

RECONSIDERING POSSIBLE MACASSAN PRAYER STRUCTURES IN NORTHERN AUSTRALIA: PORT ESSINGTON AND RAFFLES BAY

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Abstract: The pre- and early colonial makeshift mosques on the periphery of northern Australia represent a novel subject. They are part of a lost Islamic tradition within ancient Aboriginal lands. These makeshift mosques could only have existed through the presence of Muslims, for whom mosque construction was a fundamental requirement for communal worship. In Islam, building a mosque is considered a highly meritorious act. Tracing the cross-cultural history of the First Nations peoples and the early Macassan settlers, this research provides valuable context for understanding the now-vanished makeshift mosques in Australia. Initially, Islam in Australia was facilitated by Macassan traders and Sufis. This study focuses on the sacred buildings by analysing architectural literature, comparing makeshift mosques with regional counterparts and early church buildings, considering the work of skilled Macassan builders, reviewing early colonial paintings, a Yolngu sketch of a makeshift mosque, Yolngu-Macassan narratives regarding Macassan huts and shelters, other Aboriginal and Javanese remarks, and reports of the old Javanese bamboo-bush mosque in Mackay. Collectively, these sources suggest the possibility that Macassans used temporary prayer structures or adapted communal spaces for worship in northern Australia. This article highlights the often-overlooked makeshift mosques in Port Essington and Raffles Bay, aiming to preserve their legacy within Australian history.

Keywords: *mosque, makeshift, huts, Macassans, builders*

INTRODUCTION

By the late 15th century, the influence of the golden age of Islamic civilisation extended across all continents, lending support to claims of an early Islamic presence in Australia. The process of Islamisation among the lowland populations, particularly “Macassan” (Makassan) fishermen and traders from Sulawesi, began in the 13th century, preceding its acceptance by local rulers.¹ In addition to Macassan seafarers, other groups from the Indonesian

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¹ Nurhayati Abd Rasyid and Nurdin Nurdin, “The Diaspora of the Sufis in Indonesia: Moving from Western to Eastern Islands,” *International Journal of History and Philosophical Research* 9, no. 1 (2021): 39; Khairudin Aljunied, *Hamka and Islam: Cosmopolitan Reform in the Malay World* (Cornell University

Archipelago, such as the Bugis, Bajinis, Bajo, Malays, and Javanese, also regularly visited northern Australia. Collectively, these groups were referred to as “Macassans.”²

The earliest documented presence of Islamic peoples on the Australian coast is associated with the trepanging era.³ The estimated timeline of Macassan arrivals continues to evolve as new research and hypotheses emerge. Mulvaney and Kamminga,⁴ and Clarke indicate Aboriginal and Southeast Asian contacts in the 12th century.⁵ Macknight asserts Macassan arrivals from the mid-18th century, suggesting the possibility of earlier contact.⁶ Cole places the arrival in the 17th century;⁷ Taçon et al. identify 1664 as the year of arrival;⁸ McIntosh gives the 17th century or earlier;⁹ and Ganter also posits a mid-17th century or earlier date.¹⁰ Similarly, Wesley et al. propose an arrival period prior to the mid-17th century.¹¹ Darling claims a 400-year history of arrivals;¹² Bolton claims they began at the beginning of the 16th century;¹³ Rogers suggests they occurred as early as the 1500s;¹⁴ and Haveric considers a 500-year timeframe.¹⁵ Determining the earliest arrival of Macassan Muslims in Australia also requires an understanding of the Golden Age of Islamic civilisation, which lasted until the 15th century and, in various respects, influenced regions worldwide.¹⁶

Press, 2018), 112; William Cummings, *A Chain of Kings: The Makassarese Chronicles of Gowa and Talloq* (KITLV Press, 2007), 7.

² Charles Campbell Macknight, *The Voyage to Marege: Macassan Trepangers in Northern Australia* (Melbourne University Press, 1976), 18.

³ Ronald Murray Berndt and Catherine Helen Berndt, *Arnhem Land: Its History and its People* (F. W. Cheshire, 1954), cited in Ian McIntosh, “Can we be Equal in your Eyes?” A Perspective on Reconciliation from Northeast Arnhem Land” (PhD diss., Northern Territory University, 1996), 215.

⁴ John Mulvaney and Johan Kamminga, *Prehistory of Australia* (Smithsonian Institution Press in association with Allen and Unwin, 1999), 420–21.

⁵ Alexandre Lee, “The Macassan–Aboriginal Relationship and the Commonwealth of Australia 1901–1906,” *History Australia* 22, no. 1 (2025): 66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2024.2401562>.

⁶ Macknight, *The Voyage to Marege*.

⁷ Keith Cole, *Arnhem Land: Places and People* (Rigby, 1980).

⁸ Paul Taçon et al., “A Minimum Age for Early Depictions of Southeast Praus,” in *At the Margins: Archaeological Evidence for Macassan Activities in the South Wellesley Islands, Gulf of Carpentaria*, ed. Annette Oertle et al. (Australasian Historical Archaeology, 2014).

⁹ Ian McIntosh, “The Ship’s Mast. The Legacy of the Macassan Presence in Northern Australia,” *The Beagle: Records of the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory* 15 (1999): 157, <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.320161>.

¹⁰ Regina Ganter, *Mixed Relations: Asian-Aboriginal Contact in North Australia* (University of Western Australia Press, 2006), 6–7; Regina Ganter, “Histories with Traction: Macassan Contact in the Framework of Muslim Australian History,” in *Macassan History and Heritage Journeys, Encounters and Influences*, ed. Marshall Clark and Sally K. May (ANU Press, 2013), 57.

¹¹ Daryl Wesley et al., “Re-evaluating the Timing of the Indonesian Trepang Industry in North-West Arnhem Land: Chronological Investigations at Malara (AnuruBay A),” *Archaeology in Oceania* 51, no. 3 (2016).

¹² Cited in Regina Ganter, “Muslim Australians: The Deep Histories of Contact,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 32, no. 4 (2008).

¹³ Geoffrey Curguenven Bolton, *A Thousand Miles Away: A History of North Queensland to 1920* (Jacaranda Press, 1963).

¹⁴ Janak Rogers, “When Islam came to Australia,” *BBC News*, June 24, 2014. Accessed March 20, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27260027>.

¹⁵ Dzavid Haveric, *History of Islam and Muslims in Australia: Early Encounters, Settlements and Communities prior to the mid-1940s* (Lambert Academic Publishing, 2019), 17.

¹⁶ Dzavid Haveric, *History of the Muslim Discovery of the World: Islamic Civilisation within the Plurality of Civilisations* (Deakin University Printing Service, 2012).

Today, Macassans and Yolngu people commemorate a 500-year joint history that began in the 15th century.¹⁷ The era characterised by trepang trade and maritime voyages from Macassar to northern Australia is often referred to as a “golden era;”¹⁸ however, it represents a frequently neglected chapter in history that includes the possibility of Macassan prayer structures in Australia.

Mosques, as the central role of Islamic life, became significant landmarks for Islam, which emphasises their significance as places of worship and community. The architecture of mosques across Islamic civilisations is “deeply shaped by the religious beliefs, cultural norms, and social customs of each society.”¹⁹ They have exhibited a rich variety of styles – from early “prototypes” modelled on the Prophet’s mosque in Medina to distinct architectural traditions such as the Moroccan and Andalusian architectural design. Mosque construction development since the time of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ has changed.²⁰ A *hadith* of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ highlights the structure’s temporary nature:

The columns were of palm-trunks and the roof of palm-fronds. And it was said to him [the Prophet], “Why do you not roof it [i.e., properly]?” And he said, “It is a booth like the booth of Moses made of twigs and grass; the affair [i.e., the end of the world] will happen sooner than that.”²¹

This statement affirms the perishability of wood and thatch as a “deliberate and positive value, one that acknowledges the transience of this life and its trials.”²² An initial viewpoint in Islam is: “All the earth is a place of prostration and a means of purification, so wherever a man of my *Ummah* is when the time for prayer comes, let him pray.”²³

Throughout history, there are countless examples of makeshift mosques across the globe. For instance, the holy city of Jerusalem witnessed one of the most impressive early adaptations of any city settled by Middle Eastern Muslims. When Aelia (centred around Jerusalem) capitulated to the Muslims in 638, a “makeshift mosque” quickly replaced the Herodian Temple. Shortly thereafter, the Dome of the Rock was erected.²⁴ The first Persian mosques were “makeshift in quality and only attempted on small scales, not being considered

¹⁷ Dzavid Haveric, “Macassan Muslims and Aboriginal Australians: Cultural and Spiritual Encounters,” *Religions* 17, No. 4 (2026): 15.

¹⁸ McIntosh, “The Ship’s Mast,” 157.

¹⁹ Mohamed Tribak and Mekki Klaina, “Islamic Architecture between Civilizational Constants and External Influences: An Analytical Study of Environmental, Social, and Historical Dimensions,” *International Journal of Education Culture and Society* 3, no. 3 (2025): 732.

²⁰ Azizi Bahaiddin and Hakimi Ahmad, “Sufism in the Architectural Typology of the Melaka Tengkeri Mosque, Malaysia,” *Islamic Heritage Architecture and Art II* 177 (2018): 161, <https://doi.org/10.2495/IHA180131>.

²¹ Kenneth Hayes, “The Wooden Hypostyle Mosques of Anatolia Mosque – And State-Building Under Mongol Suzerainty” (PhD diss., Middle East Technical University, 2010), 17.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ahmad an-Nasa’i, *Sunan an-Nasa’i*, vol. 1, book 8, hadith 737, accessed September 26, 2026, <https://sunnah.com/nasai:736>. Grade: *sahih* (Darussalam).

²⁴ Aaron Hughes, “Book Review: The Places Where Men Pray Together: Cities in Islamic Lands, Seventh through the Tenth Centuries,” *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, September 12, 2001, <https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2001/2001.09.12/>.

for large construction.”²⁵ The first Turkish Muslim worship took place in “simple enclosures or in structures made of wood.”²⁶ In the Swahili town of Shanga, Kenya, a small wooden mosque was built in the 9th century. The early site was determined by holes in the ground where posts had been pounded in.²⁷

Therefore, it can be assumed that the Muslims who settled in pre-colonial Australia would have been interested in building makeshift mosques to serve their ritual needs. The existence of a mosque should be considered a “central manifestation” of Muslims, including the Macassans’ spiritual lives.²⁸ Such humble buildings were also relatively short-term Macassan arrangements in the absence of long-term settlements.²⁹

A widely held scholarly view is exemplified by Bowker in a popular media of *The Conversation*, who asserts that “no Macassan mosques are known to have been built in Australia” and “the *adhan* also left no trace upon the soil...”³⁰ The absence of surviving evidence does not necessarily preclude the existence of temporary prayer structures. In northern Australia, the Macassan and Javanese call for prayer was heard by Aboriginals and this is evident in their prayer rituals.³¹ Underabi also believes, despite being Muslims, the Macassan did not build mosques where they stayed due to the temporary nature of their visits.³² This statement lacks facts about the nature of a makeshift mosque.

It is beyond the “standard” cliché to consider that the first mosques were built only from the end of the 19th century by Afghans and Indians. Saad asserts that, in the 1930s, “the first mosque built by the Malay community in Australia was in Broome, Western Australia.”³³ However, a notable example of a “Javanese-style mosque out of grass and bamboo” constructed within the sugarcane fields of Mackay, during the 1880s, is also forgotten.³⁴

²⁵ Rana AlKadi, “The Origin of the Islamic Ribbed Vault Located in North Africa and Spain” (PhD diss., Universidad Politecnica de Madrid, 2016), 209, accessed March 5, 2025, https://oa.upm.es/47687/3/RANA_ALKADI_02.pdf.

²⁶ Ibid., 38.

²⁷ “Shanga,” Nabataea.net, n.d., accessed August 12, 2024, https://nabataea.net/explore/cities_and_sites/shanga/.

²⁸ Johan Pattiasina et al., “The Existence of the Wapauwe Old Mosque in Kaitetu as a Trace of Islam Spread in Maluku.” *Jurnal Lektur Keagamaan* 20, no. 2 (2022): 356, accessed July 6, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.31291/jlka.v20i2.1067>.

²⁹ Rhys Dafydd Jones, “The Makeshift and the Contingent: Lefebvre and the Production of Precarious Sacred Space,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37, no. 1 (2019): 1, accessed February 1, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775818806513>.

³⁰ Sam Bowker, “Friday Essay: The Australian Mosque,” *The Conversation*, September 23, 2016, accessed May 4, 2024, <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-the-australian-mosque-65101>.

³¹ Lloyd William Warner, *A Black Civilization: A Social Study of an Australian Tribe* (P. Smith, 1969); Ian McIntosh, “Islam and Australia’s Aborigines,” in *Aboriginal Religions in Australia: An Anthology of Recent Writings*, ed. M. J. Charlesworth, Françoise Dussart, and Howard Morphy (Routledge, 2017).

³² Husnia Underabi, “Mosque Sermons and Audience Receptivity” (PhD diss., Western Sydney University, 2018), 37.

³³ Qassim Saad, “Perth Mosque: A Cultural Structure Strengthening Collective Identity,” *Garland Magazine*, March 12, 2018, accessed May 4, 2025, <https://garlandmag.com/article/perth-mosque/>.

³⁴ Ursula de Jong and David Beynon, “Non-Christian Religious Architecture,” in *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, ed. Philip Goad and Julie Willis (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 498.

The architectural characteristics of mosques vary across these regions, which is mostly due to climatic conditions or inspired by regional, traditional and cultural influences.³⁵ Tropical climate and cultural encounters shape economic and spiritual life. It had been said that “every race adapted an Islam according to its own character.”³⁶ Just as the spread of Islam across a broad geography guaranteed regional variations in Islamic architecture over time, so too are geographical, spiritual and symbolic references at play in mosque construction in Australia.³⁷ In particular, contingent and makeshift sacred spaces bring more nuanced and complex understandings of the intertwining of sacral formations.³⁸

Makeshift sacred spaces provide insights for geographical studies of religion.³⁹ However, most of the existing scholarship omits this essential dimension of Islamic studies and civilisation. The possibility of Macassan makeshift prayer structures has received little attention in Australian scholarship. This absence can be attributed to prevailing non-Islamic misperceptions about these architectural traditions or limited scholarly attention from Muslim scholars regarding this overlooked aspect of Islam in Australia. However, the significance of the mosque is rooted in its position within a transnational religious and geographic narrative.⁴⁰

Understanding the diversity of sacred spaces, particularly those on the geographical margins of northern Australia, is essential.⁴¹ Makassar’s trade and cultural interactions with Australian Aboriginals can be described as a “creative renaissance” in terms of recognised culture and art and forgotten Macassan vernacular architecture in Australia.

METHODOLOGY

Any attempt to evaluate the novelty of a historical phenomenon of the earliest mosques in Australia’s north must also examine the architectural, environmental, cultural and spiritual systems from which it emerged.⁴² Based on this statement, this research considered the questions: Could Macassan Muslims have built mosques on the Australian islands and coastline where they settled for centuries? Were makeshift mosques also known in the nearby region of the pre-colonial or early colonial eras? Should the prayer to Allah have been heard only under the open sky? Did the early construction have to be made of only mud, bricks and solid wood?

³⁵ Hussain et al., “The Mosque’s Primary Spaces and Required Direction of the Mosque Building,” *Journal of Islamic Architecture* 7, no. 4 (2023): 719.

³⁶ Feliks Koneczny, *On the Plurality of Civilisations* (Polonica Publication, 1962), 268.

³⁷ Jessica Harris, “Tradition, Identity and Adaptation: Mosque Architecture in SouthEast Queensland” (paper presented at the Thirtieth Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand, 2013), 343.

³⁸ Jones, “The Makeshift and the Contingent,” 1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁰ Ron Geaves, “Mosque Building and Sufism,” in *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (Routledge, 2020), https://ebrary.net/261646/education/mosque_building_sufism.

⁴¹ Jones, “The Makeshift and the Contingent,” 177.

⁴² Hayes, “The Wooden Hypostyle Mosques of Anatolia Mosque,” 28.

This article is primarily written from a historical perspective, not an archaeological one, although it incorporates archaeological and anthropological evidence along social-religious discussions. It uses a “wide range of materials beyond mere textual documents.”⁴³ Since it is not feasible for archaeologists to excavate “slab construction of bush and bamboo” structures built centuries ago, this article fills the gap from a historical perspective, as “history seeks to generate and improve scientific knowledge where current science itself fails to do so.”⁴⁴

This study contributes to the field by expanding and re-examining the significance of the earliest vanished prayer structures in northern Australia and their similarities with those in adjacent regions. Addressing questions regarding Macassan vanished mosques in northern Australia is a complex task; as Ibn Khaldun, a prominent Islamic scholar, observed, “many an operation with numbers, which are the clearest things in the world, is difficult to grasp.”⁴⁵ The article acknowledges the importance of Aboriginal knowledge, which highlights distinctive approaches to interpreting the landscape and its features. Drawing on available data, it is possible to generate “scaled drawings of the houses and their tectonics,” thereby facilitating a more comprehensive analysis of Macassan architecture.⁴⁶ Furthermore, it is essential to recognise that architectural solutions often emerge not only from technical or physical requirements but also from “a human desire and need to form space, to respond to social expectations,” including religious practices.⁴⁷

Given the subject’s historical significance and potential for new revelations to introduce uncertainty or bias, a relevant methodology is adopted. The central theme of the “makeshift mosque” guides the narrative, implicitly and explicitly, thereby unifying the account and conveying its significance.⁴⁸ The collected qualitative data was analysed through the interpretation and comparison of makeshift mosques in the region with those in Australia, and by adding early examples of makeshift churches. The research conducted a literature review on early mosque architecture, compiled puzzles of relevant data and included oral stories from Yolngu and Macassans to foster a deeper historical understanding.⁴⁹ Consultations with Javanese informants and examination of old newspaper articles support the “prioritisation of storytelling by blending traditional formats with engaging narratives.”⁵⁰

Images embedded within the text are valuable evidence for comparative analysis, functioning as important historical records that reveal the decisions of individuals and

⁴³ Zachary Schrag, *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

⁴⁴ Oscar Moro Abadía, “Rewriting the Past for the Changing Present: The Need for New and Pluriversal Histories of Archaeology,” *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology* 33, no. 1 (2023): 3, <https://doi.org/10.5334/bha-675>.

⁴⁵ Abd Ar Rahman bin Muhammed ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, accessed March 3, 2026, [https://archive.org/stream/IbnKhaldunsHistoryofMuqaddimah/Ibn%20khaldun's%20History%20\(al-muqaddimah\)_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/IbnKhaldunsHistoryofMuqaddimah/Ibn%20khaldun's%20History%20(al-muqaddimah)_djvu.txt).

⁴⁶ Irene Doubrava and Gábor Ferenc Zámolyi, “Documenting the Past –Transformation and Change in South Sulawesi Architecture,” *Archiv für Völkerkunde* 57/58 (2008): 188.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 188–89.

⁴⁸ Schrag, *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research*.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

societies. Analysis of these images enables exploration of deeper meanings and contexts.⁵¹ This primary source represents more than artwork.⁵² Empirical investigation and comparative analysis substantiate the findings by providing data that challenges probabilistic inference. However, it is recognised that “no single method exists” to locate every necessary aspect.⁵³

This article does not claim definitive archaeological proof of Macassan mosques in northern Australia. Rather, it advances a historical interpretation of Macassan mosques based on converging evidence from comparative architecture, colonial visual records, oral testimony, and documented Islamic practices among Macassan communities. The argument is therefore interpretive rather than conclusive.

MOSQUE AND LIGHT CONSTRUCTIONS

In Islam, makeshift and permanent mosques are an architectural reality and part of its diversity. A permanent mosque is separated into distinct sections: prayer niche (*mihrab*) facing Mecca, the prayer space (*musalla*), the pulpit (*minbar*), and an area for performing ablution (*wudu*).⁵⁴ Many have one or more tall slender towers (*minarets*) and domes (*qubba*). Each space has a designated function and cannot be used for additional purposes.⁵⁵ This standard mosque differs from the makeshift mosques built by Sufis, who were among the first to introduce purpose-built prayer houses. Sufism exerted a greater imprint on mosque construction than any other influence.⁵⁶ They were mosque builders who were “the first to seek authentic materials from the Muslim world.”⁵⁷ They adapted “pre-Islamic forms in constructing their first house of prayer or mosques.”⁵⁸

The following building styles and contents illustrate the characteristics of Macassan makeshift mosques in northern Australia. Starting with the arrival of Islam in the Malay world, *surau* became critical social structures. In contemporary usage, *surau* refers to a small mosque, a “smaller physical structure,” “small village mosque” or “designated room.” The *surau* holds a significant role and established position within society,⁵⁹ serving as the primary venue for activities such as sleeping, praying, studying, reading the Qur’an and reciting.⁶⁰

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² “Victoria’s Early Colonial History, 1803-1851,” State Library Victoria, April 29, 2026, <https://guides.slv.vic.gov.au/Victoriasearlyhistory/primarysources>.

⁵³ Schrag, *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research*.

⁵⁴ Hussain et al., “The Mosque’s Primary Spaces,” 720.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 733.

⁵⁶ Bahauddin and Ahmad, “Sufism in the Architectural Typology,” 161.

⁵⁷ Geaves, “Mosque Building and Sufism.”

⁵⁸ Norwina Mohd Nawawi et al. “Mosque Forms as Signification–Multiculturalism and the Role of the Modernist Language in Mosque Architecture,” *Australian Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences* 10, no. 7 (2016): 137.

⁵⁹ M. H. D. Natsir and Achmad Hufad, “The Function of Surau in Minangkabau Culture,” *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 214 (2018): 123, accessed March 4, 2025, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2991/ices-18.2019.29>.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 122–23.

The term *surau* is generally applied to a mosque raised above the ground on posts and used for daily individual and group prayer as opposed to Friday community worship.⁶¹

Furthermore, the bamboo makeshift mosque, often called *langgar* in Makassar, erected by Sufis exhibits simplicity, smallness, symbolism, and accessibility for prayer, study, and community events.⁶² The floor of the prayer hall is slightly higher than the porch. The arrangement of these supports is also symbolic.⁶³ In its interior, on the west wall, was the *mihrab* indicating the direction of Mecca.⁶⁴ Modest Javanese houses were adapted to mosques and later for social activities.⁶⁵ Others are “square, have a pyramidal roof, and are constructed around a group of four pillars.”⁶⁶ The makeshift building in the form of *rumah panjang* (long house) functioned a spiritual sanctuary where “rituals are performed, connecting the community with their ancestors and the divine, ensuring the spiritual health and prosperity.” Its *ruai* (long corridor) provided a daily space for “weaving and crafting to celebrating festivals and hosting guests, embodying the communal spirit.”⁶⁷

The makeshift mosque is a reminder of the time when the White Australia Policy banned the arrival of Macassans and Javanese to Australia in 1906/7. Macassan huts or houses and makeshift mosques had similarities with the earliest light construction of bush huts, houses or churches of colonial times. On the way to Australia, Captain James Cook saw many “structures having a grass thatch.”⁶⁸ The bush hut also became “one of the most successful of colonial innovations.”⁶⁹ The first church in Australia, the Church of England in Sydney Cove, Circular Quay, was a humble place of worship opened for services in 1793. The edifice was constructed of wattle and daub with a thatched roof. It did not survive due to a fire; however, the reverend, his first church and his labours “deserve to be held in lasting honour.”⁷⁰

Bouma notes that the “pattern of mosque development is similar to the evolution observed in certain Christian churches.”⁷¹ In both contexts, missionaries initially constructed places of worship in the form of makeshift houses. For instance, in Arnhem land, symbolic representations of Aboriginal religion were moving into the Christian churches at Mililingimbi

⁶¹ Wayne Bougas, “Surau Aur: Patani Oldest Mosque,” *Archipel* 43 (1992): 90–92, accessed November 11, 2024, https://www.persee.fr/doc/arch_0044-8613_1992_num_43_1_2808#.

⁶² Achmad Ubaedillah, “The Khalwatiyah Samman Sufi Order in South Sulawesi: Encountering the Local, Escaping the Global” (PhD diss., University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, 2011), 164.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ NST Regional, “The Tradition of Longhouse living in Sarawak,” *New Straits Times*, March 21, 2024, accessed February 10, 2026, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2024/03/1028745/tradition-longhouse-living-sarawak>.

⁶⁸ Thatchinginfo.com, “Thatching in Australia, New Zealand & the Islands of the Pacific: The Craft in Australasia, Melanesia, Micronesia & Polynesia; until c1930,” accessed February 8, 2025, <https://thatchinginfo.com/thatching-australia-new-zealand-oceania/>.

⁶⁹ Ray Kerkhove and Cathy Keys, “Australian Settler Bush Huts and Indigenous Bark-Strippers: Origins and Influences,” *Queensland Review* 27, no. 1 (2020): 2.

⁷⁰ “Australia’s First Church,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 21, 1909, 11.

⁷¹ Gary D. Bouma, *Mosques and Muslim Settlement in Australia* (Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994), 65.

and Elcho Island in “the form of Aboriginal design.”⁷² Other accounts note the existence of makeshift churches, such as “a bush church destroyed by cyclone in Eastern Arnhem Land,”⁷³ a bush church in Durrumbunya, Goulburn,⁷⁴ or a little bush church, under gum trees, in the lonely countryside.⁷⁵ There was also a thatched bush church, a building made from superphosphate bags which, owing to stormy weather, was in constant need of repair.⁷⁶ A bush church in a bough shed near Goondiwindi, was depicted in the *Queenslander News Budget* showing religious services, which were held as often as a clergyman was able to be secured for worshippers.⁷⁷ A beautiful poem was also written about the bush church. Despite its modest construction under a thatched roof in a slanted shape covered with bush, it honours the sacredness of the church and respective faith:

The pathway like a silver band leads upward to the church-crowned hill. I watched the children’s bounding grace, as over the hill to mass they came...For all with self-same worship knelt and joined in what can never change...One thing alone on all this earth can suffer neither change nor death...The heavenly gift of priceless worth—our holy, apostolic Faith.⁷⁸

Considering these examples of churches and mosques, there must always be a place that promotes “harmony, peace, and goodwill among people.”⁷⁹ Prophet Mohammad ﷺ emphasised that mosques, regardless of their size, “should be built to represent the greatness of Islam, not only for worship purposes.” He further indicated that mosques should function as educational centres and facilitate various activities.⁸⁰ For Macassans, the mosques were constructed as centres for religious communication and seafaring camps.⁸¹ However, to analyse makeshift mosques in northern Australia, it is first useful to compare the mosques in the nearby region from which they derive.

MAKESHIFT MOSQUES IN THE NEARBY REGION

Examples of Macassan huts in Sulawesi and its surroundings offer a basis for comparative analysis of similar patterns in construction and early Islamic practices observed in Australia. The primary similarity lies in the design of the huts and sheds used for prayer, such as their materials, construction, style, humility, and accessibility.

⁷² Ronald Murray Berndt and Cathrine Helen Berndt, “Body and Soul: More than an Episode!” in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions: Ethnographic and Historical Studies*, ed. Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose, 110–14 (Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1988), 51, <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/AASR/article/view/16615/14035>.

⁷³ “Bush Church Destroyed in Cyclone,” *West Australian*, April 5, 1952, 1.

⁷⁴ “Bush Church,” *Sydney Mail*, July 2, 1924, 21.

⁷⁵ “The Little Bush Church,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 17, 1940, 9.

⁷⁶ “Thatched Bush Church,” *Western Mail*, September 7, 1939, 47.

⁷⁷ “A Bush Church,” *Queenslander News Budget*, 30 September 1911, 16.

⁷⁸ “A Bush Church,” *Advocate*, July 9, 1910, 37.

⁷⁹ Hayder Jawad Shakir Haraty et al., “Transforming Mosques into a Containment Space During Natural Disasters; Browsing Through Recent Publications,” *International Journal of Engineering & Technology* 7, no. 3.7 (2018): 87.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁸¹ Pattiasina et al., “The Existence of the Wapauwe Old Mosque,” 355.

Two makeshift mosques on Aru Island at Dobbo, Indonesia, and on Cocos (Keeling) Island within Australia's territory are useful for comparing mosque styles. The first structure is similar in construction to Port Essington. The second finding likely provides evidence of an old mosque, underscoring its heritage as one of "Australia's oldest Muslim groups."⁸² For both examples, the creative Islamic influence is evident in the usage of makeshift buildings of "Southeast Asian architecture of tropical rural areas for purposes such as temporary shelters, community spaces, prayer, or storage."⁸³



Figure 1. Village on the Aru Island at Dobbo, by British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, 1869

An example of a makeshift mosque is described in 1869 on Aru Island at Dobbo, the Maluku Islands of eastern Indonesia, less than 770km north of Arnhem Land, and its construction is described in a way that could have been found in Australia's Top End. This historical account is supported by a painting of bamboo-bush-palm tree huts, one of which is a makeshift mosque with an imam present (Figure 1). The account notes, "Among the traders was an *imam*, who performed the funerals, which were very simple. The body was wrapped up in new white cotton cloth and was carried on a bier to the grave,"⁸⁴ a ritual introduced in northern Australia. All the viewers sat down on the ground around "the imam who chanted some verses from the Qur'an...the graves were fenced round with a slight bamboo railing, and a little carved wooden head-post was put to mark the spot."⁸⁵ The account also states:

There was also in the village a small mosque, where every Friday the faithful went to pray. This place is probably more remote from Mecca than any other mosque in the world and marks the farthest eastern extension of the "Mahometan" religion [Islam].⁸⁶

⁸² Nicholas Herriman, *The Cocos Malays: Perspectives from Anthropology and History* (Springer, 2022).

⁸³ David Bridgman in Cathy Keys, "House Elevation and the British Military Settlement of Port Essington in Northern Australia," *ABE Journal* 22 (2023), accessed May 4, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.15204>.

⁸⁴ Alfred Russel Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago: The Land of Orang-Utan and the Bird of Paradise* (Macmillan and Co., 1880), 479.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 480.

Not only Java, but also Sulawesi, Sumatra, Borneo and the Aru Islands in the Moluccas, myriad small islands in Timor and the Arafura seas near Australia's top coast were dotted with similar makeshift buildings.



Figure 2. A two-storey building lined with mats on the Cocos Islands, by Syms Covington, 1836

In 1836, while travelling westward from Java, Charles Darwin and the crew of the *HMS Beagle* visited the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, populated by Cocos-Malay Muslims. Darwin's assistant, Syms Covington, made the sketch of a two-storey building with an "external ladder and thatched roof built by the Malays" (Figure 2). It was a large barn-like house open at both ends and "lined with mats," a feature characteristic of a mosque interior.⁸⁷ This artwork and written account appear to indicate the mosque in Cocos (Keeling) Islands. Hunt also identifies several early makeshift mosques on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, constructed with thatched roofs, where Malays observed festivals such as *Selamatan* (thanksgiving feast) and *Hari Lebaran* (Eid al-Fitr).⁸⁸

MOSQUE BUILDERS AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

For most Australians, the stories of Macassan–Aboriginal spiritual relations are unknown - it is a forgotten history of Islam,⁸⁹ especially analysed from a Muslim viewpoint. As the Macassans expanded their explorations, they employed local religious preachers, built mosques, and encouraged other Muslims to travel.⁹⁰ Sailors from Macassar regularly

⁸⁷ Nicolas Herriman, "Homes in History," Cocos (Keeling) Islands Fieldwork, June 9, 2014, <https://nicholas.herriman.blogspot.com/2014/06/homes-in-history.html>; Herriman, *The Cocos Malays*.

⁸⁸ John G. Hunt, "The Revenge of the Bantamese: Factors for Change in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, 1930-1978" (MA diss., Australian National University, 1985), 39, 45.

⁸⁹ Paul Taçon and Sally K. May, "Rock Art Evidence for Macassan–Aboriginal Contact in Northwestern Arnhem Land," in *Macassan History and Heritage: Journeys, Encounters and Influences*, ed. Marshall Clark and Sally K. May (ANU EPress, 2013), 129.

⁹⁰ McIntosh, "The Ship's Mast," 155.

travelled for two weeks in fleets of proas (boats) to northern Australia.⁹¹ Their “stratum of culture” left various traces over the centuries.⁹² This includes possibilities of the construction of hut-like structures, built without nails, using traditional building techniques for the sites of their spiritual practices.

It was the process of “localisation of Islam” that was a historical aspect of settlement development,⁹³ as evidenced by the construction of small prayer structures. Macassan architectural form appeared after Macassan builders left Sulawesi in search of livelihoods, bringing with them “their specific traditional architecture” used “in settlements outside of South-Sulawesi.”⁹⁴ Settlements featuring this building type were typically isolated and consistently located along shorelines, including in northern Australia.⁹⁵

In a highly mobile society, such as Macassan, there would likely have been demand for permanent spaces and material reification of worship, rather than just the individual prayer carpet, which is the simplest arrangement needed for prayer.⁹⁶ Macassar builders found plenty of plant-derived coverings from Sulawesi for building a local mosque or transporting them to northern Australia.⁹⁷ The south-bound fleets would slowly rendezvous at nearby islands, load coconuts and water for their journey, and from there acquire “building material for the big trepang smokehouses they would later erect on the Australian coast.”⁹⁸

The construction of substantial trepang-processing facilities demonstrates the availability of labour, materials, and building expertise, making the construction of temporary prayer structures plausible. These experienced builders coming from the Islamic court in Macassar needed basic requirements for their congregational worship in their settlements in Australia. Upon Macassan arrival, Muslim settlements were established with huts. Carpenters and builders designed and constructed structures using simple and cost-effective methods.⁹⁹ To build huts, such as in the north coast of Groote Eylandt, the “bulk of the timber must have been brought from some little distance.”¹⁰⁰ Other materials readily available included palm leaves, sugar-palm fibre, grass, or bamboo tiles.¹⁰¹ For instance, the Macassans erected, a little behind the beach, a shed made of bamboo and “attop” mats, about 16 feet long (up to 5 metres) and eight feet wide (up to 2.5 metres). This was covered by a gable-shaped roof and the eaves are about five feet from the ground, at which height a platform of split bamboo

⁹¹ Aaron Corn and Brian Djangirrawuy Garawirrtja, “The Legacy of Yolnu-Makassan Contact: Before the First Wave,” in *The First Wave: Exploring Early Coastal Contact History in Australia*, ed. Gillian Dooley and Danielle Clode (Wakefield Press, 2019), 111.

⁹² “Tracing Origin of Aborigines,” *Daily Mirror*, 31 August 1954, 22.

⁹³ Muhamad Ali, “Muslim Diversity: Islam and Local Tradition in Java and Sulawesi, Indonesia,” *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 3.

⁹⁴ Doubrawa and Zámolyi, “Documenting the Past,” 3.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹⁶ Hayes, “The Wooden Hypostyle Mosques of Anatolia Mosque,” 39.

⁹⁷ Christian Pelras, *The Bugis: The Peoples of South-East Asia and the Pacific* (Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 220–21.

⁹⁸ Gene McCarthy, “First Traders,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 13, 1947, 11.

⁹⁹ Doubrawa and Zámolyi, “Documenting the Past,” 40–41.

¹⁰⁰ Macknight, *The Voyage to Marege*, 48.

¹⁰¹ Pelras, *The Bugis*, 220–21.

reached from one end of the shed to the other.¹⁰² Staying in Australia's north for three, six or nine months, they had sufficient time to construct a palm or bamboo hut, a makeshift mosque or a grass-roofed, wall-less shelter without minarets or domes.

Makassar's long history with Arnhem Land has been promoted as a source of "cultural pride" by the Yolngu people.¹⁰³ Macassans were always mobile and their ships frequently sailed the entire Malay and West-Indonesian areas.¹⁰⁴ These seafarers were skilled observers in navigation and astronomy, studying the night sky only using "simple compasses or telescopes" but possessing "rich knowledge of stars, currents, wave patterns and the behaviours of various sea animals and birds."¹⁰⁵ It was necessary that they determine the Qibla direction for the mosques. However, not all early built mosques show the same level of astronomical precision.¹⁰⁶ This skill helped them to establish prayer times and calculate the optimal dates for Ramadan.¹⁰⁷ The Macassans were also familiar with the Arabic lunar calendar.¹⁰⁸ They observed celestial objects not only to predict weather for travel and agriculture,¹⁰⁹ but also to guide the building of houses.¹¹⁰

Therefore, it would be misleading, as most of the literature suggests, that only fishermen were among the Macassans. In fact, among them were navigators, astronomers, builders, Sufis, imams, traders, cooks, planters, crafters, dancers and even gunners or troopers. It is also notable that Drum Major O'Deen, a Malay from Sri Lanka, was recognised as the first Muslim translator who brought the Qur'an to Australia.¹¹¹

Islamic principles specify that "Malay houses are usually built in a west-east direction because all buildings should face the "approximate direction of Mecca."¹¹² These miniature houses were also subjected to rules and prohibitions concerning practices or techniques that the local population regarded as builders' technical innovations "introduced after the advent of Islam," which enhanced their sacred status.¹¹³ They were built in sacred locations,¹¹⁴ where

¹⁰² Macknight, *The Voyage to Marege*, 54.

¹⁰³ Ganter. "Histories with Traction."

¹⁰⁴ Doubrava and Zámolyi, "Documenting the Past," 17.

¹⁰⁵ Sandy Blair and Nicholas Hall, "Macassan Sea Roads: The Heritage of Intercultural Maritime Routes Connecting Australia to Southeast Asia," *Historic Environment* 25, no. 3, (2013): 47.

¹⁰⁶ Abdul Koha, "Al-Biruni's Contribution to the Development of Qibla Determination Methods: Historical Analysis and Scientific Relevance," *Academic Journal of Islamic Studies* 10, no. 1 (2025): 254.

¹⁰⁷ J. D. Harlock, "Humanity's Place in the Heavens: An Introduction to Islamic Cosmology," *Middle East Eye*, March 9, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/discover/islam-cosmology-introduction-man-place-heavens>.

¹⁰⁸ Cummings, *A Chan of Kings*, 21.

¹⁰⁹ N. Hasanah and D. A. Suriamihardja, "Astronomy in Buginese–Makassarese Culture based on Historical and Ethnographical Sources," *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* 771 (2016): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-6596/771/1/012018>.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Paul Thomas. "Interpreting the Macassans: Language Exchange in Historical Encounters," in *Macassan History and Heritage: Journeys, Encounters and Influences*, ed. Marshall Clark and Sally K. May (ANU Press, 2013).

¹¹² Doubrava and Zámolyi, "Documenting the Past," 17.

¹¹³ Christian Pelras. "Bugis and Makassar Houses: Variation and Evolution," in *Indonesian Houses: Tradition and Transformation in Vernacular Architecture*, vol. 1, ed. Reimar Schefold, Gaudenz Domenig and Peter Nas (KITLV Press, 2003), 266.

¹¹⁴ Doubrava and Zámolyi, "Documenting the Past," 8.

they were associated with the “connection of earth and heaven.”¹¹⁵ These settlements often contained the residence of a local “lord,” such as an imam or Sufi, where the domain’s regalia were stored. Following Islamisation, the local mosque was also included.¹¹⁶ Islamic practices interacted with Indigenous traditions, resulting in processes of religious and cultural adaptation that are documented in several studies.¹¹⁷ During their temporary settlements in Arnhem Land, the Macassans performed Islamic prayer rituals, which influenced the local population to adopt terms and practices. This development can be attributed to the influence of mystical Sufis whose identities remain unrecorded in historical sources. Historical accounts generally describe Macassan–Yolngu relations as cooperative and characterised by sustained cultural exchange. There are numerous documented instances of Islamic expressions and rituals practised by the Macassans that were incorporated by Aboriginal people, resulting in syncretic elements within the Yolngu Dreaming tradition.

Arabic religious vocabulary preserved in Yolngu ceremonial traditions provides linguistic evidence of sustained Islamic influence.¹¹⁸ Macassan Muslims, for instance, would lift their voices in supplication (*du’a*) at the start and end of each journey. An imam or Sufi guided the community in the departure prayer, known in Makassarese as *doa palamakang* or *doa perahu berlayar*. Even the Yolngu word for prayer, *djambayang*, echoes this legacy, tracing its roots to the Indonesian *sembayang*, which means Muslim prayer (*salat*).¹¹⁹

Certain “adoptions of Islamic religion into rituals and customs” occurred among Aboriginal communities.¹²⁰ The Arnhemlanders observed and incorporated aspects of the religious customs practised by Macassan “holy men” (imams), who were regarded as “ceremonial leaders.” The Islamic presence along the northern coast can be traced to the trepanging era. Berndt and Berndt report that priests (imams) accompanied the praus to Australia, citing an Aboriginal informant:

When the mast of a prau was erected, as it prepared to set out on the journey to another settlement or to return to the Sulawesi, a prayer-man would climb the mast and chant [*djela war*]. Or at sunset the prayer-man would emerge from his *hut* and bow towards the west, repeating the name of *Allah*. This prayer man, whom the Aborigines called a “sick man” [*buwagerul*] was known as Deingaru or sometimes as Baleidjaka. He would move his head from side to side; then, holding it with one hand, he would seize with the other the post of his *hut*, and look towards the sunset, saying: ‘*ama*’ (amin or amen)! Then he would bow his head to the ground, calling out [*wali tha ’wali tha*]. The prayer-man first addresses God as ‘Father,’ then addresses him as the “Most High God” [ie. *wali tha ’wali tha*].¹²¹

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹¹⁶ Pelras, “Bugis and Makassar Houses,” 268.

¹¹⁷ Alexis Karpouzou, “Sacred and Profane in Mircea Eliade’s Theory” (Cosmic Spirit 2022), 2.

¹¹⁸ Koneczny, *On the Plurality of Civilisations*, 269.

¹¹⁹ Charles Campbell Macknight, “Macassans and Aborigines,” *Oceania* 42, no. 4 (1972): 296.

¹²⁰ Graham Seal, *The Savage Shore: Extraordinary Stories of Survival and Tragedy from the Early Voyages of Discovery* (Allen and Unwin, 2015), 6.

¹²¹ Berndt and Berndt, *Arnhem Land*, 45–46; McIntosh, “Can we be Equal in your Eyes?,” 215.

This description partially aligns with the practice of Muslim congregational prayer, during which worshippers stand shoulder to shoulder, awaiting the imam's proclamation of *Allahu Akbar* ("Allah is the greatest") and the raising of his hands to begin the prayer. The prayer concludes when the imam sits and recites, *Assalaamu alaykum wa rahmatullah* ("Peace be upon you and the mercy of Allah"), turning his head to the right and then to the left.

Evidence suggests that a Muslim community existed within one camp, where members assembled for religious observances under the guidance of their religious leader. The repeated reference to the "hut" during prayer times in the above passage implies that ceremonies and rituals were performed in and around these hut mosques. Within these camps, numerous Macassan huts or shelters were named after individual Macassan boat captains. Each Macassan (Bajo) captain was required to possess esoteric knowledge called *pangatonang/ilmu* and to demonstrate this expertise within the huts designated for his fishers and seafarers.¹²²

The ceremonial songs also reflect the spiritual practices the Macassans introduced. For instance, an Aboriginal sings with two Macassan traders as they teach him the call to prayer – "it is this beautiful moment of these men in white with these prayer mats...a full prayer sung with these beautiful voices."¹²³ As a result of Macassan influence in Australia, some elements of Islamic expression were incorporated into Aboriginal prayer, especially among the Yolngu people. Important evidence of Macassan Islamic influence first became evident after Lloyd Warner's fieldwork at Milingimbi in the 1920s. McIntosh believes it is also the first evidence of Allah.¹²⁴ Warner refers to a mortuary ceremony, which is part of the Aboriginal song cycle, stating it was performed when the mast of a Macassan *prau* broke or when a man was dying. He recorded and interpreted their "chorus chants" during the funeral:

...Two or more men pick up the dead body and move it up and down as though they were lifting a mast. The chorus sings, "Oh-a-ha-la!" while the "mast" is laid down. When it is picked up again, they sing "O-o-o-o-a-ha-la! A-ha-la!! A-ha-la!!"¹²⁵

Sneddon interprets that the phonetic resemblance between segments of this phrase and the Arabic term for God, *Allah*, is evident, suggesting this similarity may represent a version of Islam's initial declaration of faith, the *shahadah*: *lā 'ilāha 'illā llāh* ("there is no god but God").¹²⁶ Furthermore:

...Two men stand over the [dead] body, each with one hand over his face and one hand thrust out straight over "the mast." The first two men continue to move the "mast" up and down...two other men...dance as though they were pulling on ropes that raise the mast... Two men in unison say what the natives believe to be a Macassan prayer..."Ra-bin-a-la

¹²² Natasha Stacey. *Boats to Burn: Bajo Fishing Activity in the Australian Fishing Zone* (ANU E Press, 2007), 136.

¹²³ Wititj Healing, "Aboriginal-Makkasan Interactions in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," November 23, 2010, accessed March 20, 2026, <https://wititjhealing.yolasite.com/reemaccasan.php>.

¹²⁴ McIntosh, "Can we be Equal in your Eyes?," 215.

¹²⁵ Warner, *A Black Civilization*, 420.

¹²⁶ David Sneddon, "Indigenous Australians and Muslims: A History of Micro and Meso Dialogue prior to the 20th Century," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020): 77.

la-ha-ma-ha-ma,” (“They ask again for something from that man god who lives in the moon”) “Ser-ri ma-kas-si” “... Be-la bel-la,” “... Daung.”¹²⁷

“Serri-makasi” (*terima kasih*) means “thank you” in Bahasa Indonesian.¹²⁸ An Indonesian teacher explained that the word *terima* is derived from the concept of “accept or receive,” while *kasih* means “love.”¹²⁹ The full meaning of “Bela bela Daung” could be related to the idea of “the humble one” being held “on high,” then “coming down to the dust again.”¹³⁰

One of these chants, the Aboriginal recitation of “ra-bin-a-la la-ha-ma-ha-ma” closely resembles Islamic terminology and may reflect the Macassans’ Arabic prayer, *Rabb-il-‘al*, meaning “Lord of the worlds,” an appositional noun for Allah. McIntosh believes the Aboriginal word “ama” also resembles the terms *amen* or *amin*, which signify “verily,” “truly,” or “so be it,” and are used to express agreement with Divine truth.¹³¹

These expressions can be interpreted as a “form of *dhikr* by the Sufi Macassans.”¹³² Moreover, several *du’a* were related to the day on which travel was undertaken along with ritual activities associated with fishing; prayers were needed to control dangerous weather conditions and repel evil spirits and misfortune; and rituals accompanied boat repairs when it had been damaged at sea. They also prayed when sickness occurred among the crew. They prayed to drive away bad luck and for guidance and strength.¹³³

Borrowed items can, with linguistic analysis, be identified – “you are hearing hymns to Allah or at least certain prayers to Allah.”¹³⁴ In particular, Berndt and Berndt together with Warner trace the meaning of a word spoken by the Yolngu people – *a’immah*, denoting “imams” (Muslim leaders), who had accompanied Macassan fleets.¹³⁵ *Wurramu*, which is an Aboriginal mortuary ceremony, includes reference to Allah.¹³⁶ Repetition of the lyrics “Aae-yah” in the song’s chorus represents their prayers to Allah as recorded in a traditional Aboriginal song called *manikay*.¹³⁷

MAKESHIFT MOSQUES IN COLONIAL PAINTINGS

Although the Islamic presence was marginalised during colonial times, this does not imply that their settlements lacked mosques in northern Australia, which can be described as the “spiritual heartland” for the Macassans. “Mosque is significant feature in any Muslim settlement.”¹³⁸ The early colonial artists captured interesting details of the time, uniquely

¹²⁷ Warner, *A Black Civilization*, 420.

¹²⁸ McIntosh, “Can we be Equal in your Eyes?,” 216.

¹²⁹ Haji Yanto, Javanese teacher, interviewed by Dzavid Haveric, February 3, 2026.

¹³⁰ McIntosh, “Can we be Equal in your Eyes?,” 216.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Stacey, *Boats to Burn*, 137.

¹³⁴ Rogers, “When Islam came to Australia.”

¹³⁵ Corn and Garawirrtja, “The Legacy of Yolnu-Makassan Contact,” 110–11.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹³⁸ Bouma, *Mosques and Muslim Settlement in Australia*, 65.

documenting aspects of Muslim history in Australia. Their sketches and paintings represent a fascinating intersection of culture, history, and creativity, shaping the visual landscape of societies and territories colonised by European powers.¹³⁹ However, the colonial authorities in Arnhem Land, who focused on disrupting Yolngu and Macassan trade and cultural links, did not leave written records of Islamic practices or mosques, prioritising the Macassan camps and buildings in their paintings. A strong reason could be that the earliest mosque architectural typology lacked “symbols like crescent, minarets or domes,”¹⁴⁰ when the aesthetic evolution of “ornamentation in mosques was also discouraged.”¹⁴¹ The external features in their painting do not preclude the possibility that a house or shed functions as a mosque.

Nevertheless, colonial artists left valuable paintings of the first Macassan makeshift buildings in the Northern Territory: Port Essington’s huts and shelters at Raffles Bay, some of which can be interpreted as makeshift mosques within the camps.¹⁴² The construction of a mosque or shelter is not just a place of worship and, as in other places around the globe, is a symbol of the “arrival of Islam to a region.”¹⁴³ It is the triumphal symbolic appropriation of space, not necessarily conquest, but interaction and settlement.¹⁴⁴

In the absence of written colonial accounts of Muslim prayer practices in northern Australia, one fascinating painting by H. S. Melville depicts the Macassan Muslims in their settlements in Port Essington with many huts and boats, fishermen drying fish and trepang-boiling pots. The painting is an invaluable source for understanding the arrival of “alien” Macassans through historical and cultural lenses. In the painting, the colonial artist indicates the likelihood of the existence of early makeshift mosques. The building shapes are essentially “pyramidal type forms like traditional mosques in Malaysia and Indonesia.”¹⁴⁵ By then, they were mostly described as houses for drying and smoking trepang.

¹³⁹ “Colonial Artistic Movements and their Legacy,” USA History Timeline, accessed July 7, 2025.

<https://usahistorytimeline.com/pages/colonial-artistic-movements-and-their-legacy-025637ed.php>.

¹⁴⁰ Bahauddin and Ahmad, “Sufism in the Architectural Typology,” 161.

¹⁴¹ Tribak and Klaina, “Islamic Architecture between Civilizational Constants and External Influences,” 732.

¹⁴² Haveric, “Macassan Muslims and Aboriginal Australians,” 14–15.

¹⁴³ Pattiasina et al., “The Existence of the Wapauwe Old Mosque,” 356.

¹⁴⁴ Hayes, “The Wooden Hypostyle Mosques of Anatolia Mosque,” 38.

¹⁴⁵ Nawawi et al., “Mosque Forms as Signification,” 137.

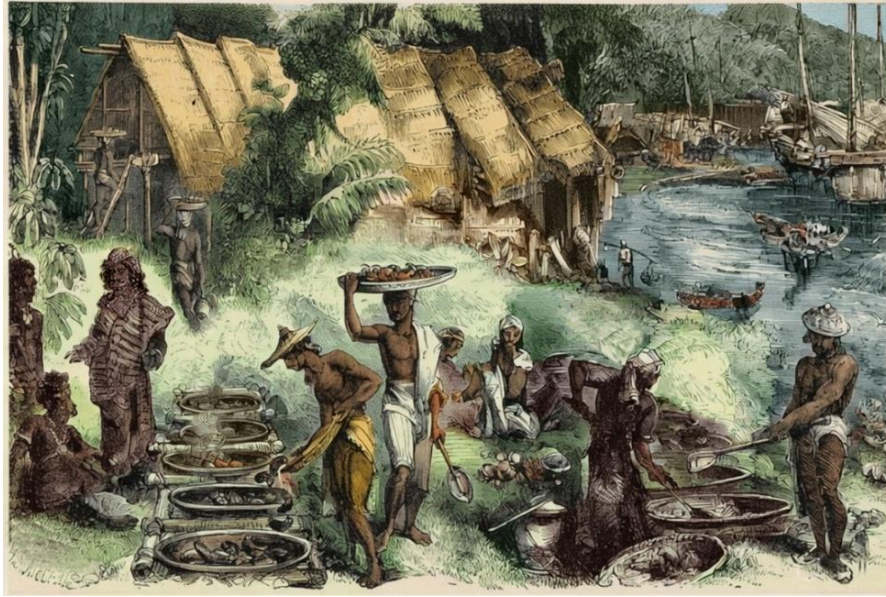


Figure 3. Macassan camp in Northern Territory, Port Essington Macassans at Victoria, Port Essington, by Harden Sidney Melville, 1845

The unique example of the Port Essington camp, resembling a small Macassan village, is the first time in Australian history that illustrates several single coastal huts elevated above ground (Figure 3). These Macassan places of prostration were in the form of a hut *surau* or *langgar*. Although smaller, the makeshift huts at Port Essington exhibit similarities to those found in Dobbo village on the Aru Islands. Thus, one of the huts may have functioned as a communal prayer space within the Port Essington settlement. About such similarity, Peter Bell notes that elevation of buildings is by no means unique to Queensland or northern Australia; it occurs in several other parts of the world, such as Indonesia and mainland South-East Asia.¹⁴⁶

Based on image representations, Macassans in northern Australia adopted early Islamic architectural forms like those in the Archipelago, constructing temporary structures resembling *langgar* (a place for communal meals), *surau* (a small house), and *rumah panjang* (a long house), which potentially served as places of worship.

The spiritual dimensions and Islamic practice of Macassans required shelter not only for protection from inclement weather but also to fulfil congregational needs. Makeshift houses, referred to as *suraus* or *langgars*, exemplified by those in Port Essington, served various purposes, including “sleeping, praying, studying, and feasting,” as previously noted by Ubaedillah.¹⁴⁷ These shelters could be adapted from sleeping quarters to spaces for religious congregation. The use of huts in northern Australia for religious rituals mirrors practices from Macassar. These structures typically featured woven bamboo walls and consisted of a single room with a small, thatched roof. According to oral testimony from Haji Yanto, “Among the small makeshift huts in the settlement, at least one may have served as a mosque (*surau* or

¹⁴⁶ Bell in Keys, “House Elevation and the British Military Settlement.”

¹⁴⁷ Ubaedillah, “The Khalwatiyah Samman Sufi Order in South Sulawesi,” 164.

langgar), accommodating up to ten people for prayer. The prayer hut also had a *mihrab*, but no *minbar*.¹⁴⁸

The houses of the maritime tribes of Java, Sumatra, Borneo and Sulawesi, which stand on seaside columns, are generally known as a “stilt house.”¹⁴⁹ A historical account about the Macassans’ building at Raffles Bay notes:

A fascinating conjunction occurs in the Northern Territory of Australia, for the Macassan trepang fishermen who frequented the coasts had their own tradition of building on stilts. A trepang fishery was established at Raffles Bay in 1828. The British settlement at the bay, Fort Wellington, was abandoned in 1829, but the trepangers remained, and an illustration of the settlement shows very substantial buildings with lashed frames, resting on high stumps.¹⁵⁰



Figure 4. Trepang fishermen in Raffles Bay, by Louis Le Breton, 1839

In 1839, Louis Le Breton, a French painter who specialised in marine paintings, drew a notable sketch of shelters in Raffles Bay near tamarind trees (Figure 4). The age of the tamarind tree in the region suggests it is many centuries old, before 1839. On the seaside, several large boilers of cast metal and small stone walls were used as fireplaces by the Macassans who nearby “erected open bamboo sheds composed of four strong stakes stuck into the ground supporting a roof with covered frames...” These sheds were described as only for drying fish “when the weather is bad.”¹⁵¹ In the sketch, Macassans were primarily interpreted as fishermen, rather than as Muslims who used these sheds for purposes other than fire and drying during their stay. Similarly, open sheds or shelters in Southeast Asia

¹⁴⁸ Yanto, interview.

¹⁴⁹ M. F. Suharto, R. S. S. I. Kawet and M. S. S. S. Tumanduk, “A Comparative Study of the Traditional Houses Kaili and Bugis-Makassar in Indonesia,” *IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering* 306 (2018): 2, accessed March 4, 2025, <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1757-899X/306/1/012077>.

¹⁵⁰ Miles Lewis, “Stumps, Ants and High-Set Houses,” in *Culture of Building* (Miles Lewis, 2024): 8–9, accessed August 5, 2025, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/665eb5267d514a33168dfeff/t/6677915a4e6f776930dfe3e/1719112035061/10.05+stumps.pdf>.

¹⁵¹ Dumont d’Urville, *Two Voyages to the South Seas. Volume 2: Astrolabe and Zelee 1837-1840*, trans. Helen Rosenman (Melbourne University Press, 1987), accessed December 19, 2023, https://www.surfresearch.com.au/1837_dUrville_Astrolabe_Zelee.html.

were used not only for trading and processing trepangs, but also for religious gatherings and ceremonies. Therefore, the Macassans likely prayed in a closed space or they built it only for drying trepang, such as in case of the makeshift mosques in Raffles Bay.

From a Muslim viewpoint, the Raffles Bay makeshift mosques in the form of *raham panjangs* (long houses)¹⁵² are one of the “architectural identities of the archipelago.”¹⁵³ Haji Yanto stated that “long houses” (*rumah panjang*) in Le Breton’s painting represent a “type of long, narrow or multi-room building for communal dwelling”¹⁵⁴ or “social and religious activities.”¹⁵⁵ Like in Indonesia and its neighbourhood, including Australia, Macassan houses on stilts were built for “fishing as well as an offshore housing.”¹⁵⁶

Located near shallow waters, seas or creeks, Macassan shelters were places of prayer, allowing collective, undisturbed worship and connection with the Creator. Their wall-less shelters, situated amid God’s creation, with their grounds designated as “places for prostration,” provided the Macassans with congregational access to the Divine presence. The spatial organisation of long houses was explicit, dividing the house primarily into private and public functional areas.¹⁵⁷ These shelters in Raffles Bay were large enough to accommodate groups of all sizes for prayer. “Their facilities can accommodate at least one hundred people for gatherings, ceremonies, religious and spiritual activities.”¹⁵⁸ These houses are “consistently situated along the shoreline.”¹⁵⁹ Situated along the seashore, these houses were protected by tamarind and palm trees from the intense tropical sun, monsoonal winds, and heavy rain. Their proximity to water for *wudu* (ablution), combined with the customary use of a rolled mat, enabled the Macassans to perform devotional rituals as part of their daily routines.¹⁶⁰

Although the building of makeshift houses was largely ignored by many scholars, Phil Harris and Adrian Welke stress the importance of Aboriginal and Macassan architectural precedent in northern Australia, particularly regarding climatic responsiveness.¹⁶¹ Some ethnographic and anthropological records diversify the architectural history of elevated housing. Architectural historian Miles Lewis mentions that high-set housing was found in near areas of the “Southeast Asian archipelago and north of Australia,” including the Port Essington settlement.¹⁶² These buildings can be contextualised within “elevated housing precedents in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Macassan and northern Archipelago

¹⁵² Yanto, interview.

¹⁵³ Andi Hildayanti and Wasilah, “The Existence of Stilt Houses Post-Disaster,” *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 903 (2021): 1, accessed February 7, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/903/1/012009>.

¹⁵⁴ Yanto, interview.

¹⁵⁵ Denny Daud, Javanese informant, interviewed by Dzavid Haveric, February 23, 2026.

¹⁵⁶ Allan Reyes Manabat, “Geographical Distinctiveness: The Structural Identity of Stilt Houses,” *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews* 24, no. 2 (2024): 2664.

¹⁵⁷ Doubrawa and Zámolyi, “Documenting the Past,” 11.

¹⁵⁸ Yanto, interview.

¹⁵⁹ Doubrawa and Zámolyi, “Documenting the Past,” 16.

¹⁶⁰ Jones, “The Makeshift and the Contingent,” 6.

¹⁶¹ Cited in Cathy Keys, “House Elevation and the British Military Settlement.”

¹⁶² Lewis, “Stumps, Ants and High-Set Houses.”

communities.”¹⁶³ Bridgman’s research on the tropical bungalow in northern Australia also engaged with Macassan houses as a possible “model” for later elevation at Port Essington.¹⁶⁴

MAKESHIFT MOSQUES IN YOLNGU-MACASSAN TESTIMONY

Macassans were not only among the “world’s most skilled sailors in small sailing craft,”¹⁶⁵ they also brought metal tools to Australia. Metal blades, knives and axes made it easier for the Macassans to cut trees or bush and build huts, houses and shelters for their coastal dwellings.¹⁶⁶ It could be considered that not only Macassan Islamic practices support the existence of makeshift mosques in Australia’s north, but also their building skills and tools.

Berndt and Berndt note that, in addition to fishing and cultivating vegetables and rice, “Bajini built houses of stone, with raised floors, and grew vegetables and rice, besides being fishermen.”¹⁶⁷ Stone arrangements at Wurrwurrwuy in north-east Arnhem Land represent various subjects linked to Macassan camps, such as trepang fireplaces, drying houses, and “Macassan houses with multiple rooms”¹⁶⁸ as well as “marking the sites of shelters.”¹⁶⁹

An Aboriginal rock painting at Malarrak, in the Goulburn Islands, Northern Territory, also closely resembles Macassan structures. Malarrak is recognised as a substantial archaeological site in Arnhem Land for its extensive rock art and material evidence of Macassan settlers. This painting depicts a two-storey building with a peaked roof, which has been interpreted as representing a Southeast Asian structure, specifically a Macassan building. While the building was initially interpreted as a colonial European “church,” it is more likely a mosque, given the painting’s association with Macassan Muslims. Identification of the building as Macassan is further supported by its proximity to elements in the painting that share colour and stylistic features with Macassan ships, one of which appears immediately to the right and another below the house in the composition.¹⁷⁰

The continuous influence on the Yolngu people and Macassan mariners was profound.¹⁷¹ Islamic teachings about the value of praying in a dedicated space made a lasting spiritual impression on the Aboriginal people in the camp. The Yolngu took careful notice of the religious customs of Macassan holy men described as “ceremonial leaders.”¹⁷² One example

¹⁶³ Bridgman in Keys, “House Elevation and the British Military Settlement.”

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Osmar White, “Indies Smugglers Strike it Rich!” *Herald*, March 25, 1950, 11.

¹⁶⁶ “Top End Trade 1700: Beginning of Trade Links between Aboriginal People of Northern Australia and Makasar from Sulawesi,” *The Queen*, February 8, 1862.

¹⁶⁷ Berndt and Berndt, *Arnhem Land*; “The Aborigines of Arnhem Land,” *Advocate*, December 12, 1953, 13; “Folklore of Arnhem Land,” *Sunday Mail*, September 12, 1954, 25.

¹⁶⁸ Peter Sutton, “Aboriginal Maps and Plans,” in *Traditional Cartography in Australia*, ed. David Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 412–3, press.uchicago.edu/books/HOC/HOC_V2_B3/HOC_VOLUME2_Book3_chapter10.pdf.

¹⁶⁹ George Chaloupka, *Journey in Time: The World’s Longest Continuing Art Tradition: the 50,000 Year Story of the Australian Aboriginal Rock Art of Arnhem Land* (Reed, 1993).

¹⁷⁰ Taçon and May, “Rock Art Evidence,” 133.

¹⁷¹ Corn and Garawirrtja, “The Legacy of Yolngu-Makassan Contact,” 112.

¹⁷² McIntosh, “Can we be Equal in your Eyes?,” 78.

was noted by Gerry Blitner, an Aboriginal leader, who uncovered a Macassan religious location:

The Macassans created at least three camps on Bickerton Island (Arnhem Land). Two of these were ordinary camps that you would expect of people engaged in the trepang industry. The third was different. A person he described as a “holy man” [an *imam* or a *Sufi* or *guru*] stayed there, and he and his camp [hut] were to be approached with reverence and in a quiet manner.¹⁷³

This account implies that a Muslim community in a camp had a hut or shelter (makeshift mosque) where Muslims held religious observances led by their mystical or spiritual leader to worship Allah. Moreover, many Macassan hut houses or shelters bore the personal names of Macassan boat captains who had some “esoteric knowledge” (*pangatonang/ilmu*) and ability to perform it for Macassan fishers and seafarers.¹⁷⁴

The 500-year celebration at *Wind Talks: Yolngu-Macassan Encounters*, held at Docklands Library and Broadmeadows Town Hall, Melbourne, 2023,¹⁷⁵ provided an opportunity for me to gather firsthand responses from Yolngu and Macassan participants to my central question: “Did the Macassans build mosques?” Timmy Djawa Murrnmurrnga Burarrwanga, a leader of the Yolngu community, described a makeshift mosque through the shared history with Macassans. Uncle Timmy responded that “His ancestors passed him the story that Macassans built their type of light construction of mosque, calling it “sacred home” (*madayn waga*).”¹⁷⁶ His statement reveals that significant cultural and spiritual exchanges between the Yolngu people and Macassan traders, through incorporated Islamic rituals and ceremonies, also included the Macassan mosque. A few more Yolngu people confirmed the “Macassans erected hut mosques.”¹⁷⁷ This applied to the Macassan–Aboriginal customs because their “house is not only a place of residence, but also a centre of social relations, traditional laws, and religions.”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷³ Gerry Blitner cited in Murray Seiffert, *Gumbuli of Ngukurr: Aboriginal Elder of Arnhem Land* (Acorn Press, 2011).

¹⁷⁴ Stacey, *Boats to Burn*, 33.

¹⁷⁵ Haveric, “Macassan Muslims and Aboriginal Australians,” 15.

¹⁷⁶ “Wind Talks: Yolngu-Makassan Encounters Barrak-Dhimmurru|Warrak-Timborok,” public lecture, Town Hall Broadmeadows Gallery, Melbourne, November 30, 2023, <https://www.hume.vic.gov.au/Things-to-do/Arts-and-Culture/Galleries/Wind-Talks-Yol%C5%8Bu-Makassan-Encounters-Barrak-Dhimmurru-Warrak-Timborok>; Uncle Timmy Djawa Murrnmurrnga Burarrwanga, interviewed by Dzavid Haveric, November 20, 2023.

¹⁷⁷ “Wind Talks;” a group of the Yolngu people, interviewed by Dzavid Haveric, November 20, 2023.

¹⁷⁸ Suharto et al., “A Comparative Study of the Traditional Houses,” 1.

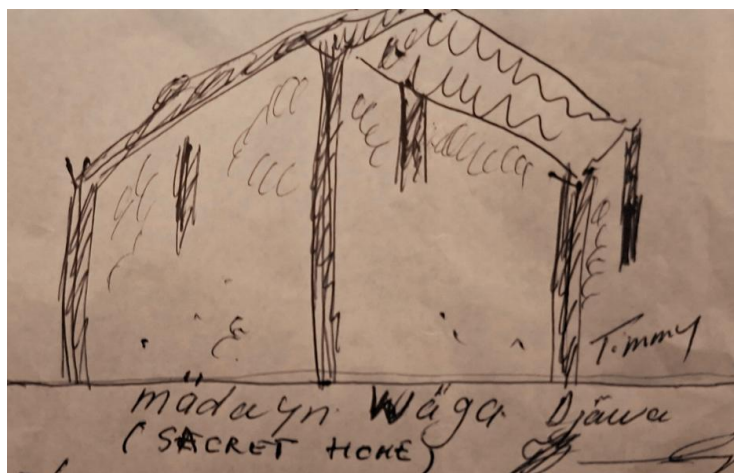


Figure 5. Makeshift mosque sketch by Yolngu leader Uncle Timmy, 2023

A group of visiting Macassan artists and scholars also recalled “the existence of this earliest mosque in the form of shelters. Our ancestors must have needed their huts or shelters for religious congregation, especially during bad weather.”¹⁷⁹ Therefore, Macassans not only smoked trepangs but held gatherings and religious rituals. Next to his oral testimony, Uncle Timmy sketched a Macassan makeshift mosque based on his ancestral narrations (Figure 5).

The Yolngu–Macassan testimonies support the possibility that Macassan communities maintained dedicated spaces for communal worship in northern Australia. Initially marked by apprehension and reservation, Macassans and Aboriginals visited each other’s abodes. Makeshift mosques paved the way for greater friendships and connections, where the Macassans welcomed Aboriginals. Another Yolngu man corroborated this account by recalling ancestral words: “sometimes our [Aboriginal bush] houses were visited by the Macassans too.”¹⁸⁰ It was the result of inter-relationships of all forms of art and building, which played a part in every aspect of their life.¹⁸¹

An Aboriginal informant stated:

We [Aboriginal people] had our way of shelters or houses different from those of Macassans, but we built from similar materials. Aboriginal people almost exclusively held rituals outside shelters, while Macassans usually held their prayers under or inside shelters or huts. We use fire in their ceremonies, which is not the case among Macassans.¹⁸²

The following example of a makeshift mosque can be considered a representation of the former Macassan makeshift mosque (Figure 6). An account describes a makeshift mosque constructed in the 1880s by Javanese settlers in the sugarcane fields of the Palms Estate, Mackay, Queensland. Although no images of the structure remain, contemporary reports and recollections from local Javanese residents indicate that these indentured colonial labourers

¹⁷⁹ “Wind Talks;” a group of Macassans, interviewed by Dzavid Haveric, November 20, 2023.

¹⁸⁰ “The Pearl Shell and Beche-le-mer Trade,” *Australian Town and Country Journal*, August 12, 1876, 28.

¹⁸¹ “In the World of Art: Arnhem Land Productions,” *The Age*, 29 July 1950, 8.

¹⁸² Cameron Madden, Aboriginal informant from Gordon Institute of TAFE, Geelong, interviewed by Dzavid Haveric, January 20, 2026.

established a small mosque, which has not survived.¹⁸³ The mosque, described as a “Javanese-style mosque out of grass and bamboo,” was built to meet religious and cultural needs. It was an “extended form of a house,” but was later burnt down when a nearby sugar plantation caught fire.¹⁸⁴ In her 90s, Asneah Contor of Mackay recalled that “Javanese people lived mainly in Baker’s Creek and the Javanese small mosque was before my time.”¹⁸⁵ This “palm-bush” structure was built in a sugar cane farm “near the Javanese cemetery in Mackay.”¹⁸⁶ It is the only remaining Islamic symbol, with some artefacts, including a “plate with the inscribed word *Allah*, Islamic coins, cans, pottery, and glass” found in the vicinity of a sugar plantation, which rarely speaks of that type of a bush mosque.¹⁸⁷ European settlers referred to it as a “Mohammedan [Muslim] church.”¹⁸⁸



Figure 6. Reconstruction of the Javanese mosque in Mackay from the 1880s, sketch by Gosia Reflinski, 2024

Several years later, the “Afghan mosque” in Adelaide was built. Macassan makeshift mosques vanished before the Afghan makeshift mosques built by cameleers, hawkers, merchants, imams, Sufis and other labourers in the following period.

CONCLUSION

The term “Macassan makeshift mosque” was significant but largely omitted from Australian historical and religious narratives. Temporarily erected Macassan vernacular structures represent the earliest forms of Muslim–Australian architecture. Evidence indicates that Islam influenced the foundational framework for architectural development, beginning

¹⁸³ De Jong and Beynon, “Non-Christian Religious Architecture,” 498.

¹⁸⁴ Harris, “Tradition, Identity and Adaptation,” 342.

¹⁸⁵ Asneah Contor, Javanese Informant, member of Muslim community in Mackay, interviewed by Dzavid Haveric, April, 21, 2024.; Madden, interview.

¹⁸⁶ Badar Khan, a member of the Muslim community Mackay, interviewed by Dzavid Haveric, December 12, 2019.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

with the simple mosques and dwellings established by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and later reflected in northern Australia through Macassan bamboo bush makeshift mosques.

Comparative analysis with other makeshift mosques, particularly in proximate regions, reveals significant similarities with those indicated in northern Australia. These parallels are suggested in colonial paintings, early archival records, and, notably, Macassan and Yolngu oral testimonies. The indications encompass Macassan dwelling and spiritual practices conducted in huts, houses, or shelters, which were further shaped by Sufi influences, and the incorporation of syncretic Islamic elements into Yolngu rituals and ceremonies.

This study has examined a range of historical, comparative, architectural, and oral sources relating to Macassan presence in northern Australia. While definitive archaeological evidence of Macassan mosques has not been identified, the convergence of evidence suggests that Macassan Muslims likely used temporary prayer structures or adapted communal spaces for religious observance during their seasonal residence in northern Australia.

The evidence presented does not provide certainty regarding the form, location, or function of structures. However, colonial depictions of Macassan settlements, comparisons with contemporary Southeast Asian prayer structures, documented Islamic practices among Macassan communities, and Yolngu oral traditions collectively support the plausibility of dedicated spaces for congregational worship. Further archaeological, historical, and ethnographic research may clarify the nature and extent of these early Islamic sacred spaces within Australia's northern maritime frontier.

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