
STATUS OF DOCUMENTARY INFORMATION ON ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER
FISHING AND MARINE HUNTING IN NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

By comparison with the amount of information available on other aspects of Aboriginal society - social organisation, local organisation, material culture and Aboriginal religion for example - our knowledge of Aboriginal use of the sea is indeed poor. In many cases, Aboriginal groups who occupied coastal areas were not exclusively maritime people, since traditionally they moved across fairly large tracts of land that could include coastline, off-shore islands and hinterland. In addition, and particularly in northern Australia, Aborigines exploited marine resources in estuarine and tidal environments - sometimes many kilometres from the sea. Nevertheless, our knowledge of the economic activities of all these people remains limited. In this paper I discuss some of the reasons that lie behind this paucity and examine both the limits and the extent of the information that is available.

The lack of detailed information about Aboriginal people, as constituting a major maritime culture, is all the more surprising since coastal areas of Australia undoubtedly offered some of the richest and best living areas for people on the whole continent. The coastal areas were generally well watered, had abundant supplies of fish and other marine foods and provided routes for easy access along beach ways and the opportunity for transport by sea. Certainly northern coastal parts of Australia were well populated and it has been estimated that there were, on average, two persons per square mile in this region. However, in some southern coastal areas there may have been as many as five to ten persons per square mile (Maddock, 1974). Moreover, early explorers and settlers first encountered, and therefore described Aborigines in the coastal areas, while those inhabitants of the more remote and more arid interior were often not encountered by explorers and settlers until very much later in the history of colonial Australia.

The coastal Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia bore the brunt of the excesses of the settlers as well as suffering more than some of the interior dwellers from contact diseases like chicken pox and influenza. Thus, many of the coastal cultures were among the first to disappear from the face of the newly settled land. However, the absence of interest, in maritime cultures probably reflects a preoccupation of early explorers and later researchers who were more interested in other aspects of Aboriginal society. Research workers, and in particular, anthropologists, were taken up with matters that had to do with Aboriginal myth and religion, material culture and kinship and social organisation. Moreover, the students of the Aborigines were themselves, on the whole, from societies that stressed the importance of the land, and whose economic system was largely based upon the land. In the

absence of any diverse or comprehensive and capital intensive fishing industry or other complex process of marine exploitation, the **European** mind did not easily comprehend the Aboriginal utilisation of the sea, its economic importance and **territorial component** in Aboriginal culture.

We do not know for certain the exact date when Aborigines first arrived in Australia. It is, however, generally agreed that this probably occurred sometime about 40,000 years ago. Those early settlers, travelling as they did from the north or the north-west, arrived here by sea. They did therefore belong to a maritime culture and had the capability to traverse considerable **distances** over the sea in boats that were at least secure enough to offer them a passage that enabled them to colonize the . . . continent. Although the sea straits were probably narrower than they are today, the voyages of these **early settlers** were indeed courageous. Blainey has traced the possible routes that these early voyagers must have taken and noted that the widest gap that they would need to have traversed would have been at least 70 to 100 miles wide. (Blainey, 1975). Mulvaney (1975) has indicated alternative routes to New Guinea (which was then a part of Australia) - but the sea distances involved were sizeable.

The archaeological record is all too easily ignored when assessing our knowledge of the maritime cultures of Australia. A number of archaeologists have explored remains on offshore islands which indicate that Aboriginal people had lived in these maritime environments in times gone by. In particular **Beaton** (1978) has discussed the archaeology of the Great Barrier Reef. In Western Australia, Dortch (1984) has examined prehistoric stone artefacts on some of the offshore islands of **Western** Australia, and concluded that they provide evidence of occupation of the shelf prior to the rising of the sea. Also in **Western** Australia, Glover (1984) has suggested **that the** source for stone artefacts, found in the Perth basin, occurred in an area which is now inundated by the sea. In the Pilbara region of Western Australia, Lorblanchet has excavated shell **middens** and recorded rock art sites revealing details of a maritime culture in excess of 6,000 years old (Lorblanchet and Jones, 1980).

In this discussion of the status of documented knowledge about Aboriginal use of the sea, I divide the relevant data into four major categories. The first includes the comments and observations of the early explorers and settlers about Aborigines and their use of the sea. The second includes those writers who made a study of **Aboriginal** society in one form or another, but whose work had a particular material culture bias, and generally excluded any sociological or economic analysis. Third, there are those writers who have written on maritime cultures in one form or another and most of whom have been trained anthropologists. Finally, there is a growing body of literature which has emerged in the last eight years or so which concerns Aboriginal rights to the sea and their interests and ownership of it. This literature has resulted from legal and political movements whereby Aboriginal people have sought to gain control and access to the sea and sought support from research workers in stating their claims.

THE EARLY EUROPEAN EXPLORERS

Just as the first Aboriginal settlers and explorers of Australia came by sea, so too did the Europeans. In fact, Australia was known as a continent by mariners long before any Europeans had attempted to settle the place. The first European explorers commented upon the coastal Aborigines they encountered. William Dampier, visiting the coast in January 1688 remarked:

Their only Food is a small sort of Fish, which they get by making Wares of Stone across little Coves or Branches of the Sea; every Tide bringing in the small Fish, and there leaving them for Prey to these People, who constantly attend there to search for them at Low-water. This small Fry I take to be the top of their Fishery: They have no instruments to catch great Fish, should they come; and such seldom stay to be left behind at Low-water.. . In other places at Low-water they seek for Cockles, Muscles, and Periwinkles: of these shell-fish there are fewer still; so that their chiefest dependence [sic] is upon what the sea leaves in their Wares; which be it much or little they gather up, and march to the Places of their Abode.
(Dampier, W. in Masefield, 1906)

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the pioneering settlement of 1788 had aroused European interest in the continent as a whole, a number of voyages of discovery took place. These consisted largely of attempts to circumnavigate the continent, mapping the topography, charting the seabed, and keeping an eye open for suitable harbours, places for future settlement and resources, and matter of interest to natural historians at the time. One such explorer was Nicolas Baudin who was Commander-in-Chief of the Corvettes Le Geographe and Le Naturaliste. The explorers were not interested in detailed ethnographic description, nor did they generally have the time or the opportunity to do more than navigate their vessels.

Until then, we had not seen a single one of the natives of the country, but as we landed, we saw one up to this waist in the water, busy spearing fish.
(Baudin, 1974)

The illustrations that were produced at the time of the Baudin expedition are perhaps more informative - telling us something of the way Aborigines fished using nets as well as spears and had a variety of vessels, including dug-out and outrigger canoes. Baudin also records that the Aborigines were jealous of their land in the face of the encroaching foreigners:

But as he continued to advance, the natives began to shout violently, signalling us to go back. As his signs were in the direction of the ships, we were in no doubt at all as to what he was saying to us.
(ibid.)

Later accounts by early settlers also contain many references to the Aborigines in coastal areas. However, most of them give us little more detail than a descriptive account, of the material culture of the Aboriginal people living by the sea, their use of fish traps, and in particular their utilisation of canoes.

THE EARLY ETHNOGRAPHERS: MARITIME MATERIAL CULTURE IN AUSTRALIA

Poor though our information may be in general on Aboriginal use of the sea, the literature on canoes is extensive. Maybe the exotic nature of a dug-out or bark canoe captured the imagination, of early ethnographers. Whatever the reasons were, we probably know more about this aspect of the coastal Aborigines' material culture than any other facet of their maritime affairs. What we do not know so much about, however, are issues of ownership, co-operation, trade and prestige associated with canoes, canoe making and canoe owners.

Matthew Flinders, who sailed the northern coasts of Australia between 1801 and 1803, was probably the first to note the use of canoes by Aborigines in Australia, but it was left to later writers to differentiate their types and use. E.M. Curr, writing in 1883, noted details of canoe building, as well as their use in hunting and fishing by coastal Aborigines. Curr was probably one of the first ethnographers to document accurately this aspect of material culture (Curr, 1886). Radcliffe-Brown, better known for his studies in social anthropology, wrote of the rafts of Western Australia (Radcliffe-Brown, 1916), while the Frobenius Expedition of 1938-9 documented a variety of watercraft, including dug-out canoes, bark canoes and rafts (cf. Lommel, 1952). Another significant writer on watercraft in Aboriginal Australia was J.R. Love, who described their use amongst the Warora in northern Australia in his classic work Stone Age Bushmen Today (Love, 1936).

Apart from the log rafts of Western Australia, the canoes of northern Australia fall into two types: bark canoes and dug-out canoes. The former were made from a single piece of bark prised from a tree and gathered at the end to form a bow and stern. These canoes were serviceable especially on inland waterways like the Arafura Swamp. The canoes required constant repair and had to be caulked with grass and mud. They were discarded at the end of the season. Thomson, observing these canoes in Arnhem Land in the 1930's, recorded in detail their manufacture and use for goose egg collection (Thomson, 1983). The people with whom he lived and worked also had access to the dug-out canoe, which was more seaworthy and allowed access to offshore islands, and permitted their navigators to traverse coastal waters. The dug-out canoes were, however, more complex to build than the bark canoes, involving a greater degree of co-operation and were very heavy, but had the advantage of lasting much longer (Jones and Meehan, 1977).

The Aborigines on Cape York used an outrigger canoe, also constructed from a hollowed out log. The advantage of extra stability made it superior to the dug-out used without an outrigger, and it probably owed its genesis to the influence of the Torres Strait Islanders and Papuans to the north. Some

writers have noted that the dug-out canoes of northern Australia had their origins in the island of Celebes, from whence the Macassans came to exploit the rich shallow trepang beds of the northern Australian coast. The trepang or sea cucumber was a much prized delicacy which Macassan traders exported as far as China. The Macassans left their dug-out canoes with the local Aborigines - in part as payment for what they took. The Aborigines themselves, no doubt, copied the style of the canoes from the Macassans from whom they also learnt about steel knives, steel fish hooks, pottery vessels and alcohol (Macknight, 1976; Thomson, 1949; Warner, 1969).

Other papers and notes of ethnographic interest proliferate. The library at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra has literally hundreds of brief references to canoes, fishing techniques, fishing with nets, fish hooks, spears, fish traps, turtle hunting, the collection of turtle eggs, dugong hunting, the making of dugong ropes and so on. Yet despite this quite extensive literature on how Aborigines utilised the seas, we are left largely in the dark as to what social processes were involved, and what were the interactions and exchanges that characterised this economic and social activity.

The overall impression of these earlier writers is then - with very few exceptions - of a descriptive account of Aboriginal uses of the sea with little or no analysis. Not that this work is in itself of no account. It provides a useful insight into the operations of coastal people in Australia. However, it has limitations when compared with the work of anthropologists who tried to link coastal Aboriginal material culture with their lifestyle, attitudes, beliefs and the ways in which their societies were changing.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN MORE RECENT TIMES

One of the pioneers of modern anthropological studies in northern coastal areas of Australia was Lloyd Warner, who wrote in 1937 A Black Civilization. This book describes the Murngin (generally called the Yolngu) of north-east Arnhem Land. Although Lloyd Warner studied a group who lived on the coast, his interests were focused on local and social organisation, kinship and totemism, with only a passing interest in economic activity and transport (Warner, 1969). However, Warner did pay detailed attention to matters of social change and the influence of the Macassan traders (ibid.).

Thomson worked in east Arnhem land, particularly 'round Blue Mud Bay in 1935 and 1937 and wrote of the effect the Macassans had on the ceremonial exchange cycle of the region (Thomson, 1949). Thomson had also visited Cape York, where he documented dugong hunters, fishermen and the culture of a coastal people in detail (Thomson, 1934a, 1934b, 1956). F.G. Rose, writing in 1961, discussed the effects of the introduction of the dug-out canoe on the economy of Groote Eylandt, where he worked in the 1950s. Warner, Thomson and Rose stand out from other writers of this period. They were certainly more interested in matters of social change, interaction, social structure and culture rather than simply describing fishing techniques, canoe manufacture and associated technologies of the coastal people.

By the time David Turner visited Groote Eylandt in 1969 'the changes wrought by modernisation on the island were quite apparent. In his book Tradition and Transformation (1974) he notes the way this island culture had altered as mining, mission and modern technology had replaced more traditional institutions. The photograph on the book's cover is fitting: a dug-out canoe with an outboard motor (Turner, 1974). Despite this, little work has been done on the effect that such things as aluminium dinghies, "Mercury," outboards and modern nets have had on indigenous economic systems, local political control and technology. Moreover, as the years passed and the traditional forms of activities declined, little was written on the changing pattern of the maritime exploitation and the uses the Aboriginal people made of the sea in the context of their changed social and technological circumstances. The effects of 20th century technologies on dugong, turtle and other populations has received scant attention, but has been addressed in a paper by Chase,, (1979).

Turner was not alone in developing anthropological studies of change in northern Australia. Other workers had developed an interest in Aborigines' conception of the sea, not merely as an economic resource or as a means of transport, but as a spiritual reality which took its place in their belief system. This aspect of Aboriginal religious belief has received less attention than Aboriginal beliefs about the land - a matter that informs the writings about Aborigines and the land from quite early on.

In 1970 R.M. Berndt wrote a monograph titled The Sacred Site: The Western Arnhem Land Example, in which he documented the spiritual beliefs Aborigines held about the sea, the straits, reefs and offshore islands. Although Berndt did not specifically address the issue of maritime cultures per se, he introduced a new ingredient into the study of coastal people that was to have significance later on. Moreover, it was an aspect of Aboriginal religious belief that had remained largely undocumented. In 1976 Berndt published an account in which he documented in detail the ownership of both islands and adjacent seas in north-east Arnhem Land. He demonstrated how it was that the mythological beings of the creative era of the Dreaming traversed both land and sea and so ordained the clan territories and sacred sites of the local Aboriginal people (Berndt, 1976a).

Other work by R.M. Berndt and his wife C.H. Berndt included Man, Land and Myth (1970), a study of the inland Gunwinggu people of western Arnhem Land which also included reference to coastal people with whom they had also worked. Like Warner, the Berndts were interested in social anthropology, but unlike Warner they included a chapter on economic utilisation of the environment; including comments on the economic relationships that the Gunwinggu had with their maritime neighbours. R.M. Berndt's Love songs of Arnhem Land (1976b) includes many songs collected from coastal people, thus extending our knowledge of 'the diverse and complex cultures of these people who lived with the sea.

There were other studies undertaken which also helped to contextualise our knowledge about coastal people. **For** example, J. Altman wrote of the riverine and estuarine Gunwinggu in western Arnhem Land and provided detailed data on marine species. Altman also discussed the significance in economic, social and cultural terms of the exploitation of marine species (Altman, 1982). Jeffrey Heath, a linguist, working in south-east Arnhem Land, has produced a variety of texts in the local language which contain a rich variety of references to the use of the sea. Heath's work shows the complexities of a language evolved by a maritime culture (Heath, 1981).

Other researchers have also contributed to our knowledge of Aboriginal use of the sea in more recent times. In particular Betty Meehan has written a definitive account of the use of shellfish and other marine foods by a group of Aborigines with whom she worked in northern **Arnhem** Land (Meehan, 1982). Anderson (1982) describes in detail a maritime economic system in north Queensland. Peterson (1973) has studied camp site locations amongst coastal people. There have also been studies of seafood and diet undertaken by O'Dea and Sinclair (1982) carried out on the Kimberley coast in Western Australia. In addition, Crawford (1983) has written on Aboriginal exploitation of marine resources in the Admiralty Gulf area of the Kimberley region. Ohshima (1983a, 1983b) has studied the ecological and cultural diversity in Torres Strait in a comparison of Australia and New Guinea cultures, as well as producing an account of land use and sea surface use amongst maritime people. Other research, largely unpublished, has been carried out by Fisher (1984) on Aboriginal Customary Law, while Kathleen Pope, continuing the tradition of an interest in material culture, analysed materials collected from Cape York Peninsular from the Roth ethnographic collection at the Australian Museum in Sydney. This included much work on outrigger canoes (Pope, 1967).

Although there has been a number of modern studies relating to coastal Aboriginal people, most of these reflect mainstream trends in Aboriginal anthropological studies, rather than specifically being interested in maritime cultures for their own sake. Thus, writers like Williams (1982), Reid (1983), Keen (1978), Sutton (1978) and von Sturmer (1978), Clunies Ross and Hiatt (1977) have all provided important data on coastal people, but the focus of their research has not been upon a maritime culture.

Other writers have commented upon Aboriginal proprietorial interests in the sea that form a part of their territorial estates. Chase (1980) documents ownership of the seas in eastern Cape York, concluding incidentally that the main Barrier Reef, some thirty kilometres off-shore was unknown before lugger employment (ibid.). Chase and Sutton (1981) also describe Aboriginal ownership of the seas in the region of the Lockhart Community. Davis (1983) presented detailed data concerning **territoriality** and use of the seas **in northern Arnhem Land** where he also worked as a school teacher. However, as our knowledge of Aboriginal culture and society has broadened with the increase in anthropological work, particularly during the last twenty years, so too has our understanding of the peoples who have lived

adjacent to the sea. Nevertheless, it is true to say that there is no single work which has focussed on an Aboriginal group as a maritime culture, and attempted to develop understandings about that culture in terms of their relationship to the sea in economic, ritual, social and environmental contexts.

LAND RIGHTS AND SEA RIGHTS:, A NEW DIRECTION FOR ABORIGINAL' RESEARCH

In 1973 Justice Woodward undertook a Commission of Enquiry into the possibility of establishing Aboriginal Land Rights in the Northern Territory of Australia. Woodward took evidence from a variety of people, including a number of Aborigines living on settlements around the Northern Territory and in Arnhem Land. While listening to Aboriginal aspirations about their land and indeed about their seas, he came to understand that Aboriginal Land Rights need necessarily include Sea Rights. He wrote:

I accept that Aborigines make traditional claims to most, and probably all, off-shore islands. Their legends link those islands with the mainland because of the passage of mythical beings from one to the other. The effect of this is that the sea between also has significance. Certainly Aborigines generally regard estuaries, bays and waters immediately adjacent to the shoreline as being part of their land.
(Woodward, 1974)

However, the Federal Land Rights legislation as it was passed in the Northern Territory in 1976 did not provide for ownership of the seas, but it did make provision for reciprocal legislation of the Northern Territory in relation to the making of laws, "regulating or prohibiting the entry of persons onto, or controlling fishing activities in, waters of the sea.....within two kilometres of Aboriginal land". (Aboriginal Land Rights (N.T.) Act 1976, Section 73.1.d). The Northern Territory Aboriginal Land Act 1978 was enacted to fulfil this requirement.

The details of the Northern Territory Aboriginal Land Act and the cases mounted before the Northern Territory Land Commissioner as a response to it are beyond the scope of this review. However, the Act and the resultant "Sea Closures", as they are somewhat misleadingly called, have been significant for two main reasons. First, research was carried out on behalf of Aboriginal people (and the Land Councils representing them) in which the interests of the Aboriginal people were considered first and those of the academic community second. This meant, that there was a change of emphasis and focus on the part of researchers. Moreover, the sea, the littoral zone, off-shore islands, reefs and marine resources became the focus of a detailed investigation. Perhaps for the first time studies were produced examining Aboriginal uses of the seas, their territorial inclinations, religious beliefs and economic exploitation of a maritime environment as a whole. Second, therefore, there has emerged over the years since the introduction of Land Rights in the Northern Territory a growing body of material (most of it remaining unpublished) which has to do with Aboriginal use of the sea.

Memmott (1977) wrote on the ownership of the seas in north-east Arnhem Land for the Joint Select Committee on Aboriginal Land Rights in the Northern Territory. Also at this time both Keen and Morphy made separate submissions to the Select Committee, and Meehan commented upon the role of seafood in a contemporary Aboriginal society (see Keen, 1977; Morphy, 1977; Meehan, 1977).

The bulk of the material which has emerged from the Aboriginal Land Rights Act in the Northern Territory is available in the form of "Sea Closure Application Books" or "Land Claim Books" lodged with the Northern Territory Land Commissioner. A review of the "Sea Closure" procedures in the Northern Territory was produced by Keen (1985), and an account of Aboriginal ownership of the seas and adjacent land was written by Palmer (1985). Some of the "Land Claim Books" contained material relevant to Aboriginal use of the sea. These included reports by Avery and McLaughlin (1977) and Bern and McLaughlin (1980).

The first Sea Closure under the Aboriginal Land Act was at Milingimbi (Dreyfus and Dhulumburrk, 1979) followed by an adjacent area known as Howard Island and Castlereagh Bay (Davis, 1982). The work of these researchers provided a wealth of detailed data on Aboriginal use of the seas. The Sea Closure process is not without its critical component - both legal and anthropological - and comments on the applications provide valuable additional reading (Keen, 1980, 1983; Aboriginal Land Commissioner, 1981).

There have been three other Sea Closure applications lodged to date; one for Groote Eylandt, one for Croker Island in western Arnhem Land and one for Bathurst and Melville Islands. All three are as yet unheard (Palmer, 1984; Palmer and Brady, 1984). Toohey in his review of the Aboriginal Land Rights (N.T.) Act (Toohey, 1984) briefly considered the Aboriginal Land Act and noted that the powers of the Commissioner should be strengthened under the Act consistent with his powers under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act.

The interest in sea rights in the Northern Territory extended to Western Australia when consideration was being given to Land Rights legislation in that State. Seaman, the Commissioner of the Aboriginal Land Inquiry was asked to consider the extent to which waters adjacent to Aboriginal land should be protected. He noted the considerable evidence he collected from Aboriginal people and their interest in the sea (Seaman, 1984). Although the Western Australian legislation floundered in the Legislative Council of that State, the process of producing the draft Bill did at least contribute to our knowledge of Aboriginal attitudes to the sea in the northern areas of Western Australia.

CONCLUSION

In this review of the status of our knowledge of Aboriginal use of the sea I have outlined much of the literature, both published and unpublished, available to us. I have also attempted to trace a trend which reflects something of the history of Western intellectual endeavour over the last 200 years or more in Australia. The hallmark of much early commentary was

ethnocentric curiosity made with respect to an alien and at times distant culture. Later observers were intrigued with the curio value of what they saw and observed. However, they generally omitted reference to the social fabric and complex network of relationships and interactions that gave birth to the material culture they described. Indeed, some early observers regarded the Aborigines as a "primitive" race whose material culture they considered to be simplistic and a reflection of the Stone Age. From this limited view, later scientific enquiry made considerable progress towards understanding the structure and composition of Aboriginal society and in characterising it as a functional and complex system. However, this enquiry was still often constrained by the pre-occupations of western anthropological tradition - Aboriginal religion, totemism, social organisation, kinship and marriage. With very few exceptions (Meehan, 1982; Berndt, 1970) a broader understanding of Aboriginal relationships (both spiritual and economic.) with a coastal domain were not a matter for detailed consideration by anthropologists.

The paradigm shift that resulted in a radical change in our appreciation and understanding of coastal peoples took place with the development of the need to understand in our own legal as well as social terms, how Aborigines on the northern coasts lived, owned and comprehended the land and sea about them. In this new era data have been collected, presented and analysed from an altogether new perspective that has a history of less than ten years. It is to this new literature that we must turn if we are to become properly informed about the ways in which Aborigines use and understand the sea today. However, this should not be done at the expense of neglecting earlier sources and the work of those researchers who have provided us with detailed accounts of coastal people in the past. Our knowledge should be cumulative and our interests ecumenical - so as to avoid the narrow perspectives that have so limited the understandings of some of our predecessors.,

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