



An Early Wooden Weir at Milikapiti, Melville Island, Northern Territory

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Abstract

This report records a little known, wood-lined, freshwater weir or impoundment situated at the high-water mark near the community of Milikapiti, Melville Island, Northern Territory (NT). Local Aboriginal informant, Gibson Farmer, stated that the wooden weir had been used in the past, by Macassans and others, for washing trepang [sea cucumber, a Chinese delicacy] and obtaining freshwater.

In the early Dry Season, Melville Island was the site of the last Australian landfall before the Macassans' returned home to Indonesia. Many Macassan sites have been recorded in the NT, primarily the remains of trepang processing and occupation areas comprising stone lines that supported boiling pots, tamarind trees, and ashy archaeological deposits featuring pottery and glass fragments.

This wooden weir is believed to be the best preserved early well in the NT. Other early NT wooden weir sites have invariably decayed and disappeared over time, been renovated and modified by Mission staff or Defence Force personnel in the 1939-45 conflict, obliterating the earlier structures. The site was previously recorded in an unpublished 1995 National Trust/Tiwi Land Council report on cultural contact sites on the Tiwi Islands, but due to the very limited circulation of that document, this current updated report is deemed necessary.

Introduction

In July 2016, Mr Gibson Farmer, Chairman of the Tiwi Land Council, identified a wooden structure on a rocky beach near the Tiwi community of Milikapiti on Melville Island, and explained its history and function [see Map 1]. He stated that 'the old people' [i.e. people of his parents' generation] had said that the wood-lined weir was made by the Macassans and had been used by them on their way back to present day Indonesia in the early Dry Season.

Gibson Farmer said the Tiwi and the Macassans also constructed a nearby tidal fish trap which, due to a high tide, was not visible at the time of the field inspection. Farmer, in 1995, reported that the ‘old people’ had said that the site was used only under cover of darkness, since they feared attack from the Tiwi in daylight [Bathgate and Lewis 1995 :173].



Map 1 : Locality Map - Milikapiti, Melville Island

Site Description

The site is located at the high-water mark, immediately adjacent to an approximately 10 metre cliff, close to the Milikapiti community sewage ponds. At the base of the cliff, freshwater was observed seeping onto the beach in July, in the middle of the Dry Season. Farmer said that at the time of year when the Macassans were passing by this site, in the late Wet Season, the water flow out of the cliff base was (and remains) substantial. The intertidal zone at the weir site is relatively steep and dominated by rocky regolith cobbles and boulders.



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

The timber posts comprising the structure [see Figure 1] are approximately 20cm in diameter and have been dug into the rocky beach in a vertical pattern, forming a wooden weir type structure [3 metres by 1 metre] and standing approximately 120 centimetres high, which ‘boxed in’ the freshwater. Some form of woven matting may have originally lined the boxed area.

The long axis is roughly parallel to the shoreline. It is tentatively speculated that the timber posts are from Ironwood trees [*Erythrophleum chlorostachys*] though this identification is subject to further analysis. At least one of the timber posts had an axe or adze mark on its surface [see Figures 3 & 4].



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

The position of the wooden weir site, on a steep rocky beach, makes it relatively safe from crocodile attack, a real factor in these waters. Alternative freshwater sources at the headwaters of tidal creeks would have been considerably more dangerous, both from crocodile attack and due to the Tiwi Islanders' purported hostility towards intruders. Verbal testimony by Gibson Farmer confirms historical evidence that the Tiwi received dugout canoes from the Macassans, by way of payment for services & facilities enjoyed by the Macassan fleet. Therefore, as the weir was constructed and used with Tiwi agreement, it may be that this site stands at odds with the conventional view that the Tiwi were always hostile to outsiders.

The Antiquity of the Site

Metric dating of the timber structure and associated fish trap is difficult to conduct, independent of the oral history, since no associated artefacts or deposits were located. Carbon dating may provide an answer and the authors will look into the feasibility of undertaking this process. Although negative information is not usually significant, no chainsaw marks were observed at the site, a technology which became prevalent in the NT after World War Two, supporting an early twentieth century date as a terminus ante quem.



Figure 5.

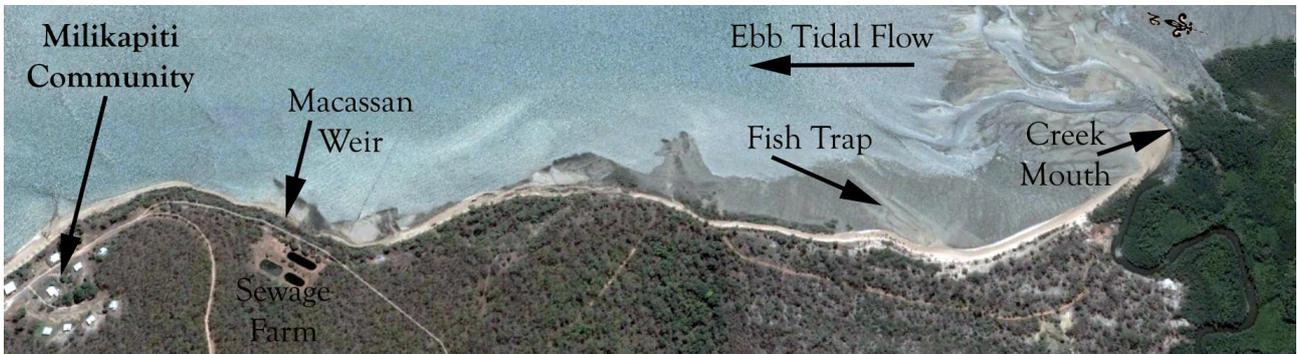
A close inspection of the cliff top immediately adjacent to the wooden weir site was made and no archaeological materials were located.

This area has been heavily disturbed through the construction of the sewage ponds, and a large amount of post-World War Two camp debris was also found in this area.

Artist's impression of the site in use is provided in Figure 5.

It is speculated that a close woven matting may have originally lined the weir. [Artwork: Debbie Morgan]

Associated Tidal Fish trap



Map 2. Relationship between the Milikapiti Community - Macassan Weir - Fish Trap and feeder creek. Google Earth image.

The fish trap on Google Earth appears to consist of parallel lines of stones running NE diagonally across the beach face descending towards the absolute low tide mark. The construction is therefore noticeably different to other fish traps that have been recorded near Macassan watering points such as Millingimbi [they are generally curvilinear in shape].

It is located approximately 1050 metres south of the wooden weir site and Farmer suggested that the fish trap was later modified by the settlement staff. Farmer also said that the fish trap site and the wooden weir were contemporaneous. A field inspection at the absolute low tide will be required before this site can be properly recorded and described.

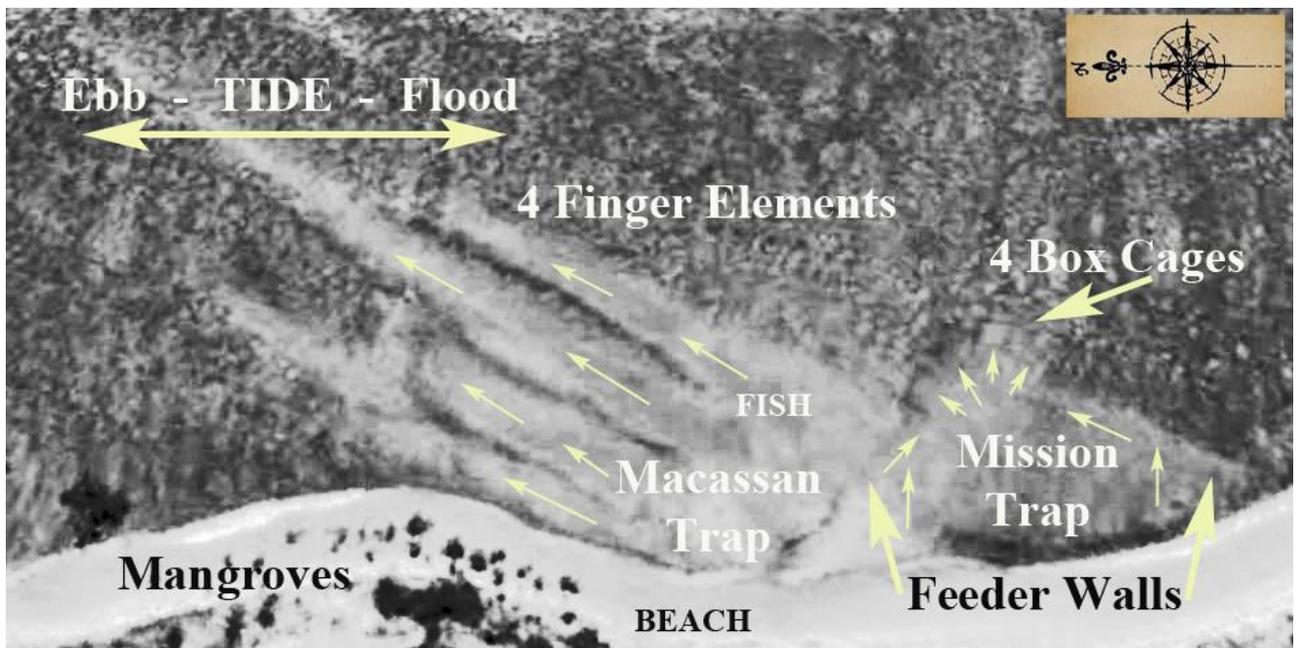


Figure 6. Macassan Ebb Tide Fish Trap at Milikapiti – modified Google Earth image

Discussion

Freshwater sources easily accessible along the coast in the NT have long been significant to both foreigners and local Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal groups around Australia have been recorded carefully managing and protecting sources of freshwater [see for instance Berndt and Berndt 1982:110], and the Macassans often developed these sources to suit their needs.

Early Arnhem Land Missionary Wilbur Chaseling, for example, observed a beachside freshwater source in Arnhem Bay which had been modified by the Macassans by 'wedg[ing] a hollow tree trunk into the neck of the spring' [1957:136].



Fig. 7.

More recently, Mission and defence personnel have dug out and modified pre-existing wells and wooden weirs around the Top End, which has generally obliterated earlier infrastructure. For instance, Bathgate and Lewis report on another freshwater source adjacent to the coast at Caution Point, Bathurst Island where steel drums have been incorporated into the well walls [Bathgate and Lewis 1995:165], which may have replaced earlier timber or stone lining.

At the site under discussion here, no further additions or renovations have displaced the early timber infrastructure. A small concrete weir, made as the first water source for Milikapiti settlement, dating to circa 1942 [Pye 1993:110] was also identified nearby by Farmer. [Figure 7.]

Macassan or Japanese Origin?

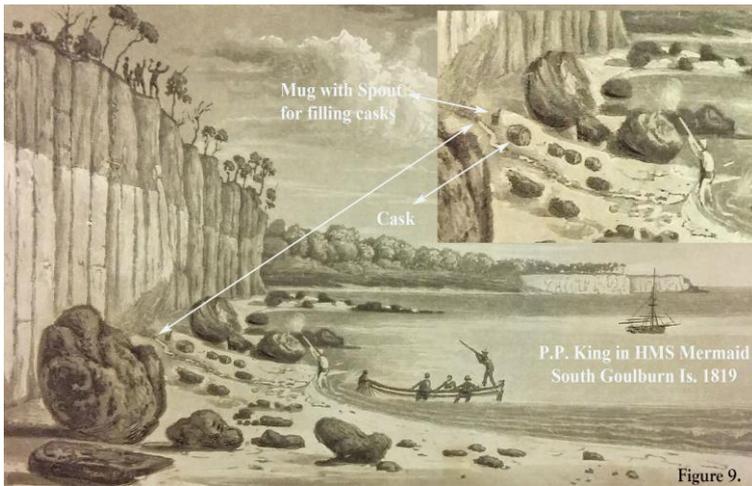
It is noted that in the Northern Territory the term 'Macassan' is often used to refer to fishermen from Makassar as well as other Asian groups, which may in some instances include Chinese, Filipino and Japanese pearl divers, trepangers and turtle/trochus shell gatherers. The waters around the Tiwi Islands appear to have been utilised by non-Macassan groups since the 1870s, the last pearl divers leaving the area in the 1930s [Bathgate and Lewis 1995:14, Lamb 2015].

Pearling industry historian John Lamb stated that the pearling beds off the north and western coasts of the Tiwi Islands [Lamb 2015:158] were exploited by Japanese pearling luggers in the 1930s and were provisioned with oil, water and other goods from a compound at Pirlangimpi [formerly known as Garden Point] [Lamb pers comm].



Fig.8

Pirlangimpi is much closer to the pearling beds than Milikapiti and so it seems unlikely these pearl divers built the weir structure. The Macassans, who were known to have used bamboo lengths [King 1827:65] and ceramic jars [McKnight pers.comm] to store freshwater on their praus, were visiting the Tiwi Islands up until around 1890 [Bathgate and Lewis 1995:16]. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the newly established Commonwealth Government closed this fishery to the Macassans [McKnight 1976: 100 ff].



Australian born navigator and explorer, Admiral Phillip Parker King, published a plate [see Figure 9] that illustrates some of his crew collecting water from a very similar freshwater spring in the same topographic position in the landscape, at the base of a sea cliff, this one on South Goulburn Island in Arnhem Land some 290 kilometres to the east of Milikapiti [1827: un-numbered plate opposite p 66]. King recorded that his crew found Macassan ['Malay'] items, namely lengths of bamboo, a length of cord and a coconut, near this water source [ibid: 65].

It is the assessment of the authors that the wooden weir most probably dates from the late nineteenth century and is of Macassan origin.

Site Management

On the whole, timber structures in the Top End have a short lifespan due to the hostile environment. Given the highly unusual location of this site, however, the timbers have been protected by the sand from termites, by the spring water from Teredo worm and away from the very frequent Dry Season fires. Furthermore, the anaerobic postholes have largely protected the timber from organic decay.

However, it is a concern that a dead tree has recently collapsed onto the site from the adjacent cliff which greatly increases the possibility that the timber structure will now be susceptible to termites and/or fire damage [see Figure 2]. It has been suggested to the Tiwi Islands Regional Council staff at Milikapiti that the overlying timber be removed to allow for the site to be viewed without impediment, and to ensure its continuing survival.

Concluding Remarks

Melville Island has many sites of intercultural and historical importance, notably the early British settlement of Fort Dundas [1824-1829] and the early twentieth century Mission site at Garden Point. Little archaeological work has been conducted on the Tiwi Islands, despite usually being the first and last footfall for the various seafarers from current day Indonesia and further afield, including Dutch explorers in the 1600s. By far, most archaeological and historical attention in the Tiwi Islands has been focussed on the early British attempt at permanent settlement at Fort Dundas in the Apsley Strait [Crosby 1978, Pugh 2017 - <https://www.pastmasters.net/fort-dundas--garden-point.html>]. These islands, especially their northern coasts, remain tantalising blank slates in terms of archaeological reconnaissance.

Linguist Nicholas Evans suggests that linguistic evidence from northern Australian languages indicates that there were two phases of Macassan/Austronesian loan word acquisition in north Australia. There was a Macassan phase from the 1700s to 1907, which is well documented [Evans 1992 : 45-91]. Evans suggests there is also an earlier phase which may relate to the 'Baiini' or 'Bayini', a seafaring group distinct from the Macassans [Evans 1992: 63, Berndt and Berndt 1954:32ff] though detailed research on this group by McIntosh (2015) suggests close links to Macassans. McIntosh suggests that a further group, the Sama Bajau or sea gypsies, may be responsible for the introduction of other loan words in the Tiwi, Yolngu and other Aboriginal languages. Further linguistic research may help disclose the extent of foreign contacts and connections.

Some early commentators have also referred to the possibility that Timor-based Portuguese-Timorese (Topasses) slavers operated in the Tiwi Islands prior to 1800 [see for instance Morris 2001: 29], and others have suggested this resulted in the purported Tiwi hostility toward foreigners in the early historic period. However, the number of Macassan and other sites already identified to date would seem to indicate that the Tiwi were much more in contact with outsiders, or at least open to visitation, than previously considered.

The wood-lined weir appears to be a legacy of the most recent in a long line of foreign seafaring visitors which, we argue, are yet to be fully identified and documented. This weir and fish trap complex should be considered for inclusion in any Tiwi Islands Heritage List and cultural tourism venture the Tiwi Islanders may develop in the future. Although currently difficult to visit, due to limited local accommodation and tourist infrastructure, the site has a unique history and is sufficiently robust to withstand tourist visitation whilst providing a tangible context for relating the Tiwi's early connection to Asian and European seafaring peoples.

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Biographical Notes

Michael Hermes is an ANU trained archaeologist and a teacher. He lectured at the Batchelor College in the NT in the Natural and Cultural Resource Management [Indigenous Ranger Training] course for three years [1992-1995] and was the Training officer in the Aboriginal Heritage Unit in the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service [1995-1997]. More recently he has worked as an Archaeological Consultant in Queensland, Western Australia and New South Wales. He has a Master of Letters Degree in Cultural Studies [CQU], having written his thesis on nationalism and cultural policy in Suharto's Indonesia. He has taught in remote Aboriginal schools for several years, including at Nguiu School, Bathurst Island.

Mike Owen is a Darwin based heritage consultant with 40 years' experience of remote communities throughout the Northern Territory and across northern Australia. He has worked in the Rural & Remote Health, Aboriginal Affairs and Local Government sectors - is a co-founder of PastMasters. He maintains the image archive and is the webmaster for <https://www.pastmasters.net/>

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Tim Stone is an independent Consultant Archaeologist, Geomorphologist and Geochronologist with over 30 years experience in cultural heritage management and academic research. He holds both Bachelors and Masters Degrees from the Australian National University and a PhD from the University of Melbourne. His Masters research, on the Weipa shell mounds, developed methods for distinguishing Aboriginal shell middens from natural shoreline deposits. The landscape history of the Murray River was the subject of his PhD. Here, he specialized in optically stimulated luminescence & other radiometric dating techniques. His research has been published in international academic journals & popular magazines including Australian Geographic & Australasian Science.

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