

THE SCIENCE OF THE ANDAMANS AND *THE SIGN OF THE FOUR*

The distorted racial hierarchy of British imperial anthropology

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the dichotomous relationship between racial hierarchies effected by imperial science, on the one hand, and the subversive potential of the scientific knowledge gleaned from the Andaman Islands, on the other, in Victorian Britain. Knowledge about the Andaman Islands and its ‘savage’ aboriginal tribes had been etched onto British consciousness since the establishment of Britain’s naval base in Greater Andaman (present-day Port Blair), in 1789, followed by a century of anthropological, ethnological, zoological and linguistic and explorations into the Andamanese people. When Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of the Four* began being serialised in 1890, a fantastical knowledge of manners and physiognomy of the Andamanese was remarkably familiar to London, through colonial histories, a wide array of photographs in British periodicals, and iconic clay sculptures of the aboriginals displayed at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in 1886. While British imperialism wanted to project its inexhaustible scientific and technocratic powers counterpoising them against the untameable and (supposedly) prehistoric life of the Andaman Islands, *The Sign of the Four* ruptured that discourse. I argue that, in the character of the little Andamanese “hell-hound,” Tonga, Doyle presents an example of the failure of imperial scientific prowess to appropriate the savage identity into its racial and hierarchical discourse. Within the seemingly scarce presence of India in the world of Sherlock Holmes, it is deeply consequential that Doyle selected the Andaman Islands as a key location for the origin of his detective plot, as the home of the subaltern Tonga, who pre-empts the spectrality of the hound—a manifestation of imperial guilt and panic—to come later in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

KEYWORDS: Sherlock Holmes; Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of the Four*; Andaman; India; London; Tonga; Colonial and Indian Exhibition

In 1885 – a year before the Colonial and Indian Exhibition was held at South Kensington and five years before the serialisation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of the Four* in the *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine – the Bulletin of the Essex Institute* published excerpts from *Ancient and Modern Methods of Arrow-Release* (1883), written by Edward Sylvester Morse, director of the Peabody Academy of Science. Inter alia, Morse discussed Andamanese arrow-releasing practices. One of his primary sources was the renowned anthropologist and photographer, Edward Horace Man, whose book, *The Aboriginal Inhabitants of the Andaman Islands* (1880), was one of the scores of Victorian anthropological and ethnographic accounts of the Andaman archipelago. One of Man’s

predecessors, Frederic John Mouat, had written in his *Adventures and Researches Among the Andaman Islanders* (1863) of the ambushes and clouds of the poisoned arrows that many Britons had perished from or been mortally wounded by in the archipelago (Figure 1).

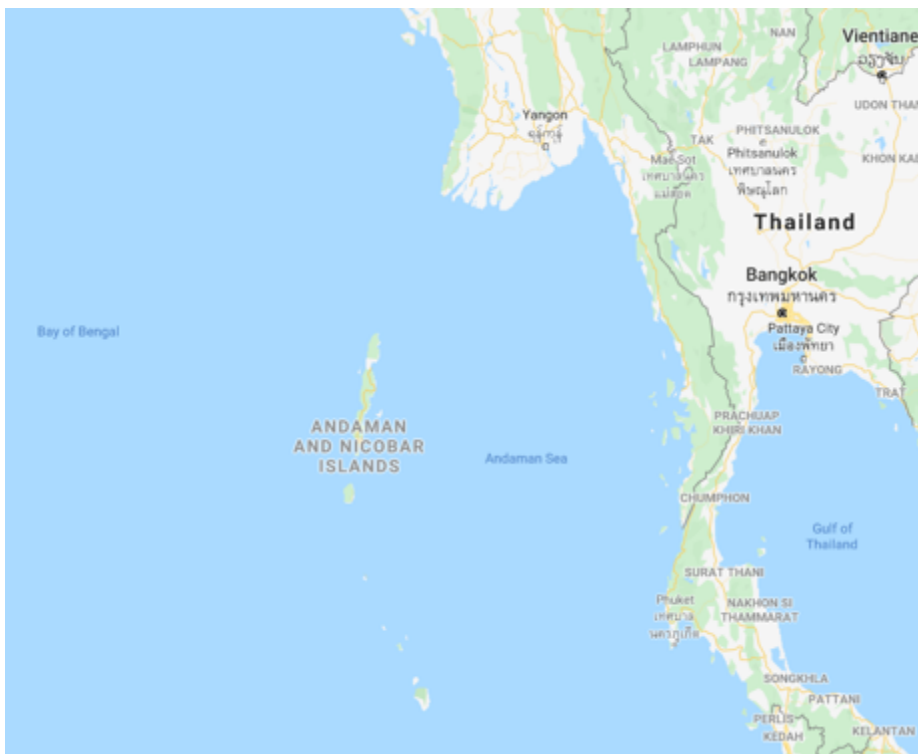


Figure 1 - Map of Andaman and Nicobar Islands and position in Bay of Bengal (Google Maps, 2020)

The Battle of Aberdeen on the Andaman Islands, fought in 1859, was a wonderfully hushed affair in Victorian consciousness. The battle was fought by the Andamanese tribe Jarawa, with bow-and-arrows, against heavy British musketry. Although the tribe was woefully outnumbered and outsmarted by British weaponry, Maurice Vidal Portman's *A History of Our Relations with the Andamanese* (1899), one of the rare accounts of the battle, would somewhat valorise the shooting skills of the Andamanese bowmen (cf. Figures 2 and 3). "It seems to require long practice and skill of touch," he remarked, "to use the bow and arrow as the Andamanese can use them" (ibid: 391) Portman's account made no mention of poisoned arrows, only lethally poisonous vipers. Man, who did refer to Portman's account on a few occasions, disagreed emphatically with his predecessor on the question of poisoned arrows: "no evidence is forthcoming to show that they ever applied poison to their arrow or spear-heads – in fact the only poison known to them appears to be *Nux vomica*," or strychnine (ibid: 138-39). Man's conclusion was that Mouat had ascribed to the Andamanese "more intelligence on this point than they possess" (ibid). Besides these, there were several accounts, which, while making anthropological, ethnographic and linguistic observations

on the Andamanese, placed them at the nethermost scale of human evolution—the very state of nature at its most savage, unteachable and untameable.¹

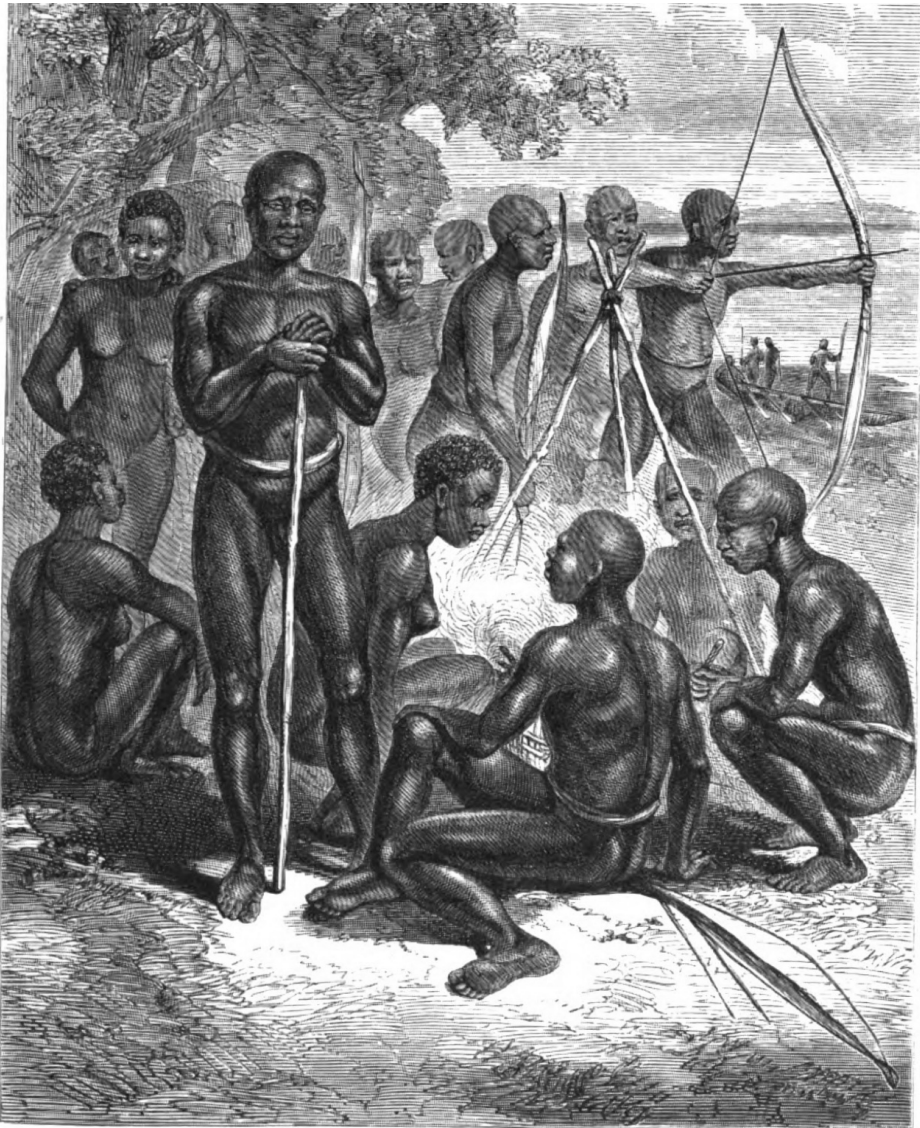


Figure 2 - (Detail from) “A Group of Andaman Islanders” (Mouat, 1863: vi).

¹ While this paper refers to several qualities of Andamanese tribes and the character from *The Sign of the Four*, Tonga, in strongly worded racial terms such as ‘savage’, ‘hound’, ‘beast’, and similar, these are not to be taken as attitudes of the paper towards a race or races of people, but are instead meant for the sole purpose of emphasising Victorian perceptions of the Andamanese, and foreign tribes in general, that British anthropology propagated. This paper strongly opposes all such racist notions.



Figure 3 - “Andaman Islanders and Implements” (Mouat, 1863: 314).

It is no mystery which of these inspired Doyle to sketch the character of the fiendish Andamanese, Tonga, in *The Sign of the Four*. “It was that little hell-hound Tonga who shot one of his cursed darts into him,” says Jonathan Small, the criminal mastermind behind the plan to retrieve the stolen Agra Treasure (1890: 203). The man whom Tonga shoots dead, mistakenly, is Bartholomew Sholto, the elder son of the retired Indian army officer, Major John Sholto. The instrument of murder was a most unlikely blow-pipe, with which Tonga was used to shooting thorn-sized poisoned darts that left almost no mark on the mortal flesh of its victims save a “tiny speck of blood” at the point of contact (170). 21st Century pharmacology and toxicology are still speculating whether the bizarre poisonous elements in Doyle’s oeuvre – such as the Devil’s Foot (*radix pedis diabolic*) from the eponymous adventure published in 1910 – were real or fictional. It is not inapposite to speculate, in the same vein, what might have been the motivations behind Mouat and Doyle crediting the Andamanese with greater toxicological wisdom than they otherwise seemed to possess according to mainstream imperial science.

The world of Sherlock Holmes is considered to be devoid of a living and breathing India (Thompson, 1993: 69-73). Alongside that strategic absence of the Raj, *The Sign of the Four* has been interpreted as a perpetuation of the ‘savage’ representations of the Andamanese people, allying with dominant anthropological, ethnological, zoological, linguistic and toxicological investigations of the Victorian mind into the life of the Andaman Islands (Mehta, 1995: 639; Frank, 1996: 66; McBratney, 2005: 155). This paper challenges such a notion through evidence from the novel, and argues that Doyle, with his counterintuitive insight into Andamanese history, understood the inherent and uncontrollable spectrality of the imperial project. *The Sign of the Four*, like its predecessor *The Moonstone* (1868), is an expression of the dangerously inappropriate manifestations of imperial science and what Ian Duncan has called, “imperialist panic” (1994). Critiquing Victorian anthropology and ethnography, Gyan Prakash has observed that British imperial science, in its mature

stages, ran rife with the risk of going “native,” or being used by Indians as a tool of self-representation and self-determination, to oppose their own objectification within colonial discourses of racial hierarchy (1992).

In examining 20th Century records and contemporary criticism, in the first two sections I shall explore the history of the Andaman Islands, as recorded in Victorian consciousness, until the time of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, marking the inconsistencies in the discourse of racial hierarchy that imperial science sought in objectifying the islands’ aboriginal tribes. The latter half of the essay will reflect on the possible sources of Andamanese history that caused Doyle, and his creation Holmes, to conceive and perceive the character of Tonga – as a face of a devil, an Indian, an Andamanese and a dangerous equal. I finally argue that the poisoned darts used by Tonga were neither necessarily real nor fictional – neither entirely of Andamanese craft nor English imagination – but a metaphor of the boomeranging of imperial science, or, more perilously, an alien science that could become uncontrollable to those milling “loungers and idlers of the Empire” (Doyle, 1982: 3) whom the progress of imperialism had attracted into London and its suburbs. *The Sign of the Four* – and subsequently *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) – are therefore part of the same allegorical counter-discourse that Doyle created in order to unveil the spectre lurking behind acts of imperial benevolence.

An Anthropology of the Other

A postcolonial reading of *The Sign of the Four* observes that the establishment of a convict colony in the Andaman Islands in 1858 “was an instance of colonisation within colonisation, one with tragic consequences for the native population even more than for the unfortunate prisoners” (Mehta 1995: 638-39). This both reveals and obfuscates British anthropological attitudes towards the Andamanese. European presence in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands dates back to 1755, when Danish East India Company officials arrived in Nicobar. The following winter, Nicobar was rechristened as New Denmark, whose administration was governed from Tranquebar (present day Tharangambadi) on the Coromandel coastline of Tamil Nadu, which was then a Danish colony. The Nicobar Islands proved incredibly inhospitable to the Danish, and due to malarial outbreaks, beginning in 1759 and going on for almost a century thereafter, Denmark’s stronghold on the islands was thwarted. In 1778, Austrians, believing that the Danish had abandoned the Nicobar Islands, also established a colony there, which they called Theresia Islands. The British began colonising the Andaman Islands from 1789, with a naval base and a convict colony established in Chatham Island, known today as Port Blair.

A British colony set up seven years later at Port Cornwallis, in Great Andaman, was abandoned due to plague. When the Danish finally withdrew from Nicobar, in 1868, the island was purchased and incorporated into the British dominion the following year. In 1872, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were united under a joint British administration in Port Blair, which had been resettled as a British colony a year after the Great Rebellion of 1857, with the plan of building a convict colony of Indians and Anglo-Indians. This later grew into the Cellular Jail, where many Indian freedom fighters also served prison sentences. The British stronghold over the natives of Andaman, and Indian migrants into the island, grew by means of an administrative experiment of establishing the Andaman Homes, beginning from Port Blair in 1863. The new administrative system provided locals with food, health, and recreational and household facilities as part of a charitable policy

to convey to its beneficiaries that the Empire was emancipating them out of their age-old 'savagery'. Their dependence on imperial rule and commodities was meant to aid in documenting transformations in their behaviors and bodies in the course of – what Michel Foucault would later identify in *Discipline and Punish* as – appropriating them as docile objects of imperial knowledge through “a micro-physics of power” (1997: 138-160).

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands assumed great political importance during the Second World War, when the Japanese Army and the Subhas Chandra Bose-led Indian National Army invaded them. The territory became the Indian headquarters of the Arzi Hukumate Azad Hind (Provisional Government of Free India), and the site where the national tricolour of independent India was first hoisted, more than two years before the transfer of power from Britain to India in 1947. The Indian National Army's historic invasion and self-assertion is capable of overshadowing the history of Victorian Britain's racial and anthropological politics in the region. Since the establishment of the penal colony in 1858, British anthropology, ethnography and zoology sought to create a savage discourse around the local tribes, partly to bolster the racial superiority of the imperialist subject; partly to offer an exotic destination for the implementation of Western imperial sciences.

Explorations into Charles Darwin's theory of evolution of mankind from lower species would propel the Andamanese as exceptional specimens for the study of the Western man's evolutionary genealogy that supposedly went back to these 'noble savages,' now in need of the care of evolved imperial hands. Even half a century before Darwin, Thomas Robert Malthus, in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) referred to the Andamans as a scientific curiosity of barbaric proportions. “Everything that voyagers have related of savage life is said to fall short of the barbarism of this people,” wrote Malthus (1798: 13). In representing the physiognomy and psychology of the Andamanese, latter-day Victorian discourses adopted a lens of scrutinising the Indian body that magnified imperial power (Mehta, 1995: 639). In 1789, R.H. Colebrooke, the Surveyor General of Bengal (by extension of British India), toured the Andaman Islands. Excerpts from his writings published in the *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, in 1807, reflect an experience that was a European “illusion of imagined collective identity,” where observing and recording the manners of the Andamanese was mechanical than personally meaningful (Sen, 2009, II: 15). For Colebrooke, the islanders were the “least civilized, perhaps in the world; being nearer to the state of nature than any people we read of. Their colour is of the darkest hue, their stature in general small, and their aspect uncouth” (1799: 388-89). He imagined the Andamanese to be devious, cunning, lazy, physically misshapen, outwardly docile but inwardly scheming, greedy for donations and vengeful towards the donors afterwards. Accordingly, they were only capable of building prehistoric-like hovels and eating unseasoned meat. Their women went about naked and bore the chief burden of the drudgery of rudimentary norms of husbandry and household, added Colebrooke.

Colebrooke's senior colleague and former Surveyor General of Bengal, Alexander Kyd, had probably inaugurated that template of Andamanese savagery. So similar were the two accounts that it has been speculated whether Kyd and Colebrooke plagiarised from each other (Sen, 2009, II: 16). The template was, however, transplanted from primitive models of monstrosity and wonder that medieval Europeans had witnessed in the New World – marking a genealogy of fears and fantasies of alien tribes, in writings from Marco Polo to Sir John Mandeville. Kyd and Colebrooke are said to have followed Ritchie's *Survey of the Andaman Islands* (1771), which noted that medieval Europeans generally believed the

Andamanese to be cannibals. Michael Symes, a contemporary of Kyd and Colebrooke, took the words of Ptolemy – the founding proponent of an anthropocentric universe from seventeen hundred years ago – to support his argument of Andamanese cannibal feasts. The records on The Andaman Islands published by the Home Department of the Government of India in 1859 did make some progress in defying the accounts by early Arab and European fanciers, and therefore the wanton racist discourse of British accounts, but continued to endorse the “conjecture” that the islanders were cannibal savages that had devoured British captains and crews in the previous century (vii, 22, 44). These fantastical fears were then couched as the moral responsibility of the Empire to emancipate and discipline the inhospitable islands and their tribes.

For the next twenty years, numerous London publications, including *The Zoologist*, *Proceedings and The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London*, *The Year-book of Facts in Science and Art*, lectures at the University of Oxford, and the *Harper's Monthly Magazine* of New York borrowed refrains from racist jargons so prevalent in the anthropology of the Andamans. In 1858 and 1869, *The Illustrated London News* ran photographic illustrations of the aboriginals of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to mark the progress of the British settlement in the archipelago (Figures 4-5). The islands continued to make headlines as, in February 1872, the Viceroy of India Earl of Mayo was stabbed in Port Blair by an Afghan convict, Sher Ali Afridi. Afridi's lack of remorse and willingness to pose for photographs after the murder were perfect ingredients for sensation in London's periodicals. Afridi's death sentence, executed at South Andaman's Viper Island, would be a significant development in the imperial collective unconscious that had for over a century associated the place with poisonous snakes and arrows.

Although Viper Island derived its name not from Indian snakes but the English vessel *HMS Viper* that had brought Lieutenant Archibald Blair to the islands in 1789, the serpentine semantic association would manifest later – as I shall argue – in *The Sign of the Four*. While Afridi's murderous exploit did not itself change British consciousness of the Andamans, British people began seeing its natives in a more nuanced light. *A Life of the Earl of Mayo* (1876) by Sir William Hunter expresses some doubt as to the veracity of the early 19th Century records, which represented the Andamans “only as a cluster of cannibal islands, peopled with fierce fish-eating tribes, who promptly killed the savant we had sent to study their natural history, cut off stragglers from two troop-vessels that had gone ashore, and murdered shipwrecked crews” (ibid: 347). Five years later, Hunter would reiterate that intelligence in *The Imperial Gazetteer* – a book that has a special significance in the context of *The Sign of the Four*. Although Hunter too held the tribes responsible for barbarous atrocities, an article in an 1875 issue of *The Sunday Magazine*, ironically titled “The Savages of Bay of Bengal,” described them as “defenceless save for their poisoned arrows, exposed to death by hunger” (1876: 414). The aggregating nuances and inconsistencies in these accounts point to a progressive lack of homogeneity in the racial discourse, which at times bordered on paternalism and even the so-called ‘white man's burden.’ By the time Sir Thomas Wardle wrote his catalogue of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, 1886, the hitherto racially charged tone levelled at “these primitive savages” was somewhat counterpoised by “the striking peculiarities of this extremely interesting people” (ibid: 161).

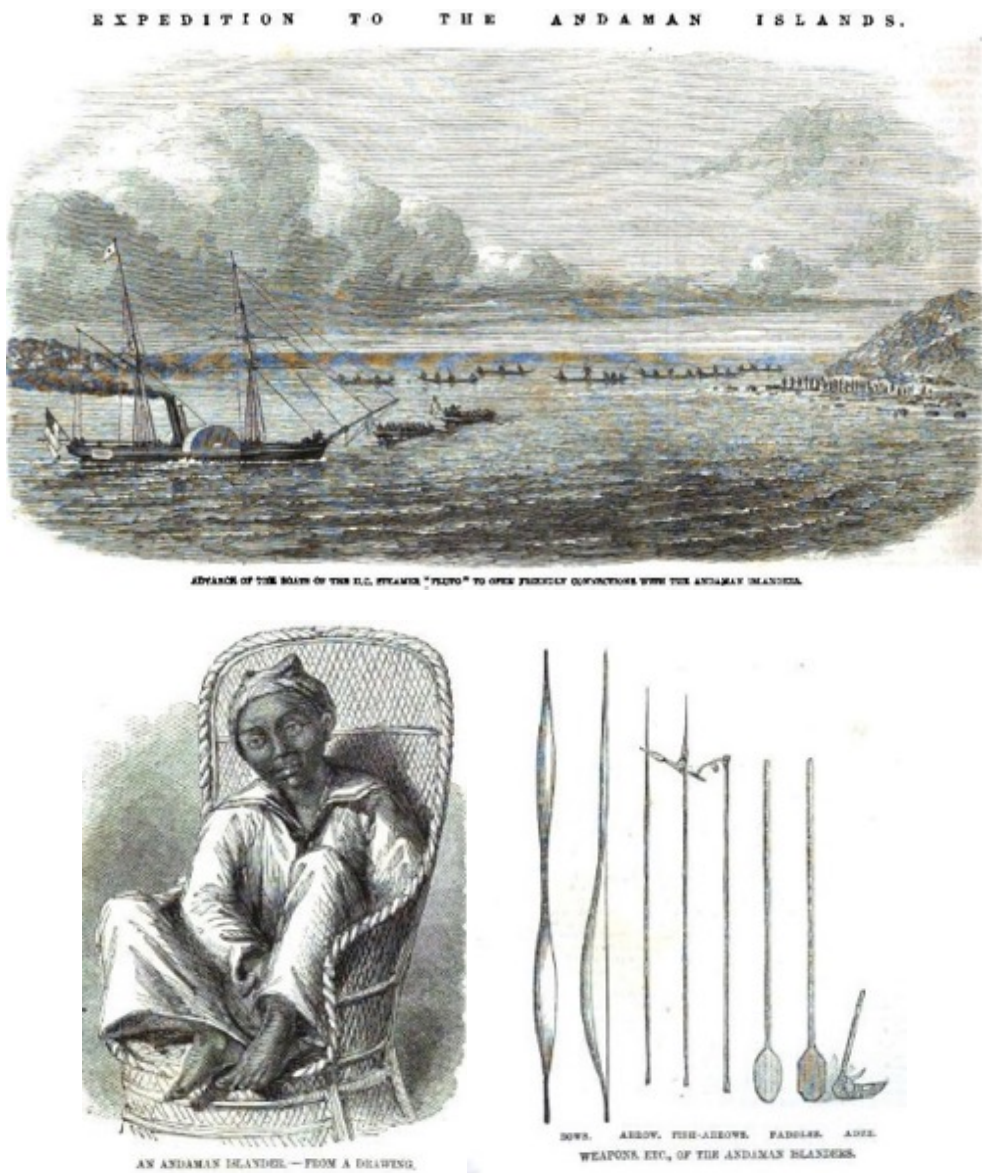


Figure 4 - 'Expedition to the Andaman Islands,' showing a seascape, an Andamanese and Andamanese weapons. (*The Illustrated London News* v25, 1859: 316.)

Caricatures of the Cannibal

Among the first influential voices to contest the notion that Andaman islanders were cannibals was the controversial Victorian anthropologist, Maurice Vidal Portman. He took many photographs of the Great Andamanese people, several of them being of a sexual and

homoerotic nature.² Prior to Portman, Edward Horace Man's photographs contributed largely to the Victorian anthropological fame of the Andamans. Man, who had an unprecedented obsession for collecting materials for the Empire, displeased some of his contemporaries, including Portman, who claimed that Man's supposed knowledge of the Andamanese and their dialects was in fact a hotchpotch of several dialects.

Major Augustus Pitt Rivers, the renowned British ethnologist and archaeologist and the future founder of the Pitts Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford in 1884, acknowledged Man's racially classified photo-anthropology as accurate records of the sleeping, eating, dancing and greeting manners of the Andamanese. However, it was felt by Henry Nottidge Moseley and Edward Burnett Tylor, who too were decorated anthropologists at the Pitt Rivers Museum, that Man was amassing a "tableaux of decontextualized culture" (Edwards, 1989: 73-76). A year before the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, Moseley wrote to Tylor with some despair that the Museum had one entire gallery full of "too much Andaman and Nicobar things" (ibid). For Portman, that was far from being the result of accurate scientific research.

The discursive shift from wretched savagery to aesthetic nakedness of the noble savage marked the trajectory of pleasures – the fantastical to the pornographic – that colonialism enjoyed while controlling the representations of the Andamans. The nakedness of the Andamanese highlighted in Man's photographs, masquerading as science, would influence Portman's photographs to come, keeping alive the plagiaristic tradition in British anthropology of the archipelago (Figure 5). In his turn, Portman attempted to recreate "not the decrepitude brought on by civilisation but the beauty of a savage body that he had recuperated in the clearing" (Sen, I, 2009: 368). The reluctance of the subjects notwithstanding, the tribes were photographed naked, alone and in groups, for the benefit of exhibitions, postcards and "an array of popular periodicals such as the *Illustrated London News* as well as journals aimed at the intelligentsia, and they were invariably trumpeted as authentic representatives of why colonialism mattered" (Levine, 2013: 14).

Nonetheless, Man's devotion to the Andamanese is distinctly observable in the fact that, in *The Aboriginal Inhabitants of the Andaman Islands*, not even once does he use the word "savage" to describe the islanders without qualifying it as the phrase "savage state," implying that the natives were inherently capable of adopting states other than pure savagery. For instance, he introduces us to the Andamanese by reflecting on their reclamation "from their savage state" and the beneficial results this had produced for the British, in that an increased consumption of imperial commodities – like tobacco – had made the natives indolent and devoid of their propensity for primitive ways of hunting, without losing their rituals of song, dance and feast (ibid: xix). The contradictory impulses that British imperial anthropology triggered in the likes of Man and Portman, and the untrustworthy nature, in general, of the anthropological and ethnological intelligence gathered from the Andamans, ran parallel to the internal contradictions of the tribes of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

² Portman was featured in headlines recently after the killing of the Christian missionary John Allen Chau, who wandered in the midst of the Sentinelese tribes of the Greater Andaman, disregarding signs and warnings placed by the Government of India on that being a protected zone, in 2018. A farfetched speculation ran that Portman's sexualised photographs from over a century ago had inflamed the Sentinelese, who had nursed that grudge for generations, finally avenging it by killing the missionary. See Aletha (2018).

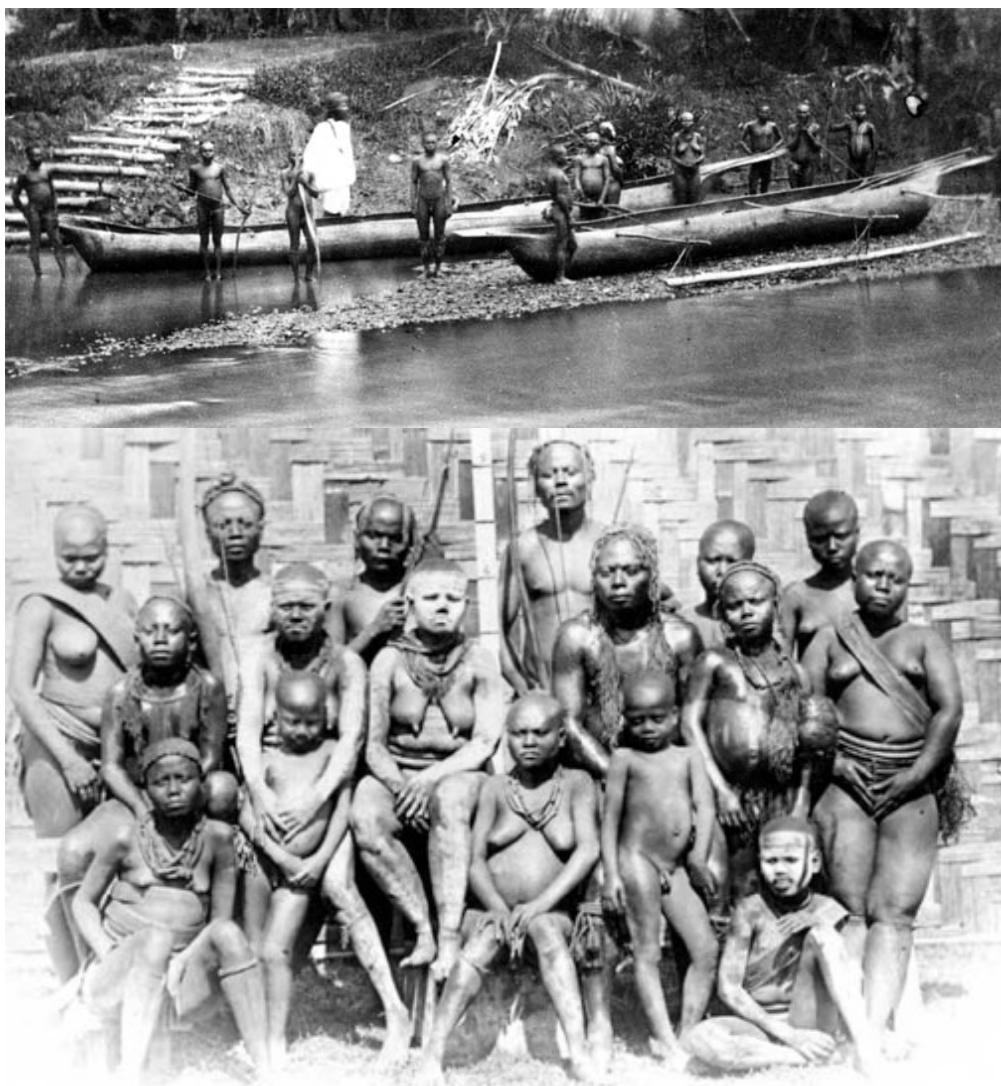


Figure 5 – (Top) the Greater Andamanese, photographed by E.H. Man, in 1875.
(Bottom) The Greater Andamanese, photographed by M.V. Portman in 1876.
(Courtesy: Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford.)

Frederik Adolph de Röpstorff's linguistic study of the tribes observed that the "Nicobarians consider themselves very much superior to these savages, whom they compare to monkeys" (1875: 3). Around this time British anthropology began using testimonies of Indian tribes and urbane Indians themselves to perpetuate the discourse of savagery around the Andamanese tribes, whom it wanted to tame into a "docile, useful, semi-accessible and pleasurable savagery," no longer to be considered a threat but a useful erotic sensation for the colonial regime (Sen, 2009, II: 21). The Colonial and Indian Exhibition marked the apogee of that experiment. The botanist Sir George Watt, former

head of the Calcutta International Exhibition (1883-84) and then commissioner of the exhibition held at South Kensington, chose Jadunath Pal, of the Krishnanagar clay workshops, as the sculptor for the clay models of Andaman & Nicobar islanders put on display. It was – as would be later argued in the case of the postcolonial Indian state as well – as much the production of images on the Andamanese as on the makers of their texts who wanted to secure their own image as the custodians of prehistoric specimens of mankind (Pandya, 2009: 174, 191; Liljeblad, 2014-15: 15). The models represented two women and four men from the Andamans and three Nicobarese men, sent to Calcutta for the purpose of modelling.

The original plan of having live Andamanese specimens on display at South Kensington was replaced by clay models that:

allowed exhibition organizers to symbolically control the people they depicted. Produced through the creative practices of mould-taking, casting, sculpting and painting, the models erased the literal and symbolic humanity and the uniqueness of the original sitter. (Wintle, 2013: 133)

Through customised skin tones and anatomy, grafted hair and accessories, an overjudged and overseen three-dimensionality was created to replace the human subjectivity of the Andamanese.

Unlike humans, the clay models were immobile and incapable of scandalising the Victorian public by – what may have seemed to imperial eyes as an ‘extra-terrestrial’ presence on the Underground, trams, hansom cabs or simply perambulating past Piccadilly or Oxford Circus (Wintle, 2013: 133). The skin colour, tonality, shade and overall negritude of these models could then be experienced by experts and visitors as a representative sampling of not only the Indian archipelago but of the Indian kaleidoscope of tribes and races, in general. The Andamanese, who had been the archetypal racial other to the British imperial identity, could now be subjected to a double alterity, being thrust into lowly racial hierarchy in comparison, especially, with Anglicised colonial subjects from the Indian mainland and metropolitan spaces.

Signs Taken for the Andamans³

With a plotline that goes back in time from 1888, *The Sign of the Four* is as important for its digressions, subplots, verbal cues and unwavering gaze on the Andaman Islands, as for the fact that it was among the earliest serialisations featuring the detective Sherlock Holmes. A key insight into Holmes’ method of scientific deduction, as revealed in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), is that for the world’s only consulting detective the realm of the supernatural is *ultra vires*, not necessarily because it is a fictional realm but that the realm of the natural itself is wonderfully amenable to hypotheses and inferences based on supreme fidelity to observation and fact. One of Holmes’ guiding motivations was nature – not unlike William Shakespeare himself – as given earlier in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). “There are vague memories in our souls of those misty centuries when the world was in its

³ The subheading is inspired by Homi Bhaba’s iconic essay ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’, where the author discusses the significance the book or the printed word as a displaced signifier and insignia of imperial authority, and the desire to discipline the alien in a colonial language (1985: 144-46).

childhood” (1892: 70) says Holmes almost like a Darwinian savant. “One’s ideas must be as broad as Nature if they are to interpret Nature” (ibid). For him, the chief ingredient of horror was imagination. Validating the capability of the human mind to commission its own traumatic twists, Holmes understood the imperialist panic that is visited upon the Major Sholto and his sons, in *The Sign of the Four*, and Sir Charles and Henry Baskerville, in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Both novels help us access the collective unconscious of the Victorian mind writhing secretly from the traumas of a century of imperial treachery in India, between the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the Great Rebellion of 1857 – or in Africa. If not in Holmes’ investigation proper, in *The Sign of the Four*, the genealogy of imperialist panic is the crucial evidence that links his perception of the Andamanese, Tonga, and Doyle’s attitude towards the Indian Empire.

“I have no wish to make a mystery of him,” says Holmes to Watson, moments before what appears only a necessary step in sleuthing analysis but is a well-disguised demonstration of Victorian anthropology on the Andamans. “Diminutive footmarks,” he goes on, “toes never fettered by boots, naked feet, stone-headed wooden mace, great agility, small poisoned darts. What do you make of all this?” Watson’s answer reflects our very own. “A savage,” he exclaims (Doyle, 1890: 189). To the average Victorian mind, at this point, wrought by decades of the savage discourse that shaped anthropological, ethnographic and popular imagination of the Andamanese, the creature in question is not only an adversary to the imperial race but even perhaps to the human one. The Foucauldian notion of micro-physics of power operates subtly in the Victorian text, but powerfully on the Victorian mind, in Holmes’ deduction:

When first I saw signs of strange weapons I was inclined to think so; but the remarkable character of the footmarks caused me to reconsider my views. Some of the inhabitants of the Indian Peninsula are small men, but none could have left such marks as that. The Hindoo proper has long and thin feet. The sandal-wearing Mohammedan has the great toe well separated from the others, because the thong is commonly passed between. These little darts, too, could only be shot in one way. They are from a blow-pipe. Now, then, where are we to find our savage? (ibid)

John McBratney argues that *The Sign of the Four* obeys an epistemological template founded by the British administration on racial anthropology and the Hindu caste consciousness, glued together by the public imagination of India that the first all-India census of 1871 had led to. Doyle seems to have played his hand at perpetuating the inherent collusion between caste-based and racial hierarchies that could galvanise and reconfigure existing social hierarchies between the British and Indians, on the one hand, and between Indians themselves, on the other. The architect of the Indian census of 1901 was the influential ethnologist Herbert H. Risley, who in his book *The People of India* affirmed that caste was an expression of inherent racial hierarchies. The supposedly “authoritative taxonomies” (1908: 153) in which British India was imaginatively constructed for administration, as well as for consumption by the Victorian public, were in fact motivated largely by preconceived imperial hierarchies of ethnicity instead of historical observation.

McBratney’s hypothesis is that the inaugural gazette volume that Holmes refers to in illuminating Watson – and us – on the ethnicity of Tonga, is Hunter’s *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (1881). Categorising them as part of the non-Aryan branch of Indian primitives,

Hunter described the Andamanese as one of the “rudest fragments of mankind,” who were better known to early Arab travellers as “dog-faced man-eaters” (ibid: 174). Drawing on McBratney’s hypothesis, it seems Doyle must have fictionalised these adjectival elements into what his mouthpiece, Holmes, reads from the *Gazetteer*:

They are naturally hideous, having large, misshapen heads, small fierce eyes, and distorted features. Their feet and hands, however, are remarkably small.
(ibid: 190).

Although Holmes’ *Gazetteer* puts the average height of the aborigines at below four feet, the anthropology of the time can itself be cited to challenge this purblind pseudoscience.

An issue of *The Calcutta Review* notes that the height of the Andamanese people was anywhere between 4 feet 6 inches and 5 feet four inches (1878: 154). According to another anthropologist, William Henry Flower, who was a contemporary of Man and Portman, the average height of the Andamanese men was 4 feet 8.5 inches, while women averaged 4 feet 6.5 inches (McBratney, 2005: 155). More uncannily, while Holmes’ *Gazetteer* calls them fierce, morose and intractable, the Indian Census of 1901 and the 1908 edition of the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* saw them as “bright and merry companions, talkative, inquisitive and restless, busy in their own pursuits, keen sportsmen and naturally independent, absorbed in the chase from sheer love of it and other physical occupations” (Hunter, 1908: 367). Understandably then, what Doyle hoped to create as the exactitude of science in his detective fiction has come under attack (Tomaiuolo, 2018: 119; McBratney, 2005: 154). Nonetheless, some verbal cues and seemingly unnecessary digressions, by Holmes, add subliminally to the subversive quality of what can be considered Doyle’s idea of the natural and uncontrollable consequences of imperialism.

The first cue – howsoever minor – is that while Watson calls Jonathan Small’s associate “a savage,” Holmes refers to “the savage instincts” of Jonathan Small’s companion or, later as, “our savage” (Doyle, 1890: 182; 189). Arming himself with his revolver, Holmes eggs Watson onto the “war-path” before donning the disguise of a vagabond and criminal himself. He tells his trusted doctor, “Jonathan I shall leave to you, but if the other turns nasty I shall shoot him dead” (ibid: 183). Holmes’ use of the pronoun “our” and the nuanced understanding of savagery as an instinct, rather than a natural state of being, suggests a certain degree of empathy towards the Andamanese, while the detective’s perfected resolve to shoot him contradictorily suggests an imperially preordained animosity between the Western intellect and the Eastern pagan. Thus far, we are, as Holmes would say in the ‘Adventure of Silver Blaze,’ “suffering from a plethora of surmise, conjecture, and hypothesis” (1894: 2). The fact is, however, that although Holmes allows the *Gazetteer* to articulate – or for us to articulate – the anthropological features of Tonga, he is able to reconstruct the physiognomic description of Jonathan Small without a scholarly resource: “as to his personal appearance he must be middle-aged, and must be sunburned after serving his time in such an oven as the Andamans... His height is readily calculated from the length of his stride, and we know that he was bearded” (ibid: 182). Was the reference to the *Gazetteer* merely theatrical?

It is here that Doyle – rather craftily – allows Holmes to betray his knowledge of the Andaman Islands beforehand. If Holmes was already aware of the tropical conditions of the convict colony in the archipelago, it seems almost redundant for him to refer to the *Gazetteer* for intelligence on Tonga’s ethnographic typology. That was, meant more likely, for the interest of the reader and Watson himself. The discrepancy in anthropological data

between Holmes' fictional *Gazetteer* and Hunter's *Imperial Gazetteer* cannot be taken for a sign of Doyle's pseudoscientific attitude. Instead, it may as easily point to the author's stance against the quasi-anthropological and pseudo-scientific surveys into the Andamanese tribes that we find in the hotly contested and contestable versions of Man, Flower, Portman and previous imperial records on the islands.

It is, then, a hermeneutic error to take Holmes' *Gazetteer* as anything but a work of fiction within the fictional world of the detective. Unlike Watson and the reader, Holmes' investigation has no use for precisely how tall, how fierce, how intractable and how morose the average Andamanese is, in any case. What is otherwise assumed as Holmes' own instinct for racial hierarchy may as readily be interpreted as his conception of the subjective agency in Tonga's defensive psychology. Although Jonathan Small is, to our understanding, the chief plotter behind the inadvertent deaths of Major and Bartholomew Sholto, and the theft to retrieve the Great Agra Treasure, Holmes fancies that even that criminal mastermind would have done his best not to employ Tonga. Tonga's poisoned dart, that kills Bartholomew Sholto, is less an evidence of Doyle's misplaced belief that the Andamanese used poisoned arrows; it is more a sign of the savage's lack of awareness of his own greatness of powers—thus of his own danger to the imperial metropolis.

The Aesthetics of Atavism

The question of atavism haunts *The Sign of the Four*. The novel was published only two decades after John Lubbock's *The Origin of Civilization* (1870), which propounded the theory that savage mental and cognitive abilities continue to inhabit the civilised mind as subliminally as human fossils populating the underbelly of the earth and furthered notions of the savage as the child. When Watson confesses to Holmes that his reading of Jean Paul is derived from Thomas Carlyle, the detective is quick to latch on to an aquatic metaphor, denoting the idea in his mind of his own atavism, which secretly links him with Tonga. "That was like following the brook to the parent lake," responds Holmes, in a metaphor that could possibly date the civilisation around the Thames back to the Indian Ocean archipelago (1890: 183). This metaphorical quality of Holmes' speech consistently marks the way in which Doyle chooses to flesh out the character of Tonga – except the entry from the *Gazetteer* – for all along the doctor and the detective have been referring to Small's "associate." In an enigmatic suggestion – not so enigmatic considering this new hermeneutic line – Holmes quotes Jean Paul Richter to Watson: "the chief proof of man's real greatness lies in his perception of his own smallness" (ibid). Unmistakably, it is Tonga that he defines here, as his own alter-ego. If, later on, Small describes Tonga as "that little hell-hound," Holmes is described by Watson as "a trained blood-hound," while Holmes calls his dog, Toby, a "specially-trained hound" (ibid: 173, 203). This is particularly instructive given the significance of the "footprints of a gigantic hound" in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. In that novel, the solitary appearance of the word "gigantic," for the hound, serves no other purpose than to illustrate the demonic proportion of the mythical beast and the threat it poses in the psychology of the Baskervilles and their associates, rather than its physical attributes. The careful concatenation of characteristics of smallness with that of a hound – and a gigantic hound to come – wound Holmes and Tonga in a secret thread.

Further doubts, if any, are cleared by Watson's impressions of Holmes, whenever a discussion of the Andamans or Tonga is initiated. Holmes quotes to Watson from the *Gazette*, alludes to a metaphor on human evolution, and, finally most strikingly, takes up

the violin, as if to censor from his friend and the Victorian public at large from the secret knowledge of the Andamanese psyche to which the detective is privy. Tonga's truth "is more than I can tell," says Holmes. Moments thereafter, Watson provides us with a hint, as Holmes lullabies his companion to sleep. "I stretched myself out he began to play some low, dreamy, melodious air," as the doctor recollects the events until he fell asleep. "I have a vague remembrance of his gaunt limbs, his earnest face, and the rise and fall of his bow" (Doyle, 1890: 190). Traditionally given to bow and arrows, Tonga however resorts to shooting his darts by using Doyle's almost musical and ingenious contraption, a blowpipe, which otherwise has no equivalent in Andamanese history. The missing anthropological links in his story are fulfilled by Watson's hazy memory of the movement of Holmes' face and limbs, and the dexterity of his hand at another kind of musical bow. Both Tonga and Holmes are capable of inducing soporific effects in the recipient of their art. Unlike Bartholomew Sholto, who is sent into a hysteria-driven rigor mortis by Tonga's dart, Holmes' violin sends Watson into a dreamland where the face of Mary Morstan crowns the doctor's fantasy, effecting the erasure of any trace of trauma that the imperial panic over the question of the Andamans is likely to cause.

Another point to be observed is how Doyle aestheticises poison, or at least the little case containing Tonga's poisoned darts. Left for the most part to be constructed in our imagination, Tonga is shown to us just once very fleetingly, through the eyes of Watson, during the breakneck chase on the Thames. He appears in the darkness as an "unhallowed dwarf with his hideous face, and his strong yellow teeth" (Doyle, 1890: 202). The resemblance of the gigantic beast in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* to the Andamanese dwarf in *The Sign of the Four* is not merely fortuitous. Both are shot at together by Holmes and Watson. Watson's word for both is "savage." Even after the hound is shot dead at Dartmoor, its "huge jaws seemed to be dripping with a bluish flame and the small, deep-set, cruel eyes were ringed with fire" (1902: 225). Before killing the hound, Watson allows the reader a peek into his own psychological state, which is that of a "mind paralyzed by the dreadful shape" (ibid: 223). The diabolical link between the two novels yields that most of what we remember of the appearance of Tonga and the bestial hound are from recollections of Watson's remarkably traumatised mind. Tonga's face, glimpsed once in the dark from aboard the *Aurora*, is capable of giving sleepless nights to Watson. "Never have I seen features so deeply marked with all bestiality and cruelty," reports the doctor. "His small eyes glowed and burned with a sombre light, and his thick lips were writhed back from his teeth, which grinned and chattered at us with a half animal fury" (1890: 202). Seen as a human embodiment of an ancient fossilised race of semi-humans, to the anthropologist and the psychologist, Tonga is a case study into the prehistoric mental faculties from which the Western mind is believed to have evolved (Frank, 1996: 66).

The phosphorescence that bounds the anatomies of the hound and Tonga are personifications of the kind of bioluminescence that explorers were beginning to observe in the North Andamans, and that which had started appearing in the periodicals of the day. The only other character with luminescence is Holmes himself, when Watson sees him appear "like an enormous glow-worm crawling very slowly along the ridge" during the chase (Doyle, 1890: 179). A contemporary historical novel, William Clark Russel's *The "Lady Maud,"* alluded to the bloodshot sunset sea in the Andaman (1882: 282). *A Popular Account of Phosphorescent Animals and Vegetables* (1887) by Charles Frederick Holder also mentions the discovery of bioluminescent fungi in the Andaman Islands (137). The phosphorescent membranes seen to be covering the bodies of Tonga and the hound

accord both these strange visitors to the shores of England an otherworldly aura or halo, making their histories inaccessible for the most part. Doyle intended for the reader to see Tonga both through the eyes of Watson and the cusp of Andamanese artefacts. Like Holmes' violin, Tonga's darts are precious instruments, albeit of another civilisation. As Holmes holds up Tonga's dart-case before Watson, the latter observes, it to be a "pouch woven out of coloured grasses and with a few tawdry beads strung round it" (1890: 180). Seen from another perspective, the pouch is only as evil or artistic as the instruments with which Holmes' prepares his seven percent solution of morphine, or Thaddeus Sholto's Oriental hookah. "In shape and size it was not unlike a cigarette-case. Inside were half a dozen spines of dark wood, sharp at one end and rounded at the other, like that which had struck Bartholomew Sholto" (ibid). It has been noted that the blowpipe with which Tonga shoots his poisoned darts has no recorded historical equivalent, and that its role was to augment the savage's prehistoric qualities (Frank, 1996: 59; Wintle, 2013: 142). This is in keeping with the fact that the poisoned arrows of the Andamans reported in early Victorian England were later found to be figments of medieval and early imperial imagination.

It is a fact today that Doyle's sources were highly suspect and fraught with prejudices and plagiarisms. There is nothing to claim, however, that Doyle was not aware of this himself. Whether Doyle was indeed a sympathiser of Indian or Andamanese self-determination is quite another matter – his loyalism towards the Empire is well known with his involvement in British war propaganda. Nonetheless, read allegorically and not necessarily only through Watson's eyes, *The Sign of the Four* offers several keys to an anti-imperial hermeneutic. Tonga's darts, for instance, are emblematic of the biblical "thorn in the flesh" or the short-sightedness of Major and Bartholomew Sholto.⁴ In the same vein, Jonathan Small's wooden stump and Tonga's stone mace can be seen as metaphors for the heavy conscience of the Sholtos. The metaphor of wood also links the racialist discourse with commodity fetishism and imperial traffic. Britain's imports of teakwood that were brought primarily from Burma, until the 1870s, came to be replaced with timber from the hill stations of India and the *padauk* variety extracted from the Andamans. The increasing demand for wood in late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain, and later during the Great War, led to increased deforestation in South Andaman, which was to multiply six times between 1900 and 1912. Resources of *padauk* timber were exploited as raw materials for construction, shipbuilding, railroads, manufacturing weapon carriages, pianofortes, furniture, besides much else (Krishnakumar, 2009: 108-109). Whether the author of *The Sign of the Four* was out to celebrate the prowess of the Western intellect in Holmes or the diabolical threat of Eastern tribes to British gentility, the novel itself is rife with opportunities for reading into Andamanese self-assertion. Tonga is killed by Watson and Holmes as soon as we see him, but not before the two escape his poisoned dart, and their death, by a hair's breadth. That Tonga's bones remain buried in the Thames keeps alive the theme of atavism encoded in the novel as the savage is offered the chance of a Shakespearean metamorphosis. At the bottom of the river, his bones will become corals, and his eyes will turn into pearls.⁵

⁴ Rev. J.G. Darling's sermon delivered at Trinity Church in Southport, in 1861, explains the apostle St. Paul's Biblical thorn in the flesh as a kind of partial blindness. The phrase is from the *Second Epistle to the Corinthians* in the *New Testament* (1861: 3-10).

⁵ "Nothing of him that doth fade/But doth suffer a sea-change." See Ariel's song to Ferdinand in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Act I, Scene II (88).

Doyle's aestheticising foretaste into Tonga – like the invisible darts themselves – is an incisive entry into the inscrutable Andamanese psychology. It forebodes the inscrutability of the mysterious species of a Dartmoor to come in Doyle's forthcoming novel, where, as we are informed, Jonathan Small might spend the rest of his life digging drains. It also carries forebodings of the arrival of Dr. Grimesby Roylott, a Calcutta-based English physician who retires to his country estate, Stoke Moran Manor, in Surrey, in *The Adventure of the Speckled Band* (1892). Dr. Roylott takes sadistic pleasures in keeping a court of deadly Indian animals in his garden, including the creature that Holmes identifies as the swamp adder – the deadliest snake in India according to him – which gives the story its title. The lineage of this fictional serpent arguably goes back to a family of vipers from Viper Island in Andaman, where the British had set up their convict colony, and from where Jonathan Small had escaped with Tonga. According to *The Cyclopaedia of India and of Eastern and Southern Asia* (1885), from 1875 to 1880, an average of about 17,000 annual deaths were recorded due to snake bites in British India (574). Given the nearly half-a-dozen daily deaths from poisonous snakes, any appearance of the serpent itself in Victorian literature might have seemed like a quasi-scientific expression. Although *Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London* (1871) provides studies into several reptilian species from India, and quite a few of the venomous and speckled variety, it makes no mention of snakes found in swamps or marshes, thus making it difficult to ascertain whether Doyle's serpent had historical equivalents or that too was a work of pure fiction.

What is more likely is that Tonga's darts and Roylott's serpent are allegorical extensions of the British imperialism's inherent toxicity and the enormous chasm between the workings of its anthropologists, zoologists or toxicologists and what they sought to fathom of the Andamans (Goldsmith, 2012: 38). Doyle's scientific fiction has attracted the criticism of fostering a romantic orthodoxy of imperial control instead of a subversion of imperial and English conservatism (McBratney, 1996: 163). Such a thesis ignores Holmes attitude towards Tonga, which borders on a respectful silence. He does not reveal the background to Tonga's history but allows Small to bring us up to speed with the events. That which is a dwarfish hound to Watson's traumatised mind, is a noble character in Holmes' vision. At his most lethal, Tonga is recognised by Holmes to have broken "fresh ground in the annals of crime" (Doyle, 1890: 171). Doyle's project in *The Sign of the Four*, as elsewhere, is not to reaffirm the veracity of British imperial sciences – or injure them professionally, as Holmes would say of Inspector Athelney Jones – but to elicit the toxic consequences of the mainstreaming of the imperialism's scientific snooping and anthropological curiosities that cunningly camouflaged Victorian fantasies of imperial loot and the wealth of the Raj.

Conclusion

This paper began by tracing the evolution of British imperial knowledge on the Andamans through scientific branches, predominantly anthropology and ethnology. Through photographs, exhibitions, censuses and gazetteers, Victorian Britain attempted a racially hierarchical discourse through which to interpret Andamanese history and to place its subjects in an oppositional binary with the British race. While photographs and clay models of the aboriginals, and imperial discourses of savagery and cannibalism woven around them, did much to channel the colonial gaze upon the Andamans, the larger racial discourse was conflicted from within by the contradictory motivations of British anthropologists, especially after 1859. That the Andamanese were cannibals and that they poisoned their arrows were hotly contested notions, as was the notion that they were intractable and incapable of making trustworthy subjects of the British Empire. If

anything, late-Victorian photographs by Man and Portman deconstructed this myth by neatly arranging the “savage” subjects as docile models for their anthropo-pornographic experiments. The reliance of London’s exhibitioners on Indian sculptors in the creation of clay models for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition ushered a new age of science in India. Henceforth the native subjects of the Raj assumed the role of representing their own ethnological diversity, thus leading to Western science becoming instrumental in challenging the walls of those racial fantasies that British imperialism had built around itself.

Although Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes series was meant as a loyalist British expression of Victorian scientific advancement, the sympathies of the author and his creation were divided between protecting the sanctity, morality and physical security of the imperial epicentre and an aesthetic empathy for criminal talent, even if it had its origins in the moorlands of the convict colony in the Andamans. It is an oversimplification to read *The Sign of the Four* as a condemnation of the savage race of Tonga, who, among all of Doyle’s characters – with the exception of Professor Moriarty – comes closest to Holmes’ own powers of physical, artistic and cognitive agility. Far from being a bulwark of imperial racial fantasies, the novel comes the closest to disrupting them from within, by exposing how inappropriate and uncontrollable the consequences of imperial science and the project of domesticating the Andamans were to the hearts of the Sholtos, and of London in general. If anything, Doyle gives Tonga the place of a dangerous equal to Holmes – a “savage” force that imperial scientific discourse fails to appropriate into European racial hierarchies.

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