Macassan Sea Roads: the heritage of intercultural maritime routes connecting Australia to southeast Asia

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Abstract

This paper explores the idea of considering the extensive and interlocking maritime routes created through global trading networks over many centuries as cultural routes. These sea roads are extended contact zones carrying the imprint of long, dangerous and difficult journeys, a space where history has been enacted through conflict, possession, dispossession, exile and enforced migration. Our paper examines the case study of the Macassan trepang trading route as part of this long tradition of seaborne journeying to seek adventure and new resources in a wider world, through connections with different cultures and lands. These connections formed at the southernmost limits of the Indonesian archipelago with northern Australia still resonate today. There is increasing interest in recognising and protecting the tangible and intangible heritage of this Macassan sea route. Given its international and global context, the World Heritage category of cultural routes offers one opportunity to recognise and celebrate the intercultural heritage of this historic route in an international setting. The paper tests this case study against the defining features of the World Heritage category of cultural routes and raises the possibility of a World Heritage nomination of the Macassan trading route as a collaboration between Australia, Indonesia and China.

Introduction

The idea that cultural routes make up the connective web of the world’s heritage, tying regions and empires together; is an engaging concept presented by Michael Taylor (Taylor 2013:17). He goes on to point out that they represent a qualitative change in the concept of heritage conservation and are increasingly considered important aspects of world heritage, as evidenced by being recognised as one of the four World Heritage categories established to date. Yet, in discussion of routes, those on the sea have received relatively little attention, even though the heritage of water is widely recognised as an extraordinarily rich theme in global cultural heritage (see UNESCO World Heritage Day theme Cultural Heritage of Water 2011).

Maritime trading routes as heritage

Some maritime historians have envisaged the sea as the greatest highway of all – with imprints of long, lonely and difficult journeys, especially in the age of sail (Powell 2010:1). Increasingly, the sea is recognised as a contact zone, a place of exchange, a space where history has been enacted through conflict, possession, dispossession, exile and enforced migration (Balint 2012:346-7). Internationally recognised sea routes include the southern maritime route of the Silk Road (the Silk Road on the Sea), which dates back almost 2000 years, linking China to India, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and into the Mediterranean. Less well-known are the migrations across the Pacific stretching over tens of thousands of years, a topic of some anthropological and archaeological, though not yet cultural heritage, interest and study (Rice 2001).
Our case study, the Macassan trepang trade route, is part of this long tradition of seaborne journeying to seek adventure and new resources in a wider world, through connections with different cultures and lands. The historical route was followed by annual fleets from the port city of Makassar (now Ujung Pandang) in what is now South Sulawesi, Indonesia, to the coasts of the Kimberley and Arnhem Land, known as Kayu Jawa and Marege' respectively, in northern Australia. The town of Ujung Pandang is still an important Indonesian trading port today, but in the eighteenth century it was one of the largest cities in southeast Asia. The Macassan fishers, mainly Makassarese, Bugis and Bajau ethnic groups, were seeking trepang, (*Holothuria* sp. marine invertebrates of the echinoderm family), prized for their culinary and medicinal values in Chinese markets. The Macassans sailed to Australia with the northwest monsoon each December and returned to their home port of Makassar with the southeast trade winds around March or April each year. The trepang catch and other marine products were traded on to Chinese traders supplying the markets of southern China.

During their visits, the Macassans developed social and economic ties with local Indigenous groups, setting up seasonal camp sites and returning year after year to the same parts of the coast (Clarke and Frederick 2006; Macknight 1976; Mitchell 1994). This far-flung trading connection long pre-dated European contact, and recent research based on the dating of Aboriginal rock art depictions of the wooden sailing vessels known as praus used in this trade suggests the connection may date back to at least the 1700s. There is also intriguing new evidence to suggest that the Macassan praus were visiting northern Australia even earlier (Taçon and May 2013:127-128; May, Tacon, Wesley and Pearson 2013:83-102).

The trade: Makassar, China and the trepang fishery

China’s demand for new sources of trepang emerged from the late seventeenth century (Sutherland 2004:98-9). Maritime expansion and commercial development by Muslim traders working the trade into China spread throughout Southeast Asia into the Indo-Malay archipelago. The port city of Makassar was captured by the Dutch in 1669 and was established as a centre for Dutch trade and as a colonial outpost.

The timing and impetus for the initial development of the trepang trade remain matters of much debate (Macknight 2008:136-7); however, new research into the records of the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), or Dutch East India Company, has filled in many of the details of the ships, skippers and commodity trading from eighteenth-century Makassar (Knaap & Sutherland 2004). Ready access to the trepang-rich southeastern seas enabled certain ethnic groups who had lost access to the more-profitable spice trade through the new Dutch monopoly to re-engage in local and regional trade by tapping the new and rapidly expanding market for trepang in China. The productive trepang fisheries in the Gulf of Carpentaria and more generally on the northwest coast of New Holland were called by the Chinese Lam-Hai’ (Crawford 1967:441). Makassar benefited in this local and regional trade from its central position at the intersection of many routes. Northern Australia became the southernmost limit of this trade (Knaap & Sutherland 2004:148,246; Macknight 2008:137).

The Macassans came on yearly return visits, setting up temporary villages and processing sites at sheltered beaches along the coast. The Arnhem Land coast offered a long series of suitable anchorages, running parallel, or nearly so, with the direction of the monsoons and relatively free of unwelcome control by government or other interests, at least until the 1880s (Macknight 1976:49). Extensive archaeological evidence at sites such as Anuru Bay, including what are almost certainly Macassan burials, as well as the distinctive rock-line processing sites where trepang were boiled in stone fireplaces, offer tangible proof of the Macassan industry, its industrial processing methods and the density of related sites in particular locations along the Arnhem Land coast (Macknight 1976: 61-82; Theden-Ringl et al. 2011: 41-8). The voyage was a commercial enterprise based on the collection and processing by smoking and drying of trepang. Processed trepang was returned to Makassar, and from there exported to China. While not of the highest quality, Marege’ ‘chalk fish’ or ‘white trepang’, also called ‘koro’, was very abundant and of consistent quality such that it commanded reasonable prices when processed skilfully (this including being buried in sand to remove the calcareous deposits in
the skin that gave it its chalky appearance). It was referred to as tripang Marege' (Macknight 1976:7,40; Schwerdtner et al. 2010: 5). There appears to be only opportunistic collection of other products by prau crew: besides trepang, the Macassans also imported to Sulawesi timber (ironwood, cypress pine, sandalwood), pearl, pearl shell and tortoise shell. Items such as these were often collected and traded by Aboriginal people in exchange for cloth and various items made of iron (tomahawks and knives), glass and ceramics, food (rice, cocoa), alcohol and drug substances such as betel nut, opium and tobacco (Brady 2013; Macknight 1976:40, 84; Wurraramarba 1986:1,3).

Besides the shallow tropical waters of island southeast Asia and northern Australia, the main fishing grounds for trepang are all in the Indian and Western Pacific oceans. Tripang Marege' made up the largest part of Macassan exports and of the total imports into China (Macknight 1976:14-16; Schwerdtner et al. 2010:5). In Australian waters, the fishery was comparatively large and well organised. At the height of the trade, as many as 60 praus carrying between 1000 and 2000 Macassans spent four to five months of the year gathering trepang. The product fetched considerable amounts of money in Makassar for the fleet financiers, who enjoyed high social standing in their community (Macknight 1976:19). Shipping to southern China was handled by the Chinese businessmen living in Makassar. Most voyages were financed and outfitted by merchants who supplied basic items like rice, tamarind fruit, ‘kajang’ (awning mats made from palm leaves), ‘atap’ (mats similar to kajang, made of nipa palm leaves), rattan, ‘karoro’ (palm-leaf sail cloth), iron pots for cooking, ‘paring’ bamboos for building, and so on (Macknight 1976:20). At the height of the trade from the 1770s, an annual junk sailed directly from Xiamen, or Amoy, in southeast China, to Makassar to collect the trepang (Knaap & Sutherland 2004:148-9).

Journey to Marege'

The experience of the journey of the Macassan traders to Marege’ is of considerable interest. Recent research into the navigation skills of the Bugis of South Sulawesi helps to explain the success of the Macassans in undertaking these difficult and often dangerous journeys year after year (Ammarell 1999:1). Bugis seafaring capability, developed over centuries of inter-island trade, was based on an indigenous system of non-instrument navigation by which fishing boats and trading ships could be guided along often treacherous coastlines and across broad stretches of open sea (Ammarell 1999:1-8). Of particular importance was an intimate knowledge of the wind, which propelled their ships and determined the ship’s course. Safe navigation in these difficult and sometimes dangerous waters also relied on knowledge of stars, currents, wave patterns and the behaviours of various sea animals and birds. The Macassans drew on this rich seafaring knowledge to sail without navigational instruments other than simple compasses or telescopes, although some Dutch maps and charts were available. Navigation was possible only because of the personal knowledge and skill of individual seafarers who learnt the southeast passage from oral traditions. Many could remember details of the coastline years after they sailed (Macknight 1976:35; see also Daeng Sarro’s account in Macknight 1969:180-7).

Indonesian praus were frequently described and drawn by early Europeans, often seaman themselves, who were intrigued by the unfamiliar craft with its great rectangular sails, as well as the use of bamboo, rattan and other seemingly flimsy local materials in the rigging and superstructure. These craft and other Macassan objects are also depicted frequently in Aboriginal rock art along the northern Australian coastline (Clarke & Frederick 2008:148-64; May et al. 2010:57-65).

The praus left Makassar with the onset of the northwest monsoon in late December or early January (Macknight 1976:33-5). The total trip from Makassar was about 1600 km and often took approximately two weeks. The crossing from Makassar to Timor took about eight days, while the 500 km crossing from Timor to Melville Island (immediately to the north of Darwin) took four days. Early visits were haphazard and poorly coordinated but as the industry became more organised, so did their visits. They aimed to strike the Australian coast in the vicinity of the Cobourg Peninsula to the northeast of Darwin and then work slowly eastwards. During these summer months of the wet season, several praus usually worked together in one locality for
a few days or even weeks. When the dugout canoes, from which the trepang was collected, had combed the immediate vicinity of the processing camp, the bamboo smokehouses were dismantled and the praus moved on. By April and the change of the monsoon, the fleet was scattered around eastern Arnhem Land, Groote Eylandt and down into the bottom of the Gulf of Carpentaria. With the dry southeasterly wind behind them, all turned back to Makassar (Macknight 1976:37).

According to oral traditions, the Macassans regarded the voyage to northern Australia as a long and adventurous one. Marege’ was the farthest south and east of the areas they normally visited, with many differences from the more familiar islands to the north. While there were also contacts with the Kimberley coast, this trade was always more complex, both in regard to the products collected and the home ports of the vessels involved. The trepang industry effectively ended when the last prau returned from the Arnhem Land coast in the 1906-1907 fishing season, when the South Australian government decided to stop trepanging in its waters. While among the official arguments put forth for the ban was the need to protect the Aboriginal population from the harmful influence of the Macassans, who imported spirits, it seems that anti-Asian sentiments also played a role, as did attempts to encourage locally-based industry controlled by Europeans (Macknight 1976:120-124). Nevertheless, there were sporadic visits to this coast throughout the twentieth century.

**The route of connection**

This route of intercultural trade, together with the journeys, encounters and influences it has encompassed over centuries and which still continue, has created many cultural resonances both in Makassar and among the Indigenous peoples of northern Australia. The effects of such interactions have been manifested across many fields including language, art and music, religion, health and economic life. As well, the memory of the Macassan presence is still strong, particularly for the communities along the coast of Arnhem Land (Blair and Hall, 2013:205-226).

Some of the most compelling accounts we have today of the Macassan traders and their close relationship with Aboriginal people come from the Yolngu of northeast Arnhem Land. The Macassans had mainly friendly relations with the Yolngu: the same boats returned each year to the same places and their crews established continuing relations with the people who lived there. Yolngu were employed to work collecting and preparing the trepang. They learnt to communicate with the Macassans, and a trade language developed that survived long after the trade was halted. Yolngu would travel with the Macassans along the coast, with some even returning with them to spend the dry season in Sulawesi. The captains of the Macassan boats developed close relationships with particular local Indigenous leaders, which were reflected in an exchange of names. These were passed on, and Yolngu are still able to identify names of Macassan origin (Morphy 2004).

There are also many Macassan loan words in Yolngu languages and other items of material culture from Macassan times (Evans 1992). Yolngu obtained dugout canoes from Macassans and, with the benefits of iron tools, began to manufacture these for their own use (Morphy 2004). The vessels were much more stable and seaworthy than bark canoes (Mitchell 1996:184). The Yolngu also learnt how to work iron from the Macassan traders, and this trading relationship was the main source of metal for shovel-nose spears, a valuable commodity for trading with inland groups (Allen 2011).

These connections formed at the southernmost limits of the Indonesian archipelago with northern Australia still resonate today. This route of intercultural connections situates Australia in the south-east Asia region in ways that other travel routes do not, which emphasise connections to Europe and the remoteness and distance of the colonies. The significant story of the Macassan trade is of an intercultural and international route that symbolises the complex connections and seas in our region. Multiple perspectives and a new appreciation of the sea as a maritime road help to bring a wider understanding and to situate the significance of the trade as part of a much larger story of the emergence of large-scale maritime trading networks.
across the globe. In our region, researchers are increasingly recognising that the extensive trade in marine produce, particularly trepang, bound northern Australia into a global economy and inter-colonial networks long before the arrival and settlement of the British (Balint 2012:347).

Significance of the Macassan trepang route in an international perspective

Well known maritime trade routes along the coasts of Scandanavia, around Western Europe, in the Mediterranean and in the Red Sea have great antiquity. The expansive nature of the maritime routes across the Bay of Bengal and within southeast and central Asia however are less well recognised, but are tremendously significant in terms of the global history of cultural and material exchange. It was the linking of the trade systems across the hemispheres (largely through Muslim Arab intermediaries) that fuelled the great expansion of trade, travel and cultural exchange that occurred around 1000 AD, when European, Arab, Indian and southeast Asian merchants and sailors began more effectively collaborating to build truly global maritime networks. While trade from Europe and the Ottoman Empire grew in importance after 1000 AD (Panzac 1992), the geographic scale and organisation of trade in the Indian Ocean and southeast Asia was already far advanced at this time. Prior to 1500, the Indian Ocean trade that linked east Africa, India and southeast Asia represented the globe’s largest sea-based trade network (Evers 1988). The monsoonal winds which were seasonally directional enabled long distance travel east-west to link to the also well-developed southeast Asian trade networks, in much the same way that monsoonal winds facilitated the Macassan trade route to Australia.

The emergence of well organised long-distance maritime trade networks in the southern hemisphere is necessarily linked to increasing sophistication in seafaring technology and other
maritime skills such as navigation. With increasing maritime travel capacity in east Africa, India and southeast Asia came new concentrations of power and wealth in nodal trading ports where merchants and local ruling interests were able to finance and share in trade and promote interests across a wider stage. The importance of merchants and ‘guilds’ in bringing greater organisational structure and capacity to long-distance maritime trade has been documented from sub-continental maritime trade in the centuries following the beginning of the Christian-era (Ray 1989:43).

Merchants and the deity that accompanied them were active agents for transporting not only goods, but religious and cultural constructs (Smith 1999:14). Across the Indian Ocean for example travelled iconography, Sanskrit language and religious and social practices of Brahminism, Hinduism and Buddhism (Smith 1999:14). From the first to the sixth century AD. Carnelian Seals with Brahmi characters and ship symbols appear in coastal southeast Asia (Ray 1991:1360). In the fifth and sixth centuries, significant trading entrepôts emerged in the Mekong Delta (Bishop et al. 2004:320-321). Over the whole of the first half of the first millennium AD, ocean-going shipbuilding technology in southeast Asia and China had developed increasing sophistication and maritime trade from south to central Asia blossomed (Hall 1985; Ray 1990; Ray 1991:363). By the tenth and eleventh centuries a heightened period of exchange was underway between China, Angkorean Cambodia, the states of Champa and other emergent states in southeast Asia, India and east Africa (Guy 2007:1).

Along with the global spread of the religious practices of Brahminism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, these trading routes fuelled technological and social change. In general, long distance trade is now widely accepted as one of the principal influences which has encouraged the growth of central bureaucracies (Ray 1991:357; Webb 1975) and in southeast Asia, access to expanded maritime trading networks and inclusion in a broader market system has been recognised as a major stimulus for state formation (Evers 1988:90; Hall 1985).

The southeast Asian trade networks, of which the Macassan trade route is a part, are tremendously significant in terms of the history of cultural and material exchange. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the southeast Asian trading networks had developed to a point where they were much more diverse than European ones at the same time (Evers 1988:90), and local merchants and the ruling entrepôt powers continued to dominate the system for a considerable period of time. It was only around 1800 that European ascendency began to manifest itself in the region as they introduced greater control of the market and protections along the route (Evers 1988:91; Willis 1993:105).

The Macassan trade route is an end-arm of the southeast Asian trading routes that ran north-south from China to Manilla, to the port of Makassar and extending to the Australian northern coast. Trepang, as a specific trade good, was of increasing interest to Chinese but of little interest to Europeans. Hence it was considered inconsequential to the emerging colonial trading systems that were focussed on spices and fabrics and other precious cargoes travelling west. The north-south trade, of which the Macassan trade with northern Australia was a part, continued to expand in the colonial era and the Macassan trade demonstrates the somewhat distinctive and persistent nature of the southeast Asian maritime trade network. The maritime trade links across the Timor Sea and northwards are historically embedded in, and culturally place, the Australian continent within the story of southeast Asia, well before the European settlement of ‘The Great South Land’.

Trading networks in general are ‘social processes of exchange’ (Evers 1988:92), and maritime trade networks accelerated social change in enabling people and goods to travel larger distances more quickly and cheaply (in general) than continental trade routes (Munro 1999:1). Maritime trade routes also facilitated quite distinctive cultural traditions from further afield to have direct contact, rather than contacts mediated through numerous smaller neighbouring intermediaries, as in continental trade or localise coastal trade. While the technological, social and spiritual influences of the Macassan trade on the communities of the northern coast of Australia may not have been so dramatic or tangible as they were along other more recognised and celebrated trade routes, it is likely that the social processes of exchange that have taken place have deep-seated expression that has evolved with mutual referencing in both the various Aboriginal and Sulawesi cultural systems that played a part in the trade.
Recognising the heritage significance of the Macassan route

There is increasing interest in recognising and protecting the heritage places associated with the Macassan sea route. The Northern Territory Government has recently assessed the Djulirri rock art site complex located on the Arnhem Land coast for listing in its Heritage Register for its significance as a pictorial document of observations and encounters, notably the prominent Macassan contact images. This heritage-listed Anuru Bay area also has one of the largest Macassan trepang processing sites in northern Australia and was a focal point of culture contact between local Indigenous people and the visiting Macassans from Sulawesi. There are many places of significance along the coast of Arnhem Land connected to the route (May et al. 2010:57-65). There are other places that contain tangible evidence or key components of the stories of the trade and connections that lie along the route and back in Sulawesi (Clark 2013:159-182).

How are these places connected to the route known, documented and managed? Does a heritage approach have a role to play in thinking of the tangible and intangible aspects, the sum of knowledge and how the ongoing aspects of the connections may be more widely understood and celebrated? There is also the possibility of documenting and assessing these sites for Australia’s National Heritage List, providing recognition of its relevance as a set of key stories in Australian history, largely neglected to date.

The stories of the extended and ongoing contacts of Aboriginal people of northern Australia with the multi-ethnic, largely Muslim, Macassan traders is one of strong Aboriginal autonomy and deliberate shaping of connections with outsiders, very different from the mythologies about Europeans settling an empty land sparsely occupied by primitive nomads whose culture was easily overwhelmed by the invaders. Indeed, this legacy of negotiated access to country and resources has been a strong factor for the Yolngu people of northeast Arnhem Land in their success in gaining recognition of land and sea rights (Ganter 2013:55-68; Morphy & Morphy 2013:177; Russel 2004:3-17).

Given the international and global context of the Macassan trade route, the World Heritage category of cultural routes offers one opportunity to recognise and celebrate the intercultural heritage of this route in an international setting. This relatively new category highlights long-distance routes and journeys, such as those associated with trade or pilgrimage routes, which have linked people, countries, regions or even continents for long periods. These routes and journeys have often created remarkable cross-cultural exchanges and influences, for example, the Pilgrim Routes of Santiago Compostela in France and Spain, entered on the World Heritage List in 1993 and 1998 respectively, or the more recently inscribed Camino real de tierra adentro, the Royal Inland Road, or silver route connecting Mexico City to Texas and New Mexico.

Defining sea routes: challenges and issues

According to maritime historian Michael Pearson, the methodology for the analysis and assessment of sea routes as cultural routes is not yet well-developed. Sea routes can vary in width, from a tight channel between islands, to many hundred-kilometre wide bands of favourable winds in the open ocean. The open ocean has no landmarks, though it may have indicators of general location in its currents, depth or weather patterns, which have been used by many indigenous navigators around the world (Pearson 2013). Hence the delineation of...
sea routes is, at least in part, conceptual rather than physical. While ports and navigation waypoints provide a partial physical context, the route as a whole was often plotted on mental maps, relying on the generational transfer of traditional knowledge and seafaring skills, as with the Macassan trading routes.

Identification and documentation

Table 1 below examines some of the defining features of a cultural route, and considers how they might apply to the Macassan trading route. This table is based on research by the authors. A more detailed analysis and description of the route and its heritage values is contained in a recently published paper (Blair & Hall 2013:205-226).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural route defining feature</th>
<th>Macassan trepang route</th>
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<tr>
<td>Different types, e.g. religion (pilgrimage), trade (silk, salt, slaves), military (crusades)</td>
<td>• Inter-cultural maritime trade route linking Indonesia, China and Indigenous Australia.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interactive movement of peoples as well as exchange of goods and ideas, knowledge and values between peoples, countries, regions or continents over significant period of time</td>
<td>• Eighteenth century trading route based on marine products especially trepang collected along northern Australian coastline by fleets of praus from Makassar, then traded with China. • Some evidence suggests the trading relationship predates the eighteenth century, with other forms of contact prior to trepang trading • Significant cultural exchange involving material and social-symbolic aspects over hundreds of years. • Has significant contemporary cultural expression and re-interpretation through art, music, ongoing cultural practices.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflects cross-fertilisation of cultures in both tangible and intangible aspects of heritage</td>
<td>Tangible aspects include: • Rock art and bark painting depictions of Macassan praus and trading goods around the coast of Arnhem Land. • Archaeological remains of beach camps and processing sites on Kimberley and Arnhem Land coasts of northern Australia. • Landscape components including tamarind trees, wells and potable water sources near former camp sites. • Technology of dug-out canoes and working of iron learnt from Macassans. Intangible aspects include: • Language, placenames in northern Australia. • Influence on cultural practice of Yolgnu in many areas. • Expression in art, music and other cultural forms. • Oral narratives. • Macassan traditional navigation practices and knowledge associated with riding the monsoonal winds to Australia.</td>
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Must combine cultural exchanges with journeys, as compared with those that only represent a physical act of travel, such as railway lines

- Extensive evidence from many sources of cultural exchange over a long period, including Aboriginal bark painting and rock art, archaeological remains of Macassan camp sites, linguistic evidence of word borrowings and ethnographic evidence of changes in cultural practices.

Interaction with the natural environment in all of its diversity is often important

- Winds, sea, currents, wave patterns, maritime ecology, coastal geomorphology, terrestrial fresh water, constellations and night sky.

Must be described and delineated to its full extent, including boundaries, component parts, setting

- The route is a 1600 km sea crossing from the port of Makassar in central Indonesia to the northern coastline of Australia (and to China).
- Stopping points/features along the way.
- Sites in Makassar including port, church, island, graves.
- Sites along northern Australian coast.
- Possible underwater remains, shipwrecks.

Does the cultural route as a whole entity (rather than individual components or features) have OUV

- The Macassan trepang route meets World Heritage criteria X-X (A full assessment of the OUV would be determined in a joint project with other state parties).

Exploring the possibility of a World Heritage nomination to recognise the heritage values as a collaborative project involving Australia, Indonesia and China may be one option for the future. Such a project would present many challenges. The Macassan trepang route crosses territorial, social and cultural boundaries. Like the China Silk Road, already on the World Heritage tentative list, it has both land and sea components, and is in fact a network of routes. However, there is currently no comprehensive inventory of Macassan sites and only limited understanding of the route as a whole entity. It would require researchers from many different academic and professional disciplines to document the natural and cultural heritage values, including the intangible aspects, of this extensive, intercultural maritime route.

Threats, management and protection

There are also challenging management issues associated with site protection along what remains today a remote coastline, as many of the places of former Macassan contact in northern Australia are suffering heavily from natural and human impacts. Eroding coastlines and rising sea levels are particular threats along parts of the route. Future coastal infrastructure and mining developments are also possible threats to rock art galleries, archaeological site complexes and cultural landscapes associated with the former Macassan maritime trading route.

Heritage tourism and interpretation

Much of the northern Australian coastline is Aboriginal-owned land, and communities are eager to incorporate meaningful cultural heritage work in their land and sea management programs. Some communities already engage with tourists through small Indigenous-owned and operated tourism businesses, providing access to Macassan sites and re-telling stories of contact from Aboriginal perspectives (Blair & Hall 2013:205-226). A Macassan-themed project documenting stories and sites and looking after them would be a valuable addition. Such a project needs vision, context and practical support. Hence more than just inclusion of selected Macassan sites on a heritage list is needed for cultural heritage practice to pay a useful role. A strategic and integrated approach is needed to understand the contribution and interplay of tangible and intangible heritage in this cross-cultural context.
Conclusions

It is useful to draw some wider conclusions from our case study as it raises issues and suggests directions that are relevant to the study of maritime routes more broadly, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. It is tempting to look only at the beginning and end of these often extensive maritime routes, rather than understanding the route as a whole, crossing seas and oceans, territorial and geographic boundaries. A multi-disciplinary approach is essential, bringing expertise and perspectives from all relevant disciplines to fully appreciate the diverse natural and cultural values, including the strong intangible aspects of these maritime routes. It is also important to respect the heritage of the multi-ethnic, multi-religious communities that are associated with these intercultural maritime routes – they need to be fully involved in projects to research, conserve and interpret the heritage values. Good management outcomes will only be produced through collaborative projects, with heritage professionals working closely with regional and national governments, Indigenous communities, industry stakeholders and other interest groups. Cultural routes based on both sea and land may also be important to local Indigenous communities for their contribution to economic and social development, for example, through ranger programs and sustainable tourism businesses.

References


