Simron Jit Singh

THE NICOBAR ISLANDS
Cultural Choices in the Aftermath of the Tsunami

DIE NIKOBAREN
Das kulturelle Erbe nach dem Tsunami

published by Oliver Lehmann
Czernin Verlag
Sri Lanka Nicobar Islands (India)

Pakistan

India

Malaysia

Thailand

Myanmar

Bangladesh

Indonesia

Sumatra

Java

Lakshadweep (India)

Andaman Islands (India)

Cocos I. (Aust.)

Christmas I. (Aust.)

Maldives

Chagos Archipelago

Andaman Sea

Bay of Bengal

Laccadive Sea

Equator

Nicobar Islands

Earthquake Dec. 26 2004

Epicenter
THE NICOBAR ISLANDS
Cultural Choices in the Aftermath of the Tsunami

DIE NIKOBAREN
Das kulturelle Erbe nach dem Tsunami
A kareau – as these wooden statues are called – possesses magical protective power. They often represent the head of a family and greet the guests who enter the house.

THE NICOBAR ISLANDS
Cultural Choices in the Aftermath of the Tsunami

DIE NIKOBAREN
Das kulturelle Erbe nach dem Tsunami

Published by / herausgegeben von
Oliver Lehmann

Czernin Verlag
To the Nicobari elders
who taught me to honour their culture

Den Alten der Nikobaresen gewidmet,
die mich lehrten, ihre Kultur zu verstehen und in Ehren zu halten

Simron Jit Singh
About this book

This book is a first extensive collection of photographs showing the everyday life and rituals of the Nicobarese. It is possible that they are also the last documents of the culture of these people who inhabit the Nicobar group of islands in the Bay of Bengal. The images were taken by Simron Jit Singh during his field research between 1999 and 2005.

Über dieses Buch

This book, “The Nicobar Islands”, focuses on one aspect of the disastrous tsunami of 2004 in Southeast Asia that has gone unnoticed until now. It offers a gesture of support for a people who had previously been living in a kind of “time capsule” (Simron Jit Singh), virtually untouched until very recently by modern developments – and who were suddenly confronted by force of circumstance with the present.

The Nicobar Islands, a part of India, are one of the areas most severely struck by the tidal wave. Thousands of Nicobarese lost their lives. Like hundreds of thousands of other people on the coasts of the Indian Ocean they were not warned in time and had no high land to run to. Meanwhile, the survivors have been supplied with the barest necessities; the present book has the purpose of giving them the means for cultural survival as well.

“No man is an island”, as the poet John Donne has said (a quotation which, in our day, became the title of a bestselling book by Johannes Mario Simmel). What it means is that no one can ever quite evade their surroundings and that every person will sooner or later have to face the outside world and – somewhere and somehow – take responsibility as well.

No man is an island. The Nicobarese – a remarkably isolated people – were forced by the disaster to face the present. And neither do we in Austria live on an island. Even though we are thousands of kilometres away from the destruction wrought by the tsunami, as members of a global society we have to take responsibility for the victims – and we have taken it, as the willing donations from Austrians have shown.
This book contributes in a remarkable way to the culture and the identity of the Nicobarese, because it enables the inhabitants of those islands to reconstruct and conserve their own past.

Austria justly claims to be a cultural nation. With this project a culture in a remote part of the world is documented, re-initiated and protected from extermination. I thank Simron Jit Singh, the author, and Oliver Lehmann, the publisher, for their initiative and wish the book the interest it deserves and a large readership.

Heinz Fischer
Bundespräsident der Republik Österreich
President of the Federal Republic of Austria
The Andaman and Nicobar islands comprise the richest coral reefs in the Indian Ocean and globally, an area of significant flora and fauna biodiversity. And these islands are home to one of the world’s last surviving populations of indigenous peoples, who have the knowledge, the traditions, and the cultural wealth to truly live in harmony with nature. Where are the world’s so called experts in culture, sociology, anthropology, economics, ecology, and sustainable development in this desperate time of need in the aftermath of the tsunami? All that the Nicobarese ask for is respect and the meager means to rebuild their livelihoods and make their own decision of their way of life and living. Recall the words of Mohandas Gandhi, “I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any”….and this, neither by the tsunami nor the pressures of dominating Indian mainstreaming. This book is a must to enhance our understanding of the plight and potentials of the Nicobarese in this, their time of need.

Mahendra Shah
United Nations Science and Policy Relations,
International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (Laxenburg)

Cultural heritage can be monumental or ephemeral, the self-regard of former elites or the more modest practice of everyday life. Man or nature can erode it slowly or wipe it out in a cataclysm. Their unique traditions, past and present, are a source of pride for future generations of Nicobarese. Ways of life change, and need to, but loss of knowledge, skills, or modes of understanding, impoverishes us all. I hope this book, and the larger, community-based post-Tsunami rehabilitation programme of which it is a part, will attract widespread interest and, above all, reinforce the self-respect and confidence of the Nicobarese themselves.

Brian Durrans
Department of Asia, British Museum (London)


The Nicobar Islands rank as one of the most fascinating biotops on earth – above and below sea level. Their inhabitants have succeeded in developing a rich culture living in immediate contact with nature. These paradise islands were hit terribly by the tsunami. It is not only up to the Nicobarese to revive their culture; it is also up to us: With this book we can achieve a decisive contribution for the rescue of this culture which developed in such a remarkable harmony with nature. If there is one place I would like to go to once this would be the Nicobars Islands.

**Hans Hass**

Legendary Austrian explorer and pioneer of under water cinematography (Vienna)

Entdecker und Pionier des Unterwasserfilms (Wien)

---

This book keeps what others either promise carelessly or do not even dare to attempt: It is a manual for a journey through time and space. It allows the European reader with all due respect to take part in the every day life and the rites of the Nicobars at the other end of the world – a soulful cosmos where a canoe can be under the influence of good spirits just like the smile of a child or the deceased ancestors celebrating with their descendants.

The book makes it possible for the Nicobarese to travel back in time before December 26, 2004. This small island people, so terribly hit, has acknowledged a fact supposedly large civilisations don’t seem able to grasp: It is their culture and its vivid practice that will secure their identity and existence. In addition: That this book developed a good part in Vienna – a city so intensively engaged with itself, so rarely worth of her own spirit – , gives the often sluggishly used term of world heritage an appropriately new meaning in the global context, which is urgently needed.

**André Heller**

Ermöglicher und Kulturorganisator (Wien)

Enabler and organizer (Vienna)
“No man is an island ...“

Foreword by Oliver Lehmann

What is remembered as a slightly chaotic but still fascinating collection of objects for everyday and cult use lie forlorn and neglected. Some bear signs of long years of wear and tear. A little extra knowledge makes it possible to decode these relics – but only to evoke a feeling of helplessness and confusion. We are talking about the showrooms of the Vienna Museum of Ethnology in the western wing of the Neue Hofburg, the former imperial palace. Since 1999 these rooms and corridors have been in the process of being refurbished, and valuable objects from all over the world are stored elsewhere until the re-opening, planned for 2007. As a matter of fact the building site as a whole is closed to the public, but one room – overlooking the imperial garden – is open for meetings of the Friends of the Museum.

On May 4, 2005, the speaker in this room is the 35-year-old anthropologist, Simron Jit Singh, talking to a group of ethnologists on the Nicobar Islands, which the Indian scholar has been studying since 1999. This is actually a subject for specialists. The source material on this archipelago in the Bay of Bengal is limited. Documents and artefacts are archived in London, Copenhagen and also in Vienna. But since the disastrous tsunami of December 26, 2004, what was a specialist subject of South-East Asian anthropology has become an enormous challenge to the world in general: can the indigenous populations of the Nicobars – one of the most secluded peoples in the

„Kein Mensch ist eine Insel ...“

Vorwort von Oliver Lehmann


Die Chancen – erzählt Singh an diesem milden Frühlingsabend – stünden schlecht; und das nicht so sehr wegen des Tsunami, der in acht bis zu 20 Meter hohen Wellen über die flachen Eilande hereinbrach. Die Gefahr für die Nikobaren gehe auch von der Katastrophe nach der Katastrophe aus. Der Titel des von Singh auf Englisch gehaltenen Vortrags: "When help becomes abuse - Disaster capitalism in the Nicobar Islands", also „Wenn Hilfe zur Misshandlung wird - Katastrophenkapitalismus auf den Nikobaren“. Seine Sprache und seine Erscheinung sind höflich und zurückhal-
world – maintain their culture, their identity and their very existence as Nicobarese in the face of a threat of disappearance?

Chances are not good, Singh says on this mild spring evening, not so much because of the tsunami, which roared over the flat islands in eight waves of up to twenty metres high. The Nicobarese are also at risk from the catastrophe, which followed the catastrophe. The title of Singh’s talk is: “When Help becomes Abuse – Disaster Capitalism in the Nicobar Islands.” His speech and manner are gentle, but his lecture is not. He gives a description of the absurdity of disaster response by aid organisations in the first few days and weeks, which he encountered during his stay on the island in January and February of 2005.

This lecture led to a meeting between Simron Singh and me that formed the basis of the article on the Nicobars in the July number of Universum magazine six months after the catastrophe. Singh asked me for advice on finding a publisher for a popular-scholarly book on the Nicobar Islands that could be distributed to the Nicobarese to assist them in reviving their culture in the aftermath of tsunami. It soon became apparent that an ordinary book would not be enough. Singh needed a reference book for the Nicobarese, whose culture had hardly ever been written down. In order to revive all forms of cultural expressions, said Singh, it was necessary to give the people as quickly as possible some documentation which could supply examples. Within a short time the project developed as a real cooperation between a scientist and a journalist, both of us fulfilling parts and functions necessary to produce a book that meets the needs and expectations of the Nicobarese, the scientific community and the general public: an exciting enterprise in cross-culture-mediation for both of us. Benedikt Föger and Klaus Gademeier of the Czernin Verlag publishing house in Vienna offered their participation – free of charge, as did most of those who took part in the project, and to whom I extend my heartfelt thanks. They are all named on page 227. The fact that this book is appearing five months after our first talks is wholly due to the willingness of a group of people in Austria to put their time and effort at the service of a people in need in the Bay of Bengal. Until December 2004, only a few of them had even had an idea of the existence of these people. Those who have helped with this book take
their responsibility as members of an all-encompassing society, following a meditation by the English poet John Donne (1571-1632) of which the first sentence, in its simplicity is often misunderstood as being trite. The remainder of that quote, however, describes our present concern in a manner, which is touchingly exact:

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were. Any man’s death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Much of what we know today about the Nicobarese is the result of Simron Singh’s research to which he has been dedicated for many years. Singh works at the Vienna Institute of Social Ecology as a scholar and lecturer since 1999. The ideas developed at this institute – part of the Faculty for Interdisciplinary Research of the University of Klagenfurt – form an important basis for Simron Singh’s work. Under the guidance of sociologist Marina Fischer-Kowalski, the Institute of Social Ecology has, from the beginning of the 1990s, developed into a central authority for questions of the interaction between man and nature, as well as its ethical, social, ecological and economic consequences. Simron Singh describes his own work as follows:

„As a Human Ecologist (...) my interest is driven by contemporary environmental problems (or crises) that have been a result of the way in which humans have interacted and continue to interact with nature. However, within this broad spectrum, my interest is mainly in pre-industrial island societies, the approach being field-based and interdisciplinary.


In doing so, I employ a wide range of concepts and theories that encompass both a society’s biophysical and cultural realms, to wit, society’s metabolism, colonisation of natural systems, labour and time management, rituals, the economy, social organisation, world-systems theories, island ethnology, transition and co-evolution. (…) Besides employing the above-mentioned concepts for studying the Nicobars and their inhabitants, a major component has been to delineate the course through which they have been and are being driven into the world-system as a peripheral economy. At the same time, I am actively involved in efforts concerning the “transition” of small islands across the globe.”

Already as a student of ecology and environment in New Delhi, Singh applied these ideas to his research on the Van Gujjars, a nomadic group of buffalo herders in the central Himalayas. In 1999, his interest shifted to the study of pre-industrial island societies that took him to the Nicobar Islands. The result of his annual expeditions were published in 2003 as a book, ”In the Sea of Influence” (now sadly out of print), by the Swedish University of Lund, where Singh has been teaching and researching since 1997.

When he arrived in Vienna in 1999, Simron Singh made a surprising discovery. A reasonable collection of ethnological objects and documents on the Nicobars was being held at the Museum of Ethnology. The reason for this vast amount of artefacts was the ambition of the Habsburgs to imitate the maritime powers of the 18th century in building up a colonial empire. With the aid of a Dutch captain, a convicted opium dealer dismissed from the British East India Company, the formerly Danish Nicobars were occupied by the Austrians. (The Danes, for their part, had already abandoned their colonial aspirations when the colonists gradually died off through malaria). In 1778 the Austrian occupiers themselves complained about the lack of fresh water and food, but Vienna abandoned them to their fate. When the leader of the troop died in 1783, so did first attempts at colonisation. In a
spirit of discovery, the Austrian archduke Ferdinand Maximilian (later unfortunate and short-term emperor of Mexico) sent the frigate “Novara” round the world. On board was a team from the Academy of Science, which was to investigate the possibility of establishing prison colonies in far-off lands. In February 1858 the explorers anchored off the island Car Nicobar. The ethnologist Karl von Scherzer brought back around 400 objects, but in spite of his recommendation, plans for a colony on the island were not realised. Finally, in 1886, the corvette “Aurora”, en route to eastern Asia, dropped anchor in the harbour of Nancowry. In the meantime, the islands had been occupied by the British. The dream of a royal and imperial colonial empire was blown away. What remains are objects from later expeditions, now in the Museum of Ethnology, actually presented to the public for the first time in 1987. The photos in Simron Singh’s introduction are from this collection.

Copies of these pictures were of great help to Simron Singh in his fieldwork in the Nicobars. The Nicobarese regarded the archiving of their past as an estimation of the value of their culture. When Simron Singh started his work in 1999, the population was in a transitional phase of the kind that has been significant for other indigenous populations since the 1980s. Thus, Simron Singh documents the decline of an economic system based on self-sufficiency in favour of an existence within a market economy. Coconuts are no longer bartered for textiles and metal tools as was in former times, but are now processed into copra – dried flesh of the coconut and the basis of coconut oil – used in payment for food such as rice. Changing times leave their mark on the culture. A diesel engine produces electricity not only for lighting, but also for the television set. Within a short span of time, Bollywood epics intensified contacts with the Indian mainstream in a way that schooling or official welfare programmes had not been able to achieve over decades. Simron Singh does not pass judgement. In an interview with Universum magazine (of July 2005) he states: “We cannot treat the population like museum pieces.” In conditions such as those up to December 2004, this transition would have taken years and so would have been almost tolerable for all age groups. Singh describes the Nicobarese as then living in a “time capsule”. Under normal circumstances this capsule would have had a crumple zone sufficient to absorb the approach of the global present without sustaining much damage.
The catastrophe changed everything. In his introduction to this book and in the final chapter Simron Singh describes the consequences of the combined natural and the disaster response for this society, which was literally torn up by the roots. Immediately after, traditional decision mechanisms no longer worked, handed-down knowledge of the elders was wiped out by the mega-waves. Everyone had to start from scratch and re-organise. Simron Singh himself had to decide in January 2005, whether he should confine himself to the role of chronicler of an immense catastrophe, thus accepting the inevitability of the destruction of the culture of the Nicobarese. Or whether he should act as a mediator between the indigenous populations on the one hand and officialdom and aid organisations on the other, knowing that this sudden and tremendous confrontation of the Nicobarese with the present was extremely problematic, but that he could help direct things towards more or less acceptable conclusions. Urged by the Nicobarese, he decided to give up his role as observer and to act as adviser, mediator, spokesman and scholar. In his interview with *Universum* magazine, Singh said: “Nothing can be as it was before. My greatest wish is that – no matter in which direction the Nicobarese develop – it is assured that the population will be consulted about their future. They must be aware of the consequences of their decisions and be aware of the risks and dangers (...) I inform them, but they have to decide for themselves. They are responsible for what happens to them. Maybe they will not choose the best scenario, maybe only the second or third best – but everybody should be in agreement.”

A good part of the Austrian share of the reconstruction will be financed through Andre Heller’s initiative “Austria for Asia”. Sales from this charity CD of the Austrian pop music scene, and funds collected by the Institute of Social Ecology and Caritas Austria formed the basis for the Sustainable Indigenous Futures (SIF) fund dedicated to rehabilitate indigenous people of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands affected by tsunami. Projects are developed and applied for by the affected communities themselves and approved by the steering committee of the SIF fund for financing on the criteria that they are culturally appropriate, ecologically sustainable, economically feasible and socially equitable. It may be relevant to add that the proceeds from the sale of this book is also dedicated to SIF’s efforts.
This book supplements ongoing rehabilitation efforts in the direction of cultural revival. It is based on the results of Simron Jit Singh's field research in the form of notes and photos. The arrangement of the chapters should, on the one hand, give the reader an understandable impression of the economic, social and spiritual-cultural general scheme of things that formed the life of the Nicobarese, at least until December 2004; on the other hand, the Nicobarese themselves, who receive this book will be able to look up the rituals, working practices, artefacts and the architecture documented in it; it is meant to be not only a documentation of the past but also a handbook for the present and the future. The book attempts not only to fulfil and to understand the needs and interests of the population of a destroyed island world in the Indian Ocean but also those of inhabitants of the western world with its post-industrial life-style. If we succeed in building this bridge, then the greater part of the work has been achieved.

Whether or not the intentions of this book – the documentation of the cultural heritage and the building of a bridge between worlds - are realised, remains to be seen. It is an open-ended experiment. For this, and the fact that the fate of the Nicobarese is not an inevitable or hopeless affair, we have to thank the commitment and knowledge of Simron Jit Singh. The purchase of this book significantly supports this work – and proves that, even after 400 years, John Donne still continues to have got it right.
A short history of the encounter of the author with a secluded archipelago, the people and their culture. How a long-term scientific project - based upon interdisciplinary methods and field research - was forced into a relief task in order to conserve and revive the basic living conditions of the Nicobarese disrupted by the tsunami.

Of the 24 tropical islands that make up the Nicobar archipelago, only 12 are inhabited mainly by indigenous communities of the Nicobarese. They invariably lived in villages along the coasts that were well sheltered by mangroves or natural bays - until the tsunami.
Some of the islands are endowed with white sandy beaches where occasionally one spots another human being. As a specially protected area the access to any of these islands for outsiders is strictly regulated. For this reason tourism has never been permitted. Every part of the island, even those uninhabited, is owned by some Nicobari family.
Rites and festivities were an important part of the daily life of the Nicobarese. The image shows the inhabitants of Chowra celebrating their annual *Panuohonot* (or pig festival) to commemorate their ancestors.
Legitimate ownership to the property of the deceased can only be claimed once the potential heir has carried out the secondary burial of the bones and the skull of his ancestor.

The inhabitants of Pilillow village on Kamorta Island perform some rites of this ossuary feast at the grave of the deceased in 2003.
An essential part of an ossuary celebration is Hachua (stick-combat). If so agreed, the potential heir can lose his inheritance to the unexpected winner.
Human as well as mythical figures are prominent in nearly all Nicobari homes. They perform a significant function of ensuring the well-being of individuals, families and the community at large.
Sitting human figures are made posthumously for a benevolent menluana (doctor-priest) that serves as a repository for his/her bones. Such a figure is then believed to retain some of the powers of the deceased that may be invoked in times of distress.
Outrigged-Canoes are the main vehicle for transportation. During an ossuary celebration, special racing canoes are manufactured for a contest between associated villages.