

## Transplanted Musics in a Plantation Society

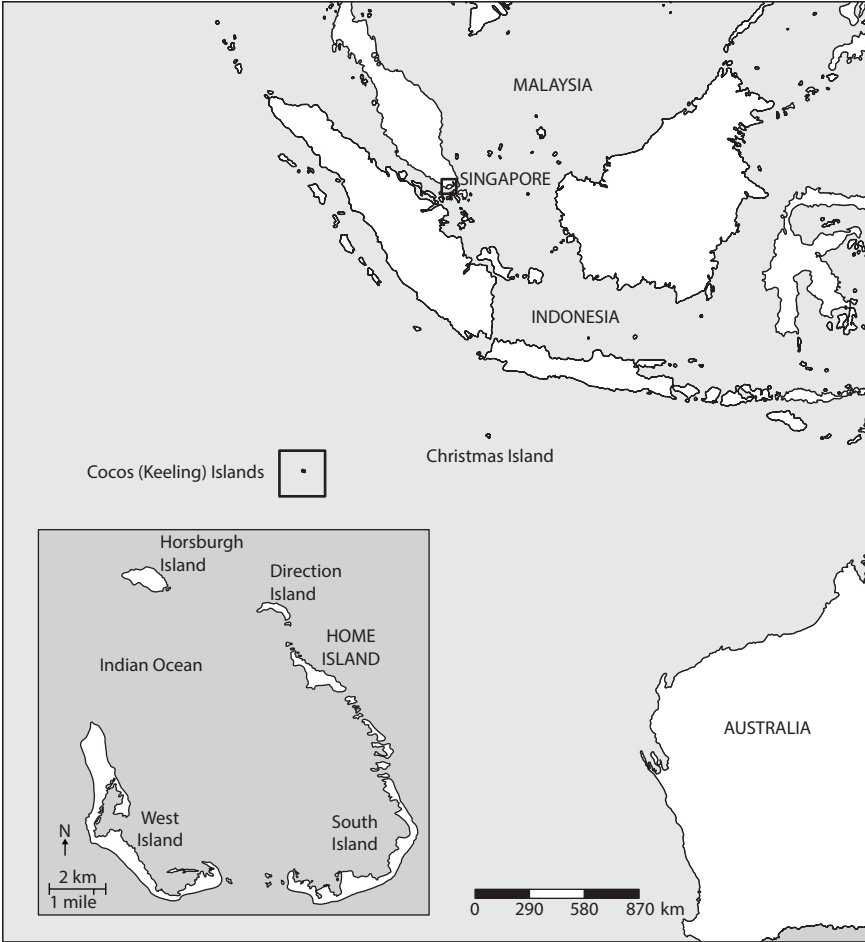
*Performing Arts on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands,  
1826–1955*

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In 1954, Queen Elizabeth II (1926–2022; reigned from 1952) made her first tour of Australia and other parts of the British Commonwealth. Wherever she went, she was greeted with pageantry on a grand scale that was filmed and documented extensively, and transformed into full-length movies or news stories with luscious orchestral soundtracks. On her way from Western Australia to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), she stopped for one day, April 5, at the Cocos (Keeling) Islands (map 12.1). This tiny coral atoll (hereafter Cocos), consisting of no more than 14 km<sup>2</sup> of land, was home to under 400 Cocos Malay people and a small number of residents from Britain and Australia.

The queen's visit to Cocos was broadcast throughout the British Commonwealth by Movietone news and British Paramount News. These newsreels preserve what appears to be the earliest known video recording of Cocos Malay performing

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MAP 12.1. Map showing location of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the Indian Ocean. Inset map: The Cocos (Keeling) Island atoll. Map by Joanne Byrne. Used by permission.

arts, although with dubbed audio. In the Movietone reel a voice-over provides the official narrative:

After *The Gothic* had anchored two miles out the Queen and the Duke came ashore by launch. With them were their host and hostess Mr and Mrs Clunies-Ross. A perpetual lease of the islands was granted to the family by Queen Victoria. Malays, and they provide the majority of the population, now performed a special dance of welcome. (British Movietone 1954, 00'19"–00'36")

This “special dance,” shown in figure 12.1, was a *silat*—a martial arts dance genre believed to deter evil spirits—performed by two Cocos men, Badrie bin Jamihan



FIGURE 12.1. *Silat* performed by Badrie bin Jamihan and Lloyd bin Zanlay before Queen Elizabeth II, 1954. Still no. 383 from <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/96595/>. Reproduced by permission of British Pathé.

and Lloyd bin Zanlay (Clunies-Ross 2009, 160; Ramnie bin Mokta and Ayesha [Jan Young], personal comm., April 13, 2023). They were accompanied by a *gendang* (double-headed drum) and two *biola* (violins) (see Irving 2019, 308–9), although only one *biola* is visible here, on the far left.

In this scene the soundtrack music changes from a symphony orchestra to what is clearly a South Asian instrumental ensemble, featuring sitar, violin, and bansuri (British Movietone 1954, 00'36"–00'43"); the producers probably used “stock” recorded music. In another reel by British Paramount News, which uses the same footage, the music does sound Malay (British Paramount News 1954, 00'33"–00'50"), with a melodic instrument (which sounds like the double-reed instrument *serunai* rather than *biola*) accompanied by drums. However, it is not apparent whether the recording comes from this occasion; it is most likely “stock” audio (and no evidence of the *serunai* on Cocos has yet emerged). After the procession arrived at the Clunies-Ross family's residence, known as Oceania House, there were entertainments on the lawn outside, under a pavilion. Two men performed *melenggok*—a dance with scarves, usually given for weddings—again accompanied by *gendang* and *biola*, followed by many dancers performing *selong*, a dance by male-female couples, stepping backward and forward (see Irving and McCallum 2020, 10, and video 8'34").

Newsreels such as these were typically distributed internationally after the visits took place, but newspapers preempted the occasions. Two days previously, *The Mail Digest* in Adelaide, South Australia, had announced that a remarkable mix

of Malay and Scottish cultural traditions were to be found on the islands: “When the local orchestra goes into action, Malay dirges are lightened with snatches from ‘Cock o’ the North’ or ‘A Hundred Pipers.’ During wild island dances Malay *kronchongs* often give way to foursome reels which go on for hours” (“Queen to Meet a Brown Mr. McTavish” 1954, 51). This story included highly specific references to Scottish melodies; it is also a rare instance of the *kroncong* genre being mentioned in connection to Cocos. Australian newspapers also gave space to the distinctive history and current political status of Cocos, the islands being owned by a twenty-five-year-old “king,” John Cecil Clunies-Ross, the fifth hereditary patriarch of his family to “rule” them. His young English wife, Daphne, was billed as a “queen” (“Queen Elizabeth to Meet Another Queen” 1954, 4).

Few stories of island “kingdoms” in English-language news reports have captured the imaginations of twentieth-century readers like those of Cocos, and the five patriarchal heads of the Clunies-Ross family, originally from Scotland, who ruled from 1827 to 1978.<sup>1</sup> The romanticized image of the “Kings of the Cocos” became a trope in descriptions of the islands, a moniker undoubtedly popularized by John Scott Hughes, who wrote a book with that exact title (1950). In some respects, Cocos was similar to the “kingdom” of Sarawak, the polity on Borneo ruled from 1841 to 1946 by three successive “white rajas” of the Brooke family, who had originally been granted the royal title by the Sultan of Brunei (Runciman 1960). While Cocos was occasionally considered a Sarawak-in-miniature, it also was significantly different. Its oceanic location was significantly remote and it had no preexisting society before its colonization.

The twentieth-century media typically represented life on the islands as simple, idyllic, and carefree: a tiny and remote “kingdom” where there was reportedly no currency—although in fact it produced its own, which became a matter of debate in the late twentieth century—and no crime, with the main export product being coconuts. Information was evidently sourced from encyclopedia articles, histories, and travel accounts of the islands. Reporters commented on the presence of Scottish names among the Malay inhabitants and mentioned that the population of the islands was quite small. English references to Scottish culture as England’s original “other” may have heightened for Anglophone readers the sense of simultaneous alterity and familiarity. The overall image presented was of a remote utopia, with a timeless unchanging lifestyle regulated only by the winds, the waves, and the sunset. Indeed, only four years earlier Hughes had concluded his popular book *Kings of the Cocos* with an evocative comment about the soundscape of the islands: “For far the longer part of the year . . . the trade wind rolls up the white breakers on the barrier-reef, ripples the water of the lagoon, singing night and day its sibilant song in the fronded palms, the music of coral-island life” (Hughes 1950, 162).<sup>2</sup> However, in the decade prior to Hughes’s publication, Cocos had undergone drastic social, cultural, and economic change, and the community had endured great trauma.

During World War II, the population of the islands—then consisting of around 2,000 Cocos Malays, and a small number of other people—was suddenly expanded by the presence of approximately 5,000 servicemen, and daily life affected by increased military activity. The tiny community was transformed suddenly into a lively node within a complex web of military maneuvers and global politics. The British military also engaged, for the first time, in a sustained way with this remote part of the empire that had until then been so often overshadowed by its larger colonial neighbors. A secret military report of 1944 contains many fascinating glimpses into what they described as the “feudal system” on Cocos, and the comment that “it is by force of personality rather than threats of punishment that the Clunies-Ross family administer their islands” (National Archives of the United Kingdom, WO 203/134, “Cocos Islands: Topographical Report on the South Keeling Islands Issued by Intelligence,” 10). The same year, John Sidney Clunies-Ross (1868–1944)—the fourth “king”—died of a heart attack (on August 14), following an aerial attack, and the military assumed control of Home Island.

On May 10, 1945, celebrations for the Allied victory in Europe were marked in Cocos by a day off work, and a football (soccer) match played on West Island. Some 80 jukongs (local sailing boats) conveyed around 400 islanders across the lagoon to watch the match, after which Malays took soldiers for sailing trips in the lagoon. The report records that on this day bagpipes were heard, played by soldiers from Punjab then stationed on West Island: “The Islanders had rides in lorries and jeeps and were particularly impressed by the playing of the pipe band of the 26/14 Punjabis” (National Archives of the United Kingdom, CO 273/673/9, “Cocos Islands: Emergency Organisation,” document headed “The Office of the Military Administrator, ‘BROWN’ / 6th June, 1945,” “Report for the month of May 1945,” 1). The comment that the Cocos Malay listeners were “impressed” makes one wonder whether it was the first time that they had heard the instrument. Despite the bagpipes’ symbolism as an iconic musical emblem of Scotland and the connections of Cocos to Scottish culture, it is striking to note that this is the earliest documentary evidence known so far of bagpipes in the islands, and that the players came not from Scotland but the Indian subcontinent, where pipe bands had been introduced by the British to military music traditions.

This interregnum continued until the arrival of Ross’s widow, Rose Alexandra Nash (1903–1991), and her son John Cecil Clunies-Ross (1928–2021) in 1946, by which time most of the military personnel had departed. Rose decided with their managers that the Cocos Malay population was too large for their estate to support and began an emigration scheme between 1948 and 1951 in which approximately two-thirds of the community (around 1,600 people) were moved to Christmas Island, Singapore, and especially Sabah, Malaysia, which meant that fewer than 400 Cocos Malays lived on Cocos by the time of the Queen’s visit (Hunt 1989, 98–104; United Nations Department of Political Affairs 1978, 2; T. E. Smith 1960, 97).<sup>3</sup> The largest group of emigrating Cocos Islanders, numbering 1,486, settled

near Lahad Datu in Sabah, Malaysia, by 1952 (Baker 1965, 14). Following this emigration, diasporic connections with the Malay world were subsequently maintained through the former British colonies in what is now Malaysia—mediated by the Clunies-Ross Estate—even though the ethnic and ancestral origins of most of the Cocos Malay community come from what is now Indonesia.

The United Kingdom transferred sovereignty of Cocos to Australia in 1955, but the operations of the Clunies-Ross Estate remained relatively undisturbed until the 1970s, when the Australian government and the United Nations made interventions amid allegations of “Slavery on Cocos” (Hunt 1989, 152): these focused specifically on the style of the estate’s administration by John Cecil Clunies-Ross, and especially the payment of Cocos Malay workers’ wages by use of locally minted plastic tokens that could be used to redeem goods from the company’s own store (see Hunt 1989, 150–64). Federal intervention and migration programs managed by the government resulted in numerous Cocos Malays settling in mainland Australia during this decade, although the process was ad hoc until the government established a formal resettlement scheme in December 1976.<sup>4</sup> Following increased political pressure on the family, and under close scrutiny of the United Nations, the Australian government bought the freehold of the islands from the Clunies-Ross family in 1978; six years later, the islanders voted in an Act of Self-Determination for integration with Australia (Mowbray 1997, 391).

Today the Cocos Malay diaspora is spread throughout Borneo, Singapore, and numerous parts of Western Australia (for a map of the diaspora, see Winarnita and Herriman 2012, 377). Nevertheless, Cocos has remained the symbolic homeland of the Cocos Malays. Only three islands in the main atoll were usually inhabited (see inset of map 12.1): the Cocos Malay community and the Clunies-Rosses lived on Home Island; government and military officials lived on West Island (where the airstrip is located); and the employees of the Cable & Wireless Company lived on Direction Island from the turn of the twentieth century until the closure of the station in 1966. Today the Cocos Malay kampong remains on Home Island, and most visitors stay on West Island.

Until the 1990s, studies of performing arts on Cocos were typically made within broader studies of Cocos Malay history and culture, especially those by Pauline Bunce (1988) and John Hunt (1989), who were able to interview many elderly residents of the islands. Since the 2010s, there have been research projects in the fields of ethnomusicology and anthropology.<sup>5</sup> These have combined ethnographic work with archival research to explore the histories of Cocos Malay performance arts, among other topics. Many have focused on cultural practices in recent generations, and particularly during the period since 1978. This chapter looks earlier to explore documentary evidence of the transplantation of music and dance to Cocos, from the point of the islands’ permanent settlement until the United Kingdom transferred sovereignty to Australia in 1955. (The scope of this chapter does not allow for discussion of the enormous topic of vocalization for Islamic worship and devotion—these types of religious sound are usually considered in

Islamic thought to be distinct from “music”—nor the extensive use of drums such as rebana, kompang, and beduk; however, see Bunce [1988], McCallum [2020], and Irving and McCallum [2020] for further context.)

Archival details about music and dance from those times are relatively sparse, and some have previously been discussed by C. A. Gibson-Hill (1952), John Hunt (1989), and Nicholas Herriman (2022). Here I aim to revisit the well-known sources about performing arts on Cocos but also to combine the discussion of them with analysis of textual and iconographic traces newly gleaned from archives. This approach can offer a keyhole view into a rich microhistory of a tiny and isolated community at the crossroads of trade. Overall, it is hoped that new findings about the transplantation of performing arts to Cocos have broader implications for understanding the complexity of British-Malay cultural exchanges in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and may feed in to further work in the field. Before we start, however, it is necessary to outline some earlier historical contexts.

#### THE BEGINNINGS OF COLONIALISM ON COCOS

First recorded on maps in the seventeenth century (Bunce 1988, 38), Cocos remained uninhabited until 1826.<sup>6</sup> That year Scottish trader Alexander Hare (1775–1834), who has been described as the first “white raja” on Borneo (F. A. Smith 2013), arrived there to establish a settlement with a retinue of ninety-nine enslaved people (Bunce 1988, 133). They originated from many parts of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, including Bali, Bima, Sulawesi, Madura, Sumbawa, Timor, Sumatra, Pasir-Kutai, Melaka, Penang, Jakarta, Cirebon, Banjarmasin, Pontianak, Tasikmalaya, and Kota Waringan (Bunce 1988, 43; Gibson-Hill 1952, 228; Lapian 1979, 153–54; Ackrill 1984, 229–44; Brockman 1978, 1981; Linford 2009, 29–57; Hunt 1989, 4; Herriman 2022, 35–36). Some of these enslaved people had apparently been presented to Hare by Sultan Soleiman of Banjarmasin (r. 1801–1825), in whose court Hare was appointed British resident in 1811 (Gibson-Hill 1952, 235–36; Ackrill 1984, 231; Hunt 1989, 4; Herriman 2022, 36). Among their number were musicians adept at performing music in a “European” style, fulfilling the typical roles expected of them in colonial societies in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago (F. A. Smith 2013, 110; Herriman 2022, 36–37).

Relatively few details are known about these musicians: there is no information on their names or number, the precise kinds of instruments they used, or the kind of music they performed. However, it is likely that their practice reflected that of other ensembles of enslaved musicians in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. As an example, Gibson-Hill transcribed the advertisement of an auction in Batavia in 1833 of enslaved people (fifty-one adults and sixteen children) who included twenty-two musicians—players of violin, flute, clarinet, trumpet, French horn, bassoon, sackbut, bass violin, Turkish instruments—to be offered for sale along with clothes and “music of the latest editions, imported from Europe” (Gibson-Hill 1952, 168–69; F. A. Smith 2013, 110n38). Since no such details exist for the musicians



under Hare's control, it is important not to draw conclusions about the nature of their practice. Rather, it is worth revisiting the few early textual descriptions of his household before the settlement on Cocos. As Hare's rival John Clunies-Ross wrote in the mid-nineteenth century:

At Malacca the very few of them [i.e., enslaved people] which Mr Hare had whilst there—were employed as domestics in his house. On Borneo—it is not needful to say how the women were employed, farther than that there was no out of doors work to be performed by them—the men were set to learn music so as to perform the part of a band at his (*Mr H's*) dwelling place.<sup>7</sup> [emphasis added] (John Clunies-Ross, "PAPERS of Capt. John Clunies Ross, first real settler on the Cocos or Keeling Islands in the Indian Ocean," British Library, Add MS 37631, f. 174v [p. 56]; Clunies Ross 2020)

Here the gendered role of musicians (only men) is emphasized, although this serves also to reinforce Clunies-Ross's implication about the kind of work that was expected of women. Allegations of Hare maintaining a harem or a group of concubines within this community are repeated in a number of sources, and Clunies-Ross leaves the charge of "indoors labor" unspecified.

In 1819 Hare was forced out of the Dutch colonies in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago and traveled with this entire community of "112 retainers" to the Cape, South Africa (Hunt 1989, 4). It was here, as observed by Clunies-Ross in a letter to Rear Admiral Sir T. Bladen Capel, that Hare's "habitual mode of domestic life with the women began . . . to be taken notice of in the British society wherein no fellow feelings existed in its favour" (Gibson-Hill 1952, 241). Clunies-Ross also wrote that the enslaved people taken by Hare to South Africa were unhabituated to the hard outdoors labor assigned to them on Hare's farm (around twelve miles from Cape Town), since "in Java, etc., [they are] generally or rather universally are employed, not in fieldwork, but in domestic services, such as in the kitchen, *at the table and performing music—all rather amusing exercises than laborious toils*" (emphasis added) (Gibson-Hill 1952, 241). It is striking that Clunies-Ross considered music—alongside the work of the kitchen and home—a form of amusement or entertainment rather than labor. According to Clunies-Ross in a document of 1835–1836, members of this group complained of their treatment to local authorities and insisted that they were free people (Gibson-Hill 1952, 241).

Following his move to Cocos in 1826 Hare constructed a residence on Pulu Beras, which included enclosed accommodation for women and girls. (The Malay name Pulu Beras means "Raw Rice Island," but its English name is more appropriately "Prison Island"; today it has eroded to an extremely small size, and it may eventually disappear as a recognizable island altogether.) On Cocos, Hare's regime scandalously involved the incarceration and exploitation of young women, as attested by a number of witnesses.<sup>8</sup> His scheme was disrupted, however, when his former colleague and rival Clunies-Ross arrived in 1827. According to an undated account by British naturalist Henry Nicholas Ridley (1855–1956) of his visit to the islands in 1890, an elderly Cocos Malay man "who was living on the island in Hare's time (i.e., for two generations)" told him that Hare gave "a fiddle and two sheep" to



men from Clunies-Ross's camp in an attempt to stop them from coming to his island (Henry Nicholas Ridley, "Visits to Cocos and Christmas Islands," Ms., n.d., Royal Botanic Gardens Library and Archives, HNR/5/15, 11).<sup>9</sup> Clunies-Ross gradually took control of the islands, and people in Hare's camp moved to his rival settlement. By 1831 Hare left Cocos, never to return.

The scholar Frederic Wood-Jones (1879–1954)—who was present on the islands for fifteen months in 1905–6 and who made a second visit in 1907, eventually marrying one of George Clunies-Ross's daughters, Gertrude, in 1910—wrote in lofty tones of Alexander Hare:

His attempt to realise his ideal—to be the monarch of a slavish Eastern court amidst the luxurious setting of a tropical coral island—had proved a failure. His band of musicians, his slaves, his courtiers, his harem, and his splendid sovereignty had slowly but surely slipped from his grasp, and the more stubborn, more practical rule of Ross Primus [John Clunies-Ross] had ruined his Utopia. (Wood-Jones 1912, 20; also quoted and discussed in F. A. Smith 2013, 117)

It is interesting to note that the first element of monarchical status mentioned here by Wood-Jones is a "band of musicians," a symbol of prestige preceding even mention of "his slaves, his courtiers, [and] his harem." Whether Hare wanted to emulate the grandeur of Dutch or British colonialists, or of Malay sultans, is unknown. Unless further documentation emerges, the size and nature of this musical ensemble remains a mystery, although it is clear that a violin was present.

Some years after Hare's departure, Clunies-Ross established a "social contract" with the Cocos Malays in a document of December 21, 1837, and initiated a quasi-feudal regime—which "bore a number of likenesses to a traditional nineteenth-century Malay state" (Hunt 1989, 1)—under his rule.<sup>10</sup> The agreement was signed by twenty heads of family, who represented around 100 people. It promised housing and payment in return for the harvesting of 250 coconuts per worker, per day; any member of the community who chose to do so could leave the islands, with three months' notice, but they could never return (Hunt 1989, 5–6; Birch 1885, 16–17). The settlement on Cocos remained a private project until the islands were annexed by Captain Stephen Grenville Fremantle for the British Empire in 1857; he had in fact made a mistake, as he had originally been directed to another set of Cocos Islands (part of the Andaman Islands) in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>11</sup> In 1886 an indenture from Queen Victoria formalized the Clunies-Ross family's ownership of the islands (*United Nations Involvement with Australia's Territories* 1975, 163–65; Hunt 1989, 7).

While the settlement and political structure of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands appear to be relatively unique in the colonial history of the eastern Indian Ocean, the history of music on Cocos reflects the situation of a few other islands—such as Bermuda, where the earliest settlers in the early sixteenth century encountered a natural environment and soundscape as yet unmarked by any permanent or settled human intervention (Tomlinson 2007, 1–3). From the 1820s to the early 1950s, the culture changed rapidly as a result of external influences, immigration

and emigration, the introduction of new technologies, and the resourcefulness of the local community in finding new ways to adapt to the environment. However, the ruling family controlled many aspects of this process. Rosemary Ann Brockman, drawing on a model devised by George L. Beckford (1972), has described Cocos as a plantation community that “was both a total economic system and a total social system” (Brockman 1981, 29). The history of transplanted music and dance on Cocos is in many ways intertwined with the forms of control exerted by the dominant ruling family.

It seems that some aspects of Scottish culture—such as dancing and celebrations for New Year—were grafted onto the practices of the Cocos Malay community, and that Cocos Malays were integrated into multiple generations of the Clunies-Ross family through marriage and children. Yet a circumstance that distinguishes Cocos from many other British colonial outposts, at least until the early twentieth century, is that two out of five heads of the Clunies-Ross family married a non-European wife and had children with them. John George Clunies-Ross married Supia Dupong (or Dayapong, 1823–1863) in 1841; she was from Sumbawa, near Bali, and her gravestone on Cocos “says she was born in Cape Town in 1823” (Clunies-Ross 2009, 51).<sup>12</sup> Their son, George Clunies-Ross, married Inin (1850–1889), a Cocos Malay woman, in 1868. In her role as the community’s matriarch, George’s wife Inin (figure 12.2) appears to have played a significant role in influencing domestic life through the institution of a top-down model of household management. Henry O. Forbes observed in 1885: “Every Cocos girl has had her term of apprenticeship to spend in Mrs. Ross’s house in learning under her direction sewing, cooking, and every house-wifely duty as practised in European homes” (Forbes 1885, 18). Following Inin’s death in 1889, George married again in 1896 (Clunies-Ross 2009, 79); his second wife Ayesha—who was also Cocos Malay—appears to have held a position of authority and influence in the community.

Like George, other men of the Clunies-Ross family married Malay women, as a report of 1885 stated: “The Ross family consists of seven brothers and two sisters. The men are hardy, intelligent, and well-informed. They have all received a Scotch education, and have made up their minds to settle down in the Islands and intermarry (as five of them have done) with the natives” (Adams 1885, 3). The core and extended family were thus becoming closely integrated with the Cocos Malay community and adapted aspects of their culture to fit with prevailing local norms, while maintaining cultural differences (such as site of residence, and freedom to travel) that symbolized their political position. However, this acculturation came to the notice of British authorities, who were suspicious of it. In 1891, British colonial inspector Walter Egerton explicitly criticized George Clunies-Ross’s lack of provision for English-language training on the islands, writing: “It is lamentable to see the way in which even his own nephews and nieces grow up, unable to speak anything but Malay” (*Papers Relating to the Cocos-Keeling and Christmas Islands*



FIGURE 12.2. Inin Clunies-Ross (*left*) with a cousin of her husband George Clunies Ross (*right*). Photograph by Capt. Adams R.N. (1885), no. 2 of 20 appended to Ernest Woodford Birch, *The Report of Mr. E.W. Birch, Deputed by the Officer Administering the Government of the Straits Settlements (Mr. Cecil C. Smith, C.M.G.) to Visit the Cocos-Keeling Islands* ([Singapore]: n.pub., 1885). King's College London, Foyle Special Collections Library. The handwritten caption reads: "M.<sup>rs</sup> George Ross. Miss Ross—a cousin of the present proprietor."

1897, 48). It appears that none but the patriarch's direct heirs were taught a sufficient degree of English to impress any colonial officials visiting from Singapore. In response to this observation, Lord Knutsford (Secretary of State for the Colonies) wrote from Downing Street, London, to Sir Cecil Clementi Smith (1840–1916), then governor of Singapore: "Unless the Ross family as a whole maintains its status as that of a race boasting a higher civilization than that of the natives, it will be difficult hereafter to allow the leaders of the family to continue in that unique position of authority over the population which they have hitherto enjoyed" (*Papers Relating to the Cocos-Keeling and Christmas Islands* 1897, 50; Brockman 1981, 45).

Thus, within the space of three generations, the family had become strongly interconnected with the Cocos Malay community and saw themselves as part of it, although they did not convert to Islam. They maintained a sense of distinction as rulers of the islands and emphasized a Scottish identity. In the late 1930s G. W. Webb, the District Officer on Christmas Island, stated that "John Sydney [*sic*] Clunies Ross . . . regards himself as the head of the community and his word is final in all matters, 'after the fashion of the old Scottish head of the clan[,] as he himself put it'" (National Archives of the United Kingdom, CO 273/632/2,

“Administration of Cocos Islands: Mr J S Clunies-Ross,” G. W. Webb, “Report on Cocos Islands” [8 December 1937], 35). It is significant to note that John Sidney was also described in a secret British military document of 1941 as “Seven eighths Malay and one eighth Scot, whose Malay mother and grandmother possessed royal blood” (National Archives of the United Kingdom, CAB 106/100, “Reconnaissance report on the Cocos-Keeling Islands 1941 Mar. by Colonel R. H. F. Duckworth, Royal Engineers,” 5). Of this ruler’s four grandparents, only one was European, which in fact made his ancestry three-quarters Malay. Unlike his father and grandfather, however, he would marry an Englishwoman, as would his son John Cecil (Hunt 1989, 123).

### OUTSIDERS’ VIEWS OF TRANSPLANTED MUSIC AND DANCE ON COCOS

A traditional narrative of the Cocos Malay community is that of isolation and separation from the outside world, with contact mediated by the Clunies-Ross family, who maintained total control over economy, education, and cultural life. Nevertheless, a diachronic examination of archival material complicates this picture, demonstrating that there was significantly more interaction with people beyond the islands, at least during the rule of the first four family heads, and even in the time of the last ruler. Cable and wireless communication, the bartering of goods, the sending of letters (and, in the later twentieth century, sound recordings of messages; see Hunt 1989, 151, 160), and interactions with visitors to the islands were all ways in which external contact took place. These circumstances resulted in the circulation, transplantation, and local cultivation of specific kinds of performing arts. In particular, many Malay and Javanese forms of music, dance, and drama were transplanted to Cocos, where they were cultivated assiduously.

The interwoven histories of the Clunies-Rosses and the Cocos Malay community, whose lives were collectively affected by maritime enterprises and trade (although not equally, with a social hierarchy on the islands), sets the backdrop for a remarkable set of performing arts practices transplanted to Cocos. Many genres of music and dance were brought to the islands, where they were cultivated by numerous generations. The earliest historical description of music and dance on the islands comes from the pen of the young Charles Darwin (1809–1882), who arrived at Cocos on the HMS *Beagle* in April 1836. Although Darwin sojourned there only twelve days (April 1–12), he wrote evocatively of Cocos and its inhabitants, and his brief remarks in his published *Journal and Remarks* of 1839 were surely one of the first accounts of the islands and their people to reach a broad international readership. His report came at a significant time, just ten years after the establishment of the community on Cocos.

Darwin gave an outsider’s account of the first generation of settlers, from the perspective of an educated naturalist. While much of his short narrative focuses

on the natural history of the islands—geology, fauna, and flora—he took a special interest in the people, their voices, their dwellings, reporting on the unusual circumstances of the people's arrival in the islands, their manner of subsistence, their cultural origins, and even music and dance. On April 3, 1836, Darwin recorded in his diary:

After dinner we staid to see a half superstitious scene acted by the Malay women. They dress a large wooden spoon in garments, carry it to the grave of a dead man, and then at the full of the moon they pretend it becomes inspired, and will dance and jump about. After the proper preparations, the spoon held by two women became convulsed, and danced in good time to the song of the surrounding children and women. It was a most foolish spectacle, but Mr. Liesk [the English resident in charge during the absence of John Clunies-Ross] maintained that many of the Malays believed in its spiritual movement. The dance did not commence till the moon had risen, and it was well worth remaining to behold her bright globe so quietly shining through the long arms of the cocoa-nuts, as they waved in the evening breeze. These scenes of the tropics are in themselves so delicious, that they almost equal those dearer ones to which we are bound by each best feeling of the mind. (Darwin 1839, 546)

This is the earliest known description of performing arts on Cocos and gives a fascinating glimpse of the kinds of animist practices that originally existed in this Muslim community. (The islanders already identified as Muslims and were perceived as such; a letter of 1836 from Port Jackson, Australia, describing Cocos, states that “pigs . . . the Malays would not touch, or attend to, being Mohametans” (National Archives of the United Kingdom, ADM 125/131, “The Cocos or Keeling Islands and Seychelles,” f. 31r).)

The “wooden spoon” was probably a wooden grave marker (Hunt 1989, 3, citing Bunce; Clunies-Ross 2009, 39) that appears to have become spiritually animated in the course of the ritual. From the words “acted” and “spectacle,” however, it is unclear whether this was a performance that was specially staged for the visitors. It is significant to note Darwin's comment that the spoon “danced in good time to the song of the surrounding children and women.” Although he makes no further comment about this vocal music, or about how many men were present, he mentions earlier in his entry for the same day that he “liked both their general expression and the sound of their voices” (Darwin 1839, 545). The location of the event is not made clear; Darwin refers to being at “the Settlement” (on Home Island), where “Captain Ross and Mr. Liesk live in a large barn-like house open at both ends, and lined with mats made of the woven bark. The houses of the Malays are arranged along the shore of the lagoon” (1839, 545). Darwin's account is unique among archival records of performing arts in this early phase of settlement. It seems possible that Darwin was accompanied by his servant Syms Covington, who was a musician (fiddler). Nevertheless, Covington makes no mention of this event in his journal, but he does sketch a house and a *jukung* (Covington 1995).

Other nineteenth-century voyagers to the islands left brief remarks about what they encountered there, and colonial reports of the 1880s onward give more detailed descriptions of cultural practices, although they are based on relatively short visits (see discussion of some in Irving 2019, 305–8). A more detailed account of Cocos Malay customs and practices was made by Wood-Jones (1912, 45–56), who as mentioned above became a son-in-law of George Clunies-Ross in 1910. John Hunt notes that while his writings give a valuable perspective of Home Island during a period of cultural transition, “rather too often he reflects the prejudices and historical perspectives of his host (and later father-in-law)” (Hunt 1989, 182). Another was made by Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill (1911–1963), a British medical doctor who in 1941 lived on the islands for ten and a half months (Gibson-Hill 1947, 170–74). According to John Hunt (1989, 25), the observations of these two authors had varying degrees of reliability. Like other accounts of the time, we must read them with caution.

#### MINSTRELSY, DRAMA, DANCING, AND GRAMOPHONES

A range of evidence left by visitors to Cocos attests to the diverse range of performing arts transplanted to the islands. When ships visited the islands, their own crews and passengers contributed to musical life on the islands, and fleeting archival references offer glimpses of these events. Some were one-off performances, and there is no proof of transplanted practices taking root. For example, a handwritten caption to a photograph from 1885 (figure 12.3), at the time of the visit of the ship *Espoir*, states: “A group of villagers—both Cocos born & Bantamese taken after the ‘Espoir’ Christy Minstrel [*sic*] performance. Some marines & Blue jackets may be seen in the group” (Photograph no. 12, Appendix XIV, in the copy of Birch 1885 held by King’s College London, Foyle Special Collections Library, FOL. DS486.5 K4 STR). “Christy’s Minstrels” was a kind of blackface minstrelsy originating in New York that since the mid-nineteenth century had had a relatively standardized style of performance (Henderson 2001). It was probably fairly common on board British and American ships calling at Indian Ocean ports; it became popular in southern Africa, and minstrel songs entered Cape Malay repertory (Laffan, personal comm., March 14, 2020; Desai 2010, 715). Minstrel performances by ships’ ensembles before local audiences in various ports of call clearly contributed to the dissemination and knowledge of the genre, but whether minstrelsy entered into lasting practice on Cocos is unknown. The annotation to this photograph is so far the only archival evidence of this practice on Cocos; it is nevertheless possible that more stories may emerge.

A number of genres of music-drama were performed for events such as circumcisions (*sunat*) and weddings (*kawin*). The *wayang kulit* theater was transplanted to Cocos in the 1860s, by Nek Sebina, an immigrant laborer from Banten (see Hunt 1989, 38, 46; Lindsay 1997). It became a popular genre and in the 1930s performances

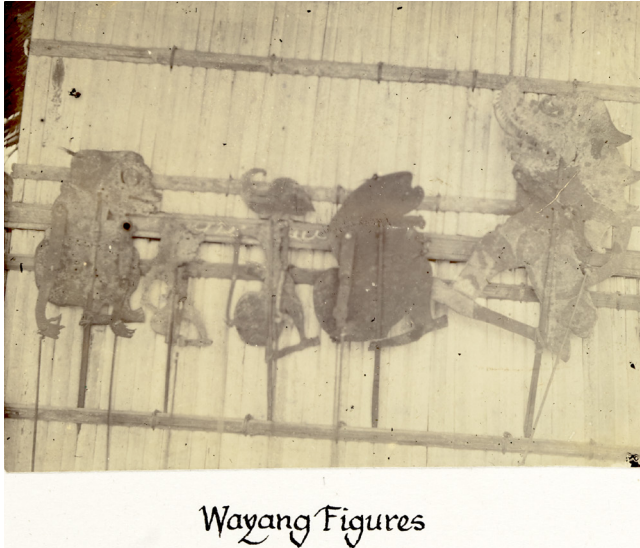




FIGURE 12.3. Photograph by Capt. Adams R.N. (1885), no. 12 of 20 appended to Ernest Woodford Birch, *The Report of Mr. E.W. Birch*. King's College London, Foyle Special Collections Library. Part of the handwritten caption reads: "A group of villagers—both Cocos born & Bantamese taken after the 'Espoir' Christy Minstrel performance. Some marines & Blue jackets may be seen in the group. In the background the old man with white whiskers & beard is Neh Basir, the oldest inhabitant. The old man under the porch on the right is Pa Adim the senior Penghulu or headman."

given by the *dalang* (*wayang* master) Nek Itjang (1867–1949) were reportedly accompanied by an instrumental ensemble of *kendong* (i.e., *gendang*; two-headed drum), *kenong* (a gong in a wooden frame), *gambang* (Javanese xylophone), and *suling* (end-blown flute); members of the Cocos Malay community commissioned these for celebrations surrounding a circumcision ritual, at the cost of around three weeks' wages (Hunt 1989, 46). Two rare photographs taken by Charles W. Andrews (1866–1924) in 1898 (one reproduced in figure 12.4), held in London's Natural History Museum, show some of the puppets; they appear to have attracted the attention of this visitor to Cocos.<sup>13</sup> A full set of seventy-five puppets has survived on Cocos to the present day, and since 1987 has been on display in the Home Island Museum (Hunt 1989, 46; Lindsay 1997). According to Hunt, who cites interviews of Cocos Malay informants Nek Dittie, Nek Bika, and Nek Renja, "all the major characters of the Pandawa Cycle (the Javanese version of the Indian epic, the Mahabharata) are represented, including Arjuna the ideal hero, his wife Dewi Sumbadra, Hanuman the monkey warrior, the gods Batara Guru and the beloved Semar, and a host of monsters, villains, servants and heroes" (Hunt 1989, 46). Following the death of Nek Itjang, "the gamelan instruments were thrown into the sea and the puppets locked in a chest for almost 40 years" (Hunt, quoted in Lindsay 1997).





### Wayang Figures

FIGURE 12.4. “Wayang Figures.” From “Photographs of Cocos Keeling Island. taken 1898. by Chas. W. Andrews,” DF 152/2/9. Library and Archives, Natural History Museum, London.

*Bangsawan* (Malay folk theater, deriving from the Parsi-derived theater genre prevalent in colonial Malaya) was also present on Cocos. Also introduced by Nek Itjang, it featured a large number of stories, and some performances were opened with “a prayer for Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands,” which Hunt states contributes to indications that it originated from Java (1989, 47). The genre—combining drama with vocal and instrumental music, and dancing—is still practiced on Home Island, although only occasionally; a performance was recorded in 2016 (Irving and McCallum 2020). Yet one of the most prominent forms of performing arts on Cocos, and one in which the entire community came together, was dancing. Dances took place outdoors and in communal structures, but also in the home of the Clunies-Ross family. Like the plantation estates of parts of the Americas, the house of the patron was the locus of assemblies involving the whole community and the site of considerable interaction (Brockman 1981, 95). The Clunies-Ross family’s desire to maintain a position of prestige within the community involved the building of a large mansion in 1893 (Hughes 1950, 99; Hunt 1989, 17). Surviving today, it is known in English as Oceania House and in Malay as *rumah besar* (the big house). These dances were performed for New Year’s Eve but also ad hoc for visiting officials, and Queen Elizabeth II in 1954.

In the late 1890s, several official British colonial reports on the islands mentioned performances of music and dance, noting the hybrid mix of traditions. One such report was made by Arthur Keyser in 1896 at a dinner hosted by George

Clunies-Ross (see Irving 2019, 306). Musical exchanges took place on visiting ships too; in the same report of Keyser, he relates that eighteen members of the Ross family came aboard the HMS *Æolus* for dinner, after which “some of the ship’s company gave a most enjoyable concert, and the evening closed with an impromptu dance” (*Papers Relating to the Cocos-Keeling and Christmas Islands* 1897, 88). Such events were part of the regular traffic of sailors coming and going. In a report of a visit in 1897, Justice Andrew J. Leach described the dances as “malengo,” a dance involving men and women, and a dance similar to Sir Roger de Coverley (*Cocos-Keeling and Christmas Islands: Report on the Annual Visit for 1897* 1897, 21). These performances have been identified as the practices known today as *melenggok*, *selong*, and *dangsa* (Hunt 1989, 18; see also Anthony 2003; and Irving and McCallum 2020).

When the Clunies-Ross patriarch was absent, his wife or another relative would host visitors. In September 1901, W. Langham-Carter (Acting-Collector of Land Revenue, Singapore) visited Cocos in the official capacity of conducting a colonial inspection for the Straits Settlement government. George Clunies-Ross was absent from the islands, having gone to London for an eye operation, but Langham-Carter was received by George’s son, John Sidney Clunies-Ross, and George’s wife Ayesha. Langham-Carter wrote at the conclusion of his official report:

Information was freely given, boats provided, and their usual generous hospitality displayed by the Ross family. On my last night, Mrs. Ross kindly afforded such of the officers of the “Rosario” [his ship] as could be present and myself the pleasure of witnessing a Cocos’ ball [*sic*]. This consisted mainly of reels and country dances, taken part in by the Islanders, but omitted the more violent efforts, such as the “Hunting of the Fowl,” etc., described by Mr. Leach and Mr. Farrer [in their previous reports]. (*Cocos Islands. Report for 1901 1902*, 13)

From such descriptions, it appears that a significant degree of blending of Scottish and Malay cultural practices was occurring in the formal dances at the Clunies-Ross house, but that Scottish identity was being both cultivated and privileged.

Few accounts of dances have emerged from the decades that follow, but in reporting a performance given at a dinner on April 17, 1948, British naval captain M. J. Ross gave an intriguing description of styles. He described how the dances began with a *ronggeng* performed by children, after with the adults performed Malay and Scottish dances (accompanied by four biola players and a number of drummers) with an increasing number of Scottish dances being performed, and the music accompanying them being “easily recognisable Scottish Airs” (National Archives of the United Kingdom, ADM 1/21152, “Cruise of HMS HART to Cocos and Christmas Islands: Report of Proceedings” [1948], 8; see further discussion of this quotation in Irving [2019, 307–8]). From the 1950s, new dance music was introduced by John Cecil Clunies-Ross and his wife Daphne (née Parkinson). While older forms were still practiced, they gradually attained the status of “tradi-

tional” *dangsa cocos*; new forms were called “Scottish dancing,” and the two styles coexisted (McCallum forthcoming).

During the first half of the twentieth century, the types of accompaniment used expanded from fiddles and drums to include gramophone records, accordions, and various other instruments. It is unknown exactly when the first gramophone came to Cocos—or, indeed, when the first sound recording was made there, and with what equipment—but shipping records of the Clunies-Ross Estate indicate some of the musical materials brought to the islands.<sup>14</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, there appear regular orders for numerous sets of “Malay Dance Records,” “Malay gramophone records,” and peripherals such as gramophone needles (on one occasion in 1923, some 1,000 needles were ordered) (National Archives of Australia, A9752/119, “Caldbeck MacGregor—Accounts and indents and correspondence”; National Archives of Australia, A9752/118, “Invoices from Messrs MacGregor and Company, Singapore” [1933–37]). Although most of the records are unidentified, a 1936 order included recordings of European art music by Weber, Wagner, Chopin, Gounod, and Rachmaninoff (National Archives of Australia A9752/118, “Invoices from Messrs MacGregor and Company, Singapore” [1933–37], March 19, 1936). An order in 1935 included popular music such as “Who Is Sylvia,” “My Bonnie,” “Shenandoah,” and “4 Columbia latest Dance records” (National Archives of Australia A9752/118, “Invoices from Messrs MacGregor and Company, Singapore” [1933–37], November 1, 1935). The recorded repertory imported to the islands from Singapore likely reflected the general trends in public taste and commercial production in the burgeoning gramophone industry in British colonial Malaya (on this industry, see Beng 1996 and 2013). Imported discs were likely destined for Cocos Malays as well as the Clunies-Ross family; gramophone records and at least one gramophone player were present within the kampong, as a document of 1944 attests (see Irving 2019, 301–2).

## CONCLUSION

Cultural transplantation is a common phenomenon resulting from the circulation of performing arts around the Indian Ocean and in Southeast Asia. Not all genres or practices take root in a host culture, but only those that are meaningful to a local community or which are compatible with prevailing ways of life and religious structures—or those that are imposed by an influential ruling family. The relatively rare evidence and examples of performing arts on Cocos from its settlement in 1826 until the middle of the twentieth century, teased out from traces in the archives and comments in colonial reports and travelogues, demonstrate that there was a diverse repertory of genres and practices, some reflecting patterns in other plantation societies around the world.

Although there were policies of isolation and the ruling family exerted strong control in mediating contact with the outside world, it would be misleading to see these islands merely as a cultural zone that was the end recipient of imported cultural practices and objects. Rather, Cocos was the fertile ground of hybrid

responses to multiple cultural influences and a place where unique local practices emerged. Glimpses into the community's life afforded by archival data, some newly gleaned, contribute to the broader picture of transplanted cultures in the maritime Malay world, and further details are likely to continue to emerge.

## NOTES

1. John Clunies Ross (1786–1854) was present on the islands from February 1827, and consolidated his rule following the exit of Alexander Hare in 1831, ruling until his death. He was succeeded by John George Clunies Ross (1823–1871; ruled from 1854); George Clunies Ross (1842–1910; ruled from 1871); and John Sidney Clunies-Ross (1868–1944; ruled from 1910). The family's surname became hyphenated from the fourth generation, but for consistency is hyphenated throughout the main text. The fifth hereditary owner of the islands, John Cecil Clunies-Ross (1928–2021), came into his inheritance on the death of his father on August 14, 1944. He arrived on Cocos on July 6, 1946, with his mother, Mrs. Rose Clunies-Ross (née Nash), who controlled the estate until her son reached the age of majority. His ownership ended on September 1, 1978, when the Australian government purchased the property of the Clunies-Ross Estate (except his house and another building). Data from Bunce (1988, 63, 133) and Linford (2009, 127, 206–8).

2. For a critique of Hughes's book, see Hunt (1989, 184).

3. Official documents from the time acknowledged that it was “admittedly cruel to send away the surplus population.” See National Archives of the United Kingdom, CO 537/4738, “Cocos Islands,” “Notes of Conference at the Colonial Office on the 7th March, 1949,” 125–32.

4. Thanks to John Hunt for this insight.

5. For studies on music and dance since the transfer to Australia, see Irving and McCallum (2020); Irving (2019, 288–99); McCallum (2020); and McCallum (forthcoming). For recent anthropological studies see Winarnita and Herriman (2012), Herriman and Winarnita (2021), and Herriman (2022).

6. There may, however, have been previous brief encampments by shipwrecked or marooned sailors (Holman 1835, vol. 4, 374; Guppy 1890, 2).

7. Thanks to Michael Laffan for pointing out this quotation and to Katharine Anderson for providing a transcription of the manuscript (now published as Clunies-Ross [2020]). On this source see also Anderson (2018).

8. See a letter of March 19, 1830, by surgeon William Simpson of HM Sloop *Comet* (National Archives of the United Kingdom, ADM 125/131, “The Cocos or Keeling Islands and Seychelles,” f. 5v); it is also mentioned by John Clunies Ross ca. 1830 (as reproduced in Gibson-Hill 1952, 235–47, esp. 244).

9. This source is cited and the text reproduced with the kind permission of the Board of Trustees, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

10. This document was transcribed by Birch (1885, 16–17), and a manuscript copy is in the National Archives of the United Kingdom, ADM 125/131, “The Cocos or Keeling Islands and Seychelles,” 79r–81r; a more recent transcription is in Gibson-Hill (1952, 279–81).

11. An account of the Fremantle's act of taking possession of Cocos is in “Taking Possession of the Cocos Islands,” Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies D-FR/213/12, “Papers Relating to the Cocos Islands, Including a Long Report on Taking Possession of the Islands by H.M.S. *Juno* (under Captain Stephen Grenville Fremantle), 1857–1858.”

12. Thanks to Michael Laffan (personal comm., July 17, 2020) for information about Dayapong.

13. His papers also include examples of *pantun* (quatrains in Malay). These must be among the earliest written examples of the genre, at least in romanized form, from Cocos. Library and Archives, Natural History Museum, London, C. W. Andrews, untitled notebook DF 152/2/2, n.pag.

14. Thanks to John “Johnny” George Clunies-Ross for permission to cite these shipping records held in the National Archives of Australia, within A9752, “Collection of correspondence, photographs, press clippings and accounts relating to the Clunies Ross administration of Cocos (Keeling) Islands.”

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