



The Ancient African Coins of Arnhem Land

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Indigenous knowledge is informing a scientific expedition that hopes to uncover the origins of medieval African coins that may have been left in Arnhem Land hundreds of years before the arrival of Cook.

I first learned about the Kilwa coins in the late 1980s when I lived on the Yolngu community of Elcho Island in north-east Arnhem Land. I was working closely with the traditional owner of the Wessel Islands, the late David Burrumarra MBE, on issues of social justice, sea rights and reconciliation. Burrumarra and I even toyed with the idea of mounting an expedition to try and solve the mystery of how ancient coins from East Africa ended up in his homeland more than 8000 km away.

Burrumarra, the leader of the Warramiri–Golpa clan, had spoken at length to me about the history of Yolngu connections with the wider world. The north-east Arnhem Land coast is alive with references to past contacts. He would describe, for example, how at “the beginning of time” a harpooned whale had dragged a large sailing canoe filled with black men onto the Australian coast. I wondered to myself if there was any trace in the land or seascape to mark this historic occasion.

He would speak about a beach where “men with hats of mirror” had come ashore on the Wessel Islands, a possible reference to armoured outsiders. Were they the Portuguese freebooters who had looted and burned Kilwa, an island off the coast of Tanzania, in 1505?

Among the most fascinating stories were those of the flying

fox people who, in partnership with Yolngu, had made boats from local timber and iron implements from ironstone outcrops along the Wessels coast. Anchors, knives and axes were among the tools made, and these feature prominently in the mythology, songs and ceremonies of many Yolngu clans.

Australian Aboriginal history contains many references to how early settlers and explorers were considered to be the ghosts of the dead. This was also the case in Arnhem Land. The small red flying fox, known as the *Matjurr*, gathers by the tens of thousands in the paperbark forests and jungles of the Wessel Islands each year. Then, after feasting on gum blossoms for a month or so, they head north towards New Guinea, never to return.

According to the Yolngu, the *Matjurr* are travelling to the land of the dead where they “get fat”. The very next year another batch of flying foxes will arrive and prepare for departure from the known world to a mysterious paradise in the north.

The very first white people on the coast were identified in Yolngu sign language by the hand signal of arms crossed over the chest – the same sign for the *Matjurr*. The implication was that the deceased, in the form of these white apparitions, had come back to life. Their purpose was unknown.

The academic study of myth and history is well advanced, and



Ian McIntosh inspects layers of rock art, from traditional totemic images to introduced themes of boats and sailors, in the Elder Cave on Marchinbar Island.

both Burrumarra and I understood that making definitive statements about what actually transpired was problematic. Arnhem Land, however, provides us with a unique opportunity for showing how Yolngu negotiated the presence of others on Australian soil over many generations.

My interest in the Kilwa coin mystery was reignited during my presentation at a conference at the Australian National University on Macassan heritage and history. Trepang (sea cucumber) fishermen from Makassar in Sulawesi frequented the northern Australian coast on a seasonal basis for 150 years or more from the mid-1700s, but Yolngu mythology and oral history also refers to extended contact with pre-Macassans. I wondered if there might have been a Kilwa connection.

I had originally believed that the coins were a talisman or lucky charm carried by Indonesian sailors who had interacted with the Yolngu, although I was open to the idea that many

vital part of the war effort.

The Kilwa coins found on the Wessel Islands are an archaeological conundrum. Kilwa coins have only been found in two regions beyond the immediate vicinity of their place of manufacture in East Africa: one in the ruins of Great Zimbabwe and one in the Dhofar region of Oman on the Arabian Peninsula. Dutch coins, in contrast, have been found all along the Arnhem Land coast, usually in association with the Macassan trepang camps.

The traditional Aboriginal owners of the Wessel Islands, the Warramiri–Golpa clan, are strong supporters of a view of the past that links them to the multifarious peoples of the Indian Ocean. According to Burrumarra’s son, clan elder Terry Yumbulul, the Yolngu are guided in their reflections about ancient contacts by their oral history, sacred mythology and geographical place names. The 130 km-long wall of sandstone known as the Wessel Islands contains hundreds, if not thousands, of sites that speak to them of foreign exchanges through centuries.

In July 2013 I led an expedition to shed light on the African coin puzzle. Did the coins implicate Australia’s Aboriginal peoples in the Maritime Silk Route, an ancient Indian Ocean trading network that linked such exotic ports as Kilwa and Zanzibar in East Africa with Arabia, Persia, India, China and Indonesia?

Our party included a range of experts in archaeology (Mike Hermes), numismatics (Peter Lane), historic heritage (Mike Owen), heritage detection (Bob Sheppard) and



Ian McIntosh and Mike Hermes with members of Norforce during a training session on the use of metal detectors at a Macassan trepang site.

geomorphology (Tim Stone). A non-traveling team including Terry Yumbulul and his wife Clely, a researcher (Sandy Horne), Kilwa coin expert (John Perkins) and a second numismatist (Bill Mira) provided invaluable backup. This formidable group we called the “Past Masters”. We had a short list of places to explore, none of which was more important than the beach where the coins were found.

The first objective of our expedition was to train Yolngu sea rangers and Norforce, a surveillance and reconnaissance army unit, in heritage detection and conservation. These are the young men and women who manage the north Australian coastline on a daily basis. We wanted to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to make the types of discoveries that really could lead to a reconsideration of Australia’s past.

Next we had to locate the site where the Kilwa coins were found, which Isenberg identified with an “X” on a World War 2 survey map. The key to making sense of the map was locating Isenberg’s camp and radar base, but this was no easy task because repeated Japanese bombings had led to the base being relocated on at least one occasion. After a painstaking search, we believed we could confirm the accuracy of Isenberg’s recollections and also his map annotations.

It appeared that the coins were found at a place known by Yolngu as Djinnan. The Yolngu used to live well above the crocodile-infested waters of the mangrove-lined creek on the large open sand hills. We completed a very thorough survey of the site but did not find any more coins, so the search continues.

As archaeologist Mike Hermes remarked: “We got to know every rock, tree and green ant in the entire area”. Equipped with an underwater metal detector, Mike also walked knee-deep in water along the length of the creek while other team members kept watch with spears in hand for any signs of danger.

The presumed coin find site is partly covered in a dense mangrove forest and is littered with flotsam and jetsam. Some team members believe that the coins came from one or more shipwrecks and were washed up on the beach, where they were stranded. Others believe that the coins were in the possession of a single person, either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, who lost them while passing through Djinnan.

The explanation I favour is that the coins were the private property and worldly wealth of the Indonesian shipwreck survivor Budiman, who lived out his life on the Wessel Islands in the late 1800s close to where the coins were found. A close friend of the Yolngu, Budiman is remembered very fondly even



Yolngu art on the Wessel Islands reflects generations of contact with non-Aboriginal people, and may provide vital clues about the origins of the Kilwa coins, which were found adjacent to a cave containing this image of a boat.

today. His name has been handed down through the generations, and the songs he composed and the words that he used for certain sacred totems like the whale, were still known by Yolngu when I was at Elcho Island.

We did not have to look far to find actual evidence of visiting mariners. The Yolngu themselves had recorded their exchanges in the many rock art galleries of the island chain. Among the vast number of red, yellow and white images of snakes, whales, crocodiles, bandicoots and more obscure totemic designs are paintings of waves of foreign ships and their crews, including men with yellow trousers and wide-brimmed hats who were either carrying guns or with arms akimbo. I know of only a handful of sites in Australia like this, but none as impressive.

The idea, then, that Australia lay isolated in the great southern ocean, hidden from the rest of the world until Europeans could liberate the continent from its seclusion, is a relic of the mindset that perpetrated, and still perpetuates, the myth of *terra nullius*. With the Kilwa coins, we have potential evidence of much earlier contacts that challenge the Captain Cook-centred view of Australian history that prioritises English and some Dutch discoveries.

Our second Wessel Islands expedition, planned for the middle of this year, aims to interrogate the unique rock art and explore for possible shipwrecks. The Yolngu of Arnhem Land have an inspiring past that we hope to showcase by working hand-in-hand with the traditional owners, sea rangers, and our team of experts and enthusiasts.

The mystery of the Kilwa coins is simply one among many that we hope to resolve.

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