

“Pearl Rush” and the Construction of Australian Imagination of Aru Islands, 1869-1937

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Abstract

In the early 20th century, the Aru Islands emerged as an economic centre in Eastern Indonesia's lesser known region. Australian pearling industry entry into its maritime zone created the “Pearl Rush”. This western-mode of natural exploitation shaped Aru's conception as a thriving pearling centre. This image of Aru was therefore a direct result of a constructed imagination reinforced by the active Australian pearling zone. Movement of Australian mariners and pearling fleets influenced the public views of the region, as reflected in the Australian newspapers and popular magazines. Such views connected the Aru Islands' image into the greater “Pearl Zone” of North and Western Australian cities. This paper examines how Australia's views of Aru's natural resources impacted and shaped the understanding of the islands' commercial role and it will highlight the role of the pearling industry in creating the allure of imagined valuable resources, which paved the way for its exploitation.

Keywords:

Aru Islands;
Maluku;
Australia;
pearling; pearl
shells; natural
exploitation

Abstrak

Pada awal abad ke-20, Kepulauan Aru muncul sebagai pusat perekonomian di wilayah Indonesia Timur yang saat itu kurang dikenal. Masuknya industri mutiara Australia ke wilayah maritim ini menciptakan “Pearl Rush”. Eksploitasi alam dengan cara barat ini membentuk konsep Aru sebagai pusat mutiara yang berkembang pesat. Oleh karena itu, gambaran Aru ini merupakan hasil langsung dari imajinasi yang dibangun dan diperkuat oleh zona mutiara aktif Australia. Pergerakan pelaut dan armada mutiara Australia mempengaruhi pandangan masyarakat mengenai wilayah tersebut, sebagaimana tercermin dalam surat kabar dan majalah populer Australia. Pandangan seperti itu menghubungkan citra Kepulauan Aru dengan “Zona Mutiara” yang lebih besar di kota-kota di Australia Utara dan Barat. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana pandangan Australia terhadap sumber daya alam Aru berdampak dan membentuk pemahaman tentang peran komersial pulau-pulau tersebut serta akan menyoroti peran industri mutiara dalam menciptakan daya tarik sumber daya berharga yang dibayangkan, yang membuka jalan bagi eksploitasinya.

Kata kunci:

eksploitasi
alam;
Kepulauan
Aru; kerang
mutiara;
Maluku;
mutiara

Introduction

The Aru Islands, located just Southwest of the spice isles of Banda, is made famous for its rich fishing ground for the famous *Pinctada Maxima* oyster, which produces the famous silvery-white pearl (Strack, 2008: 26). Besides pearl, other unique natural resources harvested from Aru were trepang (sea cucumber), birds-of-paradise plumes, and edible bird nests. Hans Hägerdal has pointed out how Aru's natural resources is a significant factor in their unique historical position in the Moluccas (Hägerdal, 2019: 127-128). Throughout most of its history, the Aru Islands has been a subject of extensive natural exploitation, especially with the arrival of Australian pearlshellers who transformed the islands' natural resources into an industrialized commodity and fundamentally altering the landscape of Aru. The value of pearls as a commodity was therefore actively constructed, which paved the way for their industrialization. The concept of the 'Pearl Rush,' borrowed from Adrian Vickers (2022), encapsulates this phenomenon of rapid industrialization and commercialization of pearls in the late 19th century by Australian pearlshellers.

But western attention on Aruese pearls can be traced back to the 17th century, when the VOC (Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie) made contact with the Aru Islands in 1623 (Hägerdal, 2020: 556). However, during the 17th and 18th centuries, the Company failed to exert control over pearling exploitation due to their direct involvement in local socio-political dynamics. This dissatisfaction with pearling exploitation was subsequently transferred to the colonial government in the early 19th century. Interest in pearling only resurged in the 1870s, driven by the arrival of Australian pearling ships from Torres Strait in the waters of the Aru Islands (Lehane, 2014: 221).

Thus, this research will attempt to study the islands' history through the eyes of the Australian audiences and their imagination of Aru's perceived valuable resources, using online archival collections of newspapers and popular magazines. Previously, these sources have remained untapped for their potentials to complete the research on Aru's natural and commercial history. They will be critically used to understand how the public views on Aru's natural wealth have shaped and influenced Australian commercial activities in the region. This, in turn, will be beneficial for further understanding Aru as an integrated part of a transnational ecological and commercial Pearling Zone¹ spanning along the Torres Straits and the Arafura Sea. Meanwhile, the term 'Pearl Rush', coined by Adrian Vickers, will also be used again here to explain the construction of pearls as a commodity.

1) This is a socio-geographical term used by Adrian Vickers and Julia Martinez in their book *The Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labor and Indigenous Encounters in Australia's Northern Trading Network* (2015), which covered the Arafura Sea and Timor Sea and Parts of the Flores Sea.

The question posed for this research focuses on how Australian popular imagination strengthened Aru's pearlshelling activities and how the pearlshelling industrial mode of exploitation affected the social life of Aru. It will also explore how the exploitation of natural resources created distinct economic interactions which transcends the interest of the colonial state and the commercial sector in the island. Furthermore, this paper will delve into the interplay between Australian pearlshellers and Aru's social world, examining the economic and cultural shifts that occurred as a result of this industry's rapid expansion. Ultimately, this study aims to provide insights into the multifaceted impact of the pearlshelling industry, from economic transformations to cultural shifts, and to shed light on the role of Australian popular imagination in shaping the natural exploitation of the island.

Lonely Frontier and Untapped Resources

Several European sailors have already recorded the abundance of Aru's natural products during their time visiting the islands. A British sailor by the name of George Windsor Earl had visited Aru back in 1839 and written a book *Sailing Directions for the Arafura Sea* which itself was based on the travel reports made by a Dutch Colonial administrator, Lieutenant Kolff in 1825. He mentioned Aru's chief products as pearlshell, tortoise shell, trepang, nutmeg, and various other valuable articles (Earl, 1893: 9). Although this has been one of the first publication of the Aru Islands made from non-Dutch source, the entirety of its content was very technical and sometimes re-describing the scene in which Kolff had already written. Although arranged with a very technical language, Earl's publication became one of the leading foundations for Aru's exploration by the renowned naturalist, Alfred Russel Wallace. Another viable also came from John Crawfurd, a British colonial administrator, which mentioned Aru in his book, *A Descriptive Dictionary of the Indian Islands & Adjacent Countries*, as a productive zone for pearl shells (Crawfurd, 1856: 330)

Alfred Russel Wallace travelled to the Aru Islands in January 1857 as part of his journey through the Maluku archipelago. During his visit, he encountered the trading season at the quiet village of Dobo where the winds attracted Ceramese, Javanese, Makassan, and Buginese to come as itinerant merchants and trade Aru's natural products for goods coming from inter-insular trade. During this time, the small sandspit of Dobo transformed as a bustling town accommodating approximately 1000 people (Wallace, 1862: 131-132). Wallace's observation on the life in Dobo gave birth to a romantic model of society, which pivoted a close relation between its people and their natural resources. In this regard, Wallace's idea of untapped resources dances on the extravagant Aru's social life that borders between societal barbarity and civilization. He describes the natural wealth of Aru as the most important part of the island's existing societal peace, as he had written an interesting

opinion on the Aruese trade in March in 1857 as this:

“I dare say there are now near five hundred people in Dobbo of various races, all met in this remote corner of the East, as they express it, ‘to look for their fortune’; to get money any way they can. They are most of them people who have the very worst reputation for honest, as well as every other form of morality – Chinese, Bugis, Ceramese, and half-caste Javanese, and other islands – yet all goes on as yet very quietly. This motley, ignorant, bloodthirsty, thievish population live here without the shadow of a government ... yet they do not cut each other’s throats, do not plunder each other day and night, do not fall into the anarchy such a state of things might be supposed to lead to. It is very extraordinary” (Wallace, 1869: 443).

Wallace attributed this constant peace in the distant and lonely Eastern frontier as singlehandedly a result of trading activities. He considered it as a self-regulating invisible force which keeps peace and unites the particularly heterogenous group into a well-behaved community (Wallace, 1869: 444). In other words, Wallace argued that Aru’s precious commodity was a driving force in fostering peace between its people with any outsiders. Therefore, Wallace’s idea of a “tropical paradise” in Aru hinges on the local people’s ownership of the natural resources.

With Wallace’s extraordinary findings being published in his famous book, *The Malay Archipelago* in 1869, knowledge about the richness and apparent opportunities of the Maluku islands was fully circulated in the Australian press. Entering the 1860s, interest about Wallace’s works and the Malay connection with the Australian continent was also picked up by several newspaper in the region such as *The Australasian*, *Launceston Examiner*, and *Empire*. They recount some of the interesting ecological features of the region as well as its ethnological description. The newspaper *Empire* even so far as to dubbed Dobo as the “Ultima Thule” of the group (*Empire*, 31 December 1869: 2).

Interest in the Malayan archipelago fuels the Australians curiosity regarding their northern neighbour. In the following years, it will lead to a number of expeditions to Aru as some desired for adventures and riches. As they did in the 1870s, when Australian newspapers began reporting interesting news on some of its citizens who dares to cross the Arafura sea and into the lesser known islands of the Netherlands Indies. One such figure was John T. Cockrell, an Australian naturalist who went to the Aru Islands in 1872. Sailing from Brisbane in December 1871, aboard his schooner *The Naturalist* with his two sons, Martin and Routledge with a number of Aboriginal crew (*The Age*, 16 February 1874: 3), his journey was serialized in the newspapers in 1872 and recounted many of Cockrell’s encounters with the people and nature of Aru.

He admirably describes the Aruese people as “the most honest, sober, industrious, and moral people on the face of the earth” (*The Brisbane Courier*, 21 January 1874: 5). This opinion was backed by his own telling when the Aruese supposedly never once stole from him even when they had plenty opportunity to do so (*The Brisbane Courier*, 21 January 1874: 5). Cockrell also mentioned some 20 tonnes of pearl shells and bêche-de-mer or trepang, and some 20 lbs of edible birds’ nest and a small weight of tortoise shells were harvested in the year he visited the islands. He even recounted many Makassar traders wishing to purchase most of the items in his belongings (*The Brisbane Courier*, 19 February 1874: 3). But in his observation, the quality of the pearl shells was questionable and does not differ from those found in Australia. Upon his return to Brisbane, he was informed by a competent judge that none of the shells brought were worth saving, except a few (*Northern Star*, 29 April 1885: 4).

Around this time, Australians of the now-Northern Territory and Queensland were already interested in exploring much of the northern frontier regions in order to secure future land access and open trade. On one example, the Queensland Government under the imperial direction, was determined to occupy Cape York in order to create calling stations for Netherlands Indies and Australian ships, as well as a port of refuge and supply for those engaging in pearl trade in the Torres Strait and the Aru Islands (*The Hampden Guardian and Western Province Advertiser*, 31 March 1874: 2). While the same opinion was shared when Mr. R.D. Ross, an Assistant Commissary-General in Adelaide was very optimistic to promote trade between Port Darwin² with Banda and Aru. He also recommends the introduction of rice and sugar to the plantations in the Northern Territory as means to develop trade in the region (*The Brisbane Courier*, 14 July 1871: 3). As discussed before, imagination of Aru as a place with bountiful resources has been in circulation starting from the publication of Wallace’s *The Malay Archipelago*. Ideas of imagined valuables contained within a constructed tropical paradise pushed many Australians to explore and determine the worth of Aru as a commercial and ecological zone.

However, the increased in voyages made between Australia and Aru were perceived as a threat to the islands’ stability by the Dutch colonial authorities. Suspicions began to rise as conflict in Aru increasingly targeted non-Aruese population in the late 19th century. In 1881, the Resident of Amboina, Baron van Höevell was forced to peacefully approach an *Achterwal*

2) Since 1863, the present Northern Territory was annexed by South Australia through the Patent Letters issued by Great Britain it was again surrendered to be part of the Australian Commonwealth by 1911. See: Malcolm Herbert McLelland (1971), ‘Colonial and State Boundaries in Australia’, *The Australian Law Journal*, 45: 674, 677-78

ex-pearl diver named Belbel, who rebelled after supposedly receiving a dream from his ancestors to ‘cleanse’ Aru from foreign influence” (*Indische Gids*, 1893: 1248). Another native figure named Naelaer, was arrested in 1885-1887 after inciting a rebellion in the *Achterwal* (van Höevell, 1888: 83). But the largest of this came in early 1893. A former pearl diver named Toefoeloen had gathered an armed alliance in the *Achterwal* which sailed to the island of Dobo and attack the town (Spyer, 2000: 58-59). After his rebellion, Toefoeloen and five of his “co-conspirators” were arrested and shipped to Ambon. While direct casualties were among the Makassar, Bugis, and Chinese merchant, the entrance of Australians into the pearling trade could potentially brought more complications than relief.

Previously, to assess native response of foreign vessels working in their water, a small survey was conducted in the Aru Islands by the Resident of Amboina on 15-20 November 1889. The surveying team, consisted of the Resident and two *Posthouder* from Dobo and Watuley, travelled with the warship *Arend* in order to survey various *Orang Kaya*³ and other heads of villages or *Negeri*⁴. Most *Negeri* representatives has concerns the impact of European exploitation for Aru’s local economy.⁵ With that in mind, Baron van Höevell also mentioned in his other missive, that an Australian schooner owner, Mr. Raymond O’ Kelley refuses to obey the 3-mile limit border, stating that the colonial government does not have sufficient law in creating such demarcation.⁶ With many rebellions and an overwhelming negative response from native Aru, the colonial government passed the *Parelvisscherij Ordonnantie* No. 261 in 1893; banning any non-native or local vessels to engage in pearlshelling activity within the 3-mile waters adjacent to any Netherlands Indies islands (*Staatsblad van Nederlandsch Indië*, 1261/1893)

Despite the enactment of Ordinance 1893, Australian vessels continue to work outside the 3-mile limit, a mere small distance from the jurisdiction of colonial warships. For example, a pearlshelling vessel *Flowerdale* worked the waters off the 3-mile limit from the Aru Islands on April 1893 and was able to gather 22 tonnes or about £3,000 worth of shells, with much chagrin

3) A Particular title used in Southern part of Moluccas for the head of a small village or *Negeri*. The title refers to their position as an authority figure for conducting relations or trade agreements with foreign parties, see: Ellen, R.F. “Conundrums about Panjandrums: On the Use of Titles in the Relations of Political Subordination in the Moluccas and along the Papuan Coast”, *Indonesia*, No.41, (1986): 50.

4) *Negeri* or sometimes spelled in Dutch as *Negerijen* is an administrative unit used by various Indonesian regions resembling that of a village or *desa* in Java.

5) ‘Process Verbal, Vergadering gehouden te Krei op Vrijdag den 15den November 1889’. National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia (ANRI), Jakarta, Archive of Inventory Algemeene Secretarie Serie Grote Bundel Besluit 1891-1942, No. 367.

6) ‘Missive Resident of Amboina, Baron van Hoevell to the Governor-General of Netherlands East Indies No. 995, 16 March 1893’, ANRI, Jakarta, Archive of Inventory Algemeene Secretarie Serie Grote Bundel Besluit 1891-1942, No. 367.

form the Dutch (*The Express and Telegraph*, 30 May 1894: 3). Another incident in 1894 happened when an Australian schooner *Mavis*, was spotted operating inside the 3-mile limit near Gomo-Gomo village. It was only after colonial warship, *Pontianak* was dispatched, that the Australian left Gomo-Gomo. Despite Dutch method of suppression, *Mavis* was able to profited their gains from Aru at £ 1,606 (*The West Australian*, 27 October 1894: 6). In order to deter further encroachment of Australian vessels, colonial warships reportedly block any foreign pearling ship to lay anchor and resupply water, food, or coal in the *Achterwal* (*The Brisbane Courier*, 7 February 1894: 7). Interestingly, one particular visit by the HMS *Lizard*, manned by Captain Hancock with his pearling fleet on June 1894 reported the following statement about the relationship between Australian pearlshellers and Dutch authorities:

“...he found the reports of the strained relations between the pearlshellers and the Dutch much exaggerated. Very little pearlhshelling is going on at Dutch New Guinea. The Dutch made no efforts to fish for pearlshell, nor do the natives do so, yet they are always jealous of Britishers coming in to work the industry” (*The Daily Telegraph*, 17 August 1894: 5)

While forbidding any foreign vessels proved to be an expensive and dull task, the Dutch colonial government concluded that controlling access by applying permissions, were the solution for both the Aruse and colonial interest. In 1902, Dutch colonial authority published a revised version of the 1893 Ordinance, with more detailed instructions to apply for concession in all of Netherlands Indies’ water. Based on British and Australian pearling ordinances,⁷ the 1902 Ordinance constructed a legal instrument to promote a more centralized pearling industry by establishing the colonial government’s control to grant access. This legal framework enables local Indies businesses with large assets and capital to compete with one another, and to secure state’s right in controlling the exploitation of natural resources. Steve Mullins (2001) described the phenomena as a colonial compromise to ease tensions between Dutch and Australian state actors.

The establishment of the 1902 Pearling Ordinance coincidentally came at the right moment, as many Australians increasingly viewed the Aru Islands as an alternate source for their ever-expanding pearling fleet. It came at the time when Australian Federal government just passed the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901. The legislation, which aims to limit the number of Asian migrants to the country, could potentially restrict access pearling

7) Netherlands Consulate Offices at Burma, Singapore, and Australia supplied Batavia with local British colonial laws regarding pearling license. “The Burma Fisheries Act of 1875” and “Western Australia Pearl Shell and Fishery Acts and Regulations, 1886” significantly influenced the 1902 *Parelvisscherij Ordonnantie*. See: ANRI, Jakarta, Archive of Inventory Algemeene Secretarie Serie Grote Bundel Besluit 1891-1942, No. 367.

industry to recruit pearl laborers. An internal push from this policy led to a more active approach towards the Aru Islands which eventually culminated in the 1905 purchase of the Aru Islands concession to the Australian, James Clark and his Celebes Trading Company consortium (Mullins, 2002: 38-39). Immediately following this purchase, James Clark began moving the company's schooner and lugger away from their traditional grounds on Thursday Island and into Aru's water. Settling on the hub town of Dobo, James Clark began what most Australians have failed to try and achieved since the enactment of 1893 ordinance.

Aru as Part of the Australian "Pearl Zone"

The search and exploitation of natural resources in Aru was framed by Australian newspapers as being imbedded with adventurous zeal. This phenomenon, exacerbated by James Clark and the Celebes Trading Company (CTC) birthed Aru as a region with closer socio-economic ties with the Australian pearling zone. Steve Mullins (1997) discusses the transferring of pearling assets from Thursday Island to Aru as a combination to circumvent scarcity of labour, depletion of shells, as well as a strategically managerial move to avoid the unstable policymaking in Australian markets and labour laws. Their migration cemented the town of Dobo as the centre of the pearling life in Aru. During this period, Dobo was physically described by *The Bulletin* magazine as:

"a mere sandspit, with a tropical sea in front and a tropical swamp at the back, and crocodiles and coconuts all round. There isn't a hill in the whole of the Aru Islands – just slime and sweat, and mosquitoes and malaria" (*The Bulletin*, 1 September 1910, Vol.31 No.1594: 14).

Around this time, the town boasted a population of 1,000 indentured worker from which 500 were Japanese laborers (Hiroshi & Hitoshi, 1907:2). By 1913, Dobo grows as a town and adds multiple buildings and facilities to sustained their 1000 or so population with grocery stores, barbershops, restaurants, and woodworking industry, along with Japanese nationality club or *Nihonjinkai* (Pangestoeti, 2022: 90-91). Another aspect brought by this migration was the official trade connection between Aru and northern Australia. James Clark with the jewel schooner *Pretoria* navigated between the two 'zones' to unload cases of pearl shells while stocking up provisions such as dried beef, canned food, biscuits, tobacco, and fabrics for the pearl laborers back in Aru (*The Brisbane Courier*, 25 October 1905: 3). By 1905, as Clark's fleet grew to 7 schooners, 115 boats, and 130-ton auxiliary steamer (Mullins, 1997: 35), movement of pearl shells from Aru began to be recorded in many Australian newspapers. *Pretoria's* ship log provides an interesting glimpse into the productivity of the Aru Islands ground, as seen in the table 1.

Table 1. Pretoria's Cargo from Aru Islands to Thursday Island, 1905-1908

Years	Months	Pearlshell cases
1905	November	676 cases
	December	500 cases
1906	April	584 cases
	May	350 cases
	October	20 cases
	December	270 cases
1907	January	333 cases
	May	100 cases
	October	260 cases
	November	179 cases
1908	January	48 cases
	March	70 cases
	April	170 cases
	May	160 cases
	September	100 cases

Source: compiled from *Northern Territory, The Daily Telegraph, The Telegraph, The Sydney Morning Herald, Daily Post, and The Express and Telegraph* newspapers between 1905-1910 via trove.nla.gov.au

But the existence of Australian pearlshelling industry brings with them a particular image of Aru's social world. As previously described, Australian imagination of the islands can be aptly worded as "an adventure to the unknown". One story, imagined the Aru and Kai Islands as part of the mythical "Skull Island"; a place of mystery and riddled with violence. Often times, Australian newspapers captures the image of the pearling connection of the Aru Islands in violent terms. Such as the case in 1902, when a Malay crew from Aru were stranded in Cape Wilberforce, Northern Australia and was murdered by local Aborigines who allegedly pretended to guide them (*The Advertiser*, 16 May 1902: 4). Another case happened in 1906 when a Malay pearling crew by the name of Karonis, Karasuga, and Deresy were killed by Aborigines after their 13-ton ketch was blown off course from Aru to the Northern Territory (*The Register*, 26 March 1906: 4). This idea of violence is not entirely new and on the contrary, has been reported by Dutch visit to the islands in the 1800s. von Rosenberg (1867) cited a report made by Dutch administrator, Bosscher that in 1853, two Buginese merchant were killed in the *Achterwal* following a dispute with the local Aruese population over pearling grounds (von Rosenberg, 1867: xix)

While violence is not a novel product of Australian migration to Aru, it reinforces the idea of how the practice of pearlshelling itself was riddled with hazards and harsh condition for many of its labours. Therefore, a unique idea of pearlshelling-related violence and unruliness was beginning to take

shape in the Aru Islands, during the tenure of CTC throughout the early 1900s. One Australian newspaper correspondent who visited Aru left with this interesting statement:

“I had almost written that Dobo is ‘the gateway to the East’. But it is less a gateway than a gutter. Its reputation never has been savory, and it is not savory now. For centuries it has been, excluding wild and inhospitable New Guinea, the farthest out of the great Dutch possessions of the East Indies. Removed thus from the centre of government at Batavia, the Arus naturally attracted the most lawless rovers of the archipelago.” (*Barrier Miner*, 24 August 1910: 5)

This particular violence can be seen as one aspect of Aru that closely resembles the Australian pearling town of Broome. Christine Choo (2011) have discussed how inter-ethnic riots of 1907, 1914, and 1920 broke out in Broome, due to conditions that arise from working in the back-breaking and strict pearling environment. Choo’s categorization of riots exposed the racially segmented workforce between different Asiatic groups which stems from conditions set by the white pearl masters (Choo, 2011: 475). Although inter-ethnic conflict exists in Aru, the particular conditions mentioned in Choo’s work doesn’t seem to precipitate into any particular societal clash between ethnic groups of Aru. That being said, on some instances, murder cases happened aboard pearling vessels. Such as the case in November 1907 when a Kai crewmember attacked Kosahera, a Japanese diver aboard the *Mimcie* a lugger belonging to CTC *Sketty Belle* fleet (Giay, 2022: 148-150). While another story involved one Makassarese diver trying to kill his mate with an axe, before failing to kill his captain and injuring a fellow sailor in the leg (*Evening News*, 19 June 1912). But other than these few cases, a more extensive research is needed to explain the relations between inequality and ethnic-related violence in Aru’s pearling ground.

Pearling-related violence were also found in Dobo, when pearl laborers returned around July and stayed long into September after working for 8-9 months in the *Achterwal*. Conflicts, murders, and crimes were usually reported during these lay-off seasons. Dutch posthouder reported in 1916 of Butonese and Makasarese mob fighting on the streets armed with kris, knives, and cleavers (Vickers, 2022: 465). Murder cases were also reported in Dutch newspaper, such as when one Japanese pearl labour killed a woman, in which he was sentenced for 7 years in prison by a Makassar court (*Het Nieuws van de Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indie*, 8 April 1914: 3). Interestingly, attempts were made by CTC management to strict violent outburst by threatening to freeze payments for any laborers found guilty of such crimes (*Gympie Times and Mary River Mining Gazette*, 19 March 1910: 5).

The harsh conditions brought by the western mode of exploitation

was therefore, transposed from an Australian landscape into that of Aru. The island was painted as full of tragedies in many Australian publications and mostly involved the tragic life of pearl divers, due to the hazardous nature of their work. A diver in Aru was reported to have died when his connecting and air-pipe line wrenched off from the lugger because of large swarms of diamond fish (*The World's News*, 27 December 1919: 4). Another more emotionally tragic story was from a diver named Solani Naru who had gone mad after his lady in Dobo rejected his love. Which he then subsequently tried to kill himself by drowning, before finally died after cutting his own throat (*Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 21 September 1906: 2).

Reviewing some of the news items brought to light on how the exploitation of pearls in Aru reconstruct the islands as a locus for industrial exploitation. Dobo's unruliness and Aru's profitability became an integral part to explain the "Pearl Rush" of 1905-1913. The imagined Aru was therefore, a direct product – or an extension – of Wallace's description of ecological richness and political remoteness. Aru was seen as a "wild east" of profitability and richness for some but death and despair for many. Despite the conditions brought by the Australian pearling concession, *The Lone Hand* (1910) described Dobo's kettle of mix living with a bit of sorrid optimism.

"Somebody has said that every town possess a different odor; Dobo would appear to have united all of them; and its offence is rank. To heat, smells, disease, and a heterogenous personnel, add some white houses, a number of dingy shops, a few Arab dhows rocking at the shore, with a back-ground of swaying palm-trees and mangroves crooning to the slight breeze like repellent sirens, up to the waist in the shallow water – and you have a perfect miniature portrait of Dobo." (*The Lone Hand*, Vol. 7 No. 41, 1 September 1910: 416)

After CTC: There and Back Again

Although the Australian tenure in Aru marked a significant shift in the islands' commercial history, its boom does not last long. During the events of the First World War, European demands for luxury products dropped CTC's profits. In 1914, some 5 schooners, 92 luggers and 1 steamship were forced to stay in Dobo with no work being done, as 600 Malay pearl laborers went back to Ambon, Banda, and Tual. The only ones left were the Japanese as they had to manned the last 35 luggers still working in Aru (*De Preanger Bode*, 20 November 1915: 5). Eventually the company was sold to a Dutch firm Schmid & Jeandel for f200,000 and in 19 August 1918, Schmid & Jeandel officially owns CTC.⁸

8) Besluit Gouverneur-Generaal No. 4 19 August 1918, ANRI, Jakarta, Archive of Inventory Algemeene Secretarie Serie Grote Bundel Besluit 1891-1942, No. 2529

Retaining the Celebes Trading Company name for their operations in Aru, the now Dutch-based company continue the work of James Clark and his consortium. Internal changes within the management does not seem to disrupt any connection between Australia and the Aru Islands. On the contrary, Australians seems to still regard it as an active part of the Pearl Zone. Few remained in Aru and continue practice pearlshelling in smaller scale while holding position as traders and plantation managers (Mullins, 1997: 30). Movement between the two pearl zones were also retained, with Australian pearlers even going as far as playing soccer in Dobo with Aruese laborers (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 August 1923: 16).

CTC's experience in Aru still imprinted the islands as part of the imagined pearling zone. Consequently, stories of Aru were circulated with more vigorous titles and contents which again, transforms the island into a myth, such as the story of divers being stuck in the jaws of giant clams or gripped by hideous octopus (*The Bulletin*, Vol. 41 No. 2048, 22 January 1920: 24). Meanwhile, animals such as the dreaded Barracuda was seen as one of the deadliest forms of death in Aru. Ion L. Idriess even quoted the animal as a "curse of the sea" as one of his Malay friends was disembowelled after diving for pearls in Aru (*Gippsland Times*, 29 September 1937: 6)

Topics on the hazardous pearling live can still be seen as the main attraction for the Australian press. "An Aru Islands Mystery" was a tragic take on a diver's love life and the dangers encountered when engaged in pearling. The story was narrated by a white pearl master in Aru, about his trusted Japanese diver, Tashima who has plans to marry a girl in Thursday Island, Hanami-dori but died in Aru after his lifeline and air pipe snapped when he went underwater. The captain noted how he was suspicious of the diver's tender who might also be attracted to Hanami and killed Tashima in jealousy. Other stories also framed the abundancy of pearlshell as having closely related with pearlers violent tendencies. Such as the story when a Malay diver in Aru killed his fellow mate for a £5000 worth of pearl (*Smith's Weekly*, 28 February 1920: 9).

However, Australian influence in the islands came not only in the form of haven for the exploitative industry. In the years following CTC's departure, pearls were regarded not only in terms of profit but also security. As pearling grounds in Aru has attracted a new competitor in the pearlshelling business, the Japanese. This relatively new power in the Pacific has gained momentum ever since the country's victory in World War 1. With this competition, Australian press have regularly framed the Japanese as 'poachers', which was an ironic term as Darwin and Thursday Islands pearlers have known to work in Aru during the off-season. The Flores Pearl Fishing Company from Australia was even reported by CTC in 1931 for fishing on the outskirts of

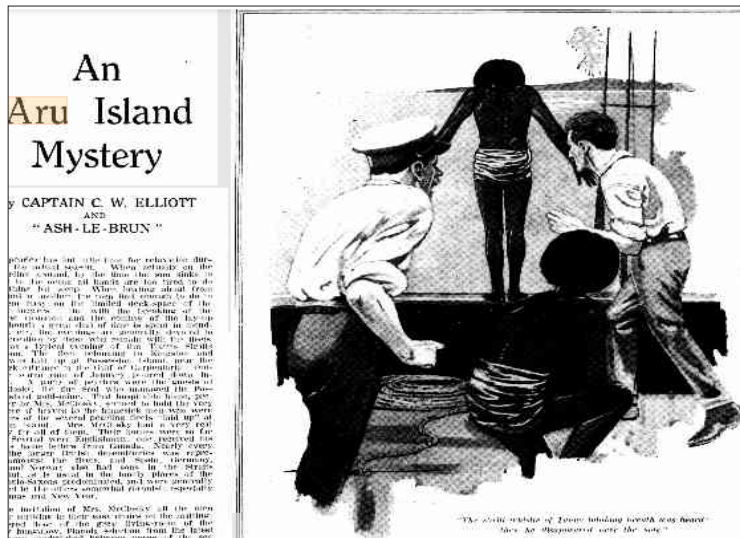


Figure 1. Caption. Source: Sydney Mail, 12 April 1922: 11, trove.nla.gov.au

PEARLS AND DEATH



Sitting on the deck of a lugger at Thursday Island, we discussed the \$2000 pearl recently found at Broome. "One cannot say how many valuable pearls are found every year in the waters around Thursday Island and Broome," said the diver. "The Japs rarely let outsiders into the know when they find a big pearl, but reveal it somewhere until they find an opportunity of sending it to a southern buyer."

Once word gets around that a diver has dropped across something valuable, his life is in danger until he disappears off his find. Scores of tragedies have occurred hereabouts owing to a diver opening his mouth too wide after finding a pearl. He even stands a big chance of being murdered by his own commandos on the lagoon before the boat reaches shore.

There was a Malay diver who found a big pearl in the waters near the Aru Islands. He showed it to the crew, and its value was roughly estimated at £2000. He carried it about with him. The following night he disappeared mysteriously—probably thrown overboard after being robbed of the treasure. We kept our eye on the crew after we returned to Thursday Island, and soon found one of our divers, who was also a Malay, throwing money about in a reckless manner in one of the gambling joints. We collared him, and he confessed that he had stabbed the diver who had found the pearl, thrown the body overboard, and had sold the pearl for £2000 to a Chinese buyer as soon as he stepped from the lugger.

"I never knew a Malay or Maubin native to do any good with a pearl after he found it. It generally went in drink, gambling, or women. The Jap is different. I've known scores of the yellow chips, who were good divers, come here at the close of the pearling season, pack up their worldly goods, and catch the first boat to Japan. When you saw them step on the gangway you could bet your life that they had dropped across something really valuable, which would realize its full value when taken to the land of Nippon." J.R.

Figure 2. Caption. Source: Smith's Weekly, 28 February 1920: 9, trove.nla.gov.au

STRANGE THINGS I HAVE SEEN

— by Ion L. Idriess —



ALTHOUGH THE SHARK is dreaded and causes far more casualties, the barracuda is the most feared fish in tropical island waters. It is called the Sea Pike, and is referred to by the Malays as the "curse of the sea." It grows up to seven feet in length. For teeth it has fangs resembling those of the crocodile, but sharp as shark's teeth. It attacks with ferocity and having drawn blood wheels back to the attack like a mad dog.

An old Malay friend of mine was disembowelled by one of these brutes when skin diving for shell off the Aru Islands. At birth it was foretold that he would die by the sea. But he took a lot of killing. In Broome waters tangled in the flukes of a whale's tail. The whale bolted, but the man's life was saved by a miracle. Three times he had been attacked by sharks; he lived through three cyclones, had been wrecked and clung to a spar for nineteen hours. His adventurous life deserved an easier end than disembowelling by the "Curse of the sea."

Figure 3. Caption. Source: Gippsland Times, 29 September 1937: 6, trove.nla.gov.au

Aru in the off-season.⁹ But at the beginning of 1933, CTC operation is already showing great concern over Japanese presence near Aru.¹⁰ This was later confirmed when colonial administrator visited the *Achterwal* and found 14 Japanese pearling vessels working just outside of the 3-mile limit from Aru.¹¹

9) Letter from N.V. Compagnie Commerciale Schmid en Jeandel to the Resident of Amboina, 8 May 1931, ANRI, Archive of Inventory Algemeene Secretarie Serie Grote Bundel Besluit 1891-1942, No. 3671

10) Letter from N.V. Compagnie Commerciale Schmid en Jeandel to the Governor-General of Netherlands East Indies, 25 March, 1933, ANRI, Jakarta, Archive of Inventory Algemeene Secretarie Serie Grote Bundel Besluit 1891-1942, No. 3671

11) Verslag van een gedane zeeonderzoek naar den achterwal der Aroe-eilanden met de

Victor Clark, an Australian Pearl Master argued that their work in Aru Islands was a mean to reduce the numbers of pearls being ‘poached’ by the Japanese (*The Evening News*, 28 December 1933: 2).

This spirit to successfully outcompete against the Japanese also produce some counterintuitive results. Increasing competition among pearlers increased the risks of diver’s death. Luggers from Australia, Aru Islands, and Japan work near one another and compete each other divers’ ability to quickly dive and search for pearlshell (*The Mail*, 9 November 1935: 2). Quick movements when ascending made divers especially vulnerable towards paralysis, hence creating a deadly cycle of competition and death. Situation such as this even caused many laborers to protest for a higher wage from £23 to £25 per ton of pearlshell they collected (*The Telegraph*, 3 March 1936: 9). Even further, overexploitation in Aru forced some of the CTC fleet to search for extra shells in the New Guinea islands after the pearling season in Aru has ended (*Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 29 June 1937: 12). Although the exact data on how much of the pearlshells has decreased is still in need of further research.

Ultimately, the bond between these two pearling worlds culminated in the special news segment called “Dobo News” or “Dobo News Items” which came from a correspondent in Aru to the Australian newspaper, *Northern Standard* since 1937 all the way until the 1940s. It reported everything related to pearl fishing and the activity of Japanese luggers. This close correspondence maintained any information on pearlshelling and to relay Japanese activity in the islands. By the late 1930s, Dutch authorities even began using military means to deter illegal Japanese pearlshellers, as news reporting captures and arrests made in Aru (*Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 12 May 1936: 7; *The Herald*, 19 February 1937: 3). It seems such military actions was greatly appreciated by the Australians, including when Dutch colonial forces deployed 150 military police in Aru, to deter further illegal Japanese activities (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 4 August 1936: 1).

By 1942, as global tension mounted into another World War, the Aru Islands became a target for the invading Japanese forces and after 1945, with the tumultuous conditions of Maluku, the last Australian pearling company relinquish their work in Aru. The last of these was in the early 1950s, after two Australian pearlers H.S. Cross and Carl Monsted created the Combined Trading Company and was permitted to work in Aru in 1947 (Marinez & Vickers, 2017: 134). The Combined Trading Company stopped working as Maluku was emboriled in a bitter civil war with the newly born Indonesian Republic. As of 1956, their assets were nationalized and was formed under

motorschoenen “Princess Mary” van den 24sten Maart 1935 tot en met den 2den April 1935 door den Ontvanger E.A.A. der I.U.A. te Dobo H.W.F. Meeng met den Opasser I.U.A. te Dobo A. Veerman, ANRI, Archive of Inventory Algemeene Secretarie Serie Grote Bundel Besluit 1891-1942, No. 3671

Yayasan Mutiara Maluku, which eventually discontinued the operations of pearlshelling in Aru (Nanulaitta, 2009: 144-145).

Conclusion

Australian pearlsheller expansion has considerably transformed Aru's natural resources into a sought-out commodity for the growing western market production and consumption. Naturally, industrialization of Aru's pearlshell at this period was sustained by western-mode of natural exploitation. Much of these changes occurred at a time when knowledge and imagination of Aru were widely circulated within Australian newspapers and popular magazines. This unique phenomenon not only created an imagined value for Aru's pearls but also eventually functioned to foster a trans-maritime connection with the Australian pearlshelling network.

In particular, Wallace's natural expedition left a lasting mark on Aru as an economic frontier, seemingly untouched by Western industrial exploitation. This early Western understanding of the island became a cornerstone for the incorporation of Aru into the active Australian pearl zone. Aru's supposed "remoteness" from any form of Western government rule serves to fuelled pearlsheller's desire to escape the ever-constraining Australian government policies and cementing the idea that Aru serves as a place where natural exploitations are to be expected. Its place within the collective imagination of Australians draws Aru closer into the creation of the aforementioned transnational pearl zone.

Ultimately, the allure of Aru's pearlshells came from the Western belief that Aru's natural product remained untouched and contained within this remote "exotic paradise". This perception not only fuelled the expansion of Australian pearlshelling but also serves as a narrative to advocate for the industry's right to operate without excessive government intervention. Aru became a symbol of the untamed beauty of the natural world, and its pearlshells were cherished as treasures from an unspoiled environment, making them highly sought-after in the Western market. In this way, Aru's transformation was not only a result of industrialization but also a product of the environmental and economic imagination circulating in Western publications, solidifying its place in the Australian pearlshelling network.

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