

Pilots of history

Ethnographic fieldwork and anthropology's explorations of the past

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ABSTRACT: The establishment of the Malinowski Forum for Ethnography and Anthropology in South Tyrol provides a good opportunity in the journal of Italy's relevant academic association for a reconsideration of the current significance of ethnography, as initiated by Malinowski, for various scholarly fields in anthropology and beyond. One of these fields is historical anthropology and history in the broad sense of the term. This article seeks to explore how the Malinowskian legacy in ethnographic fieldwork may be usefully and productively activated and elaborated for historical fields and for historical anthropology. For this purpose, the first section will outline how Malinowski's notion of an empirical field was open to all kinds of comparative interdisciplinary inquiries. Eventually, these also came to include history, despite Malinowski's original well-known caveat in his time (Firth 2002). The second section will then elaborate the case example of maritime pilots as well as other cultural brokers with cosmopolitan expertise in the Indian Ocean, in order to demonstrate how ethnographic insights may support, enrich and complement historical data or, if these are absent, how they may become historically relevant indicators in their own right. A summary section points out that this leads to pioneering new tasks for anthropology.

KEYWORDS: COSMOPOLITANS, FIELDWORK AND HISTORY, LOCAL KNOWLEDGE, MALDIVE ISLANDS.

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The establishment of the Malinowski Forum for Ethnography and Anthropology in South Tyrol provides a good opportunity in the journal of Italy's relevant academic association for a reconsideration of the current significance of ethnography, as initiated by Malinowski, for various scholarly fields in anthropology and beyond. One of these fields is historical anthropology and history in the broad sense of the term. This article¹ seeks to explore how the Malinowskian legacy in ethnographic fieldwork may be usefully and productively activated and elaborated for historical fields and for historical anthropology. For this purpose, the first section will outline how Malinowski's notion of an empirical field was open to all kinds of comparative interdisciplinary inquiries. Eventually, these also came to include history, despite Malinowski's original well-known caveat in his time (Firth 2002). The second section will then elaborate the case example of maritime pilots as well as other cultural brokers with cosmopolitan expertise in the Indian Ocean, in order to demonstrate how ethnographic insights may support, enrich and complement historical data or, if these are absent, how they may become historically relevant indicators in their own right. A summary section points out that this leads to pioneering new tasks for anthropology.

1. Oxymoron or continuum?

At first and second glance, our topic of "ethnography's relevance for history" seems to imply a classical oxymoron, equivalent to the relevance of "mountaineering in Holland", or of "whale-watching in Switzerland". By definition, ethnography always takes place on the ground within a given present-day horizon – so how can it possibly have any relevance for history at all, which basically is something different from the present, even if preceding it as its precondition?

1. Earlier drafts of this text benefited from critical comments and suggestions by participants to the Third Biennial Anthropological Talks in South Tyrol, i.e. the symposium on *The Malinowskian Legacy in Ethnography*, held at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano on September 21 and 22, 2017, as well as by its hosts, Dorothy Zinn and Elisabeth Tauber. Comments by two anonymous reviewers were received and integrated with appreciation. Advice from Michael Young (ANU) on Malinowski's terminology and from Noura Kamal (Austrian Academy of Sciences) in identifying the reliable edition and relevant text section of Ibn Battuta's work in its original Arabic version is acknowledged with special gratitude, in addition to David Westacott's editorial assistance.

This perception of an apparent oxymoron most probably still finds some considerable support in various corners and arenas of contemporary anthropology – which, after all, is primarily though not exclusively committed to the study of contemporary phenomena. A popular academic version of the “oxymoron perception” would therefore tend to argue that not only is ethnographic fieldwork carried out within very specific present-day contexts but, moreover, that this is pursued to elucidate whatever is happening in the present. According to the oxymoron perception, historical themes, problems, or puzzles would usually require other methodological approaches than ethnographic fieldwork.

In several ways, such popular versions of an oxymoron perception in contemporary academia echo two main aspects of the established narrative about Malinowski’s original contributions to British and global anthropology. First, the introduction of ethnographic fieldwork (and of practicing participant observation at its core)² represented a unique methodological transformation that helped to set social anthropology apart from other sub-fields in the social sciences and humanities, as well as from previous traditions within the discipline known by the somewhat pejorative terms «museum anthropologists» and, worse, armchair anthropologists. Second, this transformation placed anthropology firmly within the social sciences while keeping the historical fields at a distance. Key strands of this established narrative continue to be valid, but certain elements in it require refinement and differentiation if they are to remain useful. Two such differentiations seem to be particularly relevant here. If readers can be convinced to accept them, then the somewhat too narrow oxymoron perception may in fact be substituted by a more inclusive «continuum» perception about ethnography and history. The two adjustments to established narratives about the Malinowskian revolution in anthropology’s history proposed here are as follows: first, the methodological innovations introduced by Malinowski were not quite as “unique” as is often claimed by the established canon; and second, in his time Malinowski also had valid political reasons for keeping the historical fields at bay as much as possible.

The first proposition argues that “field practices” of various kinds had already become fairly common in the late imperial academic environments and communities in which Malinowski grew up, i.e. in the Habsburg Empire’s Galician capital Kraków/Krakau. In fact, the term “field” in

2. Malinowski himself did not yet use the term participant observation, which was introduced into the social sciences at a later point.

Malinowski's concept of ethnographic fieldwork was a more or less explicit allusion to existing notions of the field in methodological academic discourses of the time. As the son of an established and respected linguist, the young Malinowski must have noticed that linguistic research, for instance, took place both in laboratories as well as in field contexts (Young 2004). His subsequent early interests in the philosophy of science emerging in Cracow, Budapest and Vienna (e.g., Ernst Mach) during his own student years certainly made him aware of the wide variety of empirical methods of investigation that were becoming standardized (Thornton, Skalník 1993). They ranged from laboratory experiments to field experiments and field trials (*Feldversuche*) to the study of individual case examples and case studies. While most of these forms of methodological standardization became firmly rooted in the natural and life sciences, they also had gained some ground in the social sciences and humanities as well – such as, precisely, linguistics (Rupp-Eisenreich, Stagl 1995; see also Stagl 1998). In consequence, Malinowski used notions of the field in a self-evident manner throughout the *Argonauts* volume as his first major ethnographic monograph (Malinowski 1922).³ Against the intellectual and academic contexts of roughly the 20th century's first decade, Malinowski's subsequent invention of ethnographic fieldwork as a concept and a method not only built on important precursors within the anthropological fields (e.g. Lafiteau from France, Boas from Germany and the US, Glaser and the Heins from Vienna, to name just a few; see Barth *et al.* 2005). Perhaps even more importantly, Malinowski's revolutionary methodological innovation within anthropology also interacted and competed with the earlier methodological developments in the natural and life sciences and in some areas of linguistics (Kuklick 1997). Developing social anthropology as an academic discipline in its own right in a way necessitated a specific methodological inventory for this new discipline as a typical set of methodological procedures that spoke to what already existed elsewhere, and that might also attract some recognition from there. It has been said that the existing methodological spectrum of standardized procedures in other disciplines ranged from repeatable experiments at one pole to singular case studies at the other, with the field as the crucial set between these poles. In short, some formative ideas in the Malinowskian notion of ethnographic fieldwork were not unique at all.

3. In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski (1922) *inter alia* refers to «scientific field ethnology», «field worker(s)», «field work», «ethnographic field-work» and the «field ethnographer».

Moreover, they were not as unilaterally associated with the particular dimensions in case studies as certain directions in contemporary anthropology would prefer to have it. In fact, in addition to existing connections to the strong particular element in case studies (and to a lesser extent in case examples), a certain emphasis on field trials and field experiments with explicit comparative potentials was also part and parcel of Malinowski's innovation from the outset. Malinowski's practical and conceptual innovation of ethnographic fieldwork implied a fairly explicit allusion to what was understood as a field in other academic disciplines of his time, where any empirical field always entailed exemplary and comparatively valid potentials of insights. Those comparative potentials of the field, however, imply that the main dimensions in resulting insights may subsequently also be tried out for cases (or subfields) other than the original fieldwork.

Our second proposition argues that Malinowski's strict separation between history and social anthropology also had important institutional and political reasons in their time. In institutional terms, the social sciences in most British and European universities of the early 20th century were a newly emerging set of academic disciplines that was not yet sufficiently institutionalized to endure. In contrast, the historical disciplines of the time (including archaeology and philology) had already been influential in most parts of academia for at least a century. Insisting on the separate institutional establishment of the social sciences in university contexts, and of social anthropology among them, ensured the relative independence required for an emergent set of disciplines vis-à-vis the other academically much more established and more influential disciplines. In addition to such matters of university politics, the 20th century's early decades also featured ample examples of wider political dangers whose potential effects upon anthropology Malinowski sought to minimize. This concerned the specific ease by which history could be instrumentalized in one way or another for nationalist interests. Perhaps being somewhat too optimistic about it, Malinowski attempted to keep the dangers of political instrumentalization at bay by keeping history at a distance. It is worth remembering that the apparently implied slogan "anthropologists do not do history" did not survive Malinowski for long. It was already being undermined by such a close colleague of Malinowski's as Raymond Firth (1959) and his famous re-study on Tikopia.

As valid as these institutional and political factors were in Malinowski's time, today they do not represent sufficient reason to maintain such a safety zone between social anthropology and the historical fields. Certainly, the dangers of political instrumentalization have not gone away, but instead they have changed while becoming ubiquitous. Because of this, however, today it would be quite misleading to primarily identify these dangers with any single academic discipline. More importantly still, social anthropology and the social sciences in general are no longer the emergent, fragile set of fields they were in the early 20th century, while the historical disciplines have meanwhile lost some of the hegemonic position they still occupied a hundred years ago. In contrast to Malinowski's time, interactions between history and anthropology are in fact today tending to become normalized. They have taken on the same basic status as with any other relevant discipline – whether it is medicine, environmental studies or, for that matter, research into the arts or religion. Wherever useful, it has become normal standard that these interdisciplinary interactions have resulted in anthropological subfields such as medical anthropology, ecological (or environmental) anthropology, the anthropology of the arts and of religion, or historical anthropology.

Concluding this first section, our two methodological propositions allow for a respectful appreciation and elaboration of the Malinowskian legacy in ethnographic fieldwork also at the intersection between anthropology and history. Wherever it still prevails, an “oxymoron perception” about the relevance of ethnography for history should be substituted by a “continuum perception”. Today, anthropology's previously useful safety zone against history has become superfluous, since history has attained the new routine status of one within a *continuum* of many major disciplines with whom anthropologists regularly interact. At the same time, a closer re-examination of contextual conditions for the Malinowskian revolution reveals that, in its most elementary orientation, ethnographic fieldwork may also be useful beyond its indispensable, particular present-day contexts in a potentially comparative manner – i.e., by taking into consideration the comparative potentials of resulting insights for contexts other than today. As a result, this opens up perspectives upon similarities and differences between the present and the past, including possible *continuities* between both. The historical and ethnographic case in the following section aims at demonstrating how this may yield insights that historians could not easily achieve through their own methodological routine.

2. *Pilots in Maldivian history*

The islands were so low-lying [...] that, if it had not been for the tall palm-trees growing on them, they would have been virtually invisible⁴.

This section will first briefly summarize, by means of an anthropological reading, what is known from historical sources about the period of early Islamization in Maldivian history. Second, the argument will proceed to demonstrate how ethnographic field insights may contribute to shedding light on local agents in the processes of early Islamization.

Local sources such as the state chronicle and local legends attribute the official beginnings of active Islamization in the Maldives to the activities of one specific Islamic preacher (and “missionary”), Sheikh Yusuf Shams al-Din of Tabriz, today in Iran, starting in AD 1153 (548 AH). The fact that other sources give the Maghrebin Abū al-Barakāt al-Barbari as a second name, and a later date for this at least in some parts of the archipelago, indicates from the outset that Islamization was not a sudden event, but rather a protracted process (cfr. Bell 2002: 17; Forbes 1981). We address this process here as the transitional period of early Islamization. That transitional period began with an incipient phase during which an initial Muslim minority co-existed together with the previous, declining Buddhist majority on one or a few among the Maldivian islands. This incipient phase may have emerged either around the same time when, or more likely even before the first Maldivian ruler embraced Islam. Comparable processes may serve as a rough guideline, such as the Islamization of Yemen in the 7th century or for that matter, the adoption of Christianity as a state religion in Ancient Rome during the 4th century AD. From such a perspective, the Maldivian ruler’s conversion (i.e. “from above”) is likely to have occurred – in addition to being backed by transoceanic networks of Muslim traders and scholars – not without some minimum support by pre-existing Islamized segments of the local population (“from below”). The incipient phase therefore introduced the overall period of early Islamization. It may have preceded the mid-12th century for an unknown duration, and it entered into a phase of early growth together with the first Maldivian king’s conversion. After its incipient and its early growth phases, the processes of early Islamization on the Maldives

4. Portuguese Valentim Fernandes explaining the fundamental difficulties and dangers to navigate the Maldivian archipelago; written about 1507 and cited in Villiers 1992: 24

gradually approached the next point of historically confirmed culmination and consolidation in the mid-14th century AD, when the famous Arab traveler Ibn Battuta (1304–1368) established himself for eight months at the Muslim ruler's court in the Maldivian capital Mahal (today's Malé), taking on the position of supreme judge and marrying local wives. It is therefore safe to state that Sunni Islam became the dominant religious denomination throughout the archipelago between AD 1153 and the mid-14th century (cfr. Knoll 2018b), i.e. during an incipient phase and subsequent phases of early growth and consolidation of early Islamization.⁵ In view of the scattered coral island and atoll nature of the Maldivian archipelago, as well as by assessing parallel historical processes elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia, a certain differentiation between scriptural Islam and various forms of popular and folk Islam should also be attributed to Maldivian history of that period. Those popular and folk elements would also have included elements from earlier historical periods.

The period before active Islamization fully set in had been characterized by predominantly Buddhist influences in the Maldives. This is indicated not only by archaeological findings, some written sources and coral mosque architecture (Jameel, Ahmad 2016) but also by the linguistic evidence of, and in, the Maldivian language (Dhivehi), which is related to Sinhala. That earlier, predominantly Buddhist period may also hypothetically be seen as characterized by a spectrum from certain centers of scripturally informed piety to wider fields of folk and popular religious practices. The Maldives' Buddhist period thus had received some main inspirations from Sri Lanka in the northeast, whereas the archipelago's subsequent early Islamic period received some decisive influence originating from Arabia and the Gulf in the northwest (it seems that the Indian mainland played no important role in early Islamization on the Maldives).

Located at the very center of the Indian Ocean at the crossroads of major maritime trading routes, the Maldives were positioned at the intersection of co-existing and rival cross-continental networks and flows of ideas, objects, practices and persons – one of these sets of flows gradually losing its earlier hegemony, while the other set was gradually taking over. As argued elsewhere (Gingrich 2018a), this particular incipient phase of the transitional period during (and perhaps also before) the 12th century was

5. At first the Maliki direction of Islamic jurisprudence prevailed; in the 16th century, however, the Maldives moved to the Shaf'i madhhab. This linked the archipelago to the Shaf'i Muslim communities of the Indian Ocean littoral while distinguishing them from the majority of Hanafi Sunnites among the Indian subcontinent's Muslims (Dunn 2005: 231; Forbes 1981: 60).

characterized by denominational co-existence in the Maldives, combining a diminishing Buddhist majority with a growing Muslim minority. This must have been the local and regional setting that either stimulated the first Muslim preachers to come, or that followed their initial success. Together with some inferences from socio-cultural anthropology, this view of a local transitional period in the Maldives in the 12th century, if not much longer before and afterward, primarily is derived through locally rooted historical evidence, including archaeology and linguistics.

The insight of a Maldivian transitional period first mentioned in written sources by the mid-12th century receives additional substantiation through historical Arabic evidence about the gradual expansion of various sets of Middle Eastern influences and flows in the medieval⁶ Indian Ocean world, up to the point that they constituted fairly stable maritime networks. These medieval maritime activities of Middle Eastern origin across the Indian Ocean go back to at least 500 BC and apparently had intensified by the 9th century AD, while the Arabic-Islamic Empire reached its peak (Forbes 1981). That empire's subsequent partial stagnation and disintegration became intertwined with the Crusaders' confrontation in the north, and at a later point with the Mongol invasion from the east and northeast. Long-distance Arab maritime interests had thus increasingly shifted to the south, meanwhile taking the southern Red Sea shores, South Arabia (i.e. Yemen and Oman) and the Arab/Persian Gulf regions as the decisive threshold zones for maritime departure and return. A number of technological advances further facilitated these navigational movements to the south along the shores of east Africa, and into the southeast, i.e. to South and to South East Asia. Between the 10th and the 15th century, long-distance "Arabic-Islamic" navigation thereby acquired a certain form of hegemony in the Indian Ocean. Less expansive but similar movements co-existed, emanating from certain regions in East Africa, South China, as well as South and Southeast Asia. Commercial interests, including the slave trade as an important part, were certainly a central driving force in these Arab-Islamic endeavors. Military activities (e.g., guards for slaves, escorts for emissaries) frequently accompanied commercial interests. Scientific curiosity and religious interests in Islamization were important but secondary (and sometimes instrumental) to this (Gingrich 2018a, 2018b).

Following the annual monsoon rhythms, medieval "Arabic-Islamic" navigation in the Indian Ocean world eventually promoted, and to an extent resulted in, the establishment of temporary and more permanent residence in many of those distant but key destinations. This in turn led to local

6. In the present text this contested term is used as a shorthand reference to the periods between the 9th and the 15th century AD.

intermarriage⁷, a web of trading exchange, the spread of Islam and the ensuing steady increase of pilgrimage to Mecca, while all these processes were accompanied if not preceded by the emergence and dissemination of various hybrid forms of *lingua franca* such as Kiswahili or Malay. These medieval “Arab-Islamic” movements across the Indian Ocean certainly had Arabic-speakers and Muslims at their core, but they also included Jews, Christians and other believers, as well as speakers of other first languages. Certain source materials (e.g., the *India Book* among the 10/11th-century Cairo Geniza documents; see Goitein, Friedman 2008) indicate that most of these Arab-Islamic expeditions were not initiated by states or governments but by private enterprise. The ships’ captains and their leading crew members (including the interpreter and navigator, and probably including a few junior assistants) by necessity had to be experienced as regular sailors but often they were also literate, moving in more or less fluctuating networks of ships’ crews. In sum, they represented a relatively affluent elite of “big men”⁸ aboard these ships: men with a solid amount of cross-continental, technical and intercultural knowledge who may for their time be characterized as cosmopolitan (Hannerz 1990).

A certain level of fairly regular, shorter or longer visits by cosmopolitan Arabic-Islamic maritime sailors and merchants since at least the 10th century AD therefore provided the more immediate background to the local Maldivian transitional period identified for the mid-12th century or longer. On their routes to the southeast, these ships would rarely stop at the Maldives but would prefer the easier winds and access attracting them to Sri Lanka’s and southwest India’s river mouths. For their return routes from South East or South Asia, however, final destinations in South Arabia or the Gulf that combined with the prevailing winds made a stopover in the Maldives (or a passage through one of its maritime channels) almost unavoidable. If at first these almost unavoidable stops were only for food and water, the ensuing opportunities for trading with the locals were not missed. It was thus only after Southeast Asian destinations had become a relatively stable element in Arab-Islamic medieval navigation (Tibbetts

7. Already in late pre-Islamic and early Islamic times, Arab merchants and sailors had settled and intermarried with local womenfolk of the Indian Ocean coastal regions. In certain cases, new ethnic and cultural groups emerged from these trans-local and trans-cultural relationships, such as Kerala’s Mappila by the 7th century or the Islamicised Malay (Forbes 1981: 66-68).

8. Most of these crews were normal sailors as the regular counterpart to the “big men” on board. Their numbers, fluctuations and respective backgrounds still lack any detailed and substantial research.

1979) that the Maldives became an unavoidable maritime point of passage (i.e. mostly in the direction from the southeast to the northwest) of the eye-of-a-needle type. Since these distant destinations in South East Asia only became regularly relevant after somewhat longer periods of maritime interaction, this may help to explain the comparatively late official dates of active Islamization by preachers on the Maldives.

Historical source materials therefore permit an anthropologically informed conclusion to the first part of this section on early Islamization in the Maldives by combining locally rooted and Arabic historiographical evidence. A transitional period in and possibly beyond the mid-12th century was marked by a shrinking Buddhist and a growing Muslim presence and co-existence in crucial parts of the archipelago, including Malé as a main port. The emerging Muslim presence developed from a minority to a majority in central locations and institutions, and it was the local answer to, as well as the cross-continental by-product of, the growth of the eventually hegemonic Arabic-Islamic maritime interactions in the Indian Ocean world, primarily in their return directions from South East Asia after the 10th century. Regular Maldivian stopovers by the cosmopolitan elite players in Arab-Islamic navigation had resulted in shorter or longer sojourns, trading and intermarriage.

The second part of this section will now pursue the question of local players in early Islamization and thereafter. From an anthropological analysis of historical sources we have concluded that in addition to foreign, locally active Arabic preachers, processes of early Islamization also involved some of the Muslims from among the elite cosmopolitans who opted for shorter or longer sojourns on the Maldives on their return trips from South East Asia. The first part of the answer concerning local Maldivian agents in early Islamization can be deduced from the historical evidence by means of anthropological knowledge and ethnographic insights into Islamization processes in Asia. In addition to the officially converting king, local women and girls who agreed to marry a foreign Muslim cosmopolitan – or at least should have agreed according to Shari’ah law – in all likelihood belonged to the first local (or: “bottom up”) Maldivian proponents of Islamization⁹. This set in with greater certainty on the occasion of their marriage if they themselves converted to Islam, but also to some extent if they did not. Within both possibilities and regardless of whether their superregional

9. As testified by Ibn Battuta’s personal case, many if not most of these marriages were of the temporary or so-called *muta’* type (Ibn Battuta 1996:13). This does not exclude the possibility that some marriages were concluded as permanent from the outset.

husbands settled down for longer or shorter intervals, these women would inevitably seek to become more or less intimately acquainted with the basic standards and priorities of a Muslim lifestyle on a daily, seasonal and annual routine in terms of food taboos and fasting, hygiene and sex, ritual and ceremonies. Many of them probably benefited from their elitist spouses' affluence, those of them who converted were eligible for *mahr* (bride-wealth; *ran* [gold] in Dhivehi), and once they had children all of them felt responsible for ensuring their offspring's inheritance claims in terms of paternal Islamic family law. Social status, claims on inheritance for children, and sometimes eligibility for *mahr* thus provided additional incentives for some interest in maintaining an Islamic lifestyle on the Maldives under the conditions of early Islamization in its incipient and early growth phases. In a methodological sense, this first part of our answer about local Maldivian agents has drawn on local ethnography (participation in weddings), on the comparative insight rooted in ethnographic fieldwork *by other researchers* (as summarized to an extent by Goody 1990, but also available through the work of e.g., Altorki, El-Solh 1988, and others in the anthropology of gender in Islam).

Cosmopolitan Muslim travelers with some form of residence in the Maldives not only had temporary local female partners (wives or slave concubines) in their domestic and local social lives. They also had various crucial male associates in their local professional lives. Local female partners of cosmopolitan Muslim travelers, as well as these travelers' regular local business associates, may therefore be regarded as local cultural brokers. The external cosmopolitans would not have become as successful as they did without personalized, local acceptance and support. In that sense, the "big men" from far away depended on the open-minded benevolence and hospitality of local women and men as cultural brokers (who eventually developed some cosmopolitan skills themselves through these regular interactions with specific individual foreigners). This leads to the second part of our answer about certain local agents and cultural brokers in early Islamization in the Maldives. In line with the overarching focus on ethnography in this article, we shall leave aside all other professional associates (e.g., interpreters, traders, crafts' specialists) in order to concentrate on those who become visible for us in Maldivian history when considered through the lens of ethnographically informed observation and interpretation.

As observing passengers on many local boat passages across the open sea between the Maldivian atolls and across their inner waters and lagoons¹⁰, it became evident to us that most of their captains or first mates worked with no other means than their own and their crew's practical expertise and experience. Without such contextualized maritime experience and local environmental skills, it is impossible to avoid underwater coral elevations and to safely find the few existing passages through a reef and across the lagoon. Captains of fishing boats, ferries and all other means of local maritime transportation – not yet equipped with GPS – have to rely on precise local knowledge of these highly dangerous waters, tides, currents and shoals.

As already mentioned, the Republic of Maldives is a coral island archipelago of 1192 individual islands and islets, grouped in a chain of twenty-six natural atolls, which further contain coherent reefs, isolated blocks of coral, sandbanks, lagoons and tidal shallows. Under medieval conditions of navigation, it thus also seemed indispensable for any foreign captain to take a specialist Maldivian pilot aboard¹¹. Our ethnographic observation guided the subsequent re-consultation of historic sources, which revealed precisely that.

Overwhelmed by their unique geography, Ibn Battuta describes *Dhībat al-Mahal* (the Maldivian Islands¹²) as

10. This refers to travels and sojourns we made between 2004 and 2018, i.e. an anthropologist specializing in Arab cultures of the Middle East and with an interest in history (Gingrich 2018a, 2018b; Gingrich, Haas 2015) and a medical anthropologist with a regional focus on the Maldives. Andre Gingrich spent a net total of six months in the Maldives, mostly in the southernmost atolls but to a lesser extent also in the archipelago's central and northernmost parts, and primarily as a companion of his wife Eva-Maria Knoll. She carried out fieldwork in ten of the twenty administrative atolls investigating the biosocial impact of the blood disorder thalassaemia (2017a, 2017b, 2018a) and aspects of the history of the archipelago (2018b and under review). Having spent a net period of eleven months in the Maldives she is currently continuing her research in outer island locations, focusing on the intersection of genetic responsibility and remoteness.

11. During the heyday of European expansionism certain "pilots" also served as kind of navigators for merchant ships. They were often of European origin and especially in demand if they had previously been on an Indian voyage (see the remark by the Archaeological Commissioner of Ceylon H.C.P. Bell in Pyrrard 1887: 13, *FN 1*). By contrast, the pilots we address in this article are natives and local experts with seafaring skills, who are highly specialized in their immediate environmental surroundings.

12. Earlier accounts in Arabic had referred to the Maldives by other terms, e.g. as part of al-Dībājāt.

one of the wonders of the world and [they] number about two thousand in all. Each hundred or less of them form a circular cluster resembling a ring, this ring having one entrance like a gateway, and only through this entrance can ships reach the islands. When a vessel arrives at any one of them it must needs take one of the inhabitants to pilot it to the other islands. They are so close-set that on leaving one island the tops of the palms on another are visible. If a ship loses its course it is unable to enter and is carried by the wind to the Coromandel coast or Ceylon (Ibn Battuta 1953 [1929]: 241).

Missing one of the archipelago's larger navigable channels and being carried away across the Laccadive Sea was not uncommon (cfr. Villiers 1992: 24). Much worse still, a ship running off course might strike a reef. An early 16th-century *roteiro* (Port.: maritime guidebook, naval handbook) in Spanish illustrates this danger for ship, crew and merchandise. It

advises ships' captains who find themselves approaching Maldivian waters by mistake, either for lack of wind or through bad steersmanship or because of the strong currents, to send a skiff ashore to fetch a native pilot who can guide the ship into one of the navigable channels between the islands, and, until the pilot comes on board, to stand the ship off at some distance from the shore (*ivi*).

Maldivian history is interspersed with shipwrecks to such an extent that the anthropologist Clarence Maloney (1980: 4) reckons «shipwreck as one of the factors contributing to the cultural complexity and civilizational growth of the country». François Pyrard de Laval, for example, a chronicler in a French merchant expedition to the East Indies was shipwrecked on a northern atoll in 1602¹³. Lacking the services of skilled Maldivian pilots to navigate the treacherous reefs and shoals, one of the two expedition ships, the *Corbin*, ran onto a reef and sank. The tragedy began when – after having crossed the Indian Ocean – the Dutch and English pilots aboard the two ships had a «great dispute» on their actual location. Pyrard reports:

we sighted at a distance great reefs, which surrounded a number of small islands [...] We saw little boats, which seemed willing to approach and pilot us – as indeed, I afterwards learnt from the natives was the case; but our General would not wait, and imprudently took no notice of them.

The expedition's intention was

13. Involuntarily spending five years in the archipelago, Pyrard became the Maldives' most prominent castaway. He managed to master the local language *Dhivehi*, became acquainted with the Sultan and the local aristocracy, and in his memoirs, some 260 years after Ibn Battuta's first detailed description, he provided the most comprehensive historic account on socio-political life in the Maldives.

to pass by the north of these island, between the head of them and the coast of India; but, on the contrary, we were running right into the midst of them to our peril. [...] all who have the duty of navigation in those parts must cautiously avoid the dangerous banks and reefs from a hundred leagues off, if he can, otherwise there is great risk in passing through these islands without losing your ship (Pyrard 1887: 49-51).

Embarking from the Maldives five years later a wiser Pyrard once again emphasized:

The passage between the islands is very dangerous, by reason of the reefs and banks, which are exceeding numerous; and no one would dare to steer through them without having native pilots, as we then had (*ibidem*: 321-322).

A Maldivian pilot interacting with foreigners thus has to be envisioned as a seasonally active specialist who had acquired his expertise through growing up in, and growing into specific micro-environments of the archipelago's waters. This amounted to long periods of (informal) apprenticeship of the type commonly known from the transmission of knowledge in specialized skills and crafts across generations (see e.g. Gingrich 1994). Their expertise would be based on the acquisition of explicit and tacit knowledge, primarily as an accompanying personal assistant on a tuna-fishing boat and probably to one or a few senior pilots. As an established maritime expert in dangerous but unavoidable regional waters, such a senior pilot thus would have to guide a large foreign ship through safe waters into a lagoon and to one of the few major Maldivian ports. Operating on a seasonal basis, these pilots by necessity would interact with foreign cosmopolitans more regularly than many other Maldivians, they would have to master at least a minimum of communication with them, and they would owe at least some of their income to these activities¹⁴. Together with members of their own household and those of their junior assistants, these pilots – to a certain extent embodying the role of local intercultural brokers – would therefore develop a clear interest in the maintenance of regular interactions with foreign cosmopolitan seafarers, many of whom were Muslims. Some of these local maritime intercultural brokers would tend to appreciate interactions with their cosmopolitan counterparts to the point of identifying with their values and beliefs.

14. For the Maldives, historical evidence regarding the exact payment or remuneration of such native pilots for the pre-colonial periods is still lacking. For subsequent centuries, maritime historians may be able to gather additional information from extant logbooks. For other maritime pilots in the western Indian Ocean during the pre-Ottoman centuries, see also Lunde (2005) and Tibbets (1971) with references to Ibn al-Mājid's remarks from the 15th century AD on local pilots in the Red Sea and Gulf waters.

Anthropology has a fairly rich record in small-island studies, ranging from pioneers in the British tradition, such as Malinowski on Trobriand, Radcliffe-Brown on the Andaman Islands, or Firth on Tikopia, to US research endeavors such as Margaret Mead on Samoa or Julian Steward's Puerto Rico project (also including Sydney Mintz and Eric Wolf as young participants), to equivalents in French and German speaking anthropology. Several of these records also include coral islands and other dangerous maritime shores, which is why the basic significance of pilots in such waters is common knowledge in general socio-cultural anthropology. In contrast, the figure of the local pilot is largely unfamiliar to most historians, except for highly specialist experts in pre-modern maritime history. It is therefore no coincidence that an emphasis on local environmental knowledge, which in this case addresses maritime pilots, is almost a self-evident routine for anthropology's ethnographic orientation. On the other hand, although relevant historical sources offer many biographical details about cosmopolitan knowledge, and historians are well versed in interpreting it, those sources hardly ever mention local pilots at all and general historians rarely consider the few sections of text that do.

It takes the results of participant ethnographic observation to make the relevant point. Whenever foreign crews tried to reach the Maldives in medieval times, *by necessity* they must have been assisted by local pilots. This is a class of ethnographic cases whose necessity in fact is stronger than, and thereby overrides, the opaque contents of most relevant historical sources here. In fact, ethnographic insights in the present demonstrate this necessity to such an extent that it may be attributed an almost experimental status, elucidating an obscure historical source situation. If many local or cross-continental historical sources do not mention local pilots, then they obviously conceal or ignore local expertise: this in turn is another good reason to question the frames, narratives and biases in those sources. Simultaneously, anthropologists and their colleagues in other fields are encouraged to re-read and re-interpret existing sources with the fresh focus gained from an ethnographic perspective that concentrates on the small details that often tend to escape the historians' gaze. In a methodological historical sense, ethnographic insights thereby have a twofold potential. They may either represent a historical source *sui generis*, as long as they indicate a binding necessity of occurrence in the past (regardless of whether or not they are confirmed by other sources), or they may serve as guidelines to re-examine existing other sources to confirm such evidence that has hitherto escaped much scholarly attention.

It therefore requires an ethnographic perspective to search for such seemingly small details in certain passages of text and then sometimes to be fortunate enough to actually find what one has been looking for. In fact, this may be the brief and modest remark in Ibn Battuta's travel accounts of his first visit to the Maldives from Malabar in AD 1343:

When a ship arrives near one of these islands it must of necessity have a pilot from among its natives¹⁵ (Ibn Battuta 1996: 3; see Dunn 2012: 230).

This section in Ibn Battuta's travel accounts has been edited, translated and published, but its significance for a historical analysis of early Islamization on the Maldives has so far not been recognized. Comparative anthropology and ethnographic insights do help to clarify what has so far escaped historians' attention with regard to crucial local players in the early Islamization in the Maldives.

3. *Re-reading historical sources*

We know today that, with regard to history, over most periods of academic developments in the 20th century, British and French anthropology pursued trajectories that were quite different from developments in US and German-speaking anthropology. In their most enduring and influential manifestations, British and French anthropology tended to favor presentist and social science approaches, while US and German-speaking anthropologists mostly prioritized historical approaches in the discipline (Barth *et al.* 2005). These tendencies seem to have prevailed until the 1970s and 1980s, but they have receded since then. From a present-day perspective rooted in today's global and transnational academic professionalization of anthropology, these (quasi-) national differences of the past can no longer be assessed and treated as matters of principle. Instead they are best seen as useful forms of an earlier, bygone global division of labor in anthropology, as long as it lasted. Within international anthropology before the end of colonialism and the gradual emergence of a global anthropology, one group therefore primarily elaborated various trajectories toward historical anthropology while the other group pursued paths toward the anthropology of the contemporary world. Even in their time, these differences were not as absolute as some of their advocates thought. For British anthropology, Firth's early introduction of re-study approaches as tools for assessing continuities as well as processual changes has already been mentioned. Since the 1930s, the main representatives of what after 1947 became the

15. In Arabic, the author writes *dalil min ahlihi* – literally, «a guide from (among) its people», see Ibn Battuta (IV), Arab. ed. 1997: 53.

Manchester School in anthropology were taking current and recent changes under the impact of colonialism into their analytical consideration (Evens, Handelman 2006). In many ways, Jean and John Comaroff's work subsequently continued and elaborated those impulses (Comaroff, Comaroff 1991a, 1991b), while works by Eric Wolf (1982), Sidney Mintz (1986) and others pioneered historical approaches to the emerging anthropology of translocal connections, leading up to globalization studies. Ever since the accomplished works of Jack Goody (1987, 1990) were published, new paradigms for historical anthropology also have been established for European-based research. Historical anthropology today is a wellrecognized and respected subfield of the discipline on a global scale.

This was the wider disciplinary background against which in this article we have sought to demonstrate that, and how, relations between ethnographic fieldwork and historical anthropology no longer need to be misinterpreted as an apparent oxymoron. Discussing certain aspects of Maldivian history as a case example, the ensuing argument has outlined how ethnographic results in fact sometimes provide additional insight that may either inspire the critical re-reading of existing historical sources, or deliver new insights that help to question and even to override the sources so far available. In turn, the argument concluded that certain ethnographic insights will have to become accepted and respected by the historical fields as *historically relevant source material sui generis* – regardless of whether they are confirmed, have not yet been or never will be confirmed by any available textual evidence. Such a methodological emphasis in historical anthropology is part of a wider, interdisciplinary ambition, which is also shared by representatives of other fields in historical research, to undermine any clear-cut distinction between written and oral history, as well as between language-based forms of historiographic sources and other (non-verbal) historically relevant source materials.

By re-considering and developing the Malinowskian legacy in ethnographic fieldwork, anthropologists may therefore remain faithful to its core methodological elements while opening up its significance for historical anthropology as much as for new interdisciplinary endeavors, with a special focus on the native's point of view. Certain unknown or little understood aspects of history will in fact benefit from the new ways by which the results of ethnographic fieldwork are made useful for understanding them, whether that is through fieldwork on the ground in the same region or if it is translated from comparable cases. If pursued in a transparent and coherent manner, ethnographic fieldwork insights may thus shine new light into some of the darker and little explored corners of history. In these ways, anthropologists themselves may become pilots of history.

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