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Review of Ricci, R. (2019) Banishment and belonging: exile and diaspora in Sarandib, Lanka, and Ceylon

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Ronit Ricci, *Banishment and Belonging: Exile and Diaspora in Sarandib, Lanka, and Ceylon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, xvi + 282 pp. ISBN: 9781108480277 (hardback), price: USD 72.65 (hardcover); 9781108727242, USD 28.48 (paperback).

Banishment and Belonging is written by one of the leading scholars on the shared history between South and Southeast Asia. While much previous scholarship has focused on the acculturation of Hinduism into the local cultures of Southeast Asia, Ronit Ricci—in this book and in her other works—examines influences in the opposite direction. Her oeuvre is unique and powerful, as it draws from many local sources, especially Malay and Javanese manuscripts. Rather than treating them as objects of philological studies, Ricci uses these texts to reconstruct the history of the Malay world in relation to Islam, colonialism, and other parts of the world.

Most significantly in my view, the book illustrates how the Malay world has colored Sri Lanka, both culturally and demographically. For many people in the Malay world, these westward mobilities have disappeared from their collective memory. Yet the island's name, now primarily associated with a severe economic crisis and a history of political conflict, once featured prominently in their texts. In the roughly 170 classical manuscripts incorporated in the Malay Concordance Project (https://mcp.anu.edu.au/; accessed 19-11-2022), I find "*Selan*" 70 times, "*Selong*" 76 times, and "*Sailan*" 259 times, alongside the less common variants "*Silung*", "*Silong*" "*Sailong*", "*Silan*" and "*Selon*". The people of Ceylon are referred to as "*Sailani*" in some Malay manuscripts, such as in *Hikayat Aceh*, *Syair Bidasari*, and *Bustan al-Salatin*. These diverse names reflect regional variety, but also a sense of opaqueness on account of the island's geographical distance. Nevertheless, the evocative power of Ceylon—as a site of misery and exile, but also as a way station en route to Mecca or Europe—remained strong until the early twentieth century. It features, for example, in the writings of the intellectuals Mohammad Sjafei, Adi Negoro and Parlindoengan Loebis.

The book consists of nine chapters. The introduction familiarizes us with the historical formation of "Sri Lankan Malays" and the key methodological and theoretical themes of this book, its scope, and its sources. We are invited to trace Sri Lanka's past through stories and imaginings reconstructed "in relation to place, time, and movement through the prisms of Sarandib, Lanka, and Ceylon" (p. 10). For this purpose, the author "seeks to explore the Sri Lankan Malay's history, literature and perspective on exile through multiple lenses and from different shores, integrating sources from Malay, Javanese, Arabic, Dutch and English to present the views of colonized and colonizer in the Dutch and

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British periods, poetic and prose depictions of exile, single texts that move between across languages, religious traditions relating to Ceylon, and documents ranging from letters to family diaries to theological manuals and charms" (p. 10). This rich use of local sources allows the book to go beyond the perspectives of the colonizers and capture the voices of colonized subjects.

Chapter 2 explores the history and writing practices of the diasporic Malay community in Ceylon. It examines how the community recorded its past, what topics they recorded, and how these were circulated and distributed. The contents, linguistic diversity, and script of the 270-page *Malay Compendium* testify to strong intellectual and religious connections maintained with the archipelago and Arabia. This Sri Lankan Malay manuscript is also proof of the way this diasporic community shaped its cultural world and inherited traditions (p. 47).

Chapter 3 explores both personal and collective expressions of memory. The author investigates several manuscripts written in Ceylon by exiles from Java, such as *Kidung Rumeksa ing Wengi*, *Hikayat Tuan Gusti*, and *Angkatan Menulis Isms*. Such indigenous sources express the feelings of longing for home and the heartache of living in a faraway island, but also record political, socio-cultural, religious, and cosmological interests of this diasporic community. The Jawi script used in these texts was "maintained through the generations in unlikely circumstances, forming a living, creative link with the past" (p. 75).

The next two chapters delve into the phenomenon of exile through several other manuscripts, including *Babad Kartasura, Babad ing Mangkunegaran*, *Babad Tanah Jawi* and *Babad Giyanti*, recording the experiences of Javanese royal exiles moving from Java to Ceylon (p. 77). Most of them were deported from Kartasura in Central Java. Through a thorough and close reading of these texts, the author reconstructs the psychological, social, religious, political, and geographical dimensions of these displacements. Ceylon is described as a frightening place of exile and homesickness, epitomized in the Javanese expression *diselongaké:* "to be Ceylonized" or "being banished to Ceylon" (p. 76). I would add that similar expressions can be found elsewhere in the archipelago, such as *diselongkan* among the Buginese. In the oral narratives of western Indonesia, such as Minangkabau *pantun* poetry and some maritime Malay epics, *Sailan* is conceived as a frightening country located far away, surrounded by a vast ocean with dangerous big waves. Such expressions show how deeply the negative impression of Ceylon has been anchored in the collective memory of the peoples of the archipelago.

Chapters 6 and 7 explore, respectively, the Islamic tale of Adam's fall into Sarandib—another name for Sri Lanka—and the Hindu tale of Sita's banishment to the island. The author has conducted a close reading of a copy of

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Hikayat Seri Rama (Ms Laud Or. 291), a Malay adaptation of the *Ramayana* epic that was very popular in the Malay-speaking world from at least the early seventeenth century (p. 157). Through both chapters, the author shows how these ancient stories of banishment might have informed the experiences and memories of more recent exiles (p. 125). As a Malay, this made me wonder whether the decision of the Dutch to expel religious and royal dissidents to an island described in their own literature as frightening was deliberate or just a coincidence. Whatever the motivation of this policy, it ended up creating a sense of shared fate among these exiles, who came from various ethnic groups in the archipelago. Together, the Madurese, Javanese, Buginese, Ternatans, and Tidorese gradually became "Sri Lankan Malays" and formed an early "little Indonesia" overseas.

Chapter 8 delves into the involvement of Malay exiles in the British colonial army in nineteenth-century Ceylon. Again invoking both foreign and local sources, the author describes the role of the Malay Regiment in the nineteenth century, including its military, political, religious, cultural, and psychological dimensions. On the latter topic, I was reminded of a tearful plea for Dutch mercy written in Jawi by Siti Hapipa—the widow of a sultan from South Sulawesi who was exiled to Ceylon in 1767—as I have explored in an essay cited in *Banishment and Belonging*.

The final chapter, Chapter 9, examines the survival of Malay literary culture in Sri Lanka. The author explores "how the Malay presence in Ceylon was made sense of, remembered, and consolidated into a meaningful experience that would be passed down through the generations", considering "the always-complex diasporic condition" of this allochthonous community and "the gaps and silences inherent in its archives, viewing Malay diasporic life and writing as loosely forming a vernacular frontier of language, culture and religion" (p. 218). Special attention is paid to the work of Baba Ounus Saldin (1832–1906), "a central presence in the Malay community as author, publisher, editor and religious leader" (p. 218). The chapter mirrors Ricci's extensive fieldwork among the community, which among many things has led to a digitalization project of Sri Lankan Malay manuscripts funded by the British Library (p. xi). The chapter presents her laborious mapping of Malay writing across the island by interviewing public figures and ordinary citizens, visiting the scriptoriums and places where manuscripts are preserved, and identifying and photographing various text (billboards, brands, signboards, emblems, epitaphs, etc.) written in Malay, in order to chart this important yet scattered literary tradition.

This book is an excellent study on Malay exiles during European colonialism in Asia. Using a rich variety of foreign and local sources, it reveals the voices and perspectives of insiders and outsiders. It does not address one of

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my own long-standing curiosities: the existence of Malays in Sri Lanka prior to the arrival of European powers and the way they would have interacted with other communities known to have frequented the island, such as Chinese, Persians, Arabs, Turks, Maldivians, Africans, and different peoples from India. I nevertheless strongly recommend it to academics interested in new methods to study the history and the culture of the Malay world. As for colleagues who continue to glorify and prioritize Western print literacy and underestimate the importance of local sources, akin to some of their Dutch predecessors in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I hope this book will inspire them to mend their ways.

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