



## **The Idea of Minicoy: Nineteenth Century Writers on an Indian Ocean Coral Island<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

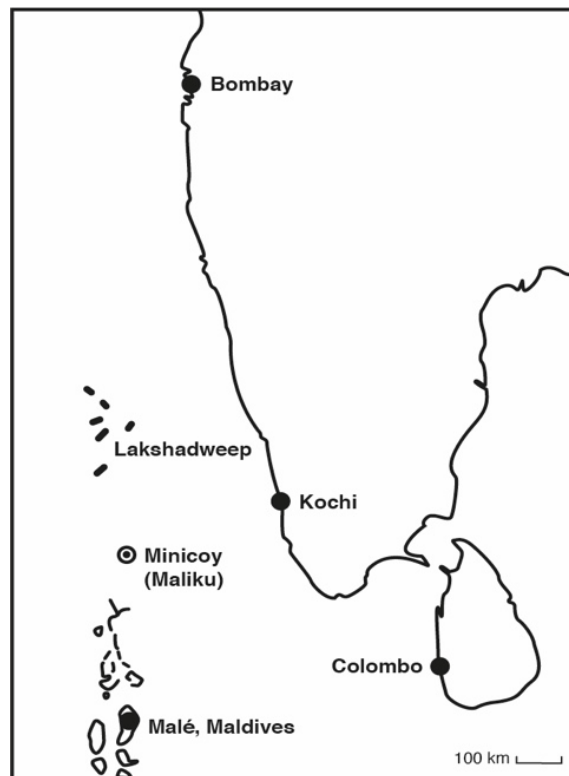
Minicoy received international recognition in 1882-83, when the authors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica published the following text, quoted here as an excerpt:

Minicoy (called Málíku by the natives), a small island 6 miles in length, 108 miles south of Kalpéni and 68 miles north of the Maldives, belongs politically to the Laccadives in so far as it forms part of the estate of the bibi of Cannanore. The natives, however, are of the same race and speak the same language as the Maldivians. [...] The people are well behaved, but of a very independent character [...]. (Yule 1882-83)

The description of the island's inhabitants, the Malikun, in the Encyclopaedia Britannica as 'well behaved, but very independent' cannot be understood other than belittling. The authors and editors of the encyclopaedia do not reflect on the question, who has the right to represent others. The accentuation of physical skills of the Malikuns or the praise of the rapid adaption of European navigation techniques may be intended as well-meaning statements but places the observer-cum-writer in a higher position. However, it must be acknowledged that the paternalistic attitude of European scholars has diminished in the twentieth century. The Encyclopaedia Britannica of 1963, the first issue after Minicoy joined the newly formed State of India in 1956, Minicoy can be found under

"Laccadive Islands" with a short note that they speak 'Mahal (akin to old Sinhalese)' (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1963: 562f.), with no further mention about their character and behaviour.

**The location of Minicoy in the Indian Ocean.**



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Figure 1, source: Frank Heidemann.

Today Minicoy, hereafter Maliku, marks the maritime boundary of South-West India. Totally 10,444 people (Census 2011) live on a landed area of less than five sq. km, but most of the working men spend several months in a year as seamen in international waters. Others are fishermen; they catch tuna with pole and line, which is marketed as Maliku or Maldivian dried fish in India and Sri Lanka. Coconuts, which grow in the south of the island, were once a major export item. They still grow in the south of the island but lost their economic importance. The islanders' language, Mahal, is very close to standard Dhivehi as spoken in Malé and the northern Maldives. In addition, most people know Hindi from movies and from their work as seamen, and Malayalam, because it is taught at school. The islanders make use of the regular ferry service, which connects to Kochi, where more medical and educational facilities are available.



The island was once a part of the Maldives and has a long and complex history. Islanders and archaeologists found an ancient stone anchor, Buddha heads and an elephant bone, which are kept in the Minicoy Museum. Of unknown origin are human-made caves with arches from flat coral stones and a long human-made wall at the east shore to protect against storms and high waves. In 1153 the people of the Maldives converted to Islam and were ruled by the Sultan in Malé. Since then, the people of Maliku, hereafter "Malikun", have been following the Sunni tradition. Cultural influences from Sri Lanka, Gujarat, Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, and South-East Asia are inscribed in language, culture, and social system. Sometime around the year 1500 C.E. the island fell under the control of the Ali Rajas of Cannanore, who were subdued by Tippu Sultan, the ruler of a large territory around Mysore. In 1799, when British troops defeated the army of Tippu Sultan, the Indian Ocean Islands became part of British India. The Ali Rajas were permitted to control the southern land of the island conditioned upon an annual tribute to the British. In the course of the nineteenth century the influence of the Cannanore rulers diminished and the British administration took over.

The positive, or even famous image, of the Malikun as perfect boat builders had already been mentioned in writing at the beginning of the Portuguese rule in India (Barbosa 1515). The idea of Maliku as a special island can also be found in the account of Francois Pyrard de Laval, who shipwrecked in the Maldives in 1602, stayed as a privileged prisoner in Malé and other islands, learnt Dhivehi and escaped via Maliku in 1607. In his book-length account he fills just half a page on his two days visit. The island, he writes, 'is now governed by a lady, who holds it of the king of Cananor, for the sake of greater security. The queen gave me a very good reception, for she had often seen me at the court of the king of the Maldives, her near relative.' (Pyrard 1980 [161]: 323). The description of a Muslim Island with a female ruler, 'wonderfully fertile [...] coco-trees, bananas, millet, and' where '[t]he fishery is very good' (ibid.: 323) was published in French, and an English translation was edited by Albert Gray and H.C.P. Bell in 1887.

After his visit no substantial reports on Maliku can be found in European texts for more than two centuries. No doubt, many ships from South India travelling to the Maldives or crossing the Indian Ocean on the East-West route were visiting Maliku. But I could not find traces of eyewitness in published texts and unpublished manuscripts. One exception is a short note of the surveyor John McCluer in his 'Continuation of the Description of the Coast of Malabar' (1791). He made a short visit to Maliku, and reports about the lagoon and the reef, which 'forms a kind



of *Harbour*' (McCluer 1791: 19). About the Malikun he writes: 'The People appeared very civil to the Officer who went in on a boat and offered any thing their *Island* afforded [...].' (ibid.: 19)

The idea of Maluku as an ideal place with a lagoon suitable as a harbour, abundant fruits and coconuts, good fisheries and hospitable islanders was supported and widely spread in the nineteenth century. Especially in the second half of the century several representatives of British India and other Europeans measured the landmass, studied the lagoon, counted the people, investigated in the origin of the islanders, and wrote about the economic and social life. Their descriptive or narrative accounts construct the Malukuns in most positive terms and as friendly islanders (like McCluer quoted above), but descriptive texts are never neutral and manifest a power relation. Writing about a place, a time or an event is always "representation" in the double meaning of the word: first, it is a description of something absent, or "speaking about", and secondly, acting as a representative, or "speaking on behalf", "speaking for".

**Map of Minicoy according to Basevi  
1872.**

**Photograph of Minicoy  
from ISS.**

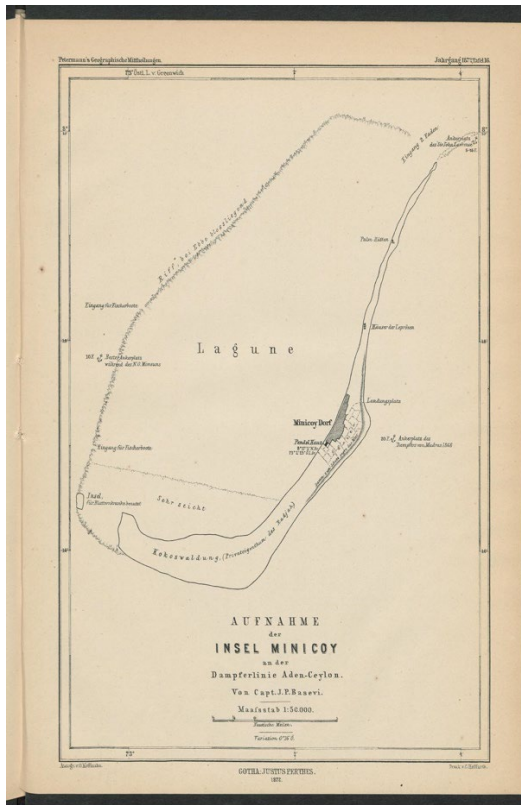


Figure 2, source : Uni Jena<sup>2</sup>

Figure 3, source: Wikipedia<sup>3</sup>.



There has been a long and heated debate in social anthropology about the ethics of representation (Spivak 1994), about the strategies and styles of writing (Clifford & Marcus 1986), and the implication of creating the cultural other, or "othering" (Fabian 1983). Reflecting the own style of writing went along with a re-evaluation of classical monographs. George W. Stocking's project "observers observed" and Clifford Geertz's critique of Lévi-Strauss, E.E. Evans-Pritchard and others (Geertz 1988) created a new awareness of publishing. Ethnographies lost their innocence, writing became a political act, embedded in colonialism, enlightenment, or post-colonialism. Also, ethnographic texts, written to honour and respect the host society, were never free of a power relation: the writer controls the image of those s/he writes about. At the same time, each writer leaves traces about himself or herself. The view on the cultural other is always shaped by the author's perspective. In this essay, my perspective is that of a social anthropologist, interested in the people of Maliku and those who wrote about them. I shall quote extensively from what they claim to have seen. I shall not discuss the passage to Maliku, the weather conditions, the flora, fauna, and maritime world, which is included in the text corpus. My focus is on the nineteenth century writer's observation of social life and the way in which they presented their idea of Maliku.

### **Visitors and authors**

A first view into the early texts on Maliku makes obvious: All writers (except one person, Chappu Menon)<sup>4</sup> were white men. They came to the island with a task, they were in charge of something and exercised control and power. I shall look into their background and to offer a contextualised review of their texts as encounters between European visitors and the inhabitants of a coral island. In a nutshell: I shall focus on the questions: Who wrote about Maliku in the nineteenth century, and what did they write? The text corpus was produced by 14 authors.

List of authors on Maliku in the nineteenth century in the order of the visits:<sup>5</sup>

1804 - Dr. John Leyden, medical doctor, humanist, naturalist, writer

1835 - Robert Moresby inspected the Maldives and noted down what he heard about Minicoy

1847 - William Robinson (1848)

1858 - Edward Thomas, Special Assistant Collector



## FORUM

1869 and 1887 - W. Logan, Subcollector, here quoted as Logan (1889)

1869 and 1887 - Captain J.P. Basevi, mathematician, surveyor

1870 and 1877 - H.M. Winterbotham, Special Assistant collector,

1881 - V. A. Brodie, special assistant collector

1885 - C.W. Rosset, researcher and collector of ethnographica

1885 - Bartholomeusz, medical officer at the time of the construction of the lighthouse

1885 - Fritz Sarasin, researcher and collector

1880 - Cappu Menon, B.A., in British Colonial service

1891 - A. Alcock (1902), medical doctor and naturalist

1898 - J. Stanley Gardiner (1899; 1902) zoologist, marine-biologist

The first author, Doctor John Casper LEYDEN (1775-1811) met 'several intelligent natives' (Leyden 1805, cit. in Vilgon 1991-98: 59) from Maliku on his way from Travancore to Pooloo Penang in 1804. He began his journal with the statement: 'Few places of India have so completely escaped the observation of intelligent Europeans as the Maldives and Laccadives.' (ibid.: 59) With great detail he summarises the sociology, economy and history of Maliku, its fauna, demography, and language from the verbal information he received on board. Maliku, he writes, is under the authority of the Ali Rajas, but a part of the Maldives. The unsettled situation, it seems, did not work against the Malikuns. The Ali Rajas protected the island from pirates and collected an annual tribute. The Malikuns continued their trade, enjoyed their free movements on the ocean and could receive relatives and royals from the Maldives.<sup>6</sup> Another author, who did not visit Maliku, was William ROBINSON in 1847. The representatives of the Ali Raja stopped him on his way to the island and so he noted in his report what he could hear and read.

Six authors, who stayed longer and published in more detail, need to be introduced before we refer to their works. James Palladio BASEVI (1831-70) participated in surveys of India and invented new methods to measure territories. His short account of Maliku and a map of the island were published post-mortem. Oliver BARTHOLOMEUSZ was the medical officer in Maliku when the lighthouse was built from 1882 to 1885. He offers many first-hand observations and reports in great detail. Carl Wilhelm ROSSET (1851-1923), a German scholar, collector, and dealer of





ethnographica, undertook, on behalf of the British Government, an expedition to Ceylon, the Maldives and Maliku 1884-86. Rosset, who had seen many local cultures, concludes that there was no other pre-industrial society, where he enjoyed his stay more than among the friendly and obliging people of Maliku (Rosset 1885). His German writings do not offer significant insights different from the English texts and will not be translated for this essay.

William LOGAN (1841-1914) was a Scottish officer of the Madras Civil Service and collector of Malabar at the time of his visit in 1869. Unlike most other European visitors of Maliku, he knew Malayalam and also Tamil. He published extensively about South Indian people, religion, caste and culture; the title of his work on Maliku is "Minicoy - The Island of Women" (Logan 1889), a text written for a larger readership. Logan was impressed by the self-conscious and hospitable women, who received him with a large delegation and gifts. Bartholomeusz also stressed the motive 'island of women' (like Logan 1889: 197), who 'are more free and social' (Bartholomeusz 1885: 22) and 'are good natured and kind towards each other, and love their children.' (ibid.: 22)

Alfred (William) ALCOCK (1859-1939), zoologist and naturalist, sailed with the Royal Indian Navy around India for four years and dedicated a chapter of his Monograph (1902) to Maliku. Later he became the Superintendent of the India Museum in Calcutta, an elected member of the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge and was made a C.I.E. (Order of the Indian Empire). His account joins the positive tone of the earlier reports. 'And of the people in general, it must be said that they have frank and friendly manners, and look wonderfully healthy and happy, and that altogether they are a credit to their clean little island.' (Alcock 1902: 198) J. Stanley GARDINER (1872-1946), zoologist and pioneer in the study of coral reefs, stayed on Maliku for 13 weeks in 1899, at that time fellow of the University of Cambridge. He conducted marine observations and lived in a bungalow in the shadow of the lighthouse but fell ill after five weeks of documentation. He left us few but important notes on the islanders in the neutral tone of a natural scientist.

These authors<sup>7</sup> have in common that they established a direct relationship with the islanders. They had different backgrounds as surveyor, medical doctor, art collector, administrator, scientist, zoologist, but they shared the background of the time they lived in. At the beginning of the nineteenth century slavery was banned, but not erased from the mind-set of colonial actors. Ideas of colonial expansion and Christian superiority, but also of enlightenment and naive adventurism were part of the public discourse. All these orientations can be found in the visitor's



texts. None of the writers refers to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, but this novel was part and parcel of over-sea travellers of that time. It seems, that all authors came to Maluku on a free will and experienced a generous hospitality. In different words and genre, they stress the extreme cleanliness of roads and houses and picture a harmonious society, industrious people, a great seafaring tradition and an unusual social system, which honours women and follows a matrilineal descent.

The remaining seven authors came as members of the Indian Colonial Administration. V.A. BRODIE opens his 'report on the Laccadive Islands visited by me in accordance with your orders during the months of January, February, and March' (Brodie 1881: 1) and stayed on Maluku from March 17-21. His, and the reports of Robert MORESBY (1835), H.M. WINTERBOTHAM (1870, 1877), and MENON (1880) follow the reporting style of their time, containing what they have heard or considered as facts. Their reports will not be quoted below because they had little contact with the islanders. Large parts of the texts are copied from their predecessors. Fritz SARASIN (1859-1942) visited Maluku from January 11-18 in 1885 with the steamer from Colombo which supplied the material and staff of the newly built lighthouse (Sarasin). His five pages chapter in his monograph on his travels and research in Ceylon does not offer many insights but is another marker of Maluku on the academic world map.

### **An administrator's arrival**

William Logan's monograph 'The island of women' had a wide circulation. He visited Maluku 1869 and 1887 in January, when the sea is calm and the temperature not as high as in April and May. In this season, the lagoon can be reached easily through one of the channels by rowing boats. When he visited the island, most seamen were at home, because they depend on the monsoon winds and leave their home later in the year. Logan begins his text with a long and detailed description of the cast of their anchor, which did not hold, and the ship was 'helplessly adrift on the Indian Ocean' (Logan 1889: 209), for two long hours, until the vessel was under steam again. He makes a detailed description of the natural environment, winds and currents and the animal kingdom. The passage of the last hours of his arrival on the island begins with details about the men and their boats.

The men themselves are smart, active, sinewy fellows, with no spare flesh about them. They are dressed in brilliantly coloured pantaloons, and each wears a coarse goat's-hair girdle round his waist, pendent from which hangs a regular seaman's knife hooked





to the girdle by a solid silver twisted wire. Their jackets are of various makes and of various materials; and on their heads, in addition to the orthodox skullcap of the Muhammadans, they wear some of them brilliantly coloured handkerchiefs—others have helmets of European patterns, much battered by rough usage—and one in particular, the skipper of the boat, has a well-worn military forage-cap, with a stiff projecting brim to it to shade his eyes. (ibid.: 211)

The clean sharp stems of the boats show to great advantage as they approach under full sail. Those boats can sail, it is very evident; moreover, they are prepared to meet with heavy winds—for line above line of reefing-points can be seen flying freely in the breeze as they approach. The number of lines seems extraordinary, for when the last reef is taken in there can be but a foot or two of the sail left above board to sail with. And yet the men evidently know perfectly well what they are about and can be trusted to put no more reefs in their sail than are absolutely required for navigation. [...] The sail is of finely plated matting (made of coconut leaves [FH]), with a quaint device or two in black on the outside. (ibid.: 209)

(T)hese Minicovites have evidently learnt the art of boatbuilding; and as the boat lies over under the huge press of sail, we feel that we are safe as in a house ashore, thanks to the great beam and deep keel with which the boat is furnished. (ibid.: 211)

The smart handling of such a big boat is interesting and pretty to watch, and as we become better acquainted with the boat and boatmen, our admiration of both increases. [...] But at last we have weathered the narrow entrance through the reef, and for the last time the helm is put down, the boat comes round, and running free, we glide swiftly in towards the reef. [...] The channel narrows as we approach the first guiding beacon, a cairn of poles kept in an erect position by laboriously piling round their butt-ends, resting on the hard limestone-rock, the pieces of the coral wrenched from their places by the waves, and thrown broadcast by them during the heavy weather of the south-west monsoon season. It is a laborious business keeping these narrow channels open, and on the day appointed for the purpose the whole of the male population of the island assembles to perform the task. (ibid.: 212)

They are born seamen, these Minicoy islanders, as we shall presently learn. [...] (N)ative boats are now distinguishable lying at anchor in the lagoon opposite the little township. Island-built, island-rigged, and manned by smart island-seamen, familiar with the use of the sextant and European navigation tables, these boats set out on trading voyages annually—to the Maldives, to the Malabar coast, and Colombo, and farther still, to the Bay of Bengal. (ibid.: 206)

The style of his writing resembles ethnographic monographs from the first half of the nineteenth century. The quotation above is full of appreciation and respect. The reader can sense the enthusiasm of Logan arriving at the island. No doubt, Logan appreciated his stay in Maliku and his writing is both, the proof of his presence on the island and a homage to



the people, who were his hosts and subordinates.

### **The islanders and their villages**

There has been a significant population growth on Maliku, much higher than in the Indian mainland. (In the twentieth century, the growth in the island was much smaller compared to India in total.) According to the Bentley Report from 1795 'the population consists of 400 families of 2000 persons.' (Bentley 1795: 1) According to the census data the population grew from 2,800 (in 1876) to 3,195 (in 1881) and 3,730 (in 1891). The smaller number of 3,098 in 1902 remains unexplained (Ellis 1924: 109). There were no reports of any immigration of individuals or groups, but a small number of seamen settled in South Asian harbour cities, mostly with the intention to return to Maliku one day.

All villages in Maliku are concentrated in the middle of the northern half of the island. Their boundaries run almost parallel from west to east and mark the shortest line from the lagoon to the open ocean in the east (sketched in Basevi's map, 1872). Each village appears like a thin slice of the landmass. There were no physical markers of the village boundaries, but social boundaries and matters of political representation left no doubt to which village each household belongs. It is a symptomatic fact, that most authors spoke about "the village", because they appeared as one physical unit. There was a concentration of houses on the lagoon side, where the fishing boats land and where the catch is distributed on the beach. North of the villages was a leper colony, in the words of Alcock, a 'remarkable aptitude for self-government.' (Alcock 1902: 201) As a medical doctor he was asked to visit the place, found 'thirteen miserable human beings, who, when they saw me, prostrated themselves on the ground with the most piteous gestures of supplication.' (ibid.: 202) They complained about starvation, but after Alcock's investigation he found out, 'that a supply of food was deposited periodically on a certain ominous boundary-stone [...]. There was no guard anywhere near the village, and no sort of watch seemed to be set upon the lepers [...].' (ibid.: 202)

Each village had a headman and a head woman. They were elected or nominated in each location in the "women's house", *varangi*, and the "men's house", *attiri*. *Varangi* and *attiri* were and are most important centres for the social life of the village, economic activity, and political decision-making. Logan explains the village houses of women and men as follows: 'Our interpreter begins to explain that there are ten *varângis* in the island. [...] (A) female institution peculiar to Minicoy; at least we have met the organisation nowhere else. *The ladies are organised*



*separately from the men, who again are organised into attiris.'* (Logan 1889: 308, emphasis in original) A varangi

is a rectangular structure, with one gable-end open; round the three enclosed sides runs a low divan edged off with wood; divan and floor are beaten hard and worn smooth by naked feet; rows of cowrie-shells have been let into the hard surface of the floor and divan in elegant curves and figures. There are one or two small-barred windows, and on the walls hang sundry flaming pictures, in the native style, of impossible heroes and heroines in the gaudiest of colours, varied by a stray picture or two from some illustrated English newspaper; and interspersed among these are various bits of mirror, sure proof that the Minicovite female society is not indifferent as to its looks. The floor and divan are strewn with the coir fibre and yarn, in process of manufacture. (ibid.: 312)

The men [...] of the two lower castes are similarly organised into attiris. Each attiri selects its own headman and has its own meeting-house—a thatched wooden erection on the shore of the lagoon. There the men congregate to do the work of the community; the carpenter plies his instruments of carpentry; there they are shaved by the barber; it is there that they collect to debate on public questions, to cut the exquisitely elaborate, fancifully designed tombstones in vogue in the island, to haul up the boats as soon as the fishing season is at an end, and also the island vessels when their voyages have been completed, and they are hauled up to be placed in shelter for repairs during the monsoon months. (ibid.: 313)

### **Status groups**

There were four status categories in Maliku. Several authors called them caste or compared the social system to the Indian caste-system, because they were (1) hierarchically ordered, (2) associated with a particular economic specialisation and were—besides exceptions explained below—(3) endogamous. These three structural similarities were also found in the Maldives, where the "old caste system" has vanished in the last two centuries (Maloney 1980: 291ff.). But in the Maldives and in Maliku an essential quality of the Indian caste system was conspicuous by its absence. The South Asian ideology of purity, the most powerful factor to explain the status of a person, was missing in the islands. In India the association with any kind of pollution like death, blood, animal skins or even the removed hair in the barber's shop, was unknown. The four groups lived in close neighbourhood and there was no untouchability on the basis of purity in Maliku.

The four status categories are usually described by a division of labour and associated with privileges and rights. The highest category, *bodun* (or often referred to by a name suffix Manikfan), are the owners of ships



and landed properties. The second, *niaming* (or referred to as Malmis), are captains and navigators. The third, *medukembin* (or Takkrus), work as crews on ships or are fishermen. The fourth, *raverin*, harvest coconuts and produce jaggery and artifacts from coir.<sup>8</sup> But the division of labour was not as differentiated as on the mainland. All women in Maliku, except the bodun, produced coir-ropes and mats. Every man in Maliku knew several crafts and could build his own house. There was no status group for blacksmiths, for carpenters, for tailors, for barbers etc. In older writings, and most likely in a long historical process, the first category was associated with Koyas and the last with Melacheries, both castes common in Kerala (Ellis 1924: 76).

The first and the last category worked on land and were supposed to stay on the island, while the second and the third category worked on boats. Therefore, the major hierarchical division was also on the boat, the workplace of the largest section of the male society (Kattner 2007, 2010). In the 1880s the number of households for the first category were 17, the second 36, the third 302, and the fourth 207 (Logan 1889: 312). In other words: The upper two status groups, who were in control of the means of production and the maritime knowledge constituted about 10 per cent of the households, and the families, whose males worked on ships and climbed coconut trees totaled about 90 per cent of the households.

Social respect was expressed in a form similar to South India and Ceylon: lower status groups kept some physical distance from higher categories, especially in the narrow roads; they stood up while talking to higher categories and used a respectful form of address; higher status groups had the privilege to wear certain cloths and wooden sandals, therefore they could be heard while approaching in darkness. Inter-dining and intermarriages were permissible between the first two and the last two categories and between the two middle ones.

The most striking quality of the social system was the matrilineal aspect of the kinship system and the social status of women. After marriage a woman stayed in the maternal household. Her husband used to visit her in the evening and moved back to his maternal home before sunrise. He took care of both households. But his children belonged to the wife's house, i.e. her matrilineal line. Likewise, the property was inherited in a matrilineal order, from mother to her daughters. The nineteenth century text mentions the impact of women on local affairs, their freedom to move and to decide their own matters. The society in Maliku, as visitors described them, existed only in this island. It was not another version of a known society, but a unique social system in its own rights.



### Dresses and ornaments

Dresses as public markers of identity are mentioned in most of the texts. They indicate the status of a person in her or his phase of life, the belonging to a particular group or location, and also the quality or circumstances of an event. Logan observes: 'Although Muhammadan by religion, they are all unveiled and bareheaded.' (Logan 1889: 307) The most detailed description of apparels is from Bartholomeusz. In his words:

The dress of the women seems to be peculiar to this and the Maldive Islands. It consists of a cloth worn round the waist and kept in position by a silver girdle; and over this a long loose tunic, "libbas", reaching from the neck to a little above the ankles, with sleeves up to the wrists. The collar of the tunic is beautifully embroidered with threads of different colours, and has a slit and button on either side instead of in front or at the back. All classes of women and girls wear this tunic, and they look very decent and modest in them. They are made either of silk or some less costly material, according to the social position and means of the wearer. Only two colours are used, and they distinguish the upper from the lower caste women; that worn by the former is read with black stripes, and the latter yellow with black or brown stripes. (Bartholomeusz 1885: 21)

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Detailed descriptions of men's wear are conspicuous by their absence, apart from Logan's notes mentioned before. Bartholomeusz, too, does not elaborate on this aspect. He states that '(t)here is nothing very peculiar in the costume of men' (ibid.: 24) and continues to briefly describe accessories and caste-related differences. Another aspect hardly mentioned in the nineteenth century sources is the footwear. We know from narratives of elderly Malikun that up to the middle of the twentieth century footwear was another strong indicator of social status. The upper two status groups had the privilege of wearing wooden sandals with the audible effect of indicating their arrival. There were no lights in the narrow streets and in the nights one person had to give way to another when both passed the same lane. Other than in South Indian societies, it was not the aspect of purity and pollution, which required social distancing. In Maliku it was a question of status and respect to give way to a superior category and abstain wearing their type of dress. Bartholomeusz observes:

The low caste woman wears a set of three bangles on each arm; they are made of brass, are spiral, and extend from the elbow to the wrist, tapering from top to bottom. The high caste woman wears a set on each arm made of silver, and extending from the wrist to the elbow. [...] The united weight of all the bangles worn on each arm amounts to about three lbs. [...] They wear several ear-rings like the Moorish women of Ceylon, about eight or ten



along the border of each ear. Nose rings are unknown among them, and finger-rings are very little used. [...] (Over their hair) they wear a blue silk kerchief when fully dressed. [...] All of them go in largely for painting [...] their eyebrows and the borders of their eyelids [...]. The paint is a thick, tarry substance, of an intense black colour, and is said to be prepared from burnt almond shells or frankincense. (ibid.: 21f.)

### **Houses and house names**

The house was the basic unit of Maliku society. Like in many other languages the term "house" was used for a physical structure and a social unit. A "house" in Maliku referred to a singular house or to a small number of buildings within the same compound. The boundary was either fenced with mats from coconut leaves or made from coral stones. Each house had a name. Until today, people of Maliku are identified by their personal name in combination with their house name.<sup>9</sup> Houses were

[...] built of cocoanut and jungle wood, and roofed and walled with the platted leaves of the cocoanut [...]. The better class houses are built of small slabs of solid coral, and mortar made of coral, lime and sand. The doors and panels, which are elegantly carved, are made of wood imported from India and Ceylon. [...] Every house has a verandah, and a porch, called the "hundoligha", or swing house. In the centre of this porch [...] is a large swing cradle [...] (Bartholomeusz 1885: 29).

A typical feature of the houses are the swinging cots, which we find until today in some Maliku houses and on verandas. Referring to the houses of the well-to-do families, Logan writes:

The most noticeable feature about them (the well-to-do houses [FH]) is the number of swinging cots hanging from the rafters of the verandahs, each cot having a set of thick cotton mosquito-curtains, which effectually provides such privacy as the Minicovites desire. Each daughter of the house has her own cot, occupied by herself and her husband when he is at home. The cots are made to swing, and so to keep the air in motion to prevent mosquitoes—surely there are nowhere mosquitoes so numerous or so bloodthirsty as those in Minicoy—from attacking the occupants of the cots while the mosquito-curtains are up. The children of the house have swinging cots of their own. The cots themselves are plain slabs of wood, of various patterns and devices, covered with gay quilts, and hung by a rope at each corner to the beams and rafters of the roof. A low railing runs round the edge of the bed, to keep things from falling off it, and there is considerable room for a display of taste in the colouring, carving, and laquering of the rails. A few large wooden bins for keeping grain, sundry very handsome grass mats for the floor or to serve as dinnercloths, a chair or two of European pattern, a box or two, and perhaps a table, complete, along with flaring native pictures on the walls, almost the whole of





the furniture. The wealth of a family is shown in tasteful carvings of verandah pillars and doors and windows, and in various cornices and brackets on the walls. (Logan 1889: 313f.)

### **Boats and ships**

The visitors of Maluku were impressed by the boatbuilding, seafaring and fishing skills of the islanders. Fishing boats (mass boats – *dhoni* and *lanchi*) and trading boats (*odies*) anchored in the lagoon in front of the villages. Water vehicles were the objects of aesthetic expression, and no other material object marked the division of labour and separation of sexes with more precision. Men worked on the boats and ships, and women processed the catch of the day or worked with the cargo from the mainland. In Maluku, not unlike other islands, the harbour was the visiting card of the locality. Success, wealth, order, and taste were inscribed in the fleets at anchor; and the number and size of wharfs were further indicators of the island's maritime quality.

The lagoon of Maluku near the villages is a wonderfully shaped and safe harbour with a narrow entry at the north and more entries of smaller size in the west and south (map of Basevi 1872). The location of the villages was the best choice, because sufficient ground water is available. Moreover, the north the island is too slim and in the south the lagoon is too shallow for boats to anchor. Wharfs were and are located in the villages facing the lagoon. The locally built boats are mentioned in most of the colonial reports.

The natives build their own sailing vessels, called "gundras" or "hodies", in which they carry on a regular trade between this and the ports of India and Ceylon. They resemble a brig in shape and appearance, carry two masts, and are square-rigged. They are built in two sizes; the big ones, "boduhodi", are equal to a freight of about two hundred tons and are intended for long voyages. The smaller ones, "banduhodi", with a carrying capacity for about fifty tons, are confined only to the trade between these islands and Ceylon. The vessels leave every year between August and September, and return about April or May, shortly before the setting in of the S.W. monsoon, when they are hauled ashore for repairs. (Bartholomeusz 1885: 26)

All the "Odies", "bandodies", "Massboats" and smaller ones are built in Menakoy (the smaller pegged and the first nailed) partly of cocoanut and partly of woods brought from the mainland. [...] Their Mass-boats sail excellently both before and against the wind [...]. (Thomas 1859: 259)

Nearly all the small and some of the larger vessels in the Island are built from remarkably hard, strong old cocoanut trees [...]. The boats are chiefly pegged [...]. (ibid.: 249)

And now look at the (fishing [FH]) boat itself. [...] The bows are



decked in as far back as the mast, and the stern ends in a lobster-tail shaped platform, projecting considerably beyond the sides of the boat. The platform is useful when the boatmen congregate at the stern with their fishing-rods to catch the *bonito* as their boat, under full sail, passes and repasses through the shoals of that fish, which periodically visit the neighbourhood of the island in the fair season. You can see their rods lying, tied up in a bundle all ready for action, above the weather-boarding forward. (Logan 1889: 210)

These boats were constructed on the island, built mainly from the wood of coconut trees and the planks were tied together with coir ropes or wooden nails.<sup>10</sup> They used various kinds of nautical instruments including the European sextant, but little is known about the origin of navigation at the time of the first settlers of Maliku. In spite of advanced forms of shipbuilding and navigation we also had to learn about several tragic losses of ships and crews. Logan mentioned the incident of 1867, when 'three of their fine island-vessels had gone down in the cyclone waves in the Hooghly at Calcutta.' (ibid.: 207) In the nineteenth century all sails were made from the leaves of the coconut tree. A detailed description is given by Bartholomeusz:

The material invariably selected for the manufacture of the leaf sail is the tender leaf of the cocoanut, before the leaflets have properly expanded. This is first heated and steamed over a fire, which, by depriving it of a good deal of its moisture, renders it soft and pliant. It is then exposed to the sun and dew alternately for two days and two nights. The leaflets are now torn away from the midrib, and divided into strips, each about a third of an inch wide; these strips the women weave into a large mat, which, when complete, measures about twenty feet long and eight feet broad. The strips are woven as close together as possible, so as to render the sail airtight; and, in order to help it to bear the strain of the wind, thin coir rope is stitched into it from top to bottom, and from side to side. [...] The sail is now complete, except that the distinguishing number has to be attached to it; this is generally cut out of in blue cloth and sewn on the middle of the upper half of it. The numbers are large, and can be seen at a great distance, and are evidently intended to help those on shore to prepare to meet their boats as they return after a day's fishing. (Bartholomeusz 1885: 27f.)

### **Fishing tuna and dry fish production**

In the nineteenth century fishermen constituted the largest category of working men. Their main catch was skipjack tuna, which was both a staple food and as dried fish the major export item. Baitfish was caught in the lagoon and kept alive in floating containers in the open water, and later stored in a basin in the middle of the fishing boat. The seamen left the lagoon in the early morning and caught the fish with pole and line in the open ocean, usually a few nautical miles away from the island. The



captain, or *keylo*, was in charge of the operation. He selected the crew, organised the trip, decided the timings and destinations. When the fish were spotted, two men, one on each side, splashed the surface of the water to attract the tuna to come to the surface, and threw baitfish alive into the water. All other fishermen stood at the stern of the boat and caught the bonito, similar to what can be seen on videos uploaded in the present age.

The fish are caught with the hook and line, both of which are manufactured on the island. Fine strong thread is made from the outer bark of a tree growing wild here, and this is the material used in the manufacture of the fishing lines as well as the nets. The hooks are made of iron and coated with lead; the object of this lead coating being to give the hook the colour of the little fish used as bait. The hook has a broad curve, and the second barb is dispensed with, so that there may be no delay in unhooking the fish. On approaching a shoal of fish, handful of the live bait are thrown out towards them, and they immediately follow the boat, which does not stand still, but continues sailing along; and the bait is doled out to them as long as they keep on following. At the same time ten or twelve men, armed with rods and lines, station themselves on the little after deck, and with a dexterity seemingly natural to them, they land the fish into the boat almost the very moment they take the hook. (Bartholomeusz 1885: 28)

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Generally speaking, each *attire*, or more precisely *ava* (Kattner 1996), owned one fishing boat and some of the boats were constructed and managed by individual persons. In 1858 Thomas (1859: 262) mentions 10 fishing boats, and according to Gray and Bell, who edited the monograph of Pyrard, there were eight fishing boats, six large vessels and four coasting vessels in Maliku in the 1880s (Pyrard 1980 [1616]: 322). Fishing had and has seasonal peaks. The men used to fish from October until April or June, because from June onwards the monsoon winds were too stormy and a passage through the narrow entrances of the lagoon was difficult or, at turbulent days, impossible.<sup>11</sup> According to Bartholomeusz (1885: 28) each boat used to catch two or three hundred fish each day, and as stated in the Thomas report 'about 50,000 fish is the average number taken; 100,000 could only be taken in a very fine season; about 25,000 are used in the Island and the remainder are cut up, dried [...] and exported.' (Thomas 1859: 262f.) A rough calculation does not show any contradiction: If ten boats each catch 250 fishes per day (as suggested in 1885), i.e. 2.500 per day for the entire island, and count 200 fishing days, we could confirm the average number given in 1858.

The catch was distributed at the beach after each trip. In the old literature and in oral history various systems of sharing can be found.



Thomas speaks of '14 per cent of the daily catch which goes to the owner of the boats [...]' (ibid.: 262), which was most likely a share of one fish out of seven. Some systems include the carpenters, who repair the boat, others mention the persons who looks after the nets for the bait fish and the sails, and other systems specify a small share for the person who wakes up the crew in the morning and keeps the beach clean. After reaching the anchor place in the lagoon, the fish are taken in a small dingi to the shore, where women and children wait. The distribution is done in public and is transparent to all. From the beach, women carry the tuna to their homes as head-loads in large baskets made from coconut-leaves. The processing of the catch to dry fish was done by women. In their homes the fish was 'cut into 4 pieces, and the bones and any scraps are boiled into a rich soup with more solid balls of the same substance in it [...]' (ibid.: 263) The *rihaakuru* from Maluku was famous in all harbour towns in South Asia 'and is also sold in Pulo Penang.' (ibid.: 263)

### **Coconut products**

Coconut trees were and are the most common plant on the island. Trees in the residential area were owned by the person who planted them or by their successors. Even today some of them have a sign or mark to indicate the owner. All products of the coconut tree were useful raw materials. The stem was the basic material to build houses and ships, the leaves were used to thatch houses and to weave mats and sails, the juice from the flower of the plant is the basis for jaggery and the most valuable product was the coconut. The coconut milk and the flesh were used for cooking (and producing copra, one of the most important export items until not long ago) and the hard shell proved to be useful to make kitchen items or devices for fishing boats. Humans and coconut trees co-existed, both troubled by rats, who lived in the trees and consumed young coconuts.

The nineteenth century sources stress the fact that it was not allowed to ferment the liquid into toddy, since the islanders did not consume alcohol. This condemnation, Bartholomeusz (1885: 25) suggests, attributes to 'the peaceable nature of the people'. The juice was collected twice a day and transferred into jaggery by boiling it over a slow fire. 'The manufacture of jaggery is one of the chief industries of the island, and is carried on by the women and girls of the Raveri caste, while their men and boys employ themselves on the tree tops, cutting and trimming and tapping and binding the flowers from which the toddy is extracted.' (ibid.: 25) The coir products of Maluku, however, became even more



famous in the Indian Ocean trade. In sharp contrast from the work of the men 'on the tree tops' (ibid.: 25), which Bartholomeusz describes in great detail, the manufacture of ropes is mentioned in passing. The coir has to be soaked in salt-water, then dried, pounded, and then weaved into ropes of different sizes. For centuries, ropes from the Laccadive and especially from Maliku were known for their high quality beyond India in the Arabian Peninsula and Southeast Asia.<sup>12</sup>

In nineteenth century writings as well as in the present perception of visitors and writers, the local knowledge and embodied technologies of planting, caring, harvesting coconut-trees and the procession of their fruits appears as an underestimated faculty. It requires a tremendous amount of skills to produce high quality jaggery.

The flower selected should be still enclosed in its spathe or flower sheath [...]. It is at first tapped all over with a mallet or the handle of a knife, and then tightly bandaged from the base to within about two inches of the tip, with tape-like strips of the pandanus leaf, and the tip is then cut off, and the cut surface rubbed with lime and saffron, and adjusted over the cocoanut shell, which is suspended under it to receive the nectar or sweet flower juice [...]. (ibid.: 25)

This is the men's side of the work, but we read little of the women, who produce jaggery from the liquid. Conspicuous by its absence is another task of women: the production of ropes. The raw material had to be soaked in the right mixture of sweet and salt water and beaten with a wooden club in the right way, not too soft and not too hard. The women and men of Maliku were able to produce goods which were highly valued in Ceylon, India and beyond. Compared to the maritime skills, knowledge around garden products appeared less adventurous and less exotic, but they were extremely complex and fundamental for the survival on a remote island. Much of the work was done by women. The male observers, however, focussed their attention on seafaring and fishing.

### **South Pandaram**

In his map, Basevi (1872) marked the large area in the southern part of Maliku as the "coconut plantation" and "private property of the (Ali) Raja" (original: "Kokoswaldung (Privateigentum des Rajah)"). At the time of his visit, he must have had learnt that the Raja of Cannanore was still in control of the coconut plantation. But the question of private land ownership was a tricky one and caused confusion and conflict. In the words of Ellis: "The Raja (of Cannanore, F.H.) never had at any time advanced any claims of overlordship over the lands in the occupation of the people or rather the trees upon them (for the idea of property of



land itself seems to be of recent growth) were always treated as the absolute property of the islanders." (Ellis 1924: 55). It seems that a representative of the Raja was delegated to Maliku to control the utilisation of the trees, but the procedure was managed by the *amin* of Maliku. In 1889, when Logan made his last visit to Maliku, the British Government appears to have been in control of the area, called South Pandaram. He reported a division in 27 compartments on the basis of *attiri* and *varangis*. The compartments were demarcated by a path cutting through the thick vegetation from the eastern reef side to the lagoon. In his words:

In the first five compartments which lie nearest to the township, and which, in consequence of their accessibility, receive more attention than the others from the island headmen, the nuts are gathered by plucking. The *Kahlus*, or tree-climbers, swarm up the trunks and throw down all the mature nuts, which, with those already on the ground, are gathered by the women and conveyed to the store at the Government office [...]. The men receive 20 per cent of all the nuts they pluck as remuneration, and the women for gathering them get four nuts each, and 4 per cent more of all they gather [...].

The remaining nineteen compartments [...] are allotted among the women of the various *varangis*, according to population. No attempt is made to pluck the nuts or cultivate the trees, which are largely smothered by dense growths of impenetrable screw-pine and other jungle. The rats reign supreme, and what nuts they spare are collected from the ground by the women, each of whom receives as remuneration eight nuts on each occasion, and 4 per cent more of all she collects. The nuts thus collected are piled into rough stores at various points along the lagoon shore of the island, and after being stripped of their outer husks, are exported to the mainland, and sold on behalf of the Government revenue. (Logan 1889: 319f.)

In Logan's text, the South Pandaram was a well-organised, fenced and protected agricultural area, which was enjoyed by the British Government. He did not mention the islanders' opposition to introduce a new tax system in the 1880s, at the same time when the appointment of a new *amin* was contested. In 1887, as described by W.H.R. Ellis, Mr. Dance had the mission to issue cowles (taxes) for the Pandaram lands, as it had been done in other islands of Lakshadweep. He called for coolies to assist the cleaning and measuring of the land, but they refused to follow the order, because 'it was contrary to custom.' (Ellis 1924: 26) Protests followed and at the end 'the question of introducing the cowle system, or of substituting a tree tax for the poll tax and tax of fishing boats, was indefinitely postponed.' (ibid.: 28)<sup>13</sup>

Ten years after Logan's last visit Gardiner stayed in the southern part





of the island near the lighthouse. Gardiner, who was interested in the impact of humans on the environment, mentioned the South Pandaram in a footnote and made observations that were rather different than those of Logan. Obviously, Gardiner did not rely on administrative documents but was informed by local leaders.

Owing to an old arrangement the produce of half the island is deemed to belong to the Bebe of Cannanore. An arbitrary line of division exists near the village with gates and guards, who rigorously exact three-fifths of the coconuts gathered south of the fence. In this portion no timber of large size or old growth exists, the whole surface at one time having been cleared and planted. Subsequently on the hold of the Bebe becoming weakened or relaxed, vegetation was allowed again to assume its sway, resulting in the present dense, jungly growth. On the management of the Bebe's dominions being undertaken by the British Government, the old line of division as found was retained permanently with much injustice to the inhabitants, as it had been formerly periodically open to revision. [...] (The southern half of the island, F.H.) has become a dense jungle, rapidly going to waste. It produces annually under the present system only a few hundred rupees' worth of coconuts, which the government might well commute for a fixed annual charge. (Gardiner 1901: 2)

From the writings of Logan and Gardiner we can assume that the South Pandaram was organised and controlled by the *amin* and partly utilised by the people of Maliku. Private or individual ownership was known in Maliku for boats, ships and houses, but nor for land beyond the residential area. The *amin* gave permission to enjoy landed spaces, but there was no question of permanent ownership. A new *amin* could make decisions different from those of his predecessor. The "ownership" of the South Pandaram, first by the Ali Raja and later by British India, became a most contested issue. From the documents available, many details concerning the transfer of the coconut plantations from the Indian to the British rulers remained unclear. Bell and Gray, the editors of Pyrdard's monograph, write in a footnote that Maliku was the 'property of the Cananor Raja, but since 1877 (has) been sequestrated for non-payment of tribute, and are at present under British administration.' (Pyrdard 1980 [1616]: 324) There is no doubt, that the power of the Ali Raja eroded in the nineteenth century in two fields. First, the control of Maliku crews on ships owned by the Ali Rajas; second, the management of the coconut-plantations on the island. This transfer of power began in the first half of the century. From the report of Thomas:

A considerable change was wrought in the relative position of the Beebee, and the people on the occasion of a quarrel 30 years ago (1825 F.H.) between one of the Beebee's Captains and his crew; the latter mutinied and the matter having been referred to the Beebee's agent on the Island, the people clubbed together and



refused to tolerate his interference; from that time the Beebee's power here has been more of influence than of despotic authority, this however, from a discreet use of the power of obliging or disobliging them given her by her landed possessions there, and by the number of appointments which she held out for sailors, pilots and captains in her various vessels, has always been very considerable. (Thomas 1859: 249)

The "character" of the Malikuns termed in the Encyclopaedia Britannica 1882-83 as 'very independent' (Yule 1883), might be informed by the incident mentioned above, or relate to the islanders' opposition against the introduction of a new tax system in the years following 1869. If we consider that the visits of British administrators had to be cancelled or postponed due to weather conditions or technical problems, and that the visits on the islands were usually just for a few days, Maliku appears as an island hardly influenced by foreign rule.<sup>14</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The authors who wrote on Maliku in the nineteenth century portrayed the island as a good place to live: the soil was fertile, the fishery could not be better, the roads and villages were clean, crime and theft seemed to be unknown, and the islanders enjoyed good health and offered great hospitality. I have no doubt that they would agree with Alcock's statement, that the islanders

live, if not in such luxury and ease as to excite any envy, yet certainly not in poverty and sordid toil, but in a happy mean of sober diligence and modest sufficiency that to the white man, discouraged and dismayed by the frightful contrasts which he often sees in his own opulent societies, seems like an ode of Horace come true, or like a survival of the Golden Age. (Alcock 1902: 187)

The overall picture is of a paradise, except a few constraints. It has been mentioned that all authors, except Chappu Menon, were white men, who appeared on the island with the backing of a powerful colonial state. Alcock, Bartholomeusz, Basevi, Gardiner, Logan and Rosset were trained in natural sciences and most of them made an academic career after their travels in the Indian Ocean. They were good observers and offer many valuable eye-witness moments from their stay. It should be mentioned that all visits took place in-between the monsoon seasons, usually in December, January or February, when the sea is calm and the weather not as humid and hot as from May onwards. They were guided through the villages by members of the higher status groups who spoke several languages, so that the Europeans could use a translator to ask questions. Even Logan who had language skills in Malayalam and Tamil,



mentioned interpreters in his book.

In addition to their mediated face-to-face interactions, they gathered information from their Indian assistants, who made inquiries on their own behalf. What they learnt was their informants' normative or idealised view, a view from above. In the past as in the present, public expression of disaccord and aggression is negatively connoted; the people in Maluku honour politeness and co-operation. Therefore, it is more than likely, that visitors experienced a most harmonious and peaceful local society. But it would be naive to think, that nineteenth century Maluku, as a stratified society with unequal distribution of wealth, was always as free of conflicts, as experienced by the visitors. What they saw were happy people, well-built boats, clean places, and social order.

The publications vary in style and in length. Most texts are reports and begin with a description of the physical and biological environment, the climate and currents. The authors establish their authority as scientific observers and unbiased witnesses. At the same time, they establish a feel-good atmosphere and leave no doubt that they enjoyed having been there. I do not want to make any comments on their personal feelings; the publication of Malinowski's diary from his anthropological fieldwork (Malinowski 1967) is a warning to the readers of ethnographies. Malinowski felt miserable and homesick but described his months in Trobriand in most positive terms (Malinowski 1922). What I want to say is, the visitors of Maluku found the place worth to be represented as an island paradise, and it seems most likely, that they were favourably impressed. The most common topos to express a positive image is the proximity of people and nature: society appears as a perfect adaptation to the natural environment, the people develop technologies to make use of all given properties, from palm-trees to monsoon winds. A more subtle but still powerful reference are implicit theories of evolution. The strongest protagonist of the latter approach is Alcock, when he writes:

It would not be quite right to convey the impression that life at Minnikoy is all summer afternoon, though it is true that at first one is wonderfully charmed with the quiet air of prosperity that pervades the island and with the happy combination of innocence and primitive civilisation that exists. Things, in fact, remind one of the stories of our own early ancestors, but without the violence and tyranny of those somewhat brutal times; for here as then, wealth is reckoned, not in a banker's scrip, but chiefly in kind [...]. But although there are no feuds between patrician and plebeian or between capital and labour, yet, as in all such primitive societies, the blind elemental forces of Nature, often bring about a sudden or acute desolation that is worse than any amount of the chronic discomfort that accompanies a higher civilisation. (Alcock 1902: 199f.)



The most outstanding style is Logan's 'Island of women'. His authority as an author is based on the detailed observation and on his background in the colonial hierarchy as a collector. His style is entertaining; for example, he explains the rules of marriage and residence with fictive households named John and Brown. He does not say a word about bad habits or makes fun of the cultural other but conveys the impression that Malikun have much in common with the better part of Englishmen. Contrary to his perspective is the short report of Sarasin, a trained anthropologist, who stayed on the island, like Alcock, for one week. Sarasin is a protagonist of what can be called "othering", representing the cultural other in terms of difference, and rejecting their co-evalness. As an exception Bartholomeusz must be mentioned. He stayed on the island longer than all other authors and had no duty or obligation to report. It seems that he, as a medical officer, had a more direct contact to the islanders. To a large extent, his text is free from paternalistic attitudes but reflects the gendered view of his time.

After reading the nineteenth century texts about Maliku I was reminded of Werner Petermann's (2004) monumental history of anthropology. He opens his work with the statement that the discipline derives from enlightenment and colonialism. The same holds true for the corpus of texts discussed above. A short summary of my reading is that the authors discussed above had no intention to degrade or offend the islanders, still their texts are not free from belittlement and degradation. If the idea of Maliku was a stage play, the islanders would be handsome, skilful, industrious, friendly and hospitable, and the story would offer a happy ending. But the stage and the audience would be entwined with positivism, evolutionary thought and the unquestioned rightful ownership of the island. Those men who visited the islands felt as legitimate representatives of the proprietor. They visited what they felt was theirs and were pleased with what they saw. More than half a century after the abandonment of slavery, the authors appear in their texts as rather friendly contemporaries.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Kolugegothi Mohammad ("KG", Maliku), Naajih Didi (Malé), Ellen Kattner (Heidelberg), Luisa Marten (Munich) and Thoiba Saeedh (Malé) for their critical reading and comments. Most of the texts quoted here are part of Lars Vilgon's "Maldivian Odd History", a collection of documents and rare texts from libraries and archives around the world, many of them translated by him. He made twenty copies and distributed them in selected libraries, a great contribution to the history of the Maldives. My reading of the nineteenth century texts is based on short stays on Maliku in the second decade of the twenty-first century (Heidemann 2019, 2020),



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where I experienced the same kind of hospitality and positive qualities as the authors under discussion in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> [https://dwb.thulb.uni-jena.de/receive/ufb\\_cbu\\_00012891](https://dwb.thulb.uni-jena.de/receive/ufb_cbu_00012891).

<sup>3</sup> <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minicoy#/media/Datei:ISS002-E-7260.PNG>.

<sup>4</sup> I have found no references to European women visiting the island in the nineteenth century (but I would like to mention that the German anthropologist Ellen Kattner stayed on Maluku in 1990-91). Basevi, in his map of Minicoy dated 1872, marked the anchor place of the Sir John Lawrence, a 689 ton and 170-meter-long liner, that sailed twice from Plymouth to Adelaide. The vessel left England in May 1861 and July 1862, reached Australia in August respectively October of the same year, and anchored at the northern end of Maluku. We have no written documents about the stay at the island. The stop must have been for technical or any logistic reasons because shipping agencies took pride in fast connections. It is only Basevi's map, which tells the fact of Sir John Lawrence's visit to Maluku. We cannot even estimate, how many other big ships stopped at the island, because no harbour records were kept. Elderly men from Maluku tell us, that many ships had anchored in the times of their fathers and grandfathers. If the Sir John Lawrence would have been a singular event, it would have found entry into the local lore.

<sup>5</sup> In 1900 Rudolf Festetics de Tolna (1865-1943), a Hungarian nobleman who was on his way back to Europe with his collection of art and ethnographica, shipwrecked at Maluku. He was driven by the irrational fear that the islanders would loot his possession, so he set his own ship on fire and destroyed most of his collection himself (Festetics de Tolna 1900). His book on his journey includes a chapter on Maluku, which is based on fundamental misinterpretations and false information. This text, produced in the early twentieth century, requires a separate discussion and is not included here.

<sup>6</sup> Other documents indicate serious tensions between the Malukun and the representatives of the Ali Rajas on the island. "A Ballad from Minicoy" dated "before the year 1787", published in "Lakshadweepile Kathaganangal" (Kottayam, Kerala 1975), and translated by K. Singh, Stockholm, is included in the collection of Vilgon (1987). The narrative is about an illegal relationship of the "Administrator" of the Raja of Cannanore with a married Maluku women, who was divorced after the affair, married the Administrator, and finally was killed by him.

<sup>7</sup> A close reading of these authors brings up the question: Who was the original author of the text in print? Several parts of these texts are almost identical translations of other texts. But—and this comes as a surprise at the second reading—a "translation" of an earlier text includes information, which is not included in the original. It seems that the authors had access to unpublished manuscripts of their contemporaries and used them rather freely—without any concern of copyright. We shall not raise the question of the "original" source but will quote from these authors the passages that illuminate a European perception of Maluku with greatest detail. When two passages appear in almost identical form, we shall stick to the English version rather than translating C.W. Rosset, who wrote in German.

<sup>8</sup> Kattner (2010: 170) gives more details about the status groups, which were confused in colonial writings with titles or name suffixes.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed analysis of house and house names see Kattner (2010).

<sup>10</sup> Later, in the twentieth century the larger boats were built with iron nails and some of them ordered from Cochin or Tuticorin. Elderly men in Maluku tell that their forefathers sailed to Oman, but no regular trade between the Arab peninsular developed. Fishing boats made from coconut-planks were still built in Maluku at my last visit in 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Until the 1950s, I was told in Maluku, some fishermen used to keep smaller boats on the beach at the eastern coast and went for fishing on the calmer days during the monsoon period.

<sup>12</sup> Since the maritime use of coir ropes in a matter of the past, this industry came to an end in



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Maliku. But on many Maldives islands women still sit in front of their houses or at the beach sites and produce ropes with the same technology, because they are used for the building of huts and cabanas on tourist islands. For the same use they plait coconut leaves into mats, but nowhere the production of sails from coconut leaves can be found.

<sup>13</sup> When I talked to elderly citizens of Maliku born in the 1920s, they recall that the South Pandaram was utilised by the people of Maliku according to their needs. They confirmed that a guard controlled the entrance but added other forms of utilisation. When a person needed building materials for a house or for a boat or coconuts or other fruits for a ceremony, he could approach the *amin* and tell his needs. After listening to the client, he "cut" a short note with a knife on a palm leaf, which was presented to the guard at the gate. After cutting trees or harvesting, the products were placed on small boats and pulled by rope along the hollow waters at the lagoon shore. The elders confirm that there was a kind of share taken by the colonial government, but the main use, they say, was for local needs.

<sup>14</sup> In 1947 Robinson undertook an inspection tour to the Laccadive Islands, but the representatives of the Ali Raja did not give permission to visit Maliku. This is what he heard about the island: 'If my information be correct, the fiscal system of the island is peculiar. The entire plantation of the island appears to have been confiscated and appropriated at an early period by the Cannanore family, possibly in right of conquest. But according to another state made to me, this confiscation was for rebellion and the massacre of the Cannanore public servants [...]. (T)he plantations are closed to the people except on certain days [...]. Each inhabitant then takes a certain number, probably ten nuts each; and the rest are taken to the Beebee's godown and there sold to the people. [...] The islanders have, therefore apparently, little or no interest in the soil, and their whole energy is turned to trade and fishing.' (Robinson 1874: 1).

After his tour it took more than one decade, until Thomas made his visit in 1858. In the 1880s there were visits by Mr. Dance (in 1887 accompanied by Mr. Logan). Later, several inspection tours of Logan failed, because no ship was available, an engine broke, or the chronometer did not work, and the vessel did not find Minicoy. Only after the turn of the century, in 1901, the Government purchased the RIMS Elphistone for annual visits (Ellis 1924: 30ff.).

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