

Search for descendants of Aboriginal people who settled in Indonesia at least 150 years ago

By national regional social affairs reporter [Erin Parke](#)

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Photo discovery sparks investigation into mysterious overs...



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The discovery of a trove of long-forgotten, black-and-white photographs in an Italian library has proven that a group of Indigenous Australians formed a community in South East Asia 150 years ago.

WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this article contains images of people who have died.

The striking images were taken in the Indonesian city of Makassar in the 1870s, and show half a dozen young Aboriginal men and children from northern Australia.

They corroborate written and oral accounts that describe Aboriginal people moving overseas with visiting Asian fishermen, some prior to British settlement of northern Australia, and some even dating back to the 1600s.



These photographs were taken by Italian naturalist Odoardo Beccari, who travelled through South East Asia in the 1860s and 70s. (Supplied: Pigorini National Museum, Rome)

There are also multiple first-hand descriptions of Aboriginal people living in Makassar.

The discovery of the photographs has triggered an international search for descendants, with the potential for DNA testing to reveal the scale of the migration from northern Australia to South East Asia.

Professor Jane Lydon, who uncovered the portraits in a library in Rome, says the discovery challenges the prevailing view of Aboriginal people passively inhabiting the continent prior to European settlement.

"I think it's a really rich part of our history that's been overlooked," she explains.

"It points to these centuries-old trade and connections and exchanges with our region, with Indonesia and Sulawesi.



Professor Jane Lydon is the Wesfarmers Chair of Australian History at the University of Western Australia (*Supplied: University of Western Australia*)

"We know that Aboriginal people travelled to Makassar on a regular basis, and some of them stayed there and had families.

"So I think it's highly likely that there are descendants of those mixed families still living in Makassar."

'A lot of families stayed'

Aboriginal elders believe the people in the photos are Yolngu people, from the Arnhem Land area.

On a stormy afternoon in Darwin, more than 150 years after the young men and boys posed for Italian naturalist Odoardo Beccari in Makassar, Helen 'Nyomba' Gandangu viewed the images for the first time.

She recognised them without hesitation.

"They are Yolngu people ... from Arnhem Land," she said.

"We can recognise the markings on their bodies ... that was happening back in the olden times."



len 'Nyomba' Gandangu and Manuel Dhurrkay are sure the young men and boys are Yolngu, from the Arnhem Land əa. (ABC News: Hamish Harty)

Nyomba said the photos matched up with oral history describing men and women moving overseas with foreign fishing crews.

"I've heard about this happening," she said.

"I was born in 1960, and when I was growing up I heard stories about a lot of people taken to Indonesia.

"Men and women went there, and a lot of families stayed."



Ingu musician Manuel Dhurrkay says elders who would have recognised the people in the photographs have since passed on. (ABC News: Hamish Harty)

Her nephew Manuel Dhurrkay — an accomplished Yolngu musician — agreed.

"The people here, the scars and faces look like they're from north-east Arnhem Land," he said.

"I think [these] are the faces of people who were living there [in Indonesia], and it was too hard for them to come back to Arnhem Land ... their own place.

"It's pretty sad, you know."



ikassan fishermen travelled along various routes to northern parts of Australia in their search for trepang. (ABC news: [Sharon Gordon](#))

The pair have taken copies of the photographs back to their remote island community of Galiwinku, to see if local knowledge can help identify the subjects in Beccari's images.

Large-scale trade

It's believed the boys and men were among a significant number of Yolngu men and women who moved overseas with visiting Asian fishing crews.

It's not known whether they left voluntarily or were forced.



Hand-coloured lithograph by Louis Le Breton of an Indonesian trepang processing site in Arnhem Land, 1842.
(Artwork: Louis Le Breton)

The annual visits by Makassan trepang fishermen are believed to have started in the 1600s and continued until 1907, when the Australian government shut down the industry.

Every year, an estimated 2,000 Asian fishermen sailed south to set up camp along the northern coast of Australia.

One of the many bays in northern Australia where Asian fishing crews camped. (ABC News: Andrew Seabourne)

For months at a time, they'd catch, boil and dry the lucrative trepang, or sea cucumber, which were — and remain — a much sought-after delicacy in China.

There's plenty of evidence of interactions with local Aboriginal people, with Makassar words, tools, and images being incorporated into tribal culture.

But the photographs are the first visual evidence that First Nations people travelled back to Indonesia with departing crews.

ck art believed to depict an Indonesian fishing boat, painted at a site called Marngkala on Groote Eylandt in the rthern Territory. *(Supplied: Anindilyakwa Land Council)*

First-hand accounts

As a naturalist, Beccari spent much of the 1860s and 70s travelling through South East Asia documenting the people and places he encountered.

He seemed struck by the cosmopolitan mix of people he found in the bustling port city of Makassar in the 1870s.

the port city of Makassar as depicted in a 19th century illustration. *(Supplied: Australian National Maritime Museum)*

In 1873 — the year he took the photos — Beccari wrote the following in his travel journal:

"To Makassar come some [boats] every year from northern Australia ... and Indigenous Australians are not uncommon in Makassar where you see them moving about in the streets.

"In July and in September at the height of the influx, the harbour teems with boats of every type and size: Chinese, Malays, Indians, Bughis, Papuans, and Australians form a confused jumble of colourful turbans and multi-coloured clothes."

Professor Lydon says there are even earlier accounts of Aboriginal people visiting Makassar.

In 1824, the Dutch governor-general described seeing what could now be considered the earliest wave of Australia tourists to Indonesia.

"They are very black, tall in stature, with curly hair ... and, in general, are quite well built," he wrote.

archaeologists examining early trepang fishing sites on the northern coast to try to establish their age. (*ABC News: drew Seabourne*)

The language reflects the ethnographic assessments of racial variance that were popular at the time, but are now considered offensive by many.

Professor Lydon says the photographs were likely taken as part of a similar study.

A shock discovery

Professor Lydon travelled to Italy to try to find the photos after seeing them referenced in a 19th-century textbook.

She says she wasn't sure if she'd be able to locate them in the vast archive of the Luigi Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography in Rome.

copies of the photos are being distributed in Arnhem Land and Indonesia to try to track down the families of those who own. (*ABC News: Hamish Harty*)

"When I went in, there were no lights on, but the curator was very friendly and left me alone with the archive," she said.

"I went through incredible photograph after photograph from this 19th-century archive, and there they were, this collection of Australia Aboriginal photographs that had been undiscovered for such a long time.

"So it was tremendously exciting — I was absolutely blown away."

ccari's note on the back of a photograph, translated from Italian, reads 'People of northern Australia, photographed Makassar in 1873'. (*Supplied: Pigorini National Museum, Rome*)

The handful of images now stand as a solitary visual record of a barely-known diaspora.

Professor Lydon has spent countless hours gazing at the faces, looking for clues of the lives that were being led so long ago.

"To me, they are a wonderful record of people who would otherwise not be known about," she said.

"The portraits have dignity.

"They're kind of like a window into a past life and a world that we otherwise wouldn't have access to."

She said DNA testing would be one way to try to glean information about the presence of Australian First Nations genealogy in the now vast metropolis of Makassar.

But she said her focus was on using oral histories and documentary evidence to try to build a picture of the early waves of northern migration.

Indonesian perspective

Helping with the investigation is Dr Lily Yulianti Farid, who was born in Makassar but is now based in Melbourne at Monash University.

She viewed the photographs at a music studio in Darwin, where Yolngu and Makassan musicians were gathered for a cross-cultural collaboration.

Under the warm studio lights, she and Makassan singer Dian Mega Safitri studied the historical images for clues.

Beccari was struck by the features of the Aboriginal people he met in Makassar. *(Supplied: Pigorini National Museum, Rome.)*

Lily Yulianti Farid and Dian Mega Safitri studied the photos during a break in music studio recordings. *(ABC News: mish Harty)*

Like many seeing the photos for the first time, they fixated on the young boy standing with the older men — did he come by boat from Australia's northern coast, or was he born in what is now Indonesia?

"We do know about these early encounters, and family histories where women from communities here married Makassans," Dr Farid reflects.

"When you listen to the stories you have it in your imagination about the people and what happened.

"But the photographs are different, they give you a very strong connection that, 'Oh, they are real, they were there, they visited Makassar in the 19th century'."

Lily Yulianti Farid says the photos highlight the oft-forgotten historical links between Indonesia and Australia. (AB ws: Hamish Harty)

Tracking down descendants

Dr Farid has been helping track descendants of both the Asian fishermen who fathered children in Australia, and the Aboriginal people who relocated to Indonesia during the 18th and 19th centuries.

It's early days, but she has been able to interview people in both countries, and there's a keen interest from both sides to explore and document the family links.

"It's not only important for study and research but, at the end of the day, these are people's stories, she says.

"People try to find their families, and are asking endless questions. 'Do I have family in Makassar, and how can I reach them?'

"It's also important for these two countries' relationship — not only are we close neighbours, but we have this shared past and it could help shape our future."

Singer Dian Mega Safitri says through a translator that she's keen to help find descendants when she returns home.

"I am so surprised by this," she says.

"What happened to these people, and what happened to the next generations?"

"There are so many questions."