

Broome's oldest surviving pearl diver Akira Masuda reflects on the 'dangerous job'

ABC Kimberley / By Hinako Shiraishi

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Every day, Akira Masuda sits outside the Roebuck Hotel in Broome. *(ABC Kimberley: Hinako Shiraishi)*

In a town and a pub that have no shortage of characters, Akira Masuda stands out.

The 88-year-old former pearl diver — a veteran of the trade that defined much of his hometown's identity — Mr Masuda is a fixture on the balcony of Broome's "Roey" Roebuck Bay Hotel.

He says a 5-o'clock beer is part of a routine and philosophy for a good and happy life.

Every day, Mr Masuda sits outside the Roey, nursing his beer and watching patrons mingle in and outside the bar.

Some people give him a nod with a "Mate" while others recognise him as the man who is always at the pub at the same time, every day.



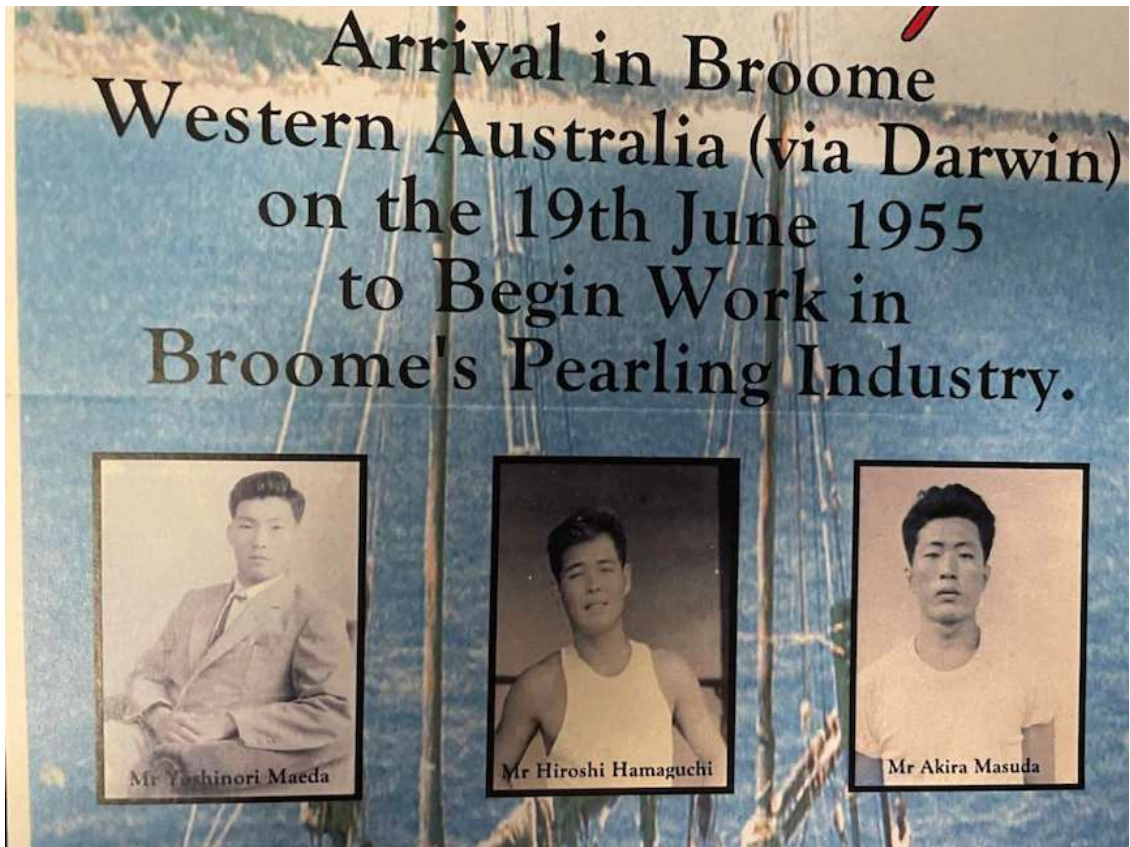
Akira Masuda is well known among locals after living in Broome since his 20s. (ABC Kimberley: Hinako Shiraishi)

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A new life as pearl diver

Mr Masuda is somewhat of a local hero.

He moved to Broome at 21, leaving his hometown of Taiji in Japan to seek a new life with friends Hiroshi Hamaguchi and Yoshinori Maida.



A 50th anniversary poster of Mr Masuda (right) and his friends arriving from Japan.
(Supplied: Pearl Hamaguchi)

The dangerous nature of the pearling industry required divers like Mr Masuda and his friends to don suits weighing up to 180 kilograms and constantly battle strong ocean currents.

Encounters with underwater creatures provided some of Mr Masuda's most striking memories.

"As a diver, it was a dangerous job," he said.

"You had to be careful if you work on the boat because there are plenty of dangerous things, like the sharks and the sea snakes."

Mr Masuda described hitting his heavy diver shoes against the rocks to deter predators.

"[It] made a loud sound and the sharks would hear that and run away," he said.



A chest plate was bolted onto a canvas dive suit before the brass helmet was screwed on. (*ABC Eyre Peninsula: Jodie Hamilton*)

Many divers' lives lost

Mr Masuda spoke frankly about the secret to making it through the pearling industry.

"You need to be the right body type for the ocean pressure, otherwise you lose your life," he said.

"About 900 bodies were buried in the Japanese cemetery here."

Mr Masuda said his body type was close to ideal for diving.

"I wasn't that fat so my body was fit for the ocean pressure, [but] if your body didn't fit... you had better quit as a diver," he said.

While working on the pearling luggers with a mix of cultures, Mr Masuda picked up how to speak Malay.

"From the people on the ships, five were Japanese and there was a Malay crew of four people ... Malay's easy to learn," he said.

Mr Masuda soon met his wife Evelyn, a Broome local, who worked in the hospital kitchen and they had eight children.



Mr Masuda, centre, next to his wife, when King Charles visited Broome in 1979. (*Supplied: State Library WA*)

Holding on to culture

Although he has been in Broome since his 20s, Mr Masuda still enjoys the comforts of the country where he was born.

"I had a lot of Japanese books, because they were sent by my family," he said.

"They're still at home but I think they're about 20 years old and I've read them to death."

Japan's Ambassador to Australia Shingo Yamagami paid tribute to Mr Masuda and other Japanese-Australian residents during a visit to Broome earlier this year.

"I was so moved to see the old generation of Japanese people who came all the way to Broome," Ambassador Yamagami said.

"I'm so impressed with their perseverance and dedication to their work and commitment to Australia ... becoming a great bridge between Japan and Australia."



Japan's Ambassador to Australia visited Broome and met Akira Masuda (fourth from right). (Supplied: Embassy of Japan in Australia)

A 'racist' history

The pearling industry, with its [acknowledged record of slavery and blackbirding](#), sits in a complex position for Broome and the wider West Kimberley's traditional owners.

Nyamba Buru Yawuru Research Office curator Sarah Yu specialises in local Broome history.

Ms Yu said the divers were brave and faced [decompression sickness, known as the bends](#), as well as "extremely claustrophobic conditions".

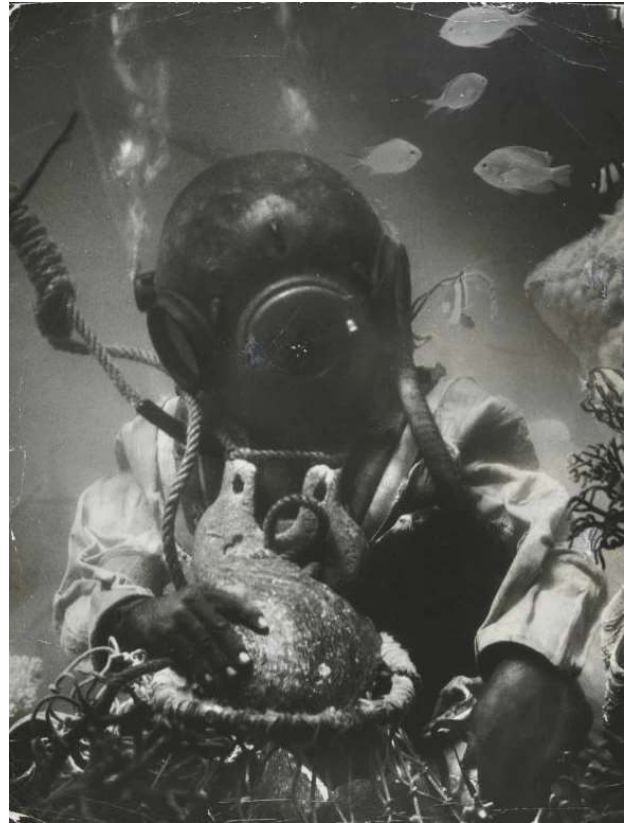
"I don't think I've ever heard of a diver who never suffered the bends," she said.

"Back then, they just would go back down in the water and hang for a period of time to allow the nitrogen to pass through."

Ms Yu said people like Mr Masuda were a critical link to the history of both the Kimberley and wider Australia.

"He's representative of a culture of people who contributed to the industry from the late 1800s," she said.

"They also lived in terribly racist periods where they didn't have rights."



A diver's cumbersome helmet, suit and boots were heavy and sealed tightly. *(National Library of Australia: Frank Hurley)*



Mr Masuda shares tales of his years as a pearl diver among "plenty of dangerous things". *(ABC Kimberley: Hinako Shiraishi)*

Ms Yu said her father-in-law experienced the same discrimination.

"[He] was one of the Chinese divers who worked after the war and I think it took him about 50 years to get his citizenship, even though he was married and had children," she said.

"They were not well recognised by the authorities, and they were treated like indentured labour.

"There are lots of people in Broome with family members who were divers, and they've all got their own story."

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