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Image, Object, Text: Representing the Andaman Islands¹

Clare Anderson

University of Warwick

The Andaman Islands are a small and relatively isolated island archipelago in the Bay of Bengal, closer to Burma than to India. Uncolonized during the eighteenth century, by the turn of the nineteenth century the Islands were at the centre of increasingly important trading routes between India and China. In 1793, the East India Company moved to occupy the Andamans as a penal colony, directing the transportation of all Bengal life convicts there to work on land clearance, cultivation, and other projects.² It shipped about three hundred convicts to the Islands,³ but the settlement was ravaged by disease and within three years the British had abandoned it. We know little more of this ill-fated attempt at colonization; most particularly with respect to the nature and extent of contact with the Islands' indigenous peoples, who were widely believed to be cannibals.

The British began to consider recolonizing the Islands during the 1840s and 1850s after a series of Andamanese attacks on distressed seamen and passengers. However, the immediate spur was the Great Revolt of 1857, a widespread military and civilian uprising that spread across the north of the Indian subcontinent and produced an unprecedented penal crisis. In its aftermath, the government of India decided to establish a penal colony in the Andamans, and transported the first convicts in March 1858. Drawing on a relatively rich colonial archive, histories of the Andamanese have centred on the devastating effect of colonization and on nineteenth-century debates around their supposed 'racial' origin, for contemporary scientists thought that they could provide clues to the origins of humankind.⁴ The essays

¹ This collection was first presented as part of a panel at the British Association of South Asian Studies annual conference, University of Leicester, 26-8 Mar. 2008.

² Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library (OIOC) P.128.7 (Bengal Judicial, 20 Dec. 1793): H. Barlow, Register Nizamat Adalat, to E. Hay, Sec. to Gvt Bengal, 20 Nov. 1793.

³ OIOC P.128.12 (Bengal Judicial, 25 July 1794): J. Duncan, Resident Benares, to G.M. Barlow, Sec. to Gvt Bengal, 10 July 1794.

⁴ Elizabeth Edwards, 'Science Visualized: E.H. Man in the Andaman Islands', in Elizabeth Edwards (ed.) *Anthropology and Photography, 1860-1920*, London, RAI, 1994, 108-21; Zita van der Beek and Marcel Vellinga, 'Man the Collector: salvaging Andamanese and Nicobarese culture through objects', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 17, 2 (2005), 135-53; Sita Venkateswar, *Development and Ethnocide: Colonial Practices in the Andaman Islands*, Denmark, IWGA, 2004.

presented here seek to build on this dual interest through an analysis of the representation of the Islands' indigenous peoples over time – photographic, lithographic, three-dimensional, and textual - in the context of the parallel social meanings ascribed to landscape, space, and community. Further, they seek to open up a broader discussion on the multi-layered relationships between images, objects, and texts, most particularly with respect to the slippages between text and image/ object, and the nature and context of their reproduction, distribution, and consumption. The authors focus on these interrelationships in order to suggest the centrality of visual and discursive representation for the production of historicity. Finally, moving through and beyond trajectories of historical change aligned typically with colonialism and post-colonialism, the papers coalesce around the issue of representation to focus on the Andamans as a connected – rather than isolated - space, geographically, culturally, and imaginatively.

The sequence opens with Clare Anderson's discussion of the first ever photographs taken in the Andaman Islands, by the photographer Oscar Jean-Baptiste Mallitte (c. 1829-1905). Mallitte accompanied the survey party sent by the government of India to the Islands at the end of 1857, its brief to find the best site to situate a penal colony for mutineers and rebels. The Mallitte prints have long since been assumed lost or destroyed, but recently a curator at Windsor Castle identified them as an uncatalogued set in the Queen's Collection. Anderson's essay opens up the photographs as representations of the landscape and peoples of the Andamans shortly before permanent colonization, and focuses on a deeply affecting set of images of an Islander kidnapped by the survey party and taken back to Calcutta in 1858. As the photographic process was described in some detail in various contemporary publications, and because the photographs were widely copied and published as engravings, she shows how the images enable us for the first time to interrogate some of the textual and visual interconnections and slippages that were implied during the written production and visual transformation of the earliest photographs and engravings of the Islands. She suggests that the photographs are of huge significance as visual signifiers of the violence of colonization, as evidence of some of the ambivalences that characterized colonization through penal transportation, and as a sort of 'missing link' that enables us to examine some of the ways in which the Islands and its peoples were constructed and represented both discursively and visually through the trope of colonial 'tropicality'.

In her analysis of the colonial exhibitionary complex, Claire Wintle's essay takes the theme of representation further, exploring the production of Andamanese and British identities and histories in the decades following colonization. She shows how the British reinvented Andamanese 'identity' in a variety of guises. For the government of India officials posted on the Islands, Andamanese peoples became part of an everyday working and living environment. Others, including readers of anthropological journals and miscellanies in the UK produced them as scientific 'evidence' central to socio-evolutionary debates of the period. For the wider population, the Andamanese became part of what Wintle terms the 'tangible fantasy' of how Britain imagined Empire. By examining representations of Islanders as three-dimensional statues at Victorian international exhibitions, she explores how the Andamans were positioned in the mechanics of the exhibition paradigm and how this positioning intervened in the popular imagination, thus lending new understanding to how the 'colonial exotic' was employed as dynamic visual entertainment for and infiltrated into the psychology of a metropolitan audience.

The final essay presented here, by Vishvajit Pandya, shifts the focus to the present day. He unpicks some of the complexities of contemporary representations of the Andamans through an analysis of Bourdieu's invocation of *intent* and *surplus* in photographic meaning. Pandya focuses on events in the Andamans in the aftermath of the 2005 tsunami as a means of examining the overlapping textual and visual production of the 'hostile', 'stone age' people of North Sentinel Island. He shows how this politics of representation has been constituted historically and consolidated politically through an often unacknowledged collaboration between the state, media and non-indigenous Andamans settlers. His paper is an important reminder of how the construction of news from the Andamans is itself a cultural subject that requires an ethnographic, semiotic, and analytical focus to comprehend fully the complex tensions between different forms of representation. With the Sentinelese the only Andamanese tribe not yet incorporated into the mainstream nation-state, Pandya brings the papers full circle. He shows how text and image form a specific relationship in the visual depiction of subjects as 'constant' over historical time, in the face of evidence of the Sentinelese as a connected and far from timeless community.