Man In India, 100 (3-4): 2020:: 229-246

THE SEAMEN FROM MINICOY: AN ORAL HISTORY OF SOCIAL TRANSITION IN THE LACCADIVE SEA

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Abstract: Seamen from Minicoy (Maliku), the southernmost island of the Lakshadweep, were and are an integral part of the local maritime economy. Since time immemorial the people of Maliku developed an ocean-based economy including fishing, trading and boat building. Local society was based on a matrilineal and matrilocal kinship system and Muslim faith. From the eighteenth century onwards Malikun worked as seamen on ships in South Asia and beyond. In sharp contrast to other seamen, Malikun are not uprooted individuals or "marginal men", because seafaring was the best, and almost only option for young men from this island and has always been an honourable occupation. Today, most of them work worldwide in the merchant navy. This article is based on interviews during a multi-sited fieldwork in Maliku, Kochi and Mumbai. I shall argue that long-lasting dynamics in the twentieth century were induced by their Seamen´s association and by the Indian state and its administration. The most significant change is the disaggregation of an ancient status system and a growing diaspora in Kochi. The Minicoy People´s Welfare Association, formerly Minicoy Seamen´s Association, owns hostels in Mumbai and became a home-away-from-home. This network provides information and offers help in the complex legal context which controls the movements of Indian seamen.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, Lakshadweep, Minicoy, Muslim, matrilinearity, seamen, life-history.

INTRODUCTION

Seamen contribute to global logistics of goods and are an integral part of history. Yet, their origin and everyday life remained understudied, especially for the South Asian subcontinent. The history of seafaring in the Indian Ocean has ancient roots, but the large-scale recruitment of seamen from the hinterlands of Bombay and Calcutta came into being with the introduction of steamboats in the nineteenth century (Balachandran, 2002). Most of the seamen came from the same region as the mill workers in Bombay and Calcutta. They left their homes for survival or with a vision of a better life. They experienced hardship and exploitation; they were without legal protection and experienced racism (Ahuja, 2006). Many seamen saw the ocean for the first time when they entered a ship in a harbour and had hardly any ideas about the work and life on board. Many life-histories confirm the story of individuals lost somewhere on the globe with no hope to return to their place of origin (Ewald, 2000). They were marginal men, uprooted and sojourners without a final destination (Forsthy, 1983; Sherar, 1973).

The following analysis is about a small community of seamen who do not match this generalized description of Indian seamen. I would like to argue that they constitute a different type of seamen´s early history, which has been poorly dealt with in academic writings. In a nutshell, the following shorthand note can be

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generalized for the past and for the present: Seamen of their native island Minicoy had no noteworthy alternative to being a fisherman or a seafarer. They were not uprooted or marginal persons but stood in the middle of society. For those men, the ocean was the place to work, to become an adult, to earn a new status. The ubiquitous dichotomy of land and sea did not apply to the perception of these men. From their point of view the open water was the space, from where fishermen return after many hours and seamen after many months. In their view, seaman and family-man were not antagonistic, but complementary aspects of life. They loved their homes and worked on the open waters. The ocean was not a barrier but a highway. I am not overly surprised that a community with limited land and located between two main international sea routes, the Nine Degree Channel and the Eight Degree Channel, became skilled in shipbuilding, were highly rated as seamen and developed a distinct seafarer´s ethos (Heidemann, 2019). Until today they have been known as outstanding seamen. When I talked to seamen from other countries and asked about Minicoy, I got many affirmative replies referring to "a small Indian island with a lighthouse", where "many seamen come from". But in published books and articles they are suspicious by their absence.

Minicoy (in local terms and hereafter called Maliku), the southernmost part of the Lakshadweep, is a crescent-shaped island, with just above 10 km extension from north to south and a landmass of less than 5 sq.km (Basevi, 1872; Ellis, 1924).An estimated number of 11,000 persons live in several villages in the northern part, grown together into one residential area over centuries. They speak Mahal, a dialect of Dhivehi, and have their own and unique identity and culture within the overall diversity of India. Coconut trees cover most of the island´s space, and supply wood, coir ropes and oil to build fishing boats and trading vessels in the past (Barbosa, 1505; c.f. Vilgon, 1991-1999). The main export was dried tuna, in former times used on sailing vessels and until today a popular commodity in South India and Sri Lanka. Up to the fifteenth century the island was part of the Sultanate in Male, but after Minicoy became part of India in 1956 the trading routes to the south became the boundary of the new nation state.

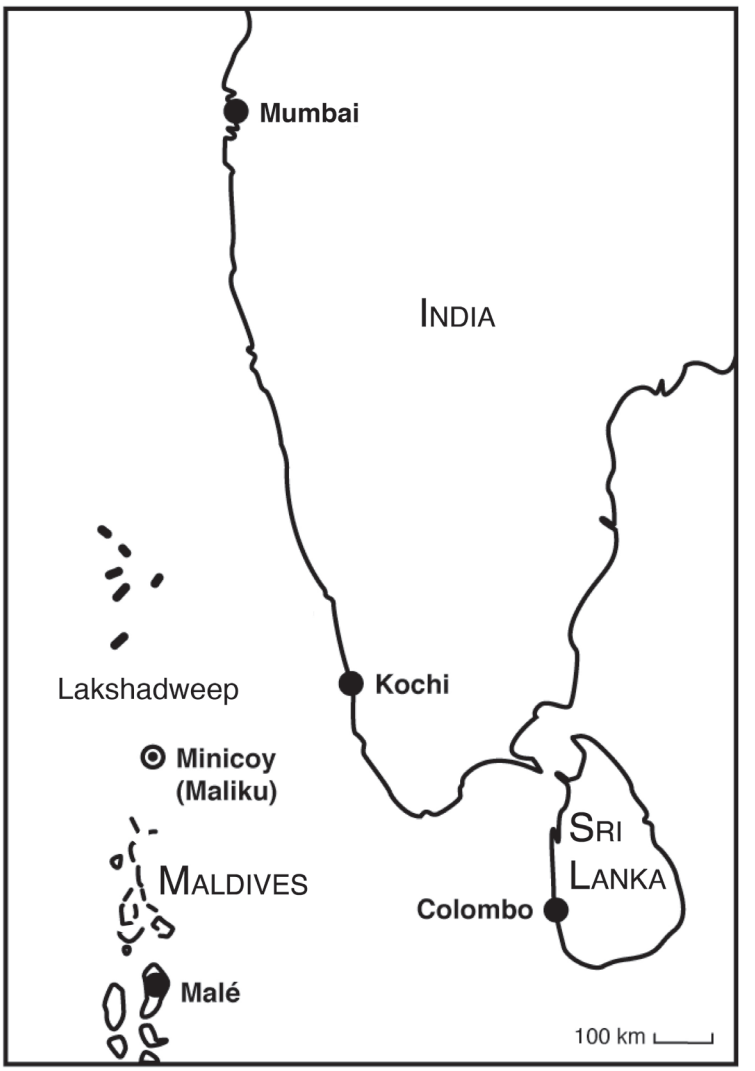

Figure: Location of Minicoy in the Indian Ocean

I cannot recall when I heard or read about Minicoy or Maliku for the first time. Maybe it was the book by Timothy Severin (1982), *The Sindbad Voyage*, about the journey of the *Sohar*, a reconstruction of an Arab Dhow, from Oman to China. In the book he mentions Ali Manikfan from Maliku, who was said to speak 14 languages, and who was not only instrumental in finding the wood, coir ropes and sails for the construction of the *Sohar*, but supervised the entire construction process. The Lakshadweep Islands are known as coir islands, where the best ropes

were produced since time immemorial. Severin (1982) describes the men of Maliku as the best seamen of India. They are raised on a small island, where each man knows how to build a house, how to swim, and how to work in teams. People from Maliku, Severin (1982) says, work on ships for several generations and the team of the *Bombay Pilot Services* is staffed by men from Maliku exclusively. They can cope with all kinds of difficult situations, and they never went on strike. Ali Manikfan helped Severin to recruit craftsmen, including several men from Maliku. The team was brought to Oman, where they built the *Sohar* without a single iron-nail; all planks were fixed by coir ropes. Until today, shipbuilding in Maliku is called "ship sewing" (Severin, 1982: 38 ff).

SEAMEN´S EARLY HISTORY

In 2014, three decades after I read *The Sindbad Voyage*, I met two young men from the Lakshadweep on an air-flight from Delhi to Bangalore. They were enthusiastic newcomers in the tourist business and told me that foreigners can now travel freely to Maliku. At that time, I had two very clear memories in my mind. First: from a kinship seminar I learned that the islanders are Muslims and follow a matrilineal and matrilocal system (Forbes, 1978, 1979; Logan, 1889). Second: A German anthropologist, Ellen Kattner (2007, 2010), who had worked on Maliku several years ago, had told me about her fascinating fieldwork on the island. After landing in Bangalore, the two young men sold me a ticket for an overnight trip on the *Kaveratti* to the island. On the ship I met many seamen on their way home. They had served worldwide on ocean liners and super-tankers, transporting all kinds of raw materials and goods. In the following days they invited me to their homes, found much time to talk and showed pictures from their ships on their mobile phones.Through their families, I made contact with retired seamen born in the 1920s, who could recall what their forefathers used to recollect. To my great surprise, I met Ali Manikfan (Romero-Frias 2003, n.d.) in his house-cum-workshop at the southern shore of the island. As the son of the last government-appointed island chief under the British (in office from 1938 to 1954) he could remember the time in the 1950s, when the island became part of India, and the 1960s, when the first mechanised fishing boats were introduced under a hire-purchase scheme.

After this initial trip I kept contact with the people of Maliku and read anything about the region that I could find online and offline in libraries and archives: In 1515 Duarte Barbosa (1515, c.f. Vilgon, ibid), a Portuguese official, reported that the "Malabar Moors" said that the people of Minicoy "built many great ships of palm trunks, sewn together with thread, for they have no other timber, and in these they sail to the main (land)" (Barbosa, 1515, c.f. Vilgon, 1991-1999: 7-11). In 1607, the French seaman who had learnt Dhivehi during his five and a half years stay in the Maldives, described the island as "wonderfully fertile in coco-trees, bananas, millet, and other products... The fishery is very good... (and) the people have the

same customs, manners, and language as those of the Maldives" (Pyrard, 2010: 323 c.f. Gray and Bell, 2010). Albert Gray and H.C.P. Bell, the editors and translators of Pyrard´s book (Gray and Bell 2010), state in a footnote that the majority of the men follow a seafaring life, trade with the Maldives, and own six vessels for the Bengal trade, four coastal vessels and eight fishing boats. In 1805, on his trip from Madras to Penang, John Caspar Leydon (1805) met people from Maliku, who worked as a crew on the Brigg Louisa Valli and was amazed by the skill and knowledge of the seamen. He drafted a detailed report of the island, its climate, vegetation, agriculture, the local population and the language, including a list of 300 words in Mahal. In 1885 O. Bartholomeusz (1885), the medical officer stationed at Maliku, wrote, that the local vessels "carry a large number of islanders as passengers to the chief ports of India and Ceylon, where they seek employment in steamers and other vessels as lascars." (Bartholomeusz, 1885: 26). The number of lascars, often labelled as coolies of the sea, grew in number in the nineteenth century with growing trade and the introduction of steam boats (Ahuja, 2006; Ewald, 2000; Milne, 2016). The contribution to this trend is documented in a census taken by the British officer Mr. Winterbothom, who came to the island just before Bartholomeusz. He counted 1179 women and 351 men and concluded, that "most of the people work as sailors" (Misra and Tiwari, 1981: 233-34)

I have no doubt that Malikun, with their long, but undocumented history in searfaring, shared much of the sufferings and deprivations of South Asian seamen, often referred to as lascars (Ahuja, 2006; Balachandran, 2002). My own attempts to reconstruct their early seafaring history carried limited fruits, because many written documents on the island are lost forever. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, fires destroyed almost all administrative records in the houses of island chiefs and ship owners (Ellis, 1924). I could locate a few old photographs from the trading vessels owned by Malikun and collected several life histories. The elder generation of navigators and captains disagree with the depiction of their medieval history, which says that Minicoy was "ruled" by the South Indian Ali Rajas, who controlled parts of the Indian Ocean from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century (Kurup, 1970; Ellis, 1924). They also disagree with postcolonial writings about the deep impact of British rule in India (Dirks, 2001). In short, they agree that their forebearers paid an annual tribute, but this was a kind of compensation for the protection against pirates, a major threat at that time. My informants claim that the island was always governed by their own headmen and the duty of the Ali Raja´s representative was limited to the collection of the annual payments. The association with an Indian ruler finally led to the inclusion into British India and into the India Union after her Independence.

The narratives of Maliku seamen reach back to what they know from their fathers and grandfathers at the beginning of the twentieth century. In their narratives there are no traces of their deprivations and sufferings. One reason for this empty

space is the seamen´s ethos not to talk much about hardship and loss (see also below). Further reasons might be that Maliku seamen had substantial informal knowledge about the merchant navy and harbour towns even before steamships were introduced. Therefore, they followed their extensive informal networks and built their own institutions like the Minicoy Seamen´s Association, which was running their own seamen´s hostels. There are no recollections about indebtedness to hostel owners, captains and shipping companies (Ahuja, 2006). But in their narratives, I find implicit hints about discontent: They discontinued the service on one ship and entered into a contract with a different company. However, they were never explicit about what were the reasons.

SEAMEN AT HOME IN MALIKU

When I came to Maliku for the second time in February 2016, I met Mr. Mohammed Kolugege, one of the most knowledgeable men in the island. He guided me on the island and years later also joined me on trips to the Maldives. In Funhilol, his native village, not a single minute passed without meeting a new person, who he introduced with his name, and added, that he is or was a seaman. There were just a few persons who were not seamen, some were fishermen, one was a medical doctor, one worked for a bank and another owned a shop. "More than 80% of the working population are seamen", he said, and it became also my guess after learning more about the local economy. When the older, retired seamen learned that I am from Germany, a number of harbours were listed: "Hamburg, Bremen, Kiel, Lübeck, and Rostock" etc. and of course the Kiel Canal, a canal connecting the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. Most of the younger men returned home after nine or twelve months and stayed for about three months and were what could be called "visiting fathers", often busy with house-construction work. In their days at home, they spend the night in their wife´s home, and most of the day-time in their parental house. In the evening hours I found many men with motorised two-wheelers at the jetty or at the northern shore along the beach road on the lagoon side.

I talked to the seamen about their vision and the options they have in life. One of the first decisions is whether they prefer to sail within the boundaries of India or in international waters. The latter choice is the preferred option because of higher payments in spite of long absences from home. Those who follow the first option find employment on ships run by the Lakshadweep Development Corporation Limited with twelve months of payment, annual leave and a pension fund, or work for the Shipping Corporation of India. Most men decide in rather young years which kind of career they would like to follow and maintain in the same line. Almost everyone talked about their work environment in positive terms and praised the advantages of being a seaman. Part of their narrative was the matrilocal residence; they could leave the island without major worries about the well-being of their wives and children. In similar tone young women depicted the advantages of staying at home

after marriage. The long absence of men was a social fact and it seemed that most islanders were used to live with it. When I heard complaints, it was about the internet connection on the island or difficulties of getting a boat ticket to Kochi.

One of the oldest and most impressive seamen to whom I could talk was Moosa Manikfan HMG; born in 1929 (the acronym stands for Hassan Manikfan Ganduvaru, his family´s house name in Sedivalu village). He is the son of Ibrahim Manikfan HMG, who was the island chief (*amin*) from 1924 to 1946, elected from the islanders, not to be confused with the island chief nominated by the British administration. From his forbearer he knows that ships built in Minicoy traded with Arabia, but this trade stopped two generation before his father´s time. In the 1940s, Moosa Manikfan remembers, a total of seven *odis* (trading boats) were owned, managed and staffed in Maliku. Three of them sailed between Maliku, Cannanore and Calicut and brought rice and other commodities to the island. The other four plied between Colombo, Galle, Kolkata, Rangoon and Port Blair, and took cargo and at times also passengers from harbour to harbour.

In 1947 Moosa Manikfan embarked on *Kotiya Safeena* (locally known as *bodubagala*), without any training and without any documents. He had learnt to read and write Mahal and Arabic and was interested in navigation. After a talk with the captain he was allowed to join the ship from Maliku to Car Nicobar, where a close relative of him had invited him to come. They passed the south of Ceylon without a stop in Galle, but were hit by a storm before their destination. Therefore, they sailed to Port Blair to repair the damage and then back south to Car Nicobar. After a few years in his relatives´ house he went to Burma, where he met a British Gentleman who taught him navigation and international maritime law. With his help and with the witness of the harbour manager he was able to get official documents and served as a captain on a motor vessel on routes between harbours in Burma. In 1956 he learned from a telegram that his father fell ill and he returned to Maliku. Three years later Ibrahim Manikfan HMG died. At the end of the interview I asked him why his watch showed – what I thought was – the "wrong" time. But this was a misjudgement. He uses the Greenwich Mean Time and finds it more comfortable as he was used to it when he was sailing.

THE GROWING DIASPORA IN COCHIN

In February 2018 my planned trip to Maliku could not take place because the cyclone Ockhi had caused serious damage on the island in November 2017. I came to Kochi, from where the ships disembark to the Lakshadweep islands, to see some Maliku friends and find out about the situation of their relatives at home. I knew from the press that the tropical cyclone had caused damage to houses, ships, and infrastructure and that it had uprooted thousands of coconut trees. But when I spoke in Kochi to those who witnessed the cyclone, and many of them had to claim

material loss, I learned that there was little stress on the damage, but a clear emphasis on the solidarity of the islanders. Several times I heard the summary: "We saved every single life, nobody died, nobody was left behind.“ I was surprised to find the emphasis on immediate emergency aid, followed by undivided neighbourly help so prominent in their narratives. The description of personal suffering and the total loss was hardly highlighted. They were proud of the immediate measurements and their life-saving acts. One year later on Minicoy, I could see offshoots growing from damaged coconut trees, some of them partly uprooted with the stem in a horizontal position. I saw photographs on my interlocuters´ mobile phones of destroyed fishing boats and houses with blown off roofs. The destruction was serious. The discrepancy between what I heard in Kochi in 2018 and what I saw a year later on Maliku became a reminder of what is a commonplace in oral history: narratives are coloured memories and the way they are told follows normative expectations. Seamen of Maliku, I would argue, avoid exaggerations and complaints.

Talking to retired seamen from Maliku in Kaloor, a central part of Kochi, I found a similar tone in their life-histories. When I asked them about critical points on sea, their reply was rather uniform: no unusual events. In passing, they mentioned storms to explain a loss of a ship, but never to tell a heroic story. I experienced these men as self-confined personalities, proud of their life achievements and less talkative than what I expected from widely travelled men. Most of them were in their early 80s and kept good health. In their childhood they moved in the close neighbourhood of their parental home, learnt to swim at the age of five or six and how to fish in the lagoon a few years later. It was not common to attend a local school, but they learned to read the Koran in Arabic and how to read and write Mahal. At the age of 14 or 15 they joined their brothers, cousins, uncles or fathers on the daily fishing trips, leaving the lagoon in the early morning with fresh bait to catch tuna in the open ocean. The sailing boats returned on the same day in the afternoon or evening and the catch was distributed on the shore. In their memory, there was no question of whether to join a crew and work on a merchant vessel. The question was “when” and they eagerly waited for their chance to come.

The typical story begins with a departure from the island at the age around twenty, always in the company of an elderly relative or an experienced man in their peer group. They joined a trading vessel to Cannanore, Colombo or Kolkata. A different, but unusual route was via Malé, which could be reached from Maliku easily before 1956, when the island became part of Independent India and the sea-route to the south was closed because it crossed the Indian national boundary. After reaching a major harbour they waited for a chance to get a contract. They stayed with their known people or joined other men from Maliku. For vessels run by foreign companies they required documents and a certified basic training, but other trading boats took them without any written records. They sailed for a few years, often stayed in little Maliku diasporas in Burma or the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The first seaman I talked to was Ali Moosa Master, 88 years old and physically fit, with white hair combed back and a distinct chin strap beard. He left Maliku at the age of nineteen, stayed in Kolkata for a while, in a house run by the Minicoy Seamen´s Association. This was the place to be for seamen returning from a longer trip or waiting for hire. He stayed for a few weeks and earned his living as a day-labourer in the harbour, until he got a hire to the Andaman Island. He left the vessel in Port Blair and worked on local inter-island ferries, was promoted and felt comfortable in the region. In Port Blair he used to meet seamen from Maliku and received messages from home. Later he worked as a carpenter and went back to Maliku on a few occasions. He did not tell (and I did not ask him) about being married in the Andaman Islands, but from other narratives I learnt that a few men from Maliku settled there, had a wife and children, and a few came back to their native villages after several decades. Ali Moosa Master stayed in the Union Territory of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands until 1994, returned to Minicoy and later moved to Kaloor, where his children found work and where the grandchildren go to school.

The number of families living in Kochi is growing year by year. More than thirty joint families have bought a house in Kaloor and about the same number lives in rented places. Some of them stay permanently, others come for a limited period, be it formal education of children, long-term medical treatment, or indefinite waiting for a new hire on a ship or for a complicated court case. In many houses I found a floating group of people, some family members lived in Kaloor throughout the year, some came for special purposes, while others just dropped in to see relatives or go for an extensive shopping tour. In general, the families of Maliku feel comfortable in Muslim neighbourhood of Kaloor. I asked whether they miss their island, and most of my interlocuters said that they did not feel isolated from their island, because a constant coming and going brought news and fresh fish from their village. But this is – as mentioned above – a verbal statement. In Maliku most younger people know about the life in Kaloor, and in my impression they seek to combine the best of the two worlds: a safe and clean environment in an island with a tight network of friends and relatives, and a home away from home in a Kerala city with privacy, more consumer goods, medical care and a faster internet. For the young men with a degree in marine engineering it is difficult to decide to which place priority should be given.

A protagonist of the younger generations with high formal education was Hassan Manikfan, who attended the school in Maliku up to the fifth standard, continued on a boarding school in Kavaratti up to the 12th standard, where he was exposed to teachers from all parts of India and learnt Malayalam and English as the medium of instruction. He also spent a year as an exchange student in Lucknow, where he suffered from the cold climate and was exposed to Hindi. After schooling he studied in the hot climate of Tuticorin mechanical engineering, where six seats were reserved for students from the Union Territory of the Lakshadweep. Until today he

maintains contact with his co-students. His schoolmates from the higher secondary school are active on facebook, so he knows that six men from his batch became medical doctors, a few are engineers, one is a major in the Army, one works in Nigeria, and one owns a tattoo business in Paris. Today he works as an engineer for a Singapore based shipping company and made Kaloor his home about 10 years ago. He owns an impressive modern house with a private gym on the top floor and a separate flat for his aged father. For him, his wife and the two children the new residence is the centre of his social life.

THE MINICOY SEAMEN´S ASSOCIATION IN MUMBAI

In February 2019, I spent a week in Mumbai to visit the Minicoy Seamen´s Association. I knew about this organisation from the life histories mentioned above and wanted to speak to the men in the hostels. The association is interwoven with the maritime history of the island and has its origin in Kolkata, where it all began and where a hostel for Maliku seamen existed. The generation of Hassan Manikfan HMG and Ali Moosa Master stayed in the three-floor building near the harbour. On the ground floor the elderly and experienced seamen lodged while waiting either for the next hire or for their train back to Cochin; on the middle floor the mid-aged men were accommodated and on the top floor the freshmen and younger men from Maliku found a place to sleep. Some had to wait for months for the next job and worked as day-labourers at the harbour. In the narratives, the life in the hostel in Kolkata appears like a phase of passage, where the freshmen learned about the world of ships and seafaring. The building was owned by the association and staffed by members of the influential families from the island. I could not locate any written document or photograph of the house. The origin and the legal form – some speak of an endowment – remains unclear. But there is a consensus that a long standing fight in the leadership, based on different political associations, led to legal dispute and the end of the lodge.

In the 1960s the association was shifted to Bombay (now Mumbai), because the harbour of this city gained more importance (Kattner, 1996). Legal and tax requirement suggested a new form of registration, today known as "Minicoy People´s Welfare Association". The president and the secretary each stay in one of the three hostels for several months a year, otherwise they are with their families in Maliku. By and large, the aim of the association has not changed: they assist and accommodate seamen on land, arrange trainings, legal documents and jobs. The larger hostel has three floors, which are arranged like the former place in Kolkata. The three different age groups live and cook together in limited space and follow the rigid rules of the house. Like in the old days in Kolkata, some stay many months and even years waiting for their chance to leave. They get up and return home at fixed times, and at 10 pm the light is switched off. The dwellers attend their daily prayers, visit the nearby mosque and maintain their high reputation as disciplined

seamen and pious Muslims. My access to their rooms was limited, because the strict house rules do not allow visitors to the hostels, and at the time of my visit no person in charge was in town.

I commuted daily from my hotel to the private hostel for Maliku seamen in the Muslim part of Phydone, run by Mr. D.D. Shareef, a well-known man among all age groups. His life story reads like "dishwasher to millionaire". He had his schooling in Maliku and came with very limited knowledge of English and a few words of Hindi to Mumbai at the age of 19, worked for six months on a ship, and then decided to make his living in town. Now, twenty years later, he is co-founder and partner of Uniship Management Private Limited, an independent crew management company in Andheri. He took me on his motorcycle to the Indian Seamen´s Hostel near the harbour, to the National Union of Seafarers of India and invited me to the best dinner I ever had in Mumbai. I met him as a great host, a never-tired man with a permanent ringing mobile phone, who´s children drive on their hoverboard in the narrow space of his hostel. One year later I received a phone call from him from Switzerland, where he spent his perfect planned holiday with his family: each day in a different place. He does not represent a particular type of seamen; he stands for him alone.

During my stay in Mumbai I spent most of the time in Mr. Shareef´s hostel and spoke to seamen and those who would like to become one, all born in Maliku. About twenty men find a place to sleep and live here. The hostel, located on the first floor in a narrow busy street, is a place to stay and a place to visit. Many came for a purpose, to get documents through the service of Mr. Shareef, who receives his clients in a small office. A common cause for a visit is to send or to receive small parcels or just to see friends. The advantage of sending parcels, often with sweets or medicine, is not just safety, but to meet a person who had personal contact to the sender and could talk about the family and their well-being. The seamen meet their visitors in the main room, where they roll out their sleeping mats in the evening. A TV is fixed in-between two windows and among the few decorative items are models of ships; one model is a racing boat from Maliku used for a competition at the annual Minicoy Festival. The tiled floor is spotless, small suit cases are lined up on a shelf, and all wash bags and towels hang one-by-one in front of the two small rest rooms. Like on ships, each item has its place, and nothing is lying in the way.

Most of the young men had a college degree, preferably in mechanical engineering, spoke good English, and were at the beginning of their maritime career. They are, like my students in Munich, digital natives and find all that they need to know or like to show on their mobile phones. In the hostel they learn how to cook and do not hesitate to call or to text their mothers, sisters or partners in Maliku when they got stuck in the process of cooking. They love their excursions to the fish market in Colaba, Southern Mumbai, but have not many interactions with other people in Mumbai. They move within their own Maliku circles, pray in the Mosque

on the opposite side of the street, and go to the movies once in a while. Alcohol is a no-go. Away from home, they follow the social norms of Maliku to be co-operative, to avoid loud speech and visible dissatisfaction. The atmosphere among the young men appears to be often warm, usually friendly and always cordial. But there is also frustration when individuals have to wait long periods for a contract or – before this can happen – for certificates. During long periods of waiting they cannot visit Maliku, because the next administrative step or a job offer might follow at any time, and in that case an urgent response is essential.

The basic documents, which are needed, are the CDC, "Continuous Discharge Certificate – cum – Seafarer´s Identity Document" and the STCW, "Standard of Training Certificate and Watch keeping". But before applying for the CDC a passport is needed and for a passport a birth certificate is required. The STCW requires various training programmes such as first aid, fire-fighting, general safety, personal survival and social responsibility. In addition, medical tests are needed to proceed any job and most of the shipping companies demand a sailor´s visa for the United States, which causes additional waiting time. Elderly seaman told me that their Muslim names made it more difficult to get such a document after terrorist attacks of Islamic extremists in September, 2011. In sharp contrast to what I learnt from the elderly seamen before, the new requirements are more of administrative hurdles, which cannot be overcome by physical fitness and embodied knowledge. The retired seamen in Kaloor told me, that they were ahead of their competitors, because they could swim and dive, repair all kind of things, and hardly were homesick. Shareef confirms these narratives and adds what contributes to the good reputations of Maliku seamen today: Unlike others, they remain on the job for two or three decades and do not drop out after three or five years of sailing; as Muslims they do not drink alcohol, and they are considered to be duty minded, hard-working and respectful of hierarchies. In his words: "They are smart, but not too smart."

One of the young men I talked to was Harish Hassan. I had met his father three years before in Maliku, at a time when Harish was a student of Government Senior Secondary School, Minicoy. I could remember well how his father was working on the hull of a 60 feet fishing boat, a major investment of his extended family. Harish told me about his time in Chennai, where he earned his Diploma in Nautical Sciences in one of the private colleges. In his batch were about 200 students from all over India, three of them from Maliku. His family had to spend more than one lakh Rupees, but the greater part was refunded from the Government for people from the Lakshadweep. At the age of 20 he came to Shareef´s hostel where he had been living then for six months. When I met him, he had gone through the long administrative process and was waiting for a contract. Like most of his peer group, he planned to go to sea for more than twenty years, visit Maliku each year for three months, get married, have children, and invest in an extension or re-building his home. After seafaring he would like to settle in his island and look after the fishing boat of his family.

STATUS CATEGORIES, SOCIAL DYNAMICS AND THE INDIAN STATE

Culture and society in Maliku have shown an enormous stability with respect to language, kinship rules, religious orientation and the fishing economy (Maloney, 1980). But other aspects have undergone a significant change. Among these dynamic fields is the social stratification of this island society. Before India became independent the population was strictly divided in four status categories. *Bodun* were the highest category; they owned ships and controlled the land on Maliku (Kattner, 1996). *Niamin* were captains and navigators. *Medukembin* worked as crew on ships. *Raverin*, the lowest status category, looked after the gardens and coconut trees. According to this old order, only *Niamin* and *Medukembin* were on board of the ships (Kattner, 2010: 170), while the highest and the lowest status categories were not allowed to leave the island. A spatial and a symbolic order went along with this stratification, not so different from the Indian caste system. Only higher status groups were allowed to wear sandals and gold jewellery and members from lower groups should not sit in front of high-ranking persons. Identity, often expressed in the house name, landed property and boats, were passed in the female line. Until today, a small number of families continue to be honoured for their former status and a few signs of old status categories can still be found in personal names like "Manikfan" (indicating the status group *Bodun*) and house names like "ganduwaru" (often translated as "palace"). But many expressions of this hierarchical order (Kulikov, 2014) have changed since the second half of the last century.

Today seamen come from all status categories, and I did not find any clear connectivity of the old status in the island and the status on merchant ships. The position on a ship depends on education and certificates, which is an open field of competition. It should be mentioned that all natives of Minicoy are classified as scheduled tribes and make use of their privileged access to higher education and to government jobs. The life-histories which I collected in the last years suggest that the career in the merchant navy is not determined by the old hierarchical structure in the island. I would argue that the social status among the retired Minicoy seamen presently residing in Kaloor is associated with their experience, years of service, last position in the hierarchy of the ship and possibly income. Among the younger generation in Shareef´s hostel formal education, academic degrees and command of Hindi and English seem to be factors to scale a person. I do not want to deny the impact of the old status categories as a quality of a person´s identity, but – no doubt – the strict social boundaries of the past have faded.

Marriage rules are one of the strongest instruments to demarcate social groups: In a normative sense, status groups in Maliku form endogamous units, even though "neighouring" groups practiced intermarriages. The octogenarians now living in Kaloor are married within their social stratum, like most of their peer groups in Maliku. As Muslims they were permitted to marry up to four wives, but monogamy

was (and is) the rule. Some of the old seamen or their forefathers had a second wife in a harbour town far away, and I have heard about individual cases where these wives settled in Maliku. But in the course of the twentieth century the force of the marriage rules, social expectation and marriage practices proved to be a dynamic field. Among the young Malikun in Mumbai different ideas about an apt marriage alliance constitute an impressive, but not really controversial plurality. Some men state that a "traditional" marriage is still considered to be a good choice, while others claim that the prospective wife should be from (any of the status groups in) Maliku. One seaman, who dates a girl from Kavaratti, said, the bride should be from the Lakshadweep, and some voices would welcome any partner "from the Muslim community in India" or, as one man stated, "from any religious background in India". The ideas about their future residence also differ. Most men would not even think of a place other than Maliku, while a few individuals consider Kochi with an established medical and educational infrastructure as a good place to live. The rule of matrilocality, however, was never in question.

The monetary aspect of family and kinship shows aspects of continuity and change, too. It was (and is) the duty of the husband to support both the household of his mother and that of his wife. The social practice to increase the support to the wife´s side after the death of one´s mother remained unchanged. Before Independence, seamen sent money in cash to their families through friends and personally carried the main amount in a safe place, usually a money belt. Today, as a rule, every family has a bank account. The task to make savings for greater investments does not follow a clear agenda; at times it is the wife´s duty, in other cases the men control the reserves. Seamen working for international companies run an NRI (non-resident Indian) account based on US-dollars but cannot save in a foreign currency due to legal restrictions. They make remittances to their mother and wife or keep signed checks in their homes. In some cases family members have a debit card and have access to their account. I was told in many cases that they divide their income in three parts: one for the mother, one for the wife and one for the account holder, and even more often I heard that the distribution key is less transparent. But by and large, the income of seamen became more transparent and the flow of money more fluid.

In all three fields mentioned above, the decreasing impact of status groups, the shifting boundaries of endogamy and the modified allocation of financial resources, the role of the state becomes obvious. Before Independence a few *Bodun* families of Maliku (and also village communities) owned and managed trading boats; they controlled the selection of the crew and accumulated wealth. They also monitored the observance of marriage rules and the social conduct of status groups. The constitution and administration of the new secular state gave more options and chances to lower status groups and the effective control of the maritime economy was no more in the hands of the *Bodun*. The responsibility to solemnize a marriage

still vests with the *Katheeb*, a learned man from the lower status group. The system of collectively owned land, which was managed by the *Bodun*, was transformed into individually owned properties. The introduction of a cash economy and the opening of state-owned banks on Maliku modified the flow of money and the allocation of means of payment. In addition, other state-controlled institutions and agencies became operative: police services, local administration, public elections, penal code, taxes and the inclusion of Minicoy into the Union Territory of the Lakshadweep islands. Today, every step in the life of a Malikun is embedded in what the state prescribes: from birth certificate to pension fund, from the purchase of a SIM-card to the ship ticket from Maliku to Kochi. But the cultural change within this system rests on the agency of the Malikun and their everyday perceptions, individual assessments and collective decisions.

SUMMARY

The seamen of Maliku form a heterogeneous group in terms of training and education. They work under different forms of contract, occupy different positions in the marine hierarchy and sail on different types of ships. But they have in common, that they are considered to be excellent seamen. This is not surprising since the economy of an island without a market economy and hardly an occupational alternative to fishing and sailing contributes a potential for specific forms of perfection. In the case of Maliku the lack of an alternative to ocean work increased specialised maritime skills and deep knowledge. The history of this island demonstrates how high performance in a trade or a craft develops over generations and how knowledge, and respective values, morals and emotional contours evolve. Before the advent of motorized vessels, the seamen returned to Maliku in April or May and went back to South Asian harbours after the monsoon in August or September. In the mean-time they were occupied with boat building and fishing, and found time to share their knowledge within their peer group. Today seamen return annually for three months or so and do basically the same.

In the colonial past and in contemporary society the seamen of Maliku constitute a specific sociological type. They are not marginal men, and therefore differ from most seamen in the rest of the world. From the eighteenth century onwards, they did not leave their homes as destitute men to find work in urban centres, in mills or harbours. Instead they followed their childhood dream in the footsteps of their fore-bearers. This tendency continues until today. For almost a century they have been supported by the "Minicoy Seamen´s Association", now re-named as "Minicoy People´s Welfare Association", owning hostels in Kolkata and later in Mumbai. These houses are much more than an accommodation and offer all kinds of information and assistance. They constitute homes away from home, an island in a metropolitan harbour city where the mother tongue Mahal is spoken and from where parcels find their way to the native homes and back. A century ago

the association made sure that seamen were not engaging in an indentured labour contract or fell into a debt trap of a lodge owner. Today the formal and informal networks of the association assist in legal matters, help to get official documents and to engage in fair contracts. Social control, which once was in the hands of the highest status category in the island, is now rooted in a number of decentralised networks, among which the seamen´s association and the Indian administration must be mentioned first.

The pre-modern history of Maliku began as a kind of "caravanserai" in the ocean (Kattner, 2003), became a hub (as Schnepel and Alpers, 2018 called such centers) for the ocean-going traffic, and turned into a headquarters (Heidemann, 2019) of seamanship. The small island at the southernmost point of western India left hardly any written autochthone documents, but archaeological, linguistic and anthropological evidence (Maloney, 1980) support what visitors since Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century wrote and what is reflected in the memories of present-day octogenarians: Since time immemorial this short and thin stretch of landmass was the home of fishermen, sailors, pilots and for more than two centuries of seamen, who served under numerous flags, built large-scale networks, founded own associations, ran hostels, and adapted their movements and skills in the turbulent chapters of recent history. The seamen of Maliku, the older generation and the youngest sailor today alike, do not consider the history of their forefathers as dependent lascars or colonial subjects. They see themselves as successors of free and skilled seamen, who were honoured for what they were. I know of no historical document which tells a different (hi)story.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the seamen of Maliku and their families for their overwhelming hospitality, Naajih Didi, Ellen Kattner, Mohammed Kolugege and Wolfgang Schwentker for their comments on earlier versions of this text, and the Alexander von Humboldt-Foundation for the financial support.

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