

2016

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Speedy, K. (2016) 'Arab Castaways'/'French Escapees': Mobilities, Border Protection and White Australia', *Law, Crime and History*, 6(2), pp.15-30. Available at:

<https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/handle/10026.1/8934>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/8934>

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SOLON Law, Crime and History  
University of Plymouth

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## **‘ARAB CASTAWAYS’/‘FRENCH ESCAPEES’: MOBILITIES, BORDER PROTECTION AND WHITE AUSTRALIA**

*Karin Speedy*<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

In 1901, the year of Australian Federation and the implementation of the White Australia Policy, a small boatload of suspicious, brown, Muslim men landed ‘illegally’ on the Far North Queensland coast. The reaction to their arrival on the part of locals and the authorities highlights the collision of ideologies in a space where established practices of Indigenous and non-white mobilities and openness to outsiders arriving by sea were being challenged by a new national framework that revolved around the policing of coastal borders and the restriction of movements. This article discusses the men’s gendered identities and the ways in which they were racialised and criminalised by the authorities and the press before being rejected as undesirables. In this early Federation coastal drama, we recognise the exclusionary discourses that have characterised Australia’s fixation with border security and the consequent imperative to keep out non-white others said to pose a threat to the nation on racial, religious or moral grounds. It provides yet another historical echo to the twenty-first century ‘Stop the Boats’ discourses and anti-refugee policies.

**Keywords:** (cr)immigration, racialisation, exclusion, White Australia Policy, New Caledonian *bagne*, ‘Stop the Boats’ discourses

### **Introduction**

The arrival, in 1901, on the Far North Queensland coast of a suspicious group of brown men, ‘Arabs’ in a boat, or ‘refugees’, as they were initially referred to in some headlines, provides interesting insights into the continued presence, connections and movements of non-white people in Australia, the marginalisation of that history, and the concerted effort on the part of the authorities to implement the national imperative of closing the borders to all ‘clandestine’ landings that were said to pose a threat on racial, religious or moral grounds. In her essay on liberalism and Australia’s long history of racially-based exclusion, Anne Curthoys evoked the plight of the 438 Afghan refugees on board the *Tampa* who were refused the right to land on Australian soil in 2001, 100 years after the passing of the Immigration Restriction Act 1901.<sup>2</sup> She noted the eerie echo of this nationally and internationally debated refugee ‘crisis’ with a similar decision to reject the entry of a shipload of Chinese immigrants on board the portentously named *Afghan* in 1888 and with an even

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<sup>2</sup> The Immigration Restriction Act 1901 is seen as the first legislative step in the White Australia Policy under a Federated Australian government. However, individual colonies had passed various discriminatory laws of their own prior to Federation. Ann Curthoys, ‘Liberalism and exclusionism: a prehistory of the White Australia Policy,’ in Laksiri Jayasuriya, David Walker and Jan Gothard (eds.) *Legacies of White Australia: race culture and nation* (University of Western Australia Press, 2003) pp 8-33.

earlier instance of refused entry to the *Hashemy* that was transporting British convicts to Sydney in 1849. Indeed, as she went on to demonstrate, the *Tampa* incident was entirely consistent with colonial and post-Federation Australia's tradition of excluding others 'on the grounds of race, religion, culture, or morality'.<sup>3</sup> She argued that the importance of protecting 'Australia's borders from refugees and those designated "illegal immigrants"' formed an integral part of liberal democratic society.<sup>4</sup>

Thirteen years on from the publication of Curthoys' article, attitudes to and policies against those attempting to navigate their way into 'Fortress Australia' by boat have, if anything, hardened further. Conservative Prime Minister John Howard's 2001 'Pacific Solution', a policy that had bipartisan support, dictated that any person seeking to enter Australia by boat would be intercepted and transported to offshore island prisons (Nauru and Manus Island) for 'processing'. This policy had a brief reprieve 2007-2012 under the Labor government. However, the detention centres were reopened by Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd who also signed the 'Regional Settlement Arrangement' with Papua New Guinea in 2012. Under this agreement, all asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat would be sent to Papua New Guinea where, if their refugee status was deemed genuine, they would also be resettled.<sup>5</sup> A short time later, and under intense pressure from the 'loud panic' created by the conservative Coalition against the arrival of 'crimmigrant' 'queue jumpers' on Australia's shores, he signed a similar agreement with Nauru.<sup>6</sup>

Punitive measures were amplified again when Tony Abbott's conservative Coalition government swept to power in 2013, pronouncing a zero tolerance policy toward people smuggling in their 'Stop the Boats' election campaign. Once in government, the military-led 'Operation Sovereign Borders' was implemented and the Australian Defence Force, under cover of a secrecy policy, began intercepting vessels carrying asylum seekers at sea. Many of these boats had departed from Indonesia. The operation has seen both the turning and towing back of boats out of Australian territorial waters and the continued incarceration of asylum seekers in offshore detention centres. Pivotal to the policy is the declaration that 'no irregular migrant arriving by boat will be resettled in Australia: rather, those granted refugee protection will be resettled in third countries'.<sup>7</sup> This neo-colonial framework of co-opting

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3 Curthoys, 'Liberalism and exclusionism,' p. 9.

4 Ibid, p. 8.

5 Michael Grewcock, 'Australian border policing: regional solutions and "neo-colonialism",' *Race & Class*, 55, 3 (2014) 71-78, pp. 73-74.

6 See Patrick van Berlo, 'Australia's Operation Sovereign Borders: discourse, power, and policy from a crimmigration perspective,' *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 34, 4 (2015) 75-104 for a discussion on the discourse of 'crimmigration' in the Australian border security context.

7 Ibid, pp. 2-3.

Pacific neighbours both as 'contractors' of the Australian government and as places of resettlement for unwanted 'others' has served to deterritorialise the asylum system. This move has drawn international criticism as it allows Australia to contravene the obligations of the 1951 Refugee Convention of which it is a signatory.<sup>8</sup> Intensifying discourses of the illegality and illegitimacy of the mostly Afghan, Iranian, Iraqi, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan asylum seekers, conflating them with terrorists and transnational criminals, have been used to justify increasingly draconian measures to keep them out, restrict their freedom, and violate their human rights.<sup>9</sup>

This fierce, military policing of any 'unauthorised' arrivals by boat has, as Curthoys has argued, developed out of Australia's tradition of liberalism and nineteenth century exclusionary practices which led to the promulgation of the White Australia policy.<sup>10</sup> While fears of 'degradation' to society based on white supremacist notions of the racial and moral inferiority of non-white 'others' undoubtedly drove the push to close Australia's borders, nineteenth century Australia, as has been shown in transnational historiography,<sup>11</sup> was also an 'interconnected space within a set of expansive global networks',<sup>12</sup> a centre of entwined or 'entangled' maritime mobilities and connections or even, as Tracey Banivanua-Mar has put it, a hub in the Hau'ofa inspired 'Greater Pacific'.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the mobile peoples coming to Australia's shores as travellers, traders, workers and settlers included indigenous peoples from the Pacific and New Zealand, Asians, Southeast Asians, Indians, Muslim fishermen, merchants and cameleers, former slaves from the Americas or the Indian Ocean, and Africans and Europeans of diverse origins.<sup>14</sup>

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8 Paul Hodge, 'A grievable life? The criminalization and securing of asylum seeker bodies in the "violent frames" of Australia's *Operation Sovereign Borders*,' *Geoform*, 58 (2014) 122-131. See also Andreas Schloenhardt and Colin Craig, "'Turning back the boats": Australia's interdiction of irregular migrants at sea,' *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 27, 4 (2015) 536-572, p. 572.

9 van Berlo, 'Australia's Operation,' p. 7.

10 See also Rose Cullen, 'Empire, Indian indentured labour and the colony: the debate over "coolie" labour in New South Wales, 1836-1838,' *History Australia*, 9, 1 (2012) 84-109 for an in-depth examination of the Indian labour debate.

11 See, for instance, Tony Ballantyne, 'Mobility, empire, colonisation,' *History Australia*, 11, 2 (2014) 7-37, the essays in Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (eds.) *Connected worlds: history in trans-national perspective* (ANU E Press, 2005), Marilyn Lake, 'Histories Across Borders,' in Anna Clark and Paul Ashton (eds.) *Australian History Now* (University of New South Wales Press, 2013) pp. 269-287.

12 Ballantyne, 'Mobility,' p. 9.

13 Tracey Banivanua-Mar, 'Shadowing imperial networks: Indigenous mobility and Australia's Pacific past,' *Australian Historical Studies*, 46, 3 (2015) 340-355. Placing the eastern seaboard of Australia in the 'singular frame of analysis' of the 'Greater Pacific', Banivanua-Mar is inspired by Epeli Hau'ofa's famous re-conception of the Pacific as a sea of interconnected islands that facilitated indigenous mobilities. See Epeli Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands,' *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6, 1 (1994) 147-161.

14 See, for example, Ballantyne, 'Mobilities', Banivanua-Mar, 'Shadowing', Alice Te Punga Somerville, *Once Were Pacific: Maori connections with Oceania* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), Alice Te Punga Somerville, 'Living on New Zealand Street: Maori Presence in Parramatta,' *Ethnohistory*, 61, 4 (2014) 655-669, Regina Ganter, 'Turning the Map Upside Down,' *History Compass*, 4, 1 (2006) 26-35, Sophie Couchman and Kate Bagnall (eds). *Chinese Australians. Politics, engagement and resistance*

As Australia moved toward nationhood in the late nineteenth century, the bio-political agenda to create a white settler nation became evident through both discourse and legislation.<sup>15</sup> Anxiety around non-white migration and mobilities, and fears of miscegenation<sup>16</sup> led to the production of a national narrative that ultimately whitewashed Australia's racially diverse settler population. It also played a key role in the move to pass laws that actively sought to exclude non-white and non-British 'others'. An important factor in this exclusion was the shoring up of the hitherto permeable oceanic borders; patrolling, policing and protecting the emergent White Australia from purportedly dangerous 'aliens' who could arrive (or invade) by sea. Yet, the dynamic, global networks of mobility that characterised colonial Australia did not disappear overnight. Indeed, parliamentary debates in the lead up to Federation and the passing of the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, revealed the competing desires of 'fostering a national ideology based on racial exclusivity' whilst not offending the sensibilities of a diverse British Empire.<sup>17</sup> The incident I discuss in this article illustrates wonderfully the competing tensions that have shaped modern Australia.

## 1 The Extraordinary Story of Shipwrecked 'Arabs' Hits the Australian Press

Between June 26 1901 and 1 February 1902, Australian newspapers published numerous articles on what was first framed as an 'extraordinary' drama of shipwrecked 'Arab' sailors in Far North Queensland. However, doubts were very swiftly raised as to the identities of the men and the circumstances under which they had landed on Australian soil.

Sometime in June 1901, eight men came ashore in Cape Grenville, a small peninsula situated between Shelburne Bay and Temple Bay in Far North Queensland. Their presence

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(Brill, 2015), Nadia Rhook, "'Turban-clad' British Subjects: Tracking the Circuits of Mobility, Visibility, and Sexuality in Settler Nation-Making,' *Transfers*, 5, 3 (2015) 104-122, Peta Stephenson, *Islam Dreaming: Indigenous Muslims in Australia* (University of New South Wales Press, 2010), Samia Khatun, 'Camels, ships and trains: translation across the 'Indian Archipelago, 1860-1930,' unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2012, Cassandra Pybus, *Black Founders. The Unknown Story of Australia's First Black Settlers* (University of New South Wales Press, 2006), James Badley, 'The colonel and the slave girls: life writing and the logic of history in 1830s Sydney,' *Journal of Social History*, 45, 2 (2011) 416-435.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Curthoys, 'Liberalism and exclusionism,' Cullen. 'Empire, Indian indentured labour'.

<sup>16</sup> See Rhook, "'Turban-clad' British Subjects', Ganter, 'Turning the Map', David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the rise of Asia 1850-1939* (University of Western Australia Press, 2012), Kate Bagnall, 'Across the Threshold: White Women and Chinese Hawkers in the White Colonial Imaginary,' *Hecate*, 28, 2 (2002) 9-31, Jane Carey, "'Wanted! A Real White Australia": The Women's Movement, Whiteness, and the Settler,' in Fiona Bateman and Lionel Pilkington (eds.) *Studies in Settler Colonialism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Chad Cooper, 'The immigration debate in Australia: from Federation to World War One,' *Parliamentary Library (Australia)*, (2012), available online: [http://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/ImmigrationDebate](http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/ImmigrationDebate) (accessed 12 December 2016).

was reported to authorities on Thursday Island by the passing steamer, *Omba*, whose captain had been alerted to the men's plight by the Piper Island lightship. When the steamer reached Cape Grenville, she sent a boat that was met by a Japanese pearling lugger whose master told those on board that he was returning to Thursday Island in a few days and that he would drop off the stranded men. He had supplied the men with two bags of flour and they were able to survive on that and fish. At this point, the men were assumed to be escaped convicts from New Caledonia.

The pearl lugger *Ivy* landed on Thursday Island on 25 June and the next day the men's incredible story hit the headlines. Professing to be 'Arabs' and unable to speak English, the men recounted through local Arabic-speaking interpreters a 'fantastic' story of shipwreck and survival at sea. They said that they were sailors who had left Port Saïd (Egypt) three months earlier. After sailing across the Persian Gulf, they became lost. A storm had hit their boat and they had spent eight days in the water before all reaching the shore together. They did not know where their boat had disappeared.

Suspicious arose when, under question, the men were not able to provide satisfactory answers. They claimed that they were sailors but did not know the name of their boat, where they were going, nor did they have a compass. They were not able to agree on the size of their boat with one reporting it was a small, one-masted vessel of 10 tons, another man, apparently a Spanish speaker, claimed it was a topsail schooner and another indicated that it was so large that it could carry 1,500 tons. The men were described as looking 'like Lascars'<sup>18</sup> or having an 'appearance similar to that of the firemen employed on steamers trading to the East'.<sup>19</sup> Thursday Island shipping master and sub-collector of Customs, Mr G. H. Bennett, quickly decided to hand them over to the police as vagrants.

Bennett sent a telegram to the Home Secretary in Brisbane in which he related the story of the men's arrival. He reported their names as 'Hamad, Usop, Mohammed, Ali, Lool, Mustaga, Abdul Kadir, and Gadu', names that, according to him, demonstrated that they were 'Mohammedans' and had all 'been pilgrims to Mecca'.<sup>20</sup> Despite the suggestion from the Piper Island lightship that they were runaways from New Caledonia, Bennett cast doubt on this, alleging that the men, who were 'all Arabs', 'did not appear to have any knowledge of French'.

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18 'Refugees in Torres Straits,' *Evening News*, 26 June 1901, p. 4.

19 'Supposed New Caledonian Escapees, Eight Arabs Brought to Thursday Island. An Extraordinary Story,' *Toowoomba Chronicle and Darling Downs General Advertiser*, 27 June 1901, p. 3.

20 *Ibid.*

He wrote:

If they are not escapees from New Caledonia, and I do not think they are, they must be either runaway sailors or firemen from some passing steamer, or else men who have been landed at Cape Grenville by pre-arrangement, in order to avoid the preventative regulations re the landing of aliens.<sup>21</sup>

An inquiry was launched and the mystery of the men's identities was quickly solved. They appeared before the Thursday Island Police Court on 26 June 1901 where it was shown that their tale of shipwreck was false. One man was found to have a letter containing a prisoner's name and number, postmarked in Algiers and written in Arabic except for the New Caledonian address, which was in French. Another was carrying a New Caledonian newspaper. Moreover, a witness, described as 'an aboriginal' by the name of 'Big Alick',<sup>22</sup> affirmed he had seen the men land in a creek at Temple Bay where they were drawing up a boat into the mangroves. When he called out to them, they ran off into the bush. Bennett swiftly sent another telegram to the Home Secretary stating that it was 'evident that they are escapees from New Caledonia' and consequently the men were remanded for eight days on the charge of vagrancy.<sup>23</sup>

The men were eventually sentenced to six months imprisonment in Brisbane Gaol. On 17 December 1901, shortly before their incarceration was due to finish, the French made a formal demand for their extradition. The 'Algerian Arabs' were named this time as 'Kallouch Ben Ali, Bouras Mohamed, Bel Hadj Lajerg, Allou Abdel-Kader Ben Ali, Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Bachir Ben Mohamed, Ben Abou Ben Djilali and Amar Ben Trebat'.<sup>24</sup> The warrants for the extradition of all eight men were issued and the handover to the French authorities took place in January 1902. The *Brisbane Courier* reported 'they left Brisbane under the charge of a French military warder on board the steamer *Arrawatta*, which sailed yesterday afternoon for Sydney, where the escapees will be transferred to a vessel to take them to New Caledonia.'<sup>25</sup>

## 2 The Sceptre of the French *Bagne* Next Door

Despite the somewhat entangled histories of Australia and New Caledonia in the nineteenth century and the frequent traffic between the two colonies, the proximity of the French island was a source of anxiety for Australia. Longstanding Franco-British imperial rivalries, tensions

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21 'Supposed New Caledonian Escapees. Eight Arabs Brought to Thursday Island. An Extraordinary Story,' *Brisbane Courier*, 26 June 1901, p. 5.

22 'Supposed Escapees. An Extraordinary Story,' *Warwick Examiner and Times*, 29 June 1901, p. 2. In some other reports, he is named 'Big Alex'.

23 'The Supposed Escapees. Arabs at Thursday Island,' *Queenslander*, 6 July 1901, p. 5.

24 'Extradition of Supposed French Escapees,' *Brisbane Courier*, 17 December 1901, p. 3.

25 'French Escapees Extradited,' *Brisbane Courier*, 1 February 1902, p. 4.

surrounding the balance of power in the Pacific and, most importantly, the establishment of a penal colony there in 1864, made New Caledonia into something of a *bête noire* for Australia.<sup>26</sup> In her examination of official and popular Australian attitudes to New Caledonia's penal colony, Jill Donohoo has highlighted the moral panic it engendered in a society emerging from its own history of transportation. This 'post-convict shame' teamed with the imagined perils posed by escaped foreign prisoners, played an important role in the shaping of Australia's focus on border security in its fledgling foreign policy as it moved towards Federation.<sup>27</sup>

Between 1864 and 1897, the French sent over 21,000 people,<sup>28</sup> from the metropole and from its colonies, to the *bagne* in New Caledonia. Of these, 2,106 were 'Arabs', a term employed by the French from 1830 to designate Arabic-speaking Muslims in North Africa.<sup>29</sup> The overwhelming majority of these prisoners (94%) hailed from the French colony of Algeria.<sup>30</sup> While the *déportés*, political prisoners captured and sent to New Caledonia after a series of revolts against French rule in Algeria, have traditionally served as the face of this group<sup>31</sup> and have been the subject of some fascinating research into the transplantation of Arab-Berber culture in the Pacific,<sup>32</sup> they actually formed the minority of 'Arab' convicts. Mélica Ouennoughi estimates that around 350 men were sent as *déportés*, including 120 from the famous 1871 Kabyle uprising led by Cheikh El Mokrani. The others, participants in earlier and later revolts, were sent on ships carrying common criminals (*transportés*) or

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26 See, for example, Elizabeth Rechniewski, 'The Perils of Proximity: the Geopolitical Underpinnings of Australian Views of New Caledonia in the Nineteenth Century,' *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 12 (2015), available online:

<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/portal/article/view/4095> (accessed 12 May 2016).

27 Jill Donohoo, 'Australian Reactions to the French Penal Colony in New Caledonia,' *Explorations: A Journal of French-Australian Connections*, 54 (2013) 25-45.

28 Louis-José Barbançon, *L'Archipel des forçats: Histoire du bagne de Nouvelle-Calédonie (1863-1931)* (Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2003) p. 17.

29 According to Mohamed Benrabah, 'Arab' became 'the colonial ethno-type of the *indigènes* and in colonial representations this pejorative word connoted the pathological fear of Islam which goes back to the Crusades'. Mohamed Benrabah, *Language Conflict in Algeria. From Colonialism to Post-Independence* (Multilingual Matters, 2013) p. 27. The French invaded Algiers in 1830 and embarked on a long and bloody conquest to bring the surrounding territories under their control.

30 The others were also *Maghrébins* (North Africans) but from Morocco or Tunisia. For figures see: Jean-Claude Farcy, 'Liste des "Arabes" transportés, déportés et relégués en Nouvelle-Calédonie (Louis-José Barbançon),' *Criminocorpus*, (2011), available online:

<https://criminocorpus.hypotheses.org/3499> (accessed 12 May 2016).

31 See Mehdi Lallaoui, *Kabyles du Pacifique* (Au nom de la mémoire, 1994), Michel Collinet, 'Les Arabes en Nouvelle-Calédonie,' *Bulletin de la Société d'Études Historiques de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, 36 (1978) 1-33, Lew Priday, 'New Caledonia is a Place of Many Exiles,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 March 1954, p. 7.

32 See Mélica Ouennoughi, *Les déportés maghrébins en Nouvelle-Calédonie et la culture du palmier dattier: (1864 à nos jours)* (L'Harmattan, 2006).



repeat offenders (*récidivistes*).<sup>33</sup> The vast majority of North Africans, however, were sentenced to hard labour and transported to New Caledonia for common-law crimes.<sup>34</sup>

While there is a body of literature on New Caledonian escapees to Australia, the focus has been mostly on the 'Frenchness' of the arrivals. Clem Lack, for instance, made no mention of 'Arab' escapees,<sup>35</sup> nor did Donohoo or Pierre-Henri Zaidman<sup>36</sup> and although Russell Brennan and Jonathan Richards noted the 'numbers of Arabic [sic] men' amongst the 'European fugitives' from New Caledonia, they did not expand on this observation.<sup>37</sup> However, in the context of the newspaper reports on the 1901 case, the essentialised 'Arabness' of the men was to the fore. They were variously painted as 'Arab Castaways', 'Mysterious Arabs', 'Arab Refugees', 'Shipwrecked Arabs', 'Arab Romancers' and 'Wily Arabs'.<sup>38</sup> As 'Arabs', 'Mohammedans' and escaped convicts from the French penitentiary in New Caledonia, these unfortunate maritime arrivals seemed to epitomise the racially, religiously, culturally and morally different/dangerous 'other' that White Australia perceived as such a threat to its embryonic nationhood.

### 3 Reception of the 'Arabs' by the People of the North

A close reading of the newspaper reports suggests that the initial reception that the men received from the multi-ethnic locals and seamen in Far North Queensland was not one of immediate distress. Alerted to their presence by the Piper Island lightship, the captain of the steamer *Omba* attempted to rescue the men but a Japanese pearler had already provided them with sustenance and eventually took them to Thursday Island. Once there, their inability to speak English did not hamper them from telling their 'remarkable' tale of survival at sea as Arabic and Spanish speakers were able to interpret for them.

This part of the story highlights the fact that this northern corner of Australia was far from the reserve of white Anglo-Celtic occupation. It was instead a racially diverse community that

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33 Mélica Ouennoughi, 'Les déportés maghrébins en Nouvelle-Calédonie. Naissance d'une micro-société (de 1864 à nos jours),' *Insaniyat*, 32-33 (2006) 53-68.

34 Farcy, 'Liste des "Arabes".'

35 Clem Lack, 'The Problem of the French Escapees from New Caledonia,' *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, 5, 3 (1954) 1046-1065.

36 Pierre-Henri Zaidman, 'Les condamnés de Nouvelle-Calédonie en Australie et en Nouvelle-Zélande,' *Criminocorpus*, (2010), available online: <http://criminocorpus.revues.org/176> (accessed 15 April 2016).

37 Russell Brennan and Jonathan Richards, "'The Scum of French Criminals and Convicts": Australia and New Caledonia Escapees,' *History Compass*, 12, 7 (2014) 559-566, p. 559.

38 'Arab Castaways. Remarkable Tale of the Sea. From Port Saïd to Thursday Island,' *Register*, 26 June 1901, p. 5, 'Mysterious Arabs. Supposed French Escapees,' *Telegraph*, 27 June 1901, p. 5, 'The Arab Refugees,' *Evening News*, 28 June 1901, p. 6, 'The Arab Romancers,' *Express and Telegraph*, 27 June 1901, p. 3, 'Wily Arabs. A Cock and Bull Story. Probably Escapees from New Caledonia,' *Register*, 27 June 1901, p. 5.

had strong links to Asia and the Muslim world through its history of Indigenous networks and trade. Regina Ganter has described the importance of the Macassan trepang (sea slug) trade in northern Australia and the cultural, religious, linguistic and biological impact of the Muslim Macassan fishermen on the Indigenous peoples of the area. From around 1720, men from Makassar (in present-day Indonesia) began landing in the north and developing connections, trade and family bonds with the Yolngu people. Through the trepang trade, Indigenous Australians 'were linked in trade with China well before the British colonists' in a network that reached through the Dutch East Indies and around the port cities of Southeast Asia. They also maintained extensive trading links through the Torres Strait with the New Guinean mainland.<sup>39</sup> The pearling industry saw further diversification of the population with Pacific Islanders, Japanese, Filipino, Indonesian, Malay and Chinese workers living in the region. These mobile, non-white labourers also left a lasting imprint on local society, intermarrying with Indigenous women and forming mixed communities.<sup>40</sup> The appearance of eight 'Arab' Muslims in this society was thus neither terribly unusual nor perceived as a threat.

While there were no more than 'a handful' of 'Arabs' on Thursday Island at the time of the first census in 1885,<sup>41</sup> the landing of the North African Arabic-speaking escapees did not, at least according to the newspaper reports, cause communication problems. The local Arabic speakers who served as interpreters could have been the 'Arabs' mentioned in the census or they may have been Muslim Malays or Indonesians who had studied Arabic or who had been involved in trading with Arabic-speakers in the complex web of trading connections throughout Southeast Asia. Filipino divers no doubt interpreted for the Spanish speaker, further underscoring the multilingual nature of the island. Yet, alongside this apparent facility of interaction with the Algerians on the part of the sailors and local workers and an unruffled reaction to their arrival, there is a competing thread of tension and mistrust running through the newspaper articles. This unease focuses our attention on the foreignness and dark complexions of the men and reads these and their unannounced appearance as forcibly criminal.

#### **4 Where Two Worlds Collide**

The story, in fact, portrays a society on a collision course. It is one where established practices of Indigenous and non-white mobilities and openness to outsiders arriving by sea

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39 Ganter, 'Turning the Map,' pp. 28-29.

40 Ibid, pp. 29-31 and Julia Martinez, 'Indigenous Australia-Indonesian intermarriage: Negotiating citizenship rights in twentieth-century Australia,' *Aboriginal History*, 35 (2011) 177-195.

41 Ibid, p. 182.

were being challenged by a new national framework that revolved around the policing of coastal borders and the restriction of movements. The emergence of the latter, which, in the north, coincided with increasing white settlement from the 1880s, would ultimately erase the former from national memory, creating a metanarrative of Indigenous isolation prior to European colonisation. Moreover, in this new national order, the sea as bridge metaphor was transformed into one of sea as barrier, exposing a vulnerable White Australia cut off by both water and distance from the so-called centre of the world (i.e. Europe).<sup>42</sup>

Embodying this nationalist agenda was G. H. Bennett, the Thursday Island customs officer.<sup>43</sup> As instruments of the state, customs officers taxed and harried the non-British fishermen and traders in the north, making their businesses unprofitable.<sup>44</sup> They also served as the eyes and ears for any sniff of illegal entry into the country. Their task was supported both by the pre-existing networks of communication between the Indigenous people, fishermen, traders and sailors and by the more recent state maintained surveillance measures employed around the coast and at sea.

In the newspaper reports we note, for instance, the interplay of the coastal and seaborne networks. News of the 'shipwrecked' men was brought to Thursday Island by the steamer *Omba*. The captain had received intelligence from the Piper Island lightship of the men's location and had heard of their condition and imminent arrival from the master of a Japanese pearl lugger. The enquiry then turned to an Indigenous informant for damning information concerning the men's furtive behaviour - hiding their boat and running away into the bush - when they were spotted. Big Alick's testimony demonstrates how local/Indigenous people were drawn into the nationalist web to act as agents of the surveillance state. His participation in the watching of the shore mirrors the activities of the *police indigène* in New

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42 See, for example, Ganter, 'Turning the Map,' pp. 28-29, Ballantyne, 'Mobilities,' p. 16.

43 In addition to his customs duties, George Harpur Bennett was the Thursday Island 'Protector of Aboriginals'. This position was instituted following the 1897 Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act. In this role he reported on movements and activities of Indigenous people to the Northern Protector of Aboriginals who then reported to the Home Secretary. Bennett, obviously enthusiastic about his work, took it upon himself to restrict contracts made to 'Aboriginals' on Thursday Island to six months (instead of twelve) thus decreasing the number of desertions. He was also constructing a 'patrol boat' to keep further check on those employed on boats on 'the eastern coast of the peninsula'. See Walter E. Roth, 'Report of the Northern Protector of Aboriginals for 1899,' 1 July 1900, available online: [http://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/docs/digitised\\_collections/remove/63371.pdf](http://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/docs/digitised_collections/remove/63371.pdf) (accessed 18 May 2016).

44 Eventually, the government would ban the Macassan trepang trade in 1906. See Ganter, 'Turning the Map,' pp. 27-28.

Caledonia, a Kanak police force that kept a sharp look out for escaped convicts who they would track and pursue for a bounty.<sup>45</sup>

The circulation of the story itself occurred through the modern network of telegraph cables and reached the wider public via newspapers. Bennett cabled the story to the Home Secretary in Brisbane from where it rapidly made headlines across Australia and in New Zealand by way of overland and undersea cables.<sup>46</sup> The story eventually reached Fiji by steamer in August (the cable between Australia and Fiji was not installed until 1902) where it was reported in *Na Mata*, the Fijian language newspaper.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, while communication between Brisbane and New Caledonia was facilitated by the 1891 installation of an undersea cable, news of the men's evasion had not reached Bennett on Thursday Island showing that, despite claims it would make escape almost impossible, the modern communication network was not infallible.<sup>48</sup>

## 5 Orientalist Projections of the Guardian of the Coast

In his role as guardian of the coast, Bennett was immediately sceptical of almost every aspect of the escapees' (admittedly ill-prepared and conflicting) story. He was quick to racialise the men, conflating them with the soon to be outlawed 'Lascars' or 'firemen employed on steamers', other undesirable, brown, Muslim sea folk that Queensland had attempted to ban from working on mail carriers in 1897.<sup>49</sup> His initial dubiousness as to the possibility that the men had escaped from New Caledonia suggests that he was operating more on alarmist, Orientalist<sup>50</sup> assumptions in his construction of the men's identities than much intimate knowledge of the racial landscape of the New Caledonian *bagne* or of Islam.

Bennett's assertion that the names of the men showed that they had all been to Mecca, for instance, seems ill-informed. It reveals either Bennett's own anxiety or his desire to create

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45 Zaidman, 'Les condamnés'.

46 See, for instance, 'A strange tale,' *Bay of Plenty Times*, 28 June 1901, p. 2.

47 *Na Mata*, August 1901, pp. 116-117. This article has no headline. I would like to thank Alice Te Punga Somerville for alerting me to this story in *Na Mata*.

48 Brennan and Richards, "'The Scum of French Criminals,'" p. 563.

49 The British government vetoed Queensland's law but in 1901, White Australia as a nation pursued the exclusion of this 'coloured labour' from the mail steamers, claiming Lascars posed a national security risk. The Post and Telegraph Bill, containing the amendment to exclude non-white carriers, was passed on 4 October 1901. See Cooper, 'The immigration debate,' pp. 11-16.

50 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon, 1978). Erin Claringbold has noted the anti-Islamic, Orientalist discourse concerning the presence of Muslim 'Afghan' cameleers that was rife in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Australia. 'Afghans [like Indigenous Australians] were conceived via a similar strategy of othering in the White Australian imaginary - their supposed barbarism, cruelty, and racial inferiority used to evidence white superiority'. Erin Claringbold, 'The lascivious Afghan and the threat of "brown babies",' *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, 9, 2 (2013), available online: <http://www.acrawsa.org.au/files/ejournalfiles/200Claringbold203121.pdf> (accessed 31 May 2016).

moral panic given the fears engendered by the assumed opportunities for the spread of dangerous (anti-colonial) ideas among mobile Muslim subjects of European empires.<sup>51</sup> There is in this a striking parallel with the twenty-first century discourse on Muslim 'radicalisation'. In fact, none of the names he listed included 'Hajj', the title bestowed upon Muslims who have completed their pilgrimage to Mecca.

The names themselves raise other questions. If some of them (Hamad, Mohammed, Ali, Abdul Kadir) are recognizable and Mustaga is likely a typographical error for Mustapha, Usop, Lool and Gadu do not resemble 'Arab' or Algerian names. It may have been that the significant differences between Maghrebi dialects and other varieties of Arabic<sup>52</sup> made communication between the men and the local interpreters (whose ethnicity we do not know) more problematic than Bennett had implied. Or, perhaps more likely, Bennett, ignorant of Islamic names, made transcription errors when recording the oral information passed on to him. It is also possible that some of the Algerians had some knowledge of Classical or Literary Arabic which would have rendered communication with non-Maghrebi Arabic speakers practicable. They might then have deliberately given unusual or false names to the authorities to conceal their real identities.

When the French sought the men's extradition in December 1901, the names that they supplied to the Australian authorities were quite different. Some of these names match prisoner records held in the *Centre des Archives d'outre-mer*: Kallouch ben Ali, sentenced in 1894; Allou Abdelkader ben Ali, sentenced 1894; Bachir ben Mohammed, sentenced 1893 and Ben Aouda ben Djilali, sentenced 1893. There are three records for men named Mohamed ben Ahmed,<sup>53</sup> one was sentenced in 1889, another in 1890 and the third in 1893.<sup>54</sup> All of these men were classified as *transportés* or common law criminals. The other names are not listed perhaps due to the problem of inaccurate and inconsistent transcriptions. The French recorded Indigenous names in an approximate, often deformed

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51 As European powers gained more and more Muslim 'subjects', they feared that the annual pilgrimage might favour the spread of politico-religious discourses that would challenge their hegemony in their colonies. See Sylvia Chiffolleau, 'Le pèlerinage à La Mecque à l'époque coloniale : matrice d'une opinion publique musulmane?', in Sylvia Chiffolleau and Anna Madoeuf (eds.) *Les pèlerinages au Maghreb et au Moyen-Orient: Espaces publics, espaces du public* (Presses de l'Ifpo, 2005) pp. 131-163, p. 131. These fears travelled well and, as discussed above, found their echo in Australia's emerging national ideology.

52 There are significant linguistic differences across the many varieties of Arabic spoken in the world to the point of mutual unintelligibility in a number of cases. Even within the Maghrebi Arabic, which has a Berber substrate, there are important variations. See Lotfi Sayahi, *Diglossia and Language Contact: Language Variation and Change in North Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) p 25.

53 There were other prisoners with the same name but they had died before the 1901 escape.

54 Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer (CAOM): FR ANOM COL H 1482, FR ANOM COL H 1464, FR ANOM COL H 659, FR ANOM COL H 1467, FR ANOM COL H 202, FR ANOM COL H 1489. The author will be exploring further questions related to the men's identities in a forthcoming publication.

manner and these transcriptions could vary between administrators.<sup>55</sup> Mistakes could also have been made in the transmission of the information to the newspapers or it may be that records for those particular prisoners have been lost or destroyed.<sup>56</sup> Whoever the men were, Bennett read their dark otherness, their racial, cultural, religious and linguistic differences as signs that they were 'aliens', probably criminals, and certainly contravening border laws. As such, they were not welcome in the exclusively white nation that was being fashioned. He declared the men to be vagrants and handed them over to the police.

As Zaidman has pointed out, the New South Wales Vagrancy Act 1851 was used as a provisional catch-all to prosecute escaped prisoners from New Caledonia.<sup>57</sup> It was also legislation that supported liberal philosophies favouring fixity of habitation and property ownership over temporary relationships to place and mobility. Itinerant populations in colonial and early Federation Australia were represented as morally depraved and uncivilised and charged with vagrancy.<sup>58</sup> Bennett's decision to invoke the Vagrancy Act to deal with men of uncertain identities found wandering on the secluded shores of Far North Queensland can thus be seen as following the logic of the national ideology.

## 6 Linguistic Assumptions

What, then, should we make of Bennett's contention that the men did not speak French and were not therefore likely to be escapees from New Caledonia? It seems consistent with his Orientalist framing of the men for him to fail to imagine that 'Arabs' and 'Mohammedans' could speak French. Of course it was in the men's best interests not to speak French in front of their captors if they wished to maintain their fiction of shipwreck and hide their fugitive

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55 See Benrabah, *Language Conflict* pp. 30-31 for details on how the imposition of a registry office in 1882 led to the violent infliction of 'an alien system of patronymics' upon the Muslim Algerians by the French colonisers. The law obliged Algerians to forgo traditional Algerian naming systems which showed generational identity and instead use a single surname for the whole family. These abridged surnames were transcribed in approximate ways into Latin script.

56 Ouennoughi, 'Naissance d'une micro-société,' p. 54 mentioned that a number of documents relating to the deportation of prisoners were damaged either in France during WW2 or in New Caledonia due to flooding. None of the men's names feature in Ouennoughi's *Les déportés maghrébins* pp. 317-354 lists of *déportés* (political prisoners) who were sent to New Caledonia.

57 Zaidman, 'Les condamnés'. The Australian colonies had all adopted vagrancy laws that were based on the Vagrancy Act 1824 (An Act for the Punishment of idle and disorderly Persons, and Rogues and Vagabonds, in that Part of Great Britain called England, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo4/5/83/enacted> (accessed 11 Dec 2016)). When Queensland separated from New South Wales in 1859, the 1851 NSW Vagrancy Act remained in operation until Queensland introduced its own legislation in 1931, see Andrew McLeod, 'On the Origins of Consorting Laws,' *Melbourne University Law Review*, 37, 103 (2013) 103-142, p. 126. See also Tamara Walsh, 'Defending Begging Offenders,' *Queensland University of Technology Law and Justice Journal*, 4, 1 (2004), 58-76, p. 58. For details on how vagrancy laws were used to punish, control and criminalise 'nuisance' populations in Australia see Julie Kimber, 'Poor Laws: a Historiography of Vagrancy in Australia,' *History Compass*, 11, 8 (2013) 537-550.

58 See, for example, Rhook, "'Turban-clad" British Subjects', pp. 112-113.

status. But how likely would it have been that none of them spoke a word of the coloniser's tongue?

In Algeria, many Arabic and Berber-speaking Indigenous people employed passive cultural 'resistance-refusal' in the face of French linguistic imperialism. This took shape particularly in their refusal to allow their children to attend French schools. When the French invaded, many Algerians were literate in Arabic having a long established Islamic schooling system. The French sought to replace this with schooling in French. While some, particularly in urban settings, did choose to send their children to the bilingual French-Arabic schools that had been set up, many other parents saw the French system as a 'civilising' endeavour to drive their children away from Islam and opted not to let their children attend. Eventually, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the settler (*ped-noir*) administrators blocked the Indigenous population from accessing French education fearing the potential for political empowerment. In the meantime, the traditional Islamic schooling system was being challenged and undermined by the French.<sup>59</sup>

Taking into account the dates that the men were sentenced and the fact that they would have spent several months in a French prison before being sent to New Caledonia in ships with other French convicts, they would have spent between seven and eleven years in French detention. This alone would make it unlikely that the men had no knowledge of French. On the information we currently have, we cannot be sure whether or not they spoke any French in Algeria. However, their ability to communicate with Thursday Island Arabic speakers and the letter and newspaper that they were found to have in their possession suggest that some of them may have attended an Islamic school and learned Classical or Literary Arabic and some may have had some schooling in French.

Indeed, the written texts are both intriguing and tantalising details in this story. The letter in Arabic underscores the circulation of texts from North Africa to the Pacific. One is immediately curious as to the letter's contents and the relationship between sender and addressee. While we know that the writer was literate, we can only speculate as to whether the recipient was. We do know that it was postmarked in the capital Algiers and, extrapolating from this, we can infer that if the recipient was from there too, he would have been more likely to have had some access to education in Arabic and French than a rural dweller.<sup>60</sup> If it is easy to imagine that a letter from home might be the kind of prized

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<sup>59</sup> See Benrabah, *Language Conflict* pp. 31-35.

<sup>60</sup> From 1850, the French established 'écoles musulmanes françaises' (French Muslim schools) in the main urban centres and in 1862, they created 'écoles arabes françaises' (French Arab schools) in

possession an escapee (literate or not) would take with him, one wonders what the purpose of the New Caledonian newspaper was? Was it to be read? Was it a souvenir? Was it for some other more practical purpose such as starting a fire? Naturally, these questions cannot be answered on the basis of the information in the newspaper reports but if it was taken to be read then we have to assume that at least one of the men was literate in French.

## **7 Keeping the Other Out: Cementing an Enduring National Prerogative for Border Protection**

The texts along with the evidence supplied by Big Alick were enough to convince the Thursday Island police court that the men were not Arab sailors. They were, in fact, criminals, escapees from the dreaded penal colony across the sea, not just racially and religiously transgressive but also, as convicts, morally corrupt. The press, true to their supporting role in the creation of the exclusionary national narrative, were not slow to highlight the additional undesirable and frightening qualities of the men who had arrived illegally by boat. Along with their construction as the dark, Muslim, 'Arab' other, they were referred to as 'New Caledonian Escapees', 'Convicts from New Caledonia', 'Fugitives from New Caledonia', 'French Algerines' and 'French Escapees'.<sup>61</sup> They thus presented a nightmarish vision which merged 'Arabness', 'Frenchness' and roaming criminality that politicians bent on a white supremacist agenda could use to frighten the populace.

This coastal drama, unfolding in 1901, the year of Australian Federation and the passing of the Immigration Restriction Act, throws the spotlight on a moment in history when the dynamic and complex global networks of northern Australia were being interrupted by the prerogatives of a developing national narrative that demanded fixity over mobility and the closing and policing of borders to keep out the alleged danger posed by invaders by sea. The 'invaders' in this case were a small group of Algerian men, escaped prisoners, who, despite their unfree status, were mobile, crossing oceans and imperial and national spaces. As such, they were perceived as dangerous to the new White Australia, a liberal democratic society so desperate to hide its own less than lily-white past. Despite its history of convict

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the same cities. These bilingual schools were frequented until the 1880s but were eventually replaced by 'écoles spéciales aux indigènes' (Schools for Indigenous children) where instruction was only in French. See Kamel Kateb, 'Les séparations scolaires dans l'Algérie coloniale,' *Insaniyat*, 25-26 (2004), available online: <http://insaniyat.revues.org/6242> (consulted 25 May 2016).

61 'New Caledonia Escapees. At Thursday Island,' *West Australian*, 27 June 1901, p. 4, 'Convicts from New Caledonia Land on Thursday Island,' *Bendigo Advertiser*, 27 June 1901, p. 2, 'Suspected Fugitives from New Caledonia. Thursday Island,' *Argus*, 27 June 1901, p. 6, 'French Algerines. Thursday Island,' *Bendigo Independent*, 27 June 1901, p. 2, 'French Escapees. Eight Arab Prisoners,' *Telegraph*, 16 December 1901, p. 2, 'French Escapees Extradited,' *Brisbane Courier*, 1 February 1902, p. 4.



transportation, Australia as a nation had no sympathy for those fleeing a similar system and chose to incarcerate the men in Brisbane, collaborate with the French authorities and hand them over to the New Caledonian military warder who had come to take them back to their island prison.

In the case of the 'Castaway Arabs' or the 'French Escapees', the fledgling nation did not quite 'stop the boat'. However, in the way that the foreign men arriving by sea were racialised and criminalised by the authorities and the press before being rejected as undesirables, we recognise yet another historical echo of twenty-first century discourse on border security and the alleged threat posed by brown, non-Christian, 'crimmigrant' others attempting to land on Australia's closely guarded shores.