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Walking with Yolngu: A people to learn from, not about

Embedding local First Nations histories in the Australian History Curriculum

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# Introduction

I arrived in Arnhem Land in the season of Midawarr – a time of abundant harvest and shared prosperity where country teems with life. This season holds a deeper spiritual significance for the Yolngu people; it serves as a powerful metaphor for coming together to share the bountiful harvest, fostering a collective exchange of knowledge and ideas. On the day of my arrival, I learned of Julian Leeser's resignation from the shadow cabinet due to the Liberals' NO stance on The Voice to Parliament referendum. These unsettling contradictions underscore a nation yet to confront its history or grapple with its present. My purpose in coming to Arnhem Land was to listen carefully, with the aim of incorporating a more truthful and enriched national narrative into the History classroom. I strive to bridge gaps, grapple with intricacies, and amplify voices that have long been overlooked and silenced. This exploration is an attempt to appreciate the depth of First Nations stories. Additionally, it seeks to provide valuable classroom resources for educators and students who may not have the privilege of experiencing Yolngu country firsthand, fostering a deeper understanding of our nation's diverse history.

# Focus of Study

This research endeavours to address the lack of First Nations perspectives within the History Curriculum by engaging with the Yolngu people of Northeast Arnhem Land and their rich cultural heritage.

* Stage 3: Colonial Development
* Stage 4 Depth Study: Investigating the ancient past
* Stage 5 Depth Study: Rights and Freedoms
* Extension History: The Frontier in Australia

Recognising the profound importance of incorporating First Nations knowledge on their terms, this study is guided by a dialogic engagement model, prioritising respectful collaboration with the Yolngu community over prescriptive representation.

The prevailing treatment of First Nations experiences in the national History curriculum has regrettably distanced itself from the intricate reality of local histories. Instead, it has often focused on tokenistic and stereotypical portrayals of First Nations peoples and histories, thereby overlooking the depth and richness of their cultural heritage. The schooling system, unwittingly echoing colonial paradigms, has marginalised First Nations history, relegating it to the confines of archaeology, as if sealed within a hermetic vault by the British colonial establishment (Broadie, N 2016). History textbooks, including those used by my students, tend to depict the time before European settlement as a mere prelude, dating back 60,000 years before the present. This narrow lens implies that the true historical narrative only commences once the mythical "Dreamtime" concludes.

This detached approach has had the unfortunate consequence of inadequately representing the narratives of the Yolngu people, leaving their incredibly rich histories poorly resourced and frequently ignored. Consequently, the curriculum has failed to capture the significance and complexity of their contributions to the nation's story, perpetuating an incomplete understanding of Australia's history.

The primary aim of this research is to actively listen to the Yolngu people and engage in meaningful conversations, gathering their pre- and post-colonial stories. This approach will lead to a comprehensive collection of valuable resources that can provide insights into their history and experiences. Crucially, this approach acknowledges the intrinsic value of Yolngu voices and their unique storytelling abilities. Rather than attempting to replicate this authenticity, the study embraces the notion that such wisdom cannot be wholly captured by outsiders. Therefore, the focus shifts towards creating resources that showcase the Yolngu people's cultural knowledge, allowing their stories to be told on their own terms.

A case in point is the historically significant relationship between the Yolngu people and the Macassans, Indonesian traders who engaged in fruitful cultural exchanges in Northeast Arnhem Land. These narratives challenge conventional historical accounts, which often start with European settlement, by emphasising the interwoven complexities of Australia's past. By anchoring the curriculum in more regional or local histories, students can develop a profound sense of pride, identity, and belonging to their respective communities, intertwined with a broader understanding of the nation's history. This approach creates a dynamic learning environment that moves beyond clichéd portrayals of First Nations cultures, thus resonating more deeply with students.

This research represents a sincere effort to integrate First Nations perspectives in a manner that transcends tokenism and stereotype. By empowering educators to embrace the richness of First Nations cultures, the reconciliation process can take root in educational settings, ultimately fostering a more inclusive, authentic, and intellectually rewarding learning experience for all.

# Significant Learning

During my time in Arnhem Land, I had the privilege of exploring a significant aspect of Yolngu identity – the Macassan story. For centuries before Captain Cook's arrival, the Yolngu people eagerly awaited the arrival of visitors from Macassar, Southern Sulawesi, signalled by the blowing of the *barra*' winds from the north-west. The trade was centred around Trepang fishing, taking advantage of the Yolngu coastal estates that contained abundant shallow waters teeming with sea cucumbers. Working alongside the Macassan traders, the Yolngu harvested and dried the Trepang, which was then shipped back to Macassar with the south-easterly winds at the end of the season. Subsequently, the Trepang was sold to Chinese traders, creating an extensive trade system that fostered a deep connection between the Yolngu and the Macassan people.

The significance of the Macassan story reverberated throughout Arnhem Land, manifesting in various ways that reflect the enduring nature of this connection. Notably, artworks at the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre featured depictions of the Macassan story, with fragments of Macassan pottery carefully preserved in the museum and intricate cross-hatched bark paintings adorning the gallery walls. Dhopiya Yunupingu, a Yolngu elder and proud Gumatj women, narrates the story through her art, capturing the essence of Macassan flags blowing in the wind. Randy Yibarbuk, a respected Yolngu leader, eloquently recounted the Macassan story at his homeland, Bawaka. The Macassan story's influence extended beyond art and Buŋgul; it left tangible traces on the landscape. The towering Tamarind trees lining the shores of the Bawaka homeland held historical significance, as Randy Yibarbuk explained that they were brought over from Macassar to keep the Macassan people healthy during their journey. These enormous trees served as enduring symbols of an untold history and were found all along the Arnhem coastline, serving as a living testament to the lasting connection between the two cultures. He reminds me that, “this is a big story that has been made small”.



Tamarind Tree at Bawaka homeland (Photo by Rachael Riley)

The importance of the Macassan story in shaping Yolngu identity cannot be overstated, and its significance was evidenced in white records, such as those documented by Matthew Flinders (Flinders, 1814, p. 230). Yet, this remarkable moment in our national history has been unjustly obscured, overshadowed by the weight of silenced stories perpetuated by the "great Australian silence" (Stanner, 1968). This historical silence stubbornly perpetuated the notion of Terra Nullius, deliberately overlooking and discounting the existence of profound cultural interactions and flourishing trade in the region. Despite the abundant evidence that should have elevated the Macassan story to a prominent place in historical discourse, it remains underappreciated.

As I continued to learn about the Macassan and Yolngu relationship, my teacher brain kicked into high gear, doing what every History teacher does when they stumble upon something interesting – how can I turn this into a lesson? The interactions between the Macassans, Yolngu, and White settlers in the region offers a unique opportunity to engage students in thought-provoking discussions on alternative historical perspectives. It encourages them to contemplate the 'what if' scenarios of contact history, emphasising that violent colonialism wasn't the only path taken in those times – it wasn't simply "the way things were done back then."

The respect shown by the Macassans towards Yolngu sovereignty becomes evident through their landing protocol, as Richard Trudgen, an Arnhem Land local with almost five decades of experience, explains in his work 'Why Warriors Lay Down and Die' (Trudgen, R. 2000). Their willingness to wait for Yolngu owners to negotiate trade agreements highlights a different approach to cultural interactions. Contrasting this respectful approach with the harsh realities of European and Yolngu interactions reveals a stark contrast. The early 1800s saw clashes grow more frequent, demonstrating a brazen disregard for Yolngu people and culture. European exploration and influence led to conflicts and massacres, particularly with the development of pastoral leases by the Pastoral companies, characterised by violent confrontations (Trudgen, R. 2000). The Australian Colonies, Waste Lands Act of 1842, significantly impacted Arnhem Land, dividing the region into 11 pastoral leases. This decision directly conflicted with the ancient Yolngu lore and law, which perceived animals on their land as their possession, depending on the estate they currently inhabited. The tensions escalated when Yolngu killed cattle belonging to J A McCartney, a pastoralist, and his gesture of returning with horsemeat as a gift tragically caused severe illness among the Yolngu. This suspicion sparked numerous deaths and ignited a war. Incorporating these historical events into the curriculum could offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics of contact history, prompting students to critically examine historical narratives and consider alternative perspectives. It provides an opportunity for them to reflect on the consequences of cultural encounters and the significance of diverse historical perspectives in shaping our understanding of the past.

The most profound learning experience was my visit to Macassan beach. In line with Grace Karskens' premise (Karskens, G. 2009) that 'place' assumes a crucial role in comprehending the past, this excursion offered an opportunity to understand the interactions between the Yolngu and the Macassans. The stories shared about the arrival of Praus and the ceremonies honoring these maritime visitors left a lasting impression. The 'stone pictures' presented an extraordinary spectacle, chronicling the trade between the Yolngu and Macassans. Notably, these depictions focused on historical objects, distinguishing them from the conventional ceremonial or sacred images commonly found in most First Nations' stone arrangements. The stone pictures vividly conveyed the trepang (sea cucumber) industry, including praus, houses, trepang fireplaces, drying houses, and sharpening stones for iron knives.

I had the privilege of being guided by Yolngu leaders who held personal family connections to the Macassans: Heather Ganambarr, Tony Ganambarr, Marcus Lacey, and Randy Yibarbuk. They explained the meanings embedded in each rock formation, emphasising the continuity of oral tradition and its preservation across generations. Heather Ganambarr adamantly underscored the unchanging nature of the narratives to safeguard their sanctity. Her words resonated with deep significance: "We can't have that. It's placed. It is the right procedure." I sensed her struggle to convey a profound concept within the limitations of the English language.

Among the rock formations dedicated to the Macassan culture, one stands as a symbol of Yolngu identity—the fish trap or dawurr'yun. My guides revealed that these fish traps have sustained their people for millennia and continue to be utilised in Nyinyikay, their homeland, for catching fish. Tony Ganambarr, whose grandmother was one of the Yolngu taken back to Sulawesi, shared his bond with the Macassan people. He described how language and customs intertwine between the two cultures, with many Yolngu and Indonesian words sharing the same meaning.

Tony Ganambarr also recited a ceremonial song about the Macassans, highlighting their Islamic faith and the establishment of small temples to facilitate their prayers. This profound cultural understanding between the Yolngu and the Macassans provided another essential lesson in the history classroom, exemplifying the intricacies of historical contact and mutual influence.

Upon my return to Nhulunbuy, I learned that from the early 1900s: as the Yolngu people eagerly anticipated the arrival of the Macassan traders with the monsoonal winds, the unexpected occurred—the Macassans never came. Later, I discovered that in 1906, the government had revoked the Macassans' fishing licenses for trepang. The implications of this decision weighed heavily on my mind, and I couldn't help but reflect on how the Yolngu must have felt, waiting for their friends to arrive, only to be left with no explanation as to why they would never return and the economic and social impact that an abrupt end to this essential trade system would have.

# Conclusion

My journey to Arnhem Land has underscored the vital importance and richness of embracing local histories over zoomed-out or colonial narratives. Engaging with the Yolngu people and their unique cultural heritage has shown me the power of including their untold stories in the History curriculum. By prioritising local histories, we can move beyond surface-level depictions of events and delve into the intricate realities of specific communities. This approach enriches our understanding of our past by celebrating the diverse customs, traditions, and contributions of different regions and their peoples. Rejecting colonial narratives and amplifying local voices is essential for promoting inclusivity and accuracy in our teaching of history. It ensures that the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous and First Nations peoples are no longer overlooked or marginalised.

As I continue to work closely with the Yolngu community, I am committed to creating valuable classroom resources that spotlight local histories. By doing so, we can foster a deeper appreciation for the cultural diversity that has shaped our nation and inspire students to develop empathy and respect for the stories that have been too long overshadowed.

I plan to disseminate the ideas and resources gathered on this study tour in a variety of ways:

* Develop educational resources for the History curriculum, incorporating First Nations perspectives and local narratives
* Organise workshops and webinars for teachers to guide them in integrating local histories into their lessons
* Contribute to an upcoming textbook for the new Australian History Curriculum

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