



Indigenous voyaging, Moluccan boats, rock art and cultural exchange in 1800s northwest Arnhem Land, Australia

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Abstract. We address the questions of how two rock paintings identified as Moluccan fighting boats came to be made at Awunbarna (Mount Borradaile), far inland from the coast, and who could have made them. Aboriginal people from the Cobourg Peninsula, immediately north of Awunbarna, were boarding foreign watercraft since at least 1705 and travelling to and from Sulawesi on Macassan *perahus* regularly since at least the 1820s. But in historical records of the 1830s to 1850s from the settlement of Victoria, Port Essington there are a few named individuals who stand out as sea voyagers on foreign vessels. One Aboriginal man, Alamurdie (Jack White), who travelled around and across the Cobourg Peninsula on foot, visited several Moluccan islands on a ship in 1839. The rock paintings of the Moluccan boats are only a few days walk from Victoria and the Amurdak speaking people on whose land the paintings are situated have long had close relations with their northern Iwaidja neighbours. We argue that Alamurdie could well have been the person who made the paintings, perhaps after his 1839 voyage to the islands of Tanimbar, Aru and Kei in what is today Indonesia.

Keywords: Contact rock art, Iwaidja, Moluccan boats, Port Essington, Victoria Settlement, Jack White, Southeast Asia

Introduction

From at least the 1600s, people from Southeast Asia visited the northwest Arnhem Land coast and these visits provoked the production of rock painting depictions of the visiting *perahus* (wooden sailing ships/trading vessels) by various Aboriginal artists. In this paper, we focus on who could have made two Awunbarna rock paintings recently identified as depictions of Moluccan fighting boats (de Ruyter et al. 2023) and, in the process, detail sea travel to various parts of Asia by Arnhem Landers in the 1800s in a more comprehensive way than has been done in the past. Watercraft have been a focus of much contact period rock art research in many parts of Australia and Southeast Asia (Brady and McNiven 2022; Clarke and Frederick 2006; Bigourdan and McCarthy 2007; de Ruyter et al. 2023; May et al. 2010; Roberts 2004; Sukkham et al. 2017; Taçon and May 2013; Taçon et al. 2010) but the emphasis of past research has been on Indigenous people seeing and encountering vessels, and then portraying them in rock shelters, with little about whether the rock artists may have sailed on them. Furthermore, although there is a great deal of archaeological and historical literature on European and Asian voyaging to northern Australia (see especially Macknight 1976), there is little about Aboriginal voyaging to and in Asia from northern Australia. This paper adds a new dimension to contact period encounters and rock art research with a detailed focus on Aboriginal sea voyagers from the Cobourg Peninsula of Australia's Northern Territory to Island Southeast

Asia and East Asia in the early to mid-1800s.

There is ample evidence for contact with people from Makassar. For example, Taçon et al. (2010) obtained a pre-AD 1664 minimum age for a painting of a Macassan *perahu* (AD 1517–1664 with median of AD 1577, 99% probability using IntCal09) at a rock art site known as Djulirri in the Wellington Range, south of the Goulburn Islands. Excavations at the Malara (Anuru Bay A) Macassan trepang-processing site, about 20 kilometres northeast of Djulirri, demonstrated it is 80% probable the site was first occupied around AD 1637 (Wesley et al. 2016:169) and 50% probable it was visited at least by AD 1622 (Wesley et al. 2016:191). And a Macassan burial at the site was dated to pre-AD 1730 (Theden-Ringl et al. 2011). Visits from Makassar, for trepang, turtle shell and trade, became frequent in the late 1700s and 1800s (Macknight 1976; see also Clayton 2023; Urwin et al. 2023), sometimes with fleets of 34 to 60 *perahus* and over 1,000 men (Bremer 1839:499; Flinders 1814:230). Macassan *perahus* had ethnically diverse crews with men from a range of Southeast Asian islands but Macassans and Bugis from southern Sulawesi made up the majority (e.g. see Earl 1846:240). Thus, the term 'Macassan' was adopted to describe the people visiting northern Australia in *perahus* but 'does not refer to any racial, linguistic or cultural group' (Macknight 1976:1).

Since 2021, we have been undertaking research on recent rock paintings and early bark paintings made during the late 1800s and early 1900s in the greater Awunbarna (Mount Borradaile) and Gunbalanya



Figure 1. Study area map showing the location of Moluccan boat rock art sites, Awunbarna, Victoria Settlement and Port Essington (map by Andrea Jalandoni).

(Oenpelli) areas (Figure 1). One focus has been on identifying individuals who made rock art or bark paintings, something of particular importance to their contemporary descendants. This is because ‘knowing the names and individuals behind the creation of rock paintings and museum objects... adds a whole new dimension to their significance by way of personal, familial, clan and land-based religious connections’ (Taçon et al. 2023:29). These connections reinforce place attachment and identity, which, in turn enhances First Nations well-being (May et al. 2025; Taçon 2019).

Knowing names of individual artists is also import-

ant because, when rock art sites are revisited, memories of the people who made art when current elders were young, as well as associated experiences, are provoked (Goldhahn et al. 2021; May et al. 2019; May et al. in press; Taçon 2019:13; Taçon et al. 2023:29). Linking named individuals to specific paintings can also provide new personal connections to imagery and sites.

Awunbarna paintings of boats and ships

As part of our recent research, we recorded 26 paintings of introduced watercraft at 15 Awunbarna rock art sites, about 39% of all

introduced contact period subject matter. Most Awunbarna ships and boats, including 14 documented for the first time and others documented previously, have been identified as European watercraft earlier by our team or by Roberts (2004). There are no depictions of Macassan *perahus*, unlike elsewhere in northwest Arnhem Land (e.g. Taçon et al. 2010) or on Groote Eylandt (Clarke and Frederick 2006). However, recently, two paintings of watercraft at two Awunbarna rock art sites close to each other have been identified as depictions of Moluccan fighting craft (Figures 2 and 3; see de Ruyter et al. 2023). The Moluccan boat (*korakora*,



Figure 2. Rock painting of Moluccan boat 1 and DStretch image ywe (photograph P. Taçon).

belang or *orembai*; see de Ruyter et al. 2023:26) depictions were made in small sandstone rock shelters on the southern side of Cooper Creek, part of the traditional Bunitj clan estate of Amurdak speaking people. Amurdak Country lies just south of Iwaidja-speaking Country on the Cobourg Peninsula and the two groups are closely related (Figure 1). We use the term 'Iwaidja' to refer to all people from the Cobourg Peninsula although various dialects were spoken.

De Ruyter et al. (2023:14) noted that both of the Moluccan boat paintings 'appear to display triangular flags, pennants, and prow adornments indicating martial status', unlike paintings of Macassan *perahus*. The decorated prow boards and a 'sun wheel' in one painting are distinctively Moluccan (de Ruyter et al. 2023:15). After comparing specific features of the Awunbarna boat paintings to those of Macassan *perahus* and various types of Moluccan boats, de Ruyter et al. (2023:26) concluded that 'The Awunbarna motifs therefore probably represent ceremonially decorated fighting craft from eastern Maluku Tenggara in Indonesia, and possibly Tanimbar in particular. Such vessels were used to lead trading voyages and raids from Tanimbar, Aru, and Kei to neighboring islands and regionally'. Furthermore, de Ruyter et al. (2023:26) state that 'It appears that Arnhem Land artists had opportunities to interact with Moluccan vessels in their own country, or perhaps painted these vessels upon returning from a voyage, or possibly even via both scenarios'. Additionally, they state that 'The detailed illustration implies a degree of intimate knowledge of the craft themselves through long or close observation, or from actually voyaging in them' (de Ruyter et al. 2023:15).

However, whether Moluccan boats visited the Cobourg Peninsula coast is questionable as there are no records of such visits, other than a boat from Aru blown off course that became wrecked on the coast at Cape Brogden in 1892 (Searcy 1905:42), in contrast to the countless records of Macassan visits. Given the practical and conceptual differences between

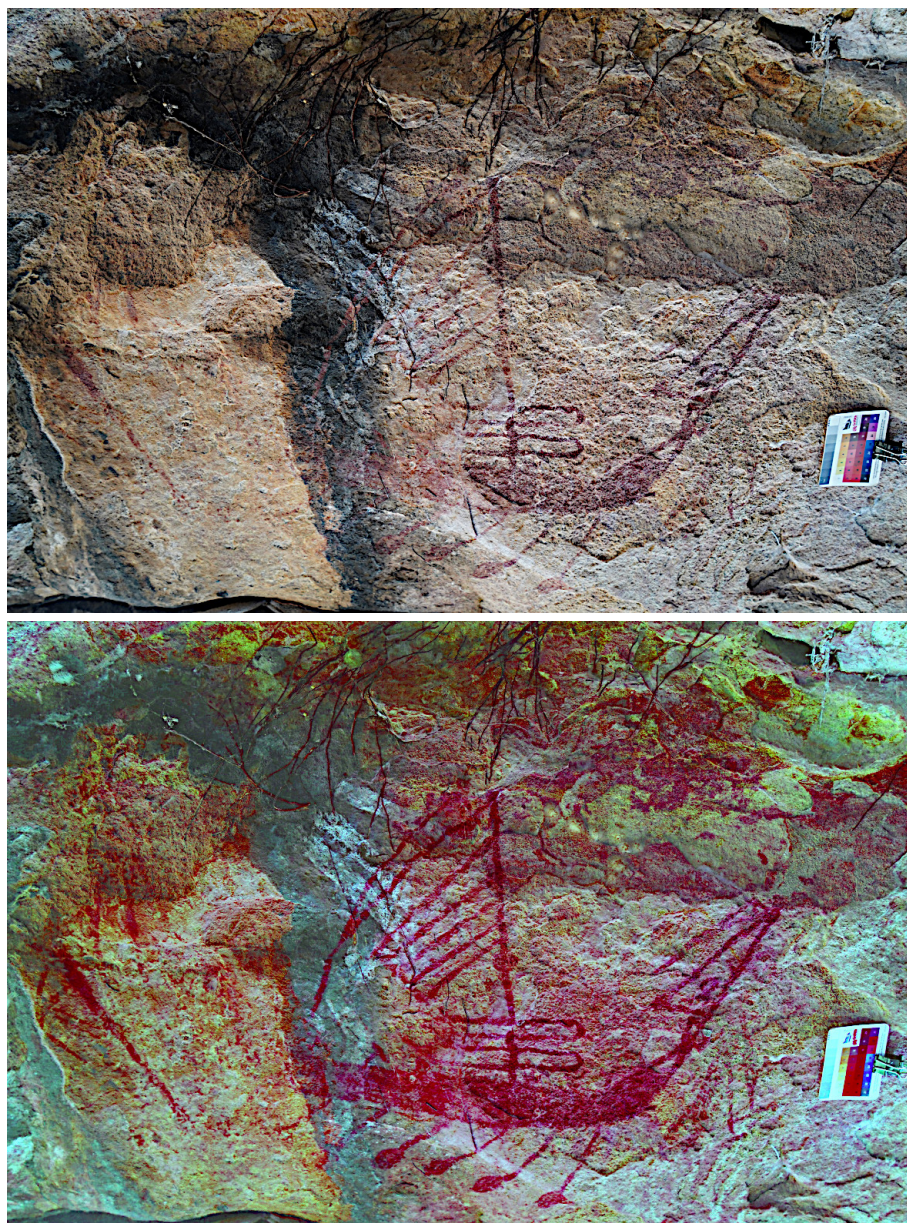


Figure 3. Rock painting of Moluccan boat 2 and DStretch image yrd (photograph P. Taçon).

Macassan and Moluccan vessels (see de Ruyter et al. 2023 and Macknight 1980) they would easily be distinguishable so if Moluccan boats had visited they should have been recorded by Europeans and European-Australians who occupied various parts of the Cobourg Peninsula in the 1800s, including Victoria from 1838 to 1849 (see below).

Therefore, the key research question we address is: *Was the artist (or artists) who made the rock paintings of Moluccan boats (a) a Southeast Asian person visiting Australia who travelled inland, (b) someone from Awunbarna who saw Moluccan watercraft at Victoria, Port Essington or elsewhere along the northwest Arnhem Land coast or (c) an Aboriginal person who travelled to the Moluccas and later to Awunbarna?* We focus on culture contact across the Northern Territory's Cobourg Peninsula, particularly at Victoria, to address this, drawing on archaeological



Figure 4. *Cylcon, originally from south of the Cobourg Peninsula, recorded in a beach midden west of Coral Bay in 2023 (photograph P. Taçon).*

methods in combination with archival research.

More specifically, after recording the archaeological and landscape context of the Moluccan boat paintings with photography and detailed description, as well as reviewing archaeological research on the historical period of northwest Arnhem Land (e.g. Allen 1969, 2008; Mitchell 1994; Taçon 1989), all the earliest historic records of northwest Arnhem Land were studied in detail, including unpublished material in diverse archives. This included written manuscripts, some digitized but others not, held at the Library and Archives NT (Darwin), the National Library of Australia, New South Wales State Archives, State Library of South Australia, State Library Victoria and various institutions in the United Kingdom, as well as ships' logs, diaries, newspaper reports and numerous other records via Trove, Google and other searches. Some VOC (Dutch East India Company) records and other Dutch texts (e.g. Reidel 1886) were also inspected. As suggested by a reviewer, an AI search of Dutch and Macassan records relating to the possibility of Moluccan ships visiting the Cobourg Peninsula or Aboriginal people travelling to the Moluccas in the 1800s was conducted but it did not find anything of relevance. A list of named individuals who may have been most familiar with Moluccan, Macassan and other foreign watercraft was then constructed. In the process, our archival research shows that Aboriginal people from the Cobourg Peninsula voyaged back and forth not only to Makassar but also to many other parts of Asia and Australia, enhancing our understanding of culture contact in 1800s northwest Arnhem Land. Moreover, we suggest that this resulted in the production of new rock art as an aid to storytelling about voyaging.

Interactions between people from the coast and the interior

Indigenous peoples

The settlement of Victoria was established in late 1838 and abandoned in 1849 (Spillett 1972). The Moluccan boat rock paintings at Awunbarna are

situated about 108 kilometres inland from Victoria and other parts of the Cobourg coast where foreign vessels would have been encountered. These boat depictions at inland sites are thus indicative of interactions between coastal Iwaidja and interior Amurdak peoples. While at Victoria, linguist and hydrographer G. Windsor Earl (1842:140) noted that 'All the clothes, iron, axes, &c., that the natives of the coast have taken from us goes into the interior, and I cannot discover that they get anything in exchange but spears, and perhaps food'. Earl (1846:247) also noted that ochre was traded into the Cobourg Peninsula 'from the hills beyond the peninsula' while an anonymous visitor to Victoria wrote that 'quartz and slate-stone, and a species of very hard wood, with which their barbed and pronged spears are headed' was obtained from south of the Peninsula (Anon 1842:88).

In the 1960s, Allen (1969, 2008) recovered 26 stone artefacts and a piece of red ochre from Victoria as surface finds from various locations and from excavating two Aboriginal middens. Among them were edge-ground axes, pounders, hammerstones, spear points and scrapers, as well as flakes. 'The artefacts are of a number of materials; creamy quartzite, hornblende gneiss, chert, porphyritic dolerite and slate, none of which stone types occur naturally in the Port Essington region' (Allen 2008:101; and see Mitchell 1994:146).

In June 2023, a granite cylcon (cylindrical stone tapering at one end; Figure 4) was documented by PT on a shell midden on the beach of the western side of Coral Bay toward Vashon Head, along with a piece of sandstone that has a grinding hollow. The granite is not from the local area and use-wear suggests the cylcon was used as a pounder. Previously, almost identical cylcons were recovered from sites between the Adelaide River and the East Alligator River (Cundy 1985). One of the largest locations for such cylcons is just west of the East Alligator River in Kakadu National Park (Cundy 1985:116), about 38 kilometres south of the Moluccan boats site.

Historical records from the 1800s further highlight trade and visits between the Iwaidja and their neighbours. For instance, Earl (1853:225–228) described many visits of men from the interior including a party of 30 'headed by a tall, active chief, named Al-arac' (1853:226). When explorer Ludwig Leichhardt (1847:518–519) was near the rock art sites with Moluccan boat paintings, on the 8th December 1845, he met a large group of people including a young Aboriginal man named 'Bilge' who had been to Victoria Settlement. Leichhardt (1847:520) was told by Bilge and others that Victoria was six days walk away. Captain John McArthur stated that on one occasion Aboriginal people from the Alligator Rivers visited Victoria for several days and 'gave us some interesting accounts of their country' (in Cameron 1999:108). McArthur also stated that 'I doubt not that the stone-headed spears of our tribes are procured from them' (in Cameron

1999:109). MacGillivray (1852:148) commented similarly about stone tools 'procured from the mountains beyond the isthmus'. During the late 1800s and 1900s interactions between Iwaidja and Amurdak people were frequent, due to accelerating contact with Europeans after the establishment of the buffalo shooting industry in the late 1800s, intermarriage between Iwaidja and Amurdak people and the establishment of the Cape Don Lighthouse in 1917. Travel on foot from the western Cobourg Peninsula to Amurdak Country and further afield was a regular occurrence (Taçon et al. in press).

Island Southeast Asians

There is one account of an Aboriginal man, Manougbinoug, from the interior visiting Victoria Settlement and returning with a Macassan or Buginese man from Makassar, Timbo, in 1839. Timbo was left at Port Essington by Macassan fleet captain Bassa Padu as an interpreter because the Aboriginal people of the area all speak some 'Malay' (Earl 1842:139). Manougbinoug and Timbo ventured inland for three months in 1839 (Earl 1842:139, 1846:245) before Timbo returned to Victoria and then back to Makassar in 1840 (Earl 1842:139).

The only other person from Island Southeast Asia known to have travelled across northwest Arnhem Land was Tingha de Hans, who arrived in Darwin in 1872 from Kupang, Timor when he was in his twenties (Mulvaney 2004:192; Thomas 2013:83). After working various jobs in Darwin, in 1884 Tingha, as he is referred to in published and unpublished literature, moved to the Bowen Straits across from Croker Island to work as an interpreter at a new revenue station managed by Customs Officer E.O. Robinson. Soon after they took up buffalo hunting across both southern Iwaidja and Amurdak land. 'Tingha and Robinson developed a longstanding relationship that lasted more than 15 years and there was considerable trust between the men' (Thomas 2013:85). In 1891, Tingha had a buffalo shooting camp called Mapole on Murgennella Creek, in Amurdak Country about 25 kilometres northeast of the Moluccan boats rock art sites according to visiting entrepreneur and buffalo shooter Harry Stockdale (1891:26). In 1898, he tallied more than 1000 hides (Thomas 2013:83). After many years in Iwaidja and Amurdak Country, Tingha died at Robinson's former Bowen Strait camp on 4 January 1906 at the age of 53 (Thomas 2013:88).

Other Southeast Asians who spent some time on the Cobourg coast include two people from the Moluccas, Shadrach Philippus from the island of Kisar, north of the eastern tip of Timor, who became Earl's assistant from November 1839 (Earl 1841:110) and a man from Seram who distilled cajeput oil at Victoria in 1848 (Macknight 1976:147). Two men from the Philippines helped build a boat and dig a deep well in 1846 (McArthur and McArthur 1843-1849, 3rd May 1846 entry) but none of the above are said to have ven-

tured away from Victoria on foot let alone far inland.

Known early maritime visits to and from northwest Arnhem Land

There are many accounts of Aboriginal people from Arnhem Land willingly travelling to and from Makassar, with the earliest recorded trips from the late 1820s (e.g. Barker 1828-1829; Wilson 1835:81). Macknight (1976:86) suggests there were some Aboriginal Australians living in Makassar in 1824. At Victoria in early 1839, Earl (1841:116) noted that:

Nearly every prahu on leaving the coast takes two or three natives to Makassar, and brings them back next season. The consequence is that many of the natives all along the coast speak the Makassar dialect of the Malayan language. A few have been converted to Mohammedanism; one of these, Caraday, a chief of one of Goulburn's Islands, visited us soon after our arrival at Port Essington. He had been circumcised, and refused to eat pork.

As Caraday had already been to Makassar when he visited Victoria in late 1838, he is the earliest known named individual from northwest Arnhem Land to have travelled there. Although Earl and other residents of Victoria often remarked on the visits of Macassans and others in their journals, letters and publications, significantly and as stated above, there is no mention of visits from Moluccans.

The earliest record of Aboriginal people from the Cobourg Peninsula, including Port Essington, regularly boarding a European ship at anchor is from between early-June to mid-July 1705. Three ships of the Van Delft expedition fleet, crewed by both Europeans and Asians, were boarded daily (van Duivenvoorde et al. 2019:41-42) but the names of those who boarded were not recorded.

In the historic records from the Cobourg Peninsula, only a few named individuals who travelled on European ships are mentioned. The first was an Aboriginal girl known as Rival, later named Mary Waterloo Raffles. In 1829, Captain Barker took her to Sydney on the brig the *Thompson* after Fort Wellington was abandoned on 29th August (Barker in Mulvaney and Green 1992:220-224; Wilson 1835:94, 110-111). They travelled via 'Coupang' (Kupang, Timor) and Swan River (Fremantle), arriving in Sydney on 21st January 1830 (Wilson 1835:299). She had been cared for by a soldier's wife after her mother and sister were killed by soldiers (Wilson 1835:74). Rival was the first known female person from northwest Arnhem Land to travel to island Southeast Asia (Kupang) and to Sydney.

We have reviewed and reassessed historical sources and identified a few men and boys who travelled on European vessels to places far from Port Essington, two who travelled to the Moluccas and three who possibly saw Moluccan watercraft when travelling elsewhere. These include Alamurdie (Jack White), Jim Crow, Neinmal, Medlone (Jack Davis) and Nulmalaloo (Bob White). Many aspects of the life stories of Neinmal and Medlone have been previously pub-



Figure 5. Map showing voyage of the *Britomart* to the Moluccas with Jack White in 1839 (map by Andrea Jalandoni).

lished (see below) but the other individuals are less known in academic literature.

Alamurdie (Jack White)

The Iwaidja individual who was most familiar with Moluccan watercraft was Alamurdie. In various journals and letters by visitors to the settlement of Victoria he was referred to as Jack White. However, a letter dated 20th December 1840 from Captain John McArthur to Commander Captain William Wylly Chalmers, acting Commander of H.M.S. *Pelorus* when it was stationed at Port Essington, is the only record of his Aboriginal name:

I am informed that one of the Natives named Alamurdie alias Jack White was seen in the Mangrove swamp this morning with a Musket for the purpose of shooting: as this man frequents the Servants quarters at Government House, I declare it my duty to acquaint you of the circumstance' (McArthur 1840:1).

There are often several variations of the spelling of western Arnhem Land Aboriginal names in 19th and 20th Century reports and publications with sometimes up to five alternative spellings (e.g. see May et al 2020:304). This is due to different people hearing and attempting to write unfamiliar names in English. Commander Crawford Pasco, who was on board H.M.S. *Britomart* when it arrived in Port Essington to help establish Victoria, published a short list of the names of some of the Aboriginal people he met at the settlement (1886:269). Five of the ten male names he recalled began with the letter 'A', with three beginning with 'Ala' or 'Alla' (Annabulla, Ala-woora-bon-ga-ganda, Allanwot, Aladyin), but the closest to Alamurdie in Pasco's list is 'Adiarawie' and it is possible it refers to the same individual.

Significantly, Alamurdie (Jack White) was induced on board H.M.S. *Britomart* in 1839 by Captain Owen

Stanley when it sailed from Victoria on 18th March to the Moluccas (Figure 5). On this month-long voyage H.M.S. *Britomart* visited Timor Laut (Tanimbar), Aru and what were then known as the Ki islands (now Kei), arriving back at Port Essington on the 15th April (Stanley in Stokes 1846a:438–439 and 475; Wallace 1839:54). Stanley's account of the 1839 voyage refers twice to Jack White:

...we sailed from Port Essington on 18th March, 1839, having on board, Captain Kuper (then 1st Lieutenant of H. M. S. Alligator,) and one of the Australian natives, who was induced to accompany us, partly by his curiosity, and partly by liberal promises and plenty to eat. He was known at the settlement by the name of Jack White, and from his great good humour and intelligence, was a favourite with every one... we anticipated no small amusement from witnessing his astonishment at seeing countries and people so different from his own (Stanley in Stokes 1846a:439).

When they reached 'Ki Doulan' (today Kei Dullah, Indonesia), Stanley remarked that:

We were all much amused and surprised at the extraordinary activity our Australian native, Jack White, displayed in ascending the coconut trees, which he did with as much ease as any of us could have mounted a ladder, and when near the top of one of the highest, finding the sleeves of his frock and the legs of his trousers in the way, he held on with one arm and leg, while he rolled his trousers up above the knee, and then with both legs, while he rolled his sleeves above his elbows. His delight at the coconuts, which were quite new to him, was very great (Stanley in Stokes 1846a:469).

Kuper (1839a, 1839b) described many of the watercraft they encountered in the Moluccas, both while travelling and at anchor, including at Dobo in the Aru islands (1839a:2). Kuper (1839a:2) and the crew also observed some people from Dobo harvesting wood and making boat parts. Some of the smaller boats were

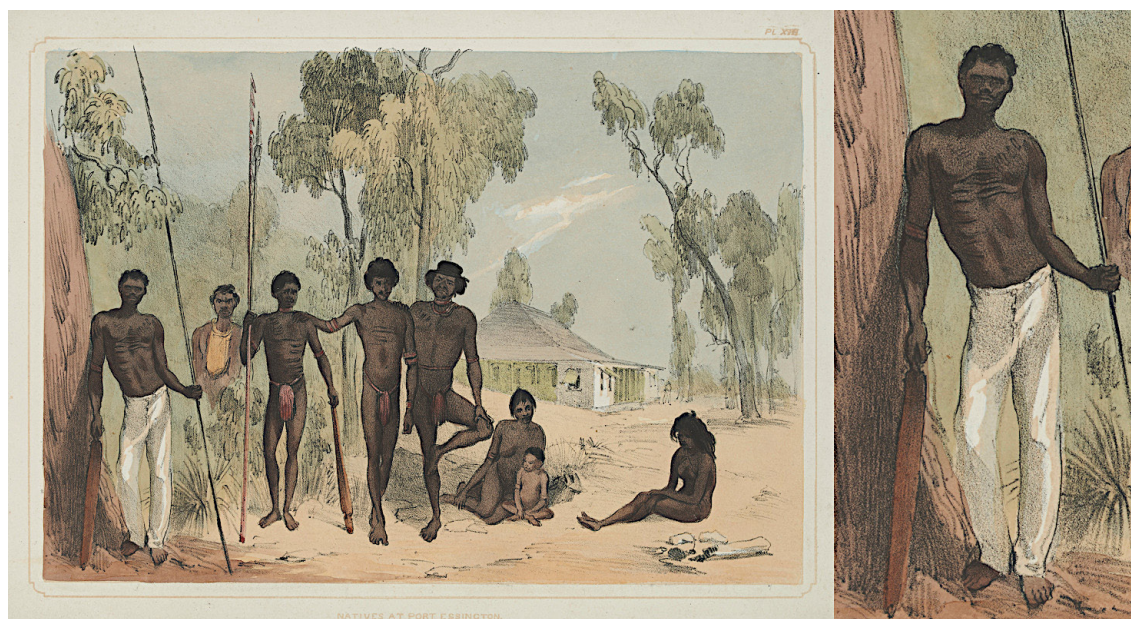


Figure 6. Tinted lithograph with Alamurdie (Jack White) and Neinmal by Harden S. Melville next to enlarged picture of Alamurdie. In the accompanying text the men are identified from left: Jack White (servant to Dr. Whipple), Loco, Neinmal (servant to Mr. McGillivray), Alkanaara and Yungan (courtesy State Library Victoria, ID 1671471).

purchased at the village of Elli, 'Great Ki Island' (see also Stanley in Stokes 1846a:466):

We purchased several of their boats at a very low price... The generality of them are from twelve to twenty feet long, but we saw several much larger, one belonging to the chief being upwards of thirty feet in length – she was a beautiful model and much carved, and ornamented with strings of shells. These boats are very buoyant and capable of carrying a number of men (Kuper 1839b:2).

In a more extended version of Kuper's journal from the voyage (in Cameron 1999:46–54), he describes numerous encounters with Moluccan boats full of men, with some coming alongside H.M.S. *Britomart* and many others on shore wherever they visited. Sixteen Moluccan fighting boats similar to the Awunbarna rock paintings, several large boats, one 30 feet long, and dugouts with outriggers are specifically mentioned. Thirty-three large canoes are also referred to, a few with outriggers. At Timor Laut (Tanimbar), 27 canoes with about '300 natives' came alongside the *Britomart* (Kuper 1839a:2).

After his return to Victoria, Alamurdie worked for Assistant Surgeon Frederick J. Whipple (Melville 1849:13). According to Melville (1849:13), he also 'had been on a voyage to Java as servant to Dr. Whipple'. This would have occurred after H.M.S. *Fly*'s second visit to Port Essington in September 1844. The ship departed Port Essington for Java in early October, arriving in 'Sourabaya' (Surabaya) on 19th October, 1844 and returning to Victoria for the third time on 27th January 1845 (Jukes 1847b:267-268). This was Alamurdie's second voyage to island Southeast Asia but although he may have seen north coast Javanese ships on this voyage it is unlikely there were any Moluccan vessels.

Alamurdie participated in hunting parties to collect native animal specimens. In late September 1843, he was part of a hunting party with Surgeon Archibald Sibbald, who had replaced Whipple the month before. Sibbald's diary entry for 30th September 1843, under the title of 'List of game killed by A. Sibbald Port Essington Australia' it is written that '1½ brace kangaroo killed at Knockers Bay... Party Timpson, Sibbald & Clark also Jack White (a native)' (Sibbald 1843:135).

During one of H.M.S. *Fly*'s visits to Port Essington in 1845, artist Harden S. Melville sketched a group of Aboriginal people in front of the Victoria's hospital for a tinted lithograph published in 1849 (Figures 6 and 7). Melville (1849:13) identified the figure at the far left as 'Jack White' and he is shown holding a barbed spear in his left hand and a spear thrower in his right. Melville states throughout his 1849 publication that his portrayals of people were 'faithful' or 'carefully-taken' portraits and in the preface states they were 'faithful representations' (1849:5), thus this should be an accurate portrayal of Alamurdie. It also is the only known depiction of Alamurdie and it is important to note he is shown wearing white sailor's trousers, unlike the other men in the lithograph, emphasizing his maritime travels.

On the schooner *Heroine*, Jack White, along with four other Aboriginal men, one of whom was known as 'Jerry' (Simpson 1852:76), sailed with Ludwig Leichardt to Sydney. They departed Victoria on 17th January 1846 'and arrived safely in Sydney, on the 29th of March' (Leichardt 1847:536). Captain of the *Heroine* McKenzie (1847:116) stated that the Port Essington natives on board the *Heroine* were crew for a small boat launched to meet natives near 'Albany Rock', Queensland, and again near the 'Turtle Islands'



Figure 7. The Victoria Settlement hospital ruins, June 2023 (photograph P. Taçon).

(1847:173). John Sweatman, who visited Port Essington on the H.M.S. *Bramble*, commented in his journal that the Iwaidja were avid sea voyagers and singled out Jack White, stating that McKenzie said they 'were among the best sailors he had and one, Jack White, was so active & well behaved that he actually intended giving him the rating "tindah" (boatswain's mate) next voyage' (Sweatman in Allen and Corris 1977:144).

After nine days in Sydney, the *Heroine* departed for Port Essington on 8th April 1846 (Anon 1846) but was wrecked at 1:00 AM on the 24th April 1846 near the Cumberland Islands, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland (McKenzie 1847:175–178). Many passengers drowned but '5 natives of Port Essington swam to a shallow part of the reef, whence they were taken off by the boats "Sapphire" & "Enchantress" which vessels also grounded on the reef, the latter only slightly but the former for some hours' (Sweatman in Allen and Corris 1977:114). Alamurdie and the other Port Essington men arrived back at Victoria on 13th May 1846 (Essenhigh 1846:550–551).

After a very adventurous life, Alamurdie died in 1850. When captain T.B. Simpson was visiting Port Essington in 1851, he was told by four Iwaidja men who came on board his ship, *General Palmer*, that:

The season before last a collision had taken place between the Malays and the natives, in consequence of some dispute arising in trading for tortoiseshell. Ten of the Malays were killed, and four or five of the natives of Port Essington: one of the latter was a well-known character, called Jack White, with whom, it appears the dispute began (Simpson 1852:76).

Jim Crow

The Aboriginal man known now only by his English name - Jim Crow - also travelled briefly to the Moluccas when a young boy. In 1843, when John Sweatman visited Victoria, Jim 'was a sort of hanger on at the mess... he used to wait at table as well as any Englishman, run errands &c' (Sweatman in Allen and Corris 1977:148). When Italian missionary Don Angelo Confalonieri arrived on 13th May 1846

Jim Crow assisted him as an interpreter and 'occasionally waited on his table' (McKenna 2019:11). With Confalonieri, Crow sailed on H.M.S. *Bramble* in company with the H.M.S. *Castlereagh* to Kei, departing on 6th July 1846, 'for the fun of the thing' (Sweatman in Allen and Corris 1977:118). He would have been about nine years old at the time, as when John Sweatman visited Victoria in 1843 Jim Crow was about 6 years old (Sweatman in Allen and Corris 1977:148). They returned to Victoria two and a half weeks later, on 23rd

July (Sweatman in Allen and Corris 1977:127). No record of him travelling beyond Port Essington after his initial voyage as a young boy, nor of his Iwaidja name, could be found. There also is no information about what traditional culture he learned, including whether he painted on bark, rock or other media. When Confalonieri died in June 1848, Jim Crow became Captain Lambrick's servant (Simpson 1852:76). After the abandonment of Victoria Jim Crow stayed in the area.

Neinmal

Earl (1853: xiii) stated that Neinmal was 'a native of the south coast of the Cobourg Peninsula, about seventeen years of age, was for several years a domestic servant of the Storekeeper's assistant'. Neinmal (Figures 6 and 8) was a Bijenelumbo man who assisted naturalist John MacGillivray (1852:153–155). MacGillivray was left at Victoria in September 1844 (Jukes 1847a:356) and picked up in January 1845 (Jukes 1847a:356–357). According to MacGillivray (1852:145), the Bijenelumbo tribe 'occupies the head of the harbour (including the ground on which the settlement is built)'. Later, in 1845, Neinmal accompanied MacGillivray (1852:155–156) on two sea voyages.

Artist Harden S. Melville knew Neinmal well and included him in his 1845 lithograph, standing next to Alamurdie (Figure 6). On 4th February 1845, H.M.S. *Fly* departed for the Torres Strait and New Guinea with both Melville and Neinmal on board (Jukes 1847b:268; Melville 1867:177–182). They were back at Port Essington on 12th June 1845, after leaving Cape York three days before (Jukes 1847a:364), until 18th June 1845 when the *Fly* proceeded to Singapore, arriving there on 5th July (Jukes 1847b:202, 269). On 3rd August 1845, H.M.S. *Fly* left Singapore (Jukes 1847b:222) and anchored at Anjer, Java on 19th August 1845 (Jukes 1847b:223). The *Fly* finally arrived in Sydney on 25th September 1845 (Jukes 1847b:269). In 1845, Neinmal was still under the age of 20 (Melville 1867:134). Neinmal spent almost three months in Sydney before

returning to Port Essington on H.M.S. *Bramble*. It sailed from Port Jackson (Sydney) on 21st December 1845 (Sweatman in Allen and Corris 1977:67) and arrived at Port Essington with Neinmal on 17th June 1846 (Sweatman in Allen and Corris 1977:114).

Neinmal was killed in August 1847 by a man from the Monobar tribe as payback for the murder of a Monobar man who was attempting to escape from custody after being apprehended for theft by a soldier stationed at Port Essington, Corporal William Masland (Attorney General of N.S.W. 1847; MacGillivray 1852:152–153 and 156–157).

Medlone (Jack Davis)

Medlone (Figure 9) was born about 1835 (Pasco 1883:6) and spent most of his life at Port Essington until passing away in 1918 (Anon 1918; Harris 2008:396). He met many officers at Victoria, including Commander Crawford Pasco (1863:6, 1897:218–219), who helped establish the settlement in late 1838. Pasco (1897:103; Stokes 1846a:402) departed on H.M.S. *Beagle* on 24th July 1839, after eight months at Victoria. He returned on 20th August 1841 for a short period (Pasco 1883:6; Stokes 1846b:331), departing on 7th September (Stokes 1846b:364).

In March 1846, at the age of about eleven, Medlone and two other boys, Mi-jolk and Alad-yin, were taken to Hong Kong (Pasco 1883:6; 1897:217–221). Pasco arrived in Hong Kong on the H.M.S. *Vulture* in 1847 and, by accident, encountered Medlone and the other boys. Pasco learned they were brought to Hong Kong 'by the master of a small vessel, then dying of fever upstairs' (1897:217–218). They had travelled to Hong Kong via Singapore with a Captain Bissex, Master of the *Sri Singapura*. Bissex applied for some land at Port Essington in 1846 and on 8th March left for China to secure labourers for a trepang and cotton growing venture (McArthur 1846). The boys had been enticed on board with a promise of a tour of the harbour but instead were taken to Hong Kong (Pasco 1897:219).

Pasco (1897:220) rescued Medlone and the other two boys, and they stayed with him on board the *Vulture*. A month later, Pasco sent them back to Victoria Settlement on a small schooner that was heading to the Torres Strait. Mi-jolk passed away on the voyage but the return of Medlone and Alad-yin to the settlement of Victoria was celebrated with 'a great corrobbery' and much singing, according to a letter from Captain McArthur to Pasco (1897:220–221).

After the abandonment of Victoria by the British Medlone stayed on. He told Police Inspector Paul Foelsche (1882:8) at Port Essington in the late 1870s that the soldiers of the settlement gave him the name Jack Davis. When Elsie Masson visited Victoria, in 1913, she found Jack Davis, then about 78 years of age and almost blind, still told the story of Victoria Settlement, the names of officers and 'the wonderful feasts at Christmas' (Masson 1915:126–127).

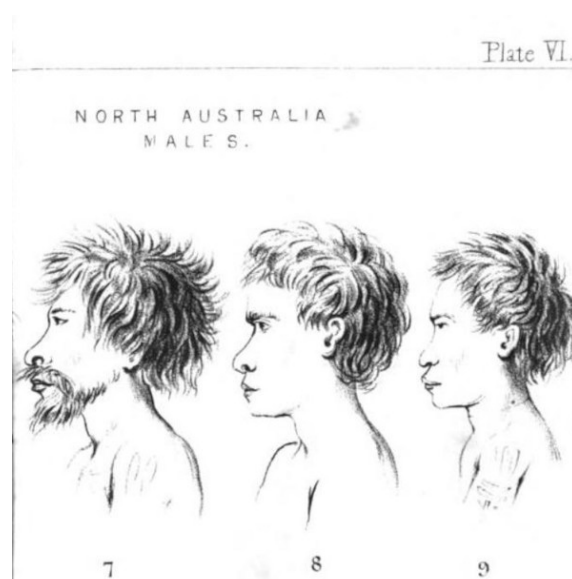


Figure 8. Profile drawing of Neinmal (centre) by G.W. Earl (1853:Plate 6, Figure 8) sometime between 1839 and September 1844 (see also sketch of Neinmal in Greenwood 1863:203).

Nullamaloo (Bob White)

Nullamaloo (Bob White) also lived most of his life at or near Victoria. In 1866, he boarded H.M.S. *Beatrice* and travelled with Captain Frederick Howard (1866:1–2), who was visiting the coast to pick up members of the McKinlay expedition. The McKinlay expedition had travelled on horseback and later on foot from the short-lived settlement of Escape Cliffs at Adam Bay, near the mouth of the Adelaide River, in search of a suitable new site to establish a permanent coastal settlement. Bob White spoke the language of



Figure 9. Medlone (Jack Davis) c.1913 (photograph courtesy Library & Archives NT, object ph1034-0001).

the Macassans and told Howard he had been 'in the service of the Malays' before and had travelled with them to Entrance Island, at the mouth of the Liverpool River in central Arnhem Land (Howard 1866:2). Alfred Webling (1866), employed as a 'tide-watcher' on board the *Beatrice*, mentions meeting Bob White several times. White came on board H.M.S. *Beatrice* with other Aboriginal people at least six times between the 30th January and the 29th June 1866 before sailing on board the *Beatrice* from 30th June to 18th July. On 8th March 1866 Webling recorded Bob White's Iwaidja name as Nullamaloo (see Table 1 for a summary of all the mid-1800s voyages described above).

Discussion and conclusions

The Moluccan boat paintings do not appear to have any great antiquity. For instance, one was made with red and white paint (Figure 2) and white paintings do not usually last long in Arnhem Land, sometimes weathering away in mere decades (Goldhahn et al.

2021; Marshall 2020; Taçon et al. 2021). Even with the early 1600s date for contact with Asia (Taçon et al. 2010; Wesley et al. 2016; see above), the Moluccan fighting boat paintings are unlikely to be many centuries old and could easily have been made in the 1800s, especially as they closely resemble 19th Century Moluccan boats more than earlier ones (e.g. see numerous depictions in de Reidel 1886).

The motivation for making the paintings could be related to telling stories of encountering exotic people with unusual sailing vessels that were different from Macassan and European ships usually seen on the Arnhem Land coast. For instance, Mulvaney (1988:41) notes that, for Aboriginal people who travelled to Southeast Asian islands, 'Those people who eventually returned from Indonesia must have brought an intellectual baggage of enriching cultural influences and a fund of exotic tales'. The same is likely true of those who travelled to and from the interior of Arnhem Land to the coast and vice versa. Stories were often

Individual	Voyage to/from and ship	Age	Date
Main Iwaidja men			
Alamundie (Jack White)	Tanimbar, Aru and Kei on H.M.S. <i>Britomart</i>	Mid to late 20s	18 th March – 15 th April 1839
	Sourabaya, Java on H.M.S. <i>Fly</i>	Mid to late 20s	Early October 1844 – 27 th January 1845
	Sydney via Torres Strait and Cape York with Ludwig Leichhardt on supply ship <i>Heroine</i>	Mid to late 20s	17 th January – 29 th March 1846
	Returned from Sydney on supply ships <i>Heroine</i> and then <i>Enchantress</i>	Mid to late 20s	8 th April – 13 th May 1846
Jim Crow	Kei on the H.M.S. <i>Bramble</i>	9	6 th – 23 rd July 1846
Neinmal	Torres Strait and Cape York on H.M.S. <i>Fly</i>	Late teens/under 20	4 th February – 12 th June 1845
	Singapore, Java and Sydney on H.M.S. <i>Fly</i>	Late teens/under 20	18 th June – 25 th September 1845
	Returned from Sydney on H.M.S. <i>Bramble</i>	Late teens/under 20	21 st December 1845 – 17 th June 1846
Medlone (Jack Davis)	Singapore and Hong Kong on the <i>Sri Singapura</i>	11	Departed 8 th March 1846
	Returned from Hong Kong on a small schooner	12	1847
Nullamaloo (Bob White)	Off and on H.M.S. <i>Beatrice</i> several times before sailing along the Cobourg coast. Had sailed along the Arnhem Land coast in a <i>perahu</i> with Macassans before H.M.S. <i>Beatrice</i>	Mid-40s	Off and on from 30 th January 1866; sailed 30 th June to 18 th July 1866
Others			
Rivalal (Mary Waterloo Raffles)	Sydney on the brig <i>Thompson</i> via Coupang (Kupang, Timor), (did not return)		29 th August 1829 – 21 st January 1830
Caraday (a Mawng 'chief' of the Goulbourn Islands)	Macassar and back on a Macassan <i>perahu</i>		1838–1839

Table 1. The known maritime voyages from northwest Arnhem Land of named individuals in the early to mid-1800s.

told in reference to rock paintings and images made at rock art sites in reference to stories in Arnhem Land (Taçon 1992). The Moluccan boat paintings were probably made in this context with stories told by the artist about their encounter. However, in terms of where the artist who made the Moluccan boat paintings came from two of three possibilities can be dismissed.

Was the artist a Southeast

Asian person who travelled inland?

There are only two accounts of a Southeast Asian person travelling into the interior of Arnhem Land in the 1800s. The first is Timbo who stayed with people from the interior for three months (Earl 1842:139, 1846:245). But it is unlikely he painted the Moluccan boats as he appears to have been from Makassar, travelled back and forth on Macassan *perahus* (Earl 1840:139) and, if he made rock paintings at all, would more likely have made depictions of *perahus* rather than Moluccan fighting boats. Furthermore, the Moluccan boat paintings are in the most recent style of western Arnhem land rock art and not in the very different style of the most recent Macassan rock art (black drawings) or red Moluccan boat rock paintings (e.g. see Figure 9 of Wattimenna et al. 2020:8 and illustrations of various rock paintings of Moluccan watercraft in O'Connor et al. 2023). The second is Tingha de Hans but he was from Timor and there is no evidence of him travelling to the Moluccas or painting in Arnhem Land rock art sites despite spending time in Amurdak Country buffalo shooting. Two Moluccans and some men from the Philippines working at Victoria in the late 1840s did not venture far from the settlement on foot or on horseback.

Was the artist someone from Awunbarna who saw Moluccan watercraft at Victoria, Port Essington or elsewhere along the northwest Arnhem Land coast?

It is possible that Manougbinoug, who escorted Timbo into the interior of Arnhem Land, or Bilge, whom Leichhardt had encountered near the Moluccan boat sites, made the boat paintings. However, when they visited Port Essington, they would have frequently seen Macassan *perahus* and not Moluccan fighting boats. Furthermore, at Awunbarna there are no paintings of Macassan *perahus*. This is very different to what is found in the nearby Wellington Range, about 100 kilometres northeast, where there are six depictions of Macassan *perahus* as well as five paintings that have both *perahu* and European vessel features (May et al. 2013, 2021). Furthermore, given that there is no evidence in any archival sources from



Figure 10. Human figure painted in the recent northwest Arnhem Land rock art style with distinctive feet and hands on hips, signifying it was a European, in the main gallery of Kakadu site Ubirr, about 40kms south of the Awunbarna Moluccan fighting boats sites (photograph by P. Taçon).

the 1800s of Moluccan fighting boats visiting the Cobourg coast, let alone on a regular basis like Macassan *perahus*, it is unlikely that someone from Awunbarna made the paintings of Moluccan fighting boats. The only exception was a boat from Aru blown off course that became wrecked on the coast at Cape Brogden in 1892 but Iwaidja rather than Amurdak people found the wreck and later killed the six crew (Searcy 1905:42).

Was the artist an Aboriginal person from the coast who travelled to the Moluccas?

Many rock and bark artists painted not only on their traditional lands but also in other people's Country, especially Mother's Country. Arnhem Land's most prolific rock artist, Nayombolmi, for instance, made rock paintings across an 1800 square kilometre area in at least six clan estates (Goldhahn et al. 2022:159). It is, therefore, possible that some Iwaidja artists painted in Awunbarna and Namunidjbuk rock shelters, especially as they shared a common recent regional style of rock and bark painting with their Amurdak and

Mawng speaking neighbours. This includes human figures with distinctive feet and legs that were painted coming out of the middle of the feet (Taçon and Davies 2004; Taçon et al. 2022:711, their Figure 7). For instance, further south, in the main gallery of Kakadu site Ubirr, a human figure in white with a red outline was painted in this northwest Arnhem Land style (Figure 10). It has the same distinctive feet as well as hands on hips, a stance signifying it is a depiction of a European person (Mokhtar and Taçon 2011:472–473). The painting confirms that artists from or near the coast painted at rock art sites to the south, in this case, about 40 kilometres south of the Moluccan boats site.

As stated above, de Ruyter et al. (2023:26) concluded that the Awunbarna depictions they examined probably represented vessels from Tanimbar, Aru, and Kei. Historical sources reveal that Alamurdie visited all of these places on H.M.S. *Britomart* in 1839 and would have encountered numerous Moluccan vessels. He became an able seaman with Captain McKenzie of H.M.S. *Heroine* stating he was ‘among the best sailors he had’ (Sweatman in Allen and Corris 1977:144). Alamurdie also roamed the Coburg Peninsula while hunting, with or without men stationed at Victoria. As a fit, active member of his community, it is highly likely he would have participated in trade and regional ceremonies that took him inland to Awunbarna and beyond, seeing rock art of various ages in the process. He made wooden artefacts and likely painted on various media like most men of western Arnhem Land (e.g. see Spencer 1914:432–439).

Jim Crow probably saw some Moluccan boats but likely did not make the Moluccan boat rock paintings because he was only nine years old when he had his brief voyage to Kei (Sweatman in Allen and Corris 1977:148). It is unlikely Neinmal encountered Moluccan boats on his voyages, especially as he did not travel to the Moluccas. Instead, he would have seen lots of European ships, Macassan *perahus* and Papua New Guinea watercraft. When he travelled in 1845 Melville (1867:134) states Neinmal was under twenty years of age and a few years before Earl (1853:xiii and Plate VI, Fig. 8) made a sketch of his profile and stated he was then ‘about seventeen’ years of age. He passed away a little over a year after returning from Sydney about twenty years old.

Medlone (Jack Davis) likely was not the artist behind the Moluccan rock paintings because, when he returned to Victoria in 1847, he was only twelve years old and would not have learned traditional culture, including painting, while he was away. Furthermore, although many people met with and subsequently wrote about him up until 1913 (e.g. Lewis 1922; Masson 1915:126–127), there is no mention of him painting on bark, rock or even objects. The Moluccan boats artist also was likely not Nullamaloo because he did not participate in any of the recorded voyages from Port Essington to the Moluccas, although he did travel to the east along the Arnhem Land coast with Macassans.

Therefore, we consider it probable that Alamurdie made the Moluccan boat paintings at Awunbarna. He voyaged throughout the Moluccas for a month in 1839, saw dozens of Moluccan watercraft close-up, had intimate knowledge of a wide range of Asian and European boats and ships, and became a valued crew member on several ships. As an initiated man, he travelled about the Peninsula and would have travelled to and/or through Awunbarna to participate in regional trade and ceremonies. Stories would have been shared when the paintings were made, no matter who the artist was, so if it was Alamurdie they likely related to his 1839 trip to the Moluccas, with the paintings made between late April 1839 and 1850, before Alamurdie was killed by Macassans.

This research leads to new questions such as were the accurately depicted Macassan *perahus* at Mawng Namunidjbuk rock art sites of northwestern Arnhem Land painted after they were observed at encampments on the Northern Territory coast? Or were the artists some of the Mawng who travelled to and from Makassar on *perahus*, such as the late 1830s Mawng ‘chief’ Caraday?

Lastly, although much global rock art research has, until recently, focused on old or finding the oldest rock art, recent pictographs and petroglyphs made during historical periods of contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are just as important. This is especially so for First Nations communities in various parts of the world, as some direct ancestral connections are known within the communities or are discovered working alongside archaeologists. These connections help contemporary people strengthen bonds with ancestors, art, places, and landscapes, underpinning both land rights and caring for rock art heritage, as well as enhancing Indigenous well-being (Taçon 2019).

For instance, in western Arnhem Land today, there are many living descendants of some rock artists (Taçon et al. 2023) as well as some of the first Iwaidja voyagers to the wider Australian maritime zone, including many descendants of Medlone (Jack Davis) through his daughter Lily Malyurlkij (Mansfield 2024). For them, the history, travels and stories of their ancestors is something vitally important to share in a multicultural history context. Undoubtedly, this was also important in the past given the numerous rock paintings of introduced watercraft across the Top End of the Northern Territory and elsewhere in Australia. New rock art would have been made as an aid to storytelling about voyaging and encounters with foreign people and their modes of transport. Furthermore, all depictions of introduced subject matter – whether watercraft, firearms, animals such as buffalo and horses or other items – can be considered biographical as they represent new experiences the artists(s) had during contact with non-Aboriginal outsiders. As Charlie Mungulda, senior Amurdak Traditional Owner and co-author in whose Country the Moluccan boat paintings are located, emphasised throughout our research

'All these paintings down here are important ... It's the story of my people'.

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