
Review of Books

A ROAD TO EXTINCTION CAN PALAEOLITHIC AFRICANS SURVIVE IN THE ANDAMAN ISLANDS? By JONATHAN LAWLEY. pp. 191. London, Envelope Books, 2020.
doi:[10.1017/S1356186321000419](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186321000419)

The Andaman Islands are an archipelago, consisting of 300 islands in the Bay of Bengal. Geographically close to the coast of modern Myanmar, they were administered during the British Raj as a penal colony dealing with the overflow of convicts from the mainland. Since 1947 they have been part of the Republic of India. From the late Palaeolithic period the islands have been inhabited by indigenous tribes originating in Africa, in what is now Botswana. The Andamanese were traditionally hunter/gatherers leading a nomadic life and entirely cut off from the outside world. Such contact as did occur—for example as a result of shipwrecks—confirmed their dislike of any newcomers who were usually killed on the spot. While different tribes, with different languages, inhabited different islands, those in northern islands were the most hostile. The establishment of the penal colony meant the arrival of prisoners and their warders: the local Jawara tribe, who lived on the edge of the settlement, often attacked and killed these intruders, making the Andamans a dangerous posting, not attractive to the faint-hearted. As late as 2018 John Chau, on a missionary mission, was killed on North Sentinel.

Jonathan Lawley's book is a *cri de coeur* pleading for a policy of non-interference with the traditional way of life of the islanders, however primitive it might seem to modern citizens of the world. At the same time, at first sight slightly incongruously, the book is a family *mémoire*, a trip down memory lane in the last days of the Raj, the India in which the author was brought up. So far as the islands are concerned, the family connection is significant and goes back a long way. In particular Lawley is struck by the career of "Reggie" Lewis, his grandfather who was an administrator on the island for over two decades. Lewis left a major report as part of the 1911 census in which his shock at the exploitation of the islanders is made clear. He blames the arrival of 'civilization' for many evils including the spread of hitherto unknown diseases—measles, influenza and syphilis—against which the islanders, lacking all contact with outsiders, had no immunity.

"Because they live in perfect balance with the environment, the Jawara and Sentinelese enjoy outstandingly good health. Their food and medicines are obtained from roots and fruits as well as honey to treat illness".¹

Lewis's report came after a revival of interest in the Andamanese following a study made by Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, the notable anthropologist. His investigation lasted for two years, from 1906 to 1908 and led to the publication of a major study of the indigenous people which also gave warning of their possible extinction. The study, published only a decade later, clearly influenced British colonial policy though in the end, with limited success.

Lawley's plea in *A Road to Extinction* is to leave the islanders alone in their idyllic surroundings. They have always understood the dangers of contact with the outside world:

¹p. 27.

“Instinct tells them to avoid contact with anything that could lead to change. They have made it abundantly clear that they do not want or feel they need anything that threatens a way of life they value above all else, and that they do not wish to associate with the rest of humanity”.²

By the time Lawley himself visited the islands in 2018, several factors had completely changed the landscape. One was the building in the 1970s of the Andaman Trunk Road, cutting its way through Jawara tribal territory. Before long the single track tarred road, with spectacular jungle scenery on both sides, had convoys of vehicles passing along it. Then tourists arrived: middle class Indians flocked to catch glimpses of naked, prehistoric peoples on the country’s own soil. The arrival of the Lawleys in 2018 sounds like the arrival at any tropical resort: they are whisked away by taxi from the airport at Port Blair to the comfort of a resort hotel, boasting all modern amenities.

Despite Lewis’s report and the attempt of the British authorities to provide some support for the locals in the form of “Andaman homes”, the gradual erosion of the indigenous way of life continued. The penal colony encroached on traditional land leading to conflict with the local Jawara tribe. After the Second World War, although committed to safeguarding aboriginal culture, the Indian Government granted permission for settlers to build and cultivate parts of South Andaman on land that the Jawara regarded as theirs. Conflict again arose: the tribesmen raided the settlers’ holdings with the result that official policy toward them hardened. As previously mentioned there then came the building of a trunk road which, though suspended by a decision of the Indian Supreme Court, has not been closed.

Lawley’s book—with its neat air envelope cover—is interspersed with accounts of his family’s colonial life and his own experiences in Africa. It includes some accounts family members wrote at the time they were living on the islands, illustrated with period photos. His own obvious pleasure at recounting the benefits of colonial life, with its social rounds and the presence of British nannies feels curiously at odds with his main theme. There is also a lot of to-ing and fro-ing in the historical part of the narrative which makes it difficult to follow. An index would have been helpful.

Nevertheless, it is impossible not to be moved by Lawley’s plea on behalf of the Andaman islanders. In a certain sense, the book illustrates a paradox known since the Enlightenment portrayals of the “Noble Savage”: should we, the beneficiaries of civilisation, deny it to others? Can social evolution be stopped? Lawley’s answer is that the islanders do not want the benefits of civilisation and that wish should be respected by the Indian Government. Change can at least be postponed.

MALCOLM JACK
Royal Asiatic Society
malcolm.jack@btinternet.com

IN THE AUTHOR’S HAND. HOLOGRAPH AND AUTHORIAL MANUSCRIPTS IN THE ISLAMIC HANDWRITTEN TRADITION. Edited by FRÉDÉRIC BAUDEN and ÉLISE FRANSSSEN. pp. xx and 454, Leiden, Brill, 2020.
doi:[10.1017/S1356186321000468](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186321000468)

When an author pens his own work in his own hand, the result has always commanded a special esteem. It could lead to an elevated economic and academic value for collectors and researchers through its aura of intellectual proximity, and, in philological terms, the authority of an immediate

²p. 25.