# IN CONVERSATION: MIKKO TOIVANEN ON NINETEENTH-CENTURY TRANSCOLONIAL TOURISM[1]

**Mikko Toivanen**
University of Warsaw

## ABSTRACT

In this interview, Mikko Toivanen shares his research on colonial tourism and its relationship with the environment in Ceylon, Java, and the Strait Settlements in the nineteenth century. He discusses how British and Dutch colonialism interacted with the environment during that century.

**Archisman Chaudhuri** (**AC**): What triggered your interest in studying colonial travelogues? And, from the perspective of understanding these travelogues as sources that speak of human-environment interaction, is there any way you can tell us how these travelogues describe, or explore, colonial developments over the long-term in the nineteenth century?

**Mikko Toivanen** (**MT**): I started working on colonial travel during my masters' studies, so this has been going on for quite a long time. I think there's something about travelogues, or travel writing, as a source that is inherently fascinating because it's a very quick way to get an overview of everything that's happening in a region or an empire, at least from the imperial point of view.

The natural environment is extremely important for all kinds of travel, but especially for the early colonial tourism that I'm interested in. Many of the sites that people visit, or see, are points of interest because of the natural environment. In the most obvious, clear sense, the natural environment itself is a destination. People go to see

---

[1] This conversation was first recorded on the *Indian Ocean World Podcast.* To listen to the whole conversation, see: Renee Manderville, "19th Century Transcolonial Tourism," *The Indian Ocean World Podcast* on *Appraising Risk*, (October 12, 2021): <https://www.appraisingrisk.com/2021/10/12/19th-century-transcolonial-tourism/>.

volcanoes on Java, people go to see waterfalls, people go hiking in the mountains, so nature itself is a destination — as it is in Europe at this time as well.

Secondly, colonial travelogues give you a very clear idea of how colonization transforms the natural environment. The nineteenth century was a period of colonial expansion and colonial consolidation in much of the region of what is now known as Southeast Asia and around the Bay of Bengal. You can see new plantations forming, new cash crops introduced, how they take space from 'wild nature' (notwithstanding that term's loaded connotations) or nature that hasn't been 'colonized' in that sense. They become productive agricultural land.

Thirdly, I think an interesting thing with plantations is that they become tourist sites and destinations in their own right. We don't often think of farms as tourist sites in the present day, except in particular circumstances, such as 'agriturismo' in Italy. But in the nineteenth century, people were very interested in seeing how new plantations worked: for example, the machinery and the organization of labour. In nineteenth-century tourism in Europe, but also in the colonial realm, there's very much this interest, this fascination, with new technology and how it's shaping the nature that becomes a part of the tourist discourse.

**AC**: Drawing upon Richard Grove's work on environmentalism in the British Empire, you argue that the reason why British and the Dutch colonial tourists were so interested in the Eastern Islands in the Indian Ocean is that they felt a disconnect between the industrialized societies back home in Great Britain or in the Netherlands, and the rustic, untampered nature they encountered in places like Ceylon, Java, and further in the Indonesian Archipelago. But what they encountered was also a product of colonial redesigning, which you argue led to the construction of botanical gardens. For instance, the Buitenzorg in Java, or the Gardens of Peradeniya in Ceylon and the gardens in Singapore. I also understand, however, that there was a strong tendency on the part of emperors or conquerors to redesign landscapes according to their whims. For instance, I'm reminded of the Mughal emperor Babur, who, after moving to South Asia from Central Asia in the sixteenth century, redesigned the landscape according to the charbagh gardens, which are now so typical of the Mughal style, and this is a style that he borrowed from Central Asia. You point out that the colonial botanical gardens also draw upon inspirations from Europe, and they are by no means the paradise-like Edens they are described as in the travelogues. But I felt that, in this case, environment becomes a performance by the colonial authorities. It's not just redesigning, it's a site of

performance, and even the travelogues that speak of the tours to these botanical gardens also become a performance of living up to the colonial realities. What is your take on that?

**MT**: I think that's an absolutely fascinating point and I really like how you raise the example of other rulers, before European colonization, using gardens as a site of imperial prestige. This is something that is often forgotten when we talk about botanical gardens in the nineteenth century, which we see as sites of European scientific worldviews. But there is a much longer history of gardens as a symbol of power, which the botanical gardens are also drawing upon.

You mentioned Richard Grove's work on how tropical islands came to be seen in the European imagination – in the imperial imagination – as paradise-like gardens of Eden. This is very much a discourse that you see in nineteenth-century travelogues — Ceylon is frequently referred to as the 'Eden of the Eastern Wave,' but similar language is also used for Java, for Singapore, and other places in the region. What I find interesting about this metaphor of the Garden of Eden is that it has a double meaning. It implies this 'untouched wilderness.' At the same time, it is a garden, so it also implies cultivated land, productive land, agricultural land. This kind of double meaning is used quite consciously by travel writers in the nineteenth century, where they often talk about the environment of these islands as being paradise-like and untouched. But when they describe it, they are not actually describing untouched land. They are precisely describing these botanical gardens, they are describing plantations, which are productive agricultural lands. So, there is this transformation of the meaning of what the Garden of Eden is, as the metaphor was used to make the case for making the environment work for the empire and leaving an imperial stamp on the environment as it becomes productive.

So, I absolutely take your point that botanical gardens are a performance of empires' relationships with the environment. There is an element of competitive botany, competitive garden-building in the nineteenth century, where Dutch travellers would go to Singapore and they'd say, 'well this is a nice garden, but we have a better one in Buitenzorg.' Especially earlier on in the period, British travelers would go to Buitenzorg and say, 'this is really nice. Maybe we should have something like this.' There is this kind of competition between these two major imperial powers.

What I'd also like to point out about botanical gardens is that there is a lot of very good work on botanical gardens in the nineteenth century, but they are quite often understood primarily as sites of science. In my work, what comes across in these

travelogues most forcefully is that they are also sites of leisure and entertainment for travelers, as well as for the elites of the local colonial society. People went there for the pleasure of a walk and for concerts. There was lot of social life, especially in Singapore. Events were organized in these gardens, and I think this is something to remember. They became an easy replacement for the supposedly 'untouched' wilderness of the colonies because they were a controlled environment. There was protection from excessive heat, insects, and diseases, which are things that the colonial environment – the tropical environment – was and remains frequently associated with. In the botanical garden, colonizers could experience the good sides of the tropical environment without the bad sides. That's the idea that is promoted in the travel writing that I'm interested in.

These gardens became a safe location for social life, also because they often had exclusive access. Sometimes only white people were allowed to get in; sometimes you have to be of an elite status to get in: it depended on time and place, but who got to be a part of the social life in the gardens was always restricted. They were made to be a showpiece of imperial culture, partly imported from Europe.

What always amuses me is this fact that I found in a document on the Peradeniya Gardens in Ceylon, where they imported park benches all the way from Britain just to create the right sort of environment, or look, for the garden. Clearly, you could have just built them there, but they were an important part of the look. This idea of botanical gardens as a representation of tropical environments that could be used as a stage for a certain kind of social life: that's what I'm interested in.

**AC**: You spoke of the trans-imperial networks of these travelers, particularly the Dutch and the British, that there is always some sort of correspondence. For example, you pointed out the case of the Dutch botanist W.H. de Vriese who went to Ceylon to understand coffee cultivation and to figure out how to replicate that in the Dutch East Indies. But what intrigued me was: do these travelers who are connected to each other in trans-imperial networks also speak to each other about the environment through their travelogues? Were there any trendsetting works that describe the flora and fauna in a colonial travelogue which were emulated by later travelers? If that was the case, in this process of emulating descriptions or painting pictures of the same place from a different time scale, does this process allow us, in any measure, a glimpse into changing colonial realities in the nineteenth century?

**MT**: One of the major arguments I make in my research is that there was this rather developed circuit of trans-colonial travel — leisure travel in particular — around the middle of the nineteenth century, that encompassed Southeast Asia and the region around the Bay of Bengal. The point that I am making is that this early colonial tourism was not national or restricted to a single colony, but that it was trans-colonial in nature. There were British colonial officials stationed in India, for example, who travel to Dutch East Indies, and there were many Dutch colonial officials who, when they went back to Europe — either at the end of their careers or for a stay — traveled through Singapore, Ceylon, and/or India. They saw these places as they traveled through the region, and so there is this creation of a regional colonial culture of travel. Precisely like you said, that leads to the emergence of a regional frame of reference, also for how people think about the natural environment.

A big part of this kind of travel is what is called 'invalid travel,' so people who go to places with supposedly more healthy climates to convalesce for a period. There were a lot of works published about this sort of travel, which gave people advice on where they should go. From the sources, you can then see the emergence of a hierarchy of places with the best climates for European colonial officials. For example, if you lived in Bengal, and you wanted to go somewhere healthier, you could go to Singapore which was considered better. But if you had more money, you should have gone to Java because that's *even better*. In Java, you could go to Buitenzorg, which is obviously the main travel destination on the island. If you had a bit more money and were a bit more adventurous, you could go to Bandung, which is not that far away but had what was believed to be a much better climate for a European constitution. So, you can see this kind of very detailed hierarchy of places and of what destinations are better than others, what kinds of climates are better than others – and it's being created on a regional scale.

You asked if there are trendsetting, or ground-breaking, works that introduced new travel destinations for the first time and then became replicated as a model of travel. Indeed, this is very much the case; this happened very quickly. For example, around the late 1830s or 1840s, the first popular, leisurely travel accounts from Ceylon started to be published in Britain. Augustus de Butts wrote one of these books in 1841 and he, in his introduction to the book, says that so much has been written about British India as a travel destination, but 'strange to say the beautiful and romantic island of Ceylon has remained in comparative obscurity.' So, he's very much making a claim on Ceylon as something

that hasn't been described before, and he's going to do this now for the first time (although he wasn't the first, of course).

Just thirty-four years later, in 1875, John Thomson wrote about Britain's Eastern possessions, and did so completely differently. When he mentioned Ceylon, he says: 'I need not pause to detail my experiences over one of the beaten tracks of modern tourists.' In those thirty-four years, Ceylon had become one of the 'been there, done that' tourist places that wasn't really interesting anymore. The process was very quick when something becomes first described in a touristic sense and then becomes over-described to the point where it's no longer interesting for readers.

Another example that I have is Charles Kinloch, who was a British official based in Bengal. He wrote about Java and the Straits in a book called *De Zieke Reiziger*, which is a Dutch name because he was traveling in a Dutch colony. The title means 'the invalid traveler'; he was on sick leave, basically. In his introduction to the book, he wrote that he decided to write the book because, at the time, there was no guidebook available for travelers who might be interested in this region, or this part of what we now call Southeast Asia. There was a gap in the market that he wanted to fill.

The travel route he described through Java, in particular, is one that many British travelers afterwards followed pretty faithfully. And, of course, this isn't solely due to the fact that many of these travelers would have read Kinloch's work — it's also due to infrastructure, and pre-existing Dutch travel habits. In my opinion, Charles Kinloch's work made this travel itinerary a model for future British travels on the island. He went to see, for example, the waterfalls near Bandung, and this then became the place that almost every British visitor to Java visited after him. Also, near Bandung, he went to see a particular coffee plantation, which also then became a place to see, almost like an item on a checklist that, if you go to central Java, you just had to see.

You also asked if these travel books allow us to see how empires' relationship with, or use of, the natural environment develops over this period of time. An example from Ceylon is Samuel White Baker, who was a famous hunter — he wrote hunting accounts — and general adventurer. Ceylon was particularly important for hunting tourism. Baker in his book, *Eight Years' Wanderings in Ceylon*, described the transformation of the natural environment over the decades that he had known the place. He wrote, for example, 'vast forests in which I formerly hunted elk and boar have now entirely disappeared,' and he's talking about how this land is being claimed for agricultural or coffee plantations. So, if you follow accounts of the same place over a few decades, you can see how the natural

environment has completely transformed, both by agriculture and the plantation economy, as well as by things like over-hunting.

**AC**: You mentioned that certain climates were described in a hierarchical order in terms of their ability to restore one's health and this is related to a developing sector of health tourism. For example, there was the idea of high-altitude places in South Asia that should be the place for an ill person to get his health back. How did a specific colonial policy develop, or publicize, these places as places where you could restore your health, or you could recover from an illness? Were there any specific measures to do that?

**MT**: I would perhaps argue that, in this early period of colonial tourism, it's not so much driven by the government as by individuals, by popular culture, and by interpersonal, informal connections, rather than big, state-backed initiatives. And so, the period is quite important here. The kind of tourism that I'm interested in — I call it 'proto-tourism' — is different from our idea of modern, twenty-first century tourism. But it's also important to point out that, in the nineteenth century, people were talking about tourism, and that this is what people meant by tourism, so the meaning of the word changes. The fully-fledged, 'mature' tourism that was also backed by government initiatives took off from the end of the nineteenth century and became more established as an industry in Asia in the early twentieth century.

In this 'proto-tourist' stage, it's really individual enterprises that drove the resort industry. For example, there were several attempts to establish Nuwara Eliya in colonial Ceylon as a resort for Europeans. Many of them failed – most failed, in fact. The reasons are tied in with inaccurate predictions about how much colonial settlement there was going to be in the next ten or twenty years. But it is also important to note that sometimes it was local rulers (and so not just European actors), such as the Sultan of Johor, who tried to promote Johor as a health resort for Singapore-based officials, or officials based in India. There was a wide variety of actors involved in these schemes, but they were primarily not centrally backed from the colonial government. In Java, the Dutch government did set up resorts, but they were primarily intended for internal use by colonial officials and military officers within the colony.

It is also important to make a distinction between two different spheres within which promotion of tourist resorts happened. It happened regionally in Southeast Asia, around the Bay of Bengal, in India, through colonial periodicals. For Southeast Asia, in

particular, there was the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago,* which was where people often wrote shorter pieces about a trip they made and wrote some advice: where you should go to a hotel; which volcano you should climb; and what sort of equipment you should have if you want to go hiking in the mountains. So, there was this kind of local press, which was important for spreading the word. Much of it is now, unfortunately, very difficult to trace because copies have just disappeared for the more short-lived journals.

Apart from that regional market, there were also major books and travelogues that were often published in Europe. These then took on more of a role as promoting specific colonies as sites of settlement, and for travel. A lot of the travel books were very explicitly promoted to young, British men, suggesting that they should move to Ceylon and start a plantation because that's where the future was. Also, on a more aesthetic, cultural level, for example, there were a lot of Scottish military officials in Ceylon. They often wrote about Ceylon, saying 'this reminds me of the Scottish Highlands', the Ceylon Highlands. They kind of create this reference frame based on European examples, or European models, that promoted these colonial destinations.

**AC**: You've argued that colonial travelogues, which spoke about visiting volcanoes or mountains, give this idea of primal fear associated with such places or that they portray an exotic kind of picture of these places. But you've written quite interestingly about Mount Bromo in eastern Java, which was an active volcano in the nineteenth century that erupted a number of times. This is a volcano that has been described by anthropologists as a 'human volcano system,' where people live very close to the mountain and their social, religious lives are associated with an annual festival dedicated to the mountain and worshiping the mountain god. Bromo caused serious environmental crises in the nineteenth century: its eruptions destroyed crops, its eruptions were associated with viral fevers which affected the entire surrounding region, and such eruptions would also force volcanic mountain communities to shift to alternative sources of occupation. Can descriptions of such volcanoes in colonial travel logs tell us anything about both the colonial understanding and the colonial-inspired popular understanding of such places?

**MT**: In the kinds of travel accounts that I research — popular travel writings — you don't really find deeper engagement with the local conditions or with the local human-environment relations, because travelers, by definition, only stayed in a place for a very short time, so they captured a snapshot, rather than an understanding of longer-term developments. This is particularly true of touristic travel writers, who wrote primarily for

entertainment, rather than someone like Franz Junghuhn, who was a scientist: a geologist wants to understand the place in a scientific sense and to get as much detail as he can out of it. So, there is this kind of superficiality in touristic travel accounts.

Mount Bromo is particularly interesting because it was an active volcano, but it was also an important cultural site and the site of a major Hindu festival. The travel writer William Barrington d'Almeida went there around the middle of the nineteenth century. In his travel book, *Life in Java*, he recalls two separate visits to Mount Bromo, on two separate days. The first of these is very much a classic volcano account, inspired by European volcano tourism of the nineteenth century. Vesuvius, in particular, was an archetype of a volcano as a tourist site in the nineteenth century where a lot of Europeans went. So Barrington d'Almeida writes about his first trip to Mount Bromo very much using the tropes of Vesuvius tourism from Europe. There are scenes of him as a lonely traveller; he's silent, contemplating at the edge of the volcano, this great destructive force. He's playing up these well-established romantic tropes that derive from Europe at the time.

By contrast, on his second visit to Mount Bromo, he describes the Hindu festival. He describes all the exotic, to his mind, details, the kind of rituals. He describes the pilgrims who came to the place, the colours and sounds of the celebrations. His first trip is depicting his personal experience of the volcano and the second trip is depicting the local, social experience of the volcano. It's this 'I and them' division, and I find it really interesting that he so clearly separated these two accounts into two different episodes, two different narratives, within his larger book. It seems to suggest that European travelers on Java at the time understood that there were different cultural significances attached to the volcano, and different ways for people to engage with the volcano. But they didn't quite have the tools to really bridge that boundary between different cultural interpretations. They had to silo them off into separate episodes. So that is a good example of how tourists, colonial travelers, tried to make sense of these, on the one hand colonial and on the other hand local, interpretations of these environmental sites and the different meanings.

**AC**: Do you think that colonial redesigning of natural environments in the nineteenth century in Ceylon, Singapore, and Java, and how they were portrayed in the colonial travel literature, still shapes the modern understanding of these places?

**MT**: To some extent, I am a little reluctant to answer that question because there is a lot that happened in the twentieth century that I'm not really an expert on. I think it's very important to consider what happened over the twentieth century because it's of crucial importance for questions of agency and control, especially questions of how post-independence regimes took over from colonial regimes, how they transformed these sorts of natural sites and travel destinations, and what happens in that point of inflection?

Nevertheless, it's a simple observation that many of the nineteenth century colonial tourism sites remain tourist destinations today. This is notably true of the botanical gardens. The Singapore Botanical Gardens are one of the major tourist sites in Singapore; the same goes for Bogor on Java, which the Dutch called Buitenzorg. These are big draws for global tourism in the present day.

There are also sites like those on Penang Island: you have Penang Hill or the waterfalls, which are very much packaged as places to see if you go to that part of Malaysia. This has been the case since the nineteenth century. The infrastructure that has developed around these sites is not the same infrastructure as in the nineteenth century, but it has been built on top of older colonial infrastructure, layer by layer.

An important point to make as well is that, nowadays, it's both the environment and the colonialism — the colonial history — that are packaged as products for tourists. For example, if you go to the Singapore botanical gardens, you enjoy the natural beauty of the place, but you're also enjoying the narrative of colonial history being presented to you. Then, afterwards, maybe you go to the Raffles Hotel in Singapore for the night, and you're being sold this tourist experience of colonialism as heritage, nature as heritage. So, these things are intertwined, I think that's important to keep in mind.

Maybe the point that I want to finish on, in terms of the natural environment and tourism in this region, is that the major form of global tourism in this region is now beach tourism, such as in Bali, or in Thailand, in various places. That's tourism for which the environment is of crucial importance, but it is a form of tourism that doesn't really have a nineteenth-century precedent. This is very much a twentieth century invention. The product you are being sold now, if you go to Thailand on a beach holiday, is of a much more recent creation than the kinds of tourism that I research.

But, of course, the beach industry is built on global economic relations, western cultural models, that are rooted in colonialism, in discourses rooted in the colonial period. The underpinning idea of exploiting nature for leisure does, in my opinion, derive from the same colonial extractive mindset that is also apparent in the sources that I've looked at. I am not an expert on beaches, professionally or in my personal life, but I think they

do reflect the same colonial histories that I've been looking at in my research of the nineteenth century.

Transcribed by Nadia Fekih (IOWC, McGill University)