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The story made international headlines and invited global condemnation of the figure at its center. On November 16, 2018, a 26-year-old American missionary was killed by members of an uncontacted tribe on North Sentinel Island, a part of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands archipelago in the Bay of Bengal. The young missionary in question, John Allen Chau, was born and raised in Vancouver, Washington, and, as several news articles attested in the wake of his killing, was deeply ensconced in American Evangelical Christianity. In addition to criticizing the admittedly colonial implications of Chau's proselytizing (he cited David Livingstone as one of his idols) and his disregard for the health of his potential converts (due to their lack of biological immunity against foreign diseases like flu or measles), the news media also emphasized the criminality of his actions. In 2017, Chau arrived in Port Blair, the seat of the Indian provincial government on South Andaman, in order to prepare for his trip to North Sentinel Island. The island, because it is home to the "last uncontacted tribe in the world," is entirely off limits. However, Chau illegally bribed two fishermen to take him to their shores and, eventually, to his death. His body was never recovered either, per his wishes in a 13-page letter he gave to the fishermen before his disappearance: "Don't retrieve my body."

It was not just Chau's illegal action that was the subject of these titillating headlines. One would think that prosecuting the actions of an endangered tribe, of which according to some sources only fifteen to twenty people survive, would be a foregone conclusion. But numerous publications broached two interrelated questions: one, why haven't the United States and India been able to repatriate Chau's body? And two, will the United States prosecute the Sentinelese for killing one of its citizens? Indian police boats attempted to approach the island and assessed the situation beyond the reach of the islander's arrows, the same arrows they have historically used to defend themselves against outsiders and one of which, in a stroke of incredibly precise symbolism, is known to have pierced a waterproof Bible which Chau was carrying before another arrow probably killed him. But the situation proved too dangerous, both for the police, subject to the arrows, and the islanders, subject to strange microbes. A case was filed against "unknown persons," and the US deferred to the Indian government's judgment to leave the Sentinelese alone. Chau's family refused to prosecute either the Sentinelese or the fishermen who took their son there, although the latter were subsequently arrested by Indian officials for breaking laws stipulated for the protection of the endangered tribe. It seemed that the Sentinelese people's lack of biological immunity also gave them a juridical immunity from international law.

The case of John Allen Chau is instructive for the examination and interrogation of a host of terms that have historically attended the representation of the Andaman Islands: “savagery,” insularity, immunity, and impunity. Andamanese tribes, and especially the Sentinelese in Chau’s narrative, appear in the *longue durée* of cultural representation as variants of the “vanishing Indian”—outside of time, always in danger of extinction. Indeed, these same descriptors were routinely deployed by the news media in order to underscore the strangeness of John Allen Chau’s fatal escapade. In a *New York Times* article on the killing, an aerial photograph from 2004 shows a “a Sentinel tribesman aim[ing] with his bow and arrow at an Indian Coast Guard helicopter as it flew over the island in 2004.” The caption goes on to describe North Sentinel as “home to one of the last undiluted hunter-gatherer societies, a rugged, Manhattan-sized island where a few dozen people live trapped in time and in total isolation.” Interestingly, qualifiers such as “undiluted,” “trapped,” and “total isolation” almost always appear together with references to the islanders’ lack of innate or acquired immunity to foreign “microbes,” indexing the islanders’ precarious lives and constructing the island’s amphibious circumference as a cellular membrane susceptible to all manner of pathogens.

Similar language of immunity is being deployed to describe the diagnosis of COVID-19 among members of the Great Andamanese tribe. Survival International, the only global organization advocating for the rights of tribal peoples, which also condemned the Indian government’s negligence leading to the John Allen Chau fiasco, recently reported that at least five members of the Great Andamanese tested positive for COVID-19. They also indicated that other tribes, such as the Jarawa and the Sentinelese, may also be at risk. A senior researcher with the organization argued that “the Andaman authorities must act urgently to prevent the virus reaching more Great Andamanese and to prevent infection in the other tribes. The waters around North Sentinel must be properly policed, and no outsiders should enter the territories of any of the Andaman tribes without their consent.” Other news outlets, primarily Indian ones, immediately held ten Muslim inhabitants of Port Blair responsible for introducing the epidemic in the isolated archipelago; it was found that they had attended a meeting of the Sunni fundamentalist missionary organization Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi, an event which became a veritable coronavirus petri dish. If the Christian missionary John Allen Chau hadn’t succeeded in further endangering the already endangered tribes, the Muslim missionaries certainly had.

Leaving to one side the Hindu nationalist Indian government’s scapegoating of regular Muslim citizens as insidious carriers of the virus and going back to the John Allen Chau case, the consistent representation of the islanders’ centuries-long insularity is part and parcel of the way their “undeveloped” biological immunities are imagined; the lack of “acquired” immunity signals their lack of development *tout court* and suggests they are trapped in a time capsule outside of modernity. This exceptional insularity is also the reason for the Sentinelese’s legal or juridical immunity from prosecution for killing the missionary, an immunity which bleeds into impunity. As an article in *The New Republic* averred:

It is hard to imagine another scenario in which an American citizen could be killed with what appears to be total impunity—and not merely impunity, but with an accompanying notion

that justice, however crudely, has been served. In other instances when Christian missionaries have plunged recklessly into hostile places like North Korea or the Taliban heartland, their frustrated governments have worked to secure their safety and release, under the legal and moral precepts that innocent people, no matter how misguided, should not be killed or jailed for attempting to spread their religious faith.

Chau's case is different. It is basically a miracle that the Sentinelese, numbering as few as a few dozen people, continue to exist.

It is inconceivable to the author of the above article that the United States, a superpower known to have its way with governments around the world and to have participated in countless incidents of saving American hostages abroad (Iran in 1979, for instance), or negotiating the extraordinary rendition of terrorist suspects, has its hands tied when it comes to repatriating Chau's body or prosecuting the Sentinelese, who therefore appear to the United States as an anachronism and the islands themselves as what Anne McClintock would call "anachronistic space." If the settler colonial United States had seen Turtle Island as a vast *terra nullius* which gave it a certain impunity to break its treaties and do with the Natives as it wished, even as the Native Americans' compromised biological immunities played to its advantage, the Sentinelese people's contemporary insularity from the community of nations rendered them immune from American intervention. They may not be immune to the pandemics of the world, but they are to its laws. As it should be.

Note: This article is an excerpt from the author's dissertation chapter on cultural histories and representations of immunity, impunity, and malaria in the Andaman Islands.