

Asia Rising Podcast – The Esky Economy of Cocos (Keeling) Islands with Nicholas Herriman

Matt Smith

Welcome to Asia Rising, a podcast of La Trobe Asia where we examine the news, events and general happenings of Asia's States and Societies. I'm your host Matt Smith, and joining me today is Dr Nicholas Herriman, a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at La Trobe University.

We're going to talk about the Cocos Islands and the research that he's been doing there as an Anthropologist and explore how those people have retained their culture and the ways in which they're doing that. Thank you for joining me Nick.

Doctor Nick Herriman

It's a pleasure to be here Matt.

Matt Smith

So if you could set a bit of context for me, for those who haven't heard of the Cocos Islands and I'm sure that would be a lot of people, where are they and what's a bit of their background? Tell me about the people living there and their demographics?

Nick Herriman

So the Cocos Islands are situated in the northeast, Indian Ocean which means they're somewhere between Perth and Sri Lanka, about half way: that would be close to the Cocos Islands. They're south of Java and Sumatra, not too far, less than 1,000 km south of those two islands. The Cocos Islands are basically two atolls, the collective title is the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, that refers to these two atolls, one is the Keeling, to the north, and then, to the south, the Cocos Islands. Keeling Island is just one island, whereas the Cocos Islands are a ring of islands. Only two of them are inhabited, one's called West Island. There's an airport there or small airport, or "strip", I should say, and about 200 people, mostly from mainland Australia. On the other side of the lagoon is a place called Home Island and on Home Island there are about 400 or so Cocos Malays.

It's a very interesting question as to how they got there. The islands were uninhabited in 1826 when a European explorer decided that he would bring a retinue of slaves, a harem too, to populate the island and be king over the islands. The next year, workers and another European by the name of Clunies-Ross took control of the whole venture. So Clunies-Ross and his descendants ruled over the islands from 1827 right up to, well officially 1984 it was finally all over. So really for more than 150 years, there was a kingdom, if you like, ruled by people who we call White Rajahs, that is European families who have styled themselves on Oriental kings, if you like.

So in a sense, it's one of Australia's oldest settlements inasmuch as it settled before Perth, before Melbourne for that matter, although it only became part of Australia formally in 1984 when the Cocos Malays were given a vote: "Do you want to become part of Australia or do you want to be separate?" And they said, "Oh, we'll become part of Australia thank you." And so in a plebiscite they voted overwhelmingly to become part of Australia and by doing that, not only did Australia gain a territory in the Indian Ocean, but we also gained our oldest Malay community, so it's really been a wonderful acquisition for Australia.

Matt Smith

So culturally wise these people would be very close to the Malay culture but they've had time to very much develop their own distinctiveness. They would have influences from European as well, wouldn't they?

Nick Herriman

That's right, I didn't explain before, but the explorer as I called him, a guy by the name of Hare, started off in Borneo and then moved to Java, and that's where he got the bulk of his slaves/harem. He then was looking for a land to occupy, if you like, and went to Cape Town in South Africa and might have got a few more people there and then headed back to the Cocos Islands. The initial and original population was what we could call Malay, and this in a broader sense, which means 'Native of Southeast Asia.'

They speak a dialect of Malay, I think the formal term for it in linguistics is an isolect – it's a small dialect that only they speak, some of the differences are for example, instead of saying "Orang which is the mainland Malay which means person, they say Orang which is more like a French 'r'. So there's some difference in pronunciation. There's also strong influence, as you suggested, of Scottish customs, so because the Clunies-Ross family were proud of their Scottish heritage, they made a consistent and continuing attempt to instill Scottish customs. So you'll have Malay Muslim people dancing Scottish Reels, wearing Batik and other Malay clothes. It's a fascinating hybrid Scottish-Malay culture that forms the background of the Cocos Malay identity.

Matt Smith

With a strong connection to Australia these days and a greater mobility, how have the populations of the Cocos Islands moved around over the years?

Nick Herriman

It's a great question because it actually starts before 1984. For about the first century, Clunies-Ross exerted quite tight control on the population, the basic rule was, 'You're allowed to leave, but you're not allowed to come back.' So leaving for some people would mean saying goodbye to everything they know, the culture the customs, the people. So not many people took up the offer to leave, even though by some accounts, work was quite hard back then, basically work revolved around harvesting coconuts which had fallen to the ground and getting the white meat which is called copra and sending it to Singapore and in return, goods would come back from Singapore which helped keep the Kingdom running. By the end of World War II, the population was basically out of control, from memory it was over 1,000, maybe as much as 1,400.

Matt Smith

That's not sustainable at that size.

Nick Herriman

Yeah, to give you some context, these are quite barren islands, I mean there's coconuts growing there but the soil is very infertile. So it's very hard to grow vegetables and keeping even chickens is difficult. Over 1,000 was not sustainable, so a large population emigrated to northeast Borneo, which is kind of nice historical continuity, they'd come originally from south Borneo a lot of the slaves and now over 100 years later they were returning to Borneo but this time to northeast Borneo to work in plantations there and that place is called Tawau. And there's still a large Cocos Malay population there.

Then as Australia became more involved in the affairs of the Cocos Islands, Cocos Malays also migrated to Christmas Island, then to Perth, a harbourside town south of Perth called Bunbury, to Geraldton and to Katanning, to work in abattoirs there, because they were Muslims they could slaughter cattle in accordance with Islamic Halal prescriptions, and also up to Port Hedland to work in the mining. And aside from that there is also Cocos Malays going to Singapore, so basically you get a huge exodus, more people leave the Cocos Islands than stay.

Matt Smith

So with such a diverse amount of locations and simply the distance, how did they maintain their culture and their links to the Cocos Island?

Nick Herriman

Initially it was difficult in the post war period. I haven't been to Tawau yet, but by all accounts the people in Tawau have held on more strongly to; if you like traditional Cocos Malay customs, than the people on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands themselves.

Matt Smith

That's interesting.

Nick Herriman

So if you go to northeast Malaysia you'll probably see more of a kind of dancing I was talking about.

Matt Smith

The Scottish?

Nick Herriman

The Scottish reels and that kind of thing. Though I've heard that the distinct features of the language aren't as strong in Tawau, as an Anthropologist I'd need to go there and check it out before I could make any comment, but that's what I've heard anyway.

So initially we know that it was very hard to maintain contact, now this is made more difficult by the fact that there was very low literacy rates. Some of them could write a kind of script called Jawi, kind of Arabic Script which is used in Southeast Asia around Sumatra and Java in particular. But a lot of them couldn't, so I've read that in the 1970's they started sending each other cassettes, for the younger generation a cassette is basically an audio recording.

Matt Smith

Ye Olde Podcast...

Nick Herriman

Ye Olde Pody Casty.. [laughter] There was also as far as I understand, a bit of travel between the various locations of migration and certainly after Australia took control of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and the Cocos Islanders voted to become part of Australia, there was a return migration. Particularly those people who had migrated to Singapore or Malaysia were now interested in migrating back, but still communications are relatively difficult to maintain.

What's interesting now, new technologies are really enabling or fostering a sense of Cocos connection and particularly that's through Facebook. I've been lucky enough to be befriended by many Cocos Islanders on Facebook and we see connections between people in Katanning, in Tawau, on Christmas Island and the Cocos Islands. One popular post is posting pictures of fish that are caught, because fish is a huge part of the livelihood there.

Matt Smith

So over the years then I suppose this would open up the opportunity for a lot to be sent back and forth between the Cocos Islands and those that have emigrated off the Island, to Perth and you said before there are a lot working in abattoirs preparing Halal meat. Is that

Nick Herriman

Yeah this is a very interesting thing that my wife Monika who is also doing anthropological research with me, my wife Monika and I are working on this which is what you could call an Esky Economy. Now for non-Australians, an Esky is like a Styrofoam box.

Matt Smith

An Ice box.

Nick Herriman

Ice box yeah. So what we noticed while we were doing fieldwork, immediately when you get off the plane on Cocos Islands you see a whole lot of Eskies or Styrofoam boxes being taken to the Customs and then as the plane takes off, a lot of them going back. And when you get to Home Island you notice that almost every house has these, one or maybe sometimes two, box freezers, by that I mean larger than an office desk, full of seafood. See Cocos Islanders fish for seafood for themselves, but they also send this frozen seafood in Eskies back to the diaspora, the locations of migration to other Cocos Malays for example in Katanning. So we were lucky enough to be asked to take an Esky for our host parents Nek Sophia and then Nek Sophia asked us to take an Esky from the Cocos Islands to Perth and when we got there to Perth airport at midnight the daughter and son-in-law came and picked up the Eskies.

We went to visit them a few days later in southeast Perth and we noticed they had the huge Cocos Island box freezer and while we were there somebody else came from Katanning bringing satay sticks that had been made in Katanning with the meat that had been slaughtered and prepared in Halal manner in Katanning. So this person picked up some seafood that had been sent from Cocos Islands from their box freezer in southeast Perth, to take back to Katanning, but also dropped off some of these satay sticks to be taken back to Cocos Islands.

Anthropologists see gifts as: we don't believe as the true gift, we think that all gifts have something attached to them and that's an obligation to maintain a relationship. If I'm working and I give the person in the office next door a Christmas present, next year I expect them to give me a present back, but also that our relationship should be a little bit closer, so anthropologists are fascinated by the way gifts bring people together. Now the idea here then, what we're working on with this Esky economy is the way that satay coming from Katanning and seafood coming from the north Indian Ocean work to bring these migrant communities together.

Also in addition to that you get Facebook posts, so somebody goes fishing on Sunday and puts up a post of this big, ikan ijo, a green fish they call it, and somebody in Port Hedland might say, "Yum that looks great, send me some please." And in the comments then the Facebook person will say, "Yes sure it's coming on the next plane" or something like that, these technologies, we've advanced a long way from just the cassettes or maybe writing letters in Jawi script. Modern technologies facilitating the connections between members of very dispersed communities.

Matt Smith

Yes, it's a great example of the world becoming smaller thanks to technology. It must make it a bit of a nightmare for the people working in customs every time a Cocos Island related plane comes into land because you know you're going to be stuck there in Customs for a while checking all these fish?

Nick Herriman

Well, no they know what's coming, so they're pretty good in my recollection, they're very reasonable at both ends, they know what's coming at the Cocos Island ends and the Perth ends they understand what's in the Eskys and they have a quick look of course to check. They don't hold things up, to their credit. They're very reasonable about it.

Matt Smith

So besides sending food back and forth through this manner, what other ways are they using these channels of communication to maintain their identity?

Nick Herriman

Well anthropologists look at what draws people together into relationships and of course as I mentioned before, gift giving is a great way to create relationships between people, but the best way of course is to build alliances through marriage. What we're finding is that there's a lot of marriage migration now, particularly back to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, back to the Cocos Malay community on Home Island. This is partly because, you know the economy in Malaysia now doesn't look so good, so there's a push back, but there's also a pull factor that Cocos Malay boasts; by the standards of a lot of people, are a very good lifestyle.

The other thing is that on the Cocos Islands itself, there are very few matches available, marriage is a huge deal, the only way to achieve status is to get married and have babies. If you do that you're a man, you're a 'Pak' which means a father or dad, or mister or sir. If you're a woman you're called 'Mak'. My eldest is a girl called Kiki and my wife is called Mak Kiki. If we didn't have children we would never be called 'Pak' or 'Mak', we would just be uncle or aunty. So the only way to really achieve status is to have children, the only way to have children is to get married, but it's very difficult for Cocos Malays on Home Island to get married, so they look out to the diaspora.

So if I'm a 35 year old guy and haven't been married yet, I start asking around and it turns out my uncle has a friend in Katanning who knows of a woman there whose aged 25, she's single and looking for a match too and that might be the start of something there. So you get, not just the seafood and satay sticks travelling around creating alliances, but also marriage creating alliances and that's facilitated again with the technology through Facebook meeting potential spouses.

Once the marriage is on, then that's a huge deal, I mean weddings there are enormous, they last for a week, super abundance of food and dancing and merry-making, costumes. Even

Cocos Malays themselves complain "It's too exorbitant, it's utterly over the top, a huge deal." And marriage and having kids is a huge deal and the technologies are helping to enable that in the same way that they're kind of enabling this satay and seafood buildings of connections.

Matt Smith

Alright, thanks for your time Nick.

Nick Herriman

Thanks very much Matt.

Matt Smith

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