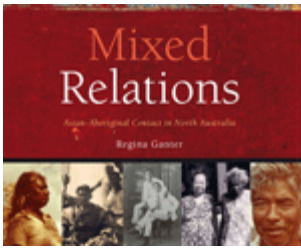


Mixed Relations: Asian-Aboriginal Contact in North Australia by Regina Ganter. Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2006, pp. xv + 280, \$A54.95 Hardback, ISBN: 1 920694 41 2.



In this fascinating and lavishly illustrated book Regina Ganter challenges one of the central tenets of Australian history teaching during the first half of the twentieth century: that immigration was exclusively white European during the era of the ‘White Australia Policy’. She shows that this was not the case in the northern part of Australia. Indeed, Ganter suggests trade between Aborigines and Macassans from modern-day Indonesia may have begun as early as the 1720s. After Britain established control over northern Australia other Asian peoples came as immigrants, including Afghans, Chinese, Japanese, Malays, and Timorese. Northern Australia became a polyethnic society with significant intermarriage between the various ethnic groups. White officials tried hard, but unsuccessfully, to prevent the growth of a mixed race Aboriginal-Asian population. This world came to an end as a result of World War II, when northern Australia’s non-white majority were seen as a threat to the Commonwealth’s security. The Australian military evacuated a substantial proportion of the non-white inhabitants and destroyed their homes and businesses. Ganter observes ‘White Australia’ only became a reality in northern Australia after World War II.

Northern Australia’s polyethnic society is atypical of the countries of recent British white settlement. The closest parallel is the Hawaiian Islands. Polyethnicity was partly a reflection of the fact that the harsh environment of northern Australia discouraged white settlement. It also partly reflected the impact of white people on Aboriginal societies. Single Asian traders often filled a gap in societies, replacing adult male Aborigines who had been killed by white sojourners or soldiers.

On the whole, it would appear relations between Asians and Aborigines were relatively harmonious. However, Ganter does observe that some of the Aboriginal accounts suggest that the early contacts with Macassan traders may not have always been peaceful. She also says oral histories suggest that some Aboriginal communities in the nineteenth century in the north of Western Australia did not make Macassans welcome. Furthermore, a few of the oral histories suggest some Aboriginal communities rejected mixed race family members. This book is a major contribution to the historiography of northern Australia.

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