CORAL STONE ARCHITECTURE OF MALDIVES:
A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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Introduction

The first people to leave physical evidence of habitation in Maldives were the early Buddhists and Hindhus in the 2nd Century when they started using coral stone structures (Mikkelson, 2000). Porites coral stone or *Hiriga* mined from the reef was used as a primary construction material until 1992, when it was banned to protect the vulnerable reef system of the country (Naseer, 1997). The coral stone architecture that thrived from the 2nd Century to the 20th century is extinct but it is an indispensable chapter of Maldivian history that provides the physical evidence to the creative genius of the early Maldivians who adapted their building systems to the changing needs of different periods. It is also a chapter that cannot be ignored because some of the building systems that evolved are not found in anywhere in the world and provides evidence to the intense cultural exchanges that took place in the Indian Ocean region. This article presents an overview of coral stone architecture of Maldives, focusing on its historic evolution, construction methods and the most outstanding type.

Maldives is an island nation, an archipelago of low-lying coral islands grouped into atolls formed on top of a vast submarine mountain range in the Indian Ocean. Stretching 648 km, it has two of the largest natural atolls and the seventh largest reef system in the world. The country has 1192 islands, including 192 inhabited islands and 96% of the islands are less than one sq km in area, and the largest island Gan in Lamu atoll is 6.1 sq km in area. Only about 1% of the archipelago is land and the average ground levels of only 1.5 meters above sea level. It is a country that will be severely affected by global warming and sea level rise in the future (Luthfee, 1995; UNEP-GoM, 2009).

The people of Maldives live in a close-knit society unified by their history, language and religion. Their religion has been Islam since 1153 while Buddhism and early Hinduism was practiced prior to Islam. Their culture is influenced by cultures across the ocean it interacted over the period. The origin of the people is not very clear, but the first were likely from south India and Sri Lanka as they are ethnically and linguistically closest to them. Today Maldivian people are a mix from many parts of the Indian Ocean region including those from India, Sri Lanka, the coasts of Arabia, Persia, east Africa and the western shores of the Malay Archipelago (Maloney, 1980; Mohamed, 2008).

Coral stone construction

Corals reefs are found roughly confined to the tropical belt concentrating in the indo-pacific regions from the Red Sea, East Africa, and Southern Asia to the Central Pacific. There are a wide variety of corals but the most important variety that builds the reef, the stony coral family Scleractima is commonly used for construction throughout the coastal settlements wherever it is found in abundance (Spalding, Ravilions and Green, 2001). It was used in coastal settlements of Indian Ocean, the Arabian/Persian gulf, the Red Sea, Pacific and even in Central American regions.

The origin of coral stone architecture is not well understood though early use of coral in construction

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has been found among the Mayan island communities of the Central American region. Excavations in the Port Honduras Region of Southern Belize found construction using coral structures dating between 900-1500 BCE (McKillop, 2004). Early use of coral in construction has also been found on the coasts of the Red Sea dating back to the Hellenistic period between 146-323 BCE. It was discovered at the site of al-Rih in Sudan where a Hellenistic cornice made from coral stone was found re-used in an Islamic tomb (Archinet, 2010). Early coral construction also existed in the Indian coastal cities, Sri Lanka, Maldives and many Indian Ocean islands. They were found in ancient Buddhist sites in Jaffna in Sri Lanka, Maldives and in the Indian subcontinent as far back as the second century (Mikkelson, 2000).

Today the best examples of coral stone architecture are seen in the Swahili coast of East Africa and Maldives (Jameel and Ahmad, 2015). Examples of coral stone construction in the Swahili coastal cities of East Africa are the buildings of ancient trading towns of Lamu and Gedi in Kenya, Fort Jesus of Mombasa in Kenya, the stone town of Zanzibar in Tanzania, ruins of Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara in Tanzania (WHC-UNESCO, 2011). The first stone mosques excavated in Shanga in Lamu region built during an estimated period of 900 to 915 CE, were constructed of neatly shaped porite coral, bonded with mud with a white plaster face (Horton, 1991). Comparing the construction techniques of East Africa and Maldives, while both East Africans and Maldivians use coral stone set in lime mortar, plastered and lime washed, the Maldivians used another construction technique of assembled shaped coral blocks with an interlocking locking system and intricate carvings. Coral carvings similar to Maldives are found in places in the Swahili coastal sites like Kilwa Kisiwani and Songo Mnara (Kirkman, 1959) but they also lack the variety and sophistication of detailing found in the Maldivian counterpart.

Coral stone was the most durable material available in Maldives thus becoming the primary building material of monumental buildings from as far back as 165 CE until recent times. Two types of coral stones, Porite coral (*Hiriga*) from the reef and coral sand stone (*Veligaa*) were used for construction in Maldives. *Veligaa* or coral sand stone sometimes called beach rock, are coastal sedimentary formations consisting mainly of coral sand, lithified through the precipitation of carbonate cements. They were used during the early periods and in areas where the finer Porite coral stone was not easily available (Jameel and Ahmad, 2015). Porite corals called *Hiriga* from the stony coral family Scleractima were the main type of coral stone that were mined for construction in Maldives (Naseer, 1997). They were large boulder like corals that are slow growing, and coral heads bigger than one meter in diameter are commonly found among its reefs. Live coral boulders were extracted manually, using rods and ropes, on to a raft or boat from the shallow parts of the reef where it was available in abundance. They were taken to land, chipped or shaped and dried before it was used.

Coral stone architecture and construction thrived in Maldives for more than 1800 year where its techniques varied, evolving to respond to the means and needs of different historic periods. It varied from simple coral stone blocks set in mortar with little or no surface decoration, to sophisticatedly assembled shaped coral stone blocks with high surface decoration to chipped coral stone and lime/cement masonry with plaster and coral stone concrete. Today coral stone mining is not possible in Maldives for environmental reasons and many of the traditional techniques are extinct marking the end of a significant part of cultural history and human creativity not found anywhere in the world (Jameel and Ahmad, 2015).

Historic periods and evolution of coral stone architecture

Maldives has been inhabited for at least 4000 years and its historical periods linking to the history of the region and the world can be categorized into following six broad historic periods. Coral stone architecture and construction varied during different

historic periods and its evolution can be traced along with the historic period.

1. Ancient period (c. 2000 BCE to c. 500 BCE)

So far no archaeological evidence from this period has been discovered in Maldives. The people of this period probably did not leave any evidence because their structures were likely from perishable materials, which quickly decayed in the tropical climate. But sightings of cowry shells, that are claimed to be Maldivian by historians and archaeologists, in other parts of the ancient world suggest an organized community who harvested the shells. *Cyprea moneta*; a small type of cowry shell found in Maldives was found among the ruins of ancient Indus Valley port of Lothal that flourished between 3000-1700 BCE (Mohamed, 2008; Hyerdhal, 1986) and in tombs of China during Yin Dynasty of 1401-1122 BCE (Mohamed, 2008).

Very little is known about this period but according to legend, groups of tribal communities from the Indian subcontinent settled in different parts of Maldives and was followed by people from the Indus valley called 'Dheyvis'. It is also likely that the mysterious sea people referred in Maldives as 'Redhin' settled when they visited the islands (Mohamed, 2008; Hyerdhal, 1986).

2. Classical period of Buddhism and old Hindhu religions (c. 500 BCE – 1153 CE)

Coral stone architecture and construction most likely was introduced with the arrival of Buddhist and Hindu cultures from Sri Lanka and India. Archaeological evidence shows that they made their structures, statues and idols using coral stone. Porite coral (Hiriga) and coral sand stone (Veligaa) were used in their structures and was shaped using basic tools, set in mortar and finished with a lime skim coat. The structures had mouldings and decorative carvings with animal and human motif. Examples of such structures were identified in the archaeological studies of H. C. P. Bell and Mikkelson (Bell, 1940; Mikkelson, 2000).

H. C. P. Bell, in his archaeological expeditions in the Maldives from 1922 to 1935, identified many Buddhist structures using shaped and decorated coral stone blocks set in mortar. He discovered coral stone statues of Buddha and other idols and relates his findings in Maldives to Sri Lankan Buddhist origins in Toluvila monastery in Anuraadhapura (Bell, 1940). Mikkelson in his archaeological studies of Kaafu, Kashidhoo site in 1998 also revealed that shaped and decorated coral stone blocks set in mortar was used in the construction of the Buddhist monastery and shell deposits found there were dated to be between 165-345 CE (Mikkelson, 2000).

Buddhism was likely introduced in c. 500 BCE when, according to local legend and ancient Buddhist chronicles of Sri Lanka – Mahavamsa, one of the ships of the Indian Prince Vijaya of Singhapura, on his way to Sri Lanka was blown off course into Maldives (Mikkelson, 2000). Chola kings from south India controlled parts of northern Maldives during the latter parts of this period (Bell, 1940). During this period many people from India and Sri Lanka continued to migrate and a cross-ocean trade of cowry shells and other products flourished (Mohamed, 2008). Austronesians from Indonesia also possibly transited and settled in southern Maldives when they migrated to Madagascar (Jameel and Ahmad, 2015).

3. Post Classical period of Islam (1153 CE – 1528 CE)

With the introduction of Islam, most other religious structures were razed to the ground and mosques were built on the sites. Coral stone was still used in the new mosques and its construction techniques remained the same. They were shaped, set in mortar and sometimes finished with a lime skim coat. The structures and finishes were simple with mouldings but all decorative elements including animal and human motif were discarded. Both Porite coral (Hiriga) and coral sand stone (Veligaa) were used during this period. Some of the features of the pre Islamic structure such as verandahs, raised platforms that did not affect the

practice of Islam, it continued in the new mosques. Examples of coral stone structure is Bodha Miskiy in Koagannu, Hulhumeedhoo built around 1403 and example of sand stone structure is Kedeyre Miskiy in Fuvahmulah, believed to be built in 14th Century (Jameel and Ahmad, 2015).

Arab, Persian and Indian Muslim traders dominated the trade in the Indian Ocean during this period. Port cities and sultanates from east Africa to Malacca prospered and so did Maldives mixing with people from the whole region. Maldives embraced Islam in 1153 and started the dynastic rule of Sultans and Sultanas. Recorded history mentions of the first queen who ruled Maldives three times over a period of 29 years from 1347 and early writers admired the queen's wealth, which was based on large quantities of cowry shells (Bell, 1940). In 1343, Ibn Battuta, the great Moroccan traveler describes the Maldives society and its flourishing trade with Arabia, India, China in Maldive fish, coconuts, coir, cowries, ambergris and tortoise shells. He also admired the skills and the mosques built in coral stone (Mackintosh-Smith, 2003). Ma Huan the chronicler of the Chinese admiral Zheng He describes the trade of cowry shells in c. 1425 (Mills, 1970).

4. Early modern period of European control (1528 CE– 1835 CE)

This is the golden period of coral stone architecture and construction. With the exposure to changing Indian Ocean trade and cultural dynamics of the region, a unique type of coral stone architecture evolved. New boat building and construction techniques fused with the existing techniques lead to a sophisticated interlocking coral stone construction technique without mortar. Maldivians called it *'Hirigalu vadaan'*, appropriately meaning coral stone carpentry. Crudely shaped Porite coral (*Hiriga*) blocks mined from the sea were transferred to the construction site, shaped to precision, assembled using carpentry techniques and finally decorated with complex carvings. The structures and finishes were sophisticated and fine construction and exquisite surface decorations using carvings and calligraphy. Examples of this period are Male' old Friday mosque (1658) and Fenfushi Old Friday Mosque (1692-1701). Today there are 18 coral stone mosques, many mausoleums, tombs stones, wells and bathing tanks representing this unique type of coral architecture (Jameel, 2015).

This period marks the beginning of European colonization of the region. Portuguese control and dominance over trade expanded in the Indian Ocean while Maldives struggled to protect its religion, independence and trade. After 15 years of Portuguese control, Maldives was liberated by Gazi Mohamed Thakurufaan and was ruled by Sultans and Sultanas from Hilali, Utheem, Isdhoo and Dhiyamigili dynasties (Bell, 1940). Later this period Maldives became a free port and trade prospered even through many struggles with Malabari raiders to control trade. With exposure to European colonial and other cultures of the region, arts and crafts developed. In c. 1607 Pyrard de Laval a French navigator wrote a detailed account of Maldives and admired the skills of the Maldivians in boat building and building coral stone mosques (Pyrard, 1619).

5. Late modern period of British control (1835 CE– 1965)

With the increasing dominance of the British in the Indian Ocean, the dynamics of trade and culture changed. Arts and technology were borrowed from new Indian and British partners in trade. Coral stone carpentry techniques slowly gave way to faster and cost effective masonry techniques using chipped coral rubble with lime mortar and plaster. Lime masonry construction became common where, porite corals were mined from the sea to be chipped into pieces and corals of the stony coral family were mined to make lime. The types of decoration use different types of moldings on the plasterwork. During this period coral structures were not exclusively monumental religious structures they became more common among the

prestigious structures. There are many structures of this type. Examples of construction technique of this period include Fandiyaaru Miskiy in Male', built in 1920s, UsgeKolhu the last standing structure of the Sultans main palace, Male', built in 1903. This type of construction continued in Maldives until cement was introduced in the late twentieth century when coral pieces set in cement and sand mortar became the primary construction method.

This period marks the beginning of British involvement in Maldives when it became a British protectorate to seek protection from Malabari raiders. The British controlled trade in the whole region and Maldivian trade and travel also shifted to British controlled ports and their allies. The first hydrographic mapping of Maldives started in 1835 by Captain Moresby of the Royal Navy. H. C. P Bell completed the first archaeological survey in 1922 and published a detailed account of Maldives in 1940 (Bell, 1940).

6. Contemporary independent period (1965 – present)

As the country developed and prospered, construction increased with a high demand for coral stone. Chipped coral with lime or cement and sand mortar and plaster became the standard type of construction for all structures. Load bearing coral walls and reinforced concrete structures with coral debris as aggregated were used in all types of newly designed buildings. In 1988 it was estimated around 14000 metric tons of coral were mined for the consumption of the capital Male' alone. Coral and sand mining declined after mining from the house reef of inhabited island was banned in 1992 (Naseer, 1997) and today coral stone construction is no longer possible ending an important chapter of Maldivian construction.

Maldives became fully independent as a republic in 1965. International air travel, shipping, telecommunication, tourism and fisheries changed the political, social and economic landscape of the country dramatically and still continues to change. In 2008, a new constitution was ratified giving the form of a modern multiparty democracy. Today due to globalization and the dramatic changes to the country the traditional visual cultures are vanishing fast and new contemporary cultures are emerging responding to the new environments and technologies.

Coral stone architecture using 'coral carpentry' technique and decorations

During the evolution of coral stone architecture over the periods, a unique type of construction technique and decoration emerged in the early modern period (1528 CE- 1835CE). They use an unusual interlocking construction technique without using mortar called *'Hirigalu vadaan'* appropriately meaning coral stone carpentry. They have a surface decoration, which is a fusion of geometric and vegetal patterns with calligraphy. The architecture that emerged manifests the coming together of many cultures of the Indian Ocean region.

Coral stone carpentry technique uses shaped Porite coral (*Hiriga*) blocks mined from the sea. The blocks are systematically built up layer-by-layer using tongue and grove, mortise and tenon, dado and other simple carpentry joinery to build up the coral stone foundations, plinth, walls and stairs. The joints are worked to a precision level of hairline groves and the wall structures are combined with timber doors, windows, ceiling and roof structure using the same interlocking system that can be assembled and disassembled. Simple carpentry tools such as Adz, chisels, carving knives, gauges, dividers and hand drills are commonly used. After construction most structures are decorated with exquisite mouldings, carvings and calligraphy. The mouldings have its origins in the pre Islamic predecessors and the surface carvings are combination of geometric and vegetal patterns. Floral and knot arabesque patterns are common and have similarity to many Indian styles such as the Mughal style, east African and the pre Islamic styles. The calligraphic decorations are derived from older Jeli Thuluth from the Arab regions influenced

by Dhiwani styles.

Coral stone architecture that evolved can be seen through the mosques, gateways, and mausoleums, bathing tanks, wells, minarets and tombstones of the period. The mosques are the best examples of the coral stone architecture of Maldives. These mosques are tropical style mosques with hypostyle prayer halls and veranda like antechambers called *Dhaala* often with a unique *Mihrab* Chamber. The architectural features include the raised coral stone platform, rising steps, tiered roof form, coffered ceiling with recessed area called *Laage'*, post and beam structure, unique arched sliding doors, diagonal lattice work on windows, special coral carvings, lacquer work and calligraphy.

The coral stone architecture that emerged was a result of exposure to many cultures of the region over the periods. The features of South Asian, East African, Southeast Asian and maritime Arabian and Persian architecture and arts are visible providing tangible evidence on extensive cultural exchange that took place within the regions. The architecture is also a result of interchange between pre Islamic dominant Buddhist culture and Islam. In 1940 the former archaeological surveyor of the British Government H. C. P. Bell admires the traditional artisans and their ability to adapt by writing;

> *'... Islam forced upon him complete abandonment of figure carving and diverted energy into the exquisite elaboration of floral patterns (so fully displayed on the beautiful exterior basement of some mosques at Male' ...' (Bell, 1940)*

Most of the early visitors who wrote about Maldives admired the coral stone structures, specially the mosques. Franciose Pyrard, the French navigator who lived in Maldives between 1602-1607 admires the design and construction of the coral stone mosques and writes in detail starting from how coral is taken from the seabed to its finished carvings (Pyrard, 1619). H. C. P. Bell in 1920s (Bell, 1940), Carswell, Forbes, and Reynolds in the 70s and 80s admired the structures and traced its architecture to its Buddhist origins (Carswell, 1976; Forbes, 1983; Reynolds, 1984). Roland Silva, former Director General of UNESCO and Commissioner for Archaeology in Sri Lanka, relates some of the features to Mughal architecture and writes about its universal significance with the need to safe guard it at any cost (Silva, 1985).

Male' Old Friday mosque and its compound

Male' Old Friday mosque or *'Male' Hukuru Miskiy'* and structures in its compound located in the capital island Male' describes best, the coral stone architecture of Maldives using coral carpentry technique. Being the biggest and the oldest structure with exquisite carvings it is most important heritage site of the country. Built in 1658 during the reign of Sultan Ibrahim Iskandhar I, it also replaces the original mosque built in 1153 by the first Muslim sultan of Maldives (Maldives-NCLHR, 1986). Male' Old Friday mosque and its compound is included in the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List since 2008 as a recognition of its potential outstanding universal value.

With an approximate area of 240 square meters and a capacity to accommodate more than 300 congregants, the mosque is in its original condition except for the corrugated metal sheet roof covering and floor covering. It has a hypostyle layout with the two prayer halls, six *dhaala/fenda* or antechambers and two chambers for the sultan and his guards. There is a large *mihrab* chamber and the *mimbar* is located in the corner of the *mihrab* chamber. The mosque is entered through three entrances with rising steps.

It is built on a highly decorated coral stone plinth using combined coral stone walls, columns, beams, doors and roof structure with an interlocking coral carpentry system. The roof is three-tiered with a modern metal roofing finish and has a highly decorated coffered ceiling, a central recessed *laagé* and ten smaller recessed *laagé's*, all raised from the main beams by turned lacquered *thona*. There are twenty-four columns in the mosque and out of which twelve are made from coral stone. The Qibla board placed to

direct to Mecca fixed to the *mihrab* wall is an exquisite piece of design and calligraphy. With its fine exterior coral carvings and interiors with carved wooden doors, lacquer work and calligraphy, the quality of workmanship is among the best in Maldives.

The mosque compound consists of the mosque building, a large minaret, three coral stone wells, a sundial and a cemetery surrounded by a boundary wall. The large unique drum-like minaret is made from plastered coral stone and tied with metal bands. The cemetery has many coral stone mausoleums and tombstones of past sultans, princes and other dignitaries of the country; the mausoleum of Sultan Ibrahim Iskandhar I who built the mosque is located here. The mausoleums are also built using highly decorated coral stone walls with interlocking coral carpentry system. The coral stone tombstones in the cemetery are also decorated using exquisite carvings and Jeli Thuluth calligraphic inscriptions. The mosque compound also has high quality coral stone wells with stepping stones leading to the entrances and a sundial.

Conclusion

The legacy of coral stone architecture of Maldives that flourished for more than 1800 years is an indispensable part of cultural history defining the creativity of its people. It was an architecture that evolved over the periods responding to the needs and means of the people. The architecture is evidence of the interchanges that took place when the people of Maldives transformed from one religion to another and also the influence of cultures from the region. With the intense cultural exchanges that took place in the Indian Ocean region some of it evolved into a unique architecture with a universal significance. In 2013, 6 of the coral stone mosques using 'carpentry technique' were included in the UNESCO world heritage tentative list.

Structures representing this unique type of coral architecture survive only by 18 coral stone mosques, mausoleums, tombs stones, wells and bathing tanks. Many of the mosques that survive are in a poor state of conservation and often remodeled without due consideration to the historic and cultural value. The mausoleums and tombs stones are neglected and not maintained. Coral stone architecture of Maldives needs better protection and appreciation for the sake of future generations.

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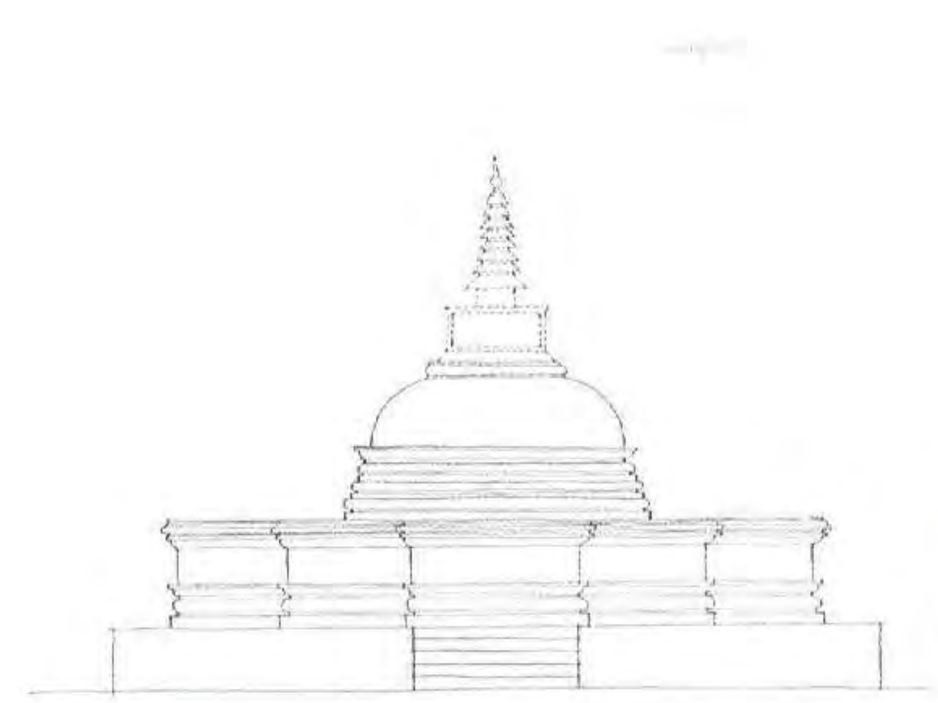
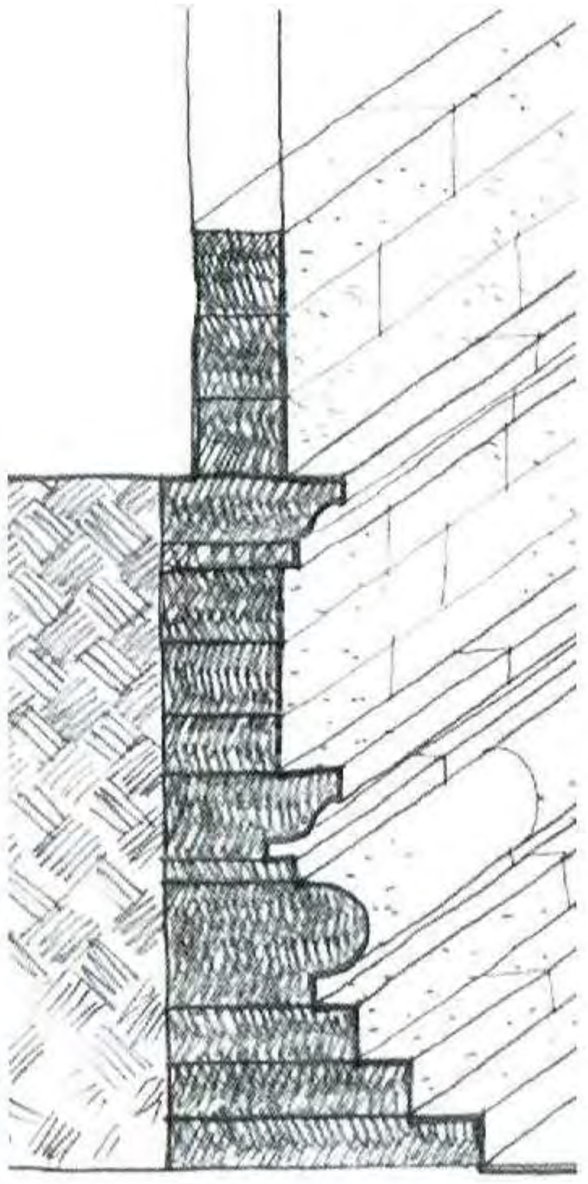
1a 1b 1c

Image 1: Coral stone statues of Classical period



2a: Elevation

2b: Image



2c: Detail

Image 2: Hadhummathi Pirivena and Dagoba, Laamu Gan, discovered by H. C. P. Bell.

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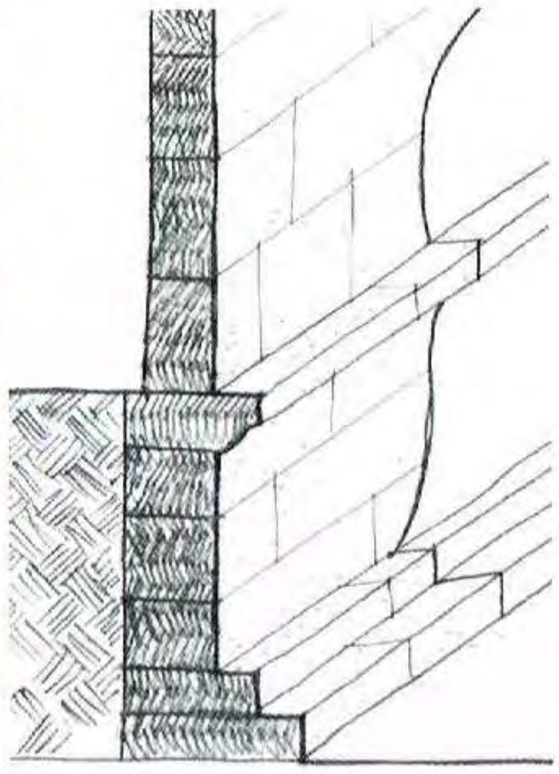
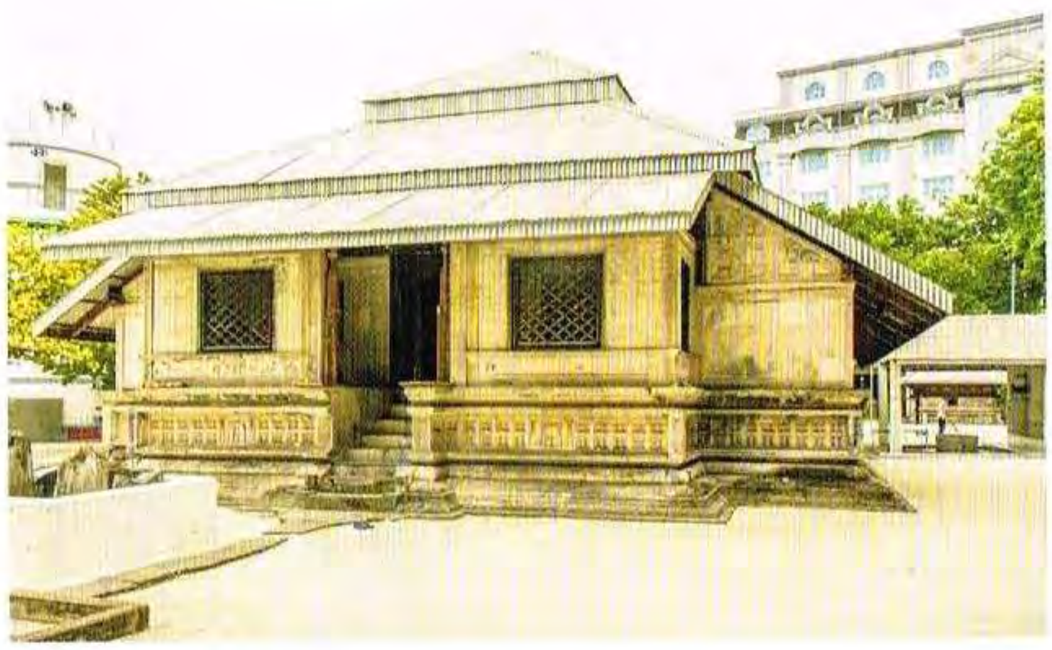
3a: View

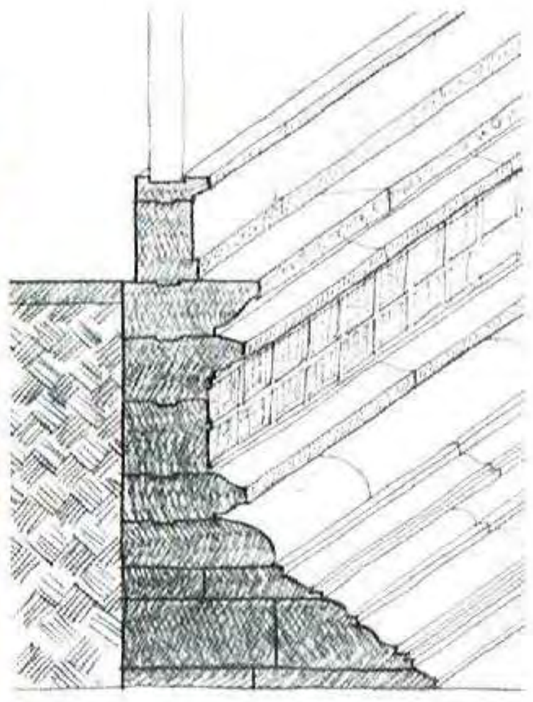


3b: Detail

Image 3: Kedeyre Miskiy, Fuvahmulah (c14C)

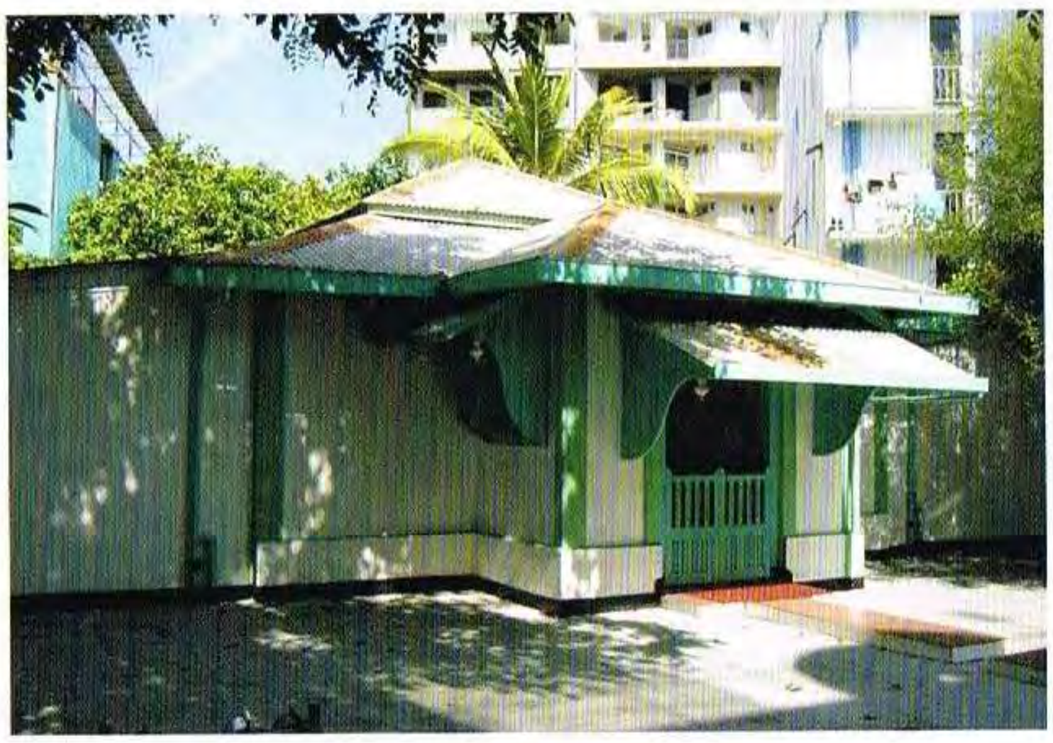


4a: Image

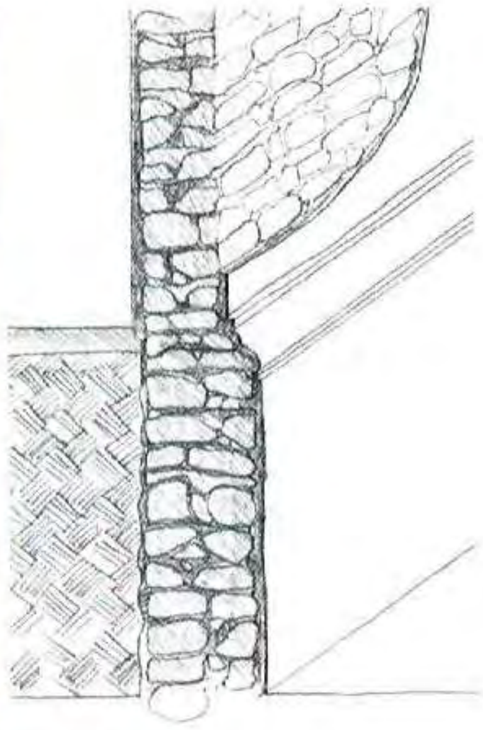


4b: Detail

Image 4: Male' old Friday mosque (1658)



5a: Image



5b: Detail

Image 5: Fandiyaaru Miskiy, Male' (c. 1920)

Image 6: Chipped coral masonry construction

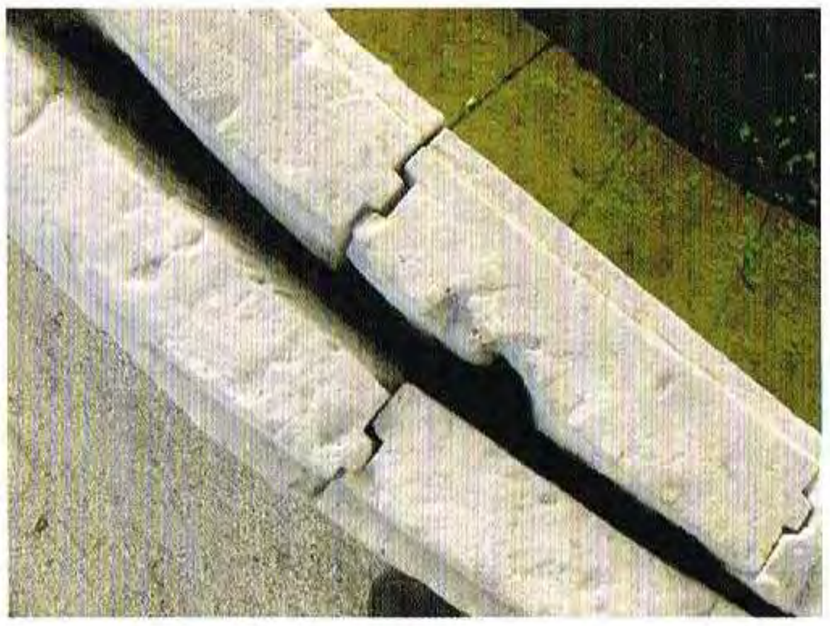


Image 7: Examples of coral stone interlocking joinery from early modern period

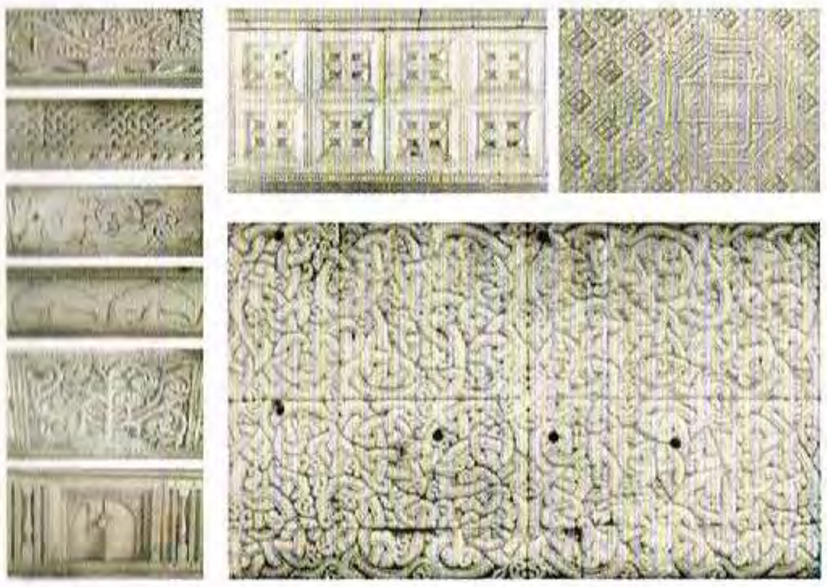


Image 8: Example of coral stone surface decoration from early modern period

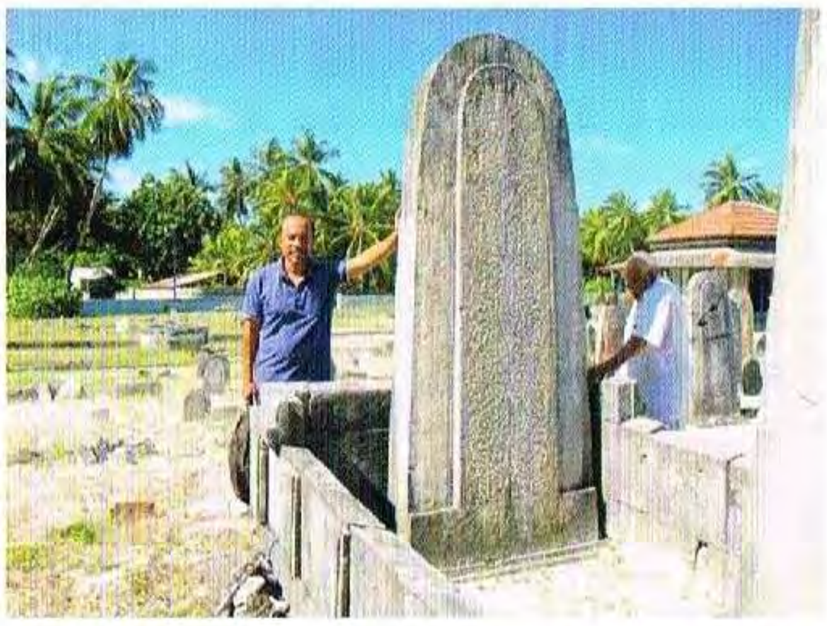


Image 9: Coral tombstone from the early modern period in Koagannu, Hulhumeedhoo, Addu City

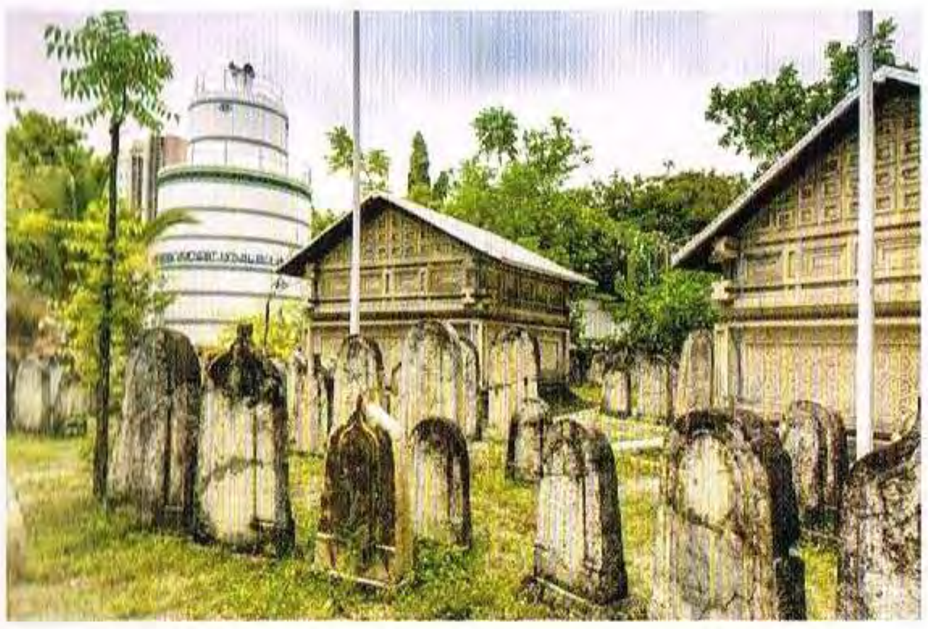


Image 10a: Male' Old Friday Mosque compound with Minaret, mausoleums and tombstones.

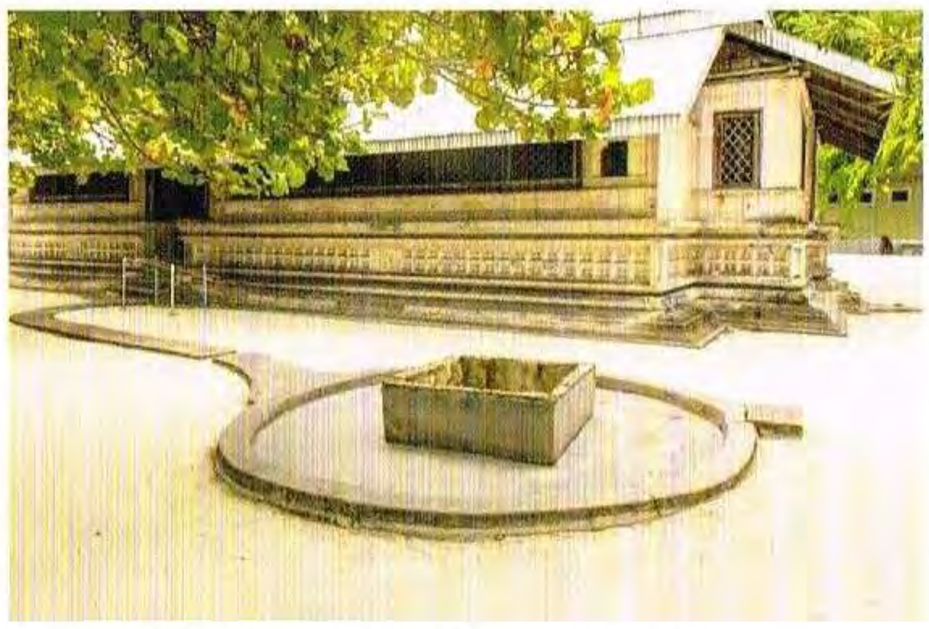


Image 10b: Male' Old Friday Mosque with well

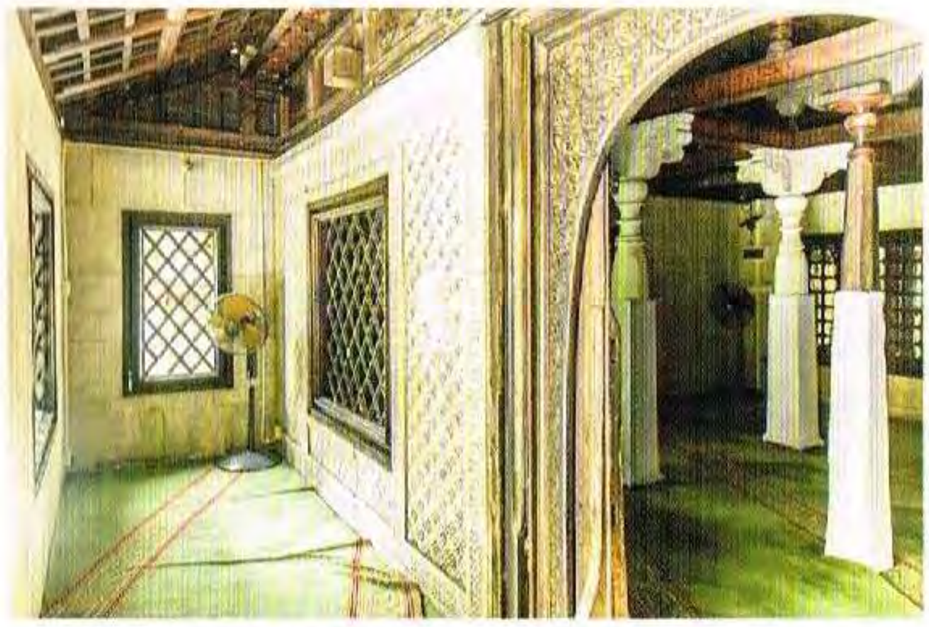


Image 10c: Male' Old Friday Mosque interior antechambers

モルディブ諸島の珊瑚石建築の歴史概略

モハマッド・マウルフ・ジャメエル*

2 世紀の仏教徒とヒンドゥー教徒はモルディブに最古の定住の址を残したが、珊瑚石を使用したものだった。珊瑚岩礁から採掘されていたその石は長年主要な建設材料であったが、1992 年に諸島の本体である珊瑚岩礁を保護するために使用禁止となった。2 世紀から 20 世紀までの諸島の歴史の不可欠な一部であった珊瑚石建築は、珊瑚を各々の時代に合わせて活用したモルディブ人の才能の表現である。こうしたモルディブの歴史は世界に類例がなく、インド洋交易網の証拠ともなっている。

モルディブ諸島はインド洋に浮かぶ、648 キロに広がる 1192 の低い珊瑚石岩礁からなりたっている。島の 96%は 1 平方キロ以下だが、その最大のラム環状珊瑚島のガン島は 6.1 平方キロである。諸島の 1%だけは海抜 1.5 メートル以上であり、将来的な海面上昇の危険に直面している。現在のモルディブ族はインド、スリランカ、アラビア、ペルシア、東アフリカ海岸を含めてインド洋各地の民族の混血によって形成された。

珊瑚岩礁は熱帯地域に存在し、特にインド洋地域周辺に多数知られている。それを建築に使用するようになった起源は知られていないが、インド洋の海岸集落、ペルシア湾、紅海、太平洋とカリブ海でも建設に珊瑚石が使用されていた。中米の古代マヤの島集落では紀元前 1500 － 900 年、スーダンでは紅海のヘレニズム時代の紀元前 323 － 146 年の遺跡に、中世の東アフリカのスワヒヒ族の都市に珊瑚石が建築に使用された痕跡があるが、複雑多岐に発展した建築はモルディブの特徴である。

モルディブでは岩礁のポリット珊瑚（「ハリガ」）と珊瑚砂岩（「ヴェリガア」）の二種類の珊瑚石が使用された。「ハリガ」（Scleractima 珊瑚属）は岩礁から巨大な石塊として棒と縄によって取られ、船で陸地まで運ばれた後切り取られ、形を与えられた。その加工技術は時代によって異なり、それぞれの時代の実用性と技術水準に合わされていた。

モルディブの歴史とその珊瑚石建築は、次の 6 つの時代に分けられている：古代（紀元前約 2000 － 500 年）、仏教・ヒンドゥー教の古典時代（紀元前約 500 年－紀元後 1153 年）、イスラーム教の後古典時代（1153 － 1528 年）、ヨロッパ人支配の近代前期（1528 － 1835 年）、英国支配の近代後期（1835 － 1965 年）、独立国家時代（1965 年から現在まで）。考古学的発掘はほぼ行われていないモルディブには、第二と第三期の痕跡が非常に少ない。近代前期以降の首都マレの金曜旧モスク（1658 年）とフェンフシの金曜旧モスク（1692 － 1701 年）が最も古いもので、全体で 18 ヶ所のモスクと共に霊廟、墓石、井戸、洗い場が残っている。

技術進化に伴い近代前期には「珊瑚大工仕事」と言う独特な技法が成立してきた。モルディブの建築家はモルタルを使わずに、斧、彫刻刀、ゲージ、ディバイダー等の大工道具を使用しながら、珊瑚石を加工して、その表面に幾何学・植物模様と文字を彫って、木造部分と共に使用した。その建築様式に現地のイスラーム期以前、インド、東アフリカ等のインド洋の各地域の要素が合併した。イスラーム建築に偶像が存在しないため植物模様が非常に細かく、多様に発展し、極めて美しい様式をつくりだした。スルタン家の礼拝場であったマレの金曜旧モスクはその優れた実例である。

現代の経済発展に伴って珊瑚石の使用は非常に増加し、1988 年に首都マレのみで 1 万 4 千立方トンの珊瑚石が採掘されるまでになった。これは止むを得ず禁止となったが、彼らの残した珊瑚石建築はモルディブ民族にとって創造の歴史の不可欠な一部となり、時代によって人々の必要性に応じて進化してきた、モルディブと周辺地域間の文化交流の証し、世界で重要な意味を持つモルディブ民族の独特な建築様式となった。

2013 年に珊瑚大工技法を使用している 6 ヶ所のモスクワはユネスコの仮世界遺産リストに登録された。現在残っているモスクは 18 ヶ所、霊廟、墓石、井戸、洗い場のみである。モスクの大部分は保存事態が悪く次世代のためその修復、保存が必要とされる。

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