, pp. 135–7). In particular, I admire the work of Ian McIntosh on the 'bayini' (most recently, McIntosh 2008, 2011), Scott Mitchell (1994, 1995, 1996) on the economy—though this relies on very elegant analysis of archaeological data—and Alan Walker and David Zorc (1981) on language. Nicolas Evans (1992, 1997) has sought to add time depth to the question of linguistic borrowings. There is clearly room for further work of this kind. One matter that would be worth exploring is an analysis of the *wuramu* or 'crookman' wooden figures and stories from northeast Arnhem Land. These are associated with Makassar in some way, as well as featuring in local ceremonies. I take *wuramu* to be an Indigenous word meaning something like 'crazy' or 'unpredictable' for which 'crookman' is a gloss. The concept represents an Aboriginal perception of the actions of Dutch colonial officials, including harbour officials, and perhaps financiers and owners who took money from returning trepangers for no reason apparent to Aborigines. The theme of collection has then been transferred to the

6 Makasar is the language spoken in the area around the city of Makassar. It is sometimes referred to as Makassarese, both forms having many variant spellings. See the chapters by Ganter, Thomas and Brady later in this volume.

local ceremonies. Perhaps *wuramu* just means people acting in incomprehensible ways for any reason. The key sources, but not the only ones, are the reports of R. M. and C. H. Berndt (1949; 1954, pp. 60–3).

Regrettably, my admonition on the need to understand the sources of influence still applies to much of the literature, most notably in the wild use of the unfortunate term ‘Macassan’. A few puzzles also remain: why do Aborigines refer to Makassar as ‘Yumainga’?⁷ A rather more diffuse question is to understand the purpose of the many illustrations of praus and other items of material culture associated with the trepangers in the rock art of Groote Eylandt and western Arnhem Land, or for that matter the two stone picture sites in eastern Arnhem Land (Macknight and Gray 1970).

A very different approach to studying the trepang industry, in Australia at least, has been through archaeology, and a distinct body of knowledge has gradually built up around this. It began, however, with the ethnographers. The approach goes back to Warner’s excavations of the middens around Macassar Well at Milingimbi in the 1920s, and, in the 1940s, the Berndts obtained shards and some other materials from the Mungaruda sandbank off South Goulburn Island—collected mainly by Lazarus Lamilami—and from Wobalinna Island in Port Bradshaw. Macknight (1969, sites 8[b] and 25[a]) gives details of these sites. The first proper archaeological work was done in 1948 by McCarthy and Setzler (1960). In the early 1960s, John Mulvaney visited several sites and saw the potential for further work (1966). This led directly to my survey and excavations in 1966 and 1967 (Macknight 1969). Ian Crawford (1969) was slightly ahead of me in the Kimberley. More recently, Morwood and Hobbs (1997) have followed up Crawford’s work and found further sites.

Archaeology has, I think, answered two questions quite well. The first is the geographical range of the industry. Thus, in the Gulf of Carpentaria, the lack of trepang preparation sites in Limmen Bight suggests that this area was not much visited, though there are important sites in the Pellew Group. Further on, the Wellesley Islands were certainly visited, but there has been no thorough survey looking for trepanging sites. In the Kimberley, all the sites are west of Cape Londonderry and there may have been sporadic contact as far down the coast as the Pilbara. The second matter we now understand in some detail is the actual working of the beach preparation sites. There is a very clear pattern for the location of boiling fireplaces, burying trenches and smoking huts (Macknight 1976, pp. 48–82).

One question that it was hoped the archaeology would answer, but which, I believe, it has not, is the question of the date at which the industry began. The

7 I do not now accept the identification with Jongaya as suggested in Macknight (1972, p. 304).

only artefacts recovered from trepang preparation sites whose manufacture can be securely dated before 1800 are several Dutch coins, but even then there are problems, such as the long-continued use of the date of 1790, to say nothing of the issue of the time between minting and deposition. The earliest example appears to be a coin of the Dutch East India Company probably dated to 1742 and found on the Lyaba site off Groote Eylandt (Macknight 1969, pp. 305–6; 1976, p. 73). Ceramics from southern China have been found on many sites, but there are many problems with dating these wares on stylistic grounds. The much more abundant earthenware can certainly be shown to come mainly from South Sulawesi, but again cannot be usefully dated by means of its decoration or form (Bulbeck and Rowley 2001). Attempts to apply fission track and thermoluminescence dating to glass, ceramics and earthenware produced inconclusive results (Macknight 1976, pp. 162–3). This brings us to the problem of the radiocarbon dates of which a number have been obtained by various people from various sites, giving results strung out over the past thousand years or so.⁸ Whatever is being dated and whatever the issues of taphonomy or other factors may be that produce these results, the historical evidence, especially the complete silence of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century sources throughout Southeast Asia on any trade in trepang, make it impossible to accept such radiocarbon dates as indicating the existence of the industry in northern Australia before some time in the eighteenth century, and I repeat my judgment that it began in Arnhem Land about 1780.

There is a clear tendency in much of the archaeological writing on the industry to want to push its origin as far back as possible. Why should this be so? There seem to be four factors, in various combinations with different authors, though given that the claims are rarely explained, it is often hard to tell which factors count most. These are: a desire to separate the industry from European initiative and activity—even if Makassar in the eighteenth century was a port dominated by the Dutch East India Company and most of the Australian coast had been on company charts since at least 1650; a romantic, Orientalist image of the ‘ageless Indies’, sometimes allied with a vague sense of the antiquity of anything to do with China; the prestige of age itself and the virtue of having been around for a long time; and a reliance on the apparently ‘hard science’ nature of radiocarbon and a failure to engage with the totality of evidence. A corollary of this attitude is often a judgment on the trepang industry as somehow ‘a good thing’, which is morally desirable in some way that other industries or activities might not be.

Moreover, much of the more recent archaeological work on trepanging sites has been directed towards elucidating the role of Aborigines on the sites and the effects of their contact with the trepangers. Scott Mitchell’s work, mentioned

⁸ The discussion by Bulbeck and Rowley (2001, pp. 59–60), drawing on the work of Mitchell (1994) in particular, is important for this question, though further dates are now available.

above, was on middens, not trepanging sites, but Carmel Schrire (1972), working in the Port Bradshaw area, and Annie Clarke on Groote Eylandt (1994, 2000)—and more recently at Caledon Bay—have dug on processing sites. Clarke, in particular, has been concerned to stress Aboriginal initiative. Daryl Wesley has recently been working along the same lines at Anuru Bay and in the Wellington Range. I remain slightly sceptical as to the possibility of answering questions about the nature of interaction between trepangers and Aborigines by means of archaeology.

One interesting archaeological puzzle remains. This is the purpose of the circular stone arrangements in the intertidal zone, of which the best example has been discovered off South Goulburn Island. There seem to be some others a little further east and others again off Bentinck Island and Albinia Island in the South Wellesley Group. One tenuous link with the trepang industry is that item 33 at the Wurrawurrawoi stone picture site near Yirrkala, where all other items seem related to the industry, looks very like a stone picture of such a feature (Macknight and Gray 1970, pp. 22–3). Since we do not understand what these rings of stones were for or when they were built—and they do not seem to be of recent Aboriginal or European origin—they are perhaps best described as ‘Dobson rings’ after Graeme Dobson who discovered them.⁹ The best guess as to their function seems to be that they were some kind of holding area for trepang that had been collected, but not yet processed.

When one comes to look at the way in which historians of Australian experience have treated trepang and trepangers, there are some strange silences, despite the abundant and varied documentary sources mentioned above. Again, the starting point must be with the ethnographers. In 1954, R. M. and C. H. Berndt published their book *Arnhem Land: Its history and its people*. This is a book with shortcomings (Macknight 2011, pp. 128–30), but it deserves to be better celebrated as the first major work in the now crowded field of Aboriginal history. Who else, at that time, was integrating oral accounts from Aboriginal informants with published sources and detailed archival research? Who else could provide illustrations such as the spectacular maps drawn with crayon on brown paper that they had sponsored? Naturally, given its focus and the experience of its authors, the book shares some of the characteristics of the ethnographic literature I have described above.

This interest in the consequences of the industry for Aboriginal societies was taken up in the work of John Mulvaney as he pioneered the study of Australian prehistory. In his first great survey, Mulvaney briefly mentions the trepangers under the heading of ‘Proto-historic influences’ (Mulvaney 1961, p. 99), and this was followed by his enthusiastic account of archaeological fieldwork in Arnhem

9 I am grateful to Graeme Dobson and Grant Leeworthy for photographs of these features.

Land and deeper reading in the nineteenth-century sources (Mulvaney 1966). As mentioned above, Mulvaney's work spurred the archaeological investigation of the industry. In the first chapter of *The Prehistory of Australia* (1969), Mulvaney continues to devote considerable space to the matter, though its salience in the literature on Australian prehistory has gradually faded, perhaps as interest has grown in the deep past.

A quite different approach to the subject is found in the first volume of Manning Clark's *A History of Australia*. Although Clark glimpsed the possibility of a long human past on the continent, he was too early to benefit from Mulvaney's work. He was more concerned with the grand geopolitical context within which outsiders first came to know of Australia, and it is within this that he gives his account of the industry (Clark 1962, pp. 37–8). Even if there are some shortcomings in his account, it has the great merit of acknowledging the need to place the industry in its archipelagic context and he makes use of the Dutch articles by Cense (1952) and Heeren (1952).

Over the past 50 years, most historians working in the category of 'Australian history' have written within a model that is essentially Anglocentric and anglophone. The dominant narrative begins with the settlement of New South Wales in 1788 and traces the development of the several British colonies and, after 1901, the federated nation-state. The focus is largely on southern and eastern Australia and the story concentrates on success, or at least on enduring features of the society and economy.

More recently, some other voices have been heard and consideration of the trepang industry arises in various ways. The effects of contact with the trepangers is a theme in Aboriginal history and particularly in relation to the question of the introduction of the smallpox epidemics that devastated Aboriginal Australia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁰ The unusual nature of the archaeology has also attracted attention (Connah 1993). There is, naturally, more interest in the industry in works dealing with northern Australia, such as Alan Powell's excellent history of the Northern Territory (2009), and especially

10 For the original evidence on this, see Macknight (1986, pp. 72–4). For my current view, see Macknight (2011, p. 137). In his final word on the subject, Noel Butlin seems to have shifted somewhat from his opposition to the case for northern introduction. He writes: 'But one disease can be regarded as having certainly been delivered to parts of northern Australia and possibly more widely from Macassan praus. This was smallpox' (Butlin 1993, p. 198). Accepting a date of about 1780 for the origin of substantial contact by trepangers, as the presumed source of the infection, with people in Arnhem Land also removes one of the many difficulties that troubled Butlin; this would make the assumed 1780s epidemic that reached Sydney in 1789 a completely virgin field event, without the effect of previous epidemics. Resistance to accepting non-European agency lingers in the strangest places. Bill Gammage, in his recent paean for Aboriginal agency, after acknowledging that '[s]ome researchers think the disease came from the north', can then go on to suggest that Tench's denial of European introduction may be 'deliberately ironic'. Poor Tench! Reading his remarks fairly and in context, it is clear that he is genuinely puzzled and very sensibly casting around for explanations—and finds none of those he can imagine sufficient to explain what he has observed (Gammage 2011, p. 152; Tench 1979, p. 146).

when they deal with issues of race, such as Regina Ganter's *Mixed Relations* (2006) and Peta Stephenson's *The Outsiders Within* (2007). This is, however, by no means general, and Henry Reynolds' *North of Capricorn* (2003) has relatively little on the trepangers from Makassar. Even more surprising perhaps, given its interest in projected contacts between north Australia and Asia, there is little on the trepang industry in Jack Cross's *Great Central State* (2011). Steve Mullins (1992), writing about north Queensland, makes the important point that there was a break between the trepanging activity on the Great Barrier Reef in the 1840s and that in Torres Strait in the 1860s and later. That break, Mullins believes, marks a shift from an industry with links westwards towards the Indonesian archipelago to one looking to the Pacific, and that made a crucial difference for the later history of Torres Strait. The fact that the trepangers from Makassar were Muslim has given them a place in a new flurry of writing on the history of Islam in Australia. Peta Stephenson rightly places them at the front of her survey of the subject (Stephenson 2010, pp. 21–34), drawing heavily on the detailed work of Ian McIntosh (1996a, 1996b).

A feature of virtually all the Australian literature mentioned so far has been that the trepangers come from over the horizon towards Australia and its people. They are the other, the unfamiliar. The perspective changes, however, if one moves from seeing the trepangers coming to the Australian coast to seeing them as setting out from Makassar to Marege', as they called Arnhem Land and the adjacent coast (Macknight 1976). Does this, however, remove the subject from 'Australian history'? At any event, the move is fundamental, if not entirely original. After all, off the coast of Arnhem Land in 1803 the Englishmen Flinders and Brown made the move from *Investigator's* deck to the deck of the trepanging prau captained by Pobassoo from Makassar; they moved across and that is perhaps why they were able to gather so much information. Very few other Europeans, if any through the nineteenth century, set foot on the deck on a trepanging prau other than to exert authority. The point has a special salience for me; the first version of the title of my book *The Voyage to Marege'* came to me on 28 July 1969, while sailing on the *pajala Galesong*, master Muis Daeng Tarrang, off the coast of South Sulawesi.¹¹ It is revealing that many have had difficulty in classifying the book. In the first chapter of the book particularly, I outline the social, political and economic contexts of the industry, distinguishing the various kinds of voyage that came and went out of Makassar.

This is a field that has received a great deal of attention recently. The trade records of Makassar, both in the eighteenth century under the Dutch East India Company and in the nineteenth century during the colonial period, have been

¹¹ At that time, I had not yet read John Smail's classic 1961 article analysing the many senses of the phrase 'point of view' (now most easily available in Smail 1993), but this is a good instance of one matter he discusses. A careful reading of this chapter will show how much else I owe to Smail.

intensively studied by historians. The sources discussed above have begun to reveal an overall picture of the trade. Gerrit Knaap and Heather Sutherland's *Monsoon Traders* is subtitled *Ships, skippers and commodities in eighteenth-century Makassar* (2004). It is based on the amazingly detailed records that survive on the trade and shipping of Makassar throughout this century and is quite as much, if not more, concerned with goods going to China as it is with the trade within the archipelago, and, like the harbourmaster's records that form its main source, it looks at 'private'—that is, non-Dutch East India Company—trade. It builds, also, on Sutherland's research into the social history of Makassar (in particular, Sutherland 2000, 2001). In these records, trepang is a major item of import and export, and a clear picture emerges of slow growth from just before 1720 to a boom in the 1780s when it was the main item of export, especially to China. The industry was important in other ways too; Knaap (2001, p. 96) estimates that the total adult male population of Makassar in 1730 was no more than about 2500. Even with some recruitment of crews from surrounding areas, this shows the significance of the estimate of around 1000 men in the trepanging fleet in northern Australia in the early nineteenth century (Macknight 1976, p. 29).

By strange coincidence, at the same time as Sutherland and Knapp were working, Jürgen G. Nagel was preparing a massive thesis from very similar sources: *Der Schlüssel zu den Molukken: Makassar und de Handelsstrukturen des Malaiischen Archipels im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert: Eine exemplarische Studie* (2003). Its purpose is to show the history of Makassar as 'exemplary' of the process of interaction between European trade and local or regional trading structures. The trepang trade fits into this picture in a most interesting and unusual way. Nagel's conclusions on trepang mirror those of Knaap and Sutherland and are set in a very extensive discussion of Makassar and its history. While some quibbles and difficulties remain with the figures in these sources and with the figures I have provided from my own work on these eighteenth-century trade records (Macknight 1986), that is only to say that there is the potential for further work.¹²

One can even find a slight mention of the trade in South Sulawesi in indigenous records. When, in 1803, Pobassoo told Flinders of a fleet of 60 praus 'belonging to the Rajah of Boni', he was referring to Sultan Ahmad as-Salih, whose extensive diaries have recently been studied in some detail, though I do not know of any specific reference to trepanging. In a diary of his predecessor, however, Sultan

12 I am very tempted to argue that the consistent gap between the import and export figures for trepang and other items is to be explained by the failure to record imports from places outside the Dutch East India Company's control or interest, including Australia. If we can infer that considerable quantities of trepang were coming from such areas, of which Marege' would rank as a prime area of production, this helps greatly to explain the considerable gap between import and export. In any case, I believe that the export figures are likely to be more accurate (Macknight 2011, pp. 134–5). The question invites further research.

Abdurrazak Jalaluddin, on 16 December 1752, a certain Ance Kia buys from the ruler what sounds like an annual licence for the trepang market on Bonerate. On 25 December, I Kacoa buys a similar licence for Bajoe, while six years later, on 14 December 1758, La Tenro hires the Bajoe trepang market. In each case, the fee seems to have been 200 reals (Asmat and Jamaluddin 2007, pp. 46, 85).¹³ The diary also allows us to know that Sultan Abdurrazak was living in the vicinity of Makassar when these transactions took place. I suspect that further work on the mass of available Bugis and Makasar diaries would turn up similar references. Various later contracts in the Makasar language are discussed in Macknight (1976 pp. 19–24), but I doubt that there are more of these to be found.

Within the history of maritime trade between Southeast Asia generally and China in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, trepang naturally features as a major item in the trade, though indications of the quantity of trepang are rare. Thus, for example, Tagliacozzo (2004) provides a broad overview, which is of particular use since it deliberately avoids much mention of Makassar. This gap is filled by Edward Poelinggomang's fine study (2002), though even here there is more emphasis on shipping than on the quantities of goods. Much more work remains to be done in searching out and analysing relevant statistics. For example, in the early 1840s, trepang was still the most important item of export from Makassar, according to a careful survey (Macknight 2008a, p. 138), and judging from an excess of roughly Dfl. 500 000 in the total export over import for the period from 1847 to 1870, this probably continued well into the century (Poelinggomang 2002, p. 157). Yoshiharu Abe (1995), who discusses the trepang industry in Fiji, Queensland, Sulu and Arnhem Land, provides one of the few comparative studies.

A major step forward in our understanding is Dai Yifeng's publication of some figures for the import of trepang into China. There seem to be no systematic Chinese records to match the eighteenth-century statistics from Makassar and elsewhere, but Dai estimates that each year from 1723 to 1820 'several hundred to more than one thousand *dan* of trepang were imported from Southeast Asia' (Dai Yifeng 2002, p. 28).¹⁴ Given annual export figures from Makassar in the 1780s of 6000 to 7000 piculs (Knaap and Sutherland 2004, p. 99; Nagel 2003, p. 501), that looks like a conservative estimate. I have also estimated an annual Australian production figure of more than 5000 piculs for the early nineteenth century (Macknight 1976, p. 38). In the late nineteenth century, Chinese imports boomed, reaching 44 142 *dan* (about 2600 t) in 1896 (Dai Yifeng 2002, p. 29). Xiamen (Amoy) and Shanghai were always the most important ports in the trade. It would be interesting to examine the trade statistics in more detail with a view to estimating the reliability of these figures based on the Chinese

¹³ I thank Faried Saenong for showing me this book.

¹⁴ A *dan* is 60 kg or almost the same as a picul.

Maritime Customs records. Given the growth in Chinese trading networks around the South China Sea and into maritime Southeast Asia generally, one wonders about the completeness of such records. Various other figures are available through the nineteenth century, many quite unbelievable, as I have discussed elsewhere (Macknight 1976, pp. 15–16, 145–6). While further work might bring considerable refinement to the figures, I believe that my estimate that through the nineteenth century north Australia supplied in the order of one-quarter of the Chinese market remains reasonable. With the addition of other sources of supply, the contribution through Makassar was a considerably larger share.

Recent public interest in the history of the industry takes many forms and produces a scattered literature. There is a steady flow of media articles and reports in both Indonesia and Australia—often claiming that the subject is little known or surprising. There are excellent museum exhibits both in the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory and in the National Museum of Australia. Many other museum and art gallery displays, especially of relevant bark paintings, refer to trepangers and their praus in captions and other material. The recent major exhibition in the Melbourne Museum entitled *Trepang: China & the story of Macassan–Aboriginal trade* played up—perhaps overplayed—the link with China (see Clark and May, this volume). In addition, there are celebratory events such as the wonderfully ironic voyage in 1988 of a replica prau, the *Hati Marege*, from Makassar to Arnhem Land to celebrate the bicentenary of European settlement, or the staging in Sulawesi and northern Australia of the opera *Trepang*, or other recent visits of various groups in both directions (see Ganter, this volume).

Interest in trepang itself has also endured; indeed, the industry flourishes as never before (see the chapters by Clark and Adhuri, this volume). This produces two kinds of literature. The first is the strictly biological, with particular attention to the complex taxonomy of the many genera and species, but there is also interest in the animal's unusual physiology and ecology. Hamel et al. (2001, p. 131) claim to have reviewed 14 theses and 352 technical reports and scientific papers relating to *Holothuria scabra*, and research continues to refine our knowledge.

This biological interest has been more than matched by the economic. As Hamel et al. say, again in relation to *Holothuria scabra* alone, 'The accumulated knowledge about the biology of the species has paved the way for sustainable management of remaining populations through restocking and stock enhancement, and also offers the potential for increasing production through farming' (Hamel et al. 2001, p. 201). The past decade has seen a great deal of effort put into both these areas—that is, sustainable management of 'wild' populations and aquaculture—and much information on the current status of the industry is

now available. A series of volumes published by the Food and Agriculture Organization draws much of this together (Lovatelli et al. 2004; Toral-Granda et al. 2008; Purcell 2010). It is interesting to note, for example, the continuing importance of Indonesian production and the role of the island of Barrang Lompo in trepang aquaculture (Tuwo 2004). The importance of understanding the history of the industry for evaluating sustainability is brought out in a recent paper by Kathleen Schwerdtner Máñez and Sebastian Ferse (2010). Until recently, Australia contributed little to this modern aspect of the industry, but this is changing with the development of some aquaculture projects (Giraspy and Ivy 2005), and Howard (2009) provides a lively account of much recent activity.

The symposium that inspired the chapters of this edited collection was the chance for scholars coming from different backgrounds to talk with each other. There was also some listening and mutual solving of problems. This chapter is intended to widen the discussion even further. Who would have guessed that such an apparently humble creature as the sea slug would hold such significance in human history, especially the past of East and Southeast Asia, to say nothing of northern Australia? Perhaps, as the Chinese economy rises again, it has a glorious future as well.

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