

## Life and Death on the Wessel Islands: The Case of Australia's Mysterious African Coin Cache

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**ABSTRACT:** This is a story of the most unlikely. In the year 1944, a soldier on Australia's most remote northern coastline at Jensen Bay finds a handful of coins, which he later learns are dated 900-1200 AD, and had come from a Portuguese base on the east coast of Africa. The whole tale provides a window onto the Yolngu history of the coast of Arnhem Land, and relate to events in the mid-1800s.

This is a detective story par excellence but one, alas, with very few clues.

The setting is Australia's remote northern coastline. The year is 1944, and the war in the Pacific is in full swing. A soldier stationed at Jensen Bay on the Wessel Islands finds a handful of coins, some of which he later learns originate from the medieval Sultanate of Kilwa founded by a Persian Prince in the 10th Century on the east coast of Africa in what is now Tanzania. These Kilwa coins dated from the 900s to the 1300s AD.

Was an Arab dhow or a Portuguese shipwreck implicated? There was no immediate evidence of this, though Aboriginal folklore certainly suggests that the possibility was real. Aborigines from this region, known as the Yolngu, even today speak of a hidden cave in the long abandoned Wessel Islands that is filled with boundless treasure; doubloons and weaponry of ancient era. Sadly, the African copper coins in question, and four Dutch 'doits' found in the same locality, have no bullion value. In the 12th century, Kilwa was the most powerful port on the East African coast and the coins bear the names of Sultans who ruled over Kilwa, and also Pemba, the Mafia Islands, Comoros, and Zanzibar, before its sacking by the Portuguese in 1505. One coin, for example, bears the inscription Sulaiman ibn al-Hasan ('May he be happy') Trusting with the Master of Bounties ('He is glorious'). As curiosity items, therefore, the coins have few parallels in Australian history, and in archaeological terms, they are priceless.

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In this paper I will describe the circumstances of the coin find, discuss their origins, analyze the range of peoples identified in Yolngu oral history who might be implicated in our detective story, and then compare this list with details from the literature on foreign exploration and exploitation of the Arnhem Land coast. I then present one possible scenario (out of many potential scenarios) to describe what may have occurred on the Wessels leading up to the deposit of the coins on a sandy creek bank in what is now a deserted stretch of Australian wilderness.

My focus will be on the life and death of one Indonesian man named Buthimang (*Budiman*, in the language of the archipelago) who, as a shipwreck survivor in the 19th century, spent many years in north-east Arnhem Land living with his Yolngu hosts. I speculate that the coins were once in his possession. He perished under mysterious circumstances in his declining years in the late 1800s at a site near where the coins were found.

#### *The Wessels, North-East Arnhem Land*

The ‘Wessels’ are a 120km long chain of islands ‘discovered’ by Captain Jan Carstenszoon of the Dutch East India Company in his ship the ‘Arnhem’ in 1623, though on his charts they are known as the Islands of Speult. These same islands are shown but not named on Abel Tasman’s 1644 map. The English explorer Matthew Flinders writes of some charts, showing the chain as one large island called ‘Wessel’s Eylandt’, and he endorsed this place-name in his mapping of the northern coast of Australia in 1802-3.

The Wessels form a great arc north from Arnhem Land’s Napier Peninsula towards Papua New Guinea. The island chain features rugged sandstone plateaus, rocky cliffs and beautiful long beaches and sandy bays, as well as extensive areas of native grassland, eucalypt woodlands, paperback forests and mangroves. For months at a time the islands are buffeted by the north-west winds from Timor, Tanimbar and Aru and from time immemorial they would have acted as a type of barrier, or a great catching mitt, for all the Arafura Sea traffic blown south of their intended course.

Apart from north-east Arnhem Land, there are but a few places on the Australian continent that have such historic importance in terms of first encounters. Apart from Port Jackson (Sydney), the most well-known, of course, is Adventure Bay on Bruny Island in Tasmania, home to Truganini, the ‘last of the Tasmanians,’ which welcomed voyagers and scientists like Captain James Cook, William Bligh, Nicolas Baudin and Bruni d’Entrecasteaux, among others. Then there is King George Sound, Albany, in Western Australia, which was a rendezvous point for

noted explorers like George Vancouver, Phillip Parker King and Dumont d'Urville.

I have described elsewhere (McIntosh 2006, 2008) why north east Arnhem Land is included in this list. Apart from the many visits by Dutch explorers like Abel Tasman and the extensive contact between Yolngu and Makassar-based trepang fisherman from Sulawesi in Indonesia from at least 1780 to 1907, there is an earlier episode of cultural contact that has not garnered the enthusiastic attention that it should have had.

When the Dutch defeated the Gowa fleet from Makassar in central Indonesia in 1667, legend describes the retreat of the Indonesians to the northern Australian coast, where they discovered the trepang that they would harvest a hundred years later. In Campbell Macknight's 1976 text, 'The Voyage to Marege', one of the last trepangers on the coast described records his recollection of this sojourn in north-east Arnhem Land was upwards of twenty years, but there are few details and no records in Dutch sources. Yolngu oral history, on the other hand, describes in impressive detail the many fine houses that were constructed on Australian shores, the boat-building, iron-furnaces, and pottery manufacture. (McIntosh 2006) My research indicates that the most likely candidate for the location of this former settlement is a place called Dholtji on Cape Wilberforce. Three smaller reconnaissance bases associated with the Gowa settlement were located in the Wessels Islands, which is just to the north-west of Dholtji. (McIntosh 2006) It is, therefore, not unusual to expect that items of a special historical character would be found in the vicinity of the coin find in Jensen Bay, where there is a large and permanent water supply.

### *The Kilwa and Dutch Coins*

The circumstances of the coin find are not in dispute. In 1944, during World War 2, the late Maurie Isenberg of the 312 Radar Unit was stationed at Marchinbar Island, in the northern part of the Wessels chain. This was a forward warning station against Japanese aircraft, surface vessels and submarines threatening northern Australia. (Mira 1993) Isenberg would spend his spare time fishing and bushwalking:

One day, whilst fishing, he saw four green circular objects lying in the sand, about one meter below the high water mark. He picked them up...and poked around in an area of about four square meters, finding five more. Having no interest in coins at the time, he...put [them] in an airtight match tin; this went into his kit bag and returned with him to [the mainland]. (Mira 1993:2)



*The author, indicating north east Arnhem Land, NT.*

In 1979, Isenberg rediscovered the coins, cleaned them, and sought help in their identification. Through a series of hands the coins came into the possession of noted coin expert William Mira, who could easily identify the four V.O.C. coins (i.e. the Dutch East India Company), with one

dating back to 1690. For the other coins, however, he relied upon the diagnosis of specialists in numismatics from Brisbane (R. Domrow) and the British Museum (N.M. Lowick) in confirming an East African connection. They were then donated by Mira to the precursor of the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, where today they lie in storage away from the public eye.

The two most curious findings of Mira and the others was the excellent condition of the coins dating from the 900s to the 1300s, and also the fact that only one such coin had ever been found outside of East Africa, and that was from an excavation in Oman. They were all intrigued as to how five such coins found their way to the Australian Outback.

William Mira contacted me in the 1990s, in the hope that I might be able to arrange for an excavation of the Wessels site. He had obtained detailed site maps from Isenberg and others who had been based at the radar station and he was confident that a shipwreck or two was involved and that a trove of some description was awaiting discovery.

At that time I was based at Elcho Island (Galiwin'ku), the most southerly of the Wessels chain of islands. I was undertaking my Ph.D. in anthropology, with a focus on the history of contact between Yolngu and outsiders. I had also been adopted into a Yolngu clan with a very close association with the Wessel Islands. Within a very short time, following discussions with clan elder, the late David Burrumarra M.B.E., I was able to locate the site of the coin find to a creek just south of Jensen Bay known by the Yolngu as Djinjan. Yet, despite the widespread interest arising from academic papers on the coins by Mira (1983, 1993) and also Freeman-Grenville (1994), I was unable at that time to attract funding for an archaeological survey.

Considerable work has been done in Australia in regard to the many Dutch shipwrecks along the Western Australian coast, where the history of voyaging across the Indian Ocean along the Roaring Forties is well documented. Great skepticism, however, surrounds the idea of a 'secret' Portuguese discovery of Australia, despite the fact that they had a major base of operations in Timor just to the north of Australia. They also had taken possession of the port of Kilwa in the 1500s so the possibility that they are implicated in the coin find appears very real.

An ancient trade route that linked East Africa and Arabia, Persia, India, Malacca and the Moluccas, home to the fabled spice islands of Ternate, Ambon and Banda in eastern Indonesia was in place well before the days of the marauding Portuguese 'freebooters'. In the 1500s, for example, the Portuguese writer Tome Pires speaks of the port of Malacca in what is now Malaysia having trade agents and resident merchants from as far afield as Cairo, Aden, and Kilwa (See A. Cortesao 'The

Suma Oriental of Tome Pires published by the Hakluyt Society), so the possibility of a 'secret' Persian, Arabian, Gudjerati or other connection to Australia is also a distinct possibility.



*One of the Kilwa coins.*

#### *The Isenberg Discovery*

Maurie Isenberg found nine coins in all, and the fact that the five Kilwa coins were found in association with 17th and 18th century Dutch coins

strongly suggests that they were deposited together at this later, rather than the earlier, dates. The latest Dutch coin is from the 1780s, a date associated with the beginning of the Makassar trepang industry in north-east Arnhem Land.

The trepang (sea cucumber or beche-de-mer) trade was Australia's first international industry. It began in earnest in northern Australia in the mid-1700s, but not later than the 1780s (Macknight 2011). Each year up to several thousand fishermen from the port of Makassar would venture forth from Sulawesi in a number of fishing vessels. In partnership with Aboriginal peoples from West Arnhem Land all the way through to the southern reaches of the Gulf of Carpentaria, they would fish for the sea cucumber, a delicacy favored by the Chinese.

Curiously, however, the Wessels are not known for trepang and there is no evidence that Makassar fishermen ever set up any processing camps on the islands. The telltale signs, namely tamarind trees, long stone lines that held cooking pots and glass and pottery fragments, are absent. However, as mentioned, there is a large permanent watering place in Jensen Bay, a fresh water lagoon, so it may well have been a reconnoitering point for the fleet. The coins were found in the general vicinity of the lagoon, just to the south at the mouth of a creek.

In the 1960s, Dutch coins were uncovered during archaeological excavations by Campbell Macknight at a number of Makassar trepang camps across Arnhem Land, but no other Islamic or African coins have ever been found. These Dutch 'doits' were minted in the timeframe of 1742 to 1840 in Utrecht and Dordrecht in the Netherlands and in Batavia/Surabaya in Indonesia, but all were meant for the Asia trade. The

Dutch coins found in the Wessels Islands, by contrast, were much older, over 100 years in several cases (dating from 1690-1784) and they originated from Zeeland, Gelderland and the Bishopric of Liege.

Were the Wessel Island coins linked to the period of first contact between Makassar fishermen and Aborigines in the 1780s or perhaps even to the visit there of Mathew Flinders in the early 1800s?

### *Coins as Gifts?*

In John Webber's famous drawing from 1777, Captain James Cook, on his second voyage of discovery, is bestowing a medal upon a Tasmanian Aboriginal, while a group of about 20 others look on. These 'Otaheti' (*Resolution* and *Adventure*) medals, were emblazoned with a portrait of King George III and, as with the Kilwa coins, included some words about the nature of the ruler's prowess, i.e. King of Great Britain, France, Ireland etc. These medals had been created upon the orders of Sir Joseph Banks and the idea was to distribute them freely among all the indigenous populations encountered in the Pacific. Lane (2009) makes the argument that such medals or coins were among the earliest gifts given by Europeans to Aborigines and that they functioned as both an attempt at fostering good relations and also in support of a territorial claim as discoverers of the land in question.

On January 28, 1777, Cook's ships the *Resolution* and the *Adventure* were anchored in Adventure Bay and a party was sent to collect water and timber. Eight 'native' men and a boy were presented with the medals in what might have been considered by Aborigines as payment for their resources. The following day Cook went ashore and distributed more gifts, including iron tools, beads, medals and fish hooks, which he believed were received with 'some satisfaction.' (Lane 2009) In an earlier visit to Adventure Bay, the explorer Tobias Furneaux, raided a deserted Aboriginal camp for items of Aboriginal material culture like spears and bags, and placed in return gun flints, medals, and a few nails, in the first instance of a form of exchange between Aborigines and outsiders in this part of the world.

Were coins or medals also gifted to the Yolngu of the Wessel Islands? If the trepang industry was just underway in 1780, as Campbell Macknight (2011) now suggests, then the vintage of the coin finds on the Wessel Islands is consistent with the idea of a first encounter gift, either from Europeans or Makassar fishermen or others. Were antique coins from Kilwa, perhaps in circulation in Makassar, also gifted to the Yolngu in order to freely access the water and other resources to be found at Jensen Bay?

In the *Life of Captain Matthew Flinders*, Ernest Scott describes the range of items that the explorer of northern Australia had in his

possession and which were to be shared with the natives. Scott writes: 'In addition to plentiful supplies and special provision for a large store of water, the *Investigator* carried an interesting assortment of 'gauds, nick-nacks, trifles,' to serve as presents to native peoples with whom it was desired to cultivate friendly relations. The list included useful articles as well as glittering toys, and is a curious document, illustrating one of the means by which civilisation sought to tickle the barbarian into compliance. Flinders carried for this purpose 500 pocket-knives, 500 looking-glasses, 100 combs, 200 strings of blue, red, white and yellow beads, 100 pairs of ear-rings, 200 finger rings, 1000 yards of blue and red gartering, 100 red caps, 100 small blankets, 100 yards of thin red baize, 100 yards of coloured linen, 1000 needles, five pounds of red thread, 200 files, 100 shoemakers' knives, 300 pairs of scissors, 100 hammers, 50 axes, 300 hatchets, a quantity of other samples of ironmongery, a number of medals with King George's head imprinted upon them, and some new copper coins.'

The reference to the copper coins is of particular interest. Were they Dutch doits? Flinders had never visited Makassar but he may possibly have had access to Dutch coinage, though any link to Kilwa is tenuous.

The literature indicates that Makassar-based trepangers would gift the Yolngu items like mirrors, cloth, necklaces, knives, axes, and dugout canoes, as well as alcohol and tobacco, in payment for their labour. (Macknight 1976) They would also trade their pearls, turtle shell and cypress for such items. The fact that a good number of coins have been found at former Makassar trepang sites suggests that they too were either the product of gifting or barter. But such coins may also have been the personal property of Yolngu who had made the voyage to Makassar and worked there for their board and upkeep prior to their return to Australia. They may also have been paid in doits for specific tasks and returned with these as a memento of their adventures.

#### *From Islamic Port in South-east Asia?*

The relative newness in appearance of the Kilwa coins suggests that they may have been minted outside of Kilwa, perhaps in the Islamic ports of south-east Asia as curiosity items or even as talisman, and perhaps they were acquired by Yolngu for their perceived magical powers. Makassar sailors who undertook a reenactment of the trepanging voyage to Australia in 1988 all carried with them such special objects or talismans for good luck. I was given one of these talisman by a crew member. He told me of how superstitious the crew was, and how they needed help in dealing with the unpredictable and potentially deadly forces of nature they would encounter on a daily basis. As mentioned previously, we know that in the 1500s Kilwa trade agents were operating

in nearby Malacca, so it is very possible that these agents were also in communication with the Makassarese. Was Makassar, then, the source of both the doits and the Kilwa coins?

Or were these coins the spoils of a looted shipwreck? Matthew Flinders recorded evidence of a Makassar shipwreck in the Wessels in 1803 and the *Encyclopedia of Australian Shipwrecks* indicates that the Northern Territory coast is littered with wrecks, both from the days of the Makassar fisherman right through to World War II and Cyclone Tracey. The causes were many, for example: 'Malay' pirate attacks in Indonesian waters, most notably with the 1825 loss of the *Lady Nelson*, but more often the shipwrecks were the product of uncharted reefs and tropical storms. Some of the more famous on record are:

- In 1888 with the loss of the *Annie Millicent* which was wrecked after being stranded on an unidentified reef with the loss of all crew.
- In 1897 when a cyclone destroyed 9 of 29 pearling boats at anchor in Darwin Harbour.
- In 1874 when the iron barque *Batavia* was lost off Stevens Island, near the Wessels. Mystery surrounds the fate of the crew. Yolngu reported that that it was stranded for 4-5 weeks and the survivors left on boats to the west, but they were never seen again. The suggestion in official documentation is that they were probably murdered by Aborigines when they landed in search of food and water, but the truth may never be known.

The possibility of a shipwreck or shipwrecks in the vicinity of the coin find site in Jensen Bay is high, especially given the dangerous rips and tides, unidentified reefs, the imposing rocky cliffs, and the frequent and powerful cyclones and tropical storms. Then there is also the treacherous 'hole in the wall', a very narrow natural passageway through two of the islands lined with graffiti of sailors, and going back to the 19th century.

### *The Other Arnhem Landers*

As we look back in time, the range and variety of outsiders in Arnhem Land who are in contact with Yolngu is quite extensive. In the 1920 and 1930s for example, there were oil miners at Elcho Island and European-run cattle stations just inland. Japanese pearlmen and trepangers were at work off the coast. They hired Yolngu as deckhands, as did the beachcomber, Fred Gray, from his camp in the Malay Road (Mata Mata) and Caledon Bay.

If we go further back to the mid- to late-1800s, we see Indonesians on the coast in considerable numbers. For the most part, these were trepang fishermen sailing out of the port of Makassar. Some captains were known to Yolngu by name, and were affiliated with particular clans, like

Daeng Rangka and Daeng Sarro. (See Macknight 1976, McIntosh 2000). Their sojourn would last upwards of three to four months, and include a range of Arnhem Land bases, whose introduced place-names persist into the present, like Lipabandria, or Ujung Tana. Some Makassar fishermen would stay for an entire year or even longer and make preparations for future seasons.

When relations between Yolngu and Makassans were at their height, both parties would have found value in in this semi-permanent habitation arrangement. Yolngu strongly desired the products of trade and such longer-term visitors would be expected to act as brokers for Yolngu in their negotiations. (McIntosh 2000) It would also have been advantageous for Makassans to become more thoroughly acquainted with their Yolngu trading partners, their languages and cultures, and to acquire insider knowledge of the land and seascape. It must be recognized, also, that some Yolngu had become addicted to the opium-laced tobacco and alcohol that were often used in transactions as payment for services rendered in the procurement of trepang, and this led, gradually, to a downward spiral in relations, culminating in murder and deception aplenty. In the latter years of the trade, the much-loved Makassar captain Daeng Rangka stooped to kidnapping a young Yolngu woman, but this may have been facilitated by illicit trade in alcohol. This woman never returned to Australia. It was only in the 1980s that Yolngu from Elcho Island and Yirrkala traveled to Makassar to meet with her great-grandchildren, their long lost relatives. (Cooke 1987)

A man called Buthimang, known to have lived in the Wessels in the 1800s, was one of those 'Makassan' intermediaries, although he appears to not have been in the employ of any Makassar captains. It is not known where he came from, as Makassar crews included peoples from a range of eastern Indonesian islands. As stated, incorporating outsiders into Yolngu society in the mid- to late- 1800s would have provided a window into a new world that potentially held many benefits, and also a possible ally in times of need. They might also be able to procure those goods they were becoming increasingly dependent upon, like sailing canoes, cloth, and metals.

I will return to Buthimang's story later. First we will look further back in time to consider the full range of peoples of non-Aboriginal origins who found themselves in the vicinity of the Wessels, and who may be implicated in the Wessels coin cache.

### *Outsiders in Yolngu Oral History and Mythology*

As I have detailed in earlier works (McIntosh 2006, 2008), the Yolngu developed a very elaborate mythology describing the reasons behind the presence of non-Aborigines in their midst, and developed strict laws on

how they should interact with them. For example, the Yolngu imbued the idea of gleaning the very best of the outside world to make their own world stronger, a sacred one. But allowing outsiders to unduly influence their social and cultural values was taboo and resisted at all cost. This law, these sanctions, and their sacred dimensions, remain a part of the living history of the Yolngu. (McIntosh 2008)

From within the Yolngu historical lens, a range of visitors are identifiable, including:

1. Eastern Indonesians who were accidentally blown southwards in storms. Their funerary canoes, burned from the inside, occasionally drift onto Arnhem Land shores. Yolngu would refer to these people to the north, in the 'old days', as 'universal travelers', for their sailing canoes were known as Djulpan, a reference to the stars of Orion's belt which is a canoe in Yolngu mythology. (McIntosh 1995)
2. Traditional whale and dugong hunters or sea gypsies (Sama Bajau) who have group names that are traceable even today to various parts of the Indonesian archipelago. While the 'Turijene', 'Papayili', and 'Gelurru' sea gypsies feature in Yolngu myths on the 'land of the dead', they are also said to be real people who have been in Arnhem Land. Research indicates that they often traveled with Makassar fishermen and worked as divers. (Macknight 1976).
3. Yolngu recall in considerable detail the names of specific leaders from the period associated with the Gowa settlement in Arnhem Land which dates back to 1667. For example, there is Djeki, Lela, and Luki, as well as the names of all the professions carried out in the Arnhem Land encampment, like policeman (Wupatha), iron-maker (Batingarra), seamstress (Mawunggi), Daymatharra (cook) and so on. (McIntosh 2004)
4. Yolngu oral history makes reference to men clothed in 'mirror' landing on the coast, a probable reference to armour, which is suggestive of the Portuguese.
5. Finally, the landscape includes references to specific individuals whose presence is recorded in Yolngu songs and stories but whose provenance is unknown. Just north of Elcho Island, for example, is a reef known Djiturrk Wangayin, meaning 'Djiturrk cries out'. It was here that an Indonesian fishermen named Djiturrk caught his foot in the reef and drowned with the rising tide. Yolngu who knew him, lived with him, traded with him, and heard his cries for help, could do nothing. This place remains off-limits even today.



*The late David Burrumarra M.B.E., a traditional Aboriginal owner of the Wessel Islands and the coin discovery site. Drawing by Julia Blackburn.*

There are many other named outsiders in Yolngu oral history, people like Buthimang who lived and died on the Australian coastline. Did the coins belong to one of them? Looking back over this list, it seems possible, even probable.

The Gowa settlement predates the earliest Dutch coin found in the Wessels, so that would seem to rule it out. The earliest visitors, the sea gypsies and traditional fishermen from Tanimbar or Aru lived by the fruits of their own labours and barter, and probably would have had little interest in coins, unless of course they were talisman. The Portuguese, as with Captain Cook and Flinders, were also engaged in the distribution of trinkets in their dealings with indigenous peoples and they had a direct link to Kilwa, having sacked it in the 1500s. It is doubtful, however, that armoured people were interested in presenting gifts of coins or building relations with indigenous peoples. Linked to the above 'Portuguese narrative' is a site in the English Company's Islands called Marak which is associated with gunfire, a sure indicator of problematic relations.

Objects with a special value for the Yolngu, like wooden or stone representations of Dreaming entities, are often deposited in caves well

away from living areas, or in sacred fresh water sources. The coins in question were found in an eroding creek bank just below the high water mark, suggesting a secular rather than a sacred significance, and that they were of value more to the possessor than to the clan as a whole.

The proximity of the African and Dutch coins when found by Isenberg speaks to the probability that they were deposited together, i.e. part of one and the same collection, and that they perhaps belonged to a single individual Yolngu or outsider, and were not the product of both Portuguese and Makassar offerings.

### *The Fate of Buthimang*

The single most critical factor in considering the history of the Wessel Islands in the late 1700s or the 1800s, when the coins appear to have been deposited, is the devastation of the Yolngu clans that took place at this time. Campbell (2002), in her book 'Invisible Invaders', has documented the spread of small pox from Makassar to Australia; and there was no place harder hit than the Wessels. Yolngu oral history describes a terrible scratching sickness that eventually led to the complete depopulation of the Wessels chain and the destruction of many clans whose traditional lands these were.

The mid-1800s, when Buthimang was living on the Wessels was a time of enormous transition. Death is for the Yolngu is always attributable to some cause. It is rarely considered natural, except in the case of the very elderly. However, even then, accusations might arise about the sinister influence of some miscreant or sorcerer from a neighbouring island. Buthimang himself may have been a carrier of this disease, or have had immunity, which might easily have given rise to suspicion or even hatred of him.

My source for information on the life and death of Buthimang was the late David Burrumarra M.B.E, one the last great leaders of Arnhem Land. (McIntosh 1994) His traditional lands included the Wessel Islands, his mother being the last surviving member of the clan from Rraragala Island. Burrumarra did not know a lot about Buthimang other than a few key details, such as the fact that he was a survivor of a shipwreck and that he lived with the Yolngu of the Wessels for the remainder of what appears to have been a long life.

According to Campbell Macknight, the foremost authority on the history of contact between Aborigines and the fishermen of Makassar, the name Buthimang is derived from the Javanese (rather than the Makassar) name Budiman. In his text *The Voyage to Marege*, Macknight identifies a captain called Boodieman from the records of a 1829 voyage to Arnhem Land. The name is also a regular adjective meaning wise, prudent or sensible. It is most probable that there were a number of

trepangers with this name on the Australian coast over the duration of the trade.

There are many shipwreck stories in Yolngu oral history, involving both outsiders and Yolngu. In the 1930s, one Warramiri clan member, a relative of Burrumarra, capsized his sailing canoe off Arnhem Land and survived when the tides carried him to the distant Timorese shore. He ended up in a small village where he married a Timorese woman and raised a large family. These were the days before passports. Even if he could communicate in the local language, the country of his origin, 'Australia', was probably not a word in his vocabulary. He knew no English; only the scattered few Malay words gleaned from his earlier contact with the Makassar fishermen would have enabled him to survive.

Buthimang, likewise, would have relied initially on the Malay/Makassar trading languages in order to get by in his early years on the Wessels. However, while he was adopted into a Yolngu clan, the Golpa, he did not marry a Yolngu woman and had no children, which may have been one reason for his long life. Other outsiders from later periods who interfered with the Yolngu women, were very quickly dispatched. Japanese pearlers in the 1930s, for example, were often attacked and killed, most notably in Caledon Bay, but also on the Wessels (McIntosh 1994). There were many women that Buthimang would have called 'wife' through the Yolngu kinship system and many others who called him father, brother or son, and so on. By all accounts, he was an integral part of the Jensen Bay Yolngu community.

David Burrumarra also knew that Buthimang did not return to Makassar or other Asian ports, even though he probably had ample opportunity to do so. At that time, many Yolngu would make the journey to Makassar with the trepang fishermen. It was not unusual for Makassar crew members to die en route to Australia or Makassar, either lost overboard in storms, or killed in disputes along the coast, so often Yolngu were welcomed aboard in their stead. At the end of the trepang industry in 1907, there were several Aborigines still living in Makassar, but their fate remains unknown.

Buthimang was an exemplary character according to Burrumarra. He was well-liked, to the extent that his name has been handed down through the generations to the present. A member of the Wangurri clan at Elcho Island bears his name today. His father, a man called Batangga, had been a great mediator in the early days of the mission presence in north-east Arnhem Land. Batangga was Burrumarra's older brother, and he speculated that by giving his son the name of Buthimang, he was perhaps sending a message that his Indonesian predecessor from the Wessels possessed these same skills in mediation, a quality that he wanted to see in his new child.

Buthimang is also remembered for the whale songs that he wrote and performed around the campfires on Marchinbar Island. I learned from the contemporary (Yolngu) Buthimang that these songs were still known and sung in the 1980s, more than a hundred years on, when I lived at Elcho Island.

As I mentioned, Buthimang's fate is inseparable from the events unfolding as a consequence of the spread of small pox throughout north-east Arnhem Land. There would have been a growing sense of desperation among the Yolngu who were powerless to effect any stay on its advance. People were increasingly facing a dilemma; their desire for the new was irreversible, even while it seemed to be killing them.

In this period of chaos, there was a lingering question about Buthimang's position within Yolngu society. Was he really a friend or was he the source of the curse afflicting the people and therefore a foe? The word 'Yolngu' means Aboriginal, but at a deeper level, it also means a person who respects and follows Aboriginal law and customs. Buthimang was such a person. He had been adopted into the Golpa clan even if he took no part in their sacred ceremonies. He knew, at the very least, to stay clear when these were being held. But then people began to ask what would happen when he died. Would he be given the full ceremonial burial of his adopted clan or some variation thereof? In Burrumarra's view, at least one person was not prepared to see him buried in the time-honoured fashion of the Dreaming and that person made a preemptive strike with a spear through Buthimang's heart. In this time of confusion and anguish, Buthimang's body was dumped at sea. There was outrage from Buthimang's Yolngu friends and adopted family, for he was deeply loved. The mourning process continued for weeks. The identity of his killer was never revealed.

By the early twentieth century, the Wessels was a deserted wilderness. And it was a place of taboo – off-limits to all because of the sadness and pain associated with the destruction of Yolngu life. All that remained for related Yolngu clans were the memories of the sacred places and Dreaming 'songlines', including noted rock art sites and megaliths, important places linked to the early Gowa presence, individual and Yolngu names that have been handed down to the present, as well as the stories of life-long friends like Buthimang.

### *Explaining the Coins*

If we consider our initial question of the discovery of rare African coins in terms of a chain of events, then the argument for the involvement of Kilwa traders and also the Portuguese is quite compelling. The Kilwa-Oman-Gudjerat-Malacca-Moluccas sea route was well established by the 1500s, and probably for many hundreds of years

prior to that. With the advent of Makassar trepanging and their trade with China in this sea delicacy beginning in the 1700s, the link between Africa and north Australia does not seem so extraordinary. Indeed, the likelihood of planned or unplanned exploration, visitation or wreckage on the Wessels is easily envisioned.

My personal view, however, is that the Kilwa and Dutch coins were probably introduced by sailors from Makassar to the Wessels in the first wave of trepanging and exploration in the 1780s. They would have been given as gifts to the owners of the fresh water lagoon in Jensen Bay on Marchinbar Island. This place would have been a very desirable rendezvous point for the Makassar fleet, either upon entry to or departing from Arnhem Land. The coins, and whatever other gifts were bestowed upon the Yolngu, may have been perceived as payment for access to their land and resources. The Makassarese would have hoped that it would cement a relationship that would last many years. While it is possible that the coins were gifted by the Portuguese to Yolngu at this very same place, but many years earlier, it seems unlikely given the fact that the coastline is unstable and has changed, even in the sixty plus years since the coins were found during World War 2.

The coins would have had little practical value for the Yolngu. Apart from those who had travelled to Makassar on the sailing ships, their meaning would have been all but incomprehensible, and their utilitarian worth, minimal. Some Yolngu clans with highly developed and extensive bodies of law surrounding the meaning of the presence of outsiders may have placed some special importance on the coins as talisman, or as evidence of the power and influence of the Dutch, who they called *Compania* ('The company' i.e. Dutch East India Company). But the location of the coins does not bear out this hypothesis.

#### *Why Was Buthimang the Recipient of the Coins?*

Did the Yolngu give Buthimang these coins in recognition that to him, and him alone, they had some sort of ritual significance? If the Yolngu believed that such objects were imbued with a power over which they had no ritual authority, they would either dispose of them or try to ensure that they were in the right hands. In the words of old, 'Render under Caesar that which is Caesar's.' In the Yolngu worldview, clans are responsible for maintaining or 'holding up' their unique part of the universe through ceremony and living in a particular way towards the land and sea. Buthimang may have been viewed as a person who also had such a role to play, as the outsider within.

The western coastline of the Wessels is very exposed and cyclones are not uncommon during the dry season. Any structures that the Yolngu might have possessed in the late 1800s when Buthimang lived there

would have been swept away by such a storm. When inclement weather threatened, the Yolngu would take refuge in the caves that surround the fresh water lagoon in Jensen Bay. Buthimang, too, would have lost his shack along with whatever possessions he had not secreted away. Some of these artifacts would be recovered 60 years later when a lone soldier, undertaking routine surveillance at his Wessels outpost, would accidentally come across them on that same creek that Buthimang used to fish.

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The association's President, as elected in 2011 is Dr Tom Bristow, of the University of New England, who has contributed a paper to this present volume of *Australian Folklore*. Email: [tom.bristow@une.edu.au](mailto:tom.bristow@une.edu.au)