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# A Postcolonial Dilemma Tale from the Harbour of St. Thomas in the US Virgin Islands

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The port of Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas has long been a vibrant centre for ship trafficking in the Caribbean, as it was during Danish colonial rule starting in 1672. In 1917, Denmark officially sold and left what became the US Virgin Islands. Not everybody left, though. The Danish-owned West Indian Company, which owned the majority of the St. Thomas port and its attendant facilities, stayed until 1993. At that point the harbour was sold to the Virgin Islanders, who for some time had complained about the fact that a Danish company still profited from the islands. The harbour of Charlotte Amalie, which is my central analytical unit here, thus provides a lens through which to approach Danish colonial imprints.

The harbour is and has been characterised by activities of a temporary and opportunistic kind: industries blossom, people and crops from far away get uprooted and replanted in the Caribbean, businesses provide work for locals, goods are shipped out to be consumed in other places. The transitory nature of projects designed by people elsewhere, I argue, is part of what colonialism is. As I will show, the traces of such projects appear not only as particular ecologies but also as dilemmas to be grappled with long after the foreign decision-makers have left. My approach to colonial legacies on the Virgin Islands, then, mobilises the shifting flows of people, commodities, and interests shipped in and out of Charlotte Amalie to leave behind altered landscapes that are continuously debated.

**Keywords:** Colonial legacies, harbour, ecology, Denmark, West Indian Company, cruise-ship tourism

## **Introduction: Incoming Waves and Insoluble Dilemmas in the St. Thomas Harbour**

A winding road took us up the hill from which we could overlook the spacious harbour of St. Thomas. The fresh breeze together with birds' song at the small parking lot contrasted with the noisy heavy traffic of Charlotte Amalie. Two big cruise ships were lined along the West India Company's quay, and in the other end of the harbour basin, along the

relatively new and deeper quay, *Harmony of the Sea*, one of the world's biggest cruise ships with a capacity for almost 9,000 passengers, lay docked. On this day, during the last of my three weeklong visits to St. Thomas, US Virgin Islands (November 2015, December 2016, and January 2017), one of the many people living off the harbour had taken me uphill. We had talked about the small island, populated with 51,000 inhabitants, and the challenges they faced. Our talk centred around the cruise ships that daily cruise in and out of the harbour and the 1.5 million passengers annually visiting St. Thomas.<sup>1</sup> We discussed how the infrastructure of the thirty-two-square-mile island could accommodate these sudden rushes of people visiting the island for six to eight hours before cruising off to other Caribbean islands and how to make the island profit the most from this industry. My field guide on this day knew the rhythm of the city of which we spoke much better than I, who was only another passer-by. He knew the chain reaction of activities that was set in motion when the huge cruise ships arrived in the early morning: how the taxis crowded on the pier patiently waited in line and how the old wrought iron gates were unlocked and the heavy shutters removed from the beautiful old renovated warehouses where vast numbers of shop counters would display high-end jewellery. He knew that all of a sudden the otherwise relatively deserted streets of Charlotte Amalie would be crowded with cruise-ship guests passing through. As a wave from the sea they would swarm the island with bags full of towels, sunscreen, divers' outfits, cameras, money, and coupons, and after some hours they would rush back to the mega ships and disappear as quickly as they had arrived. He knew that more than 80 percent of the economy is related to tourism on the USVI. And he was also well aware that in the United States, where most guests come from, the Virgin Islands are branded as "America's Paradise."

But to him, this paradise was heavily threatened: "The government" he told me, "is broke"; they desperately need more income, and the Caribbean cruise industry is a tough business where the neighbouring islands try to outdo each other, he said. The solution we came to discuss was whether the cruise ship industry should expand by investing in more infrastructure or if other solutions not tied up with industry were possible. As a man of action my interlocutor was willing to formulate what he saw as both the dilemma and subsequent solution. He dovetailed it as follows: "Either you ask 40,000 people to leave this island or you collect their money and we depend on tourism." Immediately dismissing the radical idea that 80 percent of the population should leave, he came up with a list of infrastructural initiatives which he believed would make the harbour even more suited for and attractive to tourists. However, and as I will return to by the end of the article, his proposal was far from being shared by everybody. The cruise tourist industry, to be sure, raised many difficult concerns and dilemmas with no straightforward and easy answers.

The difficulties facing the islanders, often formulated as dilemmas, reminded me of a type of allegorical storytelling originating from Africa, called *dilemma tales*. For scholars, dilemma tales designate stories with no clear-cut answers, but which need to be negotiated. As formulated by anthropologist William Bascom, who edited a book full of these tales from Africa, "instead of solutions dilemma tales lead to argumentation

and debate, whereas, to my knowledge, riddles and arithmetical problems do not. Put concisely, riddles are to be answered; arithmetical puzzles are to be solved; dilemma tales are to be resolved.”<sup>2</sup>

By nature, the responses to the discursive dilemmas in the tales are provisional and thereby only possible to retain for the moment being: “Each of the audience must give his views and an ad hoc solution is accepted at each telling depending on the consensus of opinion of those present and the weight of the arguments advanced.”<sup>3</sup> Thus it is characteristic of such tales that they culminate open-endedly by presenting a dilemma, and that the listeners are left to suggest provisional endings. The gift of the dilemma tale, then, is that no easy solution is within reach; instead everybody is invited to reflect and come up with possible solutions. As I hope to show, dilemma tales are a generous invitation and an interesting entry point into the postcolonial waters of the former Danish West Indies, where the challenges I encountered were often formulated as problems with no given answers.

In this article I explore some of the composite landscapes that arise from colonial and infrastructural projects on St. Thomas by looking at the harbour of Charlotte Amalie and by focusing on some of the dilemmas people are left to live with in a place where outsiders decide, and have for long decided, what constitutes the island’s main resources. As such, the place and its projected yet ambiguous nature are important to investigate both as a legacy of colonial activity and as a site where unintended as well as intended consequences of colonialism blossom in the shape of a thoroughly altered harbour landscape. Taking the harbour of Charlotte Amalie as my central analytical unit provides an interesting lens through which to approach Scandinavian or more specifically Danish colonial imprints as is the theme of this volume. I ask these seemingly simple questions: What follows in the wake of more than two hundred years of Danish ownership of the West Indian islands, as they were then termed? How has the Danish presence left its marks on the islands’ ecologies and policies? I approach these questions through enquiries and dialogues with some of the island’s present inhabitants and the harbour’s now deceased creators.

My argument is structured as follows: First I situate my investigation of colonial legacies in the harbour of St. Thomas by exploring the place as a set of altered ecologies, understood here as compounds of landscape features, politics, industrial activity, bureaucracy, tourism, and the like. I do this by discussing links between colonial exploitation, instrumentalist views of nature, and the omnipresence of humans. Then I go on to explore the early life of a particular piece of Danish colonial infrastructure, namely the port facilities in Charlotte Amalie built and managed by the Danish West Indian Company, and how these facilities got dragged into wartime concerns in Europe. I show how the harbour on St. Thomas became a pawn in a military strategy game happening elsewhere and in negotiating relations between a private company and a colonial state. I then move on to discuss how yet another nonlocal concern—that of attracting tourists with money to spend—was managed by the former colonisers and how this ambition depended on the presence and availability of colonial harbour structures, thereby prolonging colonial influence long after the formal selling of the islands. This is followed

by a section on the legal disputes caused by the long-lived colonial presence of Danish actors and by the related balancing of different concerns with the environment and the island's economy respectively. As a conclusion, I tie these sections together to craft and qualify what I term a postcolonial dilemma tale—to indicate the unresolvable and tough balancing act that the US Virgin Islanders have inherited and must deal with.

### **Human Imprints, Colonial Expansion, and Altered Ecologies**

The flow of people, money, and commodities is not a new feature of St. Thomas.<sup>4</sup> The port of Charlotte Amalie has long been a vibrant centre for ship trafficking in the Caribbean.<sup>5</sup> Throughout, it has been characterised by activities of a temporary and opportunistic kind—industries blossom, people and crops from far away are uprooted and replanted in the Caribbean, businesses provide work for locals, and goods are shipped out to be consumed elsewhere. Now and historically, all kinds of projects emerge, die off, and disappear, only passing through, after all, as has also been argued by sociologist Mimi Sheller.<sup>6</sup> One might say that the transitory nature of projects designed by people elsewhere is part of what colonialism is. As such, these projects occasion not only particular ecologies, but also dilemmas to be grappled with long after the decision-holders have left. I am inspired by anthropologist Ann Stoler, who suggests working “through the less perceptible effects of imperial interventions and their settling into the social and material ecologies in which people live and survive.”<sup>7</sup> In her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, anthropologist Anna Tsing writes how the history of the concentration of wealth came to turn both people and natural features into mobile assets available for global exchange with other assets elsewhere through distance-defying transport.<sup>8</sup> By a narrow focus on optimising one asset in a particular location (as seen in the archetypical colonial form: the plantation) colonialism instantiated a host of exploitative projects that came to leave (some) people behind together with radically altered ecologies.<sup>9</sup>

Caribbean histories might be understood as such an altered ecology. Columbus, I was told, visited the islands, and the Spaniards left “Old World” animals such as goats and deer to forage and multiply in the native forest as a kind of storeroom they could turn to if need be. Notoriously, the indigenous population was soon eradicated or dispersed, as colonisers began to alter the landscape and settle on the island. Through the introduction of the transatlantic slave trade, Danish ships transported around 50,000 enslaved Africans into the harbour<sup>10</sup> in order to work, further straining the lands. Native trees were cut down, and imported plants—mainly sugar—were planted in plantations on the hilly island. Indeed, St. Thomas, together with the other Caribbean islands, quickly became part of the Columbian exchange where New and Old World crops and animals were traded intensely, as is so vividly described by historian Alfred Crosby.<sup>11</sup> Altogether, the Caribbean became a place of transit that served opportune projects fostered in other parts of the world.

As a place of transit, a harbour like the one in Charlotte Amalie provides a prime case for studying how humans relate to a given environment through exploitation and

practices of uprooting. The transitory nature of colonial expansion not only brings newcomers to places like St. Thomas, it also works through the privilege of being able to leave. When the resources in question have been exploited or are no longer profitable, the colonised site is abandoned and left to other projects. As I was told by a Virgin Islander during my fieldwork, “being a colony, you know that people can always go, and no, they are not coming back!” In addition to referring to the present-day political status of the US Virgin Islands as an unincorporated US territory which she likened to a colony, the islander also pointed out that if a colony, and not your homeland, gets messed up you can just leave.

Consequently, colonialism, driven by an exploitative teleology, carries its own measure for success and failure in terms of whether projects are economic assets, that is, valuable resources, *or* hampered by obstacles that might be eradicated or at least minimised. The colonisers often ignore what falls outside this narrow scope of economic gain or consider it the necessary price to pay for the (colonial) activity; after all, when a place has been exploited, the coloniser can always move on to new frontiers.<sup>12</sup> But the people, and critters for that matter, who are staying, I will argue, are often confronted with dilemmas produced and rooted in the colonial past where radical changes (e.g., colonial projects) have been introduced.<sup>13</sup> The concept of ecology indicates the always compound nature of landscapes as also made up of bureaucratic, industrious, and touristic activities and as homes to human and nonhuman forms of life. I use it as a way to probe what Danish colonial ambition has left behind. Ecology here, then, is meant to point to a focus on relations across difference—collaborative and at times destructive—between different actors, some of which were the main attractions for the colonists to begin with. Paying attention to ecologies is thus a way to substantialise and populate places with human and more-than-human relations, as also suggested by Tsing.<sup>14</sup>

What I want to stress here, then, is that Danish colonial activity in St. Thomas has left behind a particular harbour ecology, and that such “colonial infrastructures” have a host of consequences that speak to the global problems—dilemmas—we face today.

### **Colonial Infrastructure and Shifting Interests**

In 1917, Denmark officially sold and left what came to be the US Virgin Islands. Not everybody left, though. The Danish-owned business *Det Vestindiske Kompagni*, or in English, the West Indian Company (WICO), which owned the majority of the port and its attendant facilities, stayed until 1993. At that moment, WICO and their properties were sold to the Virgin Islanders, who for some time had complained about a Danish company still profiting from the activities of the islands. The port is thus a central element in discussions about who gets to live off the island’s resources. As the main channel through which income has been and is generated, the port is an important structure where choices and unintended relations are worked and reworked.

During my visits to the port, I have been in dialogue with a variety of people who are somehow related to the activities of the harbour of Charlotte Amalie. This includes hotel

and shop owners and workers, taxi drivers, tourists in transit, dock workers and administrators, customs officers, NGOs, a city planner, a manager and lifeguards at the beaches, officers from the Fish and Wildlife Department, people from the National Park Service, and researchers from both the University of the Virgin Islands and universities in Denmark that have done research in the harbour. In addition to these face-to-face encounters and email correspondences, I have visited the archives in Copenhagen. I have looked into the files of H. C. V. Møller, the former head of the harbour construction project from 1905–1917, and the files of the former Danish tourist chief in New York, Axel Dessau, who in the 1950s and '60s worked out strategies to attract more visitors to the islands.<sup>15</sup>

Further, I have explored the rather large online archival material from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the selling of the Danish West Indian islands to the USA.<sup>16</sup> In particular, I have looked for communications where the harbour construction project was explicitly related to the sale. USVI historian George Tyson, who edited a volume on the Charlotte Amalie harbour,<sup>17</sup> a PhD project undertaken by historian Pernille Hansen about the Danes who stayed or migrated to the USVI after the transfer of the islands,<sup>18</sup> and two articles about the harbour by Danish historian Erik Gøbel<sup>19</sup> have also guided me into the turbulent historical waters of the harbour. Being in dialogue with all these people dead or alive who have taken an interest in the harbour of Charlotte Amalie and engaging with this diverse material is a way for me as an anthropologist to open up the field of Scandinavian colonialism and explore what it might mean in this particular setting to a particular group of people all sharing a concern (though not necessarily agreeing) emanating from a specific spot—namely the port of Charlotte Amalie.

It is often repeated among scholars in Denmark that critical discussions about Danish colonialism have been surprisingly absent in the educational system and in the public debate until recently.<sup>20</sup> Anthropologist Karen Fog Olwig commented in 1985 that Danish historians ran the risk of limiting their interest to a narrow Danish perspective flirting dangerously with a colonial nostalgia.<sup>21</sup> When I set out to study the harbour of Charlotte Amalie I was also surprised to read and hear that a Danish company, WICO, had invested in and profited from their harbour activities until as late as 1993, and that a Danish flag until that time was hoisted every day from the former governor's house that later became the official residence for the director of the company. I was not so surprised that a Danish company had a business on the island. But I found it striking that this business was so intimately related to the Danish colonial state in that its success depended to a certain extent upon so-called treaty rights, indicating privileges written into the sales treaty of 1917 which granted the Danish company a favourable concession. It struck me that a symbolic object such as a nation's flag, in this place the former coloniser's flag, waved from the Danish governor's residence taken over by the WICO director on the so-called Denmark Hill so long after the sale. Presumably it was regarded "innocently," as I was recently told by a Dane who had visited the city in the days when the Danish flag waved from the majestic colonial building on top of the hill above the city. In light of this let me take some time to explore these close ties between a Danish company and the Danish state, assuming that not many readers know of these relations.

In 1904, after a failed selling of the islands to the United States, a group of industrious and ambitious Danes got together and founded the Association for the Danish Atlantic Islands, covering the Danish colonies Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and the three West Indian islands. New investments were needed to boost activities and industries in colonies that had been neglected. In the Danish West Indies, sugar was no longer a profitable business and only few persistent plantation owners tried to re-boost the sugar trade. Other projects needed to be launched in order to continue profiting on the islands and their natural resources—after all they were considered Danish, and nostalgia kept the islands in Danish hands at the turn of the century.<sup>22</sup> One of the active members of the association was the successful Danish businessman H. N. Andersen. Throughout the first half of the century, he created one of the biggest business empires in Scandinavia, the East Asiatic Company, which at the time was involved in shipping and logging industries together with soy plantations in Southeast Asia and China.<sup>23</sup> During the negotiations of the sale, Andersen had promised to establish a direct line between Copenhagen and St. Thomas if the sale was cancelled—a direct line that would strengthen the ties between Denmark and its Caribbean colony. Believing in better times through industrial activities and “development,” as is also the title of one of Andersen’s books,<sup>24</sup> movement of people and goods on a large scale was considered the kind of dynamic that was needed. As a consequence, together with a small group of other prominent Danes, including the former governor of the islands, he founded WICO. In the beginning (around 1905), WICO established a wharf and a coaling station in St. Thomas where coal was offered en route to the increasing number of colliers crossing the Atlantic Ocean and in need of new supplies. This was already an established and profitable business in Charlotte Amalie, where a handful of national and private companies had coaling stations and adjacent wharfs in the harbour. A great number of poor locals made a living by carrying baskets full of coal to the boiler rooms of the then hyper-modern coal steamers. During the first decades of the 1900s, WICO bought new land in and around the coastal line of Charlotte Amalie, wanting to build a large-scale modern harbour. With the forthcoming opening of the Panama Canal (in 1914) the company had high expectations of increasing ship traffic and other ensuing activities. WICO saw opportunities in the naturally deep, sheltered, and well-located harbour and began to look for investors for their activities.

But the industrious Danish men were not alone in seeing the strategic importance of the location of the Charlotte Amalie harbour. In 1913, the Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs was once again via his ambassador in Washington asked by the United States if Denmark was interested in selling the islands. This time the Danish “no” was substantiated with big Danish investments to improve the harbour along with other unspecified things. In the late Autumn 1915, when World War I ravaged in Europe, the same minister was asked once more, or rather, strongly urged, to sell the islands to the US, and within a few weeks negotiations began in deep confidence. What led to the change of mind might be related to activities in the harbour—at least if we are to believe certain documents grouped under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the National Archives in Copenhagen, Denmark.

On 21 July 1915, the Danish Ministry of Finance received a note from the governor in the Danish West Indies asking if the ministry had any objections to the German company Hamburg American Line's request to enlarge its wharf in Charlotte Amalie.<sup>25</sup> The German company had at that time a rather big wharf in Charlotte Amalie's harbour, primarily supplying their transatlantic vessels with water and coal. Apparently, this German request put the Danish politicians in a difficult situation. In the midst of World War I where every square meter of land was bloodily fought over from muddy and cold trenches, the Danish nation was working hard to protect its sovereignty and struggling to balance a neutral position. Accepting the German company's plan might be understood by the Allies as Denmark having chosen sides—a longer wharf *might* be used by the Germans to build submarines—underwater killer machines that at the time had already destroyed American ships in European waters. Germany, it must be noted, did not have regular possessions in the Atlantic Ocean, and the United States feared, as formulated in the Monroe Doctrine, that another European power might use the Caribbean harbour as a stepping stone to the Americas—too close to US territories. So how to respond to such a seemingly minor request in a world at war where the aggressor might attempt to enlarge its room to manoeuvre via a colonial harbour belonging to a small neutral nation? This was the puzzle that Denmark and—notably—WICO's founder H. N. Andersen faced.

A three-page note kept securely in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' archives gives insights into the thinking about this issue by central players. The note was written by Andersen. It informs the reader that a few weeks after having received the German request, Andersen was sent to Berlin by the Danish chancellor in order to probe the Germans' intentions for the enlarged wharf. In the note of 8 August 1915, Andersen advised the Danish politicians to stimulate the US government to buy the islands:

Before Germany presents their request to Denmark, it is better to anticipate the matter by stimulating the United States of America to present their request to Denmark. ... I brought Mr Ballin's [the director of HAL] attention to the unfortunate consequences it would imply for Denmark if the Danish government gave his company the desired permission to expand its harbour in St Thomas ... and said that the Danish government did not want to make a decision before after the war.<sup>26</sup>

From my readings, I do not know if the Americans were stimulated or not or the extent to which the harbour of Charlotte Amalie influenced the selling of the islands. But in the following secret negotiations leading up to the signing of the treaty, the WICO concession is indeed debated and (finally) written into the treaty, thereby guaranteeing the company some favourable rights in order to protect its rather big investment long into the future. Fearing a potential reinforced German presence, the harbour was not only an economic asset but had also become militarily strategic. The selling of such a place is obviously marked by the secrecy pertaining to the war in Europe, making both Denmark and the US work under time pressure in order to present a final and almost signed treaty to the public. A quick transfer was preferred, and the "US negotiators were instructed to value speed over clarity."<sup>27</sup> This time pressure is particularly interesting with regard to WICO and the scope of the concession that enabled the company to stay in St. Thomas until as

late as 1993. Thus, interestingly, in the Americans' first draft to the treaty presented to the Danish negotiators, WICO was not mentioned on the short list of Danish private concession owners. The Danish negotiators then added WICO to the list in their response. Again, time pressure lurked and the American diplomat stated in the spring of 1916 that his government would adopt all legal commitments without seeing further documents if only the treaty could be signed quickly. This generous American offer seems later to have been partly withdrawn, as one can read in a telegram of 24 July 1916 in which the Danish negotiator asked the Americans to give up waiting for the appendixes concerning WICO due to the urgent circumstances and the appendixes' secondary nature. But this request was not accommodated.

As late as in the summer 1916, the American ambassador in Denmark was requested (again) by the US State Department to obtain official documents regarding the WICO concession since the scope of the concession was still obscure. In a note from the American ambassador to the Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs one can read that the letters and appendixes forwarded so far had not been sufficient and lacked, for instance, details about the "period of concession" and the "right of government to buy back concession." The note concluded, "In a concession of this importance there must be documents setting forth more definitely the relative rights of the company and the Danish government."<sup>28</sup> In the American archives there *could* be documents indicating whether the Danish reply was sufficient or not. In any case, the Senate accepted the treaty in September 1916. But half a century later, trials between WICO and groups of local inhabitants of St. Thomas bear witness to the unresolved nature of the scope of the WICO concession and its continuous negotiable character, as we shall see later.

My point of going into details with these negotiations surrounding the sale is to explore how the relations between the colonial state and a Danish company in the form of treaty rights in a sense continued colonial activities in the Virgin Islands. More specifically, the negotiations show that long after Denmark officially left the islands the company could profit from this colonial legacy through special legal rights. Moreover, these treaty rights were dependent on the circumstance of wartime Europe, which made the harbour a militarily strategic place in a global landscape of conflict. A small locality enabling and living through transit, then, became an important part of a complex of urgent foreign politics, national concerns, and business savvy. The port of Charlotte Amalie materialises this political ecology—much to the benefit of WICO, but with more dubious advantages for the local population, left unsure about legal conditions on a part of their home island, as we shall explore in the following.

### **Closed Doors and Open Access: The Port and the Free Market**

The close relations between the Danish state and WICO as pointed out in the American note are interesting to dwell on since they might be a key to qualifying colonial relations and infrastructure. The conditions of the WICO concession were already partly formulated in 1912 and made in order to protect, by Danish standards, huge Danish

investments. In the National Archives, I found a small folder from 1912 about the harbour project written by Andersen. In the folder the director wrote that the project is a “social task that rightly rests with the state, but which, if the state does not find it opportune to solve it, *might* be solved by private initiative, that, if possible, is protected against risk.”<sup>29</sup> From the very beginning the harbour project needed protection—the “free market” is apparently not geared to take care of investments of this scale. The strategic place of the harbour made foreign newspapers and governments keep an eye on WICO’s plans and a potential sale. In the company, all plans to offer corporate shares to foreign investors were dropped—it was feared that this would be a loophole for countries to take over a strategically important harbour in the Caribbean. Instead, the Danish bureaucracy helped the company by informing about the project to expatriate Danes and securing competitive advantages. In addition to securing port-related business in a huge part of the harbour, WICO got a monopoly on selected activities and was exempted for ten years from paying taxes on imported materials for the harbour project.

These advantages immediately caused a protest from an American coal company who for a long time had wished to open a branch in Charlotte Amalie. In a letter of 30 March 1912 found in the National Archives the company lamented that “the open door” ruling on the otherwise free port of St. Thomas was threatened because of the new law made in relation to the WICO concession. But the people invested in WICO’s modernising project were very keen on closing that door. In a summary made in the Ministry of Finance of the rather intense correspondence between Andersen and the ministry,<sup>30</sup> I found that a Mexican request to establish fluid fuel tanks had prompted Andersen to write a letter, dated 11 November 1912, to the Ministry of Finance that, considering the enormous investments used for the harbour project, WICO “could wish to have as little competition as possible, but recognises not to be entitled to protection.” In the same summary, I read that half a year later (28 March 1913), the tone is intensified and Andersen threatens the Danish Ministry of Finance with selling the project if sufficient protection is not given:

The board of the Company regards the local government’s plans as threatening for the Company’s aim and future, and without reasonable guarantees against the realisation of the local government’s plans, it intends to take steps to transfer the Company’s possessions and initiated harbour works to others.<sup>31</sup>

Immediately, the Minister of Finance reassures Andersen and undertakes to “do whatever possible to help” the company. But already two weeks later new problems arose: in a letter, the ministry has indicated a time limit for the advantages given to WICO and asks about the plans to establish a wireless telegraph. This question made Andersen threaten the Minister once again, writing that “Without the needed safeguarding with regard to the future, the company not only intends to reduce the work planned for but also to resort to sale of the acquired area and initiated harbour works.”<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, WICO had a hold on the state—and as such we see an interesting case of how politics and economy, business and state are closely entangled in each other by the end of the Danish colonial heyday. After the sale, where the Danish state had withdrawn, WICO

continued to fight for what came to be known as their treaty rights, negotiated under “world stress,” as the US Congress concluded in 1926.<sup>33</sup>

### **Colonial Personality and the Lure of Tourism**

WICO continued their business and adjusted their activities to the changing times, yet again altering the harbour and coastal ecology to cater to new projects. The strategic position of the islands was once again redefined—this time to a new and growing industry—namely tourism. The tropical sun was no longer associated with illness and moral decay but with health and freedom, as Hansen has remarked, adding that “taxis were provided with a sign saying ‘Tropical Playground—Virgin Islands’”<sup>34</sup> to underline the joyful, relaxed, and uncommitted nature of business activities. WICO realised this potential, and among other initiatives they formed a subsidiary company called the Virgin Islands Tourist Company in 1936.<sup>35</sup> In Charlotte Amalie, the Grand Hotel was opened and an old ruin and overgrown sugar plantation on St. John was transformed into a luxury resort called Caneel Bay Plantation Resort.<sup>36</sup> A ferry service between the two islands was established and the Tourist Company could then assist with information and book tickets for the type of “all-inclusive” vacation that was gradually emerging along WICO’s infrastructure and in their properties on the islands. The company was also involved in the ‘Maison Danoise’ on St. Thomas—a shop selling Scandinavian designer objects mainly to tourists. Again, the logic was that outsiders—both a Danish company and tourists—developed and determined the fate of the islands.

World War II put a momentary end to the growth of the tourist industry on the islands, but as Hansen made me aware, shortly after the war in 1952 a Danish tourist chief Axel Dessau, visited the islands. He found them well suited for tourism, but also found that they lacked what the neighbouring islands had—namely a personality rooted in the former colonial nation’s presence. In a strategy letter to a colleague on the USVI, headed Let’s put the Background in the Foreground, Dessau wrote:

These national characteristics gave each island a personality of great importance in competition with the other islands. ... I think that you’ll agree that the stamp “Danish” is today a recommendation which creates confidence. Equally, it creates confidence with many American tourists to be on American soil, when they travel in areas where political troubles occur. The Virgin Islands are in the fortunate situation to have a cultural background which is popular today and enjoy much goodwill—and at the same time they have the advantage of being with “Uncle Sam.” Now as one tourist man speaking to another, it has occurred to me that perhaps you might agree with me that it may now be an opportune time for the Virgin Islands and Denmark to work together on their common interest and to their mutual benefit.”<sup>37</sup>

Dessau listed three focus areas: Danish food, Danish design, and Danish attractions on the islands. Given the scale of the inhuman and oppressive story of transshipped enslaved Africans working in plantations for the Danes, it is striking to see how Dessau avoids mentioning these dark stories. Instead, he elegantly used formulations such as USVI having the potential of being a “pastry haven,” and that “life of the islands in the older days

offer wonderful ingredients for fascinating tours.” These are by any means far from the antagonistic voices that are vocalised today in the form of claims to reparation and requests to apologies.<sup>38</sup> Instead, Dessau tied Denmark to its former colonies, arguing that his strategy was in the interest of both USVI and Denmark; a common project or win-win situation that put development both of the tourist industry and of knowledge about the Danish nation in the foreground. Thus, he clearly came to show a strategy that “effectively manifested the fact that tourism was built on the cultural and material infrastructure of colonialism.”<sup>39</sup> In a way, such a self-confident and optimistic, some might say naïve, understanding of the days of colonialism was not foreign to WICO, who every morning raised the Danish flag—to be sure the brand of “Denmark” was not bad business.

But then things began to change. The Danish company continued to expand and develop the harbour, primarily to accommodate and entertain the continuously bigger cruise ships and their increasing number of cruise guests. In 1968, the Department of the Interior severely contested WICO's rights in ways that would ignite almost twenty years of legal fighting forth and back between WICO, judges, politicians, and various local groups in St. Thomas. In the wording of professor in marine law Dennis Nixon, who has written in detail about the legal case,

they [Department of the Interior] noted that the license and concession to WICO was intended to last only for a specified term, a term never set in the confusion of the transfer from Denmark to the United States. In such a situation, they argued, the law limits the term to a reasonable time. Their position was that after 54 years of enjoying the fruits of its exclusive concession, with no further improvements to the harbor in return, more than a reasonable time had passed and WICO's claim should be considered to have expired or abandoned.<sup>40</sup>

WICO's attorneys succeeded in protecting their rights by pointing to the vested rights guaranteed in the Treaty of Cession. A lot of legal wrangling ensued, especially as to whether WICO was exempted from the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1978. WICO claimed that with their treaty rights they were exempted from the act. A coalition against WICO began to take form, contesting WICO's claimed rights as “being long expired and void,” as the president of the Save Long Bay Coalition, Helen Gjessing, wrote.<sup>41</sup> WICO won the juridical fighting and in 1986 began filling 7.5 acres of land along Long Bay without informing the residents about the future use of the land, resulting in protests: “Emotions ran high at the thought of a Danish-owned corporation sealing off the shoreline actively used by the local West Indian population.”<sup>42</sup> A judge defended WICO by pointing to the active development that the company brought to the island and concluded in favour of the company that “The people of the Virgin Islands would suffer the loss if their government's promises are considered as will-o-the-wisp, to be kept when convenient, and broken as desired.”<sup>43</sup> But as Nixon also points out, the judge thereby ignored that the whole case was based upon, if not incomplete, then contestable information.<sup>44</sup> However, development and boosting the economy, so detrimental for the poor islands, had its price, as also acknowledged by the WICO consultants preparing an Environmental Assessment Report in 1984, where they conclude about the project's

impact: “long-term biological productivity is less important than economic productivity.”<sup>45</sup> Balancing the economy and the environment in the right proportions has been an activity that surely was fought over. The political efforts to change the treaty rights came to an end after the Coalition appealed the case to the United Nation’s Committee on Decolonization in 1988. Even though the Committee was supportive and urged the administering powers “to safeguard the inalienable right of the people of the Territory to their natural resources”,<sup>46</sup> the incentive was turned down arguing that it would be “inappropriate and ineffective (...) to alter WICO’s rights”.<sup>47</sup> Gjessing, the president of the Coalition, concluded that “it was not in its [the USVI government’s] interest to allow a foreign-owned company to have such extensive control of its principal harbour. ... Our waterfront has been lost to activities related to tourists, shopping and offices,”<sup>48</sup> thereby pointing to the colonial legacy and how it created a feeling of loss of control for the residents of the island. Nixon concludes:

A number of lessons can be learned from this case. At the outset, it must be noted that the status of the Virgin Islands as an “unincorporated territory” of the United States created a number of special problems. Until 1975, when ownership was transferred, the local government had no authority over submerged lands. Virgin Islanders were not allowed to elect their own governor until 1968, and remain under the jurisdiction of the Department of Interior. While government roles were changing and responsibilities confused, it is not surprising that WICO was able to cling to a claim which it had maintained since 1913.<sup>49</sup>

Thus the scope of the WICO concession and its exact nature that the American negotiators sought to clarify in 1916, just before the signing of the treaty, later came to create “an ambiguous legal environment for over 50 years followed by another 20 years of lawsuits, negotiations, and appeals.”<sup>50</sup> Today, WICO is in local public hands, apparently competing for customers with the equally publicly owned harbour Crown Bay that opened in 2006 to accommodate even bigger cruise ships. After the formal end of foreign ownership, for better or worse, local parties rival each other in a bid for incoming funds.

### **Balancing the Economy and Environment: A Postcolonial Dilemma Tale**

Prompted by my encounters in the harbour in Charlotte Amalie, I was reminded of the genre of dilemma tales, both by the fact that many of the people I talked to explicitly struggled with what they perceived as “dilemmas” and because these dilemmas had only ad hoc answers. For instance, right after I left the island the board of WICO—now owned by local authorities—made a decision that broke with a century of almost ever-expanding industry dating back to Andersen’s industriousness. The board “suspended its plans”<sup>51</sup> to construct yet another pier to accommodate more and bigger cruise ships in a central part of the harbour—a project with a stunningly similar design to the first concession granted to the company in 1912. The argument given by the chairman of the company board was this: “At the heart of our decision to suspend the Long Bay Landing Project, is the potential negative impact this project could have on the quality of life of Virgin Islanders as well as the visitor experience given the proposed location.”<sup>52</sup>

Apparently, and contrary to the dialogue with which I opened this paper, continued expansion of the tourist industry had reached its limits for the elected leaders of the US Virgin Islands. Whereas the man living off the harbour saw two possibilities: either drastic reduction (40,000 people have to leave the island) or further expansion (more investment in the harbour infrastructure), the government believed that further expansion might compromise the quality of life. The question, then, is what “quality of life” might mean in this particular setting, where the economy is built on mass tourism and therefore depends heavily on a continuous flow of cruise ships in order to carry on with life. Might more business actually improve the very same life quality that was cited by the board?

I heard the argument of the WICO board echoed in several conversations I had with people on the island. Along with shop owners who lament their bad sales, it seems that more and more St. Thomasians are beginning to question what the island gains from the cruise ships. They pointed critically to the ships’ all-inclusive-buffets that leave restaurants on the island empty. They also mentioned the “shopping classes” offered on some of the cruise ships where passengers learn to find the best deals in the market on the different Caribbean islands, and noted that some cruise lines promise to beat the islands’ prices. On top of that there seemed to be a common position that a vacation on cruise ships is no longer a luxury reserved for the rich, but is now also possible for the middle and lower classes. Even poor old people, I was told, could go on a cruise ship, since last minute tickets were cheap and the ships offered plenty of food, not to forget doctors and nurses that could take care of them if they did not have health insurance. This can be seen as an unintended result of the growing global economy and flourishing optimism that prevailed at the turn of the twenty-first century, when the mega ships that could accommodate several thousand guests were built. The financial crisis, however, had put a quick end to these hopes, resulting in tickets at cheap prices.

While on the island, I shared another interesting qualification of the dilemma tale enfolded in “the quality of life” argument mentioned above. A researcher from the University of the Virgin Islands offered the following analysis of what she termed a central dilemma of the harbour, between ecology and economy. She told me that if I wanted to understand the islands and its biggest harbour, I needed to understand the radical interchangeability of the place—how people continuously come and go:

What’s special about this place is that you come and you can leave anytime. So how do we deal with planning and trust? ... The whole place is a mess. Virgin Islands is in a space where everybody tries to live together. If the boat breaks you have to fix it—while others just order a helicopter. ... But when the country is messed you cannot go—but in a colony you just go! You can leave!

By pointing to the ambiguous character of the island as a home to some and a resource to others we are back with colonialism also being about projects conceived elsewhere and to which local residents need to react as best they can—whether by carrying coal, expanding a pier (or not), offering shopping and meals. Wars raging in other parts of the world, diplomatic haste, global financial crisis, and ties between state and private business all find a foothold in the harbour of Charlotte Amalie. Some can order a helicopter and

leave whenever convenient while others have to stay and fix whatever is at hand, as the quote above has it, and this insight is important for thinking about how colonial legacies are present in St. Thomas. As argued in the introduction, colonies can be defined as results of projects where the coloniser or other outsiders have taken the opportunity to exploit the natural resources of the place—and move on when troubles begin to grow out of (economic) proportion. But the people who stay have to find new ways to make a liveable life in the ruins of these previous projects. This leaves little room for taking care of colonised places as “commons”—think only of Andersen threatening the Danish state with selling off what they had invested in, unless he be granted some measure of business protectionism.

As a composite site of concerns of a more than local nature and struggles about legal rights, business privileges, and commodity exchange, the harbour of St. Thomas is thus both a highly designed place where foreign powers have had all kinds of plans *and* a place where random opportunities are continuously seized and debated—dilemmas resolved for a little while, activities benevolent and destructive at the same time. My aim in this article has been to discuss some of these dilemmas by looking at the harbour of Charlotte Amalie as an ecology of projects—planned and uncontrollable—and show how the long life of Danish colonial infrastructure becomes an organising factor in present-day life on the islands.

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### Notes

- \* Nathalia Brichet holds a PhD in anthropology from the University of Copenhagen. Brichet is a postdoc working with industrial and colonial legacies, landscape histories, and environmental concerns in former Danish colonies (Ghana, US Virgin Islands, and Greenland). As a part of her fieldwork, Brichet has designed and managed several collecting projects and curated exhibitions together with colleagues in Denmark, England, Ghana, Greenland, and the USA.
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  - 2 Bascom, *African Dilemma*, 12.
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  - 7 Stoler "Introduction," 4.
  - 8 Tsing, *The Mushroom*.
  - 9 Tsing et al., *Arts of Living*.
  - 10 Personal communication with Erik Gøbel, January 2017.
  - 11 Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*.
  - 12 Tsing, *The Mushroom*, 6
  - 13 See also Brichet and Hastrup, "In the Wake."
  - 14 Tsing, *The Mushroom*.
  - 15 DNA, MP, MHK, A III 1 Andre indenlandske anlæg III 5. Number: 8; DNA, DP, DNT0, Diverse propagandamateriale. (1950–1978), number: 153.
  - 16 DNA, MFA, GS, following boxes: 8M 15-8M 15II; 8M 16–8M 23; 8 P2.
  - 17 Tyson, *The St. Thomas Harbor*.
  - 18 Hansen, "Our Tropical Home."
  - 19 Gøbel, "Shipping"; Gøbel, "Sankt Thomas havn."
  - 20 E.g. Sebro, "Danmark"; Andersen, "Vore gamle tropekolonier?"; Danbolt, "Retro Racism"; Brichet, *An Anthropology*.
  - 21 Olwig, "Hvad skal vi med?"
  - 22 H. H. "Foreningen."
  - 23 Andersen, *Tilbageblik*; Westphall, *Aktieselskabet*.
  - 24 Andersen, *Udvikling*.
  - 25 Danish Minister of Finance E. Brandes, 31 July 1915, DNA, MFA, GS, box: 8M15-I.
  - 26 H.N. Andersen "Optegnelser", 8 August 1915, DNA, MFA, GS, box: 8M15. This and all following translations from Danish are by Brichet.
  - 27 Nixon, "The Filling of Long Bay," 6.
  - 28 Dated 7 August 1916, the day the Danish minister received the note from Mr. Egan. US Ambassador, Mr Egan to Danish Foreign Minister, DNA, MFA, GS, box: 8M18.
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