

# Across the Arafura Sea

Scientific Expeditions, Indigenous Trading Exchanges, and Vernacular Built Traditions in 19th-Century Southeast Asia and Australasia

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Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ) Volume 40

Conference hosted by the University of Queensland and the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane 2-4 December 2024

Edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz

Published in Brisbane by SAHANZ, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-7638772-0-7

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DOI: 10.55939/a5389pgtaf

Citation:

Achimadi, Amanda. "Across the Arafura Sea: Scientific Expeditions, Indigenous Trading Exchanges, and Vernacular Built Traditions in 19th-Century Southeast Asia and Australia." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 40, Islands*, edited by Ashley Paine and Kirsty Volz, 1-2. Brisbane, Australia: SAHANZ, 2025.

Accepted for publication on 9<sup>th</sup> June, 2024



**SAHANZ** Society of Architectural Historians Australia & New Zealand



December 2-4 2024

Brisbane, Australia

# Across the Arafura Sea

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Photographs from the 1870s depicting a group of young Aboriginal men and children from Arnhem Land living in Makassar, Indonesia, have been rediscovered and subsequently published. This unearthing has foregrounded the longstanding but largely forgotten maritime history across “the great divide” between today’s Eastern Indonesia and Northern Australia. Italian naturalist Odoardo Beccari (1843–1920) took the photographs during his numerous expeditions. They had been stored in the archives of the Luigi Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography (now the Museo delle Civiltà) in Rome and were unburied in 2014 by Australian historian Jane Lydon.<sup>1</sup> Beccari’s trips followed the steps of Alfred Wallace (1823–1913), establishing seminal visual documentation and scientific accounts of the natural world of maritime Southeast Asia and Australasia – including Australia and New Zealand.<sup>2</sup>

these photographs are evidence of the multi-directional mobility of the Indigenous communities on both sides of the Arafura Sea and scientific figures at the time, such as Beccari. Their migrations, exchanges, and curiosities had taken them beyond both the geographical and political borders established through European colonialism – the same set of borders that have since governed the architectural historiography of the Asia Pacific.

This paper seeks to revisit this oceanic crossing expedition and mobility of the 19th century and use them as our “map” in locating visual and built traces of the intra-regional history of vernacular architecture of the Asia Pacific. It will explore how ethnographic sketches provide insight into the interplay between the trading, mobility, and vernacular built tradition in the region connected by the Arafura Sea. It investigates the visual accounts produced by 19th-century botanists, ethnologists, artists, and photographers and how these materials contain visual traces of the places of exchanges, encounters, and trading across the Asia Pacific, specifically one that existed among Indigenous groups before and alongside the spread of European mercantilism in the region.

1.

Jane Lydon, “Picturing Macassan-Australian Histories: Odoardo Beccari’s 1873 Photographs of the ‘Orang-Mereggi’ and Indigenous Authenticity,” in *Indigenous Networks: Mobility, Connections and Exchange*, ed. J. Carey and J. Lydon (New York: Routledge, 2014), 140–166. See also Tiffany Shellam, Maria Nugent, Shino Konishi and Allison Cadzow, eds., *Brokers and Boundaries: Colonial Exploration in Indigenous Territory* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016).

2.

Odoardo Beccari, “Cenno di Un Viaggio a Borneo,” *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana* 1, no. 1 (1868): 193–214. See also Odoardo Beccari, *Nelle foreste di Borneo: Viaggi e ricerche di un naturalista* (Firenze: Tip. di S. Landi, 1902).

3.

Charles Campbell MacKnight, *The Voyage to Marege: Macassan Trepangers in Northern Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1976); Julia Martínez and Adrian Vickers, *The Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labor and Indigenous Encounters in Australia’s Northern Trading Network* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 2015); and Heather Sutherland, *Seaways and Gatekeepers: Trade and State in the Eastern Archipelagos of Southeast Asia, C.1600–C.1906* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2021).

It delves into cultural, intellectual, and biographical histories while considering the contemporary implications of these networks to examine the connections and exchanges that have shaped Indigenous experiences beyond local contexts.

The paper proposes a novel pathway for conducting historical research in transnational and imperial history and aims to emphasise the significance of global movements across colonial borders, including those undertaken by Indigenous sailors and communities. It seeks to build on Lydon's remark that "Indigenous people were equals and participants in the Macassan trade rather than subordinate victims."<sup>4</sup>

4.

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"Photographing Macassan-Australian Histories,"  
Jane Lydon, October 7, 2020,  
<https://janelydon.wordpress.com/2020/10/07/photographing-macassan-australian-histories>.