

## Spirits, Politics, and Rituals in the History of Nicobar Islands

Vishvajit Pandya

*Department of Anthropology, Victoria University of Wellington; P.O.Box 600, Wellington, New Zealand 04-463 5134, Fax: +64-4-463-5064; e-mail: <Vishvajit.Pandya@vuw.ac.nz>*

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**ABSTRACT** Using historical accounts this paper deals with the distinction of politics and religion imposed and generated in the Nicobarese culture and society by colonial and missionary enterprise. In relation to the colonial encounter, the framework of understanding religion and politics was questioned and administrative efforts were made to install an order. However, the Nicobarese responded to the new meanings imposed on them by reconstituting elements from the domain of religion and politics to create rituals of politics. For tribal culture like the Nicobarese, issues of power, belief, order, morality and faith are all fused into one. This paper is the analysis of the fused meanings in case of devil murder and carved images of Hanta-Koi, pertaining to power of spirits and colonial authorities, in generation of symbolic actions and the rituals undertaken by the Nicobarese. The intent is to establish not a meaning but rather about a series of meanings that create a lack of distinction between politics and religion within Nicobarese worldview and experienced history.

### INTRODUCTION

In December of 1992, after the Babri Masjid incident, in "mainland India" and days after the procession marking local support for Mandal commission at Port Blair, administrative capital for the Andaman Nicobar Union Territory of India, I was informed that due to "political development" the additional District magistrate would not be able to join me on the boat taking me to my field location. I had to proceed on my own. However I was joined on the deck by a group of Sadhus, (holy men), sponsored by the Hindu Vishwa Parishad to sing Kirtan at a village gathering and the local "Captain" of Little Andaman's Nicobarese settlement who was carrying a huge, bound pig from his son's family at Port Blair as a gift. The Sadhus, oblivious to the Masjid, were driven by a sense of duty- to spread the words and deeds of Ram and Krishna to the countryside where television has yet to reach. The Captain, following the Nicobarese tradition, was returning after a long time with gifts to make pos-

sible a feast. On the way, we all talked about what had happened in Port Blair and in the Indian mainland. The passengers tolerated the squealing of the tied up pig and Sadhus chanting the praise of Krishna and Ram. After nine hours of the small boat rolling in the open sea everyone disembarked at Hut Bay in the Little Andamans. Issues of Indian secularism, and communalism were not the concern of disembarking crowd. In broken Hindustani the captain said: "What is the difference between issues of politics and religion and economics? It is all the same!" And the leader of the Kirtan mandal said - "Good politics is religion and religion is political- both have to deal with disorder and generate faith."

When I look back, I wonder if the Protestant Christian Nicobarese Captain and the Hindu Sadhu distinguish between religion and politics as in writings of P. Berger where sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols (Berger, 1973: 113). For my fellow passengers there was no professional politics, no distinction between ideal and real forms of rationalised authority. They were not well versed in Weberian ideas (Gerth and Mills, 1948) nor in Gandhian or Nehru's nationalism that dealt with roles imposed by the modern state upon those who exist within the state (See Madan, 1987 and Nandy, 1989). Perhaps the idea of religion and politics always implies a separation to convey the notion of political modernity. Lack of the separation implies some kind of problem, or a form that is like the value loaded image of "underdeveloped society." The anthropological question originating within the cultural context would be to look for the inner logic by which religion, economics and politics are put in relation to an ideology that transcends the notion of secular state.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, how do we grasp the articulation of religion being politics and politics being religion (Cf. Gandhi, 1940: 383)? Perhaps people do not see the two as

distinct but combine and recombine them creating a meaning making process. In Nicobarese culture, colonialism has attempted to constantly erode the memory (cf. Madan, 1987: 754) of interconnected power, religion, and politics. While the Nicobarese received the Christian missionary categories of law (tied to issues of politics) and morality (tied to religion), Nicobarese reconstituted received categories. Nicobarese in their history and its experience reconstructed and practised social actions that actually articulated the inter-connections of religious and political concerns. Through the staged, presented, and represented rituals the people in accordance with the memory of tradition articulate politics and religion (See Bloch, 1988, 1989) articulate culture and history. So the Sadhus justified themselves by saying, "we are visiting the far flung islands to spread the words of Hinduism, just like the old times when Hindus went beyond Andamans and Nicobar to the islands of Sumatra and Bali- but somehow the Nicobarese and Andamanese (the tribal) remained as the descendants of Rama's vanar sena (troop of monkeys who helped Ram in the epic of Ramayan)." But the Nicobarese captain felt that he was returning back with a gift from his son to show that he cared about the whole of duhed (extended lineage) capable of coming together. People continue to maintain order by keeping the categories of politics and religion separate is a presupposition. Perhaps in the Nicobarese culture, its memory and construction of history is a continued effort to bring politics and religion together; a game like ritual (See Levi Strauss, 1962: 30-3) played between the colonised and the colonisers. Making history, as experienced by the Nicobarese and as attributed to them is a discourse in which rules to conduct are based on different positions of religion and politics, much like the difference of meaning held by people dealing with *realpolitik* and government imposing ideas about religion and politics on *realpolitik*.

Using historical accounts I intend to argue that the distinction of politics and religion is imposed (See Dumont, 1980) upon the culture of the Nicobarese by colonial and missionary authorities. In relation to the colonial encounter, the framework of understanding religion and politics was questioned and administrative ef-

forts were made to create a separation to install an order. This is apparently an approach and explanatory framework of Europeans. The separation of Church and State is an important way to see the society. Consequently much early Anthropology insisted on seeing a fused religion and politics as a mark of "primitive culture" and to separate the two became a prime directive for the colonial officer's cultural practice.<sup>2</sup> However the culture itself, as the Nicobarese demonstrate, responds to the new meaning imposed on them by reconstituting elements from the domain of religion and politics to create rituals of politics. The very idea that religion and politics is separate creates a problem of perception and interpretation of order, and exercise of power.<sup>3</sup> Over time, once politics and religion both are separated, the Nicobarese continue to combine the meanings and aspects from the two domain to create rituals that are political and acceptable to the colonial power.<sup>4</sup> My argument is that in a society and culture like that of the Nicobarese, religion and politics are not distinguished. For a tribal culture like the Nicobarese issues of power, belief, order, morality and faith are all fused into one.<sup>5</sup> However, we should not forget a central insight of the deconstructionist discourse of western academia (See Sturrock, 1977).

First I will show within a historical framework of colonisation what ideas of religious world for Nicobarese were perceived by the early ethnographers and administrators, and how the principles of the world understood were differentiated to create actions to take place within the discourse of political power and religious power. Secondly, I will consider the accounts of devil murder within the Nicobarese cultural and historical context that reflects the tension of power being separated from religion and politics by the colonisers, and the response to it by the Nicobarese. Finally, I suggest a cultural analysis of Nicobarese rituals that were endorsed by the colonial forces although the principals were under criticism and reform by the preceding sequence of colonial policy and administration. Specifically, I consider carved and constructed images of Hanta-Koi and the ritual role they played within the religious discourse made by the Nicobarese. For the Nicobarese



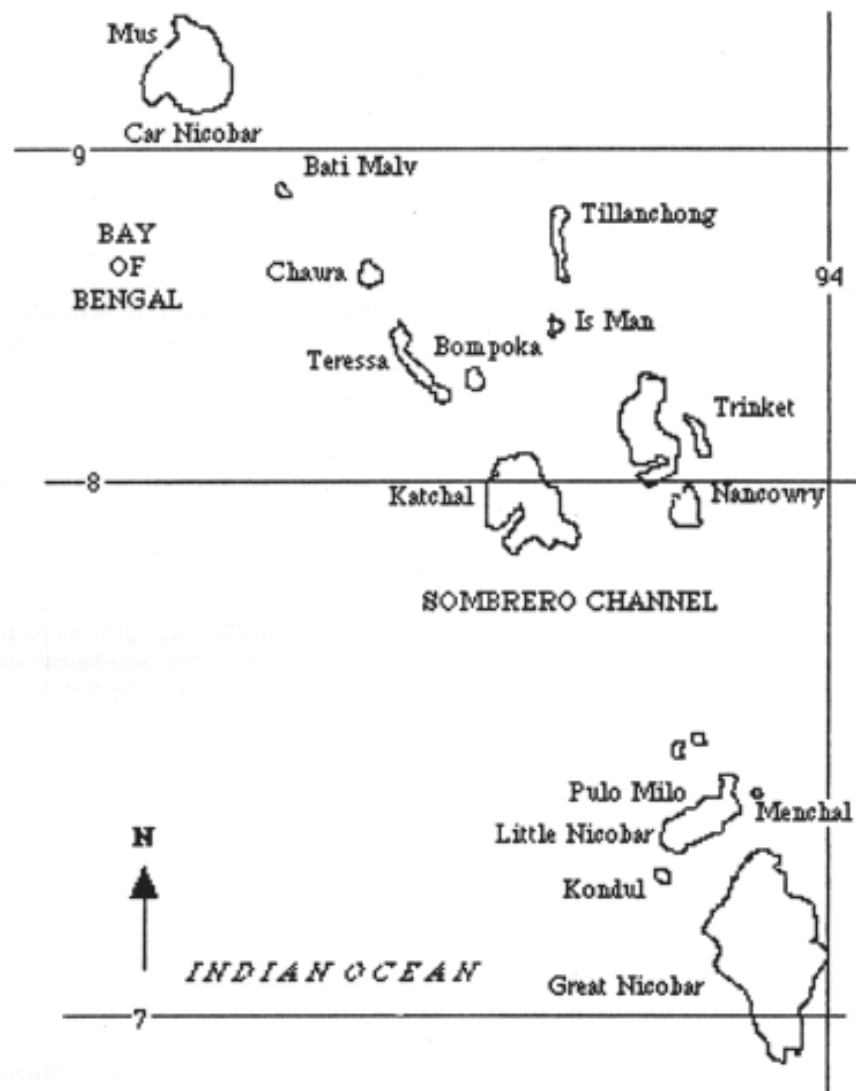


Fig. 1: Nicobar Islands

over time Hanta-Koi was not just an aspect of religious ritual but also a “new” transformed political meaning. Unlike the case of devil murder, where colonial authorities insisted on separating political and religious power, Hanta Koi’s blending of politics and religion was complementary and acceptable to the British colonisers. This is the dialogue at various levels, not about a meaning but rather about a series of meanings, that creates a lack of dis-

tinction between politics and religion. These meanings are inter-reflexive between politics and religion. It is about rituals in history where the lack of separation between religion and politics is an imposed concern of the coloniser. As soon as the Nicobarese non-distinction of political and religious view becomes suitable to the colonial powers position itself they accept and endorse the worldview in which rituals blend religion and politics.

### A WORLD OF ATTRACTING AND REPELLING ACTS

The Nicobar Islands are made up of 12 small and big islands in the Bay of Bengal. The physical features and cultural practices of the islands present them as distinctive from cultures and indigenous people of the Andamans and mainland India but having an affinity with Indonesian and Malayan cultural features traced in the ethnographic accounts of South East Asian tribal cultures. A series of encounters with diverse colonial forces brought the Nicobar Islands, with regional dialect variations, together as one administrative unit under the British Empire in India.<sup>6</sup> Traditionally, exchange relations among themselves interconnected all the islands.<sup>7</sup>

Each year from December until March the Nicobarese undertook canoe trips to the central island of the archipelago. The purpose of the inter-island visits, called *duelah*, was to trade coconuts, pigs, baskets, clay pots, and wood, bark cloth, rattan ropes, metal implements, and medicine. Implicit within the trade and exchange circuit that focused on the central island of Trinket, Nancowry, and Katchal was the issue of bringing about changes in the power imbalance in each island. People, ideas, opinions, and objects all were subject to exchange whereby a so-called Nicobarese political economy was kept in circulation and motion. An essential element of the worldview of the Nicobarese is that they saw themselves in a world that was subject to invasions of spirits bringing misfortune and disorder. Consequently, the *duelah* made possible for each household, lineage, and village of all the islands to organise the required control of spirits by means of offerings, feasts, and ceremonies to ward off the spirits and related manifestations like the inappropriate behaviour of individuals and sickness. What was aspired and desired was projected on to spirits or attributed to a role played by the spirits. Consequently, before leaving for *duelah*, the travellers erected on their home coastline small carved canoes on which items to be offered for trade and expected in return were painted. The carved and painted model canoes were also believed to attract the travellers safely home again and keep away misfortune (Man, 1895: 171). The practices of *duelah* predate Christian

missionary influence and have been incorporated into contemporary Christian customs of the islanders. Now at the time of *duelah*, local priests bless the voyagers' canoe and read prayers for a safe journey (Shyamchaudhry, 1977). The islanders, however, still continue to erect their small-carved canoes on the coastlines of the islands. The world of the Nicobarese has always been based on the principle of attraction and repulsion and has continued with degrees of Christianity and historical changes incorporated within it. The economy of exchange was premised on creating a carved model of a canoe (a ritual/religious object) that insured safe passage and profitable gain of commodities exchanged. The ritual carving kept away the negative spirit forces for the Nicobarese undertaking "economic" activity. This exemplified blending of economic activity with spirits in the Nicobarese worldview. Spirits have influence and can be influenced is a principle that survived over period of history and even incorporated Christian prayers recited for *duelah*. Traditionally, the Nicobarese lived in settled coastal villages, and depended on horticulture, fishing, hunting, and inter island trade. Nicobarese have absorbed Christian ideas and some European notions, but the operating principle of the cultural world is derived from a cosmological construct in which good spirits and bad spirits are constantly either attracted or repelled. The success of *duelah* is founded on this principle.

The benevolent spirits of good ancestors are called *iwika*; malevolent spirits, while those formed from the spirits of murderers, victims of murder, and evildoers in general, are called *iwipot*. The word *iwi* means "to become" (Roepstroff, 1875: 9). Both *iwika* and *iwipot* are believed to live in a place called *Henekla*, a place east of the Nicobar Islands but never visible to living Nicobarese. Each person who dies becomes (*iwi*) invisible and exterior to the social world of living individuals. The constant breathing of a life form maintains its existence within the visible and interiorised social world of the living. The world of the spirits is made visible and internalised by the living Nicobarese social world by means of misfortune, illness, and death. *Iwipot* (malevolent spirits) cause these evils because of their attraction to the living Nicobarese. The islanders

attempt to repel the iwipot by invoking the assistance of the iwika (benevolent spirits) through the mediatory role of the specialised individual called mineluan (shamans). Most of the mineluan were trained in central group of the island and acquired a specialised knowledge of medicine.<sup>8</sup> One of the important things the

mineluan does during treatment is carve a three dimensional wooden image or a painted board, known as Hanta-Koi, on behalf of the family or the village in order to repel bad spirits. The Hanta-Koi, while repelling bad spirits, also attracts good spirits to the place in which it is installed.

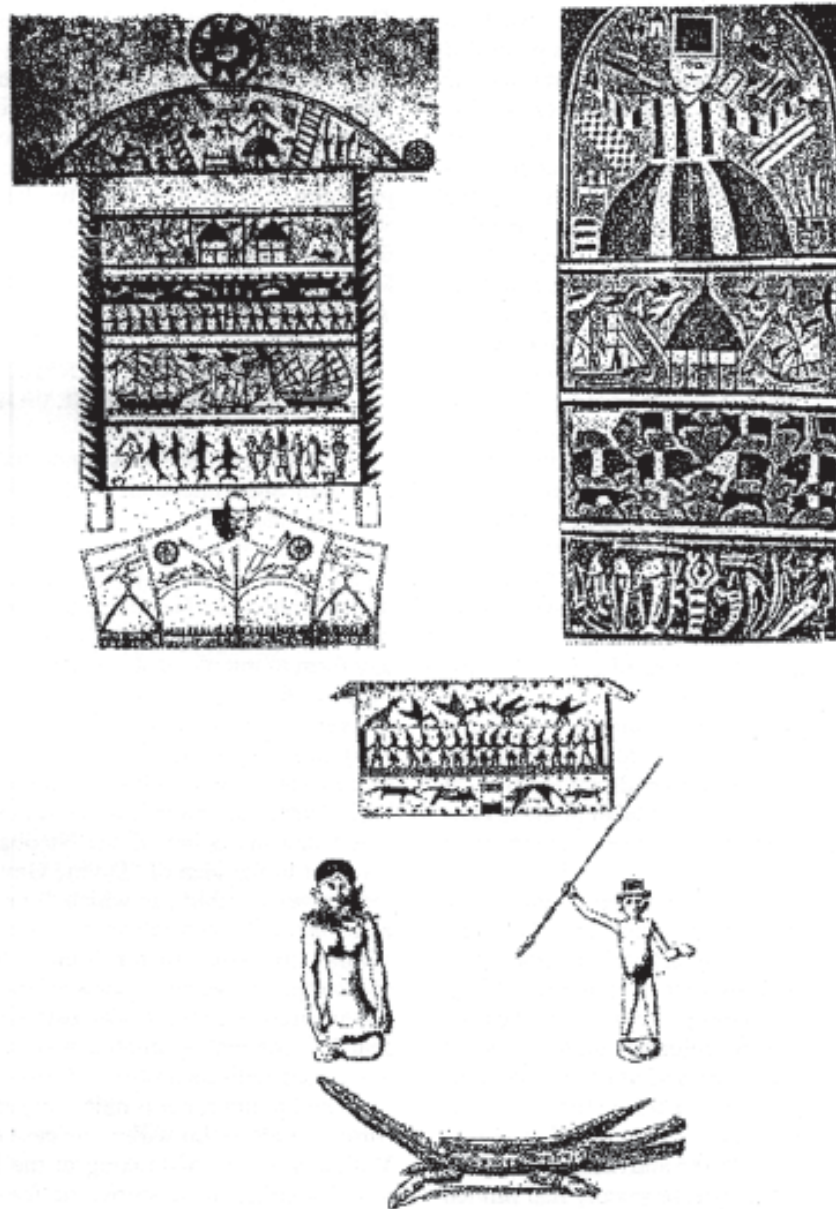


Fig. 2. Forms of carved boards (*Hanta Koi*) and carved images (*Kareyu*) made by the mineluan [After Man, 1933]



Like the small carved and painted canoes displayed on the Nicobarese coast during *duelah*, so too do the Hanta-Koi both attract and repel spirits in order to cure misfortune and illness. The technique of carving (*haneta*) and painting (*enlain-hata*) thus were the means by which the principle of attraction and repulsion is objectified in Nicobarese culture. Furthermore in the case of the personal treatment the Mineluan would cover the patient with various plant and animal substances and vigorously massage the body of the patient in a state of trance (Reddy and Sanyal, 1975: 170). In an environment with onlookers surrounding the treatment process dramatically extracts the cause of illness in the form of a rock, pig's tusk or a small bone that would represent the "objectified" cause of the problem (See Roepstorff, 1875: 10 and Justine, 1990: 67). The ceremony or the healing would end by the "object" being given to the recovered patient or discarded into the forest or sea. In some cases, the installation of Hanta-Koi was undertaken at the request of the mineluan as a last course of treatment. The installations were a form of preventative medicine— a means to ensure that sickness did not return and the mineluan was kept informed of the spirits causing illness. Important to note here is the idea that mineluans did not simply dispel the evil spirit, but extracted it and placed it into another container, usually a small image of a flying bird of prey or a boat made by folding coconut leaves. This process, known, as *henmaientoh* was an image with the evil spirit trapped that was a political capital or power objectified. If it was not discarded away in the sea, it could be used to punish or bring misfortune to the enemy by secretly placing the very package in the enemy's house or village. This often led the mineluans to conspire and create alliances with the headman in an area for social control or what the colonialists understood as generation of devil murder (Bonnington, 1935: 181-82). Because of this perception and the role, mineluans played the colonial authorities were keen on suppressing the activities of mineluans and the imparting of their skills to the *mafai*, traditional apprentices (Man, 1933: 47-8; Bonnington, 1935: 180-85 and Stevenson, 1935: 190). Although Nicobarese society had limited stratification, the mineluans were subject to loss

of status. After repeated failure, the mineluan could fall from his position of influence and any carving made by him and his apprentice would be thrown into an isolated part of the forest to rot. Successful mineluans' carvings were retained and collected in the centre of houses.

Hanta-Koi and mineluans are homologous in the conceptualised world of the Nicobarese.<sup>9</sup> They both are ritually installed, adorned with identical valuables, subject to being thrown out of power and above all capable of communicating between the abstract invisible world of spirits and the concrete, visible social world. In fact, the recovered bones of successful mineluans are placed in the carvings made by the mineluans. So the efficacy of the dead mineluan is transferred over to the carvings and were most valued for the power they had in dealing with the two worlds (Man, 1895: 138).

#### PERCEPTIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THE NICOBARESE WORLD

E. H. Man in 1869 was appointed as the first Assistant Superintendent of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Soon he also became an active fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute: a typical blend of ethnology and colonial administration for his time. He understood the Nicobarese world as lacking notions of worship, priests or any form of temple or shrine and the Mineluans "with all their other pretensions, made no claim to exercise any priestly function" (Man, 1933: 159). Still his research interest and maintenance of constant contact with the Royal Anthropological Institute made him sensitive enough to assert that the belief of the Nicobarese corresponded to the idea of "Divine Government of the Universe" (*ibid.*) in which "retribution was experienced" in relation to "transgressions against customs and traditions." Within this ethnologically sensitive view of the world, the administrative concern was perhaps never absent. The colonial assumption was that rules were associated with institutional forms of Government and politics, not religion, especially in the form as understood within the case of Nicobar. Within this way of looking at the Nicobarese world dominated by spirits, he found a divine government but no rule. The idea was that

government has rule and that affects conduct. However, the colonial administrators, embodiments of governing by law, were to severely punish individuals who committed certain acts in relation to the customs. The influence and presence of the Christian missionaries was a total failure since the administration found the Nicobarese had no acquired concept of "the future conditions influences their conduct in the present." Nicobarese only had a vague belief that "all will be well with them as long as they observe all rites" (*ibid.*). These rites all dealt directly or indirectly with the propitiation of spirits and aspects of hoin (evil spirits) that caused death and misfortune and were constantly on the lookout for another victim to attack. Within the Christian and colonial worldview, the concern of the politics of governing is separated from religion, yet it requires a sense of "good" and "bad." It became essential to look for the moral construct of proper and improper values and virtues. In other words, looking into the world of belief and even reinterpreting it suit the practice of politics. In contrast to writings of missionaries like Roepstroff (1875), the administrator Man asserted that Nicobarese had a world beyond the world of the living and in this "good Place" Henakalla individuals were placed on the basis of "hospitality, chastity, fidelity, kindness, temperance, and sobriety" (Man, 1933: 160). In a way for the missionary, the traditional Nicobar culture had no religion, but only rites and practices pertaining to spirits. The Christian colonial administrator was looking for some basis on which to impose politics of governing rules and law that would be separated from religion but share in between a moral base. Nicobarese worlds presented the outsiders with an impediment to Christianise and administer at two levels. Firstly, it was apparent that the whole range of activities in the Nicobarese world did not follow the division appropriate to derive ideas for governing and installing a sense of proper and improper, order and disorder. Secondly, the world and actions were intricately connected with the spirits being directly or indirectly effected by all the activities through out the year. In this world of the Nicobarese the dynamics of the social relations derived meaning from the hierarchical principles of good being attracted and bad being

repelled.<sup>10</sup> Much like Dumont's model of the pure and impure, encompassing and the encompassed (Dumont, 1980a and 1980b) in relation to the complex Indian society, within the Nicobarese world it is the spirits and mineluan which are central, embodiments of social institutions and reproduced value.<sup>11</sup> For the Nicobarese, the value of what is attracted and what is repelled becomes the principle of hierarchy that connects ideology and social reproduction (like pure and impure). In fact, the legitimacy of social institution like the mineluans depends on denial of the arbitrariness of the structure of value involving spirits and mineluans.

Devil murders as events and their connection with mineluans generated what the colonial administration saw as "disorder and ruthless" killing. What concerned the colonial administration was imposing a structure of social relations that would effect politics and bring about "order." In a way, it was valorisation of order and justice (as colonial construct) over the complementary opposition, (articulated by Nicobarese culture) between levels of symbolic contrasts between order/disorder, legitimacy/illegitimacy, good/bad, justifiable/unjustifiable, and above all religion/politics.

#### DEVIL MURDER

In the centre of the Nicobarese society was the mineluan, who like the spirits could be good or be bad. Consequently, early descriptions of the islands gloss mineluans as "wizard," "medicine man," and "shaman." With the setting in of the colonial administration, and the failure of early missionisation, they were regarded as "witch doctors" and individuals responsible for "devil murder." mineluans were always regarded as knowledgeable, and as having the capacity to intercede between the social world and the spirits. It was this aspect of knowledge and skill acquired that mineluans in fact imparted to their apprentices mafai.<sup>12</sup> Mineluan with his troop of mafai was an important person to both the Nicobarese and the colonisers. Individuals within the society who were seen as breaking down the relation of interdependence and a system of attraction and repulsion in the form of persistent theft, "sorcery or black magic" (*kalo nga-shi*) and



others' lives were taken or imperilled by them.<sup>13</sup> They committed murder (taiha-koi) or violent attacks on fellow beings, and were dangerous and threatening to life or property of the community. Included in the group were witch doctors (to-miluo-no) that failed in treatment and the practice of their arts (See Man, 1933: 165; Whitehead, 1924: 173; Census of India, 1901, III).<sup>14</sup> These individuals and the actions taken within the Nicobarese world were regarded as possessed by the devil, saren (Justine, 1990: 69).

Killing fakhui-tamatinlok, (Roepstroff, 1875), ori-ngafa, (Man, 1888)) them was not only a spiritual act but was seen as judicial execution. It was an orderly procedure emerging from the world view of the Nicobarese, according to which it was not an individual's fault but the individual being possessed by the devil and it was killing not of a human being, but of a bad spirit.<sup>15</sup> Something that the community did as part of the yearly event whereby all the negative spirits and embodiments would be objectified in shape of a canoe and communities would gather to cast it off the eastern coast (See Man, 1933: 159 and plate XXV). Parallel to this process was judicial spirit execution. Elders of the community would meet (kam-ho-ka) and discuss at length the 'bad' operates conduct. The idea was that if all came to a conclusion that there was no hope of "redemption" (Whitehead, 1924: 173), then the younger men were given instructions to carry out the execution of the individual. Several young men then would hide and attack the person with sticks while he was asleep and then the senseless person would be thrown out of the house. With loud cries of exultation the team would tear off the persons' limbs and break bones. They would tie up the person, take him out to the sea, and throw the body in the sea. Upon returning, the team would feel that they had done a work of merit, and that neither the devil or the individual in question would be likely to trouble the community again. The act embodied repelling of that which was attracted into the community. That spirit-individual human responsible for all that was negative was "objectified" and expelled. A process of objectifying and discarded, evident in mineluan dealing with sickness in relation to the patient and community dealing with spirits in relation to the social ceremony of driving spirits

out. In all three cases, the distinction of human and spirit is blurred. In accordance with the principle of attraction and repulsion, the Nicobarese society reproduces itself constantly by repelling that should not remain attracted to the island. The process involves not only spirits, but also individual as well as community's welfare seen in a framework of spirit execution and justice.<sup>16</sup> Punishment and disorder is not a matter of political power, but power to expel a belief to do so and an act to uphold that belief which sustains and perpetuates the world of spirits and humans in Nicobarese culture. Within this framework, the Nicobarese did not distinguish religion from politics or feelings from connected emotions. From the colonialist's point of view and our own inherited analytical concepts, notions of belief and collectiveness form the foundation of religion. So is the case of politics that has at its foundation an idealised notion of power and order. Nevertheless, for the Nicobarese both domains of politics and religion have one common element, what we regard as belief and faith. For the colonial administration the problem was how can the Nicobarese believe in the "devil" being murdered by the people via collective decision? How could it be a justified act of justice? Executions were a matter of the murder of one individual by other individuals; an event set within the colonial discourse of law and order conditioned by power and not the power of spirits. The colonial construct of the world did not include the "devil" but acknowledged only God. For Nicobarese, the belief was in only in all pervasive spirits (Iwi).<sup>17</sup> Therefore, E. H. Man reports being shocked at listening to a case of devil murder (1933: 165-66). After long deliberations at the official hearing of describing the "orthodox" way of killing or murdering Lowi a thief in Lapiti village, the headman demanded a cheroot from the Deputy superintendent. The headman stated-

"He was a bad 'devil'... I take his head like this so make neck go back and neck break! If bad man are removed from island and never allowed to return they would give up 'devil murder' altogether as there would no longer be any need for it!" (Extracted from Richard Temples lecture 22 December 1899 *Journal of the Society of Arts*).

Colonial administration's official perception



of the "devil Murder" emphasised the individual (men, women, and children) death. Nevertheless, what presented in the hearing of the case was the Nicobarese insistence on "true ceremonial killing." From the Nicobarese point of view, the act of killing was "undertaken for the public benefit by a body of villagers after more or less open consultation, for the purpose of getting rid of person considered obnoxious and dangerous to the community" (Census Report, 1901). Colonial administrators felt it was their role to control society and not mineluan using power. According to the first census of 1901, the practice of devil murder was well spread among the islands and was a case of murder (*huri tafoo* or *taw-kooee*) to be distinguished from killing (*kulok*).<sup>18</sup> The administration's perception was that most of the cases of devil murder from the Nicobarese perspective were dealings with individuals possessed by evil spirits, witchcraft exercised to public harm, homicidal proclivities, threats and attempts to murder, failure to cure and theft. The census report includes the listing of what were identified and reported accounts of devil murders from 1883 to 1900 span approximately 17 years in which 14 incidents occurred. In all, 24 individuals were killed and 52 individuals were processed as responsible for committing murder of 24 people. Out of 14 incidents, only one case documents that only one individual was responsible for the murder of a victim. In most of the cases, at least three to five people were brought to court for enquiry in the proceedings of the case of devil murder. The causes for death given by the individuals in each case are following:

| <i>Reason</i>                         | <i>Number of people killed</i> |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Possessed by Spirit/ causing sickness | 9                              |
| Practice of witchcraft                | 5                              |
| Theft and Danger to society           | 9                              |
| Failure to cure                       | 1                              |

The pattern that emerges from this material suggests that most of the incidents towards the end of the 1890s were less frequently reported and incidents of theft and individual seen as a threat to the society became a cause reported to the administration. As the time went by with the setting in of Missionary values and colonial power, the community decision to commit devil

murder involved lesser number of individuals. According to Whitehead (1924) who was posted in Nicobar in 1912, most cases of Devil Murder had ceased by 1910. It is possible that actually most cases of murder were stopped and the colonial administration's goal had been achieved. Whitehead as government agent reports (*ibid*: 164) that often people would would accuse other individual of practising devil murder as a means to resolve the economic dispute or seeking justifiable revenge within colonised Nicobar. Problems and issues of law and order had had to be dealt with and resolved by authority, but not be resolved by recourse to devil murder or explanation based in the spirit world led to the British order released on 28th August of 1882.<sup>19</sup> The Chief commissioner of the islands, Major General Protheroe, instructed appointments of the chiefs on the Nicobar Islands.<sup>20</sup> Individuals were to be selected by the Officer in charge of Nicobar, certificates were issued ceremoniously, and these selected individuals under criminal procedure code 90 were responsible for maintaining law. The newly appointed chiefs were to inform the British of any unusual event that may occur in their place of respective charge. The chiefs were instructed to deal with cases of devil murder by resolving disputes before they lead to incidents of devil murder. This was a creation of a political position within the Nicobarese world that would deal with the problem of devil murder.<sup>21</sup> The chiefs created by the British certification were to assist the government agencies in keeping order, collecting various licensing fees for trade, prices for port clearance, checking against the smuggling of liquor and guns, and above all the settlement of disputes between people and traders (Census of India, 1901: 201). Before the British installation of created and certified chiefs, historically what existed since 17th Century Portuguese occupation of the islands was the idea of a "Captain." Each captain had a flag, visitor's book and right to distribute and redistribute the coconuts and items gained from the outside world (Census of India, 1901: 214). Since the 1857 Novara Expedition nearly 5 million ripe coconuts were exported from Nicobar to parts of Asia and beyond.<sup>22</sup> Most of this trade was based on barter and not currency. There was an elaborate classification of the number of coconuts that could be

exchanged for specific items. The system as described in the Census (1901: 243, 244) presents a picture of what items were valued by the Nicobarese in 1857.

- A. Most Valued in terms of Maximum coconuts—2500 ripe coconuts or more for Double-barrelled gun, Silver wire (30 inches long), and one keg of Rum.
- B. Middle range of Value in terms of coconuts—500 to 300 ripe coconuts for Musket, Machetes/cutlass, set of 6 table knives, Axe, lamp, bag of rice.
- C. Lower range of value in terms of coconuts—50 to 100 coconuts Folding Knife, large spoons, bottle of arrack, stick tobacco, castor oil, handkerchief and 4 to 5 yards of blue calico.

By 1896, the scales had changed and 1896 added more things added to the list of things gained from the out-side world. Spoons (shaneal) were classified as dessert spoons and table spoons, silver spoons, tin spoons, electroplated spoons, mustard spoons, soup spoon, tea spoons and so on were different type of forks (See Man, 1888: 89) and depending on the size they were worth 120 to 500 coconuts. Metal tableware, plates and tumblers, worth 20 to 80 coconuts, entered circulation. Guns and muskets disappeared from the items available for barter but items like top hats, handkerchiefs, distinct cloth associated with China and Madras became most valued in terms of 800 to 2000 coconuts. Various kinds of cutting blades entered and they could be anywhere in the range of 20 to 100 coconuts. For variable price Turpentine, Camphor, Epsom Salt, Eno's Fruit Salt, sugar, and biscuits entered in the circulation and barter system. Some items that appear after 1896, like salts and castor oil, are obviously substances used for treatment of common health disorders, but it is not clear if mineluan administered them or Nicobarese consumed them on their own. Traditionally each clan collected coconuts and pigs to exchange in the Nicobarese village and pay the Captain for mitigating and upholding clan rights (See Syamchaudhri, 1977 and Justine, 1990). Soon valued items like the silver wire; cloth, top hats, spoons and forks were the most preferred forms of payments sought by the mineluan and the captains. Such imported items were significant

for decoration at ossuary feasts (See Whitehead, 1924: 77-8) and mineluan processing the dead body (See Man, 1933: 135). So most of the economy created by the contact with the outsiders and barter fed into the position and role maintenance of the matters and issues pertaining to spirits mediated by the services of the mineluans. Most of the captains, and certified chiefs were also mineluans or well connected to one or the other mineluans and the attached groups of mafais (See Census of India, 1901 Vol III: 214).<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, in the Nicobarese context the creation of the politically distinguished office really was feeding into and contributing to the reproduction of the culture in which the mineluans and spirit concerns remained in the centre. Economy, justice, and order were always part of the Spirit World and the spirits played the role of integrating the administrative colonial categories. This interconnection of categories lead Nicobarese not to see the history and politics that the colonial administration wanted to impose. After thirteen years a commission in Port Blair made the decision that the way to bring an end to the practice of devil murder and role of the mineluans would be to punish the mineluans "Chiefs" and or "Captains" if they did not report the cases. From Whitehead's (1924: 170) account, what appears puzzling to the colonial administration is that no one on the islands felt particularly "aggrieved or to feel that anything awful had happened" in terms of the devil murder. Contrary to the expectation, the deputy superintendent of the Islands found it a very easy investigation. Those who were popularly known as responsible for the murder were easily presented to the magistrate and in a straightforward manner the individuals gave account of who was involved and how they, along with accomplices, killed individuals. The idea of a wrong act and justice done was not a Nicobarese notion. For the Nicobarese it was the question of why the government would regard them as criminals; they had merely been "doing an unpleasant duty in ridding the world of 'monster' whose own conduct had destroyed whatever right they might once have had to live in it. Those people were all under the influence of the devils, and in most cases been condemned to death in the lawful assembly of the elders (kam-ho-ka)" (Whitehead,



1924: 170). The image the colonial administrations had of an enquiry into some thing that was illegal was different from the Nicobarese Captains considerations, and presentation of events. Depositions made to the magistrate about the case of devil murder conveys the difference, especially in the nature of questions raised by the magistrate. Here is a typical example:

"Two years ago (1) Taparawang and his wife (2) Ahurke, (3) Tamalhattan, a woman (4) Komchik and Dran Atsal (5) also women, were killed on the beach at Mus. The first named was killed in the afternoon and I ran away to Chokchuacha because I hear they go to kill other men. They kill them because they call them 'devil-man' but I do not savez lah-tore (believe) that. I did not see. I only hear about it. James Snook told Stephenson Mr. Pell and Young Gwynne having anything to do with it. The four women were killed the following day about noon all together on the beach. The men of Mus, Kinmai, and Lapate all assembled and assisted. Afterwards they had a feast at which they ate three pigs. Young Gwynne and Mr. Pell helped to kill but did not instigate. I was not present. I hear family of Lapate, Stephenson, James Snook, Mr Pell (not Young Gwynne) 'friend of England' give order for these people to be killed." (Deposition of Nicobarese Tondauk alias Captain Dixon, resident of Mus Village, Car Nicobar, 4th witness for prosecution in session Case No.3 of 1884-85.)

From the administrations' perspective the men responsible for the murder were not just ordinary criminals and it was not permissible for an individual or even the time-honoured assembly of a village to pass and carry out the death sentence. The colonial administration insisted that devil murders must never occur again. People who committed them were subject to the death sentence. As the deposition above exemplifies, the Nicobarese concern was why murder should be punished by death. Nicobarese elders protested that life would be impossible if the mineluans and elders did not dispose of the 'bad' people. In response to this magistrate ordered to instate the elders and mineluans to punish the offending villagers by words or whipping, but not by breaking bones or any other form of per-

manent injury. If the bad behaviour persisted, then the person should be brought before the magistrate with witnesses and severely punished if found guilty. Most of the headmen and mineluans replied promptly, "if the Government take their bad men away from the island, and kept them away they would be very well satisfied and give up devil murder of anyone, for they had no love for such work" (Whitehead, 1924: 171).

By 1900, reported cases of devil murder had declined because of the redefinition of the punishment and the related process. Instead of a few influential individuals being involved in asserting who instigated devil murder, group of elders were involved in resolving disputes before concerned. In a way the colonial administration created local power holding figures who would make sure that a public discourse was generated, some thing like a litigation, heard by all at the regional level. Colonial administration made the process of installing order and resolving conflict a matter of human conduct and not spirit matter. However, under the colonial influence, in most cases the witness reported the act undertaken at the order of the Captain and or mineluans installed, endorsed, and supported by the colonial administration. It now became a matter of imposed political economy in which humans, and not spirits played a crucial role. From the Nicobarese point of view, instead of dealing with the earlier idea of blaming the spirit, the constructed roles of Captain could now be responsible for devil murder.

Finally, the success in limiting devil murder emerged from the Nicobarese culture's logic. The procedure adopted was to bring the actual or suspected murderers (including Captains and Mineluans) out of the Nicobar to Port Blair in the Andamans. Individuals were kept until the Nicobarese were thoroughly frightened by their own belief that the most dangerous spirit was of a man who died away from home, such as Port Blair.<sup>24</sup> People related to the deported person were so intensely feared by the Nicobarese that they were fiercely avoided or ostracised leading to breaking down of the very circle of influence or the group involved (kam-ho Ka) in the making of devil-murder decisions. Even things left behind by individuals deported to Port Blair were feared, much like the fear of the mineluans

carvings that had his bones placed in it. So intense was the consternation that even the relatives of the murdered victim would request the return of the homesick accused. Upon returning, the detained individuals were still perceived differently since they returned in "convict attire" with a bundle of things acquired from Port Blair (See Man, 1933: plate XXVI). Ceremonies would be held to entice back the spirits from the Port Blair (Whitehead, 1924: 146) and sacrifices, feasts and performances by the mafai and mineluans would be staged to mark the occasion.<sup>25</sup> The returning individuals were reinstated to the central role they always played as Captains/mineluans. Now they had an additional political role created for them in accordance with the colonial worldview.<sup>26</sup> Colonial administration made the Captains/mineluans, reporters of the political situation in parts of the island, and the islanders feared reporting to the Captains/mineluans because their departure from the island was much feared. A feeling of apprehension that characterised the spirits was transferred over by the colonial administration to the transformed political role of the Captains and mineluans of Nicobar Islands. The reporting and incidents of the devil murder went down because the removal of the accused installed the fear of potentially attracting dangerous spirits. Consequently, no "devil murder" took place because its identification would create expulsion of individuals from the islands generating the potential attraction of new bad spirits (Man, 1933: 165-67).

Ultimately within the Nicobarese worldview, the deportation of the "murderers" and attraction of resulting spirits remained a principle derived from the power of spirits and not power politics. It was not politics and power relations as conceived and imposed by the colonial administration for installing justice. Even while dealing with the problem of devil murder, the problem was brought under control by actually reification of the role-played by the spirits and mineluans. For the Nicobarese themselves, and soon also the colonial administration the actual meaning of the mineluans as actors of religious and political domains being fused was concretised and even endorsed within the context of flags and Hanta-Koi made and held by the mineluans.

### MINELUANS, HANTA-KOI AND HISTORY

Mineluans and the principle of attraction and repulsion sets up a larger context beyond the ideas of protection and cure of the sick by means of the carvings known as Hanta-Koi. The role mineluans played in relation to the devil murders indicates the very central role played by the spirits and principles related to attraction and repulsion. The position of mineluans within the colonial administration's measures to control devil murder created a new meaning within the Nicobarese worldview. Mineluans did not perpetuate any conceptual difference between the politics and religion, as was envisioned by the colonialists. For the Nicobarese, spirits, mineluans, and new captains are all subjects to be feared. This fear has to be dealt with ritually as in the case of Hanta-Koi and not as a matter of order and power vested in politically appointed individuals. This transformation of mineluans and captains' role and meaning is in fact a recapitulation of the principle objectified in the representational system of Hanta-Koi. The carved and painted images are capable of repelling and attracting spirits much like the mineluans themselves, who under colonialism become a means of controlling devil murder. The principle of attracting good fortune and repelling bad fortune underlies the case of Duelah, inter island trade, cure of sickness, and control of Devil murder. From the Nicobarese point of view, both the abstract world of spirits and the concrete experience of colonial intrusion into the island get represented and articulated in fundamentally a spirit based model; a ritual conducted either to impugn or entice. This in fact becomes the culture's power mechanics derived from rituals dealing with spirits and sustained over history.

Historically, the designs of the carved wooden boards, (known as Hanta-Koi) and the objects with which the Kareyu are adorned have changed. In fact, the elements and discourse on history and politics have been incorporated into what could be regarded as classically concrete forms of expression pertaining to the Nicobarese culture's discourse on ritual and a spirit centred worldview. Incorporation of western style dress, western objects like wine glasses, telescopes, and ships are indicators of what was seen and



experienced by the Nicobarese in terms of their interaction with the missionary and colonial phase of history in their world. The items that were traded with the outside world, and the image of the devil murderer in the image of a person returning back from Port Blair, became the way to depict the spirits to be warded off. What remains significant is the fact that this incorporation is displayed in the aspects that dealt with ritual. Within the logic of a culture, which provides recourse to the people to deal with the experience of moving in and out of the spirits causing good and bad, the experience of colonialism and missionary is not strictly historical and political alone. It too is something that moves in and out of the Nicobarese world. What we might see as historical and political can be dealt within Nicobarese notion of moving of good and bad. Like the spirits, outsiders come and go to the islands and bring fortune or misfortune, particularly disease and death. An interaction with outsiders demands a resolution and the Nicobarese, observing the parallel functions of spirits and outsiders do so through the technique of painting and carving. Thus outsiders, like spirits, can be either attracted to or repelled from an island. This creates the context in which the mineluan would depict Western objects to attract or repel the Western outsiders. For example, the most powerful spirit of the Nicobarese is Reus. "Reus," a term of Portuguese origin originally referred to the unpainted or uncarved form of Kareyu. After colonisation carved images of Kareyu were more frequently referred to as Reus and were usually depicted in European dress, holding goblets, and surrounded by European objects associated with the navigators of foreign ships such as telescopes, top hats, forks and knives.<sup>27</sup>

From 1788 to 1940, outsiders as a haven first used the Nicobar Islands for pirates. Later the British resettled convicts from the Andaman Islands, the primary prison for convicts and freedom fighters from mainland India, on the Nicobar (Tarling 1960). Initially the Nicobarese violently resisted British presence in the island. In a document addressed to the Governor General of India the British court of Directors reported: "These inhospitable islands hold out against us. The natives under the leadership of wizards (mineluan) are resisting. As present advised, there is little

inducement to plant the British flag on the soil."<sup>28</sup>

The Nicobarese referred to the flags of European nations as Hanta-Koi. This association of the European flag and spirit warding carvings by the term Hanta-Koi reveals the logic of culture that did not separate the domain of spirit experience from the experience of colonial authority. Not only the embodiments of flag connect religion and politics and carved images but the role of the mineluan as a problematic wizard, who resists the presence of outsiders. As leadership is further accentuated by mineluan work upon is a Hanta-Koi, the European flag too became representative of something that is from the outside and has to be dealt with.<sup>29</sup> Here the dynamics of outside forces, whether political or spiritual, are historically dealt with by mineluan and both political symbolisation of the outsider i.e. the flag and the carving for the spirits are expressed concretely by the same term, Hanta-Koi.

Attempts to colonise through the "colonial Hanta-Koi" led to a series of confrontations with the Nicobarese, some of which were bloody and disastrous (Mathur, 1968, 1985). Around 1873, the Assistant Superintendent of the Nicobar began to give gifts and payments to the mineluan whom the British regarded as "witch doctors."<sup>30</sup> Eventually the British administration awarded the mineluan with the title of "Captain" and made them responsible for maintaining the British flag on each of the islands. The mineluan who had made Hanta-Koi for the Nicobarese now became Captains to keep the Union Jack the Hanta-Koi of the colonisers. Hostile confrontation with the islanders, as the British viewed it, ceased with this change in the tactics.

Mineluan influential role and capacity to control the spirits and being instrumental in dispensing justice by organising "Devil Murder" had changed from colonial perspective. It was no more disruptive within colonial construct of order in the island. The new mineluan or Captains within the Colonial administration's worldview were responsible for now using their religious position to foster new political concerns. Politics and religion that was being separated by the colonial concerns to wipe out the custom of "devil murder" now becomes transformed into recombining the religious and political concerns in the role of mineluan now being

Captains since it was now historically suitable to the colonial administration. However, from the "native's point of view" the mineluan may have now been called "Captains" but they continued their role of keeping life in balance by controlling spirits through the traditional Hanta-Koi as well as controlling the outsiders through the British Hanta-Koi, the Union Jack. The Nicobarese remained protected through the principle of attraction and repulsion, only a new form of Hanta-Koi had been added to the mineluan's arsenal.

The relationship between the Hanta-Koi and the mineluan exemplifies the transformation of values in the structure of the Hanta-Koi design. This is possible because the practice embodied within the traditional structure of Hanta-Koi was to attract and repel and this became the structure of practice and the structure of the Hanta-Koi design in the colonial times. During World War I on the island of Nancowry, a woman popularly known as Rani (Queen) was honoured by the British because she accomplished what the mineluan or Captain can through the use of Hanta-Koi. She alone turned back the German warship *Emden* from the island. Instead of running away and hiding at the sight of the hostile warship, Rani raised the British Hanta-Koi; that is, she hoisted the Union Jack at the shoreline. Captain Muller, the commander of *Emden* thought British batteries were hiding on the island and turned back without a confrontation. Rani was decorated by the British government for her service to the crown (Singh, 1978) and today her house is held in high esteem by the Nicobarese because it is believed to have *mafai* (influence), a quality intrinsic to the mineluan.

Even during the Second World War, when Japanese forces seemingly intent on the genocide of the Nicobarese occupied the islands, the mineluan held fast and bravely protected their culture's most valuable objects. The mineluan, although singled out by the Japanese for execution, refused to surrender the British flag. Risking their lives, the mineluan protected the most important *Kareyu*, those, which held the bones of dead mineluan, and the British flag by hiding them deep within the forest. Though not immediately able to repel the Japanese, the mineluan assured the continuity of their people and culture.

## CONCLUSION

The history, culture, and the worldview of the Nicobarese had a specific place for the value of spirits and mineluan. The colonial administration tried to impose its ideology in which the politics and religion are distinguished. Consequently the case of devil murder became an administrative concern and in order to control it the influential captains and witch doctors became the focus. They were also traditionally at the centre of the Nicobarese worldview. Although the administrators attained the politicisation of the position of Captains and witch doctors, for the Nicobarese the displacement and expulsion of individuals from the island was still connected to the spirits. For Nicobarese the ideology that sustained social contexts in which the maker of Hanta-Koi became a custodian of colonial flags. This new role of mineluan suited the intentions of colonial administration and their historical experiences. Therefore, efforts to distinguish politics and religion become negated and endorsement was made of the witch doctors creating meanings out of the discourse of spirits. For the Nicobarese, religion remained inseparable from the entire spectrum of discourse pertaining to rituals, ceremonies, trade, healing, history, justice, and representational art forms. It is a discourse through which meaning is not just given but produced, reproduced, and fought for and in which individuals create them socially and society socialises the individuals. The meaning generated in all forms of symbolic action become premised on and perpetuates an epistemology that does not compartmentalise politics and religion. Instead, it becomes a history of political rituals and ritualised politics. To use Geertz's (1973) phrase, a history and the values in it being produced and reproduced is "uniquely realistic." Any notion of order implies also a notion of disorder and chaos. It is precisely in the nature of the relationship between the culturally constructed notions of order and disorder, that a fundamental idea of ritual emerged (See Moore and Myerhoff, 1977: 18) that is ritual that postulates religion and politics being essentially analogous. For Nicobarese, the acts of mineluan and captains, spirits and outsiders are all embodiments of a common value (Cf. Tambiah, 1970) as



opposed to values separated for religious belief and value created for political belief. Maurice Bloch (1974: 77) has asserted that ritual is a special variety of political processes, an extreme form of "traditional authority." Political events could become religious, (*ibid.*: 78) but in the case of Nicobarese ritual we can see that religion is politics, and that politicisation emerges from religion of spirits. Perhaps a sharp division of religion and politics is a false methodological imposition on a cultures' value structures.

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#### NOTES

1. See early anthropological treatment of politics and stateless societies with particular reference to Africa. (Evans-Pritchard, 1978; Gluckman, 1973, 1977).
2. See *Notes and Queries in Anthropology*, put out by the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain, specially the first edition 1874, followed by 1892, and 1899 editions that reflect a shift in focusing what is religion and politics as they were definitely read by and highly influential in the perception of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in works of early ethnographers/administrators of the islands. This is particularly so in the case of E. H. Man (See Pandya, 1991).
3. For instance the phrase, "Do not take law in your own hands!" is of no consequence to a Muslim neighbourhood where pig runs in or to a Muslim butcher shop selling beef in a predominantly Hindu city—generating riots. However, they both are important aspects to what was experienced in the history of South Asia in the mutiny of 1857.
4. In a way, this parallels the ritual pursuits of Indian political and national leaders participating in public or private ritual to manipulate people's belief in power they have, or to show the faith they have in a specific form of expression while they uphold the so-called principals of secularism.
5. It is interesting to note that because of this many of the tribal cultures in South Asia and South East Asia were often reduced to being Animist and questioned for being really monotheist or not. In this matter, the classic case is the debate about monotheism among the hunting and gathering tribes in the Andamans and the Orang Asli of the Malay Peninsula.
6. Since the early 16th century, the islands have been colonised successively by the Portuguese, Danish, and British. Early Portuguese and Danish influence have remained an integral part of the island's culture and their peoples' historical consciousness. The British maintained control of the islands from 1869 until World War II, at which time the Japanese occupied the islands. Today the islands form part of the Indian Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar.
7. The early Europeans of course brought with them Christianity; its missionaries were active in the Nicobar as early as the 18th century though the religion did not exercise much influence on the Nicobarese until the end of the 19th century. Throughout this historical period, the islanders have had substantial contact with traders from Burma, Malay, China, Indonesia, and India bringing along with it attempts to spread Islam.
8. The central group of islands is also well known for producing medicine (Whitehead, 1924: 147-61 and Man, 1933: 129). The clay or the earth of central islands is regarded as efficacious and therefore during the *duelah*, when the traders from other islands arrive, they must first wash themselves before stepping onto any of the central islands.
9. In the accounts of Solomon (1902) the *mineluans* are carried around in palanquin (See Man, 1933: plate XI) and the carvings are never placed directly on the ground.
10. Richard Temple, a scholar of repute who had first hand experience of working in the islands in his foreword to Whitehead's book (1924: 11) comments about the Nicobarese world in following words, "The governing facts of the habits and customs of the Nicobarese is his belief or religion if one likes to call it so. He is pure Animist or believer in the spirits, chiefly of the dead, the most harmful being those who have died recently. The fear of these governs nearly everything he does; but as in all spirit-ruled countries, the ghosts are fortunately easily deceived, and therefore governed by the living in their turn. On this idea are based the ceremonies for driving the spirits away, sending them adrift on the on the ocean, and feeding them. They must be either coerced or induced to good behaviour. Fear of the spirits is always with the Nicobarese and dogs his whole existence; his religious customs—i.e. His customs to circumvent the spirits—playing a large part in his life. They

are practically all forms of exorcism in some way or other."

11. Best exemplified in Marx's discussion of capitalism's "Fetishism of commodities" (Cf. Turner, 1984). Debates over Marx's arguably having misunderstood the distinction between use value and exchange value has deflected recognition of what I prefer to read as a subtle ethnology of value as specific property of capitalist culture and social institutions. Dumont and Marx do not appear as divergent on this score as generally thought (see Howard and King, 1975)
12. Most of the mineluans were trained in the central islands, and once the mafai finished the training they would be installed in new villages or replace the old mineluan. In this way, the mineluans and mafais formed groups and alliances that cut across various islands.
13. Man (1888) categorically distinguishes between Paiyuh ta-mokea, magician as performers of positive magic (mokea) and negative or black magic (kalo nga-shi).
14. Note the term is distinguished from the reference mineluan.
15. Justine (1990: 95) outlines that traditionally and in the historical past, the disputes were resolved between individuals by arranged stick fight and wearing protective headgear. These fights, Malang pumon between the disputing parties or individuals had no idea of spirit involvement or being possessed by the devil. Whoever collapsed with the injury first was the loser in the disputed case. Historically very cruel forms of killing somebody because of a disagreement or a grudge and hanging the person on a crucifix was the custom of kumolong clayeh, but it was abolished since it perpetuated violence and procedure of appeasement by having a feast was installed for resolving conflicts. Nevertheless, in all the channels of dealing with conflict the genesis of conflict was never connected to the devil. In relation, to these forms of dispensation of justice, it becomes clear that devil murder invoked a distinct type of conflict in which resolution was not to punish the human but the devil.
16. The Moravian missionary, J. G. Haensal, who was in Nicobar from 1779-87, wrote in a letter about how in the Nancowry village of Oal-ta-meak people ruthlessly killed some individuals, cut the bodies up, and drove sticks through them and mutilated the bodies with no feelings at all. When the missionary inquired of the people why people who want to be regarded as gentle did it, the response he got was "You do not understand, those people who cut were not fit to live they were all Gomoy (cannibals)." This perhaps is a classic case of Nicobarese regarding the 'victim of the devil murder' not as an individual but an individual who eats fellow human beings, an unacceptable behaviour dealt with appropriately by the mineluans. (From: Notes on Nicobar Islands by Man in Indian Antiquary, XXVI, October 1897: 267).
17. "To believe in" (a fact) is to state something exists; "to believe that" is to have confidence; "to believe that X exists" is for something to be represented in a certain way. Although the difference between "to believe that" and "to believe that X exists" may appear slight, it is significant. For instance, a person believes in god (trusts in god) while the other person believes that Devil exists, that is, one recognises that he exists without, by definition, by putting one's faith in him. To believe in implies something that is beyond questioning it is a matter of how god is perceived and objectified, implicit is the aspect that god's reality. However, to believe in the existence of God need not essentially imply in the belief in god. So one could say that it is the unbeliever who believes that the believers believe in the existence of God. One could call this as a play of words but I think the idea of belief lends itself to the dimension of further exploration. For instance in Hindi, it is different rather believe when person says I have "nestha" and I have "bharossa." To believe that the X exists' is a statement of peculiar type - it is not a statement about X but a statement about an attribute of X. So when I say I believe in Krishna it is distancing my self from the frequently constructed statements like "I believe that secularism exists." The first is a believing that generates adhesion and not distance. It is significant to note that Benveniste (1969) in his Indo European Language and Society discusses belief not as an aspect of religion, but in the sense of "economic obligation"-having faith in an individual, party, or an institution making the verb to believe into a conglomerate without unity. Belief thus is arbitrarily used and its usage is based in the cultural system within which it finds meaning. The polysemy of the word is impossible to overcome. Its religious use does allow us to unify the verb's various meanings, and does not limit other usage. This observation leads us to question the way the colonialist approached the ideas believed in by the Nicobar or the people in South Asia at large. Anthropologists would deny (See Needham, 1972) that they seek to uncover the belief of those whom they study, to compare them with their own belief or those of other people, as if this object of



study and its designation presented no a priori problem, so if it were obvious that every human being "believes" this being one of our beliefs- in the same way, if not (of course) in the same things? It is application of category like religious belief and political faith that have meaning in our own culture only and the categories like believes fragmentation may be only a specific cultures process.

18. In his compilation of Nicobarese language dictionary Man (1888) in fact gives the term for murder and killing being just one thaw-kooce.
19. It was on 16th April 1869 that the majority of Nicobar was brought under British administration due to the efforts of E. H. Man.
20. Traditionally the Nicobarese society only had a 'head man' who was the eldest male of a patriarchal extended lineage known as duhed and not a 'chief' associated with a territory and various lineages in it.
21. For a detailed example of how devil murder was avoided by separating politics and religion see Man (1933: 164) particularly the Nicobarese report to the Superintendent R. F. Lewis about the potentiality of murder taking place.
22. In other parts of the island, the trade was mostly confined to collection of bird's nest, shells, trepang, and ambergris. In addition, the coconuts were bartered as a pair.
23. Another gloss for mineluan now was witch-finders or sorcerers; a gloss that reflected the colonial administrations' acknowledgement that the role of mineluan was something that could not be done away with. In fact, the elders and mineluans were seen as managing a democracy bound by customs that missionaries had failed to eradicate, and colonial administration tried to maintain politics and religion separately. (See Census of India, 1901, III: 214-215)
24. A prominent theme in the Nicobarese Folk tales; for details see Whitehead in Indian Antiquary, L, 1921: 234-287.
25. Just like the return of the individuals participating in duelah inter island trade journey and related aspects of misfortune (see Man, 1895: 171).
26. In order to make the British sovereignty over the Nicobar succeed and be efficient the Government of India authorised the Superintendent of the Nicobar to enter into relations with the "Witch doctors and induce them with trifling gifts or payments to carry out the orders of British officers. If the orders were not carried out, small penalties were to be levied by the British officers. Slowly the position should be made hereditary and official." (National Archives of India, Delhi Home Department Files, Port Blair Branch, A Progs No 23, September 1873). By 1894 the orders were modified on the realisation that family ownership of coconuts can not be disturbed and captains as well as witch doctors both should be regarded as influential people of somewhat "superior intelligence" who should be considered for exercising influence on Nicobarese on behalf of the government (National Archives of India, Delhi Home Department Files, Port Blair Branch, A Progs No. 49, January 1873).
27. Principles of cultural linguistics indicate that Reus in Portuguese is the same as Rex, implying a dominating royal king-like image and is used in other parts of insular South East Asia. What it also implies is that the choice of term incorporated into the Nicobarese culture may reflect the outsiders' questioning and imposition of having one supreme powerful image as opposed to a whole range of power figures. The idea of monotheism imposed on the polytheistic world of the tribes in the Asian context is a prominent theme, especially in writings of Paul Schebesta and Wilhelm Schmidt, who were connected to the Christian missionary and ethnological enterprise creating a particular frame of reference for approaching the tribal cultures in this part of the world.
28. Political Department File No. 36 dated October 1, 1856.
29. John Ritchie, who visited the Nicobar in 1770 in his accounts (See Indian Antiquary, XXIX, November 1900: 346) mentions, "Upon entering Nancowry Harbour at first [3rd March 1771] I was a little surprised to find a British flag, flying upon the south side of the Eastern entrance; and a small distance from it, Danish colours also hoisted. Shortly after we anchored one of the Natives came on board, and told us, that he was the principal man of the place; that the Union flag, was his colours, and that he had obtained it from Mr Dairympie, some years ago. Upon my asking him, whether his flag was near wore out, and if he would have another, (at the same time showing him a new one, of the same sort) He answered "No; -my flag is very good one and I like it, because I have had it a long time." ... The Danish flag was hoisted at a little village called Ennam by some missionaries who told me, that they had been there for five years, without having made one proselyte to their Doctrines; a striking proof of the slow religion among the unlettered people, when stripped of all it's Ornaments and trappings."
30. Home Departments Port Blair File No.23 September 1873, National Archives of India; Delhi.

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