

# The Ribaa in Fua Mulaku

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This week I asked two friends from Fua Mulaku about the Riba and they couldn't tell me about it. I fear it may have fallen into ruin and become a mound of rubble covered by the shoreline bushes, so I felt compelled to write this.

The Riba is located in a lonely windswept spot on the southern shore of the island. In 1979, the first time I saw it, the seashore sepulchre and its surroundings were well-looked after. The small building, the main roof beam reached only to my neck, was surrounded by a low wall; the inner yard was regularly kept free from weeds. Inside a small lamp was hanging from one of the beams and it was lit every night. The floor was pure white sand, carefully swept and a small white curtain was hanging from the roof. I never got to know who looked after the Riba with such neatness.

The Rashoveshi, a traditional local poem describing Fua Mulaku's main landmarks, mentions the Riba. In a verse it describes this humble building as an important *ziyaaraiy*, a kind of traditional Maldivian mausoleum:

*Ribāthakee den jehē ziyāratheke nan ivē,  
e dhimā thottashaki ē veukolhu adigandeke ē*

The oral tradition of Fua Mulaku islanders claims that the small structure houses the body of a corpse that floated and was carried by the oceanic currents until it drifted to that spot on the coast of the island, between Hanji Elhe and Diyarehifāndo. The date or names of the local people who found it and buried it are not remembered.

I wanted to know from the old people whether it was a local or a foreign-looking person, but there was no memory on how the corpse looked like, and I couldn't find out whether it was a man or a woman. Nevertheless, Magieduruge Ibrahim Didi emphasized that that person had had the extreme blessing of finding land and a decent burial even after death; hence the dead body deserved a special building, not just a regular tombstone.

In the oceanic culture of the Maldives death in the sea was considered a curse. The ocean is an ominous place with evils hidden in its dark depths; it is deemed to be no place for a human body to end up. The proper spot for a corpse was the earth, firm ground. Funerary rituals are a significant element of Maldivian identity and many ancient traditions were related to burial. Owing to their added auspicious significance, vows used to be made to isolated tombs such as the Riba. After all, even following death the corpse buried in it had had good fortune; thus sainthood was ascribed to that unknown person.

Masts, oars, and even heads of swordfish, were planted in the ground behind the Riba within the small enclosure after the favour had been granted. It was common for Fua Mulaku fishermen or sailors caught in a bad storm to declare in their anguish: "If we get back to the island we will plant the mast at the Riba; or when carried far away by a large struggling swordfish or marlin, to plant the long bill of the fish on the sand behind the building. Even while I lived there, islanders in Fua Mulaku put small pebbles on the low wall around the Riba when they wanted a wish to be fulfilled. Finifenmaage Hasan Didi said that those must probably be children. Still, they were perpetuating an ancient tradition which they must have learned from their elders.

When I last visited Fua Mulaku Island in 1989 and took the picture at the head of the article the Riba already almost looked like a ruin. It was in a bad state of disrepair; the roof had caved in from the front and no one was taking care of the tomb inside. Exposed to the salt spray and front shore winds, once the main structure has collapsed, I imagine that the building, now long forgotten, may be a heap of rubble hidden by the seafront vegetation.

# Appendix

Following the publication of the article above, I found out that the Riba had effectively been destroyed. Some people didn't even remember it, but different reactions were forthcoming. Most were from Funad people, the island village where the Riba was located, as well as from some government officials. Nearly everyone deplored the destruction of the place.

'It is a pity that Maldivians of today seem to have no respect for historical places that the older generation had preserved so lovingly,' wrote Shazra Aishath.

Rahath Hassan reminisced about the time when the little building was still whole: '... we always cleaned and kept it safe those days, when we played around the area... but after a long when I saw Riba it was like in this photo with no roof, so sad that we will no longer have this monument which we were proud of years ago.'



Hussain Rasheed, an officer in charge of building the airstrip, sent the picture above and the following comments:



'Riba is now completely demolished, but still the grave and a few remaining pieces of wall are there. Soon the place will have to be excavated for the airport RESA area. The strip mid line is located crossing the Riba. I believe it's time to dig out the truth...'

Thanks to Shavi...I am the one locating and setting out airport. RESA area is the safe area for the plane to descend when landing. Riba is located just 13m away from this zone's mid line.... I see there is a history though; we should bring this matter to the council. I guess...'

Another islander, Maleeh Jamal, wondered why no effort had been made towards the preservation of the shoreline tomb:

'I am surprised that the remaining ruins of the Ribaa were demolished during the airport land clearing process; I wonder why it was not relocated. These ancient monuments are vital for tourism and also its part of our history. When I was a kid I used to visit Ribaa with my friends from Funad especially Murad; the description exactly matches that of Shavi. It was back in 1993-94.'

