

LIDIO CIPRIANI

The Andaman Islanders

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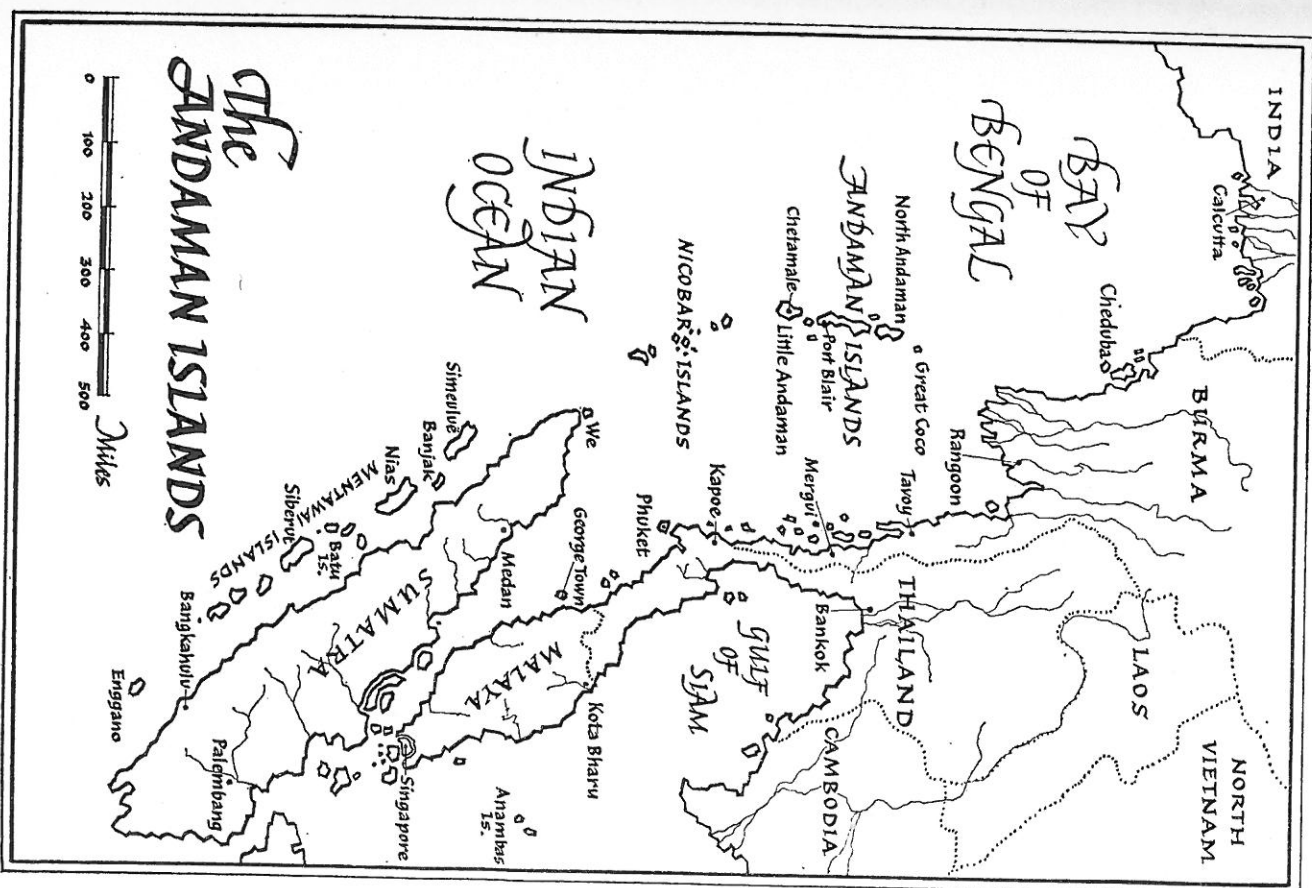


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build up a complete picture of the life and culture of the islanders; it will fall to others to continue where I have had to stop, and I can only hope, in these pages, to awaken in others the interest and sympathy which I came to feel for these strange, child-like, but lovable people – the Onges of Little Andaman.

LIDIO CIPRIANI



The People of the Islands

In the Bay of Bengal, eight hundred miles to the south-east of Calcutta and a hundred and twenty miles from Cape Nigrais in Burma, the two hundred and four islands of the Andaman archipelago stretch out in a line, with a surface area of 6,495 square kilometres. To the south-east, about a hundred miles away, lie the Nicobars, strung out in a much smaller chain covering only 1,645 square kilometres and made up of twenty-one islands, of which only twelve are inhabited.

The only islands in the Andamans which are permanently occupied are Great Andaman and Little Andaman. The former, three hundred and twenty kilometres long and at no point more than forty kilometres wide, was broken up by geological movement in ancient times into three sections, known as North, South and Middle Andaman. Today these are separated from each other by two narrow straits hardly navigable even by vessels of low tonnage. A much larger passage, the Ten Degree Channel, so called because it is crossed by the 10° north parallel, separates the Andamans from the Nicobars, and incidentally forms a dividing line between ordinarily different worlds, worlds which in the past, as I hope to show, had many characteristics in common.

The Nicobars are peopled by a very ancient Mongoloid race. There are no foreigners permanently resident apart from a family of Moslem merchants from India with a few employees. There are also the Shom-Pen, a small, wild and semi-nomadic group who have been forced back into the forests of Great Nicobar, where they preserve their ancient somatic and cultural characteristics, showing affinities with a Mongoloid people living far away on the chain of islands off the west coast of Sumatra.

The population of the Andamans, on the other hand, is now almost entirely of recent immigration: there are no Europeans permanently resident, but a large number of colonists of Indian, Burmese or Malayan origin have made their home in the islands. In the Indian census of 1911, the entire stable population of the Andamans and Nicobars was assessed at thirty thousand, 18,962 in the Andamans and 12,009 in the Nicobars, not counting the Shom-Pen. The few aborigines remaining in the Andamans are anthropologically of extreme importance. Classified among the Negritos, or Asiatic pygmies, they are one of the few surviving groups of pygmies who in the past were widely scattered all over the world. They can be divided into three groups, clearly distinguished one from the other by their mode of life, their present genetic isolation (although they certainly all originated from a common stock) and their attitude towards outsiders:

1 The Arioto, the friendly Andamanese, once very numerous along the coast of Great Andaman and now reduced to only twenty-three individuals of pure stock; now almost completely sterile, they are near to extinction. They manage to survive only because of the help given to them by the Indian Government, which has established small camps along the coasts of Middle Andaman.

2 The Jarawas, still implacably hostile to foreigners, living a nomadic existence in South and Middle Andaman. One solitary group occupies a tiny island thirty miles west of South Andaman, surrounded by seas so stormy that they are frequently impassable. This is known as North Sentinel, to distinguish it from South Sentinel, twenty miles to the south and uninhabited. Landing on North Sentinel, as indeed penetrating anywhere on Great Andaman, has hitherto always entailed vicious fighting with the Jarawas, who are determined to repulse any stranger from their last refuge. They are well sheltered by an unbelievably dense forest, which has so far made it impossible to subdue them, though there are today probably no more than two hundred surviving.

3 The Onges, sole inhabitants of Little Andaman, into which they have withdrawn. There are not more than five hundred surviving today, and these are in a state of serious demographic decline. It is probable that before 1952 no one had ever approached their camps in the interior of the island. Until the present day, they

have always been protected by the sea, which is almost invariably rough, and by a thick tropical forest which extends without a break over more than a thousand square kilometres, unpenetrated by outsiders and almost impenetrable.

THE ARIOTO

The decline of the Andamanese began with the first landing of foreigners on the island and is similar to that of so many other primitive peoples who have come into contact with civilization; a detailed account of their decline would be long and pitiful. In the case of the Andamanese, however, demographic influences arising thousands of years ago must also be taken into account. Cut off by circumstances into small groups and separated at random by large expanses of sea or by the impenetrable forest, they gradually developed somatic and cultural differences of the greatest scientific interest. Among other things, languages became modified to such an extent that members of different groups are unable to understand one another. The Onges, for example, who in my opinion are the nearest relations of the Jarawas, are quite unable to understand their language.

The peoples of Great Andaman were the first to encounter civilization, when from 1858 onwards the Indian Government, then in English hands, decided to institute at Port Blair a penitentiary for the many political prisoners after the famous 1857 mutiny. Subsequently the government sent over convicts serving long or life sentences. The life of the deportees was atrocious during the first few years, owing to malaria and the absence of medical supplies. To the majority, therefore, deportation to the Andamans meant a death sentence. Even today the only large brick building in the Andamans and Nicobars is the penitentiary at Port Blair.

Before the building of the penitentiary the English had made several desultory expeditions to the Andamans, and even before then other foreigners had landed on the archipelago. It is known that Marco Polo, probably passing within sight of the archipelago in 1292, gave it the name of Angaman, and declared the inhabitants to be ferocious cannibals with dogs' heads. As a result, even the Asian pirates were for centuries afraid to land on the islands. The barbarous forays of Arab slave traders later awoke in the islanders

a furious aversion to foreigners. This hatred has been rekindled during the last hundred years by a number of unfortunate incidents, but at one time the islanders were favourably disposed towards seafarers passing by, if we are to believe Niccolo dei Conti and Cesare Federici, fleeing visitors to the islands in 1440 and 1569. They both wrote of the peaceful native canoes that approached their ships, and this is confirmed by other travellers, like the Italians Fra Odorico da Pordenone in 1332 and Giovan Francesco Gemelli Caresi in 1709.

Violent clashes with the coastal tribes only became frequent when the English began to take an interest in the Andamans as a possible penal colony. The first prisoners to be sent there were some Indians, in 1788. In 1796 the colony was abolished owing to the swift death of nearly all the prisoners from tropical diseases. The attempt was repeated in 1838 after a mission entrusted to F. Mouat, and this time the seeds of decline for the islanders were sown. Efforts were begun to approach the coastal peoples, and even, strangely enough, those of the forests, the now ferocious Jaraws. Some of these tentative overtures were well received, but once the islanders came to think they had been betrayed it was enough to rekindle the hatred of strangers which they have retained ever since.

The evidence obtainable from archaeological excavations shows that for thousands of years the people encountered by the English in the coastal areas were the sole inhabitants of Great Andaman, living by fishing rather than by hunting or cultivation in the forests. The Jaraws arrived later. Migration from Little Andaman, imposed in relatively recent times by lack of food, brought them to Great Andaman. Since the entire coastal region was already occupied, the new arrivals took refuge in the forests of the hinterland. There they were happy, for they found an abundance of wild honey and fruit which amply fulfilled their needs. A spontaneous equilibrium was established between the coast-people and the forest-people, and both prospered.

The arrival of an appreciable number of foreigners in 1858 immediately changed the situation. The peoples of the coast, who were the most anxious to make friends with the strangers, paid for this fatal error with virtual extermination. When the foreigners had definitely established themselves, the coastal Andamanese – *Aritoto*

in the local language, as opposed to the people of the interior, the *Eremtaga* – appear to have numbered between six and eight thousand. Over the years their place has been taken by more than thirteen thousand foreigners, most of whom were deportees, enjoying relative liberty as servants of government officials, farmers and foresters. The settlers, voluntarily or involuntarily, introduced the islanders to alcohol and tobacco, forcing them to turn to the foreigners in order to satisfy their craving. In the famous and extremely frank work of the English explorer M. V. Portman (*A History of our Relations with the Andamanese*, Calcutta, 1899) official letters are reproduced which give precise instructions in the matter to government officials. The result of these instructions was to transform the Aritoto into alcohol and tobacco addicts. Syphilis was passed to the native women by the deportees, and from them to their men. When, a few years after the mass importation of prisoners, the government authorities became aware of the infection among the Aritoto, not one of them had escaped. The miserable twenty-three survivors of the eight to nine thousand of a century ago show the ultimate result only too well, and their final extinction is imminent.

Before the advent of the new civilization, the Aritoto had divided up into at least ten distinct communities, but without any true tribal organization. They respected a form of chief, chosen by tacit consent for his personal qualities rather than by name or by birth-right; but the chiefs acted merely as paternal advisers, to be respected in times of trouble, with no illusions of authority. No one commanded, and none obeyed: all were content to follow the whim of the moment, with no conception of social obligation.

When the foreigners arrived, there were five main groups of Aritoto on North Andaman, the Cari, Chede, Cora, Jeru and Tabo. Another five groups were in South Andaman, the Balawa, Bea, Bogig-iab, Joi and Col. With the numerical decline of the Aritoto, who had always been endogamous within their group, a tendency arose for the survivors to merge and inter-marry, so that the twenty-three alive today are in fact the result of the mixing of the northern and southern Aritoto, and of these with Indians and Burmese. The chief of these twenty-three individuals is Loca, a name in itself an indication of this ethnic mixture. Loca means 'whiskers', and he himself

has a moustache, whereas pure Negritos have no body or facial hair.

THE JARAWAS

For obvious reasons I was unable to carry out any studies on the Jarawas. Apart from a restricted area around Port Blair, on the east coast of Great Andaman, the whole island is a tangle of tropical vegetation, in many places impenetrable, or at most passable only by hacking a way through. A few roads radiate from Port Blair, but none penetrate more than twenty kilometres or so from the town-ship. To the north of the town is a well-maintained police cordon that stretches right across the island from east to west to prevent infiltration by the Jarawas; those in the south were all rounded up some time ago. Only beyond the cordon do the Jarawas maintain their rule over the virgin forest almost unchallenged. Like all the Andamanese they are Negritos, small in stature and extremely dark skinned. Obsessed by a fierce hatred for anyone outside their own group, enemies even of the other Andamanese, they roam through the forest with their deadly arrows. Shot from their powerful bows, their dagger-sharp arrows penetrate deep into the body of the victim – they can transfix a man's chest. The bloody skirmishing which has gone on for the last hundred years shows no signs of lessening even today.

The Jarawa ferocity increased as the result of grave mishandling of the situation by the foreigners. In this connection the following sentences from Portman's *History* may be quoted: 'On our arrival the Jarawas were quiet and inoffensive towards us, nor did they ever disturb us, until we took to continuously molesting them by inciting the coastal Andamanese against them. After a few years of this disturbance, the life of the Jarawas became very hard and in retaliation they began to attack us.' As the author in part recognizes, 'It was our fault if the Jarawas became hostile.' This was a fundamental error. Petty pilfering committed in perfect innocence by the Jarawas, ignorant of Western ideas of individual property, led to vicious punitive expeditions. To this end fire-arms were given to the hereditary enemies of the Jarawas, the Arioto. Elated by their unexpected power, they at once began slaughtering any Jarawa within sight, and enjoyed themselves hugely.

Portman, who was for a long time the English administrator in the Andamans, is one of the greatest authorities on the islands; in his excellent history he refers, with frank sincerity and detail, to the methods adopted in the anti-Jarawa wars. He tells of the payment of the Arioto with food, tobacco and alcohol, arms and ammunition for their ruthless fight against their forest kin. Since at one time the struggle seemed to the outsiders to be lacking in ardour and intensity, Portman received an order in 1884 to deprive the Arioto of all provisions, starting with food. This he was forced to obey, perhaps unwillingly. He certainly loved the Andamanese, and he understood and honestly appreciated their needs.

As he later did on Little Andaman, Portman then tried to approach the Jarawas; not on Great Andaman where they had become too dangerous, but on North Sentinel. He proposed to improve upon the work already initiated (with disastrous results) by Homfray who went to the island in March 1867, escorted by police and by a small group of Arioto. The hostility between Andamanese from different localities immediately made even the Sentinellese keenly resentful of the foreigners who were trying to make friends with them under the protection of their age-old enemies. The foreigners would in fact probably have been quite well received if they had not taken Arioto with them.

Homfray referred to naked men on the beach who fled with loud cries into the forest when pursued by Arioto. Portman repeated the same mistake. In his photographs, still to be seen in the Indian Museum at Calcutta, he actually uses the expression 'Hunting Jarawas' among the captions to the pictures he took on North Sentinel.

After several abortive expeditions by Portman, visits to North Sentinel were very few and far between until recent years. In 1926 a German, whose name became anglicized to Bonington, an intelligent timber merchant at Port Blair, became a government official in the Andamans once he had assumed British nationality. He reports having seen some Jarawas, who rapidly disappeared into the forest uttering such wild cries that they hardly seemed human. In 1953 other Indian government officials approached the island, and alone Jarawa on the beach threatened them with an arrow. I myself planned to make a landing on 20 April 1954, but was prevented by a rough sea. I went right round the island, but no Jarawas appeared.

This was a pity, as I knew that my Indian and Burmese companions were ready to run any risk with the prudence they had already shown in Little Andaman towards the Onges. Since North Sentinel is flat and its forest not impassable, a peace mission led by men accustomed to dealing with people like the Andamanese, though it would certainly need more than a brief stay, would probably be ultimately successful.

My sole source of local information on the Jarawas was the wife of a government official, who had tended a pregnant woman and four children who were captured during one of the punitive expeditions on Bluff Island. She gave me a great deal of useful information, and indeed the greater part of our scanty ethnographical and linguistic data on the Jarawas has been obtained through her.

THE ONGES

Until 1952 the attitude of the various groups of Onges was very similar. Along the coast, however, they had already had some contact many years ago with a limited number of outsiders. Compared with the Jarawas they have been uniquely fortunate among surviving primitive peoples in that their extremely fertile territory has remained immune from invasion. In this they have been helped by their geographical isolation as much as by their own ferocity. Indeed Little Andaman, surrounded by an ocean that frequently turns into the proverbial boiling cauldron, presents grave risks to anyone trying to land. I had considerable experience of this myself; on many occasions I nearly gave up when the boat was overturned by giant breakers. On one occasion on the south coast of the island we were flung into the sea, and the empty boat capsized and dragged me down. No one was in a position to come to my rescue, but the momentary relief of an enormous return wave enabled me to extricate myself. The previous day the breakers had crashed down one after another and smashed us against the coral reef which runs right round Little Andaman. Our baggage and provisions had disappeared, and until help arrived we were forced to remain for two gruelling days without water or food, with no protection from the sun and in constant danger of being attacked by the Onges.

During the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

there have been many attempts by outsiders to land on Little Andaman, but until recently none have gone beyond the coast, and the interior of the island remained unknown until 1952. Several people were drowned in the tremendous breakers, and a few were killed by the aboriginals. The last (undocumented) incident, involving Chinese sailors in search of water on the west coast of the island, appears to have taken place in 1949. There are no records of any attempt to land before 1825, when an English naval officer, T. E. Alexander, managed to do so, and was the first to report, in England, the existence of a fierce tribe of naked Onges. The encounter was bloody, as were many afterwards. Rumours (erroneous) were spread of cannibalism, as some English sailors who had managed to save themselves saw their companions being torn to pieces by the Onges: their hands, feet, legs and arms were cut off and the living remains were thrown into a great fire. This was, in fact, not cannibalism, but the satisfying of a superstition, already recorded by various well-known authorities on the Andamans, such as Portman, Radcliffe-Brown and others, that the spirit is immortal and stays by its bones. The spirit of an enemy could thus become a disturbing influence, which is to be avoided by totally destroying the living body with fire, so that the spirit flies with the smoke towards the sky, where it remains.

Some time after Alexander, various English officials tempted providence in Little Andaman¹ and finally, on 24 July 1885, Portman landed, and began intensive efforts to pacify the Onges. Well protected by a police force, he was the first man who had the courage to pitch camp on the coast of Little Andaman. For most of March 1886, he stayed in the north of the island, and then between 28 October 1886 and 21 January 1887, he went slowly right round the island, starting from his camp at Bumila Creek. In the same year, two officials of the Indian Cartographic Service sailed round the entire coastline of Little Andaman; the resulting survey was, however, very imperfect. Portman returned for a brief visit to Bumila Creek in March 1887. This time there was a serious incident with the Onges, culminating in the severe wounding of an English

¹ Homfray, 1867; Stewart, 1873; Homfray and Stewart, 1874; Cadell, 1880; Cadell and Portman, 1880; Portman, 1880 and 1882; Man, 1883; various abortive landings, 1884 and 1885.

colonel who had accompanied him. After a series of similar incidents involving other people Portman went to Bumila Creek on 10 November 1891, for revenge. A number of Onges, including the one responsible for wounding the colonel, were captured and taken to Port Blair.

Other visits by various people followed, always very brief and always limited to the coast, but there were no landings of note. Various expeditions visited the coast of the island for a few days and even made contact with some of the Onges, but the interior of the island remained as unknown as before. In February 1951 I accompanied one of these expeditions, which again did not go beyond the coast. Those five days on Little Andaman were most revealing, and enabled me to plan the landing I subsequently made in 1952. I saw that the island was teeming with game, that wild fruit and edible roots were plentiful, and that the sea round the island was full of fish, lobsters, huge crabs and turtles. Moreover, the turtles laid eggs in the sand where it was very easy to find them by following the beasts' tracks. I realized that it would be unnecessary to bring in provisions, and that it would be possible to enter the forest unencumbered with anything more than guns, cartridges and a few cooking utensils. Every day during this short stay I went with a police escort as far as possible into the forest in order to reconnoitre. In some places I noticed recent traces of small bare feet, but no Onges appeared.

Realizing that mobility was essential for any expedition into the interior of the island, I prepared at Port Blair a number of small watertight metal boxes to hang from the shoulder, to take a minimum of necessities. The largest items in my own personal baggage were a mosquito-net, a very light hammock and note-books. Cartridges were to be divided among the boxes. Tents, camp-beds and other large equipment would have to be left in a base camp, which would be established on the coast and left under police guard with radio transmission apparatus for communication with Port Blair. If necessary, a portable radio could follow us.

Several factors made me want to return. There was the mystery of the unknown interior of the island. There was the prevailing lack of information of any kind about the Onges, even of their numbers. I wanted too to carry out an investigation of their somatic characteristics, using the greatest possible number of individuals.

After submitting my programme for the approval of the various Indian authorities, I finally left Calcutta in the motor vessel *Maharaja* and arrived in Port Blair on the evening of 11 December 1951.

Once arrived on Great Andaman I began to make preparations, but for some time the sea remained so rough that the crossing to Little Andaman was impossible. In order not to lose time, I went as far as Middle Andaman, where I started excavating an ancient kitchen-midden left by a group which has now disappeared.¹ Eventually, in March 1952, there began for me what was to become a fascinating if dangerous adventure, which continued for several years, in the dry seasons, and which I hope will prove to have been of some value.

Even now we know little of the anthropology of the Onges. They are Negritos, and therefore people of small stature. They are not, however, as small as the African pygmies, or Negrillos, who are the tiniest people in the world and who are in many respects very different from the Asiatic Negritos. Among the latter, individuals of over 4 feet are giants, while the normal height is substantially less.

In their somatic and cultural characteristics the Andamanese differ from all Asiatics, including their closest connections the Semang of the Malaccan peninsula and the Aetâ of the Philippines. There is however some similarity between the three groups, indicating a distinctive common ancestry. The Negritos of today constitute the sole and fragmentary remains of a people who in ancient times were spread over a large part of Asia, and there is no lack of evidence to support their former presence much farther east and south, well into Oceania.

The word Negrito means 'small negro', but the name is inappropriate. It was originally given to these people because of the colour of their skin and the woolly texture of their hair. In their bodily proportions, however, as well as in the morphology of the head as a whole, and in particular the structure of the mouth, they resemble the Negroes considerably less than do African pygmies, who are in their turn quite a distinct type. The Negritos have some superficial affinity to peoples of small stature in New Guinea and Melanesia, such as the Tapiro, the Cameveca, the Cai and the Peschem (or

¹ See page 69.

Pesekem), although they are distinguished from them by profound cultural differences. These differences exist even between the three groups of Negritos. Whereas in Malacca and the Philippines they reflect the influx of superior cultures, these have had very little influence in the Andamans. For this reason the Andamanese have perforce remained more faithful to very ancient customs, and are also somatically the least altered.

The study of the last remaining groups, the Onges and Jarawas, now on the point of extinction if they are not protected, is thus a matter of singular urgency and significance.

We know nothing of how the Negritos arrived in their present homes with somatic and cultural characteristics quite distinct from those of any other human type. Apart from some dubious remains excavated in Indochina we do not even have any fossil remains to show their probable original distribution. There is, however, reason to believe that they were once very widely dispersed, judging from the evidence of their presence today as isolates widely separated from each other.

No traces of them remain in the continental areas adjacent to the Andamans, apart from the Malaccan peninsula. At one time it was thought that traces of a Negrito element were to be found in the Kadir of Hindustan, revealed by the occasional presence of curly hair. I have myself visited the area, and must refute this suggestion; the people have nothing of the Negrito in their body structure; their hair is markedly longer than the Negrito and they have body hair. The kinky hair (never woolly) occasionally seen may derive from distant Negro crosses, or may be an accidental similarity. I have seen this type of curliness even in Europeans who certainly had no Negro or pygmy ancestry.

It has also been asserted, possibly with some foundation, although there are few data available, that there are traces of the Negrito among the people of New Guinea, such as the Tapiro. Although of small stature, their general characteristics would seem to relate the Tapiro more closely to the Papuans; they have yellowish skin, probably the lightest in that area, they are, again, hirsute and there is a marked absence of Negrito characteristics in the proportions of the body.

The first thing that strikes one on meeting the Onges – and indeed the Andamanese in general – is the exceptional blackness and

softness of their skin. They have what must be among the darkest skins in the world, and in certain lights some individuals have a bluish tinge, which I have never seen in any other region. Something similar seems to have existed among the now extinct Tasmanians, although they differed markedly from the Andamanese in other respects. The Onges are the only Andamanese who are not invariably intensely black, and the bluish type is rare among them. This might be attributable to contact with the nearby Nicobars, where a yellowish skin is common, in conjunction with Mongoloid features. I saw no traces, however, of such admixture; the Arioto show some sign of recent Burmese influence, but any ethnic influences on the Onges and Jarawas must have been extremely ancient, indeed before their arrival in the archipelago. In the south and south-west of Little Andaman I did find individuals markedly taller than the rest (though still small), but it is clear that outwardly at least the Onges and Jarawas still retain most of their unique somatic characteristics, which have remained unchanged for thousands of years.

The Andamanese skin is very smooth in texture, and lacks the odour characteristic of many of the African peoples. This would appear to depend on the chemical composition of the sweat, as the Andamanese never intentionally wash, although brushing against the sodden vegetation, and frequent immersion while collecting shellfish, or fishing, in some measure compensates. Curiously enough their sweat does seem to repel the local ticks, which drive Europeans mad; again, it was interesting that the Indians and Burmese of my party were variously affected by them.

Their skin is also extraordinarily elastic – I noticed that in the forest I scratched myself continually at the slightest touch against thorns or branches, whereas the Onges invariably emerged quite unscathed at the end of the trek. Their greater agility of movement will undoubtedly have been part of the answer, but it would be impossible to avoid any scratches, as they do, unless their skin 'gave' to an abnormal degree.

Another effect of this elasticity is that the women suffer no disfigurement of the skin over the abdomen after childbirth, and neither sex becomes wrinkled to any noticeable extent with age. This distinguishes them clearly from peoples with whom they have been compared – such as the Bushmen, who (possibly in part due

to the arid climate) are among the most wrinkled people in the world.

At birth, the Onges are tiny, attractive little creatures, very plump, but rarely over two and a half kilograms in males and two kilograms in females. I was very fortunate indeed in that I succeeded in persuading one young couple to let me examine their new-born child. Local superstition forbids a stranger looking on a child for any length of time, and even an Onge who does so is regarded with suspicion, so I had to be extremely cautious.

The infant was born on 30 March 1954, in the forest to the north of Labanar. Like most deliveries, birth took place in the forest on a bed improvised for the purpose, with only the father (on some occasions also the wife's mother) present, and the placenta was buried under the bed. The women recover very quickly,¹ after a few days they are fit for heavy work, returning to the group without any purification ceremonies, and this was no exception. After a wealth of gifts I managed to examine the child on the morning of 31 March and again on 10, 13 and 14 April. After this mother and child vanished completely, and the father would give me only evasive replies, although only a few days before he had been willing to help me open some graves round Tambe-e-buic, allowing me to remove the bones of nine Onges who had been dead for many years; superstition (or the women) overcame him on this occasion, however.

My examinations were all carried out in the presence of the mother and at least two of the older women, who were determined to prevent me touching the child.

The child, like all Onge babies, had no body hair; this persists throughout life, though some males have sparse moustaches. Its head was covered with a very fine, sparse down, not black like the adults, but already showing signs of the characteristic woolly texture. Dark reddish-brown, the hair becomes black and tightly curled during the first year of life. The eyelashes curl markedly in adults, but the hair of the eyebrows is virtually straight; in the infant the former were barely visible, and the latter completely absent.

The nails were strong and well formed, projecting a little beyond

¹ Childbirth is normally very easy, but miscarriages are common, probably due to lack of vitality in the foetus.

the finger-tips and almost pink, with pale chocolate moons and yellowish-brown palms and soles. In the adults the nails and soles of the feet remain pale, the palms being a little darker. The head, and the visible buccal and nasal epithelia, were almost black, and the gums were pink, as was the inside of the lips, with dark petechiae, in adults very noticeable, at the base of the teeth and over the tongue and palate. The cheeks, however, were a reddish-brown, although the whole skin was already showing signs of darkening after twelve hours. Nasal cartilage was minimal, but that of the ears well-developed. The darkest area of skin were the forehead, eye sockets, lids, nipples and genitalia.

In general, therefore, the infant's skin was very slightly lighter than that of the adults, though before I could be sure of this I had to wash off the thick layer of ochre which is smeared over the unwashed infants immediately after birth. As the infants are extremely carefully protected from the sun by 'umbrella' hats made of lobed palm leaves, the darkening, which is complete by the end of the first year, is clearly biological and is not effected by tanning. As, however, the Onges interchange or 'adopt' children freely, it was impossible to carry out any proper colorimetric observations.

I saw no albinos in the Onges, usually fairly common in dark-skinned peoples. I saw several in Africa, with apparently normal parents. Some African peoples destroy albinos at birth as they do those with deformities, and the Andamanese may do the same, as I saw little congenital deformity (see, however, p. 46). Fear of being held responsible for disasters which befall the group carries great weight, and it is possible that the two cases of abnormality which I did see did not manifest symptoms at birth. Twins, however, are clearly (and gladly) accepted, so eager are the Onges to have children.

It was already clear in the infant that it would have the somatic characteristics common to all Negritos as regards the proportions of the body, the form and dimensions of the head, absence of prognathism, comparatively fine lips, nose and ears, black skin, and woolly hair, and would be well below 1.5 metres in height when fully grown. Above all, the Andamanese have a large forehead, very wide-angled jaw and large mouths, with the upper lips not invariably full, as in Negroes. Many Onges, in fact, have fine features,

and some of the women have a certain beauty and grace of movement, with a dignified walk and restrained gestures, despite their utter lack of any sense of shame. The sclera are very white, and the highly characteristic contrast between the intense black of the skin and the startling white of the eyes gives the Andamanese a ferocious appearance, which on smiling turns into a curiously childish expression (see further, p. 19). It is a curious fact that although the Onges have remarkable sight (p. 47), few of them can close each eye separately, although they are all completely ambidextrous.

In examining the child I had particularly in mind the very short stature of the pygmies both of Asia and Africa, which is regarded by some as pathological. The Andamanese have been described as Negroes who have degenerated through genetical isolation. This theory holds that they are descended from slaves who fled from the Portuguese after a shipwreck. I do not regard this as tenable. Pygmies in general, and the Andamanese in particular, are well-proportioned and physically outwardly normal. One cannot speak of dwarfism as determining their characteristics: this implies abnormal development as the result of hypophyseal disorder or thyroid imbalance. Cases of achondroplastic dwarfism are known among the pygmies of Africa, particularly where there has been mixing with Negroes, and these patients are sometimes taller than their normal kinfolk, but I found no cases among the pygmies of Asia.

One characteristic of the Bushmen which does occur among the Andamanese is steatopygia in both males and females. This is normally much more prevalent in females, and indeed before my visit to the Andamans von Eickstedt held that it was non-existent in males. I had always disagreed with this view, and was able to verify its occurrence in both males and females.

Dobson in the nineteenth century recorded in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* of London, the unusual appearance of the buttocks in the Andamanese, although he did not specifically refer to the phenomenon as steatopygia, and went only so far as to suppose it the result of an unusual accumulation of fat in the gluteal area. To him, however, must go the credit for the first observation.

His observation led scientists – in my view wrongly – to compare the Andamanese with the Bushmen. The presence of steatopygia,

and the 'peppercorn' hair (disposed in tufts with bare areas) do indeed recall the Bushmen, but superficial resemblances are not enough to classify the two peoples as at all closely related. There is an important difference between the two in the structure and cross-section of the hair. Hairs from the Onges which were examined in Calcutta were remarkably uniform, indicating the racial purity of the people, unlike those of the Ariofo, which showed considerable variation in cross-section, from the almost circular straight hair of the Mongoloid type, to the flattened, almost reniform hair of the original Negritos.

Different, too, is the shape of the head; I have never seen in the Negritos the typical Bushmen head, with the prominent occiput, and I saw no Andamanese with the pseudo-mongoloid appearance of the eyes which occurs in Bushmen.

The hands and feet are also different. Among the Kung women of the northern Kalahari in particular I saw delicate hands with very long metacarpals and a very small thumb, the elongated metacarpals displacing the thumb towards the wrist. None of the Negritos appear to have anything resembling this; their hands are always rather broad. Moreover, the feet of the male Onges are nearly always flat while those of the women tend to turn in, recalling the small peoples of Indonesia and New Guinea, but not the Bushmen.

An interesting though not congenital abnormality in the Andamanese results from the carrying of weights slung from the head from too early an age. Loads are always carried on their backs by a rope made of bark, the weight being taken on the forehead. The rope presses on the head in the region of the bregma and creates the so-called bregmatic furrow. This is more marked in females, as the women normally do most of the carrying. Even the children travel on their parents' backs, hanging like parcels, until the age of five or six when they are old enough to follow the group on their own.

The Abor, a mongoloid people of small stature in the mountains of North-West Assam, carry loads in the same way, but with no resulting head furrow. The Andamanese have softer cranial bones, and the result of load-bearing is therefore clearly visible. As it occurs in both sexes, it is often hard if not impossible to determine sex from skulls if the pelvis is absent. The long bones are not of

much assistance in this respect, as the muscular insertions are exaggerated in both sexes, both being subjected to continued physical effort resulting in muscular bulk.

One quite outstanding physical feature in the Onges is their teeth. The palate is unusually arched, unlike that of the African pygmies or the Bushmen. The teeth, which are never filed or cut, as many primitive peoples do for decorative purposes, are very white; caries is rare, and although never cleaned the teeth are retained till late in life. A common abnormality is that the lateral incisors are as pointed as the canines. This, with the whiteness of the teeth and eyes against the blackness of the skin, gives the Onges a sinister appearance, which may account for the old description of the Andamanese as men with ferocious dogs' heads. The only (summary) cleaning the Onge teeth receive is the use of toothpicks, thinner and rather longer than the European variety and made from the tough, flexible bark of a certain reed. After use, they are carefully thrust into the hair for future occasions. Every Onge has one or more threaded through the hair on top of the head.

The strength of the Onge teeth enables their owners to champ their way through what are for us inconceivable quantities of food, both animal and vegetable, which is chewed slowly and determinedly, dust, earth, sand and all, and then swallowed without apparent ill effects, other than the flatulence arising from overconsumption of animal matter. But the Onges use their teeth for other purposes besides eating. In time the teeth become worn down by the inevitable grinding of dirt and grit, but this does not prevent the Onges from continuing to chew the bark of trees and cords, which is a lifelong occupation. This duty falls mainly on the women, and I have seen aged women, their teeth worn almost to the gums, doggedly chewing bark as their contribution to the communal life of the group. The strength of the teeth is unbelievable – I have seen children of ten to fifteen years crush nails up to two millimetres thick, and dent lumps of iron.

I myself once had good cause to be grateful for their power. My party and I found ourselves stranded in the forest on South Brother without guns or even knives, and without cooking utensils. There were large clutches of turtle eggs buried in the sand nearby and my two Onge companions pointed out a coconut tree loaded with nuts (which turned out to be the only one on the islands, seeded

from a nut carried by the sea from some tree hundreds of miles away). There was thus ample food for several days, if only the coconuts could be opened. The Onges' teeth solved the problem. They attacked the nuts close to the stalk, stripping off great chunks of the fibrous outer covering until they had uncovered the three 'eyes'. These they dug out with a sharp piece of stick, so that we were able to drink the juice and then break up the nuts to get at the flesh. Never did coconuts taste so good!

Round the base of the tree I saw a thick layer of broken pieces of coconut, the remains of nuts opened by the Onges' teeth over the years. The strength of their bite resembles that of the African pygmies, whom I have seen hanging by their teeth from the lianas and who can dent the barrel of a gun.

The average life span of the Onges, and indeed of the Andamanese in general, is fairly short. On Little Andaman there are probably no individuals over the age of sixty, and most die before fifty. Here again they differ from African peoples of similar stature; Bushmen have been known to live to a hundred, and I saw one in Natal, incredibly wrinkled, but not shrunken, who was certainly near that age if not, as he claimed, over it. This is quite unknown in the Andamanese. There are none with white hair, although a few white hairs can sometimes be found on the head of an old woman, there are none to be seen in the men, who die younger than the women. There is no baldness, which is by no means rare in Negroes, particularly in southern Africa.

Precise age is not easy to determine in the Onges. Visual assessment is hampered by the absence of the signs of ageing common in Europeans. Moreover, a particularly child-like expression often lasts into adult life. In May 1952 I saw on Car Nicobar two Jarawa youths, small but robust, whose age by our standards one would have estimated at ten or twelve years. One turned out to be fourteen, however, and the other at least two years older, and both were adolescent, despite their childish appearance.

Males appear to reach their maximum height at about eighteen, and females at about sixteen; both sexes reach full maturity at about twenty-three. At forty-five they are old: their hard life, their unbalanced diet, with its enormous quantities of fat meat eaten in excess, and complete absence of salt, and their unrestrained sexual activity, may all be contributing factors. The slightly greater age

reached by the women may possibly be explained by their somewhat less arduous life physically, but biological factors may be the root cause. Despite their deceptively youthful appearance the menopause is over by the age of thirty-eight, at the latest, and they remain in good health thereafter, looking amazingly young. The oldest man I saw was Enagaghe, the head of one of the groups, and he could not have been more than fifty-five. He happily accompanied me on long and arduous trips into the forest, and climbed trees like a squirrel after honey and fruit; neither his appetite nor his zeal as a lover were impaired. His stomach managed to cope with something like a kilo a day of meat, skin and fat, plus fruit, boiled roots and honey. In a hot, damp, oppressive climate like that of the Andamans such a diet year after year cannot fail to produce a state of chronic intestinal poisoning likely to affect the organism as a whole, and may contribute to shorten life, despite an apparent physical vigour.

Connected, perhaps, with their excesses is the fact that the Onges' normal body temperature is much higher than usual; with a temperature reading of thirty-eight degrees centigrade they are in good health, with unimpaired appetite. I found an average temperature of thirty-seven point five degrees centigrade in males of various ages, the younger men tending to give the higher readings. The average in females was slightly higher than in males. I was able to observe for myself completely normal behaviour in Onges who by European standards would have been regarded as severely febrile. In part, as I have said, this may be due to diet and absence of salt, but it must certainly be regarded at least in part as a racial characteristic. It may, too, have some effect on their low vitality; it is interesting that temperatures in the Bushmen and pygmies of Africa, with their longer expectation of life, never vary far from the European norm.

These abnormally high temperatures are not a symptom of malaria. This is clinically unknown in the Andamanese although it is a serious menace to outsiders. Even a few hours on the island can lead to infection if precautions are not taken. I made all the men with me take their tablets regularly, even when propaganda in India against immunization as a Western importation led to objections, so that I had to force the tablets into their mouths myself to ensure that they were swallowed.

The Onges do not seem to require any preventive measures, and seem naturally immune to malaria. They do, however, transmit the disease to strangers, through the mosquitoes which are everywhere in Little Andaman. Like many other inhabitants of tropical areas, they probably all carry the disease without being affected by it – neither children nor adults show any sign of splenic enlargement.

In contrast to their periodic gorging, the Onges will equally cheerfully endure hunger, thirst and exhaustion. During our hazardous canoe trip to South Brother, however, they appeared much more affected than I was by long exposure to the sun. We were completely without any means of shelter for an entire afternoon in the open sea, and though the Onges tried to cover their heads as best they could, they still developed severe (and genuine) headaches, and were clearly much happier in the dark forest, which must be considered their natural environment.

Nothing has hitherto been known of the intelligence level and general psychology of the Onges. The childishness of their behaviour, however, is curiously in keeping with their strikingly child-like appearance. Like children, they seek only the satisfaction of elementary stimuli, and like children they pass in a flash from one mood to another, so that they are a people of sudden contrasts.

One example is their passionate love for their dogs, in marked contrast to the intense cruelty with which they hunt their prey. Having once realized the usefulness of dogs, first imported into the islands some thirty years ago, the Onges now pet them like little girls with their dolls, and the Onge women will suckle the family puppies quite naturally with their own children. Yet once a dog dies the other side of the Onge nature comes to the fore and the carcass is thrown into the forest – there is no looking back.

Their minds are in a sense inventive, in that they have evolved devices to help them acquire their food, but they have never, for example, thought of the fish-hook, despite the abundance of iron pieces thrown up by shipwrecks all round the islands. Anything new is taken up with a child's momentary enthusiasm, but they have no notion of sustained mental effort such as any form of counting.

Like children, too, the Onges laugh at the slightest thing, although their mirth is always restrained. In this they differ from the African peoples, particularly the Bushmen, who are often by

Western standards taciturn or sly, and the Negro peoples, who frequently manifest complete abandonment in their amusement. Obscenities appear to be an unfailing source of amusement to the Onges, who indulge in them at every opportunity, even with strangers, and the obscene dances of the womenfolk are a continual source of pleasure. The exchange of obscenities is, indeed, a sign of friendship, and I found that vulgarity was invariably immensely successful in provoking hilarity; any subsequent negotiations were always peaceable and satisfactory.

An extension of this vulgarity is an infantile vanity, not without sexual significance. The care with which their bodies are painted nearly every day is one aspect of this vanity; the more a wife loves her husband the more magnificent the designs she executes on him. The paintings on their bodies reach a peak every two or three days, as the Onges fear illness and death if they are not newly daubed, and the face at least must be continually painted, with at least smears on the chest, arms and legs. A man returning from an exceptionally successful hunting trip is met by his wife with a specially unusual and elaborate design, which she carries out with great devotion. During each of my visits to the island the Onges would rush up to show me their embellishments as soon as they were finished, and took a delight in standing in front of my camera, even though they had no idea what it was for.

It is curious that unlike most primitive peoples, the Onges do not practise tattooing, which is one of the simplest ways, if not *the* simplest, in which such peoples satisfy their craving for physical admiration. The other Andamanese do, puncturing the skin with tiny slivers of obsidian or quartz, but the Onges paint with ochre instead. They love, too, to weave garlands of fruit, flowers and leaves from the forest, returning to the camp laden with them, men and women alike, delighted with their own beauty. This divergence of customs in peoples essentially of the same stock, but separated for long periods of time into endogamous isolates, is very remarkable.

An intense preoccupation with sexual attraction and activity has led to the prevalence of aberration. All the Onges have homosexual tendencies. I became aware of this during my first visit to Little Andaman on one of my longer expeditions, when I had taken only men with me, and on subsequent occasions I therefore allowed the men to bring their wives. The effect of long periods of absence on

men naturally predisposed to the abnormality is enhanced by the fact that the youngest and most attractive women are invariably monopolized by the older men. So prevalent, indeed, is homosexuality that one is obliged to regard it as a biological, and not as a social or psychological abnormality. It is not, therefore, surprising to find that kissing is unknown; sexual excitement is aroused instead by nose-rubbing.

None of the Onges have any sense of modesty. This is partly the result of circumstances; privacy is impossible in the communal life of the group. This is in marked contrast to the comical dignity assumed during the last few years by the remaining Arioto women. The government authorities decreed that they should be clothed, and they immediately became so prudish that they refuse to bare so much as an arm, and they thus present a considerable problem to the anthropologist. Their menfolk, however, are clearly delighted with this sudden modesty which was to me a somewhat pathetic parody, and a further example of Andamanese childish-