

## **Dutch shipwreck survivors' legacy etched in faces of kin**

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The craggy cliffs and surging waves of Western Australia's coastline hold the secrets of a Dutch diaspora, an unwritten history- of shipwrecked mariners whose genes may have brushed the faces of Kathy Kickett and her younger sister Lilly.

Their mother Rachael Mallard says her 79-year-old father Bill, and his father before him, handed down stories of their Nanda tribal ancestors encountering stranded Dutch mariners. They moved in with their people and produced offspring with fair complexions and blue or green eyes.

Fifteen-year-old Kathy says she loves her freckles - "they make me unique to other people".

"But I always wondered why my family was so light-skinned. I asked my Pop, and he said: 'People were wrecked at Kalbarri.' So now I know I'm a Yamatji from my mum's side and a Nyoongar from my dad's, and I have Dutch in me." The mariners - possibly as many as 200 survivors from a dozen wrecks lying north and south of the present-day port of Geraldton - came off Dutch East India Company (VOC) vessels.

The ships were using the Roaring Forties trade winds to shorten the voyage to Indonesia's spice islands-. But with longitude measuring devices still in their infancy the ships often overshot and hit submerged reefs along the state's midwest coast.

In October, the West Australian and Dutch governments will mark the 400th anniversary of VOC captain Dirk Hartog landing at Shark Bay in 1616, the first European to set foot on the western shores of Australia.

Four hundred years later, the red hair, freckles and rare genetic traits of Aboriginal families like the Mallards will feature in Dutch Diaspora: The Orphans of the VOC/Dutch East India Company, an international photographic and anthropological exhibition that will tour four countries.

Photographer Geert Snoeijer and migration historian Nonja Peters-, from Curtin University in Perth, have collated images and oral histories from dozens of Aboriginal Australians. They were assisted- by a Dutch government cultural fund that promotes mutual heritage.

But the exhibition, which begins its tour at the Western Australian Museum in Geraldton in November, will also feature the faces of indigenous South Africans and Indonesians who share ancestry from Dutch East India Company mariners.

"The idea behind this project is a symbolic reconnection to a partly lost identity that dominates the lives of large groups of people," says Snoeijer, a former lawyer who now travels the world with his camera.

"My interest started a long time ago when I photographed New Yorkers proud of their descent from Dutch pioneers in the 17th century. I became interested in this more intangible heritage, but it's not about Dutch pride or triumphalism.

"I think it's interesting to see what migration and colonisation does to national identity," he says. "It's fascinating that you can see traces of that on the faces." Dutch-born Peters, a child migrant to Australia who was decorated by The Netherlands' royal family for her Dutch migration research, says the exhibition highlights intriguing aspects of an under-researched era in Australia's history. She cites the shipwreck in 1656 of the Gilt Dragon, or Vergulde Draek, which saw 75 sailors land on the shore at Ledge Point, just 98km north of present-day Perth. "There were seven men sent in a rowboat back to Batavia to raise the alarm, but when rescue parties returned, they couldn't find any sign of the remaining 68 men." The only clue was a circle of planks with their ends planted in the sand. "Those 68 men disappeared without a trace, but it in effect delivered the first permanent, large-scale arrival of Europeans in Australia." The Goede Hoop ship sent to rescue them stranded another 11 men; they too disappeared.

Says Peters: "Many things have been researched - the ships, the wrecks, the objects inside - but nobody has really ever researched what happened to the people." Yet evidence exists. Two Gilt Dragon survivors wrote pleading letters for help that were safely delivered to VOC authorities in Indonesia. But it was only last year that an amateur researcher, Steve Caffery, tracked down the existence of the letters - dated May 5 and 7, 1656 - in Cape Town's historic archives.

"There's no doubt in my mind that there are Aboriginal descendants here," he says. "The circumstantial evidence is overwhelming that the Dutch did arrive, they didn't leave and they did breed."

## **REMEMBERING DIRK**

Dutch East India Company skipper Dirk Hartog made the first recorded landfall by a European on the West Australian coastline His vessel, the Eendracht, moored off the coast of Shark Bay, on October 25, 1616 Significantly, Hartog left the oldest evidence of European contact on our continent by nailing an engraved pewter plate to a wooden post This October, a major commemoration to mark 400 years of Dutch-Australian contact will bring senior Dutch and Australian officials, and possibly members of The Netherlands royalty, to Shark Bay