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Addressing legacies of colonial dis:connection in Northern Australia

The problem

In 1907, the Australian federal government banned the centuries-long trade of Macassan bêche-de-mer fishermen with the Yolngu clans of what colonial maps called 'Northeast Arnhem Land', thereby enforcing a hard border between Australia and Southeast Asia. Despite this, prewar Northern Australia continued to be a world of fluid interactions across political borders and across the assumed line between land and water. What might it mean for our understanding of Australian and Asian history to foreground the protagonists of such interactions?

Core interest

I examine the watery worlds of bêche-de-mer gathering and pearl-shell diving in coastal Northern Australia from Broome to Darwin to Thursday Island. My particular interest concerns the role Japanese fishermen played in these industries in the wake of the Macassan ban, and the complex relationships they had with First Nations Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. What was the historical significance of these relationships? How have they been remembered – or not – in Northern Australia and Japan?

global dis:connect

While at global dis:connect, I'm writing up the results of the archival and museum research I have carried out in Australia, Japan, Germany and Switzerland, focussing on the bêche-de-mer industry in Cape York from the 1890s to the 1930s. This will be one part of a bigger project investigating the historical significance and the contemporary legacies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagements with Asian fishermen across the institutional and epistemological divides of area studies.

Preliminary results

It's already clear that this research requires a profoundly interdisciplinary research approach: the sources include not just written documents but also works of art, archaeological surveys, anthropological reports, historical photographs, burial sites, oral history interviews and much more. I hope also to capitalise on collaborations between contemporary artists on the one hand and museum and archival curators on the other, as one example of what it means to intervene in the writing of contemporary history.

